**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Rafael Wilschanski**

**March 25, 2012**

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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Elaine Crandall, National Court Reporters Association.

**RAFAEL WILSCHANSKI**

**March 25, 2012**

THE VIDEOGRAPHER: Rolling.

Question: My name is Dr. Henry Lustagazaler and this interview is sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Department of Oral History. If we could just start with your name, date of birth and where you were born.

Answer: My name is Rafael Wilschanski. And I'm born in November, 1924; (coughs) in a little town called Radom. That's it.

Q: Tell me a little bit  you were  you were brought up in Batumi, GeorgiA: That's where you spent your childhood. And what was Batumi known for, in terms of Jewish religious life? Was it a  was there a central yeshiva there or otherwise?

A: Okay. Really, I don't remember exactly the  the town because I was  I was very, very little when we lived in the town of Batumi. Batumi is a big  a big city, a port city. And got  I don't know exactly how many Jewish people were there, how big it was the community  Jewish community. But it was a community of sephardi Jews and a  and ashkenazic Jews, which means European Jews and the Jews from  when born in  in  in Georgia itself. I don't remember a lot because I was very, very young then, very little. When we left Batumi, I was only a year and a half. So I can't tell much  much of  of details about the community in the  in the town.

Q: Okay. Your parents were from the Ukraine.

A: Yes.

Q: And your father was, as I remember you mentioning to me, was a shochet?

A: Yes.

Q: And he attended the original yeshiva in Lubavitch, Ukraine. Could you tell me a little bit about your father? Who were his teachers, personalities he met when he was in Lubavitch community?

A: As you said it, my father was a shochet. That was his job for  all the time, but he was ordained rabbi too, a Rav. And he didn't practice directly rabbonis, directly he was a shochet. But all the time the shochet, it wasn't so  so easy in the  in this time, in  in RussiA:

Q: Well, let's  let's talk about that. What was your life like growing up before the war under communism? How did you continue Jewish practices under communism, which was, at least officially, atheist?

A: Okay. We were  it was a very, very hard time. But I can't tell you that I felt it because I was very, very young. And, you know, when you are born in this  in this atmosphere, you are used to  to see  you think that that's the way this has to be. That's what you think. You didn't see otherwise. It wasn't a Jewish school. I didn't go to a Jewish school. It wasn't a cheder. It wasn't a  a yeshivA: So my father learned with  with me, to read and to write He  Hebrew and  Hebrew and the  the bible, the chumish and rashi, all these things. And zoy it was going. And it wasn't for a long time because you can't live in one place very long. So, when I was a  about a year and a half, we left already Batumi. We left for another  another little  a little  a town called Nevel. It's about  I don't know exactly how  how  how far it is from Leningrad, from Petersburg. Because there, in this time, about in '26, '27, it was there still  even it wasn't really  really op  openly, but it was still a  academy for  rabbinical academy. My father land before his  before his marriage, he land in Lubavitch. Lubavitch now is in  now is known in the world as a  as a big community. But then it was only the little  the original town of Lubavitch. Lubavitch was a  a little town that got only 400 Yidissha families, about 400 Yidissha families. And the  most of the families lived around the yeshivA: Because the yeshiva, the Lubavitch yeshiva there, she was  she was founded in 19  tuf, reish, nun, zayin  it was about a  about, 1917  no. Nineteen seven, something like this. Nineteen hundred seven.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: My father come to the yeshiva it was al  already  already a  in the (inaudible)  16th year of the yeshivA: And that  that was the yeshiva and  and that was the foundation of Lubavitch community in the  the  all  all the rabbis of Lubavitch, the dynasty of the Schneerson. Was  in the beginning it wasn't called Schneerson. It was called Schneurie. It was called  it was called, other families. Then, in the third generation, it became the name of Schneerson. And the  the fifth  the fifth rabbi of this  dyn  dyna  dynasty, he founded the yeshiva in Lubavitch.

And when my father come  come, it was already about 15 years in the yeshiva, it was just in the peak to saying some of the best times of the  of the yeshivA: And then, in a few years, it was the  he have to leave, because then it was  started the first world  world war. And that was my father from then.

And then he  he left the yeshiva and he married. And then he mar  he married in the  in the city of Kherson in  in Ukraine. And then from there, he went to  to Batumi. Before going to Batumi, my father was in Rostov, because it was already after  just after the first world. It was in 1921. 1921. He went to the  he went to the Lubavitch Rebbe, what  who immigrated from Lubavitch to Rostov, Mystrovia, RussiA: And when he was there, the Lubavitcha  he didn't got a job in this moment, because he  he got already his  ordain  ordained from also a Rabbi, also a  and also shochet. And he didn't got a  a steady job in this moment. And the Rabbi called him and told him, here is now the role of the City of  of Batumi. That was before I was bor  born. Yes, no. No. Just  and told him here is the Rau of the City of Batumi and he needs a shochet, a shochet and a chazzan. And I wanted you to go with him together and be the  there the shochet for the  for the European community in the city of  gai. So he went there and he was shochet.

Q: But your education, itself, you were, as we would call here, homeschooled? Your  it was your father who was your main teacher in  in a  throughout your childhood?

A: Yes. My father was my  my  my  my teacher till seven, eight years. Back when we went seven, eight years, we were already in  seven years almost, we were already in a fifth place in  in  in the  in the  in the five  in the six years of my  of my childhood, we were already in fifth place. We can't stay in  anyplace das because the prosecution was very, very, hard against the religion. And being a shochet, it was against  against the  the whole  the whole communism, the whole idea of communism.

