

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Leah Silverstein
May 22, 1996
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Leah Silverstein, conducted by Randy Goldman on May 22, 1996 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Arlington, VA 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.

LEAH SILVERSTEIN

May 22, 1996

01:01:04

Q:Leah, will you begin by telling me your name, both, I think, your name now and your name in 1939, and where you were born, and your date of birth?

A:My name is Leah Silverstein and I was born in 1924 in Praga which is a suburb of Warsaw. And I was born Leah Hammerstein. And my mother's name was Sarah Bjorn Goldstein and my father's name was Leib Hammerstein. I had three, two brothers. My elder brother, was, his name was Wolf Hammerstein, we called him Wowe, and my younger brother was two years younger than myself and his name was Hershele Hammerstein.

Q:Tell me a little bit about your childhood and your family?

A:Well, my mother died in 1929 when I was five years old, and it meant a terrible change in the life of our family. From a well to do family, which operated a haberdashery business within one year we became poor, dirt poor. My father intended to emigrate to Paris, France, where he had a daughter...not a daughter, a sister, and, but the plan didn't realize and through manipulations by his family and friends, he lost the money that he acquired after selling everything we had. And it coincided with the time of the world crisis in 1929, with the depression era. So, to make a long story short, I knew hunger and cold and humiliation of being poor, walking around in tattered clothes even before the war. I was a very good student at school. I had excellent grades and I liked to go to school. And, well, my father remarried after four years of being a widower and that was another traumatic experience for our family, because my step mother turned out to be a terrible person. She didn't know how to take care of us children. I mean, well, she was a wicked step mother to put it simply. And at one point

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she tore up all my school books and school copy books which I treasured very much because I liked to study. I liked going to school. And, it well, we ended up in fighting each other physically.

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Well, she was kicking and beating me around and after that incident I left my father's home and I went to live with my maternal grandmother. Well, before the war I started to, I, after finishing my elementary school, I enrolled in a high school, which we called Gymnasium at that time. And it was a very lucky moment for me because high school in pre-war Poland was not free. You had to pay for it. I didn't have the money to pay for the tuition so I enrolled in a contest where over a hundred young girls competed for two places and one of the Gymnasium. Well, I was one of those two that got a place and for two years I attended this high school until the war broke out, as you know, on September 1, 1939.

Q:Now, was this high school in Warsaw or in Praga?

A:Yes, it was in Warsaw on Platz Krasinskich. The name of the school was Gymnasium Zaksowa.

Q:What about your religious background?

A:Well, my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was a very observant Jewish woman. A typical east European Jewish woman was all the manifestations of being Jewish. You know, attended regularly all the holidays in the synagogue and preparing shabbas as it should be, and you know, just being a typical, not quite orthodox but very traditional.

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My father was already not so very traditional. He still you know was going to the synagogue but only on the big holidays and he was more oriented towards the movements typical in the Jewish community after the events of 1905. You know the revolutionary movements and then the, the 1917 upheaval in Russia, was the, which brought on the communist regime and he was a very young person at that time, but involved in all these movements. Well, as for myself, I'm not a religious person. I cannot say that I am an atheist. I would rather say I am an agnostic. I didn't have any manifestations of the existence of God and the Holocaust even intensified this belief in me.

Q:But, as, as a child you lived in an observant home?

A:Well, my a, when I went to live with my maternal grandmother, I lived in a Jewish home.

Q:Were your friends Jewish, or mixed?

A:Sure. My friends were all Jewish friends. I didn't have any Polish friends because the elementary school, even though the curriculum was Polish exactly like the other elementary schools, Polish schools had, the lectures and the lessons were all in the Polish language. But the children were all Jewish children and the same applied to the Gymnasium, to the high school.

Q:And that was very intentional? There was a real separation?

A: Well, that's how it was in Poland. I can't exactly answer this. I haven't studied these things. But the Jewish children went to Jewish schools. That doesn't mean that all the Jewish children went to Jewish schools. There were Jewish children who went to Polish schools. It depended where you lived. It depended on the local circumstances.

Q: Were there a lot of Jews in Praga?

A: Yeah, there were. There were Jews in Praga. I can't give you exact numbers, but there was a considerable community in Praga.

Q: Now, both in your time in Praga and then in Warsaw afterwards, did you experience any anti-Semitism before the war? Did you know about it?

A: Yes. Well, I remember the one incident when I was walking home back from school and Polish boys were behind me and making anti-Semitic remarks. They were singing a sing-song. I don't know if you understand Polish, but well, well I can say it in Polish for those who understand the language, "zydowiea chaja, spraedawata jaja, po ezemu, po ztotemu." ?? That was one incident.

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The other incident that I experienced was we had, like I said before a haberdashery business and the neighbors next to our store, was a Polish store and you could feel the isolation, you know. The, there wasn't a good feeling of good neighborhood you know. They existed...they

tolerated us, but there was no real friendship. Besides, I was, at that time too young to think about these things. I was a child at that time.

Q: Now were you in, did you join or were you involved with any youth groups or cultural activities?

A: Yes, I was. Even before the war I joined a Jewish Zionist scout organization called Hashomer Hatzair. Luckily for me, because this organization really gave me a good start in my life. I mean, they gave me something to believe in. Because like I told you before, my childhood was not a very happy one and in the youth organization I found room, you know, for growth. We were intellectually active. We were, I have good friends. We went to outings, so that was very beneficial for me.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the organization? What did it believe in? What was, what was it about?

A: Well, this was one of many Zionist youth organizations that existed in Poland before the war. There was a whole row of them. This one was a Jewish scout organization, and we were connected even with the Polish scout organization. We had good friends in that Polish organization, Irena Adamowicz, and others, Henryk Grabowski, and others. And the aim of this organization was to eventually immigrate to Palestine. At that time we didn't talk about Israel because Israel didn't exist yet. And the task of this youth organization was to prepare the young people for work on the land in our homeland to build kibbutzim, you know communes, and to go to live over there. That was the main purpose.

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Q: So, even then, before the war, everyone believed in a, in a desire and a need to get out of Poland?

A: Not everybody.

Q: The people in your organization?

A: The people in my organization, definitely, yes.

Q: That's interesting. Now, prior to 1939, how much did you know about Hitler and the Nazi party and what was going on in Germany?

A: I knew almost nothing.

Q: Nothing in the newspapers, no refugees coming into Warsaw?

A: Well, they used to come when they started to expel Jews from Germany, they used to come to Poland. But being a teenager at that time, I didn't pay too much attention to that. It's only later on, you know, that I understood much more but not before '39.

Q: OK, so, how did things change, what happened?

A: You mean when the war broke out? Well, our whole life was broken right away. You know I was walking with my younger brother Hershel in Praga on the streets. It was a beautiful autumn day and planes appeared on the sky and we thought that these were Polish planes making maneuvers but in fact they were the first bombs coming down from that, from these planes

were intended, you know, for the Polish population. And I remember we started to run away because in addition to the bombs coming down from the skies, the planes came down very low and they started you know to shoot at the population from their machine guns. And, all of a sudden you know around the walls there were you know marks from the shells, so naturally we panicked and ran home. And father didn't know what's happening. We didn't have a radio so we went to the neighbors to listen to the radio. And indeed there was an announcement telling that Poland is in war with Germany. That the Germans crossed the Polish border and we are at war with Germany.

Q: Was this totally unexpected?

A: To me it was totally unexpected. Maybe to grownups it wasn't, but to me it was totally unexpected.

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Q: So, what happened next?

A: Well, next, my father...well Praga was bombarded very heavily. He, my father had a brother living on the left side of the River Vistula. You know Warsaw is divided by the River Wisla, in English Vistula. We lived on the right bank. His brother lived on the left bank. So, he collected us children and we ran from Praga to Warsaw hoping that Warsaw is not bombarded so heavily as Praga is. The truth turned out to be the reverse. Warsaw was even worse bombarded than Praga. And the flight from Praga to Warsaw, you know, we had to cross the bridge and the bridge was one of the main targets of these planes. You know, I

don't have exactly the right words to describe the panic that existed among these running people. The screams and you know the cries of the children. The women, the terrible panic that seized the population. And the planes coming down on you. It was a miracle that we made it through that bridge, but we did. We came to Warsaw to my uncle. They were surprised to see us, what happened you know. And for the first time in my life I felt the smell of burning domiciles. This was the invitation to the terrible five years that came later on, you know, when not only the smell of burning domiciles, but the smell of burning human beings came to your nostrils. Well, we stayed there a few days, a day or two. I don't remember exactly. We didn't have anything to eat. We were scared. We decided to run back to Praga, and again the same terrible situation you know. Running all the time through deserted streets you know, hiding in houses which were shaking you know. Well, we came back to Praga and I went to my grandmother's place.

Q:Now, I'm sorry, your grandmother lived in Praga also?

A:Yes. Yes.

Q:For some reason I thought she was in Warsaw.

A:No, she lived also in Praga. And one of the first days of war when I stayed with my grandmother, the house in which we stayed was bombarded. A bomb hit the house. It cut off the edge of the house, and so we didn't perish, but we were buried under a pile of rubbish. And finally we succeeded to crawl out from under this. I remember being a child I couldn't stop laughing seeing my grandmother being, you know, all covered with pinkish dust. She looked so funny and she had a wig on her, like Jewish orthodox women did, and the wig went awry on her

head, you know. Well, being a child, I still found it very funny. But we came out alive from that experience.

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When we came out into the streets, it was havoc all around, you know. Dead horses, dead people, the war was coming to us step by step. My grandmother was buried under the pile of rubbish twice, because she went to visit a friend of hers and the other house was, was hit too, yeah, and she crawled out a second time from under the pile of rubbish. Well, what would you like to know more?

Q:Well, how long did this go on?

A:What do you mean "this"...the bombing? Well about a month. Warsaw held out longer than any other Polish city. For a month it was hell on earth, to put it simply, you know. You were hungry. You couldn't wash. Your life was in jeopardy every moment.

Q:So you just went from place to place trying to find safety?

