INTRODUCTION TO THE TESTIMONY OF

Rubin Pinsker

By Glenn Dynner, Sarah Lawrence College

HVT-3038

Introduction

The Holocaust calls to mind images of slowly dying ghettos, packed cattle cars, and brutal concentration camps. Yet such images, horrific as they may be, only convey part of the tragedy. The first large-scale massacres of the Holocaust, which occurred during the June 22, 1941 German invasion of western Soviet territories (Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States), actually occurred without long-term ghettos, deportations, or gassing facilities. Most of the roughly 2.5 million Jews murdered in these territories were methodically shot over pits in nearby forests. At the same time, nearby forests could serve as sites of refuge and resistance, particularly on the heavily-wooded Belarusian terrain. Timothy Snyder's explanation for why so many Jews in the Minsk Ghetto managed to evade executions applies to other Belarusian ghettos, as well: Jews in the region "had somewhere to run".[1]

The best known Jewish forest partisans are undoubtedly the Bielski Brothers, whose gripping story forms the basis of the 2008 feature film *Defiance*. In December, 1941, Tuvia (1906–1987), Asael (1908–1945), and Zus Bielski (1910–1995)—escaped from the Nowogrodek ghetto and established a forest camp that eventually became home to around 1200 Jews, only 150 of whom were armed fighters. Tuvia fits the image of a Jewish partisan to a tee: a tall, burly army veteran with a limited formal education who was a man of action. Yet some of the

[1] Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin (London, 2011), 233; idem., Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning (London, 2015), 191, 207; Wendy Lower, Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine (NC, 2005), 69. The Minsk underground smuggled something like 7,500 Jews into the surrounding forests. Many Lithuanian Jews had similar topographical conditions; hence the preponderance of Jewish partisan units around Vilna, as well. Thanks to Anika Walke for her valuable comments to earlier drafts.

testimonies in the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive suggest a more varied cultural profile among Jewish partisans.[2]

Rubin Pinsker, whose riveting testimony is preserved in the archive, presents one of the starkest contrasts to Tuvia. A former yeshiva student of modest physical stature, he had an orthodox religious background that was typical of many Jewish young men in the western half of the Belarusian region (the eastern half was annexed by the Soviet Union after WWI and named the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR).[3] Polish, i.e., western, Belarus formed part of Europe's yeshiva heartland. Several iconic yeshivas had relocated there after the Bolshevik revolution; and Stalin's intensified anti-religious campaigns after 1926 pushed thousands more Jewish students, religious functionaries, and their families across the border and into the region.[4] At the same time, Jews in western Belarus, like Jews throughout Poland, were becoming more culturally diverse. By the 1930s, the region hosted a mélange of Zionist, Socialist, and Communist cells; Hasidic yeshivas, study houses, and *shtiblekh* (prayer houses); and non-Hasidic *musar* and conventional yeshivas.[5]

Rubin was born and raised in the western Belarusian town of Zhetl (Zdzięcioł in Polish; now Dziatlava, Belarus), which boasted a legacy of local had been home to rabbinic celebrities like R. Israel Kagan, the famed "Hafetz Hayyim" (1839-1933). Rubin attended Reb Yoizel's Yeshiva, a *musar* institution located in nearby Dworzec that was named after its founder R. Yosef Yoizel Hurwitz, the "Elder of Novaradok". Reb Yoizel's Yeshiva belonged to the more demanding and

---

[2] The film Defiance (2008) was directed by Edward Zwick. See also Nechama Tec, Resistance: The Bielski Partisans (NY, 2009); Peter Duffy, *The Bielski Brothers: The True Story of Three Men Who Defied the Nazis, Built a Village in the Forest, and Saved 1,200 Jews* (NY, 2004).

[3] Snyder has observed that "the largest group of Holocaust victims—religiously Orthodox and Yiddish-speaking Jews of Poland…were culturally alien from West Europeans, including West European Jews. To some degree, they continue to be marginalized from the memory of the Holocaust." See his "Holocaust: The Ignored Reality," New York Review of Books (July, 2009).

[4] The Yeshiva Etz Hayyim originated in Slutzk; Bet Yosef originated in Novogorodok, but had been moved during WWI to Homel and Kiev; Or Torah in Bereznica, then Zvihil, then Koretz; and Kenesset Bet Yitzhak in Slobodka, then Kramenchug. On yeshiva migrations during the First World War, see Ben-Tsion Klibansky, Ketzur halamish: tor ha-zahav shel ha-yeshivot ha-litaiyot be-mizrah eyropa (Jerusalem, 2014) 76-118; 396-400; and Glenn Dynner, "Replenishing the Fountain of Judaism: Jewish Traditionalist Education in Interwar Poland," Jewish History 31:3-4 (2018).

[5] On musar, see David Fishman, "The Musar Movement in Interwar Poland," in Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, and Chone Shmeruk, eds., The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars (Hanover, N.H., 1989), 261-5; on Hasidism, see Moshe Rosman, "The Rise of Hasidism", The Cambridge History of Judaism, vol. 7 (Cambridge, 2018), ed. by Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, 625-51; on Hasidic yeshivas, see Shaul Stampfer, "Hasidic Yeshivas in Interwar Poland," in idem., Families, Rabbis, and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe (Oxford, 2010), 252-76.

elitist Novaradok *musar* school.[6] His plan at the time was to become a rabbi, which was what his father wanted and which was "the only thing I was striving for" [II, 44:37]. Then came the war.

A yeshiva student like Rubin, conditioned to long hours of rigorous Talmudic study and prayer rather than physicality and violence, would not seem likely to take up arms during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Daniel Boyarin has argued that the traditionalist Ashkenazi Jewish masculine ideal of a "gentle, studious, sweet man" represented a conscious rejection of conventional male heroism in favor of mental acuity and gentle refinement (*eydelkeit*).[7] Yet Rubin's case illustrates how quickly cultural mores could be shunted aside in extreme conditions, particularly when geographical factors favored physical resistance. Rubin and other young traditionalist Jews in the region made the transition to hardened fighters, exchanging piety for raw pragmatism and a bit of vengeance.

The Jews of Zhetl

Most Polish Belarusian towns hosted a mix of ethnic Poles, Belarusians, and a substantial number of Jews. Zhetl's Jewish community, which constituted around seventy-five percent of the town's 4,600 residents, was undergoing cultural change. Young Jews in Zhetl, like youths throughout Poland, were gravitating towards newly-emergent Zionist, Socialist (Bundist), and other secularist Jewish political subcultures. Other Jewish youths were redoubling their commitment to traditionalism, often embracing a more activist, ideologically coherent form known as "orthodoxy".[8] Nevertheless, there was a cross-cultural comradery among younger Zhetl Jews: "we would get together, and we had discussions for hours," Rubin recalls [I, 5:04].

---

[6] Reb Yoizel's Yeshiva was established in1896 by R. Yosef Yoizel Hurwitz, the "Elder of Novaradok". Hurwitz's more extremist "Novaradok" school of musar, with its premium on self-abnegation and intensive self-analysis, contrasted with the "Slabodka" school of musar founded by R. Nathan Tzvi Finkel, which advocated a degree of worldliness for the purpose of influencing the behavior of ordinary people. See Lester Eckman, History of Yeshivot in Lithuania and White Russia from their Beginnings until 1945 (Elizabeth, NJ, 2006), 98; Fishman, "The Musar Movement in Interwar Poland"; idem., "Mussar and Modernity," Modern Judaism 8, no. 1 (1988): 41-64.

and Chaim Grade's classic novel The Yeshiva (Indianapolis, 1976), tr. by Curt Leviant.

[7] Daniel Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct: T*he Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, 1997), 2, 3, 5, 42. Solly I. from the town of Ryki, for example, describes yeshiva students as "soft and anemic, fragile". Holocaust testimony (HVT-2139).

[8] On traditionalism and orthodoxy, see Jacob Katz, "Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective," Studies in Contemporary Jewry 2 (1986), esp. 3–4; Eliyahu Stern, The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism (New Haven, 2013), Introduction.

Most of Zhetl's Jewish residents were merchants or artisans who benefitted from a centuries-old economic symbiosis with the surrounding peasant population. Rubin's father purchased grain, dried mushrooms, and other produce from farmers in nearby villages and resold it to large distributors at a slight mark-up, an arrangement that created relationships which would one day help Rubin to survive. By 1936, however, this inter-ethnic economic symbiosis had come under increasing stress by right wing nationalist groups like the National Front (Stronnictwo Narodowe), whose campaign to "Polonize" the economy included anti-Jewish boycotts, violent picketing, and full-fledged pogroms. Yet the ethnic diversity of western Belarus undercut the exclusivist Polish nationalism that was inflaming other parts of Poland, and few if any pogroms occurred there. According to Rubin, National Front activists "planted" anti-Semitism in a number of local Poles, but Jews continued to enjoy "very peaceful" relations with local Belarusians, who were on the whole "very nice" [I, 14:40].[9]

On September 17, 1939, on pre-agreement with the Germans, Soviet forces invaded Polish Belarus and the rest of eastern Poland. The region contained around 1,309,000 Jews, 376,000 of whom resided in Polish Belarus. The introduction of Soviet anti-religious campaigns and the nationalization of capitalist enterprises were felt acutely by western Belarusian Jews, who were still largely orthodox and concentrated in trade and were now forced to adopt to a centralized economy in which religious institutions were considered superfluous. Many Jews were deported eastward on suspicion of disloyalty: of the 880,000 residents of western Belarus deported beginning on February 8, 1940, around 30 percent were Jews (most others were ethnic Poles). On the other hand, the Soviet regime prohibited overt expressions of antisemitism, gave Jews administrative positions, and made it possible to survive economically. "They let us live," Rubin shrugs. "That was…the main good thing about the Russian occupation" [I, 24:44].[10]

The German Occupation of Western Belarus

The Germans did not let them live. During their June 22, 1941invasion of the new Soviet territories, known as Operation Barbarossa, around 3,000 members of German paramilitary death squads known as *Einsatzgruppen* trailed the army and, with the assistance of *Wehrmacht* soldiers, SS-led Order Police battalions, and Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Belarussian volunteers, proceeded to murder about 1.6 million people throughout Belarus that year alone, mainly Soviet POWs and Jews. An ostensibly independent Belarus known as "White Ruthenia" was established on reduced territory under competing German authorities—the military, Arthur Nebe's Einsatzgruppen B, Himmler's SS, and *Generalkommissar* Wilhelm Kube's civil administration.

---

[9] Jolanta Żyndul, Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935-1937 (Warsaw, 1994).

[10] Shalom Cholawski, The Jews of Bielorussia during World War II (Amsterdam, 1998), 1-31.

Despite command conflicts and a lack of anti-Jewish animus among most Belarusians, most Jews were murdered, albeit more slowly than in the other formerly Soviet territories.[11]

Even before the Nazis resolved on a policy of genocide, conditions for the mass murder of Jews in the Soviet territories were in place. The invasion was explained to soldiers as a war against Judeo-Bolshevism; and the activities of partisans, falsely claimed to be predominately Jews, supplied an added pretext. A consistent genocidal policy emerged over the course of the summer months. The first executions of Jews in the region occurred in Bialystok on June 27.[12] On July 2, 1941, Heydrich specified groups to be executed: officials of the Comintern, party officials, Commissars, Jews employed by party or state, and other radical elements. As there was no real way to determine which Jews were in party or state employment, however, German executioners tended to err on the side of caution. In Zhetl, the first murders occurred on arrival: between July 23-25, 120 prominent Jews were executed. Around 400 other Jews were sent to the Dworzec labor camp, while the remainder were confined to a ghetto. In Rubin's house, "they packed in about 60 people, one on top of the other" [I, 41:12].

The first mass killings began in the Pripyat swamps in summer, 1941. When Heinrich Himmler visited Minsk on August 14-15, 1941, he demanded executions irrespective of age or sex, based (according to testimony by Otto Brandisch) on a verbal order from Hitler. Himmler personally witnessed mass executions, averting his eyes with each volley yet ordering their extension to Jewish women and children. On September 3, the German administration established Jewish Councils (*Judenrat*) and Jewish police, implemented the wearing of a Jewish star for easy identification, appropriated Jewish property, and introduced forced labor.[13] On September 12, General Keitel announced that "the struggle against Bolshevism demands ruthless and energetic action, and first of all against the Jews, as the main bearers of Bolshevism." Executions were sometimes paused during the winter months owing to the difficulties of burial in frozen ground.[14]

---

[11] Ibid., 35-42. On the role of Wehrmacht soldiers in abetting and committing genocide in this region, see Waitman Wade Beorn, Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus (Cambridge, MA, 2014). The German colonization bureau planned to transfer 75 percent of Belarusians to Siberia and other locales while Germanizing 25 percent of them and transferring them to Germany as farmers. No Belarusian was to receive more than a fourth-grade education. (48-9).

[12] On June 27, Order Police Battalion 309 led some 800 Jews into the main synagogue, set it afire, and shot 2,000 additional Jews. Einsatzgruppe 8, a subunit of Einsatzgruppe B, arrived on July 1 and killed 300 of the Jewish intelligentsia there.

[13] Yitzhak Arad, The Holocaust in the Soviet Union (Lincoln, NE, 2009), 125-140; Cholawski, Jews of Bielorussia, 58.

[14] Arad, Holocaust in the Soviet Union, 150, 157.

In early 1942, many Jews of western Belarus were still alive thanks to the relative paucity of SS and police forces there, the departure of Einsatzgruppe B further east, and the unwillingness of most Belarusians to volunteer for auxiliary units.[15] On July 31, 1942, it was decided that all Belarusian Jews, save 15-16,000 essential workers, were finally to be liquidated, on the logic that Jews were the "main bearers" of the partisan movement. In Zhetl, a large-scale massacre had already occurred a few months earlier, on April 30, when an underground resistance in the ghetto was uncovered (see below). Rubin recalls that at 5:00 in the morning the Germans, Ukrainians, and Belarussians surrounded the ghetto, "started to knock on the windows and scream *Judenraus*!", escorted Jews to the main square, performed a "selection," and murdered around 1200 Jews in the Kurpiesze (Kupyash) forest [I, 44:50]. Rubin was spared thanks to his work certificate [*Schein*] for road construction work. His friend, who also possessed one, pretended that Rubin's sister was his wife; she, too, was spared. Rubin's parents, who were not considered "essential workers," were murdered [45:30].[16]

When Himmler ordered the SS to liquidate all remaining ghettos by means of deportation to concentration camps on June 21, 1943, he specified that all Belarusian ghettos were to be completely liquidated by bullets on account of the partisan problem. Only 21-23,000 Jews remained alive in ghettos and camps throughout Belarus. The Germans and their collaborators entered the Zhetl ghetto on August 6-8 and executed around one thousand ghetto inhabitants in the adjacent forest and Jewish cemetery. Around 600 Jews, including Rubin, escaped deep into the forest. A similar pattern occurred in ghettos throughout the region. The death tolls are staggering: in western Belarus, 332-350,000 Jews were murdered while only 8-11,000 survived, mainly in the forests. Around 370 Zhetl Jews would survive the war.[17]

---

[15] On collaboration by Poles, Ukrainians, and natives of Baltic states, see Martin Dean, Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine (NY, 2000), 142. For an interesting discussion of motivations of collaborators, see Snyder, Black Earth.

[16] A Schein was work permit (lit. "paper") intended primarily for artisans and doctors deemed essential to the German administration. A holder of a Schein could also register his spouse and up to two children. While many Jews believed that possessing a Schein might allow them to survive, the German authorities gradually restricted their numbers. See Leni Yahil, The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945 (NY, 1987), 176-9.

[17] Arad, Holocaust in the Soviet Union, 257, 329; 519-23. The figure 370 is supplied by Yad Vashem. As for eastern Belarus, between 230,000-240,000 Jews lived in German-occupied eastern Belarus and only 6-7,000 survived.

Jews and the Partisan Movement

The Nazi use of Jewish partisan activities as a justification for mass murder was cynical even by Nazi standards—after all, it was Nazi atrocities that drove Jews to become partisans in the first place. Nor were Jews its main participants. The roughly 374,000 partisans in Belarus by 1944 were predominately Soviet soldiers who had been cut-off by the German advance or who had arrived as reinforcements from unoccupied Soviet territories. At most, 15,000 of the 23,000 Jews who escaped into the forests of western and eastern Belarus fought as partisans, while the rest usually joined non-combat Jewish "family units" responsible for securing food and shelter.[18] Jews composed only around four percent of all partisans in Belarus, and it was only by coordinating or joining up with Soviet partisans that most combat partisans survived.[19]

Before they fled to the forests, many Zhetl partisans participated in an underground ghetto resistance organized by the local attorney and communal leader Alter Dvoretsky. At its inception, 120 prominent Jews had already been executed (July 23-25, 1941) and 400 Jews had been sent to the Dworzec labor camp (December 15, 1941). Dvoretsky used his position in the Zhetl ghetto's *Judenrat* to contact Russian partisans, purchase weapons, and distribute anti-German circulars among the local non-Jewish population. Rubin recalls that Dvoretsky "used everybody that could be of help; only the young people he mobilized" [I, 42:20]. Thanks to his work assignment on the highway Rubin had an opportunity to bring weapons parts into the ghetto, which he concealed inside bundles of wood.