And wherever  you came in a  in a city, what are you doing? Who were your parents? Was he workers in places or were  was he brokers, meant broker  people, commerceson, people  commercial  people with this. No, that's already not good, not good for us. We don't  we don't need you. This is a  a  a community of workers, not of a  of a  of people that doesn't work and living on somebody's account. That was they saying, the religious cleric  clericals.

Q: So hence that was  the reason for the  for the  for the movements  for the  the movement from one city to the next, your father's move?

A: Sure. When you can't buy  be here because when you come in a city, you have to go to the police and to register. And they started to  they started to ask you who you are, you have  who are your parents, and all this is. No, we don't need you. You can't live  live in our town here. And you are not  not a citizen on the same level that  everybody. You are  don't have the  the right to vote. And once you are not  you are not a  not a citizen exactly, to say. It's a second class.

Q: Can we switch to your mother's family.

A: Yeah.

Q: And tell me a little bit about your mother and her family and  from the same towns as your father?

A: Not in the same town, but around, from Ukraine; the same thing. Ukraine, there is  there is  there was in  from times  from the third  from the second  second Lubavitcha Rabbi, Lubavitcha Rabbi, he bought, from the government, the Czar government  in these years it was in  in the beginning of 1800  in the end of 17  from 1700s. He bought a big, big, big place. And there  he sent there Yidden to work on the ground, to work on the ground. And it was a lot of  of  it  it called colonies, Jewish colonies. And my mother is from this colony. The whole family is from there. My  my mother's father was too a shochet in a  a little colony called Romanovka, RomanovkA: And there he was das  and the whole family come from Lubavitcha  from Lubavitcha families from  from generations. And that  that

Q: I'm sorry. Can you explain, in this time before the war, from your memory, after the second world war, obviously even after the first world war, can you explain to me what a typical Shabbat night or yom tovim night, if you can, in your mind, put yourself

A: When? What time?

Q: Right after  after the first world war.

A: I can't tell you nothing after the first world war because I was born  born already

Q: No, I know that. I'm saying

A: much later.

Q: Before the second world war began. Before the second world war began.

A: Before the second war?

Q: Yes. If  if you could just describe a typical Shabbat night.

A: It  it depends. I can't tell you general, because everybody  every family has their Shabbat. It was very, very hard to keep Shabbat, first of all. The  you know, the Soviet then installed a week of  five  five days of work. The sixth day is a  a rest day. So it was  it  it didn't  it wasn't a Shabbas, to say  to say  a  a Jewish Shabbas. And that's what they did. Because they didn't want to  to  the religion, it wasn't a Shabbas. It wasn't lahaudil, a Sunday. No religion. This  this week, it is  it is Thursday, the other week it was Friday, the other week it was Monday. You see? But the families that still hold the religion, it was very, very hard. If somebody didn't come to do work, he was fired and he  you looked for all kinds of how to  how to keep a little bit of Shabbas, to not to forget that there is a Shabbas. But in  in my house, for example, it was  it was  Shabbas was Shabbas. My father was a shochet, bet  better, or worse, in Parnasa, in this, but Shabbas was Shabbas. We were eating all together, the family was here. But it was always under very, very amyrid (ph)  afraid. Because every  every minute, you can have a knock in the door and that  who, what are you doing? And they take you and you are in Siberian. You see? But the Shabbas, in my house, what I remember, from  from  my childre  chil  it was very nice. The family  we were not a big family, four kids, father and mother. Shabbas was Shabbas. A kiddish and this. And still  it was still  still a  a synagogue. And we lived in the synagogue. We lived in  in synagogue there. It  it  it  it was my father, officially, says that he was the  the keeper. He was a  a chamber, a guardian, of the  of the building. No. But he was a shochet. He was a shochet. Das. And officially he was. And that's all. And I tell you what was  when I was twe  twe  twe  seven  seven  eight years we come in this war  in this fifth place, in fifth place from my  from my  from my  childhood. It was called Verones. That in central Russia, one of the places that was very, very  in the second world  second world war it was big fights there; very, very big fights. Verones, Kursk, Netszkeiv, Moscow. Then Verones in the center, you see? There we were. And that was, for us  for us was a Shabbas, like their Shabbas. My father was learning with me, to write and to read  to read in Russian; this I learned by myself, I learned this. You see?

Q: You mentioned the

A: There is no yeshiva, no cheder, and das. It was Lubavitch yeshiva, officially, it was closed.

Q: But everything worked underground?

A: Okay. In  in  in this time, in  in  in Verones, where we were, when I was eight years old, about eight years, then was there a few older  older  young  young  young bochurim, young  young people, and they were learning in the shul underground. Because the  the yeshiva was already closed. It was  after '27 Lubavitcha Rebbe was chased out from RussiA: He was arrested and this, and all yeshivas were closed. No  no yeshivas. But two, three bochurim here, two, three young people here. And when they were in our town, Verones, you learned with me. You learned with me. Then my father was a bisel free from this work. And it was then three bochurim and a  and two younger one, five, ten, and they were changing. And one month somebody learned with me, the other month another one. And it was going till I was 12 years old. But 12 years old it was already impossible, because we were not  not going in the public schools and everybody, why the kids are not going in public school? It was very, very dangerous. If the  if the  the government would  would know. You don't want to  to learn your kids communism with all these things? So I  I  my  my parents sent me out from my house. My sister, they sent her to my grandmother in Ukraine somewhere. Then that  when somebody come, it's not in the place, nobody knows where, she's a little girl then. And my brother was younger than me. He doesn't go in school, that's all. And send him to learn the fiddle, to learn the fiddle. In the morning he was going and then after his lesson he was going somewhere and coming back. And people are thinking that he was in school. And so  and so it was.