A:Yeah, where could you run? You run to people you know, right, or to your relatives. So, we ran to one of my uncles who also lived in Praga, close to where my grandmother lived, but he decided to leave Warsaw. Because, you know, after the first week of the war, Colonel Umiastowski gave an order for armed, for men, armed able, of men who are able to carry arms to leave Warsaw and to go to the east because the east was still some...we couldn't go west, you know. West was the Germans. The East was still giving some hope to people.

Maybe for reorganizing the Polish army, whatever. So, people were leaving in the thousands, the city. And my uncle also left with his wife and two of my cousins. He went as far as a community called Katuszyn and that's where a bomb hit him and both his legs were torn off. He didn't come back, of course. He died after a few hours. His wife and the two children came back later on to Warsaw. And when the ghetto was established in fall of 1940, they went to live in the ghetto and we too. Every Jew had to be concentrated in the ghetto.

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Q:So, the bombing campaign went on about a month?

A:Yes.

Q:Then what happened?

A:Then the bombing stopped and the Germans came in. I remember, you know, we all went out to see. It's sort of morbid curiosity, you know, what's going on. And well, there they were. First, you know, on motorcycles, on trucks full of Germans, and my grandmother she tried to console us children. She said, you know she remembered the Germans from the first world war, so she said, in Yiddish of course. She talked Yiddish, don't be scared, you will see soon the Germans will distribute frozen fish. She remembered that incident from World War I and she was convinced that the same will happen now. Well, they distribute later on, but not fish. Yeah.

Q:So, what kind of changes took place once the Germans came in. Were they nice to you? Were

they scary, what, what was it like, seeing all these Germans?

A: Well, it was scary, but you see when you are very young you are protected by the absence of the notion of mortality. So, you are rather curious more than, than apprehensive. Apprehensiveness comes later on when you are more mature and you understand things better. Well, for a while before we went to the ghetto, you see the Germans came in, in September '39. The ghetto was established a year later. That doesn't mean that all the ghettos in Poland were established a year later. Some were established on the very months that they came. Like in Katnaf Tribonovsky, and, in September there was a ghetto already. But in Warsaw, it took a year. And well, we were all, they gave us like two weeks to exchange, you know, the Poles from, yeah, go ahead.

Q: But in this year, your life changed?

A: Yes.

Q: What were the restrictions? Were there decrees? Could you do certain things and not other things? What was life like?

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A: Well, for one thing schools were closed. There were no schools for Poles, certainly not for Jews. Food was rationed. Poles got better rations than the Jews, right away. The intelligencia was gathered, the Polish Intelligencia and done away with either to most of them they were you know killed off right away.

Q:And you were aware of this at the time?

A:I, well, I was aware that I couldn't go to school. I was aware that hunger was still a matter to deal with, and, but I was not quite aware of the political atmosphere at that time.

Q:Were there beatings or anything like that on the street?

A:Definitely. Definitely.

Q:That you saw?

A:Yeah. People, you know, the Jews were not allowed to walk on sidewalks. There were, they had, whenever Germans came along the street, the Jews had to step down to go in the middle of the road and to take off their hats. And we didn't, whenever they didn't do it, they were beaten. And I remember one such incident.

Q:What about religion, was that outlawed or did people continue going to synagogue?

A:No, you couldn't go to synagogues anymore. Well, I was not a synagogue goer anyway, but I don't think they were allowed. Any clandestine activity was not allowed and to go to a synagogue would be a clandestine activity.

Q:So, how did you spend your time in this year. You couldn't go to school. You couldn't I assume there were not too many cultural opportunities?

A:Right. Well, like I said, I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair and we tried to contact each other, the friends from that organization. You know, in that organization, the youth were divided into age groups. So, I contacted the friends from my age group and we started to, to do something, gathering meeting. And people tried to return to the normalcy that existed before the war. They tried. And soon some of our leaders in the organization came back from the east because many of them when was that wave of escapees to the east, they went to the east too. And some of them came back, and when they did come back, they reorganized our youth organization.

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We had some activities. We were meeting, of course clandestinely, and each time in a home of another person. Among my instructors was Szmuel Breslaw, and he used to come from Warsaw to Praga and organized it. Well, when we came to live in the ghetto, a kibbutz was established, a commune, for our organization, and other youth organizations did the same thing like the Dror organization, and I went to live in that kibbutz. The kibbutz that I belonged to was on Nalewki 23 in Warsaw, and I lived in that kibbutz till I escaped from the Warsaw ghetto. With a group of, of other Hashomer Hatzair members. At that time, one of our leaders, Josef Kaplan, succeeded in arranging for us to live on a farm near the city of Czestochowa. And so, the members of the group to which I belonged were all trying to get out from the Warsaw ghetto. At that time it was not terribly difficult to get out. It was difficult. There was always a death penalty for leaving the ghetto. Personally, I escaped by jumping into a street cart, which at that time was crossing the ghetto from one Aryan side to the other Aryan side. And that's how I got out from the ghetto. The group to which I

belonged, pair by pair escaped from the ghetto. Some, by having permits to leave the ghetto.

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Q: Work permits you mean?

A: Whether work permits or other kinds of permits, you could achieve a permit to get out.

Q: Actually, I want to stop you, because as far as I can tell there's a period when you were living on this kibbutz in the ghetto, how many, and I want to hear more about that and just the ghetto life itself. The ghetto was formed, when?

A: It was formed in October 1940, and it was closed on November 15, if I remember correctly 1940. Closed by, mean, by closed, I mean you couldn't get in or out without special permissions.

Q: Now, did you initially move in with your family?

A: Yes, initially was my family. My father went to live in a place on Ogrodowa Street, but I separated. I mean, as I told you before, I didn't live with my father anymore. Even before the war, I lived with my grandmother. So, I went to the place where my grandmother was living. Well, and from there I went to live in the kibbutz.

Q: Fairly soon after the beginning?

A: Very soon after I came to the ghetto.

Q: Tell me, tell me a little bit about the ghetto itself, not just the kibbutz. But what the life was like there?

A: To capsulize it, I would say it was hell on earth, because on an area which included several streets, I mean the wall which was running around the ghetto was like eleven miles long. So, within that area people were concentrated you know in Warsaw before the war, there were about, over 300,000 Jews, maybe more. And when the ghetto was created, the Germans herded into the ghetto Jews from the surrounding areas, from the smaller areas. And, finally there was like on this limited place, like almost half a million Jews living in terrible conditions, living on a, on a nutrition base which was below the subsistence level, attacked by dirt and hunger and soon the other killing factor was typhus which was rampant in the, German, in the Warsaw ghetto. Till this very day, you know, sometimes I get the terrible smell of carbole. I don't know what the English word for carbole is. That was a disinfectant that they were spraying in houses where cases of typhus broke out. And people were driven from those houses to public baths to, to, for so called de-lousing. Which was actually a place where you could get typhus because typhus is a disease by lice born...it's a lice born disease.

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And, well, look, we came to live in the ghetto in, in October 1940. By, by March my father was dead, starved to death, literally. Because once he was cut off from the ghetto, he was cut off from his clientele and from his, from his subsistence, you know. A terrible hunger was in my father's house because sometimes I was running from the kibbutz to see how my father is doing. And it was a sight which I will never forget. And I run to see my grandmother, whom

I loved, because she was the substitute of my mother, you know, and Randy, what can I tell you. These sights of my father and of my grandmother dying from starvation and terrible hygienic conditions, is a picture which haunts me till this very day, you know. And this is over half a century ago, and it torments me in terrible nightmares to this very day. My grandmother was lying on a, on a dirty bed because she was unable already to move from that bed, without food, and with her came to live some, a Jewish family, a young Jewish family with three little children. The mother was soon caught smuggling some food and she was put into the jail. And the father was going out with the eldest son which was like six years maybe old to find some work to earn some money. He usually came home empty handed because he was a barber and very few people needed his services in the ghetto. So, when I came to visit my grandmother, I saw these little children, you know turning into little monsters because when a person is subjected to starvation there are visible changes in their body you know. First people get swollen, and later on they become distorted. And these little children were like two little monsters, that I, and they were next to my grandmother who was also in a, in a state of decay. And sure, I remember she said to me in Yiddish, "Look in what state I am." And I stood there, a young girl, you know, tears were running down my cheeks. I couldn't help them. The only...you know, living in the kibbutz we were much better off than other people because at least we had three meals a day. Very, very skimpy meals, but still like a piece of bread and a, and a bowl of soup.

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Sometimes I saved one of the pieces of bread that I got and I was bringing it to my father or a potato.

It was nothing that could really change the situation, but it, that was the most I could do. And thinking of it now in hindsight, I think that was, that was a very terrible, I mean, it was a very

hard thing for me to do because I was hungry all the time too, you know. It's not a big deal to share with others when you have plenty, but it's very difficult to share with others when you are yourself hungry. Not only hungry, I came, my physical health deteriorated in the ghetto to a point where I fainted and I was taken to a clinic. And of course the doctor said she needs better nutrition. She needs not to work so hard. Speaking of work, what was I working in the ghetto. The members of the kibbutz, the boys, I mean the young men, we were not boys, but the young men usually worked on, on the Polish air field on Okzeie. Or in the geographical cartographic institute in Warsaw. But the girls were usually domestic helpers, you know. So, I was also a domestic help working for other Jews who were still wealthy in the ghetto. Because, you know, the differentiation was enormous in the ghetto. Not everybody was right away poor. There were many people who were well to do in the ghetto. So, well?

Q: People who were well to do in the ghetto, weren't, were they able to help those of you who didn't have as much?

A: Well, there was ZTOS, ZTOS is an acronym for Zydowskie Towarzystwo Opieki Społecznej, and this was an institution who was supposed to take care of needy people. But there were, the need was so enormous as to the possibilities of supplying, that they couldn't meet all the, all the demand that people had. So, there was a big differentiation between people who had the means and could buy food which was smuggled into the ghetto. And between the people who right away became pauperized because they were cut off from their professions.

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And especially the people from the smaller communities. They were usually very poor to begin with.

