

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Pnina Tory  
September 27, 1991  
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## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Pnina Tory, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on September 27, 1991 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Research Institute's collection of oral testimonies.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

**PNINA TORY**  
**September 27, 1991**

Q: Will you tell me your full name please?

A: My name is Pnina Tory, born Oshpitz.

Q: In what country?

A: Yeah. I was born in a little shtetl in Lithuanian, Pilvishky (ph?) in 1930.

Q: Pnina, tell me when the war broke out, where were you living?

A: I was living in Kovno with my husband and my daughter.

Q: What was your husband doing?

A: My hus...my husband was Pinchas Sheinzon. He was a engineer and a contractor, and a builder and we were, uh, we're supposed to go to Israel and we had already certificates, but the Russia came in 1940 and they didn't let us out. And in my house also, my little brother...he was the youngest one, 20 years old, and he had also certificates for Eretz Yisrael as a student and he also couldn't go out. And this was our bad luck.

Q: Okay. So then when . . . when did the Nazis come into Kovno?

A: The Nazi came in...in Kovno in the June 22.

Q: Where's your husband?

A: But...but we were taken out of the houses already a day before by the Lithuanian, by the same so-called partisans and they came into the house, took us out on the streets and the...the guns, the little ones to the right, hands up, and they brought us to jail. Kept us...all the people, all the parents of my husband were in the house, the cousin and all kind people gathered because it was the house I had plenty of food. It was war time. We knew it's going to be war and prepared for war and so they thought it will be more...more convenient to be in our house, and everybody was taken out and taken to jail. After 3 days, we managed to go out...my daughter and myself and also the nanny of my daughter who was a Christian. But she asked for a child so they took her also to the jail. Eh . . .

Q: Pnina, because of the time we have to move a little differently than I might like to. So let me just ask you...uh...when was your first husband killed? What happened?

A: He was killed...this I told you from the prison, the men were taken to the Seventh Fort. You...I told you about the Seventh fort.

Q: Well, tell us again for the tape.

A: Yeah. This is was fortation around Kovno there are fortation and the fort seven the ninth, I tell these numbers because there were many Jews killed. And they were taken there, and we were by chance let...let out because of the little child. And there on this fort he was killed, together with my little brother, my father-in-law, my...my cousin. Everybody was killed under terrible conditions. It was terrible conditions. It was a little boy. He was stayed alive who ran away who didn't..mothers...of the women and came back and he told me what was

going on in this fort. And then...uh...I had to move to the ghetto. I must make it short. I must tell you I...I was so already beaten before the war because the Russians sent my parents, and mine oldest brother with his wife to Siberia, and so it...it was a week before the war broke out, and I was very miserable because we heard that the trains were...were bombed and I was sure my parents are not alive anymore. And so I was beaten one after the other. I didn't...I didn't believe that my husband was killed and my brother was killed. Somebody told me that it's not time to tell the particulars, but I still hoped that they are alive. But I had to move to the ghetto. I was staying in the city a long time because I went to some people...uh...uh...my... with my husband, my late husband was...had connections with the Lithuanian because he build for the government, they build ...many buildings . . .

Q: I'm going to stop you because I need to stop you because I need to stop. Just slow down a minute. I'll pace it. It's fine. We're okay. We're fine.

Q: What was it like for you as a young widow, alone, in the Slobodka ghetto?

A: It was...it was terrible because I...they...everything was taken from me. They...my...my apartment, my...my money, my jewelry, everything, and I...and I was staying too long in town. Then I couldn't get a room in the ghetto because it was so few dwellings, and then it was terrible. I 'til I by chance, it is a long story, but I shall tell it. I got a little tea room. It was half a room. It was about 8 meters and then I...I went around with a...with all the belongings. I had to get a cart from the...the Lithuanians were not supposed to...to lend their carts for Jews. By law, by the German law. But anyway when you paid money you...you got it...we had to go 2 hours to the ghetto. It is...it was a short, not so far away, but the long route the...uh...the cart we went to the ghetto made it so slowly. And three times I went with the

belongings to the ghetto. I didn't have a place to put the things so I put it where acquaintances relatives were, so I put it on the...on the courtyard. And then, uh, finally, I got in a...got to this little home, and I moved in. This is also a very hard story, that uh could be told another time.