Q: And yourself? And yourself, where were you sent?

A: Where I was sent? I was sent before them in Kursk. Before then I was sent in Kursk. That  Kursk is a  a night  to travel a night from Varones, in the all night. In the  in the  it's 300 kilometers, something like this, from this. And I was just 12 years old.

Q: So in this atmosphere  in this atmosphere of religious persecution and families  because of that persecution, families breaking up, in this very difficult moment, when did you first hear of the Nazis and the invasion that was to occur June 22nd, 1941?

A: The Naz  the Nazis with the Russia were always the biggest enemies. You know? The  the  the Fascism, they called it, the Fascist. I don't know exactly what is the real word for Fascist. But till  till thirty '39 when it was the pact, the Russian with the  with the Germans, we didn't heard what was going on there. And when they made the pact of this, okay, it was  you didn't  you didn't hear exactly what's yemach shmey, Hitler's ideA: And even when the  when a  when the war  when the world war started already, a lot of people stayed with the Germans because  because they knew in this time it was all the people they knew from World War I. And then it was very good with the  with the  with the Deutsch, with the Na  with the Germans.

So it  it can't be worse. Can't be worse than we are now here in the Soviet Russian communism. So, the Germans are coming; very good, very good. Everyone was very happy. And then started to hear that it's not  not so  so  so rosy. And then it was  people started their vacation. And other people said, no, it's not  not real. That was  was the propaganda, the communist propaganda used to say. And they stayed with the Germans, nebach. We  we stayed there. And nobody knows where  what it  what it was exactly with everybody.

Q: But in your family situation, what exactly was the change that occurred in your family situation with the Germans  with the German invasion? How did it affect your family?

A: Okay. I wasn't home. When the  in '41 I was  in this time I was in Georgia; in Russia, Georgia, in Kurka (ph). Okay. We heard that the family  the war started. And a  the first time it took still, it was a blitz  a blitz war, you know, very  very  very fast. But still it took a few times and we didn't know exactly what  what was going on. For example, I wasn't home, but we were  already got the con  contact by post, by writing letters, here and here. And I  I knew that family from my mother's side and from my father's side, it was his mother, his  his brother and my mother's sister, two sisters, they come all in Verones. All what we got in Verones, it was one  one big room. And in this big room it was all  all together, all together. But it didn't took long time that we got to run  run away from there. Where we vacated? To Kazakhstan. That's in Asian  in AsiA: In Kazakhstan, in a little  a little village. I don't remember exactly even the das. And the  the hunger was very, very hard. No  no no not  Thank to God, nothing  nothing  not  nothing we had all to  to left them  to left before going away. What we got already is nothing. But  but even this  this they come to take. I remember that, you know, the oldest  this population, this Muslim population, the Muslims. And they are drinking very much teA: And there is  tea is very, very hard to find. In this  in this time, it was nothing. Russia in a  in a  Georgia, where I was, in this time, there  there is tea  there is growing das. And I said to them, "How I send it? How I send it?" There  that was stalance (ph), a  a book, I don't remember the name. But it was even  even bigger than this. Yes. Anyway, the tea, in this time, in  in Georgia, it still was teA: You know, it was in  in such box or boxes  such boxes, a teA: What did I do? I take this and I cut all around and made only open this, you see? It was here, open. And I put here boxes of teA: And I send it to my  Kamishlaba (ph) it was the name. Kamishlaba, a little village there  there. And then  and then it  I was in GeorgiA: They was  I don't know, thousands  thousands of kilometers from there. And we didn't see one and another.

Q: And how  how long  how long was this separation between yourself and your family when they were in Kazakhstan and you were in Georgia, how  how long

A: I was in GeorgiA:

Q: Yeah.

A: They was in Kazakhstan.

Q: Yeah. Kazakhstan.

A: How long?

Q: How long.

A: How long? Till after the war. Till after the war.

Q: So we're talking about how many years? When did they

A: Five years.

Q: Five years?

A: Yeah.

Q: The separation was five years?

A: Yeah. In  A little more, because I was in Georgia before a year.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Six years. Six years.

Q: Tell me about that separation. Who were you living with and what was the context? Was it a  a religious family that you were living with, where you were able to practice?

A: The Georgian Jewish community is, in a  in general, very religious. The Georgian Jews are very religious. And we were there. Then was the rest of the yeshiva, nazucht, see?

Allow me to start a little bit from before this.

Q: Please.

A: After I was in Kursk, we  we couldn't stay in a place, I told you; not only the families, but we are a few  a few boys with older boy which learned with us and we couldn't stay more. So, a few boys of us, they took us  the older ones took us and sent us to Vedicu, in Ukraine; Vedicu. An older  an older  an older young boy was our teacher. Here  here you can find it. You want a

Q: That was the teacher?

A: That was the teacher, yes.

Q: Huh, I see.

A: That was the yeshivA:

Q: That was the yeshivA:

A: Here, it says, you see, that's a photograph that was made in KDB  KGB.

Q: The photographer was the  was part of the Kavaday (ph)?

A: Yeah, the Kavaday make it  made it and here it say it  it said, underground  underground religious academy in Vedicu. Where is the date?

Q: So this was for police uses?

A: What?

Q: This was for police purpose?

A: They use it for the KGB. En Kavaday. It was  in this time it was En Kavaday. It was called Kavaday. No. En Kavaday. Here I am. You see?

Q: So you were in a yeshivA: You were in an underground yeshiva during this time.