They were right away, you know, candidates of starvation from, death from starvation. Which makes me think that usually there is this myth that Jews are rich people. This is a myth. In, in Poland before the war there was an enormous amount of Jewish people who were poor especially in the shetlach and in the smaller communities, people were not very rich. Usually the ratio between the rich and poor was such that there were a few rich people and the majority was poor. Well, you asked me if they helped. Maybe they did, but I don't think they could help a lot.

Q: You, you mentioned that your father died very soon. Were you able to see him before he died?

A: Yes I was. Yeah, I was running from time to time to see him, bringing him something to eat if I could, you know. It was a slow and painful death. I don't know if people can understand it, because in the United States I don't think that people starved to death. You can have poor people, probably people who do not have enough, but not starvation. In ghetto it was literally starvation. You died day after day. It took, it takes a couple of months to starve from, to die from starvation.

Q: So, you were able to get back and forth and you, and that's how you knew that he died?

A: Sure. One day a girl came to tell me that my father is dead. So, I ran over there, and there he was in that basement apartment...apartment, you can't call it apartment. He was on the floor in a pool, in a pool of his excrement. And that and the step mother was standing next to him, you know. Well, I didn't have much sympathy for her, but that's how it was.

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And I didn't have the money to pay for a decent burial. At that time you still could have a burial if you paid to the, to the Judenrat, to the Jewish council, about 15 zlotys they would bring a hearse and carry away the dead person. But we didn't have the money. So, what people, poor people, used to do is to put the cadaver out in front of the house. And then there were special wagons who came and picked up all of those dead people and brought them to the cemetery on Gesia Street. So, the next day I ran to that cemetery hoping to find my father there. And what I saw is, it was you know, a terrible nightmare. For the first time in my life I saw a pile of dead bodies, you know, like two stories high. Because the amount of dead people was so enormous and growing from day to day that the, the grave diggers couldn't keep up with the pace of the dead, you know, of the amount of people who were pouring into that cemetery. So they collected them, you know, piles, one upon the other, you know. And all these corpses, you know, the limbs intertwined between, you know, with open mouths and I was a young girl, and the stench from that pile of human corpses was so terrible. It's a sweetish smell, you know. I don't have the words to describe it, but, it was, you know, hell was, even the word hell is not a word to describe it, you know. Though I couldn't find him on that pile, you know. I just couldn't make it, and I went back to the kibbutz. Well, I, there was no point in even telling about it because the majority of people in the kibbutz had parents in a similar situation. Not all of them, but some were in the same situation.

Q: Let me ask you, how does a 16 year old girl deal with this? How do you handle this? I mean this is...

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A: You handle as much as you can, you know. Like I said, I was lucky that I belonged to that group of young people. And we were, you know, it gave you a frame in which you could exist, you know. It gave you a sense of belonging. That's very important. You knew where you, who you belonged to. You knew where you stand and your life was organized. That's one way how you could cope with it. It was later on that I was completely abandoned and left all alone. That was a terrible time for me, but that came later.

Q: Now, (technical conversation) where were your brothers at this point?

A: Good question. My elder brother, who was ten years older than I was, escaped somehow from the ghetto and would, and went to the province hoping to find some work. He was already a married man and he had a boy five or six years old and he was hoping to find some work so that he could come back to the ghetto and somehow feed the family, but that was it. He went and he never came back. And I don't know what happened to him. Now, my younger brother was still in the ghetto too. And for a while he was working in a bakery, but then he joined a group or was sent to a group, I don't know exactly, but he was sent to a camp in Belzec. And we know what happened, later on I learned what happened in Belzec, but at that time I didn't know. I had some news from my cousins. Though, remember I told you that my uncle was killed in Katuszyn, and the children came back to Warsaw. Later on I got a letter from one of the cousins saying that my brother, my younger brother, escaped from the, from the camp, from the labor camp and was working as a farm hand in a Polish farm, but that was it. I didn't hear from him, never again. You know after the war, we were going to the Jewish community in Praga and the survivors used to write down their names in hoping to find other survivors. And I was looking for my brothers. They were not on the list of the survivors.

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Q:What was life like in this kibbutz in the ghetto?

A:Well, it was, it was good, comparable to what was going on in other families. We kept ourselves clean, even though the premises were very limited, and we, we went to work like I said before. In the evenings and on shabbat, we used to gather and had discussions and had, you know, presentations by all kinds of literary men who used to come to the kibbutz. So, we were politically and intellectually active, in spite of the terrible conditions that existed in the ghetto.

Q:How did you...you said you had, not a lot of food, but you were able to have three meals a day. Was there a system, how did you...how did you get stuff? How were you more comfortable than other people?

A:Well, you know every Jew had a right to certain food allotments, but we didn't go to the store individually. The, the coupons were collected by one person and through certain channels we were supplied with food. There was a party key, I think, a system according to which each youth organization was getting a certain amount of food. The amount was not enough to feed all the people in the kibbutz, especially that many other members of the organization used to come to the kibbutz who were not living in the kibbutz. They were living with their respective families, but they came to the kibbutz and many of them were already starving to death, too. So, we were sharing with, with the other members of Hashomer Hatzair. So, usually it was in the morning it was two slices of bread with some substitute marmalade and a bowl of soup. In the middle of the day there was another bowl of soup, usually the same

kind of soup, and in the evening again, a piece of bread and soup. The soup was usually made out of groats, Kasha. And occasionally it was with some potatoes, very seldom a piece of fat to, you know, to make the soup richer. Very seldom a piece of butter or other kind of fat. And I remember the groats were of a special kind. They were coarsely grounded so the husks were swimming in the soup and in order to see, to eat the soup you had to separate the husks from the grains so you had a wreath around the plate, you know of the husks.

01:54:37

Q:Did you have a garden, did you have vegetables or anything like that?

A:Not that I remember. Maybe occasionally we got some vegetables, but it was not a daily menu.
The daily menu was bread and soup.

Q:Living...how many people were living on this kibbutz?

A:I think it was about, around twenty people. I have in my memoirs the names of the people who lived in the kibbutz.

Q:Was it different...you described that the work was different for the boys and the girls, but was it different living there as a girl in other ways?

A:No, no, not at all.

Q:Did you all have jobs in that home to do certain things to help maintain it?

A: Sure, yes, of course. There were, the girls were assigned to the kitchen. Each week another girl would be the, the chief cook. For me it was a nightmare because I didn't have any experience in cooking and the stove was not in, in good working condition. It was usually very difficult to make it, you know, work. We didn't have the proper fuel. You know, in Poland, stoves are, you know, heated by coal and wood. Coal and wood was expensive, so it was a very hard task. And here I was in that kitchen, you know, with the big pot for so many people and the fire doesn't start, and the boys were going out in the middle of the night like at 3:00 a.m. So, I started to work around 12:00 at night, but even with all my efforts I sometimes didn't have the soup ready and it was an anguish for me. You know, I would come out and say, "zupa jeszcze nie gotowa", the soup isn't ready. It was a heartbreaking experience, because I was responsible for the people and they had to go to work without the soup. Yeah.

Q: So the women cooked, the girls cooked and the boys...what were, what were their jobs in the kibbutz?

A: Well, I don't think they had special jobs. You know, it's a commune. You live in a commune. You have, each person tries to, to accommodate you know the way of living.

Q: I mean, did certain people have to go outside of the ghetto to try to bring in more food?

A: You couldn't get out of the ghetto without the permission.

01:57:12

Q:Nobody could sneak out?

A:Well, you could sneak out, but you always ran the risk of being caught and shot. Because you know it was, the law said that you cannot...the German law...that you cannot leave the ghetto under the penalty of death.

Q:You said you had intellectual discussions?

A:Yes.

Q:Did you have any fun? Was there music, anything like that?

A:Yeah, we used to sing a lot. Yes.

Q:So, in, in the midst of all this horrible situation, you were able to enjoy each other?

A:Definitely. And well, in my opinion it was like an oasis in that terrible ghetto, you know, which was nothing but...I would name it a cesspool of, of human, of humanity. The, the demise of people happened in such terrible conditions you know that for normally thinking people, I think it's still this very day a concept that they cannot even understand.

01:58:58

Tape #2

02:01:05

Q: Talking a little bit about your organization, your kibbutz within the ghetto, who were your leaders?

A: It was Mordechaj Anielewicz. It was Josef Kaplan. Szmuel Breslaw, these were the leaders.

Q: What kind of guys were they?

A: Fantastic guys, fantastic. The best among the Jewish youth. Intellectual, it was a mission in their lives, you know. It was a commitment to a good life and, and above everything, to free the people from the status of being pariahs among other nations, and to lead the people to their homeland, to be people equal to other people. That was the main point. They were wonderful people.

Q: Were there any women, girls who were also sort of leaders?

A: Oh sure, there were girls. Tosia Altman, Miriam Heinsdorf. Sure.

Q: You said girls weren't really treated differently. I mean, we know that in all societies women are usually treated a little differently, but was there an equality, a sense of equality amongst you?

A: I don't get the question.

Q: Well, in many societies, ours included, women generally, historically have had a different position than men.

A: No, I don't think that they were treated less...with less importance than the men. We were treated equally. A girl was equally privileged or underprivileged in certain situations just like the men. There was no, no notion of seeing the girls as less worthwhile or anything. No.

Q: In these leaders that you mentioned were they a little bit older than you?

A: Yeah, they were older. I was among the youngest. You see the group that came from Praga, I belonged to, to the youngest group. So, the leader, if I was at that time, what, 14, 15, 14 years old, and they were in their early twenties.

Q: They were old guys?

A: They were old guys. Some of them, if somebody were 30 it was definitely old.

Q: Were there other things that they told you that you can remember or guidance that they gave you. Were their plans, were their goals, other than to one day go to Palestine?