By the Spring of 1942, Dvoretsky began to doubt the chances of a successful ghetto revolt and considered creating a large Jewish partisan force instead.[20] The planned ghetto revolt was in any case thwarted by the betrayal of a former Red Army pilot named Vanya, who lured Zhetl underground member Shalom Fiolun into a German ambush with the promise of an automatic rifle and pistol for purchase. Before being tortured to death, Fiolun passed a note through his prison bars that read: "Comrades, have no fear. I won't open my mouth. If you can, save yourselves." Dvoretsky, with a reward of 25,000 marks on his head, did exactly that: he fled to

---

[18] On Jewish "family units", see Anika Walke, Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia (NY, 2015), 165-6. On Belarusian territory Walke estimates that 3,700 and 5,200 members of such units, which were attached to combat units and provided non-combat services like food acquisition and preparation.

[19] Snyder, Black Earth, 280; Yehuda Bauer, "Jewish Resistance in the Ukraine and Belarus during the Holocaust," in Patrick Henry, ed., Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis (Washington, D.C., 2014), 502; idem., "Nowogródek- The Story of a Shtetl", 23; Cholawski, Jews of Bielorussia, 218; and "Partisans," in Israel Gutman, ed., Encyclopedia of the Holocaust (NY, 1990), 3:1113. Anti-semitism among Soviet partisans, initially a serious problem, abated with the establishment of a united partisan command in 1942 by General Vasily Chernyshev, known as "Platon".

[20] Cholawski, Jews of Bielorussia, 111-12, 124-5.

the forest with six fighters. For reasons not entirely clear, Dvoretsky was killed in an ambush by Russian partisans on May 11, 1942. This setback, in addition to the "retaliatory" murder of 1200 Zhetl Jews on April 30, caused the Zhetl underground to diminish its activities and focus on constructing hide-outs and bunkers.[21]

During the final liquidation on August 6-8, 1942, Rubin and around 600 Zhetl Jews escaped to the forest. Suddenly the hunted became hunters, sabotaging German communication and transportation lines and occasionally killing German soldiers and their collaborators. The only thing left to do as long as they were still alive, Rubin explains, was "to take revenge." But there was little joy in it:

> No, it wasn't satisfying. You did it because you had no choice--to take revenge. But, uh, no, no satisfaction in killing anybody at all…the times were so bad that you had to survive. In order to survive, you had to defend yourself-- or attack [II, 9:20].

Notably lacking here and throughout Rubin's testimony is the heroic rhetoric so typical of Jewish self-defense narratives.

Many Jewish partisans from Zhetl fought in the "Zhetler Battalion," which was divided into three units headed by Hirsch Kaplinsky, Jonah Midvetsky, and Shalom Ogulnik. Others joined the Yehezkel Atlas, Pobieda, Borba, Kovalov, or famous Bielski units, which operated mainly in the Lipczynska (Białowieża) and Naliboki forests. Rubin joined Kaplinski's unit after a sojourn at the Dworzec labor camp. The unit grew to 120 members, merged with the Orliani partisan group as Company no. 3, and joined in daring attacks on German garrisons. Kaplinski was killed during the German manhunt known as Operation Hamburg between December 10-24, 1942, at which point command of the unit was taken over by Ukrainian and Russian leaders.[22] This is but one example of how partisan units could exhibit an extraordinary level of inter-ethnic cooperation in a period defined by exclusivist nationalism.[23]

Although Rubin eschews heroic rhetoric in his retelling, at no point does he fulfill the stereotype of the violence-averse Orthodox Jew. Early on, he smuggled weapons for a planned ghetto revolt at great personal risk, and he fought with partisans after his ghetto's liquidation. Rabbinical opinion during this period actually condoned such conduct. When R. Ephraim Oshry, a ritual legal (*halakhic*) authority in the Kovno (Kaunus) Ghetto, was asked by a ghetto resident whether

---

[21] Ibid., 125-6; 141, 218.

[22] Arad, The Holocaust in the Soviet Union, 508-9.

[23] Some, however, were notoriously anti-semitic. See Leonid Smilovitsky, Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941–1944: The Case of Belorussia," Holocaust and Genocide Studies 20:2 (2006).

it was permissible to escape to the forest and join partisans, he ruled in the affirmative. Despite the personal risk owing to the well-known hatred for Jews among certain Soviet partisans, Oshry reasoned, staying in a ghetto would mean exposing oneself to murder (ghetto residents were popularly known as "easy kills", he notes). Escaping to the forests, in contrast, entailed only a "possible danger" (*safek sakanah*), since those who resolved to escape were doubtless well-informed of the whereabouts of sympathetic partisans. In fact, Oshry argued, the more Jews who escaped to the forests and joined partisan camps, the more the German "Amalek" would be weakened. Therefore, "one should encourage and fortify them and extend them as much help as possible in obtaining weapons so that they will not come empty-handed to the partisan camps and will be knowledgeable in battle and warfare and poised to be on the front lines at the head of the fighters."[24]

Rubin, for his part, was beyond consulting with rabbis by then. The murder of his family and community members had been too much. "I quit being orthodox. In other words, I protested," he recalls. "Why didn't [God] prevent all this?" he demands, noting that it was often the pious Jews who were massacred first [II, 39:05]. His was not the only Orthodox response to the Holocaust—many traditionally observant Jews were convinced that they had been spared because of divine protection and returned to traditional observance as soon as they could.[25] But a loss of faith was not uncommon. For Rubin, the only thing left to do was to avenge the "innocent people they killed" before he, himself, was inevitably killed [II, 9:00].

After his liberation by the Soviets, Rubin and his surviving siblings migrated to Canada "to start living like free people" [II, 25:30]. Rubin taught Hebrew for a few years and then went into real estate and settled down in Vancouver. "Canada was very good to me," he observes with gratitude [II, 45:40]. Despite his doubts about divine justice, Rubin continued to attend synagogue with his family on occasion and was adamant about providing his children with a Jewish ("not a religious") education [II, 40:30]. Most importantly, Rubin explains, he wanted his children to be "self-sufficient," not be afraid "to stand up for your own rights" and be "proud of being Jewish," values that he himself embodied throughout his unimaginable ordeal [II, 34:20].

---

[24] Ephraim Oshry, Mi-ma'amakim (NY, 1976), no. 10, pp. 73-9. According to Snyder, by Spring of 1942 the Jews of Minsk were also "coming to see the forest as less dangerous than the ghetto." Of the roughly ten thousand Jews who left the Minsk Ghetto and joined partisans, about half seem to have survived. See Bloodlands, 237. The Bielski partisan unit formed an exception to the rule that possession of a weapons was a precondition for acceptance. See However, the Bielski partisans formed an exception: they would often accept members without weapons. See Nechama Tec, Resistance: The Bielski Partisans (NY, 2009), 3.

[25] See, e.g., Devorah S. Holocaust testimony (HVT-4109); Solly I. Holocaust testimony (HVT-2139).

Further Reading on the Jews of Zhetl before and during the Holocaust:

Baruch Kaplinski, *Pinkes Zhetl* (Tel-Aviv, 1957)

Haya Lipski, Rivkah Lipski-Kaufman and Yitshak Ganoz, *'Ayaratenu Z'etel: shishim shanah le-hurban kehilat Z'etel 1942-2002* (Tel Aviv, 2002),

http://shtetlroutes.eu/en/yizkor-book-of-dzyatlava/

Transcript

SANDY HAYDEN: OK, Holocaust documentation project, June 15, 1983. I'm Sandy Hayden interviewing Mr. Rubin Pinski. Um, Mr. Pinski, um, you were born in a little town in P-- Poland. Can you tell us what the name of the town was?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, the name of town is Zdzięcioł.[1]

SANDY HAYDEN: Zdzięcioł.

RUBIN PINSKI: In Polish.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: In Russian, it was Dyatlovo.

SANDY HAYDEN: Dyatlovo.

RUBIN PINSKI: And well-known in the Yiddish name, Zhetl.

SANDY HAYDEN: Zhetl. So how-- how do you-- how do you refer to it?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, among friends and among, uh, people, call it Zhetl naturally.

SANDY HAYDEN: OK, so can we call it-- can we call it Zhetl during the interview? I think--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, I think--

SANDY HAYDEN: A little easier for me to say Zhetl than Zdzięcioł

RUBIN PINSKI: OK, well, it's a very well-known town.

---

[1] Zdzięcioł (Yid. Zhetl), Poland. Currently Dziatlava, Belarus. Near Grodno. At one time home to rabbinic celebrities like R. Yaakov Krantz, "the Maggid of Dubno", and R. Israel Kagan, "the Hafetz Hayyim". Most Jewish residents were artisans and merchants. See Shmuel Spector, Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust* (New York, 2001), 1498; Geoffrey P. Margargee, eds., *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945* (Bloomington, IA, 2009), 1307; Guy Miron and Shlomit Shuhani, eds., *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2009), II: 974; *Pinḳes Zshetl: tsum 15-ṭn yorṭog nokh dem groyzamen ḥurbn* (Tel Aviv, 1957), ed. Barukh Ḳaplinski.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, and um, on the map here, it-- you pointed our to me a little earlier on that it's, um, it has a number of big cities--

RUBIN PINSKI: Big cities around it, yes, which is Baranowicz.[2] And, uh, we are also west of, uh, Vilna [Wilno].[3]

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: --about 150 kilometers between Vilna, Uh, our town, Zhetl, was, uh, city is Lida.[4] Which is also a well-known city. On the other side towards Minsk[5] was, uh, a city in the name of Slonim.[6]

---

[2] Baranowicze (Yid. Baranovitch). Currently Baranovichi, Belarus. Near Minsk. The town had around 12,000 Jews (about 50 percent) and was famous for its yeshiva, headed by R. Elkhanan Wasserman. Baranowicze hosted both a leading Hasidic yeshiva affiliated with the Slonim Dynasty, Yeshivat Torat Ḥesed, and the non-Hasidic yeshiva Ohel Torah, led by the famed R. Elḥanan Wasserman. See Yehuda Bauer, "Jewish Baranowicze and the Holocaust," *Yad Vashem Studies* 31 (2003), 95-152, at http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%207082.pdf; and Rubin Kaplan, Palonkeh and Baranovichi, Belarus, from 1904 to 1922, available at https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Baranovichi/baranovichi.html.

[3] Vilna (Pol. Wilno; Yid. Vilne). Currently Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. Known as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania, home to famous Talmudic scholars like R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, secular Yiddish poets like Avraham Sutzkever, and institutions promoting modern Jewish culture like YIVO (Yiddish Scientific Institute, founded in 1925). See Israel Cohen, *Vilna* (Philadelphia, 1992); Yisrael Klausner, *Ṿilnah, Yerushalayim de-Liṭa: dorot aḥaronim, 1881-1939* (Tel Aviv, 1983); Cecile Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, 2014).

[4] Lida, Poland. Currently in Belarus. Famous for a yeshiva founded by the pioneering Religious Zionist, R. Yitzhak Yaakov Reines (d. 1915), who introduced secular studies into its curriculum despite objections by some traditionalists. See https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/lida/lida.html; Yosef Lindell, "Beacon of Renewal: The Educational Philosophy of the Lida Yeshiva in the Context of Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines' Approach to Zionism," *Modern Judaism*, 29:2 (2009), 268-294.

[5] Minsk, capital of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) from 1921 to 1991; currently capital of Belarus. The Belarusians ("White Russians") Rubin sometimes refers to were a small, mainly rural minority in interwar Poland who were cut off from the Belarusian intelligentsia in Minsk, home to around 90,000 (37 percent) Jews. Under Soviet rule, secular Yiddish culture flourished there. The Germans entered on June 28, 1941, established a ghetto of 84,000 people, and began to liquidate it in November. The Minsk underground smuggled something like 7,500 Jews into the surrounding forests. See Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans*, 67-102; Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington, 2013); Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus* (New Haven, 2003).

[6] Slonim, Poland. Currently in Belarus. Famous for the Slonim Hasidic dynasty, founded by R. Avraham of Slonim (d. 1883) and best known for the book *Netivot Shalom*, by the eleventh Slonimer Rebbe, R. Shalom Noach Barzovsky (1911-2000). Much of the dynasty was wiped out during the Holocaust, as was most of the town's 22,000 Jews. At least four hundred Slonim Jews escaped the ghetto and fled to

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, and did-- did you used to travel often to these cities?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, not often. I was very young.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: I was just, uh, uh, school, uh, child. So I didn't have a chance to travel too much.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm-hmm. And how big was-- how many people were-- were in-- in Zhetl?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, the whole population was only about, uh, 7,500 to 8,000.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm-hmm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And at least 60% of them are Jews.[7]

SANDY HAYDEN: Really? So you-- you felt that it was more Jewish-- you felt the Jewish community very strongly there.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And what sort of Jewish community was it? Was it orthodox or?[8]

---

the forest, many forming a partisan group that liberated the Jews in Kossovo on October 2, 1943. See Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* vol. 4 (NY, 1990), 1363-4.

[7] Population 7500, 60 percent Jewish. In fact, Jews constituted 3,450 of Zhetl's 4,600 residents (75 percent) in 1926, and constituted about 3,500 by the outbreak of WWII. As a result of an influx of refugees from central and western Poland, the Jewish population increased to about 4,500 by June, 1941. See Geoffrey P. Margargee, eds., *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945* (Bloomington, IA, 2009), 1307; and Guy Miron and Shlomit Shuhani, eds., *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2009), II: 974.

[8] Orthodox: proponent of an ideologically and politically developed form of Jewish traditionalism. See Jacob Katz, "Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 2 (1986); Michael Silber, "Orthodoxy," in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, at http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Orthodoxy.

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, of all kinds. Um, the, uh, the youth were very-- very Zionist-minded.[9] There was a Betar[10] in our town, the extreme right; Ha-Shomer Ha-tza'ir.[11] There were also a Bund[12], which is socialist. Some very few communist youth, all kinds of, uh, organizations.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm-hmm. And was your family attached to any organization?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, my father was religious.

SANDY HAYDEN: He was religious, yeah.

[9] Zionist. A proponent of Zionism, a modern political movement for the establishment of a Jewish state, preferably in the Land of Israel (Palestine). Zionism had forerunners in eastern and central Europe, gained currency in the wake of the pogroms of 1881-2, and was first introduced to the world as "Zionism" in 1897 by Theodore Herzl (1860-1904). For its secularist and religious varieties, see Arthur Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea* (Philadelphia, 1997).

[10] Betar. The youth group of Revisionist Zionism, a movement founded by Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky (1880-1940) that advocated a militant and openly statist Zionism. The name Betar recalls the last Jewish fort to fall in the Bar Kokhba Revolt (136 CE), and is an acronym for "Brit Yosef Trumpeldor," after a Zionist martyr. See Daniel Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton, NJ, 2017).

[11] Hashomer ha-tza'ir ("The Young Guard"). The youth movement of Socialist Zionism (Poalei Tsiyon) that helped inspire and build the kibbutz movement in the Yishuv and future State of Israel. See Elkana Margalit, "Social and intellectual origins of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement, 1913-1920," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4.2 (1969) 25-46.

[12] The Bund. General Jewish Labor Bund, a secularist Jewish socialist party founded in Vilna, 1897 which fought for workers' rights and the preservation of Yiddish language and culture. The Bund helped form the Russian Social Democratic Party but, owing to opposition Jewish autonomism, periodically left the party. The Bund was suppressed in the Soviet Union but continued flourish in Poland, where its members organized strikes, demonstrations, and self-defense initiatives, sometimes in coordination with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). See Antony Polonsky, "The Bund in Polish Political Life, 1935-1939", in Steven Zipperstein and Ada Rapoport-Albert, eds., *Essays in Modern Jewish History* (London, 1988).

SANDY HAYDEN: And belonged to the Agudat Yisrael.[13] This is a religious organization. And I-- I finished Talmud Torah.[14] And, uh, also learned in a Hevra Tarbut shul[15], which was a Hebrew school.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm-hmm.
RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, then I-- when I was 13, I was sent to yeshiva. It was not far from our town, another town called Dworec.[16] They had a yeshiva on the, uh, it was called Yoizel's Yeshiva[17], from Novogrodek.
And I was there till-- till 1939.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm-hmm. So you-- you had-- you had really a religious upbringing then?

RUBIN PINSKI: Very religious, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: And-- and your early schooling was just at, in the Talmud Torah with other young Jewish boys like you?