A: Das  that  that  that was the rest of the Lubavitcha yeshiva, you see? There we are, eight, nine  nine boys. And in another place it was another four, five. And in another place another four, five. And a  and an older one, that was  it was  for him it was mamish, very, very dangerous. Because, after all, he was three years in a  in prison.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: The  the  the  because the war started. Then, they rehabilitated, to  to say it like this. But, otherwise, it was impossible. And we  we were  we were always called for  for  truson (ph)  to ask all  all kinds of interviews, to  to  to En Kavaday, there. They wanted us to say who made  who funded the yeshiva; who is funding the money of the yeshivA: And we said, no, we don't know. We run away from our houses. There I was from there, there I was from there, there I was from there. We run out from the yeshivA:

Q: And you had papers  you had papers to show them where you were from?

A: What?

Q: You had papers, identity papers, to show them?

A: Everybody has ID. Everybody has ID.

Q: Was there a Rav in the city?

A: What?

Q: A Rav. A Rav.

A: In which city?

Q: In the city where the yeshiva was. You mentioned Vedicu.

A: Yeah, sure. Vedicu, that's the  Vedicu. Vedicu was a very famous Yiddisha shtettle. In this times you got about 70,000 people, 50,000 Yiddin. And there it was still little synagogues. And we  how we were learning there? You know how we were learning? In a synagogue, that after we  we got and asked the  the gabbae  the  the nu  the direction of the synagogue. Because for them it was, too, it was very dangerous to hold such  such people against  against the das, against the government. Okay. We were coming four, five o'clock in the morning. We would come and I snuck in the second  in the second floor. And the Shamash, how you call it? How you call the Shamash?

Q: The guardian.

A: The guardian of this school, in the  our  our teacher was  was com  coming there. And he was  he was with us to teach us for two hours, something like this. And the guardian was closing the door outside. And then he was coming back to open. And two  two together, two, three boys were going in one place, and then to a second place to  to make homework. Okay, say homework. To go over what we learned and this. And that's it. And it  it only was when  because it was a Lubavitch Rebbe. The only thing what holded us, all of us, you see, is when because the Lubavitch Rebbe. And the first thing that sank over there, whatever it is, it was in  in this time, when they arrested us, the  all of this, and das, they arrested us, they arrested in the all of Russia, hundreds of Lubavitcha, Hassidim, Lubavitch Hassidim, and hundreds of  of  of religious Yiddin in general. And you asked if there was a role. There was a  some Rabonamin in  in Vedicu. What was it? They were all shot. They was all shot. We  we escaped  escaped, to say like this. They hold us for five weeks in the En Kavaday. But we were  we were  we were  juniors. How you say? How you say? Kids. We went  we went still  16 years means already an adult. And we went before in  below 16 years, what can they  what can they do with us? The older ones, there was 16 years, where that's one year, one year, three years and that's, you know

Q: Something that you said in one of our earlier talks, Mr. Wilschanski, really impressed me. That with the German invasion, and given this entire description that you are explaining, under Soviet rule, that when the Germans invaded, you mentioned to me that persecution, religious persecution, actually went down.

A: Yes.

Q: I wonder if you could just elaborate on that.

A: What?

Q: When  you're saying that when the  you mentioned to me when the Germans invaded, religious persecution actually diminished. It went down. I wonder if you could just speak to that.

A: Yeah, because the government was occupied with the  with the war. And they didn't look so much. First of all, the job was already very much done. Second of all, very  very, very many, even religious people, Yiddin, were in the front, on the  on the  on the nu  but the first lines of the  of the war, and this. It didn't look like this in  in another  in another  in another side of Russia, in Sommercant (ph). In  that is in Azerbaijan, Asian. Then, because it was a bisel much better, the yeshiva was already a yeshivA: It was their cheder. It was das. Okay, it wasn't  it wasn't official. But, they  it was already 70, 80 students, little students, das. But it was much, much better. And one of the  of the  the reasons was because then, in these times, they made a pact with  with Poland. And a lot, a lot, a lot of Polish Jews were in Siberian, in the  in the time of the  of the war. And then Russia made a  a  a  a  a contact with Poland to send out to  much people is arrested  arrested there in Siberian, tens and hundreds of thousands of Yiddin didn't come back. When they come back, they came  where they came? They're in Asian and in a  and in a  and in a  in a Georgia, in these places. And thousands, thousands, thousands, thousands of Yiddin was  come from SiberiA: Nu, and they got with  a contract with das and the Yiddin, the Polisha Yiddin, and they started to rebuild a little bit, to rebuild their life. So the government didn't look at them. Later, a little bit, when it was the  the  after  after  after the war, it started again.

Q: Right. But during  during

A: I wasn't there already.

Q: But during the period of the war, it seems that you were with  with a group of boys in this underground yeshiva and moving around. And there must have been a tremendous comradery amongst you.

A: Tremendous what?

Q: A tremendous friendship.

A: Okay. Sure.

Q: Would you say it was a tremendous friendship?

A: Sure. We are brothers.

Q: Uhhuh. Uhhuh. And

A: We are brothers. You don't see now in the  in the young generation, that's what I look on the young generation and I don't see.

Q: So you  you were like brothers?

A: Huh?

Q: But you were also a religious community. So there must have been tremendous

A: Sure, but it's another kind of life, another feeling. You know, when  when you are pressed a little bit, and you know that you have  you have to be against something, you awake your  your force, your  your strength, like that.

Q: And how was your religious strength at that time, in terms of

A: Much better than now.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Much better than now in  in what  what  thank God, we are in a free land and you can do whatever you want. But it's not the same feeling.

Q: Explain  explain that feeling; as a young boy in an underground religious community and this sense of HaShem that is there for you and  and yet, everything seems so out of control and constant police interrogations and fear of the police, in Kavidar?