A: Look, when we came into the ghetto, we tried to maintain the same life style that we had before the ghetto, because we didn't know what the next day will bring. So, the only way to sustain ourselves was to cling on to the lifestyle that we had before, until the first news about mass killings came to the Warsaw ghetto. That was a break in the attitude. That was a change, that

we didn't think about Palestine anymore. We had to think about self defense. When the realization that they, that they are about to annihilate us that, and the people in the youth organization, not only in ours, in the other youth organizations as well, realized they were the first to learn about it. You see, the first mass killings began, was the invasion of the Germans of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

02:05:22

Along with the German army came the Einsatzgruppen, killing squads. Their only purpose was to kill Jews and communists, and that's when the first massacre occurred in Ponary, in a place near Vilna. It was in the same months when, when the occupation started, I mean when the German _____ came into the east. Thousands of Jews were driven to these previously dug out graves and they were machine gunned.

Q:How did you find out about this?

A:Well, good question. Like I said, we were a scout organization and we had good connections with the Polish scout organization. And Irena Adamowicz was a good friend of Hashomer Hatzair, and she suggested that one of her acquaintances in this Polish scout organization would go to Vilna and find out what...we didn't know what happened in, in Vilna yet, until this delegate, his name was Henryk Grabewski, he went on a bike from Warsaw to Vilna and when he came, the idea was to get in touch with the, with our members of Hashomer Hatzair in Vilna. But when he came and got in touch with the people, he learned what happened to the Jews of Vilna. And when he came back, and told us about this, we were the first to realize that the Germans mean business, business of killing the whole Jewish nation. You

see, the Germans didn't come out straight and said we are going to kill you all. It was a step by step process. The annihilation, if you summarize this you can see it in, in four major steps like the writer Raul Hilberg so eloquently put it. He pointed out there were four major steps in the annihilation of the Jews. There was identification, expropriation, ghettoization, and finally annihilation. First you mark the Jews. You put a "J" for Jew, Jude, into your passport. You put on an armband, or a yellow star on your garb and you are right away separated from the non-Jewish population.

02:08:45

Then your property is taking away from you. Your bank accounts, your, your factories, your, your real estate. Everything. Then you are herded into a ghetto, you are concentrated. And finally from this concentrated places you are being driven to the death camps. But this was a process which took years, it took months. You had, they had to organize transports and all that stuff. It was a big business.

Q:When you got this information that Jews were being massacred, do you remember the dialog amongst your group and with your leaders at that point?

A:Well, I was too young to be included in these discussions, but I remember that one day we were explained that we have to defend ourselves, that the Germans are going to kill us. And this was a concept for me as a young girl which it couldn't get through my skull because why? You know, I remember a discussion that I had with my uncle, my other uncle, I had two uncles in Warsaw. And when I came to talk to him I said, "Uncle, they are going to kill us off." And he said, "Girl, what are you talking about? They don't kill people for nothing.

They kill only trespassers of the law. As long as you remain in the framework of law, nothing can happen to you." That was the concept, you know, that existed among Jews before they finally realized that, that they are going to be, you know, exterminated. I'm hesitant to use the word exterminated. Elie Wiesel in one of his articles made a good point in my opinion. He said, "Only vermin are exterminated. People are being murdered."

02:11:21

Well, the point is that the Germans considered the Jews as vermin. You see, in order to kill people the killers have to be motivated to do it and in order to be able to kill so many people, you know, we talk about killing so many people. People cannot understand that it was an enormous task to do. You can not get away with killing millions of people right away. And, the killers had to be properly prepared to that task. And one of the points that enabled them to do it was the process of dehumanizing the Jews to instill in the killers the idea that the Jews are not people. They are vermin. They are dangerous, just like rats and lice and roaches are dangerous. That's how, that's why we have to get rid of them, because they step on the moral fiber of the German nation. And in order to preserve the integrity of the German nation, we have to get rid of this vermins. That's how they could do the job.

Q:Let's get back to you, your story. So, after you got, I understand that after you got this information it was a real turning point in psychology and, and operations in a way?

A:Yes.

Q:Did they start training you for self defense at this point?

A: Well, training, it's a big word because you see the idea of self defense in the Warsaw ghetto was born much earlier than the, the uprising, you know. The uprising took place in '43, but the idea was born from the moment when we learned about Ponary, about Babi Yar, which took place in September '41, and we learned also from that courier, from that Polish courier that there is a group of young Jewish people who organized themselves in a partisan organization to fight the Germans, to defend themselves. The FBO, an organization. So, this idea swept to the Warsaw ghetto and we...we, by we I mean the youth organization...started to, to the nucleus of a self defense operation. There was the beginning.

02:14:48

You know, at the time, when the first mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto began in July 22, 1942, there was already the, the nucleus of the defense organization among Jews.

Q: OK, but I want to know while you were there, were you, were people starting to try to get weapons. Did they teach you certain things about how to protect yourself? Did you talk about going to the forest versus staying in the ghetto?

A: Look, I left the Warsaw ghetto in late summer or early fall '41. So, I was not in the Warsaw ghetto anymore when the Jewish fighting organization was organized. I was at that time on that farm.

Q: Right, but when, what I'm asking is, when you got information about Vilna, about Ponary, you were still in the ghetto?

A:No.

Q:Oh, you were not even in the, you were out already?

A:Yes.

Q:OK, so, what you're talking about is the spirit and the mentality of what was going on in the ghetto, but you at this point were gone?

A:Yes.

Q:OK, I just wanted to clarify that. Before you tell me about the farm, I'd like to learn a little bit more about the rest of the ghetto. That there was an organizational structure, I believe.

A:You mean the Warsaw ghetto?

Q:Yes.

A:Well, you know the ghetto was ruled by the Judenrat, by the Jewish council, which was appointed by the Germans. And it was an instrument in the German hands to, you know, to enforce all the laws that the Germans wanted to implement into the Jewish community.

02:17:03

And at the beginning, the attitude to the Judenrat was people didn't know what to figure out, you know, what to make out of it. After all this was the only official presentation of the Jewish community, and they were the distributor of food. They were, you know, providing all these services needed in any community like health services, burial services and work. And, the big change, the attitude towards the Judenrat change was the first expulsion from the ghetto. After that, you know, when it became obvious that the Jews driven out from the ghetto are being killed, so this was the turning point in the whole existence of the ghetto.

Q:When are you talking about, what period?

A:Well, it was like I said the first mass deportation from the Warsaw ghetto was in '42.

Q:While you were in there did you...

A:I wasn't there.

Q:No, I know that, but while you were in the ghetto did you, were you aware of the Judenrat, did you...

A:Sure.

Q:Did you know any of those people?

A:Not personally.

Q:What was your impression?

A:It was, it was the institution in the ghetto.

Q:Were they fair? Did they try to help people in need?

A:Yeah, they tried to help people, within their framework, you know. Everything was within the rules prescribed by the Germans. You see, the, the Judenrat, the policy was to appease the Germans. The policy was, that the ideas by the leaders of the Judenrat was like my uncles, as long as you stay in the framework of law, you, you have a chance of surviving, which turned out to be false later on. But at the beginning neither the members of the Judenrat or the, or the regular population didn't realize it. You see, the Germans were, were lying all the time to the Jews. They were purposely deceiving them. You know, the Germans are known as an orderly people. Everything has to be done orderly according to their rules. And one of the rules was to keep the Jews in the dark, because if you don't, there will be panic. And it's much more difficult to, to handle a panicky situation than you can handle an orderly situation. Let me add one word. In order to, to maintain this principle, the Judenrat had at their disposal the Jewish police, you know, the Ordentlich. And that was a terrible thing because by terrible thing I mean that the Germans succeeded to make the Jews participating in the process of killing Jews. You see, I don't know if I expressed myself well.

02:20:53

The idea, the German idea was to involve the Jews in the process of extermination and they succeeded, and the Jewish police were participating because they were the one who were

rounding up the people to send them to the death camps.

Q:Now, I still want to stick with the time that you were in the ghetto, so that's about a nine month period or something.

A:Right.

Q:OK, and just within that time and what you knew then, in some of the reading I've done, I understand that there was a lot clandestine activity in terms of social services, cultural activities?

A:Sure.

Q:Did you...what was going on?

A:Well, like you say, there was a lot of activities, you know. People, first of all, all the youth organizations were very active. In addition to this you know, people were trying, like I said before, they were trying to hang on to the, to the way of life they had before they came to the ghetto and to a certain extent they succeeded in it. There were organizations, there were cultural organizations. Of course, schooling even was going on in a clandestine form because you were not allowed to have open schools. But schools were existing, and, you know, even high schools and elementary schools, even universities.

Q:Did you go to any concerts or theater, anything like that?

A: Personally I didn't, but other people did. I mean, you see my existence in the ghetto was limited by the living in the kibbutz and going occasionally to my father and my grandfather.

Q: Were people, in trying to lead a normal life, were boys meeting girls were...?

A: Sure. Life has its rules you know, under all conditions people have basic needs and by basic needs I don't mean only the physical needs, right, emotional and cultural needs too.

Q: Did you have a boyfriend at this time?

A: Yeah, I had, I had a boyfriend, but well, it was puppy love. I must tell you we lived in a commune. Boys and girls, but there was no sexual activity.

Q: Was that a rule or just...?

A: Yes, it was a rule.

02:23:42

Q: Why?

A: Why? Because that was the way our moral principles told us. Yeah.

Q: Did you feel safe in the ghetto?

A:I can't answer that question. It was later on when I tried to make it on the Aryan side that sometimes the existence in the ghetto gave you more security than to be on the outside. But when I was in the Warsaw ghetto it was still the ghetto. You see, there was...the Warsaw ghetto had a different picture before the first expulsion and after the first expulsion. It changed dramatically.

Q:OK, but what, so while you were there, were there any roundups or killings or any, any sense of this?

A:Of course. I mean the Germans used to come and round up people who were politically suspect and to my astonishment and to my disappointment I have to say that there were Jews who were, you know, in the services of the German Gestapo and they were denouncing Jews. That's how, you know, our leaders were rounded up. Josef Kaplan and Szmuel Breslaw, were killed in the ghetto because they were denounced and the Germans came and killed them. And there were killings...for any transgression you, you were killed because that was the only penalty the Jews deserved. There was only one penalty, killing you. For any transgression, even for without transgressions.

Q:Did you see people being hurt or being beaten? Did you see any of this?

A:In the ghetto?

Q:Yes.