Q: We'll...we'll do another time.

A: Yeah. And then it was a...there was the parents of my brother-in-law, my...my...my sister-in-law. Yeah. Because...uh...her...and they helped me to get some food, some flour. She is...to get some flour and some foods, but it was frightening. In a short time it was gone. And you had...you couldn't have where to put...you didn't get other things. Till they organized and until they begin to give the food in the ghetto, it took some time, and then it was so ...so, uh, little. For instance, we got a 120 gram bread a day. And the...uh...there is...you...you couldn't die and you couldn't live on it you see. It was a starvation. It was such starvation, and we had to...how to...to get food. So the meaning to get food it was to sell your things, to change it for food. And the...there were brigades. We went out into the street...into the city to work. There were little brigades where you could if connections with the Lithuanians, change with them your...your...uh...belongings for food or for money and so you got some food. But you...you it was very hard work. You had to go...uh...by foot...about 10...I'm speaking kilometers, 10, 15 kilometers and then after a day's work, walk back, and with the parcel your... on your back. But when I...I did it I was already lucky because I was...I had it already...I could breath in food in the ghetto. But it took...it passed a long time til I could go out. And then happened that my...the nanny of my daughter who stayed in the city tried to get connections with me and she used to come...uh...where the people worked and send some little parcels for me.

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Q: Okay. I'm going to interrupt again.

A: Yeah.

Q: And let's stop a bit. How did you...when did you met Avraham Tory?

A: This I tell you. This is a connection of this. So but not...nobody...nobody gave it to me. Everybody...I don't know where the people got it, but they get it. So one day, I knew my husband, Avraham, a long time ago when we were...I was a girl of 15 or so, he came to our little town to make...he was a Macabi sportsman. And he used to make the little shtetl and in all the country, he used to come and make sports speech you know and teach. So to keep together the Macabi movement. And he came also in our shtetl, so I knew him the first time. And then I met him even he was my husband...my marriage in my wedding when I married. And I was also in his wedding when he married because my parents were someway connected to them. I don't remember how. But I was not aware of him at all that he's in the ghetto, and I had no connection with him. But then one day he came in and he tells me...and brings me a little parcel from the nanny. It was...was wonderful. There was bread and a little piece of butter and...uh... and salad or something, and he tells me that what told him that he was several times here and sent parcels and she never got any news from me. So this was the first time I knew him, I saw him again, but and he was very much pressed...or so pressed what he saw there, how I lived. It's already cool and it was...it was already. It was terrible. I looked terrible because I...my little...little room, I took in my cousin because she didn't find place...place, so I took her in and when my...her brother also my cousin, came to...to us to eat because...but we couldn't eat together. One went out and the other one could come in.

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Q: Okay. When did you start helping. I'm sorry. I'm going to have to keep doing this I'm afraid. When did you start helping Avraham with the diary?

A: So this was...yeah...this was after a...quite awhile further. I didn't know he writes something. He didn't tell of...he didn't tell anybody. And...uh...but when...then I...I moved then to another place because they took away the house...the...the Committee, the Council took away the house for the German...uh...Arbeiter. This was German work department. So...so we are given other place. It also was a..a house opposite the Council, the...the building of the Council. So and he used to come...he was already interested in me. He told me you can get this. You can...like other persons on the Committee and... He was interested how I'm going on.

Q: Yeah. Please. I really have to stop you. I'm sorry. Please. Follow my lead.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. I want to ask you very specific questions.

A: Yeah.