---

[13] Agudat Yisrael. The most successful orthodox political party, founded at a conference in Katowice, Poland, in 1912 and active in Poland from 1916. Agudat Yisrael enjoyed the sponsorship of Hasidic leaders like R. Avraham Mordecai Alter of Ger and major non-Hasidic leaders like Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski, but was opposed by certain prominent traditionalist leaders. See Gershon C. Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916–1939* (Jerusalem, 1996).

[14] Talmud Torah. Traditionalist Jewish elementary school that tended to instruct orphans and poorer children, funded by the community's Talmud Torah society in contrast to the heder, which charged nominal tuition. See Nathan Eck, "The Educational Institutions of Polish Jewry (1921-1939), *Jewish Social Studies* 9:1 (1947); L.H., "'Chedery' w Polsce," *Sprawy Narodowościowe* 5 (1935), p. 554, rpt. in Rafał Zebrowski, *Wybór tekstów źródłowych*, 1918-1939 (Warsaw: ŻIH, 1993), 111.

[15] Tarbut shul. A school founded in Zhetl in 1929 that belonged to Hebraist, Zionist-leaning network. Tarbut incorporated Talmudic and biblical studies into its curriculum; however, Rubin's attendance suggests his parents' openness to certain secular influences. By 1939, around 45,000 Jewish children (around 25 percent of children in private Jewish schools) studied in one of the approximately 270 Tarbut schools in Poland. See Kamil Kijek, "Was It Possible to Avoid "Hebrew Assimilation"? Hebraism, Polonization, and Tarbut Schools in the Last Decade of Interwar Poland," *Jewish Social Studies* 21:2 (2016), 105-41; Alfred Doblin, *Journey to Poland* (NY, 1991), 104.

[16] Dworzec (Dvoretz in Yiddish; currently Dvarec in Belarus). A small town near Zhetl. Dworzec was the site of a labor camp, where around 400 Jews of Zhetl were sent on December 15, 1941. For a personal account, see *Grandmother Came from Dworitz. A Jewish story by Ethel Vineberg* (1969).

[17] Yoizel's Yeshiva from Novogrodek (Nowógrodek; Navahrudak), Belarus. The yeshiva was established in1896 and headed by R. Yosef Yoizel Horowitz, the "Elder of Novaradok". It was the flagship institution of the ascetic mussar movement, which emphasized character development alongside Talmudic scholarship. See David Fishman, "Mussar and Modernity," in *Modern Judaism* 8:1 (1988), 41-64.

RUBIN PINSKI: Only the Jewish boys, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And-- and you learned all the subjects-- arithmetic and reading and writing.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, this we learned because the school was subsidized by the government. And we had to do it a half a day. And all these other-- other subjects mainly was chumash[18], Tanakh[19], and gemara.[20]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm-hmm. So that was-- half the day was-- was-- was, um, school. And the half-- other half of the day was religious.[21]

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And did you, as a young boy, did you enjoy that?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes. I--

SANDY HAYDEN: Oh, you did. You just never-- you never thought, oh, I don't feel like going. Or it wasn't too-- it-- it wasn't-- you didn't see other Jewish boys who maybe had half the afternoon free because they weren't going to Talmud Torah or something.

[18] Chumush. The printed Pentateuch with vowel and cantillation marks, usually studied with the aid of medieval commentaries.

[19] Tanakh. Acronym for Torah [Pentateuch], Nevi'im [Prophets], and Ketuvim [Writings], also known as the canonized Hebrew Bible.

[20] Gemara. The portion of the Talmud that forms a commentary on the earlier oral tradition, the Mishnah. Usually the Babylonian version (redacted ~600 CE) that was studied, with the aid of the medieval Ashkenazic commentary Rashi (R. Avraham ben Yitzhaki, d. 1105) and his grandsons, known as the Tosefot.

[21] Half day secular/half day religious. After the Jędzejewicz legislation (1932) made state-sanctioned schools mandatory, Jewish traditionalist parents whose towns lacked state-sanctioned Orthodox (Horev) schools often sent their children to public school and "supplemented" that education with an even lengthier traditionalist Jewish education during afternoons and evenings. See Glenn Dynner, "Replenishing the Fountain of Judaism: Traditionalist Jewish Education in Interwar Poland", *Jewish History* 31:3-4 (January, 2018).

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, there was also a Yiddish Folkshul.[22] And there was as I said, a Tarbut shul Hebrew only. And, uh, the youth used to get together, and we had discussions for hours, had the discussions, one with another. The religious youth and the--

SANDY HAYDEN: Zionists, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: The-- we had a very nice gathering, so.

SANDY HAYDEN: And-- and your father-- your father let you associate with all the other Jewish boys, even if they weren't religious?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes.
SANDY HAYDEN: That wasn't--

RUBIN PINSKI: It was, uh, a habit that Saturday. My father used to take, uh, the, uh, children and study with them gemara while other children were playing football or something like that. But we had to obli-- oblige to our parents and-- and, uh, and do it for them because, uh, we always respected our parents.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: So we-- Saturdays, we used to sit and study with our parents

SANDY HAYDEN: With your father.

RUBIN PINSKI: Father only.

SANDY HAYDEN: And how many-- how many were in your family?

RUBIN PINSKI: Four.

SANDY HAYDEN: Four. Can you tell-- were you the oldest, or--

RUBIN PINSKI: No, I was the third one.

SANDY HAYDEN: The third one.

---

[22] Yiddish folkshul. Secular Yiddish schools, founded on the ideals of Bundist (Jewish Socialist) thinkers like Esther Frumkin. Such schools belonged to Di Tsentrale Yidishe Shul-Organizatsye (Central Yiddish School Organization), or TSYSHO, which by the 1920s consisted of 219 institutions containing 24,000 students, mainly in Eastern Poland. See David Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh, 2005), 83-97.

RUBIN PINSKI: My sister was the oldest. I had a brother and myself, and I had a younger sister, which perished in the-- in 1942.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And, um, what-- what did your father do as a profession?

RUBIN PINSKI: He used to buy grain from the farmers, grain and, uh, other things and sell it in, uh, a bigger wholesale. He used-- in other words, he used to buy it from the farmers to sell it in the-- in the bigger-- in the bigger wholesale.[23]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And so did he sell it-- did he sell it in-- in the town, or did he take it to the bigger cities?

RUBIN PINSKI: No. He sold it in the town to someone who used to buy from everybody. Also, he used to deal with-- what was it called? Mushrooms. Dried mushrooms like-- and all kinds of-- all sorts of the-- the farmers used to sell in the city.

SANDY HAYDEN: So he used to deal with all sorts of produce then?

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: And your mother? Can you--

RUBIN PINSKI: Just a housewife.[24]

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. Can you-- can you describe your mother? What you remember.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. Very educated and, uh, like a Jewish mother, used to just oblige-- do the housework and, uh, and raise the children. Like a real good Jewish mother.

SANDY HAYDEN: Good Jewish mother, yeah. And did you have quite a bit of family, cousins, and aunts, and uncles?

---

[23] A bigger wholesale. Middleman occupations, pursued by Jews for centuries, were part of a peasant-Jewish economic-based symbiosis. However, these arrangements were beginning to be challenged and displaced owing to anti-Jewish boycotts and the creation of peasant cooperatives.

[24] Housewife. It was actually more typical for women in Jewish society to work at market stalls or small-scale manufacturing. See Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, 1990), 8-49; Dynner, "Those who Stayed: Jewish Women, Tradition, & Traditionalism in Eastern Europe," *Volume in Honor of the Opening of the Polin Museum of Jewish History in Poland*, 295-312.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. Yes, we had. Um, not far from our house were my-- my mother's sister and her family, they all perished. And my father's family was in another city. It's called Kosov[25] oh, about 100 kilometers from us towards, uh, Pinsk.
And he had a brother, and sisters, and a mother. As a matter of fact, I was only once in my life in that town where my father comes from.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: I was only eight, nine years old.

SANDY HAYDEN: So they did--

RUBIN PINSKI: I remember very vaguely about that town.

SANDY HAYDEN: So you were much-- really, you had much more contact with your mother's side of the family.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: And did you-- you used to spend all holidays and celebrations?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, we used to get together on holidays. And sometimes in the middle of the week, we used to-- I used to play with my cousins like a normal-- normal way of--

SANDY HAYDEN: Of growing up.

RUBIN PINSKI: A fun way of growing up, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: And-- the-- the other 40% of people who lived in the town, who were they? Were they Poles?[26]

RUBIN PINSKI: A lot of them were farmers. And some were the, uh-- the administration-- the Polish administration like policeman-- there was a magistrat. It's like a city hall here. And the,

---

[25] Kossov (Pol. Kossow). Currently Kossavo, Belarus. 94 km. from Pinsk. The main slaughter of Kossov Jews occurred on July 25, 1942, but some were rescued by partisans. A harrowing account appears in *Pinkas kehilat Kosow Poleski* (Jerusalem, 1945); trans. at https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Kosava/kos011.html#Page21.

[26] Poles. Citizens of Poland and other countries who identified as ethnically Polish. Ethnic Poles, who apparently formed a slim majority in western Belarus, were often favored in appointments to official administrative positions.

uh, the mayor[27] was a Pole. And the secretaries were Poles. And, uh, there was-- there wasn't a very big administration in our town. But, uh, en-- en-- enough Poles to-- to collect taxes and-- and look after all the, uh--

SANDY HAYDEN: Administration.

RUBIN PINSKI: Administration of the city, yeah.

SANDY HAYDEN: So that's really all that they did there, and the Jews were-- the Jews were involved in all sorts of other professions .

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yeah, the Jews were all kinds of professions. Shoe-- shoemakers, fixing shoes, and tailors, a lot of tailors, and, uh, storekeepers, like groceries and selling fabric. That was also developed a lot in our town, selling leather, leather soles and leather-- the shoes were made by hand.[28]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Really? Everybody's shoes were made by hand.

RUBIN PINSKI: Practically. There was only one store-- while I was growing up, I remember started Butter Shoes. And one store of Butter Shoes opened up, but until then, there was no stores, no shoes ready- made shoes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: All made by hand.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And-- and-- um, I suppose that there were no Jews who were farmers or landowners[29] around the town.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, there were a few also had some farms, not big ones, small-- small farms.

---

[27] Mayor of Zdzęcioł (Zhetl). Probably Mayor Henryk Poszwiński. He was arrested by the Soviet NKVD near the beginning of the Soviet occupation along with school principals, councilmen, and clergy, imprisoned in Nowogródek, and never heard from again. See Jerzy Robert Nowak, *Przemilczane Zbrodnie* (Warsaw, 1999), 113–115.

[28] By hand. Polish Jews were concentrated in crafts (42.2 percent in 1931) and trade (36.6 percent). In Zhetl, where artisans constituted 64 percent of the Jewish community, there was a Craftsmen Association (est. in 1930).

[29] Jewish landowners. Historically, Jews had been prevented from buying land, but at this point Jewish landownership was technically legal. Only 4.3 percent of Poland's Jews were involved in agriculture (1931), compared with 61.4 percent of the general population.

SANDY HAYDEN: So they were allowed to own the land, and--

RUBIN PINSKI: And they were doing the same as other farmers, but not too many.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: There were in the villages[30] around the town, there were quite a few Jews in the farming, like in the other-- peasant, non-Jews, peasants, they also owned a couple of hectares[31] of land and lived from that.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But in the town, there was--

SANDY HAYDEN: mainly-

RUBIN PINSKI: Mostly the Jews were like professionals,[32] like shoemakers, and tailors.

SANDY HAYDEN: And all that sort of thing

RUBIN PINSKI: And a lot of Jews were just studying- sitting and studying the Torah.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah. And what does-- what were the relationships like between the Jews and the Poles in the town?

RUBIN PINSKI: A matter fact, the relationship was very good.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah?

RUBIN PINSKI: Especially with the White Russians[33] in our town. The white Russians were very nice to us. The Poles themselves were antisemitic.

---

[30] Village Jews. Rural Jews always formed a minority of Jews in Poland. Historically, they were isolated Jewish families who leased a village or roadside tavern and distillery. After the abolition of the noble liquor monopoly (1898) village Jews plied more diverse trades, including agricultural.

[31] Hectares. One hectare contains about 2.47 acres; an acre is about 0.405 hectare.

[32] Professionals. Rubin seems to mean artisans here.

[33] White Russians refers to ethnic Belarussians.

SANDY HAYDEN: They were?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: So you experienced that right from--

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: An early age.

RUBIN PINSKI: Since Hitler came to power in 1933,[34] the, uh, Poles became different. They were already antisemitic.

SANDY HAYDEN: Can you-- can you remember in what way they became different?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, in the last years in 1937, '38, I remember they used to come from bigger cities, young Poles and carrying placards saying, don't buy from Jews and, uh, buy from Poles only.[35] And the antisemitism started already to grow.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And do you remember-- do you remember talking about it as a young boy or hearing your father and mother talk about it. Were they worried about it at all?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes, we all-- we knew already what actually from the papers, from the Jewish papers we used to get from, uh, the Haynt[36] like it was, uh, produced in, uh, Warsaw. We used to get these papers. And we heard what was going on in Germany, what the Germans did to the Jews. So we were already scared.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. You were worried that that could start happening in Poland also.

---

[34] Since Hitler came to power. The rise of the Nazis to power in neighboring Germany, with its attendant anti-Jewish policies, often served as inspiration for Polish right-wing nationalist movements whose proponents hoped to dislodge Jews from the Polish economy in the way that Hitler's regime had done.

[35] "don't buy from Jews". About half of all mercantile occupations were held by Jews at this time in Poland. The anti-Jewish boycotts, sponsored by the right-wing nationalist Endeks, intensified in the wake of the death of Marshal Józef Piłsudski (1935). Their physical enforcement included intimidation of Jews and their peasant customers alike, and sometimes led to pogroms.

[36] Haynt. Popular Yiddish daily newspaper founded by Shmuel Yankev Yatskan in 1906, which took on a Zionist orientation after the First World War. See Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov, " '*Di Haynt-mishpokhe*': Study for a Group Picture", in Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet, eds., *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis* (Leiden, 2015), 252-71.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, we were very worried and scared in the last few years before the war broke out.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And even though the Jews were the majority in your town, you still, the Poles were still openly antisemitic. They weren't scared of--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yeah.

SANDY HAYDEN: --of the fact

RUBIN PINSKI: No, they were-- they were very antisemitic openly, but not actually not the local Poles,[37] always--

SANDY HAYDEN: Oh, always Poles that came by.

RUBIN PINSKI: Came by. And they also planted, uh, antisemitism into the Poles in our town. But with the White Russians, neighbors, we lived in very peaceful. And they were very nice.

SANDY HAYDEN: So when-- when did all of that start to change?

RUBIN PINSKI: The last couple of years, uh, before the war started. That-- worse and worse and worse always.

SANDY HAYDEN: And with-- with the- White Russians and the Poles in the town also or still just the people who were passing through?

RUBIN PINSKI: The Poles. And some-- not too many White Russians became already a little bit also with a cold shoulder toward the Jews. They were already, uh, showing antisemitic, uh, tendencies.

SANDY HAYDEN: And, um, can you-- can you describe what happened, um, in 1939 when-- when--

[37] Not actually the local Poles. Picketing, anti-Jewish boycotts, and pogroms were often organized by outside agitators, who were members of the Endek-inspired Stronnictwo Narodowe (National Front), rather than locals. However, younger peasants were increasingly educated and frustrated by unemployment and the perceived inability to break into mercantile occupations, and were more easily influenced by right-wing nationalist groups.

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes, well, when the war broke out, when the Germans attacked Poland, the Poles, a lot of Polish, uh, soldiers were running through our town towards Russia. They were escaping from the Germans. And, uh, the war broke out on the 1st of September, 1939.[38] And I think it was the 17th of September the Russians came in from-- from Minsk, from the other side and occupied our town. And we became under the Russian government and the Russian, uh, occupation.[39]

SANDY HAYDEN: And did things start to change very much at that time?

RUBIN PINSKI: Changed-- it changed very-- very rapidly, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: How old were you, um, when the--

RUBIN PINSKI: In 1939?

SANDY HAYDEN: 1939. You mind me asking you?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, I was only 15 years old.

SANDY HAYDEN: 15 years old.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. So you were a young-- you were a young boy then?

RUBIN PINSKI: Very young boy.

SANDY HAYDEN: Do you remember-- do you remember some of the feelings that you had when-- when-- when the Russians occupied your town?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, when the Russians came, I mean, we-- we accepted them with open arms.
SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. You mean rather than have the Germans--

---

[38] Sept. 1, 1939. The German invasion of Poland, which was followed by a Soviet invasion 16 days later.