A: Okay, but we  we  we knew that it can't be otherwise. When you are  you know that is your way to go. And you got what to thank, HaShem, and the Rebbe. You always thought about the Rebbe, the Rebbe, the Rebbe, the Rebbe. But who thought that will come a time that we'll be in a free land, in a free world, and do whatever you want.

Q: Was there communication from  for example, was there a kind of a grapevine, some communication to the Rebbe, that you heard things about the Rebbe?

A: Through Russia? In Russia?

Q: Yes.

A: Being in Russia, after the Rebbe was  was exposed, you can say, because, you know, he was arrested and he was even  it was  it was his life. It was the first  the first  that was dead. Then is 10 years in SiberiA: Because the whole world stand up.

THE VIDEOGRAPHER: I have to stop because the mic fell off.

A: Excuse me?

THE VIDEOGRAPHER: We're rolling again.

Q: Can you tell me, with the boys that you were with in the  in the underground yeshiva, did some of them  did they come to Crown Heights? Did they  did some go to Israel? Where  where did the majority of the boys end up?

A: Now?

Q: Yeah. There  some of them are gone, clearly, but where did they emigrate?

A: Now, in Gan Eden. That now  now it's  it's all  that's from all of these boys what you see here, they have here one, in an old age home. And one is a  a little bit older than me. And the other ones are all gone.

Q: Did they come to America?

A: Who?

Q: These boys that you're speaking about.

A: One  one is here now.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: And the second one is an old age home here in America, yes.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: And the other ones  no, they were coming here to the Rebbe in America, but not  not living in AmericA:

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Not living in AmericA:

Q: What did you  during this time, what did you know of the war, of the Holocaust that was occurring in  in  in the east, in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and also in the west? Did you hear anything about these situations?

A: Very late. Very late. You  you know, in Russia, everything is censored. Cen  censored, you say, yes?

Q: Uhhuh. Uhhuh.

A: Nu. So you didn't  didn't know  know a lot. Later we heard but very, very many people didn't believe it even. Nu, that's the communism, the communist propagandA: And that's it.

Q: In that communist propaganda, did you have a sense that, in your situation, over and above the  the continuous religious persecution, that the  the German invasion put the entire population at risk, or did you have the feeling that the Jews who are in particular situation of risk?

A: From which side? From the  from the Germans?

Q: From the Germans.

A: Yes, we started to hear it.

Q: Okay.

A: We started to hear it already.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: But  but not in  not in  in '41, '42. Later. Later we start to. It was Jewish soldiers that came back. They told a little bit. But it  it  it took time because the  the Germans were in Russia a  a  a  a little time. Then till Russia come back to see what is going on in the places that were before taken by the Germans, it took time. And then we started to  to hear what  what were going on. Otherwise we didn't know.

Q: You mentioned that  you didn't know. You mentioned that you had contact with your family during this time and you were sending them tea, et ceterA:

A: Yeah.

Q: Any other kind of contact? You had letters?

A: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, you know, this war time, it was very, very hard in the  in  the post with all these things, but we got contacts. See, it  it wasn't cellulars, (chuckle), it wasn't  it telephones. It wasn't that. But letters, yes. Yes.

Q: How  do you remember how your father recalled his time of separation from his children, from you? Do  do you recall your father talking about this time, the hardships that he endured during this

A: Not too much. My sister speak about it, in  in what  whatever he go through. But my father didn't  wasn't speaking about it much.

Q: Uhhuh. During this time, as a  Mr. Wilschanski, as a  as a  as a young man, as a boy, living away from your  your parents, do you remember, for example, something that placed you in a certain situation, where your education, where your religious beliefs, that helped you make a decision to go one way or to go another way; something that  I would  you were so  you were  you were in such an independent situation and you had to rely on your upbringing and you had to rely on your religious beliefs to make decisions for yourself. Is there one particular thing that stands out in your mind?

A: I'll tell you, it wasn't about any thought in these things. We  we knew that we have a  a way to go. And that's it. Because, you know, like, this man that made this escape from  from there  from then, when we were in Necadayna, and then afterward in a  in a home for children, for  and then they sent us from Necadayna to a children's home. And he said, we  we brought through the flag of the  of the Army, see?

Q: Uhhuh.

A: It was  it was caput, like they say in Dachau. But it was  in the old Russia, it was a 20, 25, maybe 13, boychicla, boychics, and a few older  older, like  like our teacher, that didn't look at themself. Whatever it will be it will be. But we have to go the way that Lubavitcha Rebbe told for us. When  when  when the communists come, his father, this Rebbe  this Rebbe's fatherinlaw's father told, I don't say exactly when they will go down, but to hold the religion we  you have to go till the last  the last drop of blood. Okay? And that was we know. We didn't know  every  everything, how it will be we didn't know. But every  every time we gave him something, may HaShem help us, to see the Rebbe, to go in his ways, to do what he wants from us. And that's the  the  the general goal of the  of the diasporA: That holds us, the diaspora, for thousands of years, not only in  in  in our little world. Because we look forwards. We look forwards. And  and  and we look what to leave over for  for the coming generation.

Q: Did your  your entire family made it back; they all survived?

A: No. No. A lot of the family from mine mom, mother's side, stayed what it  what it does, we don't know exactly where. We know

Q: But your immediate family

A: Huh?

Q: Your immediate family

A: Baruch HaShem, two sisters, a brother, me and my parents. Nu.

Q: Do you recall the first moment that you were reunited with your family? Were you reunited as a family or onebyone: Your sister came back at a different time, your father, your mother?