A:No, but I saw people you know, starving. The street was strong with starving people, dead

corpses. That's what I saw. I came out, you know, going to work in the morning I had my sandwich with me and it was torn out from my hand by, by another starving person.

02:26:40

Q: Was there any relationship between your organization and either other organizations or the adult community?

A: Sure. Sure, the youth organizations were cooperating with each other, of course. And the youth organizations had also political parties. We didn't, but others did. So there was a cooperation. The people brought into the ghetto the relationships from before the war. Their affiliations to political parties or to some cultural organizations.

Q: Is there anything else you can think of to tell me about the ghetto, and if not then I'll ask you about your next...

A: Well, the Warsaw ghetto was described in so many ways that it seems, to me, futile to repeat it. Only, what I can tell you the most outstanding features in the Warsaw ghetto, when I was there, were hunger and typhus. People were dying at, at an incredible rate every single day.

Q: So, it was decided that several of you would leave for this farm, is that right?

A: More than seven.

Q: No, I said several.

A:Several, yeah.

Q:And this was...when did you decided to leave?

A:This was late '41, like September '41.

Q:OK. You started to tell me before that you were going to get on a train which left the ghetto. Why don't you tell me how you got out.

A:Well, I told you already, I jumped into a street cart, and the guy who was with me Amnon Klukowski, he jumped first, extended his hand to me and I grabbed his hand and I jumped into the running street car. I was young then. I wasn't looking then like I look today. I, I hurt my knees by doing it, but we came through the ghetto. We removed our arm bands and we get off the car as soon as we could. As soon as we found ourselves on the Aryan side because we, we, you didn't know who the people in the street cart were. They could denounce you or they could keep their mouths shut but you never know so it was safer to get off and to walk.

02:29:39

I must say that some of the Polish street car drivers were nice and cooperative and understanding because sometimes they would slow down the pace of the running cart so that people could jump into. It was at that time mostly for smuggling purposes, you see, you got out from the ghetto. You buy, bought some food over there and you tried to smuggle in back, into the

ghetto. But we were not smuggling, we were just smuggling ourselves out from the ghetto.

Q: So, after you got off of the street car, what did the two of you do?

A: Well, we start walking, and a group of Polish youngsters came after us and you know, "Hey Jews from the ghetto, hey Jews from the ghetto." But Amnon, my companion, succeeded in chasing them off and nothing, no harm came to us at that point. The real dangerous point was at the railway station, when you came to the railway station, which was, you know, crawling with, with people waiting for Jews. We called them shmaltzovniks. There were people you know the scum of the Polish society who made it a profession to hunt down Jews and you know, live on, on this ransom money, whatever they could take from them, money, jewelry whatever. And sometimes it ended up in only taking their possessions away, but sometimes they took their possessions away and denounced them to the Germans. So, when we came to that railway station, it was swarming with shmaltovniks, and one came up to us and said hey, don't be in such a hurry, where are you going you Jew Boy. But Amnon had the right attitude and he started, you know, to answer him in a foul Polish language because that's how you could get rid of them. And we finally succeeded to get on the train in the last moment. Again jumping on the already moving out from the, from the station.

Q: Let me ask you something. I guess you were about 16 at the time. Do you remember whether this was kind of exciting, an adventure? Were you afraid, you know, what your mood was... when you were leaving the ghetto to go the next place?

02:32:32

A: Well, first of all when I found myself outside the ghetto it was a tremendous feeling of, of relief, you know to be again on normal streets, you know. To walk like, again like a normal person. Not to walk among dead people or people confined to be dead. The sun was shining, you know. It was an exhilarating experience, you know. Boy, you know, when you are young you want to live and it, I enjoyed very much the sense of being free again, even for a short while, but that's how it was.

Q: So you jumped on the train?

A: Yeah, and we came to Zloty Potok. Zloty Potok is a station that you had, had to get off and you had to walk some twenty some kilometers to the farm. It's in the area of Czestochowa. So we came there and we were like twenty some people on that farm. Each pair had another story to tell when they came, you know, how they succeeded in getting out of the ghetto. But soon it was already full and soon there was not much work to do on the farm so, and people need to eat. We couldn't sustain all the people from the work on the farm, so the majority of the group went to Czestochowa, and they established a kibbutz there on Berka Joselewicza One, in the ghetto of Czestochowa. There was a group of five people who remained on the farm to keep the farm hoping that next summer we'll be able to resume our activities, and I was among the group who stayed on the farm.

Q: Who owned this farm? How did you get it?

A: The farm before the war belonged to, it was on a territory owned by a Jew called Praszker.

02:35:03

There was a big factory. I think they were producing, what is it...bricks, and Josef Kaplan one of our leaders succeeded in, in arranging, in arranging for us that we could come to that place and actually create the farm. We created it, you know. Why a farm and not any other kind of employment, because you see, as a, as a youth organization, as a Zionist organization, even before the war we prepared ourselves to reform workers to live on a kibbutz in, in later Israel, so that's what we wanted to do. We had kibbutzim even before the war on farms, and this was one of the farms that we created in that small community. We had a cow. We had a horse. We had some goats and some sheep and we had the fields. We were, we were growing potatoes. We had some, we had an orchard with plums. We had, we planted some vegetables and we were hoping, you know, first of all to nourish ourselves and maybe to sell some of that. But like I said, it was late in the summer and we couldn't sustain all the people.

Q:Now in a way, certainly compared to where you came from, it sounds somewhat idyllic, it sounds very nice, a pastoral existence.

A:Oh boy, it was such a relief, you know. It was such a difference, you know. You came out from hell, again into a normal life, you know, because you see in very small communities like Zarki there was no ghetto. So until the Jews were driven into extermination camps they lived normal lives. And when we came to that community it was appalling to us how people were living in their own homes, doing their businesses like usual, eating normal meals and we came from the ghetto. You know, glodomory is the Polish word for, for starving people. And the first thinking was to eat. We were unsatiable, you know. So, the, the local Jews, especially members of the local Hashomer Hatzair organization, they were coming to the farm and helping us out.

Q:Did you have any contact with the local Polish people?

A:Where, in the farm?

Q:In this area?

A:Well, our neighbors were Poles and we had good relations with them. Our next door neighbor, his name was Wesoly and they were okay.

02:38:22

Q:And you felt safe there?

A:Yes.

Q:How did you...now, there were five of you who stayed on?

A:Yes.

Q:How did you all spend your time?

A:Well, one of them soon joined the kibbutz in Czestochowa. Actually we were left four people.

Q:Who were...can you name them?

A: Sure, those four that remained, it was Amnon Klukowski, Chagit Elster, Abraham Silberstein, who later became my husband, and myself. And Abraham, you see we had to, to sustain ourselves so how are we going to make it through the winter. We got some allotments from the Judenrat in Zarki. It was a very primitive Judenrat because the community was small. We got some bread from them and that was already good. We still had some vegetables from the crop that we collected at the fall, so for, for the first months of winter we had something to eat. And Abraham Silberstein engaged himself as a helper to a smuggler. You see that farm was close to the border, was the Reich, was the Polish territory annex to the German Reich. It was easy to cross the border and to smuggle some food. So, he was doing it. First of all, to, to get, earn some money. First of all, we also had to take care of the animals. They had to eat too. So, that was one way to survive that winter. It was a very severe winter, I remember from. Was from '41 to '42, and I fell sick with typhus and that water. You see, we had some Jews living on, next to the farm and we came to visit them and they were in a very poor and very dirty -- and evidently some of the lice traveled from them to me and I got sick and I was very close to death because typhus is a terrible disease. You either make it through or you don't. I made it.

02:41:02

Q: Was there a doctor nearby?

A: Yeah, there was doctor nearby which he couldn't do much, you know it's...

Q: Did you all have... I know I asked you this before but I'm just curious, did you have certain

responsibilities that were yours that you took care of on this farm?

A:The responsibilities were very limited. They were limited to, to, to survive. You know a person needs to eat. Normal people eat three times a day. Where are you going to take the food from. That was the first concern.

Q:So, there was no division of responsibility?

A:No, no. We just tried...and during that winter we had visitors from our leaders in Warsaw and that's when the idea of self defense was instilled in us. They were already acquainted with what happened in, in the territories occupied by the Soviets. And they told us the terrible truth that's awaiting us and that we have to defend ourselves. So, how are we going to defend ourselves? To defend means to have weapons. Where do you take the weapons from, you know. We didn't have the money. Even if we could find some dealers and clandestine weapons. We didn't have the money to buy the weapons so what we did is we equipped ourselves with knives, whatever we had. It, it was a determination among our groups, they are not going to take us alive. We will fight, whatever we can. With some vitriole, with some knives, whatever we can.

Q:I think, you, did you have some contact with Arie Wilner?

A:Yes.

Q:Was that at this time?

A: Yes. Arie Wilner came to the farm in the spring of 1942. He was on his way to Bendzin, which was a Polish city incorporated into the Reich. His aim was to spread the idea of self defense in those communities too. And it was Arie who brought the idea of self defense to our group.

Q: What kind of a man was he?

A: A fantastic man. He was so handsome and so...you know, I couldn't help being infatuated with him, you know. I fell in love with him and we had precious moments, you know, together...no sex...but still very, very nice moments and then he went to Bendzin. I saw him later in the Warsaw ghetto because I rejoined the Warsaw ghetto later on.

02:44:41

Q: How, so, how long did you stay on this farm?