[39] Russian occupation. The Soviets invaded Poland on September 17, in accordance with the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (signed on August 23, 1939). The Soviet Union occupied eastern Poland until June, 1941, when Hitler invaded those areas. Jews often viewed the Soviet occupation as favorable to a potential German occupation. Belarusians and Ukrainians gave Soviet troops warm welcomes, as well. See Jan Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, 2002); Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky (eds.), *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939-46* (London: Palgrave, 1991), esp. 60-76.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right. We knew what the Germans did to the Jews. And they-- they were actually, uh, liberators. And they behaved very nice except some of the-- from the rich Jews took away the-- their stores. Anybody who had a fabric store, or other kinds of stores, they confiscated it.[40] But they let the people work for them, and they found jobs for everybody. And life went on fine.

SANDY HAYDEN: But you were hearing-- you were hearing reports of what was going on in Germany. Can you tell me what some of the things that you heard in--

RUBIN PINSKI: They used to hear only from the paper what the Germans behaved-- did bad to the Germans Jews, also to the, uh-- when we heard the trouble before the Russians came in. We knew what's going more or less on in the paper. But the Russians concealed from us everything. We didn't know what's going on in the other half of Poland.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really, once they occupied--

RUBIN PINSKI: Once they occupied, we didn't know anything, just-- they told us what they wanted to tell us.

SANDY HAYDEN: So did-- did you feel at any time that you and your family would like to escape or to go to another part of Europe? Or did you feel that you would just stay their for the meantime?

RUBIN PINSKI: Even if you felt-- but we couldn't do anything--

SANDY HAYDEN: You didn't have a chance.

RUBIN PINSKI: --because the Russian policy was you, uh, if you are not with us, you are against us. In other words, if you want to go away, you are-- you are our enemy.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So that was dangerous for you too.

RUBIN PINSKI: So we couldn't even think of escaping or going anywhere then. We didn't have the money to go to. There was no-- nowhere to go.

SANDY HAYDEN: But when the Russians came to occupy Zdzięcioł, you must have been at you-- at yeshiva in the neighboring town? Or had you come back in town.

[40] Confiscated. The Soviet authorities sought to compel residents in newly acquired territories to abandon capitalism and adopt Communism through such confiscations.

RUBIN PINSKI: No, I came back to our town, because the, uh, Russians, they didn't exactly ah-- they didn't say you can't do it, but so-- all the religious yeshivas disappeared somehow.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: They, uh, officially, they didn't say you cannot go to synagogue, because the Jews went to synagogue while, uh-- while they were in occupation. But somehow, the Jews alone were afraid to do it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So-- so yeshivas closed down?[41]

RUBIN PINSKI: There was no-- no more yeshivas at all. And then we-- we um, had to go to Russian schools to learn Russian.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So that's what you did when you went back home.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's what I did, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: So you were at-- at a school with Russians and Poles. And it was now a mix-- a mixed school.

RUBIN PINSKI: Mixed, but we-- we taught the subjects that are only Russian. We started a new language altogether.

SANDY HAYDEN: And how was-- how was it going to a school like that, because it seems to be very different from what you were used to?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, uh, but we-- we could learn, because the language itself was, uh, was a lot easier to catch, because the White-- White Russian is similar to Russian. Polish is also a bit similar in a way. And ah, the-- the writing and reading was harder, but the speaking, we caught on very fast.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And how was it to be in a class with, um, with other children, with the Russian and Polish children? Did you get on with them, or was there antisemitism?

[41] Yeshivas closed down. The Soviet regime's anti-religious policy involved closures of numerous synagogues, yeshivas, and churches alike in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Anti-religious campaigns intensified after Stalin's ascendancy in 1926. See Zvi Gitelman, *Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union* (Bloomington, 2001), 78-82.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. No, no, there was no antisemitism, because, uh, they-- they knew that uh, the Russians in the Russian government, there was no antisemitism at all.[42] Everybody is the same. And actually, they used to, uh, punish for antisemitic, uh, the writing-- sayings. They, uh, used to-- people were afraid to be antisemitic.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really? And the Poles also then were afraid in school to be antisemitic.

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, actually, the Poles, the few Poles that were in our town disappeared,[43] the ones that were in the administration before. And the-- the Polish farmers behaved like, uh, like they have to behave under the Russian occupation.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So how many years was-- were you under occupation by the Russian forces?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, from 1939, from September 1939 till the outbreak of the war at the 22nd of June, 1941, when Hitler attacked Russia.
SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So that was two years.

RUBIN PINSKI: Nearly two years.

SANDY HAYDEN: Right, nearly two years, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: Rougly two years, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: And in a way, it sounds like your life didn't change too much in those tears. The everyday living didn't change too much.

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, it did change in, uh, in uh, the way that, from one government to the other, which, uh, the Russians had started to, uh, put on us-- teach-- teach us-- teach us their ways that you cannot be in the, uh, dealings or any, uh, you cannot own a store. You can-- you can't, uh, be for your own. Everything has to be for the government.

---

[42] In the Russian government there was no antisemitism. On January 12, 1931, Joseph Stalin declared, "in the U.S.S.R. antisemitism is punishable with the utmost severity of the law as a phenomenon deeply hostile to the Soviet system. Under U.S.S.R. law active antisemites are liable to the death penalty." Published in *Pravda,* No. 329 (November 30, 1936). However, antisemitism flourished in other guises, particularly in the post-WWII period. See Gitelman, *Century of Ambivalence*, esp. 117; Joshua Rubenstein, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom* (New Haven, 2005).

[43] Poles disappeared. Of the 880,000 residents of western Belarus deported beginning on February 8, 1940, 52 percent (457,600) were ethnic Poles. See Shalom Cholawski, *The Jews of Bielorussia during World War II* (Amsterdam, 1998), 27-8.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Now what you have to work for the government.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So it was more Marxist or socialist.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right. They tried to teach us. But it wasn't so easy to absorb in the beginning.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, so that was a bit difficult for-- for all of you.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right, but it was at least safe.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And was your father able to continue doing what he had been doing?

RUBIN PINSKI: No.

SANDY HAYDEN: What-- what-- what did he-- what happened to his work then?

RUBIN PINSKI: He, uh, he used to buy, well, not exactly the same way as to-- before used to buy direct from the farmers and-- and sell it. And here he had to work for the government. He used to buy also from the farmers, but, uh, like in a cooperative sort of. He used to write down everything he buys and, uh, pay out the farmers. He worked for the government, in other words.

SANDY HAYDEN: And how-- how was that? Was that a big change for him?

RUBIN PINSKI: He got used to it fast.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. But it was-- it was all right.

RUBIN PINSKI: Before that change, yeah. But we got used to it.
SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. Did that mean that, materially, that you had less in your family than you were used to?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, uh, a little bit less, but it wasn't too bad. It was enough to get by.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So food, and clothing, and shoes, and all that sort of thing during the Russian occupation wasn't-- was that-- was not too much of a problem. You never--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, it was a problem, because it never brought in anything. They took away it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Anything that was produced, they took away from our town and sent it into Russia. But, uh, they never brought anything. If they did bring something, you had to stand in, uh, a queue for-- for hours to get it. But we didn't complain. It was-- they let us live. That was-- that was the main good thing about the Russian occupation.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So you were just hoping that that would continue right until--

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: But then in 1941--

RUBIN PINSKI: 1941, when Hitler attacked, uh, Russia, our city was taken by the Germans officially the 30th of June, 1941.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: That was eight days later. And in the eight days, the, uh, there were some battles close to our town with the, uh, the, uh, Russians who were running away with the Germans who were coming as parachutists. They-- actually they didn't take-- the Germans didn't occupy our town as a full army. But, uh, they, uh, they parachuted behind the town and attacked all the, uh, running away trucks and, uh, tanks from the Russians.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So there was--

RUBIN PINSKI: Eight days.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really, so there was fighting around your town for-- for eight days.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, was fighting about eight days.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And what was it like during those eight days.

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, it was very bad. The, uh, the Jews, uh, not only Jews the whole population couldn't get out of the houses, hiding in the houses. And when they did get out there were planes shooting over the head, the German planes. In other words, uh, most people were hiding.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And you must-- do you rem-- I mean, you must have been very frightened about it.

RUBIN PINSKI: Very frightened, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Do you remember the feeling?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, yes, I remember. I used to hide even in the basement.

SANDY HAYDEN: With your whole family?

RUBIN PINSKI: The whole family for days till-- till the, uh, shooting got a little bit, uh, eased.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And during those eight days, do you-- I mean, were you worried about what was going to happen now that the Russians had left?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, the uh, we knew that it's not so good that the Germans occupied. The, uh, living will be, a bad horror. We knew what to expect.[44]

SANDY HAYDEN: You did know?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Was this-- how hard-- how-- how did you know this information, because you--

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, we knew what they do-- they did in Germany or in Poland. So we knew what to expect. And so it happened.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Can you-- can you tell us what happened from the time the Germans occupied?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. The German soldiers, they came in the town. They-- they were very careful walking by houses singularly. They, uh, first came in without-- without, uh, cars, or tanks, or just occupied the city. And, uh, immediately, they started, um, they started to ask the, uh, some of the, uh, Polish or White-- or the-- or the non-Jewish population where are-- where the Jews are. And they asked for food from the Jews and asked for bicycles.

SANDY HAYDEN: And you gave it all to them?

[44] We knew what to expect. This seems to contradict an earlier claim that the Jews did not know about conditions and events in German-occupied Poland. It may be that by this time rumors had reached Jews in the Soviet-occupied zone.

RUBIN PINSKI: Everything.

SANDY HAYDEN: They had to, yeah.
RUBIN PINSKI: They had no choice.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And they had-- right away, the Germans had some of the, uh, of the town's inhabitants. Some of them were already with them, helping them, uh, showing them the Jewish, uh, houses.[45] And they went and robbed, and beat, and uh, and-- the three days after the, uh, they had already with them some, um, placards hanging out in, uh, three languages-- in German, in Russian, and, uh, and uh, Polish. All de-- decrees against Jews.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really? Yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: That the Jews, uh, cannot walk on the sidewalk. They cannot, uh, possess, uh, fur coats. They cannot-- they cannot have any gold. They have to give it away to the Germans-- and a long list of decrees against Jews.
So we knew right away the trouble started. And, uh, slowly, the Jews started to come out of the-- of the hiding. And-- and, uh, the, uh, Germans gave every day new orders to, uh, collect food and collect clothes for them. And then in the, uh, third week was in July the 5th.

SANDY HAYDEN: At that time, had they, um, had there been any brutality? Had there been-- had they killed any Jews during those three weeks? Or had they just beaten them up?

RUBIN PINSKI: They killed-- they made like, um, 6 o'clock was curfew.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And nobody could go-- get out of the house at 6 o'clock in the evening. It wasn't evening yet. So in several cases, some Jews walked to one house to the other.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really?

---

[45] Helping them, showing them the Jewish houses. While Polish responses to the German occupation ranged from heroic rescue of Jews to outright collaboration with Germans, Poles in the Belarusian zone often denounced Jews in order to curry favor and compete with local Belarusians for positions within the German administration. See Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine* (NY, 2000), 142.

RUBIN PINSKI: After six, and were shot right way. In other words, non-Jews weren't shot. But Jews are shot for-- for that. That was the-- several Jews were shot that way. But then on the 15th of July, they, uh, they uh, ordered to make Judenrat.[46] In other words, they picked 10 of the "best" Jews from town and-- and ordered them to have a Judenrat and have a Jewish police.[47] And, uh, then the, uh, the next day, the--

SANDY HAYDEN: Do you know-- you knew some of the people who were elected to the Judenrat?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. Actually, the "best", uh, the "best", uh, people from the city. One was a lawyer called Alter Dvoretsky[48] was a young man. He was very capable. He was at the head of the Judenrat and, uh, several of religious Jews who--

SANDY HAYDEN: So they-- they were all good people.

RUBIN PINSKI: All-- a better class of people. As a matter of fact, the rabbi for our town was also included in that. And the men on the 15th of July,[49] it was only two weeks after they occup-- they came in, they, uh, sent the police to tell all the Jews to come on the marketplace, to get on the marketplace from the age of 16 to 60.
Actually, they said officially 16 to 60, but whenever they caught younger ones, they also pushed to the marketplace. And, uh, on that-- on that, uh, marketplace, the Gestapo came in. They had a-- a table and the market chairs. And they had a big list of people who they called and said, anybody who will be called out should go forward.

---

[46] Judenrat. Jewish councils that were formed by the Nazis and compelled to carry out Nazi directives, usually composed of prominent Jewish citizens. The record of Judenrat members is mixed. Many are judged complicit in the murder of the Jewish population, but some seemed to do their utmost to stave off deportations through economic productiveness and, in the case of Zhetl, organized resistance. See Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: the Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (Lincoln, 1972).
[47] Jewish police. Jews appointed by the Judenrat and compelled to carry out Nazi directives that included abetting deportations and mass killings. Like Judenrat members, their record is mixed, ranging from repeated extortion of fellow Jews to attempts to aid them. Many became Jewish police to save themselves and their families; most were executed after helping to deport their fellow Jews. See anon., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police* (Bloomington, IA, 2014), tr. Samuel Schalkowsky, Introduction by Sam Kassow; Katarzyna Person, *Warsaw Ghetto Police: The Jewish Order Service during the Nazi Occupation* (NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), tr. Zygmunt Nowak-Soliński; Calel Perchodnik, *Am I A Murderer?* (Boulder, 1996).
[48] Alter Dvoretsky. An attorney and public figure who was active in *Poalei Tsiyon* before the war. Elected to the Judenrat, Dvoretsky took advantage of his position to acquire weapons. On April 28, 1941, he fled to the forest and joined up with non-Jewish partisans. See "The Underground in the Zhetl Ghetto" (Shalom Gerling in Baruch Kaplinski, ed., *Pinkes Zhetl* (Tel Aviv, 1957), 372; tr. A. Patt, https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007243.

[49] 15th of July. Rubin seems to mean July 23 or 25, 1941.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And that way, they took away 120 people.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. What sort of people were they? All men or--

RUBIN PINSKI: All men and the better-- the better class of people from the city, and the-- and the uh, the richer and, uh, more learned, and they packed them in trucks.

SANDY HAYDEN: How do you-- how do you think they got that list? Who gave them the list?

RUBIN PINSKI: The, uh, the list was helped by the, uh, local, by local collaborators to the Germans.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Who knew the people in the-- the Jewish people.

RUBIN PINSKI: They knew everybody. As a matter of fact, in Tarbut, in the Hebrew school, there was a janitor, and he could speak Yiddish just as good as any Jew.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And he was right away with the Germans and gave out all the Jews who were, uh, known in the-- in the town . And, uh, they took-- they said they are going to take this, uh, 120 people to work in Nowogrodek.[50] Nowogrodek is a bigger city than ours about 38 kilometers away. But we found out later that they were shot in Nowogrodek.

SANDY HAYDEN: And when did you find that out?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, we found out from-- from peasants, which saw it.

SANDY HAYDEN: So that was the first really bad atrocity that--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. That was only two weeks after they entered our town. And, uh, decrees or all kinds of, uh, every day they demanded from us something else, the Germans. They, uh, or-- we organized work like there was, uh, a highway the Russians started and didn't finish. So they,

[50] Nowogrodek. A town near Zhetl that was home to many rabbinic luminaries and a burgeoning modern Jewish culture. Massacres of Jews followed a pattern similar to that in Zhetl: the murder of prominent Jewish citizens (August 26, 1941) and subsequent large-scale massacres (three). See Yehuda Bauer, "Nowogròdek- The Story of a Shtetl", *Yad Vashem Studies* 35:2 (2007), 5-40.

uh, took men who could-- well, they were a little stronger to work on that highway. And I was also, uh, working on that highway.
SANDY HAYDEN: Because then you were a young man. You were 16, 17.

RUBIN PINSKI: I was young and strong, and--

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: And I wanted to live, and they gave out Schein.[51] Schein means some kind of a document. There was-- it went by the column more the people who were stronger hard workers had a red Schein. Some had green Schein. And, uh, the people-- the Jews were very, uh, wanted very much to get Scheins. So--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So you had-- you had a red one?

RUBIN PINSKI: I have a good Schein, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: You had a good one.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: How were you chosen to-- to go and work?

RUBIN PINSKI: I, uh, actually, they were asking for volunteers, and, uh, I wanted for this job, so I worked on the-- on the, uh, building that highway.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And your brothers?

RUBIN PINSKI: My brother wasn't with me. He was, uh-- he was already taken-- before the atta-- the Germans attacked, he was taken to the Russian Army.

SANDY HAYDEN: How-- who-- who took him? Was he conscripted to the Russian Army?

RUBIN PINSKI: No, no. He was already of age.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh, oh, I see.

---

[51] *Schein*. A work permit (lit. "paper"), primarily for artisans and doctors. By 1942, many Jews believed that their only hope of survival was to obtain these work permits, which declared that the holder was required by the German authorities. A holder could also register his spouse and up to two children. See Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945* (NY, 1987), 176-9.