A: Just when the  when the world ended, in '35, and then it still was much better that they said before in the  in the Asian, in Sommercant dash cant. Then my parents came from Kazakhstan is much  much farther. Still, they came  coming to Sommercant, and I was there, too. And it was already in '46, in the beginning of '46. And then my sisters married and as Polish  Poland citizens we got out from the Russian  from the Russia/Soviet Russia in the  December of 1946.

Q: Perhaps

A: And then  then we  then we come together.

Q: We'll stop here, Mr. Wilschanski. We'll take a little break and then we'll continue again in  in 10 minutes.

A: Okay.

THE VIDEOGRAPHER: Okay. Tape is rolling. Stand by. Let me just let it go for a little bit. (Showing picture.) Stand by again. And we're ready any time.

Q: Mr. Wilschanski, what's your memory of the moment the war was declared over? What was that memory about?

A: This moment I was  it was the 9th of May, 1945. This moment I was in a little village in a  in a  Georgia, because we can't be all together in one  one place, you see? It was very dangerous. So it was a few young boys here, a few young boys here. In this time it was already older. It was about 19 years, something like this. We didn't got directly a teacher. Was sitting by ourself learning a little bit, private houses and this. And I remember, it was  it's a village in GeorgiA: In this moment it's a  a really Jewish village. It got one  one payen  one not  not Jewish family that left there. But was, for Shabbas, everything what you needed, he was  he knew already every family, every this. And it was coming and putting the  the warm to  to warm the house with these things. And I remember that  that  in the central  central  central street, it was not  not very big, maybe  maybe a kilometer and a half, something like this, somebody on a horse was going and a  and was screaming lauda (ph)  okay, the war is ended. That's  that what das. And it was already a yontif. Everybody went out from the houses and was singing, laughing and this. The world is das. All Micatavda  that  that's the word in a  in a  in a Saccatwel (ph), in Georgian. Oh Micatavda, in a horse, he was going on the whole  in the whole street and announcing it. And that was das. That was I remember from this time  this time. And then it started a new  everybody started to think what will be now, nu. And then in  everybody started to  to bandage the  the injuries.

Q: And when did you  when did you begin  you mentioned earlier that you began to have information about the Holocaust, both in the east, the  the mass murders, the ansatsuken and also in the west. And you began to hear about that later in the war. But after the war now, what information coming back about the extermination camps, the concentration camps, the murder, mass graves in

A: Okay, still it took  it took very long to ever cochin (ph), how you say, to  to go

Q: To come out.

A: To go through. What?

Q: For it to come out.

A: Yes. To understand what is going on. People were  were shocked. Nobody could believe that it was like this. But one  one people come, second people come, people come  people come. They were going to look for  for families in the  in the towns where they  where they lived. Every time that the Russian took another  another city, where they took over back, it come a new  new  new details of all these things. We didn't knew exactly  think that Auschwitz, Dachau, these things. Later we heard that it was special camps. But we knew that it was an extermination. How it come exactly, we didn't knew the first time. Then it  people come from there, every  everything is  is no families, no nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing from  from big families, that's it. Nobody knows the  the population. Oh yeah, the Germans took the Jews, and sent them away. No.

Q: And this  this information came back to the community. May I ask, after the war, what was religious life like in the former Soviet Union? Was it as bad? Was the persecution as bad as before, as you were explaining, or was it a different level of persecution?

A: I can't tell you exactly. It seems, what we hear from people that left  left here, that stayed here  because I left Russia in  in  in December of 1946. It's all  all  only a year and something after the  the war. You got very, very difficult to  to come  come out with the  the whole population of Poland, with this. But we didn't knew exactly what's going on later, you see? We hear that later  later it was very, very hard. That was people that come later and they said that it's not better than it was before. And even  even till '53, when Stalin, Stalin was dead, they said it was even worse. Because he was a maniac and he started again and again and again to exterminate all  whatever it took. He thought that it's against him. And that's what we heard already when we were out. Because it  it  it didn't took a long time, a few time till they started again back. It took already a month  a month  a year and something.

Q: You left the Soviet Union and went where?

A: We went to Poland. That  that was the first destination. That was the immigration from the Polish Yiddin. And we went to Poland. But in Poland we stayed only  only 10 days.

Q: Where in Poland?

A: Huh? Where in Poland? Shamishel (ph). Shamishel. That's just over  over the  the border. We  we come there and we  and we thought that we are already in the paradise. We left RussiA: We are in paradise. We  we come out of the  of the  of the train, of the train. It was  the train, it was Echelon. Echelon was the viol  violence for  for  for  for pain, for death, such violence. Nu. Such violence. When we went  we come in the station, and we see there is bread, there is herring, there is whatever you want for eating, brown from dusk, we thought  people  we didn't see it in Russian for the last  last time, you see? And we thought in Gan Eden. So we asked the people where a shul because we had to wait to change  to change trains from this  from this time a  aboard; aboard other times. Even the  the  how you call it, the  you have to tell because the  the  the lines

Q: The train tracks.

A: The tracks are different.

Q: Right.

A: So you have to  we find  find a  a little shul. There was a few

Q: Old.

A: Yeah. A few little, old yids. We are not in  it was only a few days. It was upper ground and das. You have to know that you have to be very, very careful. The En Kavaday here, like in Moscow. They still have their hand over Poland. And that's, oh, you see this. So they ordered us 10 days there. And then it was the Jewish organization, Bricha (ph) escape, it is called, and they put it over to go  to go through Czech  Czechoslovakia, to  to Austria, no? After 10 days. But we  we  we saw it. We were going from  from Pemishen to  to the other side, to the border, when we went to  to Austria, to when  when the Polish codivar throwing stones on the  on the train. It's very against  against Russia, but they couldn't  couldn't see the Jews. They take  they take all our goods from Poland and they send us, the Jewish. That's what they said, nu? See?