Q: And you give me very specific answers. Okay? Just because we're short and it's not right, but I have to do it this way. When did you...when did you start physically helping Avraham with the diary.

A: Yeah. Yeah. I tell it. It was in about 42, from my new apartment opposite him, the Council. I



came one day out, and I saw him coming against me and I said hello and he...he was very, very grave so my...very much grave, and he told me, "Look, Pnina, I want to ask you something." "What's on your mind." "I write a diary and I can't keep it with me and I want you to...to...to keep...to hide it for me, to keep it in your place because I can't keep it in my place. And not in the Council. I was a...to once I was very much astonished you know, but I thought he was so grave and he repeated I can't keep it in...at my place." So I said, "Hello. This... I was very interested to hear that he writes a a diary. So I said, "Of course, I shall do it." And then he had to say to me, "You know it is very dangerous." I said, uh, "Alright. I admit.. I know. I understand. Everything is dangerous in this place." And so he brought me in the first pages, and then he used to send me...when he writing in the...the Council, we had a...a messenger, a boy of 10, 11 years, maybe older. Yankele <sup>1</sup> was his name, so he used to bring me all the...the papers and they...he begin to came in the evenings and write. What he didn't he finished he tried at my place and...uh...so it begin after while.

Q: Did you write...did you take dictation for him for awhile.

A: Ya. Yes. When he was very tired and he wanted to give up, so I said, "All right, I shall write and I...he dictated and I wrote the papers. And then I hid it..it in...my room afterwards. It began to be too dangerous and the...I used ...I used to take all these papers...these written papers when it was finished and I brought it up upstairs to an attic \_\_\_\_\_. There was...how you call it in English...you know from from straw, not straw, but I . . I . . forget now you call it, but I used to bury it under this. It was in a ...in a corner. It was a place where nobody came. And ...uh...then...then afterwards we saw one day I used to go up on this attic when I hide the

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to Yankele Bergman, an eleven year old messenger boy for the Council and close friend of Avraham Tory, Pnina's husband.

papers. I put it a pile of laundry. I put it...as if I go to hang laundry there. And ...but we didn't have a staircase. It was you know a ladder. (Laughing) So once I...I slipped and everything fell down, and so I was so frightened. I looked around. Nobody was...I put it again and after this, after this time we thought what to do and so we built in the...in the where it was water closet...it was in the water closet...closet. We...be...behind we made a second door such a small and then I used to put in the papers not to have to go all the time on the attic.

Q: Okay. When you were ready to leave to the ghetto, how did you and Avraham escape from the ghetto with Elkanan Elkes' last letter? When did you get Elkanan Elkes's last letter?

A: Yeah. Elke...the last letter of Dr. Elkes got Avraham. I was already on the...in the country because we took out our daughter and she got ill. And I was not supposed to go there. It was against of the will of the priest, our savior. He...I was very sorry to do it, but I...I knew a ill child can't survive in...in the country and I didn't know how...how good the people were. They were very . . . so...so I went out to be of the...and stayed there. To cut a long story short, I stayed there and then after several months, I begin to beg him to...to...to bring Avraham there. And this was a young boy there of 20 that wanted very much to study so I told him, "You...Look, he's a lawyer and he'll teach you everything," and this...it was the thing that brought him to speak to his mother to bring...to bring Avraham. And so it is long story of the escape, so...

Q: No. I know.

A: We don't...we don't have time for it.

Q: No. I want you to stop. Yeah.

A: So when before he left the...the ghetto, after we got a message through the priest that he a...a \_\_\_ coming to ...to take him so he was in the ghetto, a meeting with Dr. Elkanan Elkes, and Dr. Garfunkel,<sup>2</sup> who was the Deputy of the Council, and he told them what he is...that he's going away. And, of course...uh....I think Avraham will tell you about it.

Q: No. I don't want Avraham's story. I want your story.