RUBIN PINSKI: He was born in 19--

SANDY HAYDEN: So he was in--

RUBIN PINSKI: 20. He was 18 years old, and he was taken legally to the Russian Army.

SANDY HAYDEN: To the Russian Army. Uh-huh. So had you-- did you keep-- manage to keep correspondence with him during that time?

RUBIN PINSKI: It wasn't very-- it was right before the war. All we heard-- we had only one letter from him that he is going into-- deep into Russia. And since then we were apart for six years.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really? So you didn't know what had happened to you.

RUBIN PINSKI: We found him in 1946.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So that was-- that must have been very hard for your mother and father and all of you.

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: It would be really--

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right.

SANDY HAYDEN: And your sister? And--

RUBIN PINSKI: The sister was the whole time with me together.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And then your younger brother.

RUBIN PINSKI: No, my younger sister.

SANDY HAYDEN: Your younger sister, sorry.

RUBIN PINSKI: I didn't tell my younger brother. She perished in, uh, in 1942 in August together the parents.

SANDY HAYDEN: So your father-- when the Germans came, your father stopped, um, working, and--

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: You were the only one that was really, um, working on the highway.

RUBIN PINSKI: I was the only one, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: So-- what-- what-- what were you getting paid in any way?

RUBIN PINSKI: No. No.

SANDY HAYDEN: Did they feed you?

RUBIN PINSKI: No, they didn't pay us anything.
SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Uh, the-- the, uh, in 1941 on November, the Germans told us to leave our houses and go into a ghetto.[52] They made a ghetto. The Jews themselves had to make a fence, a wired fence, around it. And at that time, uh, we could only take with us whatever we could--

SANDY HAYDEN: Carry.

RUBIN PINSKI: Carry.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: And it happened that we had a big-- very big garden and used to have enough potatoes to put it in a big hole covered with earth and hide it for the next spring. That was done actually in normal times too.

---

[52] Ghetto. Restricted living area for Jews, established in Zhetl on February 22, 1942 (not November, 1941). After 120 prominent Jews were executed (July 23/25, 1941) and 400 Jews were sent to the Dworzec labor camp (December 15, 1941), the remaining Jews of the town were confined to a ghetto whose inhabitants grew to around 4,500 due to an influx of around 1,400 Jewish refugees. The first major massacre occurred on April 30, 1942, when Ukrainian, Belarusian, and possibly Lithuanian auxiliary police surrounded the ghetto, escorted Jews to the main square, performed a "selection," and murdered around 1200 in the Kurpiesze (Kupyash) forest. The Germans liquidated the ghetto on August 6-8. See Shmuel Spector, Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust* (New York, 2001), 1498.

SANDY HAYDEN: Right.

RUBIN PINSKI: So we-- all the potato that we got from, uh, before the winter came, we bur-- we buried it in the garden. And, um, so in Spring of 1942 in the ghetto, I had that chance I-- to open that hole and--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --bring in the potatoes in the ghetto so we could have--

SANDY HAYDEN: Some food?

RUBIN PINSKI: Some food for a while. The whole-- the whole, uh, all the inhabitants of that house, we shared. We used to bring in like, uh, hiding it in-- in a way that the Germans shouldn't see that they carried potatoes in this--

SANDY HAYDEN: How did you-- how did you do that?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, went into the night, at night, and brought it in. The houses that the Germans confiscated was-- in the front of the house was some sort of, uh-- uh, a *list* [letter] that, uh, that this house is confiscated by the Germans. In the front, they couldn't get in, but from the back--

SANDY HAYDEN: You could?

RUBIN PINSKI: --you could get in. But it didn't do anything. A lot of Jewish houses were occupied by-- by, uh, local, uh, non-Jews. But some of them were still empty-- our house was still empty standing there.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So you could sneak in at night.

RUBIN PINSKI: I used to sneak in every night and bring a little bit of potatoes that I could carry myself.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And that's-- that's how we could live for a while.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm And what were the living conditions like in the ghetto?

RUBIN PINSKI: Very bad.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Can you-- can you describe it a little bit?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, they packed in in the house, in a little house, about 800 square feet or 900 square feet. They packed in about 60 people, one on top of the other.

SANDY HAYDEN: And that's how you and your family lived-- lived with another--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: --50 people or so.

RUBIN PINSKI: In the basement and on top on the-- under the roof, people were one on top of the other, and the conditions in the ghetto was very bad, dirty, and no food.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And-- and lice also.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: And what-- what did the people, the leaders of the ghetto, of the Judenrat, were they fair in the way they--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, they were very fair, but they were also-- they had the same, uh, goals we did. They were also afraid of-- the Germans used them just to get their way.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, this Alt-- this Alter Dvoretsky is from the Judenrat. He organized a partisan[53] group in the ghetto. And anybody who could be of help-- he used everybody that could be of help. Only the young people he mobilized. And myself was working in the highway, building the highway. I had a chance to bring into the ghetto parts of, uh, weapons.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

---

[53] Partisan group. Belarus had the largest number of partisans in Eastern Europe (up to 374,000 by 1944), mainly Soviet Soldiers who had been cut-off by the German army. An estimated 12-15,000 of the roughly 23,000 Jews who escaped into the Belarusian forests fought as partisans, while the rest attempted to survive in hiding. Many Zhetl Jews joined the Hirsch Kaplinski and Yehezkel Atlas units, which operated in the Lipczynska (Białowieża) and Naliboki forests. Others joined the Pobieda, Borba, Kovalov, and Bielski groups. See Bauer, "Jewish Resistance in the Ukraine and Belarus during the Holocaust," 502; idem., "Nowogródek- The Story of a Shtetl", 23; Cholawski, *The Jews of Bielorussia*, 218; "Partisans," in Israel Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (NY, 1990), 3:1113.

RUBIN PINSKI: So we used to tie it in bundles of wood.

SANDY HAYDEN: So they wouldn't see.

RUBIN PINSKI: To carry it in. And, uh, I used to take chances to bring in parts of rifles and ammunition. And from time to time, the Germans used to check everybody-- every bundle of--

SANDY HAYDEN: Wood?

RUBIN PINSKI: Of wood, or on the person. Anybody that was found with something was shot right away.

SANDY HAYDEN: So you were lucky you never--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, I was lucky.

SANDY HAYDEN: you were never caught. It must have been frightening each time.

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes, I mean--

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, it's a risk.

RUBIN PINSKI: Too many risks with my life all the time.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, yeah. So you joined the partisan group in the ghetto.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yeah. In the ghetto--

SANDY HAYDEN: 194-- 1941?

RUBIN PINSKI: 1941.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: We organized the-- in the basement, we used to put together the uh rifles.

SANDY HAYDEN: And did you-- did you use them? What-- what-- what--

RUBIN PINSKI: No, I didn't have a chance to use them, and practically, nobody had a chance, only-- only a few young boys, uh, were, uh, fighting against them in the second-- not in the

second time when the Germans killed the Jews. The Germans killed, uh, about half of the Jewish population in the ghettos they killed in 1941 30th of April.[54]

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, I-- can you--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Can you tell me a little bit about--
RUBIN PINSKI: That was a very bad day. Then my parents were-- got killed killed and my sister.[55] Uh, it was the 30th of April, 1941,[56] and the Germans, with the help naturally of the Ukrainian police,[57] also there were a few White Russian police also, surrounded the ghetto. And, uh, very early in the morning, about 5 o'clock in the morning, they started to knock on the windows and scream judenraus! And, uh, they told us to gather in that, uh, it was an old uh cem-- Jewish cemetery near the, uh, the synagogues and told us to gather there, all the Jews should gather.
And I came in there. We, uh-- they told us to stand in families, each family together, all the families. So I had that red Schein, which was considered to be a good Schein. And I had a friend who also had a good Schein, so I told him to take my sister, saying that his wife and I wanted to rescue my family, my father and mother.
I remember they started to select the, uh, I showed him the Schein. So he said, "recht",[58] to the right, which was good. And right after, a couple steps from this Gestapo man, stood other

[54] The Germans killed about half the population of the ghetto. On April 30, 1942, around 1200 Zhetl Jews were murdered. On August 6-8, 1942, another one thousand ghetto inhabitants were executed in the Kurpiesze forest. Many of the remaining inhabitants were executed in the Jewish cemetery; but around 600 escaped into the surrounding forest and attempted to join partisans. See Spector and Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, 1498 (gives a higher estimate of 800); Cholawski, *Jews of Bielorussia*, 218.

[55] Shortly after this, Rubin notes that his sister was temporarily spared thanks to his friend's willingness to claim she was his wife.

[56] 30th of April, 1941. Actually, 1942, when around 1200 Zhetl Jews were murdered. There is a growing literature on history and memory in Holocaust testimony. For a pioneering work see Berel Lang, *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory* (Ithaca, 1999).

[57] Ukrainian police. Ukrainian civilians who volunteered for Nazi auxiliary units and participated in round-ups and mass killings. Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis should be understood in the context of prior Soviet policies towards Ukrainians, which included artificial famines in which around 3,000,000 Ukrainians died, as well as hopes for German support of Ukrainian statehood.
[58] *Recht*. "right"; signifying the queue with more able-bodied or manually-skilled Jews whose labor could be exploited by the Nazi regime.

Gestapo people, looked at the Schein, and they let me go through and parents chased "links",[59] in other words--

SANDY HAYDEN: To-- to the bad line.

RUBIN PINSKI: To-- to get killed. They said to resettle for labor[60] or something else, but they took them behind the town.

SANDY HAYDEN: And there was nothing that you could do.

RUBIN PINSKI: Nothing I could do. And my sister went with that, uh, my friend who had a good Schein too, and she was, uh, rescued.

SANDY HAYDEN: Is that-- that day must be a very hard day for you to remember.

RUBIN PINSKI: A very bad day, yeah. They killed half of the Jewish population in one day, and then they shortened the ghetto. They cut it in half. In other words, they, uh, took all the edges around the ghetto, and they told the Jews-- for the Jews to put an electric fence closer inside. And I continued to work on that highway.

SANDY HAYDEN: And-- and the Jews, your family and the other Jews, were they taken? What happened to them?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, they were taken. They were led through the streets. They were taken behind the town, and forced to undress, and the, uh, the graves were already dug. It was already ready, and they shot 50 people at a time right-- right on top of the grave. They were all killed.

SANDY HAYDEN: What went through your mind then? Did you feel like you wanted to avenge their deaths?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, that's the only thing was in my mind to avenge. Well, I never believed I'll stay alive. But at least I should be able to avenge for the-- for what they did.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Something that-- has that stayed-- the feeling of it stayed with you?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, I still-- the feeling never changed. Well, I can't feel exactly the same as I felt then, but I, uh, had that feeling all the time.

---

[59] *Links*. to the “left”, i.e., destined for death.
[60] Resettle for labor- a euphemism for deportation to open air killing sites or death camps.

SANDY HAYDEN: And-- and so what happened after that day?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, the, uh, the ghetto was shortened. The Judenrat actually was also killed. They told to choose a new Judenrat. And, uh, they kept us alive till August-- August 6th, 1942, and, uh, August 6th, 1942 happened the same thing.[61]
The-- the Germans and the Ukrainian police surrounded-- surrounded the, uh, the ghetto and chased everybody out in the marketplace. But, uh, at that time, I didn't-- I didn't run anymore to the-- on the marketplace. We were hiding.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Who-- who is we? You? You and your sister.

RUBIN PINSKI: I, and my sister, and my cousin, two cousins of mine. We were hiding in a-- we-- we actually dug a hiding place under the floor. But being so close to the, uh, ghetto gate of the gendarmerie was the Germans where, the other side of the ghetto, they had their, uh, their officers.
We were afraid that close-- close-- being close to the ghetto would be a lot worse if they start digging with or searching with, uh, dogs. So we were running-- we were running in a place where my cousin was working as a carpenter.
And the-- the-- it was inside the ghetto. You could get in from inside and from outside the ghetto. The, uh-- in other words, the, uh, there was-- the back of the building was inside the ghetto. The front of the building was out of the ghetto.
So we were running there and running-- and hiding in the basement. There wasn't a dark place you had to hide, but a plain, little basement with a tiny, little window. And we got into the basement and about 15 people there.
Some came also running at that the place. We were hiding there a whole day, and through the little window, you could see that-- the way the Germans chased the Jews to the marketplace and beating them. And, uh, towards evening, at night, we tried to get to-- we tried to get out of there, because we knew we cannot stay there overnight.
And, uh, somehow everybody wants to get out first and started a commotion inside when the, uh, the Germans with the Lithuanians[62] and the Ukrainians were all helping the Germans, uh, in the gathering the Jews. They heard noise in the building. And they, uh, forced open the door, and they caught us.

---

[61] August 6, 1942. The final liquidation of the Zhetl Ghetto. Around one thousand inhabitants of the Zhetl Ghetto were executed in the Kurpiesze forest beginning on that day; but around 600 Jews escaped to the forests.

[62] Lithuanians- similar to Ukrainians, the nationalist aspirations of Lithuanians were frustrated when their presumed capital, Vilna (Vilnius), was awarded to Poland after the First World War. The desire for an ethnically-cleansed Lithuania, as well as simple opportunism, caused some Lithuanians collaborate with the Nazis, including direct participation in mass murderers. See Kazimierz Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary* (New Haven, 2005); and Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*, esp. chapter 3.

And, uh, my cousin was a carpenter and started to beg the Germans as-- let us live. I-- I am a good carpenter-- I can. So the German answered, yeah, yeah. Morgan,[63] tomorrow, we will take you to the new house. In other words, we knew that they were going to shoot us.
And they pushed us in back into the basement and put a heavy table on top of it. And, uh, outside they put a post working, watching, watching the uh, the outside the little window. But to our-- to our luck, the post sat down close to the window and fell asleep.
And the, uh, the window was too small for anybody to get-- to crawl through. So we-- we scratched out all the cement around the window and made a bigger hole, and slowly, we took out the shoes, and slowly we--
SANDY HAYDEN: Escaped, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: We, uh, crawled out, and we, uh, said that we'll-- we'll meet right in, uh, that. A little river[64] was running close by, and we said we shouldn't walk with the streets. We should, uh, go with the river, which takes us out in the outskirts of the-- of the ci-- town. And that way, we--

SANDY HAYDEN: So you all escaped.

RUBIN PINSKI: Not all. An older woman couldn't make it. Two-- two people still, because they found only two people there in the--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. in the morning.

RUBIN PINSKI: --in the basement the next day. We escaped, and we wandered around for, um, for, um, until-- until it got, uh, light. We escaped, my sister, and I, and my two cousins we were running together, and we came not very far. We ran away about 10 kilometers out of town. And it was already light.
We couldn't walk any further, so we were hiding a little-- the little forest was very-- it wasn't-- it was a very dangerous place to stay. But we crawled into a bush. We were hiding there. And the shepherds could-- uh, we could see the shepherds in the morning. And somehow, we are lucky that nobody noticed us the whole day.
So the next evening, we were trying to get food into the forest, because the, uh, the forest around our town was only about, uh, 4 to 20 kilometers away.

SANDY HAYDEN: Were you planning then to join partisan groups?

[63] Lit. “morning”; or “tomorrow”.

[64] A little river: probably the Dziatlovchanka River, a tributary of the Nemen River.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, that was the main idea, to join the partisans. And, uh, the next night, we came towards the, uh, forest where the partisans were. But talking to a peasant, we knocked on the door, and he opened and talked to us, and he said-- he gave us bad news that the Russian partisans are-- they are antisemitic,[65] and they killed some Jewish partisans which was the leader, Alter Dvoretsky.[66] He was killed, and he suggested we should go into, uh, there was a Arbeitslager[67] like a working-- uh, it was a camp, which was about 30 kilometers from our town, and the town was called Dvorets [Dworzec].
And, uh, there the Germans need these people, the Jews, to build for them an airport. And there was a chance to stay alive he, that farmer suggested. And we took his advice, and we went towards that, uh, camp, which was-- together was about 33 kilometers to make.
So to the next, towards evening anyway we went around our town towards that, uh, camp. And the next morning, we came-- we came-- we finally came to that camp. We joined a group of Jewish workers, and we got into that camp. Our feet were swollen, because we were always walking barefoot.

SANDY HAYDEN: You were hungry.

RUBIN PINSKI: And hungry. But the conditions in that camp was just terrible.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: It was summer. People slept under the sky.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, there was very little food. And people had to carry stones from one place to the other to-- to, uh, build that airport. And, uh, the, uh, we couldn't work yet, because we-- our feet were all--

---

[65] Russian partisans were antisemitic. Antisemitism among Soviet partisans sometimes resulted in murders of unarmed and armed Jews. These instances abated with the establishment of a united partisan command in 1942 under the command of General Vasily Chernyshev, known as “Platon”. See Bauer, “Nowogródek- The Story of A *Shtetl,* 23-4.