Q: And at that time you were beginning to understand and hearing more stories about what occurred?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Now, you're  you're going to Poland and it's clear to you what had happened.

A: In this time we knew already. Because it was already  before we left Russia, it was already known. It was already known. People knew already what  what was going on already.

Q: And then after, okay, you were in Austria, you went where?

A: We come in  in ViennA: In Vienna we were for one month. And there our people  it's a lot  a lot of Polish Jews, Polish Yiddin, but Lubavitcha what escaped from Russia then, to contact the Lubavitcha Rebbe. Nu? And the Lubavitcha Rebbe told everybody what they have to look for, for Israel, for Canada, for America and this, you see? My family, for example, when we wrote to the Lubavitcha Rebbe, a letter, nu, and got an answer in ViennA: It was  Vienna was partaged (sic), parted four  four  four

Q: Four sections.

A: parted. Four sections, yes. American, French, Russia and  and English. And we were in the American section. And from there, writing to the Rebbe. One month we stayed in ViennA: Before the American UNRAA, that's the UN  the UNRRA, they put every people in another  another  DP loggers, DP camps. So we wrote a letter to the Lubavitcha Rebbe. And the Lubavitcha Rebbe thought before  before the war it was a question that my family has to go to AustraliA: So, the Lubavitcha Rebbe, in the first letter, where he  good wishes for coming out from Russia and escaping Russia and this. And he said, your family, that were with you in contact from Australia is still there. And it's worthful to start again about papers to go to AustraliA: Okay. And then after the one month, you go in a  the DP camp in Austria for a half a year, about six month. And then they come to  the Lubavitch  in  in the meantime the Lubavitcha Rebbe found an office in Paris special for help for the  for the refugees, from the Lubavitch  mostly for the Lubavitcha community that was coming. And  and the director of this  of this office, he took  he made  made  he spoke about papers for  for the Lubavitcha people  people from our  from our camp to come to  to Paris. And that was in May, in May, 1947, that we came a  a group of 35 families, the first group in Paris. And it  it doesn't want it. French doesn't want people, too much refugees, to have there. But it  it called that we are going through to another  I don't remember exact to which  to which country. I have somewhere the  still even the visA: Okay. But it  it has to be to stay there a month, two months, till the other papers were done for us. Still we stay there a lot more and their families prepare to go to Israel. In Israel is a very big community. Now it's still  is a few  a few villages for Chabad and now also Chabad with special LubavitchA: And this all come from  through to France, the Lubavitcha Rebbe send there before the Rebbe, before his fatherinlaw. And we come to  to Paris. And I  I  like I say, the Rebbe said that it's grateful to start again about AustraliA: In meantime, the director that was appointed for the Lubavitcha office in a  in a  Paris, Raul Goradesky (ph) was his name, he asked me to help him in the office do das. He went  people not coming. Other people from other Lubavitcha  people from other  from other DP camps, they placed people in camps, and this. And we got in connection with the American Jewish joint  joint distribution community and they ask to bring the  all these people and to see about Lubavitcha, Lubavitcha group, to restore them. And he asked me  I was already over 20 years in this time. He asked me to help him. Nu. And a  and because the yeshiva was still in  in Deutschland, in Germany, not in AustriA: In Austria we were only two camps, something like this. In  mostly, on the Lubavitcha group coming from Russia, were in Germany, in Poking it called  Poking, around Munich, around Munchen. And the yeshiva was there. The only yeshiva that come from Russia, all my  my friends, my chevera, my das from yeshiva and das. And I was there. And here it wasn't a yeshiva still. I was only in  in this group  in the group where I come from, Austria, were me and another Chaven minor, another friend, a Comnetski. He's now already in Gan Eden. So he asked me to help him in the office prepare the  the papers, all these things, for the American journey for the  they ask. Okay. I started with him. And my family, in meantime  and my father was shochet there, too, in Paris. And we start about the papers for AustraliA: In a  about a year  about a year after when we came there, come the whole yeshiva from Poking, the whole group, the most group, come in Paris. In meantime, the office which I helped him, we got to prepare houses  houses. Places for  for them. So we  from our office, I was going to  to look people from American Jew to find places in hotels and this to place the oncoming group. When the yeshiva come, I  I wrote Lubavitcha Rebbe, to the previous Lubavitcha Rebbe, his father  the fatherinlaw, this Rebbe, and I told him, all my chaverim are here and I wanted to go back to  to yeshiva, to learn still  again  more.

Q: So the entire Lubavitcha yeshiva came from Pokey DP camp?

A: Yes.

Q: To Paris.

A: Yes.

Q: What was that decision? Why did they come to Paris?

A: Why did they have to be in Pokey?

Q: No, I understand. But they  but there was another possibility  was there a possibility of going to America or

A: Yes. Yes. Yes. It was all kinds of this. All kinds

Q: Paris was a stopping point?

A: Yes.

Q: A station?

A: In this time, in Paris, it was tens of thousands of  of Yiddin, All big  big Rebbes of the  from Poland, from this. We were all going through Paris. Through Paris.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: And when the yeshiva come and installed in Paris, I wrote the Rebbe a letter. Now, in the first time, when I wrote to the Rebbe that I  that  the Raul Goradesky asked me to help him in the office, in the Lubavitch Rebbe's office, Rabbi answered me a very nice letter, okay, I was a bucher of over 20 years old, a yingle. The Rabbi told me, yeah, you have to help him, HaShem would help you, mit us. When they come, I write the Rebbe, now the yeshiva is here and I would like to go back to the yeshivA: And the Rebbe answered me, a kotzin letter, not  not a longer letter like before, the whole  the whole goal of learning Torah with Talmud is to know how to turn  to do a good thing for another Yid. You have to work to help in the office that's all and HaShem will help you. And there.