A: Yeah. And so... Yes. So he...when he got the letter. Yeah. He got then the letter from Dr. Elkanan Elkes. He was so sure that you'll stay alive and you'll stay alive, and you'll bring the letter to my children. And with this letter he came ...he went out and with this letter he came, and he waited all the time this letter.

Q: But how did you get the letter?

A: When we out from...we are going with the Brichah, fled from...from Lithuanian, and so we took the letter with us together with all the documents we took out from the earth, the crates. And all the time my husband kept the letter with him in his...uh... But when we are within one borderline and the Russian were...were hitting us, terribly shaking, and I saw they are taking all the written things of they take away And then Avraham saw it . . .

Q: All right.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Leib Garfunkel, a widely respected attorney in Kovno's Jewish community.

A: He came to me and he said, "Look what is going happen." And he took out his...the letter...letter and he gave it to me. I picked up my dress...

Q: Don't touch your microphone. Stop. I need you to stop. I need you to physically stop. Alright. I want to... Would you please take your hands and just put them here like this. No. Don't touch that.

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Now, let's start and go back. I need you not to touch that microphone.

A: Yeah. I understand.

Q: Okay.

A: One moment please.

Q: Take some water. Relax. Uh...John, or whoever's on the controls, would you just tell the front desk to please look out for Mr. Tory. Thank you, Dear. Alright. Now, I want you to tell me what happened. Start from the beginning. When Avraham came to you with the letter, exactly physically what you did.

A: Yeah. Yeah. I...he took...went aside a little bit.

Q: No. Say the, just say, Avraham gave me the letter and then tell me what you did with it.

A: Yeah. So he took out the letter and gave it to me and he said, "I am afraid they are going to take it way." I pulled up my dress and put it in my bra....the...the letter on my body and...and they checked us, but they didn't check me like that. And so...and the . . .so I came over with the letter. But I was so sweating, the letter was damp afterwards.

Q: How did you get out with the letter? How did you...where did you physically go?

A: Oh, we went a long way. We went afterwards to...to the Czechoslovakia and from Czechoslovakia we went to Hungary and then to Rumania. In Rumania, we're supposed to go by boat to Israel. We had already certificates, but then I... I can't tell you the story but we had to run away because the Russian heard about it, that there are people from... from Russia from the...from the Baltic States going on the boat, so we had to run away back and went back to Hungary, back to...uh...Austria (coughing)...sorry...and then we came to...on the border of Austria and Italy and there we passed a border. We were of the Jewish Brigade, and this was a wonderful thing what happened to us. It was like coming to \_\_\_\_\_. It was wonderful. We can never forget it. After all what happened to us...to us, this was the most wonderful thing what happened to us. And then...then in the north of Italy, I wrote to Joel Elkes,<sup>3</sup> Dr. Elkes, so they sent me the letter. So...

Q: Your letter then was mailed from Italy?

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Joel Elkes is the son of Dr. Elkanan Elkes.

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A: From Italy. Yeah. Yeah. In . .

Q: And you...you kept it on your body during that whole trip?

A: Yeah. Whole trip. Yeah. And I sweated from fear, you know. It was such a fear. I was very much afraid to...this letter. I don't really remember how I mailed it. I think I...I mailed it through military mail because we had the...there was no mail, but we had this Brigade soldiers and I...I found a way of to mail it.

Q: That's quite a story, that escape.

A: Yeah. Yeah. But this letter is just a wonderful letter. It is a historic letter and I couldn't get over to not...to not to bring it to its destiny. And...uh...and so were the other...the other documents. It was very also in the same place. We had to smuggle through the bundle of the documents. And it was a miracle we succeeded it. Just a miracle. When I think about it so (laughing).

Q: Okay. Let's stop a minute because I want to ask the control room a question. Uh...Can you stop tape.

Q: We have...Okay. Tell me when. Okay. Good. We have the key points now on tape and now we have 15 more minutes so we some more reason so we can go back. Okay, we're going to go back a little bit because we have a little more time.