[66] Alter Dvoretsky was ambushed and killed on May 11, 1942 by partisans after an unsuccessful attempt to convince them to attack the Germans in Zhetl. See “The Underground in the Zhetl Ghetto”, in Shalom Gerling in Baruch Kaplinski, ed., *Pinkes Zhetl* (Tel Aviv, 1957), p. 372; tr. A. Patt), available at https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007243.

[67] Arbeitslager/ work camp (33 km). Probably the Dworzec labor camp, where 400 Zhetl Jews were sent on December 15, 1941 to work on an airdrome from which a variety of aircraft flight operations could take place. This camp was actually 140 km from Zhetl, about a 28-hour journey by foot. It is noteworthy that Jews who escaped execution and fled the ghetto were now re-entering a camp, i.e., a space of confinement and violence.

SANDY HAYDEN: Was sore.

RUBIN PINSKI: --were beaten and swollen. But they forced us to go to work.

SANDY HAYDEN: Who-- were these not Germans again or Russians? Who?

RUBIN PINSKI: No, the, uh, the people who watched over us were actually Ukrainians. And there were Jewish police. The Germans always had this trick to-- the-- to have their-- their own-- their own people to-- to do the bad job. So there were Jewish police which chased out the Jews to work. Actually, they had to. They had no choice.[68]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So you-- you-- you are sympathetic to their position, the Jewish police. You don't feel any--

RUBIN PINSKI: No, they didn't do anything that they could help it. A lot of them were actually in the partisans, were running away to the partisans together. But, uh, they had no choice. They were appointed by the Germans, and they to do what the Germans told them to do.
And, uh, finally by-- by being there about three weeks, we did-- I, for example, had to-- was chased out to go to work on the carrying the stones. And I was looking for a way to go back to the partisans till I-- one day, I found-- I noticed someone who I knew went to the forest yet before the slaughter of the Jews in our town.
And I talked to him, and we made up, we said that he came to take out Jews from this camp to the forest. And he gave me, mapped out, a map how to--

SANDY HAYDEN: To get there.

RUBIN PINSKI: Go around. Not to go to villages or to, uh, in other words, to be careful not to fall into certain, uh, certain peasants who helped the Germans. And, uh, and, uh, one-- one evening, instead of going back to the-- the ghetto, there was also a ghetto in that camp, sort of a ghetto, I stayed behind a-- a hump of stones. And, uh, we left that camp.

SANDY HAYDEN: You, and your sister, and cousins.

RUBIN PINSKI: My sister and my two cousins.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

---

[68] On varying Jewish attitudes towards Jewish police, see anon., *Clandestine History;* Person, *Warsaw Ghetto Police*; Perchodnik, *Am I A Murderer?*.

RUBIN PINSKI: And another two, six of us, and we made it during the night to the forest.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Well, this I think we finished the first half of the tape. So--

RUBIN PINSKI: OK.

SANDY HAYDEN: They are going to rewind it and then--

RUBIN PINSKI: OK.

SANDY HAYDEN: --we can start from the--

RUBIN PINSKI: OK, in the time in the forest.

SANDY HAYDEN: In a few minutes, yeah.

mssa_hvt_3038_p2of2

SANDY HAYDEN: OK. We're ready to start.

RUBIN PINSKI: OK.

SANDY HAYDEN: So-- OK. So, can you tell me what happened in the forests of the partisans?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yeah. Uh, when we came there for the first while, well I was very young, and-- and even though in the ghetto I helped bring in certain parts from rifles or pistols, uh, a person had to own his own rifle or had to-- in order to become a partisan, he could not come in without ammunition.[69] Because most-- most partisans didn't have much to give.

But there was already in existence for the, uh, several weeks, for, uh, they organized a Jewish partisan group. And the, uh-- the head of it was, uh-- his name was Hirsh Kaplinski.[70] He was a leader from the Hashomer Hatzair in our town. And he was also a soldier from the Polish army[71] which knew how to shoot. And he knew something about the military.

And we, uh, we asked right away to become partisans. And they told us no, you can help us in any way you want, but you must have--

SANDY HAYDEN: Ammunition.

---

[69] A person had to own his own rifle. This was the general rule among partisans. However, the Bielski partisans would often accept members without weapons. See Nechama Tec, *Resistance: The Bielski Partisans* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

[70] Hirsch Kaplinski: leader of partisans, a member of Ha-shomer Ha-tzair, and a Polish army veteran. Kaplinski escaped from the Zhetl Ghetto during the second deportation (August 6-8, 1942) and led fifty Zhetl Jews into the Lipczynska (Białowieża) forest. His unit soon consisted of 120 members, many of them armed, who took retaliatory measures against collaborators. In late September they were absorbed into the Orliani partisan group as Company no. 3 and took part in attacks on German garrisons. Kaplinski was killed during Operation Hamburg in December, 1942. See Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln, NE, 2009), 508-9.

[71] Jews in Polish army: Acculturated, Polonized Jews had a tradition of volunteering for military service since the nineteenth-century Polish insurrections. Some 30,000 Jewish soldiers perished in the 1939 war; and of the officers murdered at Katyn over 430 were Jewish. Veterans were especially valuable to partisan units. See Benjamin Meirtchak, *Jews-Officers in the Polish Armed Forces 1939-1945* (New Haven, 2004).

RUBIN PINSKI: --ammunition-- a rifle or-- or a pistol. And this took a while till I got, uh, from a peasant who was very nice to, uh, to us-- and he knew my father[72]-- from our village. And I went to him and asked him to-- to give me a rifle. Because a lot of the peasants, when the Russian army was running back, they threw away the ammunition.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And they, uh, got empty-- went to the Germans as prisoners without-- without ammunition, a lot of them. And that was um, towards Fall in 1942 when I got the rifle from my-- from that peasant, the one I knew. And I joined the Jewish group.

The, uh, Jewish group was under the, uh, the command of-- of a Russian partisan group. And the first time was-- the first while was very good. The Russian partisans were very nice to the-- to the Jewish partisans, and they, uh-- we helped each other.

But later on, after the big searching[73] in 1942, in December, late in December, the Germans pulled up-- pulled away from the battlefront several divisions of tanks. And-- and-- for searching the partisans in the forests, they wanted to--

SANDY HAYDEN: Try to--

RUBIN PINSKI: --to destroy them.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And that was actually the worst time being a partisan, because it was so-- we got hit so heavy--

---

[72] Peasant who knew my father. While some peasants were implicated in anti-Jewish activities before the war, others sustained economic-based relations with Jews and lent them valuable support during the Holocaust. In western Belarus, attitude of the local population towards the Jews was on the whole better than elsewhere. On the age-old peasant-Jewish economic symbiosis, see Glenn Dynner, *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, & Life in the Kingdom of Poland* (NY, 2014). On "rescuers" of Jews in this region, some of whom paid with their lives, see Bauer, "Nowogródek- The Story of a *Shtetl*," 30-1.

[73] Big search, Dec. 1942. The first major German assault, known as Operation Hamburg, began on December 10, 1942, lasted for two weeks, and resulted in the deaths of partisan leaders Atlas and Kaplinski. A second major German attack on partisans, dated August, 1943, is referred to as the "Big Hunt" in Jewish testimonies and Operation Hermann in German documents. See Arad, *Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 509; Tec, *Defiance*, 159.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --that ah it took a long time to-- for the survivors to get together again.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. But you were just dispersed all over.

RUBIN PINSKI: We were dispersed, hiding, each one--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. --wherever he could.

SANDY HAYDEN: So were you-- were you with your sister during that time?

RUBIN PINSKI: I was with my sister all the time

SANDY HAYDEN: So you managed to stick together.

RUBIN PINSKI: We stuck together all the time, and--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --somehow, in 1943, we started to organize again.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: That--

SANDY HAYDEN: So what did you do in between all the time? Were you just living in the forests?

RUBIN PINSKI: Living in the forest--

SANDY HAYDEN: Trying to get food and--

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, food we used to try to get when the, uh-- in places where the Germans were not around. In some villages, we used to get food from the village people. They helped us out. They were sympathizing with us.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, the, uh, the bad thing was that a lot of the partisans running from the Germans became ill. Typhus[74] spread very badly--

--and a lot of-- a lot of partisans died from typhus.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Also, the, uh, the-- there was-- besides the partisan were also so many groups. In other words, family groups were hiding. They were always sticking by the-- close to the partisans. And the partisans defended them, always.

But in time when the Germans were attacking heavy, soon, everybody was running and hiding wherever he could. And in 1943, we organized again.

SANDY HAYDEN: You all came together again.

RUBIN PINSKI: Mhm. We got together and organized some groups. But there wasn't a separate Jewish group anymore.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So you were all together--

RUBIN PINSKI: We were together with the Russians.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And did that work out OK? Was there friction between--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. There was a certain anti-Semitism in the, uh, in the partisans, but, uh, we could live with it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So what sort of-- what-- as partisans, what sort of, um, activities, or what sort of--

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, there was practically activities every-- every moment.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

---

[74] Typhus. A disease caused by a bacterial infection, involving fever and rash. Epidemic typhus is due to *Rickettsia prowazekii* and is spread by body lice, often in unsanitary conditions. Typhus was a significant problem among partisans, leading the Bielski unit to establish quarantine huts in the forest. See Peter Duffy, *The Bielski Brothers* (NY, 2003), 214-17.

RUBIN PINSKI: We use to attack certain garrisons of the Germans. The Germans tried to put in in the heart of the forest and the villages, the bigger villages, posts, like a German post, naturally with Ukrainians, mainly Ukrainians and Lithuanians. And we always tried to stop them to do it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

SANDY HAYDEN: How did you-- so how did they...

RUBIN PINSKI: When we found out, uh, that they are going to do it, they are going to put the post, we used to attack-- uh, wait for them, before they reached a village, and attack them and chase them back. But many times they came unnoticed. And they, uh, they dug in themselves with heavy machine weapons--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --good weapons, better than ours, naturally.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And it was hard to take them. We used to attack also sometimes with many costs of life.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm? Mhm. So it was very frightening--

RUBIN PINSKI: To us, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: --to you. I mean, you lived-- you lived in the forest, as a partisan, always in fear of either being attacked or--

RUBIN PINSKI: Or attack--

SANDY HAYDEN: Or attacking.

RUBIN PINSKI: But we actually knew-- the Jewish partisans knew that we will never survive. So the only thing was, while we are alive, to take revenge.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. That was your feeling all the time.

RUBIN PINSKI: That was the feeling--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --to take revenge for the-- for the innocent people they killed, like f--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --for not-- for no reason at all.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, that revenge kept us alive, to--

SANDY HAYDEN: To keep going.

RUBIN PINSKI: --to keep going--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --fighting.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Is that re-- is that revenge ever satisfied, in any way? I mean--

RUBIN PINSKI: No, no.

SANDY HAYDEN: --you still feel it now.

RUBIN PINSKI: No, it wasn't satisfying. You did it because you had no choice--

--to take revenge. But, uh, no, no satisfaction in killing anybody at all.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Mhm. So it's not-- it's not something-- I mean, do you think that most people feel like you do about this?

RUBIN PINSKI: I, uh, think so, they were, the times were so bad that you had to survive. In order to survive, you had to defend yourself-- or attack. And attacking, we also attacked-- we had, uh, in 1943, we had some parachutes from the Russian front, from Moscow, to-- to give us and also leaders to, uh-- to give us information and also command how to derail trains[75] and to see that the enemy, the Germans, will not get all they gather from the-- from the peasants, lots of

[75] Derail trains. For a detailed account of such operations among Jewish partisans in Lithuanian areas, sometimes known as the "railroad wars," see the "Operations Diary of a Jewish Partisan Unit in Rudnicki Forest, 1943-4", Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, Abraham Margaliot, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Documents on the Destruction of the Jews in German and Austria, Poland and the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem, 2014), no. 211, pp. 463-70.

cattle and clothing. And they should not get it to the, to the battlefront, to fight against the Russians.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: So we-- our job was to destroy some of the echelons of this type of food or ammunition going to the battlefront. And not far from the forest was the main line, going through Lida- Baranowicz,[76] towards Minsk, toward the battlefront. And we tried to derail as many or destroy as many trains as we--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm, as you could.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's why.

SANDY HAYDEN: And-- and was your sis-- were there quite a few women involved in the partisans?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: There were. And they did the same things as you did.

RUBIN PINSKI: They did the same thing. Most women did the, uh, like, the cooking or the, uh, the housework or the, uh, n-- nurses in the hospital.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But, uh, there were also-- we had women[77] also fighting like the men.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And they were very good at it.

---

[76] Lida-Baranowicz line. A major railroad line in the region.

[77] Women in partisans. Many women escaped to the forests of eastern Poland and the Soviet Union and served in armed partisan units. Their activities ranged from more gendered tasks (laundry, cooking) to military operations. See Nechama Tec, "Women in the Forest," *Contemporary Jewry* 17:1 (1996), 34–47; Faye Shulman, *A Partisan's Memoir: Woman of the Holocaust* (Toronto, 1995); and Devorah S. Holocaust testimony (HVT-4109).

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Mhm. Are there-- are there other things that you can-- about-- about being you know, a member of the partisans' group that you would like to talk about?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes--

SANDY HAYDEN: Any particular experiences that--

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes, uh-- the, uh, for winter, for example, we used to dig, um, bunkers, like, foxholes, in the ground. And we made it big enough to, uh-- for-- for the groups to get in...they were able to stay...

SANDY HAYDEN: How big were the groups, about?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, the, uh-- some-- some bunkers were as big as this room.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really.

RUBIN PINSKI: And in the ground, special for the heavy winters, we used to cover it with, uh-- uh, with big branches of the trees--

SANDY HAYDEN: To keep you warm.

RUBIN PINSKI: The-- the-- the-- they were covered with earth, actually, but not too far out of the ground. Shouldn't be any-- the Germans shouldn't see it with planes. And the best time was actually the summer, where we could sleep-- and, uh, sleeping. At night, we weren't sleeping. We were always going to do some work to derail trains or cut the telephone poles.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: So. Or attack German garrisons. But the summer was a lot easier to get through than winter.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So there-- there were a lot of very hard times, then.

RUBIN PINSKI: The times? Yes, it was very hard.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, this lasted till-- we were liberated actually in 1944, in July--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm?

RUBIN PINSKI: --when the, uh, Germ-- the Germans were-- the Russians were pushing the Germans back.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And the last-- the last month from June, uh, must have been the 7th of June till our liberation on the, uh, 8th of July, was the worst, actually, in the forest.[78]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. What-- in what way was it the worst?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, the, um, Germans brought the Vlasov's army.[79] Vlasov was a Russian, or Ukrainian, general who gave himself over to the Germans. And he helped the Germans. He organized a fighting group with the Germans, against the partisans, mainly against the partisans. Anywhere where the Germans were afraid to go in the forest to, to search for partisans, they were not afraid.

SANDY HAYDEN: So they-- they'd come to search for the partisans--

RUBIN PINSKI: They came-- they put up posts practically in every village around the forest. They used to go every day to look for us. And we had a very bad time. A lot of surviving partisans vanished in this, in this month.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So the group was cut down quite a lot in that month.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: That was just before liberation.

RUBIN PINSKI: That was very close to liberation.

---

[78] June, 1944, was the worst period in forest. As Soviet troops grew nearer, German policies towards partisans generally became more severe. At the same time, more locals joined the partisans, which numbered 360-374,000 by 1944. See Bauer, "Jewish Resistance in the Ukraine and Belarus during the Holocaust," 502.

[79] Vlasov's army. This unit, known as the Russian Liberation Army, was established in 1944 under the command of Gen. Andrey Vlasov to fight for the Germans. Vlasov defected after his capture in 1942 and claimed to be principally opposed to Stalin and Bolshevism, but was only allowed to directly engage Soviet troops once (February, 1945). See Catherine Andreyev, *Vlasov and the Russian Liberation Movement: Soviet Reality and Emigré Theories* (Cambridge, 1987).

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Were you-- were you-- were there any times that you came close to being caught?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm?

RUBIN PINSKI: --yes. Matter of fact, one day I went with, uh, with two other young boys, to find out what's going on. And we knew the Russian front is very close. And we came to a house where a peasant was living there, who was very sympathetic to the partisans. And we wanted-- we went for two reasons-- to get some food, and to find out what's going on in the city.

And, as we came close to knocking-- knock on the window, from behind the barn came out about six tall people in-- in the, uh-- in the German uniforms, which was made special for these Vlasov's army, for these Ukrainians. But they were carrying the rifles with the butts up, so--

And, just from excitement, from scared, we started to talk to them in Russian. And they answered us in Russian and said to us, don't-- don't-- we are not going to shoot you. We want to-- we want to give ourselves over to the partisans.

SANDY HAYDEN: These men said this to you?

RUBIN PINSKI: These men said to us.