A: Well, from more or less from September '41 till May '42. In May '42 we had to leave the farm because the situation was changed. The idea that the Germans are going to kill us was spread already among the young Jewish youth organizations. It became one of the factors in our lives and there was no need already to be on the farm. Besides we couldn't exist. We couldn't sustain ourselves. So, the rest of us, the four of us joined the group in the Czestochowa ghetto and the kibbutz. We joined the kibbutz and we were there in the kibbutz till September '42. While I was in the kibbutz in Czestochowa, I was working on one of the farms, which before the war belonged to the youth organizations. And at that time, the first Akcja, the first deportation from the Warsaw ghetto took place and we had the first escapees

from the Warsaw ghetto coming to our place in the ghetto Czestochowa. At that time, I was supplied with a false birth certificate and it was decided that I should leave the ghetto and go to the Aryan side and be a courier, or be, you know, a link to someone on the Aryan side. And I went with Tosia Altman and a group of young girls who were even younger than I was. But they escaped from the ghetto and Tosia picked them up and brought them to Czestochowa because where could you run. You could run from one ghetto to another ghetto. I went out from the Czestochowa ghetto. I came back to the farm, which was deserted by that time, with a young girl there. I met Tosia Altman with the young girls from the ghetto, and we all went to the ghetto in Krakow. You see, the idea was that you ran from one ghetto to another and especially to another ghetto which had already a deportation Akcja or operation, whatever the English word would be for that.

02:47:57

Because after a while...you see, if a ghetto was big and the number of Jews was large they couldn't take them all at one time, you know. Even if you could put on a train 500 or 600 Jews you have to do it piecemeal. So, usually after the first deportation there was relatively, a time of relative peace before you knew that they will come again. So, we were running to those ghettos that had already these Akcja. And we came to the ghetto of Krakow.

Q:What was your, when you say that they thought that you may be able to serve as a courier, what was your job? What kind of information were you passing?

A:It was not information at that time. My first task was to take care of these young girls and bring them to a safer place. Safer was a relative notion, but at that moment, Krakow was safer than

Warsaw, you know. Warsaw was in the throes of the expulsion. The operation in Warsaw lasted two months, you know. From July to September or October, the beginning of October. That was my first task, to take these girls and in case we were interrogated, I would have this paper, this birth certificate that I am Polish. That was my first task.

Q:When you were sent out from Czestochowa, did, did you have any either ambivalence about leaving the other people who now you were very close with, I assume, or any fear of going out somewhat on your own?

A:Sure. I was already very close to Abraham Silberstein who later on became my husband. It was very hard for me to part with him. And it was hard to part with the other girls. We liked each other very much. It was a very good spirit reigning among us, you know, real friendship. I haven't experienced this warmth of good relationship ever since.

02:50:39

It was hard for me to separate myself from them, but on the other hand, I was, I was exhilarated, it was a chance for me to get out from the ghetto. Instinctively, you felt that you had much more chances outside the ghetto than inside, you know. A lot depended on your instincts at that time. Sure, but, you said whether I fear to go, you asked me if I...of course, I feared. Fear was the constant feeling that accompanied me since the war began until the war ended. You live in constant fear. Day by day, week after week, month after month, year after year.

Q:I don't know much about Czestochowa. Was that when...you lived there for a few months, I guess?

A: Yes.

Q: What was that like as compared to when you were living in Warsaw?

A: Well, it was like the same thing only on a smaller scale, you know. The pattern was the same, you know. You lived in a commune. You went to work. You tried to conduct some cultural activities but, you know, the danger of being deported was hanging over us like the Demoelitus sword. After what happened in Warsaw we knew it was going to happen in other places and we were informed, as a matter of fact the youth organizations were much, more, much better informed than regular Jews. So, that was, you know, it changed the whole attitude to what was going on, you know.

Q: Was this a closed ghetto like the Warsaw ghetto?

02:53:03

A: Sure, it was closed but it wasn't so heavily guarded as the Warsaw ghetto. The Warsaw ghetto was surrounded by a big brick wall ten feet high topped with crushed glass and there were fourteen gates leading into the ghetto. At each gate you had three policemen, a German, a Polish and a Jewish policeman. So, you couldn't get out. But in Czestochowa it wasn't so terrible, there was no wall against the ghetto. There were streets assigned to be the ghetto. If you had the courage to go to, to the non-Jewish part you could do it.

Q: And did you do the same kind of work there as before like helping out in someone's home.

A: No, I was working on the farm. I was assigned to a brigade who was, the task of the brigade was to collect, what would be the English word...caterpillars. We were assigned to a field where they were growing cabbage and the cabbage was infested by, by worms and there were caterpillars all over the, the cabbage beds. Our task was to collect these things. They smelled terribly and you had to collect them and many of them were squashed under your hands, you know. I described it in more detail in my memoirs.

Q: When it was decided that you were going to get Polish papers, did anybody talk to you about how you might have to act differently or did they teach you certain things, how to cross yourself, anything?

A: No. The idea was only...the idea that was transmitted to us is that from now on you have to defend yourself. The Germans are going to kill us. Defend yourself in any way you can. Don't be direct to the, to the umschlagplatz, which was, you know, the assembly place in Warsaw or in any other ghetto. Don't go to these trains.

Q: But that was basically all the direction you were given?

A: Yes, and I was given a false birth certificate which was, you know, it was like a ticket to life.

Q: Do you know how they got it?

A: Yes, they were in contact with some people who were manufacturing these birth certificates. The problem only was that on that certificate I was three years older than I really was. So, I had

sometimes trouble with look my age.

Q:So, your first mission was to take these girls to Krakow?

A:Yes.

Q:How long did you stay there?

A:For a few weeks, not too long.

02:56:32

Q:What was the life like there by comparison?

A:It was the same thing like in the Warsaw ghetto. Hunger, typhus, desolation, on top of everything our group became illegal. By illegal I mean we were not local Jews. We were coming from another city, and it was the task of the Jewish police in Krakow to round up all these illegal Jews. Evidently they had to report to the German authorities how many Jews they have in the ghetto and they had to, to give exact numbers. So, we were illegals and they were hunting us so we were hiding. In the ghetto we were hiding. I was put in some attic, you know, and kept there for days in a row without being even able to go to the, to the rest room, or, you know, being delivered food like to, to a pet or animal, you know. And in a very short time, we became infected by lice. We were dirty. We were smelly, hungry, desolate. And the, I decided that we have to run again because we couldn't live there. You know, a paradoxical situation arose, even in the Jewish ghetto, we were illegal. We couldn't even stay

in the Krakov ghetto unless we were ready to die there on that attic. So, we decided to run and we ran to a ghetto in Tarnow, which just had an Aktion. And we came over there. I will never forget the sight over there. It was, you know, like after a real pogrom, you know. Households, the doors open, broken glass, pillow cases ripped up and, you know, the feathers in the air. Domestic utensils spread all over the place. People in hiding, those who succeeded not to be rounded up. And they were not even hostile towards us. They were indifferent. You know, it was, an inhumane situation already existed there. The relations between people were not already normal. They were not human relations any more.

02:59:37

Tape #3

03:01:00

Q:When we stopped, you were talking about what it was like arriving in Tarnow after an Aktion.

A:Well it was a terrible sight you know. It was, desolation everywhere, you know. The people that we met were scared and suspicious and not willing to talk to us. Even like, it didn't matter to them anything because they were at the brink of an abyss and that changes the psychology of a person. You stopped caring about others. You stopped caring about anything. I saw the people, young people having sex almost publicly. And I asked one of them later on, why would you do that and he said, "Well, I don't know if I'll live tomorrow. I want to taste life what it is like before I go to, to die." To make a long story short, the, the atmosphere was macabre. To me I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stay there another day. There was no where for me to go. I didn't know anybody. The girls got attached to some groups and they didn't want to go with me anymore, only one girl went with me, Julcia Fiks, Ester. Julcia was her clandestine name. Her real name was Ester Fiks. She came with me and we ran back to the Krakow ghetto. The situation didn't improve in the Krakow ghetto, and that's when I decided that I will run away from the ghetto into the Aryan side. I had no contact with my Hashomer Hatzair people anymore. I had no money, maybe a few zlotys, you know. I had no food. I had no place to live. On top of everything, I heard stories like other Jewish girls escaped from the ghetto into the Aryan side and they were scooped up and killed. In spite of all this, in spite of these rumors, I decided to do it because it became obvious to me that I will sooner or later be scooped up by the Jewish police and handed over to the Germans and sent away, and I didn't want that to happen because I knew what happened to scooped up Jews. So, I

one day joined the working brigade going from the ghetto to work on the Aryan side. At a suitable moment, I detached myself from that group, take off my, took off my armband and I had this false birth certificate in my pocket and, viola, I was a Polish girl.

03:04:26

There was no where to go, no place, no money, no contacts, no where. So, for hours I was walking the streets aimlessly just walking, until I could make some decision. I remember I came, I came to a church and went into the church and it was very soothing. The inside was cool and so quiet. It was a temporary relief, you know from all the horrible sights that I saw. But I had to make a decision what to do with myself because there was a curfew time, you know, after seven or eight in the evening, I don't recollect exactly, nobody was to be found on the streets and I had to make a decision before that time. So, in spite of the rumors that I heard about Jewish girls being killed, I went to a German hospital and I offered my services. I was asking if they need some help. They told me that they are not the hiring office, that if I want to apply I should go to a certain place on a certain street. They gave me the number, and I went there from the hospital to that office and I had that conversation with the hiring woman. And she hired me. Well, I should add that I made myself as presentable as I could, you know, after that existence in the ghetto, you know. I was still in a very poor physical shape. And, you know, I was dirty and I didn't even have a place where to wash up. But somehow I succeeded to make a good impression on that interviewing woman. She gave me the job and I said when can I report to work. She said if you want you can come tomorrow. So, I went and I became a member of the, of the staff of that German hospital. It was on Marka, Swistego Marka Street in Krakow.

03:06:58

And I was assigned to the kitchen as a kitchen helper, kitchen help, and I was working there, cleaning the vegetables and it was a very hard time for me because all of a sudden I had to become a Polish girl with all the Polish mannerism, which I didn't have. One thing stood in my favor was the Polish language. I was in very good command of the language. So, at least they couldn't suspect me right away. You, see that was an impediment for many, many Jews. That even if they spoke Polish, they didn't spoke a pure Polish. There was always a Jewish accent in it and the Poles could detect you right away. The Germans couldn't, but the Poles could. So, I was working there for some time and it was very hard for me because the women in that group of kitchen helpers, they were churlish and their language was foul. Each time I heard them talk, I was red in the face, you know. I was a young girl with no sexual experience, and here I was among women who were prostitutes, who were mostly maids who worked previously before the war in Jewish households. The very lowest levels of Polish society, but somehow I managed to stay there.