A: Yeah. What do you want me...to hear...

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Q: What I'd like to hear are...uh...uh...when you were helping Avraham escape with the letter, we can...we can slow down a little bit now. Uh...When Avraham came with the letter, did you read it?

A: The . .the yeah. Of course, I read it . .I . .read it. I it. I knew about it.

Q: Alright. Let's...let's go back because you are on tape now. Uh...Let me rephrase the question. When Avraham came with Elkes's last letter, you read the letter. What was your reaction to the letter?

A: It was . .I was very emotional. It was very emotional.

Q: Did you know Dr. Elkes?

A: Oh, yes. I knew him very well. I knew him as a doctor, and I knew him as a...as a head of the...the ghetto.

Q: Could you tell us about what you know about Dr. Elkes? How you saw him as a person? Okay. And would you use his name?

A: Yeah. Dr. Elkes was...first of all, he was...he was an outstanding doctor. My parents were always his patients. Coming from the little town to..to him, and he was now...and he was now a director of the \_\_\_\_ of the hospital, the Jewish hospital. And then in the ghetto everybody honored him, and everybody admired him because he was above...above...above

all you see, and...uh...uh...I heard always about him, great admiration from Avraham. So the...our...when I heard this stories from Avraham...Avraham told me, always he used to...to confer with him to reach before in this...what is written because he wanted to know if it is correct about I things he wasn't present about...on things that Avraham wasn't present because he heard...Dr. Elkes spoke with the Germans so or so, so he...when he wrote the diary he always brought it to him, read it before him, to know if it is everything correct. And so he used to tell me about these conferences and also about the Mrs. Elkes. She was also a wonderful woman, and this is what I know about him. It is...many, many of this is written in the book and I read it too. (Laughing)

Q: Alright, one more question and then we're going to stop. Can you tell us again, when you were helping Avraham with the diary...uh...were there times when it was particularly dangerous?

Q: Of course, it was dangerous. It is always dangerous. We were always afraid. Uh...Uh...for instance, in the daytime so when a German used to come in the ghetto, Avraham used to send me messenger to tell Germans in the ghetto. So I...I knew I must be clean and everything must be... One day it was a very...it's a incident such that I was...he was...we were sitting very late in the night. It was already 12 midnight, and he went out and all the papers were still on the table and didn't have time to take it to...take them, and I went out in the ..in the second room, there was a kitchen, and there in this kitchen...it was a kitchen and a room, our apartment. So it's like two rooms. So in the forerom lived my cousin...my cousins. So I went out and I spoke to them. I didn't have the time to..to go in back in...so suddenly I hear a knock on this door and Lipzer (ph?) came in. Lipzer was one we...the head of the Brigade we worked in the Gestapo, and he thought himself a very high man and a very



powerful because he was...he was connected to them. They . ..uh . . they liked them. He worked for them...uh...and he...the Brigade was for workers, all kinds of workers like cleaners and \_\_\_, and all kinds of things. And I was so much terrified, and he came up with a man, Shilette was his name, an engineer also. He lived downstairs. And he said, "I saw light in your room, so I went up." And he made a move to go farther to my room. So I said, "Mr. Lipzer, I beg your pardon. My...my child is very sick and she fall asleep and I ask you not to wake Shulamit." So he said, "Alright. Alright." And he said, "Goodbye," and he backed out with the other one. I was terrified to death you see because if he saw I...I don't know maybe he'll give it to the Gestapo. It is the least we could after always keep Avraham in the hands to tell him I'm going to keep you out. (Laughing)

Q: The diary you mean. Yes.

A: Yeah. If he saw...it would be very \_\_\_ to see what kind of papers are sitting in my room I am writing in the night, so this is...I tell you I...a little incident...uh...what can happen in...those things.

Q: Okay. I want to thank you Pnina very much.

A: Yeah. Thank you very much.

Q: Okay. Stop tape guys.

### **Conclusion of Interview.**