SANDY HAYDEN: So what went through your head? Did you feel you could trust them, or--

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, we had no choice.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, um, they had actually their wives and children. They had horse and buggy. They had food in their ba-- in-- in the uh buggies.

And they sat and we started to talk and said the front is not very far. And we want to give ourselves over to the partisans. And they tried-- they found excuses that they always were sympathetic to the partisans but they had no choice.

And we made up that one of us will stay with them, and one of them will go with us to-- to-- to the commandant from the partisans. We couldn't do ourselves. We couldn't accept them ourselves. We had to--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --take them to the brigade. And we-- we left one of our, of our boys there, and one went with us. We brought them deeper in the forest. And they told the commandant, if we don't go and bring the others, they will kill-- the rest will kill the-- the young man who stayed with them.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: So, we sent a delegationand brought them to the forest. And happened about four days later, the Russian army came and liberated us.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we gave them over to the Russians.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So that-- that worked out OK. That was--

RUBIN PINSKI: That worked out OK.

SANDY HAYDEN: --very close, there.

RUBIN PINSKI: But it was--

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah. Whoo!

RUBIN PINSKI: --it was death in the instant, if-- if he would act differently.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: So, by luck, we-- we started to talk to them in Russian--

SANDY HAYDEN: In Russian, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: --and they answered right away, and-- and that's-- that's how we stayed alive.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And-- and I suppose there were many incidences like that--

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yeah, there were a lot of incidents--

SANDY HAYDEN: --very close.

RUBIN PINSKI: --very close, of this type--

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: --in last-- in the last while. The partisans had some contact with this-- with Vlasov's army, especially the last month, because he knew that the Germans already are pushed back. And they thought maybe they will rescue themselves by giving themselves over or keeping contact with the partisans.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But they were taken as prisoners of war--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --the same as anybody else.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So, can you-- can you tell me a little bit about what happened after-- after you were liberated, in 1944?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. Many of the liberated were mobilized[80] right away to go to the battlefront.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm?

RUBIN PINSKI: I was, uh, I was mobilized by-- that was an army recruiting office. So they-- they trusted only the Jewish-- Jewish partisans, because they knew that we can be trusted the most.

SANDY HAYDEN: Trusted, mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we were in charge of taking records to-- to Novoyelna,[81] which is about 12 kilometers from our town, we-- where the railroad is, to the railroad station, and take them to Baranowicz, which was another 45 kilometers by-- with a train. And we used to take some

[80] Mobilized. According to Zvi Gitelman, about 500,000 Jews served in the Soviet military, constituting 18.3 percent of pre-war Soviet Jews (11 percent of Jews who were Soviet citizens in 1941). See "Why They Fought: What Soviet Jewish Soldiers Saw and How it is Remembered," *NCEER Working Paper* (2011), available at: https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/2011_824-03g_Gitelman.pdf.

[81] Novoyelna. Town near Nowogródek, in present-day Belarus.

records to Novoyelna, to the train, by train to Baranowicz, to give them over to the Russian army.

SANDY HAYDEN: So you did that until the end of the war, until--

RUBIN PINSKI: I did that till, uh, February 1945.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm?

RUBIN PINSKI: In February 19-- in February or January, came a Polish delegation[82] to our town. And anybody who was born under the Polish government were allowed to go into Poland. So I registered, with my sister, and a lot of others did.

And since the Russians found out that we registered, they didn't trust us anymore.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: So they fired us from our job and--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

RUBIN PINSKI: --and we waited till we could emigrate to Poland.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: We came to Lodz--[83]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

---

[82] Polish delegation. The Polish-Soviet Repatriation agreement, signed July 6, 1945, allowed ethnic and Jewish Poles to renounce their Soviet citizenship and return to Poland. About 230,700 Jews opted for this but most did not stay in Poland, leaving Europe altogether after a sojourn in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp. See Gennady Estraikh, "1950s Soviet Jewish Emigration with a Stopover in Poland," in *Jewish History* 31:3-4 (2018), 291 - 317.

[83] Lodz (Łódz). Major industrial center in central Poland and the largest Jewish population (over 50,000) by 1946, despite the fact that around one-third of Polish Jews who survived did so in Warsaw, and that the Warsaw ghetto had been twice as large that of Lodz. The new Polish regime adopted a policy of diverting Jewish survivors away from Warsaw, the capital, towards Lodz and other centers. See David Engel, "The End of a Jewish Metropolis? The Ambivalence of Reconstruction in the Aftermath of the Holocaust," in G. Dynner and F. Guesnet, eds., *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis* (Leiden, 2015), 562-569.

RUBIN PINSKI: --in 1945.

SANDY HAYDEN: You and your sister.

RUBIN PINSKI: I and my sister.

SANDY HAYDEN: In the meantime, your brother, you've had, you don't--

RUBIN PINSKI: I-- we didn't know anything.

SANDY HAYDEN: You don't know whether he's alive or dead or whatever.

RUBIN PINSKI: No, we didn't know. No. And, from Lodz, we proceeded, in early 1946, to Germany, to-- and we came to Bergen-Belsen--[84]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --in 1946. And there we-- in Lodz, actually, we found out-- when the war ended, when the people came from the concentration camp,[85] the survivors. Until then, we knew that they existed, but we didn't know--

SANDY HAYDEN: You didn't know--

RUBIN PINSKI: --anything exactly what happened--

SANDY HAYDEN: Really, so...

---

[84] Bergen Belsen. Site of a concentration camp established near the towns of Bergen and Belsen in Germany in 1940 where around 50,000 people perished, including Anne Frank. After liberation, the British burned the entire camp and established a Displaced Persons camp nearby, which housed more than 12,000 survivors and functioned until 1951. See Suzanne Bardgett and David Cesarani, eds., *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives* (Portland, OR, 2006), esp. 165 and 226-9.

[85] Concentration camps. Nazi detention facilities—including labor, prisoner of war, transit camps, and death camps such as those created during "Operation Reinhard": Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Prisoners, disproportionately Jews, were incarcerated in concentration camps in conditions whose severity far exceeded standard norms of custody. During the implementation of the Final Solution, an unprecedented number of people, disproportionately Jews, were killed with the use of gas there. The most infamous camps include Auschwitz (about 1 million Jews killed), Treblinka (about 925,000), Belzec (434,508), Sobibor (at least 167,000), and Chelmno (156,000–172,000). See Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (first published in 1947); Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (NY, 2015); and https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth.

RUBIN PINSKI: --heard all the stories from them--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --from survivors.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And in 1946, we were in Bergen-Belsen.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we were there till the end of 1947.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm. And how was it-- how was it, during that time? Was it still very difficult, even though the war had ended?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, it was just a camp where the Jews were there, 'till, waiting for immigration, some to Israel-- or Palestine,[86] then--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And some to Canada,[87] some to other countries.

SANDY HAYDEN: To America, mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And I applied for Canada, with my brother.

SANDY HAYDEN: So, your-- when did you meet up with your brother again?

---

[86] Palestine. During the immediate post-war period, Palestine was governed by British mandate and most Jewish refugees were refused entry and detained in camps in Cyprus. In 1947, the British Government terminated its mandate and the United Nations recommended a partitioned Palestine consisting of a Jewish state, and Arab state, and an international Jerusalem. This plan, rejected by Palestinian Arabs, was followed by a war that resulted in the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. As many as 170,000 Jewish displaced persons and refugees from Europe had immigrated to Israel by 1953. See Gutman, “Cyprus Detention Camps,” 330, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*.

[87] Canada. In contrast to pre-war barriers to Jewish migration to Canada, about 40,000 Jews were allowed to immigrate in the wake of the Holocaust thanks in large part to the efforts of Samuel Bronfman. See Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto, 2012).

RUBIN PINSKI: My brother we found in-- being in Bergen-Belsen.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really? How? Can you tell me how that--

happened

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes--

SANDY HAYDEN: Because there were many people there, weren't there?

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right. Somebody came through and said, your name is Pinsky? And he said yes. He says, uh, I saw a Pinksy in a camp in-- on the, uh, American side. Bergen-Belsen was on the English side, English zone.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: On the American side. And he's, uh, a leader in a kibbutz.[88] We also had kibbutzim in the--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --in the camps. And, um, and he's a short man, short fellow. And, uh, curly hair, which he had. And then we found Dovid-- said right away, that must be our brother. So my sister went--

SANDY HAYDEN: You must have been very excited to hear--

RUBIN PINSKI: Very excited. And they brought him to Bergen-Belsen.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we are together, all three of us.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: It was a very-- biggest excitement--

---

[88] Kibbutz. Farming and work collectives, found mainly in the State of Israel. The first kibbutz in a Displaced Persons camp was founded in Buchenwald, in 1945, to prepare members for immigration to the Land of Israel by means of Hebrew lessons, agricultural training, and history courses. On Kibbutzim in DP camps, see http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/dp_camps/index.asp.

SANDY HAYDEN: I'm sure.

RUBIN PINSKI: --to have somebody alive in the family.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah, yeah. And then, did you all three decide that you would like to emigrate to Canada?

RUBIN PINSKI: No, my sister married in Bergen-Belsen.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh?

RUBIN PINSKI: So I and my brother applied, and we came as tailors.[89]

SANDY HAYDEN: Why did you decide to come to Canada--

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, we wanted to--

SANDY HAYDEN: --and not to Palestine?

RUBIN PINSKI: --to be free, to, to start living in a free-- in a-- like a free people.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And that was the closest, the first opportunity they had-- Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --to, uh-- to emigrate.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we wanted to leave the country where our parents vanished. And we didn't want to stay anymore in Europe.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So you decided to come to Canada with your brother.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: --with your brother.

---

[89] Tailors. Canadian immigration policy favored skilled laborers. See Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many*.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right.

SANDY HAYDEN: And when-- when did-- when did you actually come to Canada?

RUBIN PINSKI: We arrived in Canada on the, uh, 17th of January, 1948.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And how did you come across? By boat?

RUBIN PINSKI: By boat.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: It was a cattle boat, actually. The name was General Sturgis.[90] And they, uh, took, uh, 11 days to cross the ocean.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And I think at least 8 days of the 11 I was sick.

SANDY HAYDEN: Really! So you had seasickness, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. I was very weak. I weighed only about 110 pounds. And, uh, I wasn't strong enough. And when we arrived to Halifax,[91] we--

SANDY HAYDEN: And your sister--

RUBIN PINSKI: And my sister stayed in--

SANDY HAYDEN: She stayed?

RUBIN PINSKI: --Bergen-Belsen. She came actually later.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

---

[90] "General Sturgis" ship. USS *General S. D. Sturgis* (AP-137) was a *General G. O. Squier*-class transport ship for the U.S. Navy in World War II named in honor of General Samuel Davis Sturgis (1822-89). The *General S. D. Sturgis* made 21 voyages between Germany and the U.S. with displaced persons in the wake of WWII. See http://www.theshipslist.com/ships/descriptions/ShipsG.shtml.

[91] Halifax. Capital of Nova Scotia Province, Canada. The Jewish community in Halifax was quite small, numbering around 1,300.

RUBIN PINSKI: Awhile

SANDY HAYDEN: Were you upset to be split up from her?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, but, uh--

SANDY HAYDEN: But you accepted that--

RUBIN PINSKI: couldn't help it--she and her husband came several months later.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we made-- we stayed in Montreal.[92]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: We stopped in Montreal.

SANDY HAYDEN: Did you come over with a whole lot of other survivors who were immigrating to Canada? Was the boat full of-- of Jewish--

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, Jews--

SANDY HAYDEN: --people?

RUBIN PINSKI: --and also non-Jews.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: About 800 people.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And there were a lot of Jewish people there, and we-- you had a choice to stay in Montreal or--

---

[92] Montreal. A bi-lingual city in Quebec Province, Canada. About 50,000 Jews, many of Sephardic origin, lived in Greater Montreal by the outbreak of the Second World War. The influx of East European Jewish immigrants introduced a pronounced Leftist-Yiddishist aspect to the community, but was followed by a significant influx of Jews from Morocco. As of 2001, about 100,000 Jews lived in Montreal. See Robinson and Butovsky, *Renewing Our Days: Jews of Montreal in the 20th Century* (Montreal, 1995).

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --go on to Winnipeg,[93] or come to Vancouver.[94] But--

SANDY HAYDEN: So you--

RUBIN PINSKI: --we choose-- we chose the first thing to stay in Montreal, because we were tired of--

SANDY HAYDEN: Traveling.

RUBIN PINSKI: --traveling and tired of-- and we wanted to start living like human beings.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So, what happened when you got to Montreal? What did you and your brother do? How old were you, by now? You were--

RUBIN PINSKI: My brother's three years older than I am.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: He lives in Winnipeg, now.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: Uh, I, uh, applied to Jewish teachers' seminary. And, uh, even though it was only February, which was the middle of the, uh, the school lessons, the, uh-- it took three years in the-- to become a teacher from-- for the grades 1, 2, and 3.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

---

[93] Winnipeg. Capital of Manitoba Province, Canada. Of the nearly 100,000 East European Jews who made their way to Canada between 1881 and 1914 about 10,000 came to the Manitoba Province and settle mainly in Winnipeg. By the Second World War, Winnipeg was home to around 17,000 Jews. See Allan Levine, “The Jews of Manitoba, or 'The centre of its own Diaspora',” *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 26, 2012.

[94] Vancouver. Coastal city in British Columbia Province, Canada, and home to Canada’s third largest Jewish community. In 1941, there were 2,969 Jews living in Vancouver; by 1951 that number had increased to 5,467. The Council of Jewish Women took a leading role in assisting refugees from the Holocaust.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, um, I was given a test, in Hebrew and Yiddish. And they put me into the second class right away.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And even though it was the middle of the year, so I only started till the--

SANDY HAYDEN: Middle of June, or something?

RUBIN PINSKI: Till June '49.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: And then again, I-- I became a teacher. And I was sent to Winnipeg, to my first assignment, to teach in the Jewish school, the volksschule, in--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --Winnipeg.

SANDY HAYDEN: And your brother, did he-- he come--

RUBIN PINSKI: He-- he went in a factory, in a-- in a sewing factory.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, he was a tailor, yep.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. How was your-- how was it, when you first came to Canada? Were people kind to you?

RUBIN PINSKI: Very nice.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: They were wonderful to us, here.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: There, they are helping us. We didn't know English at all--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --not even one word of English. And, ah, we got a lot of help from the Jewish--

SANDY HAYDEN: Community.

RUBIN PINSKI: population

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --the Jewish community. Jewish Congress[95] helped a lot, to they arranged for us to learn English. And I enjoyed very much studying again, and continued studying--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --in the Jewish teachers' seminary.[96] Which was mostly Hebrew, Yiddish. And I had made a lot of friends in Montreal.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. [COUGH] So then you moved off to Winnipeg. And you had to start all over again.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right. I, uh, I was sent to Winnipeg as a teacher.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And I was teaching in the-- the Perets school, Perets Volksschule. And I met, uh, my wife. She's a Winnipegger.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we married in 1951.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Was that a very happy day for you?

---

[95] Jewish Congress. The Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), one of the main lobbying groups for Canadian Jewry. The CJC was active in lobbying the Canadian government to open the borders to Jewish refugees fleeing Europe, and in organizing the post-war relief effort for Holocaust survivors arriving from DP camps. The dominant figure in the Congress from 1939 to 1962 was its president, Samuel Bronfman (1889-1971).

[96] Jewish Teachers Seminary. The United Jewish Teachers' Seminary, sponsored by the Canadian Jewish Congress, offered a two-year full time day training course for teachers of all types of Jewish schools. See "Seventeen Students Graduate from Jewish Teachers Seminary in Montreal", *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, June 30, 1964.

RUBIN PINSKI: That was a very happy day.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, continued my life in Winnipeg, lived in Winnipeg for 20 years.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And were you-- were you teaching, all that time?

RUBIN PINSKI: I was teaching only three years.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And you-- you have, um, some children.

RUBIN PINSKI: I have three children.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh, can you tell me a little bit about them?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes. My daughter's a lawyer, here.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And how old is she now?

RUBIN PINSKI: She is, uh, going to be 30 years old.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And she lives in Vancouver?

RUBIN PINSKI: Lives in Vancouver.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: My son is a lawyer--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm?

RUBIN PINSKI: --lives in Vancouver.

SANDY HAYDEN: And how old is he?

RUBIN PINSKI: He is 28.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm?

RUBIN PINSKI: And I have a third son who is studying law in Edmonton University.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm. So they're all three lawyers.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. How many years after you were married did you have, um, your daughter, you first child?

RUBIN PINSKI: My daughter was [LAUGH] born, uh, nine and a half months after we got married.

SANDY HAYDEN: (LAUGHING) After you were married. Oh. So you had children right away.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: I had the first child right away.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And what did you after you stopped teaching?