So my whole family was working about going to AustraliA: And I stayed in Paris. And then I  from  about  about a year later, I married there. And I continued to work all the  all the time in  in the Lubavitcha office there.

Q: How long were you in Paris?

A: Twentyfive years.

Q: Twentyfive years in Paris?

A: Thirtyfive years. From '47 to '72. The family things, my first wife, La Hasholem, Olah V'Shalom, got to leave us, with this Rebbe says coming, this Rebbe already, and I continued to work here till about 10 years ago, something like this, I was all working for the office in a  in Paris. That's it.

Q: So Paris became a point where all your friends, your brothers, in this underground yeshiva, they came from Pokey? A lot of them were

A: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Q: Perhaps we can go to that photograph right now, Mr. Vilchansky.

A: Okay.

Q: If you could just identify some of the people in this photograph from this underground yeshiva and tell us who the teachers were, where you are again. I think we have a better viewpoint right now of this.

A: Okay. Coming  coming to Paris, nothing now, Paris is very, very  very big Lubavitcher community. Young people, young  young generation. But a very  it's very  there is five big schools what have about  about 2,000 kids, Lubavitcher schools.

Q: Huh.

A: That's in Paris and around Paris. And synagogues for Lubavitch, special synagogues in towns. It all started from our office, a round little office. It was printed things mit us coming here. As I say, that is in the City of Vedicu, very known Yiddish and das. And, as I told you, here is  here it says underground religious academy  underground religious academy in the City of Vedicu. And here is  no  no date. No date. Nothing down here.

Here we are the  the students, to say  say like this. Here I am. This is  I am here. And I was  in this time, I was the youngest one of this whole group. And when this  that was taking this photograph, I was  I was teves  13 years and three months. Thirteen years and three months. And it was in December, 1937. We were sitting in a little shul, in a little shul. That's the guardian of the shul. We were sitting in the basement, but not a basement. It's a cave. We were sitting all together with our teacher. That's our teacher. He came from BelarusiA: And he knew  everybody knew that this very, very dangerous to learn with kids, when this Soviet government has to learn communism. And that's his contribution. Contribution. But that was the goal of  of giving over to the coming generation. And that was the  the mission with the Lubavitcha Rebbe gave when a  when he left Russia: Not to leave the religion to go out. And it has to go do without thinking about themself.

That's in  in the guardian. That's  that's  this one is now in an old age home here in Brooklyn. This one is down in Brooklyn still. And  and that's all what's  what's  what's left from this  from this photography. And that's it.

Q: It's a very interesting photograph.

A: Nu.

Q: Very special photograph.

A: How come? Because now, in this time, you can  you can go there. They find out the whole  the whole  the whole  the whole tik, nu? The whole  nu  the whole papers from there, what was going on, the whole interrogations mit all these things. Nu?

Q: I'm sure in the archives somewhere, of course.

A: Sure. But  but now they give it out. They give it out. It's one of mine  mine  the son of this one, you  you  you  he went to RussiA: And this one, the son of him. And he found out this papers and he made it and das it. Here it say.

Q: Now, Mr. Wilschanski, one last question. And so much of your experience during the war was around this group of people, a very, very important story for you. And just taking from that and the  in the larger experience, what in  in your  your sense, in your spirit, what message would you want to pass on to the younger generation in that kind of Hashkafic message to future generations, what happened to you and your family, what are the  if I can put it in that way, what are the lessons from your experience?

A: I see that the one thing that helped us to go through all this difficult times, for us, us  us youths, us kids, and then with us young boys, and later, is because we were very, very strong with the way that the older generation made it for us. All the prescriptions, I say, the terror, the rebbeshte, the Rebbe, Lubavitcha Rebbe, was always holding us in das  in the  in the hardest times. It was the only  the only wish, that once it will come that we can be together and practice our religion openly without any persecutions, without any difficulties. And that's it. That's what holded us. And when you  we came in a free land. It's much difficult  more difficult than it was there to see you. Because you  you  you know how the Talmud say, the eyes see and the heart want it. There you  you know that you can't go left or right. You have to go in the right way, in the middle way. And that has the younger generation  generation to look and to learn from the older ones. We learned this from before us. Say later I'm not too much learn from us but still, they can look  it was every generation has to look for the other. And, most of all, we have  we have where to go. We have an open way, a very, very wide way and a good way. And that what holded us for the thousands of years and that's what hold us now. And that's the biggest miracle in the world. The Rabbi gezucht, you wanna make revenge, the Yiddish word from Hitler, go in the Jewish  in Jewish way; that will be the biggest vengeance, zestas (ph), against Hitler, a yemach shemo v'zechrai. I have a  an anichle. And he's now in  in Milana, in das. And there in Milana a family is a man and a wife and an aunt. That's a family. Not us. And he, Baruch HaShem, have four kinderlach. Then maybe he got three. And he come in tram  train. Come here, kinderlach. No, tati, tati, tati, tati. In Italiano, "Lady, nu, that's all what you have? That's it? Yes? And you  you plan to have more"? "Yeah." "How much? How much?" Das. "Six million," he told her. And that's all your  your fault. Yiddin doffin nissin, doffin gein in de richten de vag. And that will be the biggest, the biggest revenge against our enemies. And, Zecher, with HaShem help, that we will be the victorious. We will  das, das.

Q: Thank you very much, Mr. Wilschanski. Thank you very much for your time today.

A: Thank you, Mr. Lustagazaler.

Conclusion of Interview