03:09:06

Q:I have a question. When you said you had to become a Polish girl. Other than the language, what did that involve?

A:It involved everything would detract you from being Jewish. You had to assume a role of a Polish girl. It was a very hard task. I felt all these years from the moment when I went on, this, the Aryan side, I felt like an actor on a stage, playing a role which I hated, but I had to do it in order not to be detected. You had to acquire the, the way of talking, the way of behaving.

You had to learn the Polish prayers, which I managed and which I remember to this very day. You, you had to hide your, your grief and your sadness. You had to be frivolous, you had to be like other Polish girls. I just had to simulate the behavior of the Polish girls. And I had good examples in front of me. And still I was detected by one of the girls and she denounced me to the, to the German. When we came for our weekly pay, she said to the officer, this is a Jew. And the German asked me, "Are you Jude?," are you Jewish. I said, no, I said, she is. So, you know, he understood that it was a joke and besides he was a simple clerk. It wasn't his task to, to handle Jews. He took it like, you know, a bad joke or a good joke. I don't know. He didn't make anything out of it.

Q:When you were working amongst these people, did you hear anti-Semitic remarks. Did they talk about the situation and the Jews?

A:Sure, they were talking about it. At another time I was sitting in front of a big basket with vegetables cleaning it and the sun rays came on my head and one of the girls said, "Look, her hair is reddish like a Jewess." And everybody laughed and I laughed most hilariously, you know, but inside, you know, the fear was gnawing on my inside, you know. And another time the kitchen chef grabbed me and put my head on the table. He was preparing the, the sausage for the evening supper. And he put this long knife to my neck and said, "You see, if you were Jewish, I would cut off your head." Big laughter in the room and I laughed most hilariously of course. But you know what it does to a psyche of a young girl in her formative years? Can you imagine?

03:12:34

With nobody to console you, with nobody to tell you it's okay, it will be better, hold on. Total isolation, total loneliness. It's a terrible feeling. You know, you are among people and you are like on an island all alone. There is nobody you can go to ask for help. You can nobody ask for advice. You had to make life threatening decisions all by yourself in a very short time, and you never knew whether your decision will be beneficial to you or detrimental to your existence. It was like playing Russian Roulette with your life. And it was not only one incident. It was this way from the moment I came on the Aryan side. Day after day. I remember one day I got...well it's a long story. I don't know if we have time to tell about these stories, all of them. Anyway, I got a place to live. It was a Polish woman whose husband never returned from the war and she was taking in tenants to her apartment and my roommate was a prostitute. And the...it was a very difficult time for me, you know. I was -- my head was full of lice and the, and the landlady discovered it and she said, "Girl what's the matter with you? Where are you coming from?" I had to invent some excuse extemporaneously, you know. You had, this was a skill I had developed on the Aryan side. You had to lie impromptu, right away. You had to have ready answers for every unpredictable situation. So, I said something, you know, I don't remember exactly what I told, but she bought it.

03:15:11

And it was a real plague. I don't know, I hope you never experience being plagued by lice, you know. It's a plague which is mentioned in the Hagadah, you know, one of the ten plague sent on pharaoh. It's a terrible plague. You cannot live normally when you are eaten by lice, you know. And even if you wash your hair you take out, you comb out the lice, there are nits on your head and they, they develop next day into lice. And I understood I have to get rid of it. I

didn't know how. And one day by chance I went to a hairdresser. It was fashionable at that time that young girls were, were curling up their hairs with permanent. With a permanent. It was a fashionable thing. And the Polish girls liked it because Polish girls had usually very straight hair. My hair was by nature wavy, not curly but wavy. So, I went to that hairdresser and I had my, and I agreed to have a permanent. And he also asked me where are you coming from, a prison. I said, you got it. And a good thing was that smart people during the occupation didn't ask too many questions. If you came across a decent person and he suspected you of being Jewish, he had a choice whether to denounce you or to say nothing. The barber didn't say anything. After that visit I noticed a big relief. Evidently the heat from that machine coming on my head was killing the nits and after a while I got rid of that plague and it was such a relief. Well, I got lice infected later on, but that's another story again.

Q:Let me ask you a question. I'm sure there were a few other places that you could have worked. What, what prompted you to go work in a German military hospital?

A:Good question. Because I overheard that in that German hospital girls are coming for work. Some were killed but I took the chance maybe they won't recognize me. I didn't know where to go. You are in a strange city. You don't know where to go. You don't have money. You have to disappear from the street before seven o'clock in the evening. Where are you going? Like I said, it was Russian Roulette. I just knew that I heard that this place was, was hiring people so I went there.

03:18:23

Q:This was just conversation on the street or you just heard about it?

A:I heard about it in the ghetto.

Q:So how long did you work there?

A:I worked there from about November of '42 to March '43.

Q:What else happened there?

A:While I was working there. Well one thing is that...on Christmas Eve, '42, '43, the kitchen chef arranged a big party, a Christmas party and of course I participated in that party and I was terribly afraid to get drunk, because I didn't know what I might say when I will be drunk. On the other hand I didn't want to show that I am not drinking because that would be an indication, you know, only Jewish girls didn't drink. Polish girls drank, especially that group of girls had no objections of imbuing themselves with vodka. So, I was drinking, and I became drunk for the first time in my life, but even in the straight, state of drunkenness I didn't lose my, my ability not to talk of what need not to be said. I didn't lose my hold on myself completely. But that turned out to be very beneficial for me because after that party I was one of the group. It was like battle christening for me. I made it. I was Leoska. I wasn't Leah anymore, I was Leoska and it was okay. The girls they took advantage of me. They sent me to steal food for them. I did it because I wanted to be accepted and I was, and that's how, how I could exist among them.

03:21:02

Q: Did you make any friends there?

A: I, later on I made friends with one Jewish girl who also came to work there. Her name was Ursula and from the moment she came to work I suspected her of being Jewish because you know, you had a sense of distinguish right away your own people. And to prove that she's Jewish one day when we went down to the cellar to pick up the potatoes or vegetables I started to hum the Jewish national anthem, the Hatikva, and I figured if she's not Jewish she won't react to it, but if she is she might and she did. And we became friends. It was very beneficial for me because she was, her sister who was a married woman already was hiding with her husband on the Polish side in Krakow and she used to take me to them. So, that was the first honest human contact that I could have after I left the ghetto. And it was a big relief. The other important thing that happened to me at that time was that I stole a gun from one of the Germans. It happened that way. Tosia Altman, one of the leaders in my youth organization knew where I was. She knew that I am in that, that I work in that hospital. And evidently other members of the organization knew. So, one day on my way from work to the place where I lived, I met one of our members. His name was Tadek, Tuvia Szajngot was his real name. And we knew each other from the ghetto in Czestochowa. He was one of the escapees from the Warsaw ghetto. And he stayed in the Tarnow ghetto. He came, he was purposely waiting for me. He knew that I would leave work at a certain time and we met and during that conversation he instilled in me the idea that maybe I could steal a gun. The hospital has Germans and each of them has a weapon. And one day it happened. I describe it in more detail in my memoirs, so I don't think it's important to go over it again and again. I succeeded in taking out a parabellum and I hid it in my place where I was living until after a while Tadek came and picked it up. And it did a good job later on in the, in the uprising and the, during the uprising in the Czestochowa ghetto.

03:24:44

Q:Weren't you scared?

A:I was scared to death -- you mean when I was stealing it? It was one of the most romantic experiences in my life. I became so frantic that for a moment I thought I'm going out of my mind because there was a moment when I grabbed the gun out of the scabbard, what is the name, the word...and I put it into my panties and went from the room where the Germans -- you know the room was empty when I took it. There was nobody in it and it was a split second decision whether I'm going to do it or not, and I did it. And here I am with that gun in my hand which I put into my panties. I run out from room. Luckily across that room was the rest room. I ran into that rest room and didn't know what to do with it now. What was I going to do with that thing. So, I climbed on the toilet and there was a, a window. The window was leading to a little roof which was nothing but the top of, of a garbage bin and I left it there, and I went back to the kitchen, you know. But inside there was such a storm running in me that I had to use all my humanly possible power to, to control myself, you know. I was red in my face. My mouth was dry like a sole. I was trembling. I was afraid that my, that people would notice some physical changes in myself. So, I tried as best as I could to control myself and I succeeded. Nobody suspected me. I was probably the last person they would suspect of stealing that gun. Later on, you know, there was an alarm. There was, you know, Gestapo came and the police came. They arrested the German whose gun I stole, but I succeeded in getting out that, that gun from that hospital.

03:27:17

Well, around March I got a letter from Tosia Altman, that Arie Wilner, one of our leading persons in the organization, was caught by the Gestapo and he's under investigation and that I should leave immediately, the hospital, because in all probability Arie, which was, you know, Jurek was his pseudo name in occupation time that Jurek might have some picture of me and maybe even some letters from me to him. So, I had to leave immediately, which I did. On my way out from the hospital and I was running away, I had people coming to the Wache, to the check points, you know to the guards at the entrance, people asking for Leokadia Bukowska. That was my Polish name. And I ran out in a fit of, of anxiety from that building, running like crazy in front of me, just like a hunted animal, literally, you know. And I jumped into a street cart, not knowing where it's going. It didn't matter to me, just to be far away, as far away from that hospital as possible. And in my wild imagination I thought that some people are after me, you know. I was suspecting, maybe those who were asking me were told that I just left the place and they were running after me. So I, you know, in the, in the street cart the seats were, were, you know, benches, one on one side of the street cart and the other on the other side. People sit vis-à-vis each other. And there were two guys who were looking at me all the time, and I didn't know why they are looking at me, but of course suspicion right away, you know. They, they must be those guys who came to catch me. Anyway, I don't know whether this was true or my wild imagination. Maybe they were just looking at me, you know, as a young girl, or maybe they just saw that something wrong is with me. Anyway, I jumped out from that street cart and ran straight into a house and hid myself in the attic, covered myself up with some, with some shmates, some rags and I laid there for several hours. I heard some talks on the, on the, in the back yard but I didn't know whether it relates to me or not.