RUBIN PINSKI: I was in real estate--

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: --together with my brother.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: In an office.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we did very well.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. So you-- that's what you did in Winnipeg for the-- most of the time, you were in real estate.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And where-- is there-- were you very much a part of the Jewish community in--

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Did you ever talk to your children about your-- your family and your experience during the war?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, and, matter of fact, the children wanted to know a lot about my, uh-- the way I survived. I used to tell them-- they were very interested, altogether.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And I bought, uh, anything available, in books--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And they were reading. And they were very sympathetic and very helpful.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So-- so that's something that you've been able to talk to your children about, from-- for many years, then.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: And they were always asking questions.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: To them, I, uh, used to tell openly everything.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm?

RUBIN PINSKI: When I talked-- when I told them the stories, it-- I didn't, uh, live it through again.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But somehow, to strangers, I could not tell the stories.

SANDY HAYDEN: You couldn't.

RUBIN PINSKI: I always felt that I'm living it over again. And I just couldn't--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --couldn't talk about it--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. So it--

RUBIN PINSKI: --too much.

SANDY HAYDEN: --it was easier for you to talk to your children about it.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. Is it-- has-- have you been feeling like that, today, talking about it?

RUBIN PINSKI: No, today I feel fine. I--

SANDY HAYDEN: OK.

RUBIN PINSKI: I feel that I'm sharing my experiences--

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: --and some-- it's-- if anybody wants to know about it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. Well, that's good. Do you-- do you feel that, um, your-- your experiences, um, in any way, helped you bringing up your children, that-- that it was-- that there were things that you learned through going through those tough times?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. Uh-- uh, for example, that, uh, they have to fend for themselves--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --and they have to be self-sufficient, and, uh, not to be afraid to-- to stand up for your own rights. I mean, I always taught them to be-- to be, uh, proud of being Jewish--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --and, uh, and not to listen to people who say that this-- that the Holocaust never happened.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Uh, I told them that they should always, if you come in a, in, uh, circumstances where they were told-- they hear from someone that, uh, it didn't happen, some anti-Semitic, uh, uh, folks, they should defend and stand up for their right, that it did happen and their father went through it all.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Hmm. So that was something that you-- you taught them, from a young age.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right. I always told them. That's why I-- when they wanted to know what happened to me, so I always told them.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And I felt-- to them, I felt, uh, that, talking to them, I felt-- didn't feel-- didn't seem to be hard to tell them the story.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well, that's-- that's wonderful. I'm sure that they appreciated that, always.

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes. They did. They always did appreciate it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And-- and-- and-- then, when-- when did you move from Winnipeg to Vancouver?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, I, um, moved to Regina[97] in 1970. I bought a hotel there. And, uh, I, uh, lived in Regina till 1977. My-- my hotel, unfortunately, burned down.

SANDY HAYDEN: Oh, I'm sorry to-- how-- how did that happen?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, some people, uh, some guests in a room smoked and fell asleep. And a fire broke out. But nobody got hurt.

[97] Regina. Capital of Saskatchewan Province, Canada, with a very small Jewish community that dates from the turn of the twentieth century. Today, there are around 200 Jewish families in the city.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And--

SANDY HAYDEN: So that-- that-- but that-- that must have been a very hard thing for you to

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, it was very hard for me to take.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And we moved to Vancouver.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And are you working, at the moment?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, I'm going to go in real estate right now.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And your brother, is he here?

RUBIN PINSKI: My-- my brother is still in Winnipeg.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And your sister?

RUBIN PINSKI: And my sister lives here in Vancouver, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And are you-- you're all three still very close to one another.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. Oh, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Does she have children?

RUBIN PINSKI: No, my sister unfortunately, uh, is divorced.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And she's all alone.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But, uh, practically every day I talk to her.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And was she close to your children?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, very close.

SANDY HAYDEN: So, has she spoken to them about her experiences during the war also?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, yes, when they ask her, they-- she tells them, too.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: When-- only when they ask her. It's not so easy to talk about it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But, uh, when you-- when you are asked, usually you tell what happened.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Mhm. Well, that's-- that-- not everybody, um, deals with it in the way that you have. Some people don't like to talk about it to their children.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right.

SANDY HAYDEN: So--

RUBIN PINSKI: But I feel--

SANDY HAYDEN: Because I think that's brave of you, and-- to be able to do it.

RUBIN PINSKI: I feel that, uh, that people should know what happened.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm, mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And that it's the right time to-- to tell really what, uh-- that it did happen and all the-- all of the atrocities and killings for innocent people.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm.

RUBIN PINSKI: I feel that, uh, people should know about it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm, mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: The world should know about it.

SANDY HAYDEN: So did you bring your children up, um, in-- in-- as-- in as orthodox way as you were brought up, when they--

RUBIN PINSKI: A matter of fact, uh, after seeing what happened, when, uh-- in 1942, when they made-- uh, when they liquidated the ghetto and made judenrein,[98] clearing out Jews, I started to doubt. And, uh, instead of being orthodox, I quit being orthodox.[99] In other words, I protested.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. What did you start to doubt? Did you start--

RUBIN PINSKI: No, I mean, to-- to-- leading a religious life.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: Like, I used to pray every day, and--

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: --there wasn't a day that I didn't--

SANDY HAYDEN: Did it lose some of its meaning for you?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. I turned the other way. In other words, I doubted. And I protested against God by not, uh, not, uh, praying, or--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --or not-- uh, especially, I-- I was against praying all the time.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Because I feel-- I felt that, if there is a God, why doesn't-- why doesn't he show something, when the Germans killed Jews so openly--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --under the open sky?

---

[98] Judenrein. German for "free [i.e., devoid] of Jews".

[99] I quit being orthodox. Such attitudes are not uncommon; however, a study on religious beliefs and orientation of Holocaust survivors in Israel found a greater proportion of declared "religious" survivors (13.7 percent) than the control group (7.09 percent). See Devora Carmil and Shlomo Breznitz, "Personal trauma and world view—are extremely stressful experiences related to political attitudes, religious beliefs, and future orientation?", *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 4, (1991): 393-405.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Why isn't something happening to the, to the murderers? And I-- even knowing all, uh, studying in the yeshiva, even knowing all and praying, doing the prayers, I turned against it.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And have you remained that way--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: --ever since then?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: So, you didn't-- your children didn't have a Jewish education then--

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: --did they?

RUBIN PINSKI: This--

SANDY HAYDEN: Not a religious education, then--

RUBIN PINSKI: Not a religious but a Jewish education.

SANDY HAYDEN: Jewish education.

Very Jewish education--

SANDY HAYDEN: So you-- you still feel some-- there's a difference between being religious and Jewish, and it's--

a little different--

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, I'm a good Jew. I-- I belong to a synagogue. And-- and I, uh-- my-- my wife is actually religious.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And I did it because of her. I even-- I got-- I go to shul holidays. And, matter of fact, we go many Friday nights to-- to the synagogue now--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --now. But deep in my heart I still have that protest

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, my children went to the Talmud Torah and they, uh-- and they know the Hebrew.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And they know the, uh, prayers, in-- in Hebrew. They know it very well, all three of them. But, uh, myself, I still have--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. But-- so that--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

SANDY HAYDEN: But you've-- you've kept that in yourself. You haven't said to your children-- you haven't, um, prevented your children?

RUBIN PINSKI: No, no.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: No. I let them have their own way.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, they-- they come to synagogue every holiday--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --high holidays. And they don't, uh, have to read the English side, they read the Hebrew. They know the Hebrew.

SANDY HAYDEN: So, in some ways, you feel good about that. But, on the other hand, you still have something that you doubt, whether that's--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, the-- the doubting, I-- I have only in-- in praying, in the prayers.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Somehow, I protested against the prayers.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: That if there is a God, why didn't he help?

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Why didn't he prevent all this? And mainly, the-- the religious Jews, they were massacred first. Very few religious Jews escaped to the forest and stayed-- and-- and survived.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: So, somehow, I protested.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: I still protest.

SANDY HAYDEN: Did you-- did you, as a young, um, boy in-- in Poland, feel-- have any idea about a career that you wanted to have for yourself, something that you would like to have done if the war hadn't broken out?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, first of all, we never-- I-- I never believed that I will survive.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: So I couldn't plan any-- anything ahead. Because there was 99% that we will not survive.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: It was, the circumstance was so bad, all the time, in the forest, that, uh, there are no chance of surviving. And we survived. Very few survived, actually.

In-- when they liquidated the ghetto in 1942, in August, uh, several hundred escaped to the forest, uh, maybe up to 500. And, uh, the surviving amount was only 40.[100]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm. So it was very few.

RUBIN PINSKI: So very few survived, and they are spread all over the world--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --a lot of them in Israel.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm. But I'm-- there-- I think what I'm trying to ask is, your children are all becoming-- are all professionals. You have--

RUBIN PINSKI: Aha.

SANDY HAYDEN: --going to have three lawyers in your family--

RUBIN PINSKI: Three lawyers in the family.

SANDY HAYDEN: --soon, yeah.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right.

SANDY HAYDEN: And did you, as a young-- as a young boy, before the war broke out, before there was trouble, did you have any ideas about what you would like to do--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes--

SANDY HAYDEN: --a career that you would like?

RUBIN PINSKI: --the career was to be a rabbi.

SANDY HAYDEN: Is that what you were going to do?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

[100] 40/500 survived. These figures seem low. The number of escapes from Zhetl is estimated at 600 or higher. As many as two-thirds of a total of 18-21,000 Jewish partisans and around half of the 10-13,000 Jews in forest family camps survived. See Arad, *Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 514-16.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's what my father wanted.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: And that's what he sent me to yeshiva for.

SANDY HAYDEN: So you--

RUBIN PINSKI: And that was the only--

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: --thing I was striving for.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. So that-- obviously, that changed. Ah?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yeah. It changed, as I said--

SANDY HAYDEN: Because--

RUBIN PINSKI: --after the first and second pogroms--[101]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --when they killed the Jews.

SANDY HAYDEN: And did you encourage your children to-- to do law? Or was that something that--

RUBIN PINSKI: No, that's something they chose themselves.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: Which I am very grateful, and I am very happy for them.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

[101] Pogroms. Collective anti-Jewish violence, usually spontaneous and unsystematic. Rubin invokes this term to mean a massacre or deportation (*action*).

RUBIN PINSKI: But they chose it in their own way.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. But you must have-- you must have, um, emphasized their edu-- that they have good education, and that they work well--

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: --and so on, so that they--

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes, we-- we--

SANDY HAYDEN: That was very important, always.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, we--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --tried to educate them and give them their own choice what they want to be.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Hm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But that's what they chose, and they are good at it, too.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And-- and-- they're Canadians, and you are Canadian, now.

RUBIN PINSKI: That's right.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. And you feel-- you feel good about that.

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes, very, very good. Canada was very good to me.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: It's a very good country to live in.

SANDY HAYDEN: Um-- these pictures, over here, I just wanted to ask you quickly--

RUBIN PINSKI: Right.

SANDY HAYDEN: This was, um, taken at school, you said?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yeah, this is a picture taken, if I'm not mistaken-- doesn't tell the year, but it was maybe '33, 1933 or 1934.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: This is Talmud Torah. And this is-- these are all the, uh, teachers and the rabbi. This one is the rabbi.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And this one was our rebbe.[102] Like, he-- he taught several generations the aleph-bet, the A-B-C--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --and how to pray, and chumush and Tanakh.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And this was our shochet--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --the one who did-- did the ritual slaughtering of the cattle.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And most of these people are the gabba'im,

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --in other words, the committee for the Talmud Torah.

SANDY HAYDEN: And all of these are the little-- are the boys there?

RUBIN PINSKI: These are the students.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And-- and how many of these survived, in this picture, do you know?

[102] *Rebbe*. In this usage, *rebbe* refers to a traditional Jewish elementary school teacher.

RUBIN PINSKI: Uh, very few, very few.

SANDY HAYDEN: Is this you, over here?

RUBIN PINSKI: This is myself, here. This one survived and lives in Israel.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Uh-- Also this one also survived that's a partisan-- live in Israel.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And, uh, most of the rest perished.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yeah, this one, here, lives also in Israel. And he survived in-- in Russia. He-- he had a chance to escape to Russia, somehow--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: --before the Germans attacked, our village was attacked.

SANDY HAYDEN: And-- and when was this picture taken of you, sorry? This one.

RUBIN PINSKI: This was taken, uh, before the Germans attacked the Russians. This-- this was under the Russian government, in 1941.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: I-- I was taking a photograph. I don't know the reason for-- for what reason. Maybe for a document. But this was taken in 1939.

SANDY HAYDEN: And this one?

RUBIN PINSKI: This one was--

SANDY HAYDEN: Is that-- is that you?

RUBIN PINSKI: That's myself in the second one. All the-- none of the other boys are alive, as far as I can-- I know.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And this was also taken in 1939, before the Germans attacked Poland.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: My friends from our town, Zhetel.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. And you said, earlier on, that a neighbor gave a neighbor gave these, um, pictures to you after the war.

RUBIN PINSKI: Right. He said he found it on-- on our yard.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But that's the only pictures I--

SANDY HAYDEN: That you have. You don't have any of your parents.

RUBIN PINSKI: No.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Have you ever been to Israel?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes. I was Israel twice.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. When-- when was--

RUBIN PINSKI: In 1974--

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And in 1979. And both times I met with these survivors of our town.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: Not with all one-- one time I met several, and the second time I met several.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: And it was like the biggest joy in the world to--

SANDY HAYDEN: To be with them?

RUBIN PINSKI: --to be with them.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: They were happy to see me, and I was happy to see them.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Had you kept in touch with them, all-- all these years? How did you know that they were there?

RUBIN PINSKI: Well, the, uh-- we have that book, Pinkes Zhetel,[103] which was, uh, written in Israel.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: And there-- there is addresses and names from all the, uh, Zheteler who live in Israel.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: So I took-- I tore it out from the book, and I took it with me. And--

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: --being in Israel--

SANDY HAYDEN: You--

RUBIN PINSKI: --I looked up in the telephone book and found--

SANDY HAYDEN: So they must have been surprised when you--

RUBIN PINSKI: Very surprised.

SANDY HAYDEN: Ah, so that was very exciting.

RUBIN PINSKI: They actually knew that I live, because my name was also--

[103] Pinkes Zhetl. A memorial book composed by surviving Jewish residents. See Baruch Kaplinski, ed., *Pinkes Zhetl* (Tel Aviv, 1957).

SANDY HAYDEN: In there--

RUBIN PINSKI: --also here.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: And they have the same book and--

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: they knew about me.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh.

RUBIN PINSKI: But they, uh, were very happy when I found.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. How did you feel, going to Israel? Was it-- going to visit Israel-- Was it a good feeling, to be in Israel?

RUBIN PINSKI: Oh, yes I was very happy. I-- I felt to come-- uh, going off the plane, I felt like kissing the ground.

SANDY HAYDEN: You did feel that way.

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, I was very excited.

SANDY HAYDEN: Uh-huh. Was there any time that you thought of going to live in Israel, before you came to Canada?

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes, I thought of that.

SANDY HAYDEN: But you thought that this--

RUBIN PINSKI: But-- but the first opportunity to-- to leave Germany and Europe was--

SANDY HAYDEN: To come to Canada.

RUBIN PINSKI: --to come to Canada. So, I came to Canada.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mm.

RUBIN PINSKI: But I-- I thought of it a lot. I felt there were opportunities there--

SANDY HAYDEN: You would have gone.

RUBIN PINSKI: --been able to go there.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Have you-- did you visit Yad Vashem?[104]

RUBIN PINSKI: Yes.

SANDY HAYDEN: Yeah?

RUBIN PINSKI: I was in Yad Vashem.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: I was in, uh, Yad Mordechai.[105]

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm.

RUBIN PINSKI: I was anywhere I can find anything in the museum of the Holocaust I went to visit.

SANDY HAYDEN: Mhm. Well, Mr. Pinsky, thank you so much for coming today.

RUBIN PINSKI: You're very welcome.

SANDY HAYDEN: It's been-- it's been wonderful. And--

RUBIN PINSKI: Thank you.

SANDY HAYDEN: --thank you very much.

---

[104] Yad Vashem. Established in 1953, the Israeli official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust and honoring “Righteous Gentiles” who aided Jews and resisted the Nazis. The name is taken from Isaiah 56:5: "To them I will give within my temple and its walls a *memorial and a name* better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever".

[105] Yad Mordechai. A kibbutz in Southern Israel famous for its memorials to Holocaust resistance. Founded in the 1930s by members of Ha-shomer Ha-tzair, the kibbutz was renamed in the memory of Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization that led the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The kibbutz features a statue of Anieliewicz holding a grenade. Its museum also commemorates the 1948 Battle of Yad Mordechai against Egyptian forces.

RUBIN PINSKI: Thank you.

MAN OFF-CAMERA: (CALLING) OK, look interested.

SANDY HAYDEN: OK. [LAUGH]