03:30:20

Anyway, after several hours I succeeded somehow to calm down, to regain my posure, no my, to regain my balance again and I ventured, ventured to get out into the street and there was nobody waiting for me in the street. And I got in touch with that girl, Ester Fiks. She was working in another German institution called the Soldatenheim. I got in touch with her. I knew where she's working and we decided to run away. And we ran away to Lwow, Lemberg. We took a train and came there and we tried to, to establish ourselves over there, but a sense told us that this is not a good place to, for us. It was full of Ukrainians and Ukrainians were collaborating with the Germans. The atmosphere was not good for us and the very same day we took another train back, but not to Krakow anymore. We went to the ghetto and took it to Czestochowa, and we got into the ghetto in Czestochowa.

Q:Leah, when we stopped before, I think you had just arrived back in Czestochowa from, after you had been working in this military hospital. Can you pick up there?

A:I met with my friends from the kibbutz in Czestochowa from Berka Joselewicza and among them was Abraham Silberstein who was one in the group who stayed in the, at the farm after the rest when to Czestochowa and I learned at that time that they are organizing an uprising, that they are not going to be scooped up by the Germans. That they will fight when the time comes. I also learned that an uprising is being in preparation in the Warsaw ghetto. And after a few days, we recuperated, you know, could wash ourselves and bring ourselves to, to, to look normally, me and the other young girl, Ester Fiks, decided to go to Warsaw to get into the Warsaw ghetto. If we are going to fight, we are going to fight in the Warsaw ghetto. One of the reasons was Warsaw was where I grew up and belongs to me. Another is that Arie

Wilner whom I loved was there and I wanted to be with him, whether we are going to fight, I want to be with him. And the third reason was that Ester's little brother Bolus was in Warsaw and she wanted to be close to him to take, you know, supervise him somehow take care of him. So, we decided to go to Warsaw, and we came to Warsaw. And we entered the ghetto.

03:33:56

You usually entered by way of a working battalion from the Aryan side going at the end of the day into the ghetto. So, we joined a battalion and went into the ghetto. And I came to the headquarters of the Jewish fighting organization on Zamenhofa. Let me tell you, when I came to the ghetto it wasn't the same ghetto that I left in '41.

Q:Give me a time frame here, please. What, approximately when was this that you returned?

A:It was the beginning of April '43.

Q:So you were saying the ghetto looked very different to you?

A:Different. It was a ghost town, because at that time the ghetto was already, the population of the ghetto was reduced from half a million to only sixty or fifty thousand people. And they were concentrated in a small, much smaller area. And you went through a zone which was an inhabited zone, you know, with all the aspects of a ghost town, you know. A town after a terrible pogrom, you know. And it was, it was like coming into a world out of this world. A world that your senses cannot even comprehend all this, you know. You see houses abandoned. People domiciles, people's way of living destroyed and you had to go through

that area very quickly. You were not allowed to linger around.

03:36:11

Well, I came to that, to that center of the Jewish fighting organization and I met Arie Wilner over there. He was in a terrible state because it was after the, after he was interrogated by the Gestapo and he was tortured terribly. He was, there is an exact description of his tortures by Henryk Grabowski, the Pole who was the scout and who succeeded to rescue him from one of the, of the working camps that he was put into. Anyway, it wasn't the same Arie that I knew in Spring. He could barely talk to me. He was in a state of depression and maybe he didn't want to talk to me. I don't know. After a few days, we wanted to join the working groups. I remember the discussion they had between the leaders of ZOB, Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa, Mordechaj Awelewicz, Icchak Cukierman, and Cywia Lubetkin, and they decided it would be better to send me out from the ghetto to be a courier. I had the attributes than to stay in the ghetto. It was too late to train me. They didn't have enough weapons even for the people who were organized already in groups. So, I was smuggled out from the ghetto.

Q: May I ask you a few questions before you continue?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have any sense of how well trained the Jewish fighters were, how organized they were?

A: No, I didn't have at that time any idea about it. I knew that they are organized. I knew that they are

ready to fight but I didn't know the details and I was not told many things.

Q:Now, there are a couple other things that I think are, we may have missed, but it's up to you whether you want to go back now or later. I know you were doing some work in Plaszow, yes? Weren't you going back and forth to Plaszow?

A:That was when I was still in Krakow.

Q:Do you want to continue or go back to that.

A:It's up to you, what would you like to know?

Q:Well, I would like to know about this. I understand you had a meeting with...?

03:39:03

A:Irena Adamowicz. While I was working in the German hospital, it was called Krankensammelstelle. One day she came and visited me, and I was glad to see her and, you know, hear news about our friends because she was that link, that courier who, between the ghetto and outside people. She had some friends, close friends from Hashomer Hatzair in the labor camp in Plaszow. By the way, that's the place that is mentioned in the film "Schindler's List", but at that time I had no idea that this was ever come up, the name, I mean, of the place. And she said she had two friends in that camp, and she would like me to contact them because they might need some help. And if I could supply that help, she asked me if I'm willing to do it and I agreed. So, I went to that camp and through Polish contacts I got in

touch with the people, with this couple. It was a couple, and he was a dentist. As such, the Germans exploited his, his, the skills and employed him...they gave him a small room on the Wache, which is the, the guard station, and that's where he was treating, you know, taking care of the teeth of the German team there. The things he was asking me to do were not very important. To bring him some medicines. To find out if I could secure some place in case they would succeed in escaping, stuff like that, which I did. And, we established a weekly contact. On a weekend I would go to Plaszow and bring all stuffs. After a while, the Germans on the Wache they knew me already. And I used to bring some stuff that I could bring from the, from the hospital, like oranges or other stuff that were very rare and given only to Germans. So, that was the contact. Irena at that time also told me that in a nearby monastery, Jewish children can be, can be allocated, they could be hidden there for money. And she took me to that convent. I saw the children but I didn't make any point, you know, to distinguish which are Jewish and which are not. That was it.

03:42:23

Q:Was it easy to go in and out of Plaszow?

A:It wasn't easy as far as I could go was the, the check point. And, and the room that Chaim, was the name of that guy, was working, was close to that, to that check post. I couldn't get into the, the premises of the camp.

Q:But you were able to give him a package or...?

A:Yes, yes I was able to do that. What is important is to remember that you have to establish a

rapport with the people at the check point. You have to win the confidence of the Pole who introduced me to the Germans and that's how it worked.

Q:How did you do that?

A:Well, you had to have really an exceptional sense to feel out if that Pole can be trusted, you know.

That, that was a matter of intuition. You could be wrong and you could, you know, jeopardize your life. Like I said before, it was a gamble all the time. You didn't know whether what you're doing will, will turn out to be good for you or bad. You had to try. I was lucky. I had a good relationship with that Pole and he had a good relationship with the Germans and it worked.

Q:Did you ever have to bribe anyone?

A:I had to bribe the Pole. I mean by bribing I didn't give him money but I was, I was supplying them with stuff that they couldn't get in a normal way.

Q:I must say for a young girl, I mean, you had guts.

A:You had to when your life is in jeopardy you discover in yourself qualities that you never suspected that you had them. Until you are put to the test you never know.

Q:So, back to Warsaw. It, it was decided by your group that you would be of more service by being on the Aryan side?

A:Right.

Q:You want to tell me a little bit about that?

A:Yes. I was really active from that time till the Polish uprising which happened a year later. Very active. At that time I was contacting Jews in forced labor camps in Skarzysko in Starachowice. I was in contact with the Jewish partisans in the Wyszkiw area. I was a courier delivering documents to Jews in hiding. I do whatever required to, to be done. My contact was Kazik, Simcha Rotem, a very courageous young man. He was the guy who later on rescued the remnants of the Jewish fighting organization from the Polish uprising and from, I'm mistaken, from the Jewish uprising, when they had the remnants from the, when the Jewish uprising, as subdued, he was the one who succeeded in rescuing them from the ghetto through the sewage canals. Yeah, he was my contact.

03:46:09

Q:And he would help you get the documents or money or weapons or whatever?

A:No, he contacted me with other people. One of the other people was Basia Berman and she was one of the members of ZKN, Zydowski Komitet Narodowy, which was functioning on the Aryan side. She gave me assignments what to do. Kazik gave me other assignments, and we were doing it.

Q:But you were operating mostly on your own?

A: Well, to, come to the partisans in the, in the woods, I was to be helped by Polish guides. We, I mean the organization, had trusted people, Poles, and they were my guides through the, through the woods. I wouldn't know where to find them myself.

Q: Where were you during the Warsaw ghetto uprising?

A: I was on the Polish side because when I left the ghetto I didn't leave Warsaw right away. My friend, Ester, Julcia, she had to find arrangements with her brother. She was looking for him and until all these things were arranged, we, we stayed a while in Warsaw. And that's when I was observing the uprising from the Polish side. It was a terrible time, you know. To see my people being, you know, killed out. The ghetto was one big inferno. Day and night, fire and, and smoke. People jumping from, from the roofs and from the windows. The comments that you heard from the Polish people. "Zydki sie smaze", which means "the Jews are being baked or fried." There were also expressions of compassion. People are people in every society you have scum and you have people with moral principles. But that's where I was.

Q: So you were able to observe?

A: Yes. And you know there was one incident that is mentioned in many reminiscences. Next to the ghetto there was a carousel because at that time it was Passover, 1943, and at that time it was also the Christian Easter holiday. So that people were coming. It was a holiday. And they were, you know, the carousel was playing and going around was the children flying in the air, while Jewish children were dying, you know, in the flames or being asphyxiated in the bunkers, in which they hid. That's how it was.

03:49:41

Q: So, as the ghetto was burning, life was going on as normal on the other side?

A: Yes, business like usual. Mothers strolling with their childrens and dogs, you know. People, Polish people gathered on the roofs on their houses which were surrounding the ghetto. It was that morbid curiosity looking inside what's going on there, you know. There is this trait in people. Whenever something terrible takes place, people have this curiosity to see what's going on. That's how it was and you had all kinds of comments and...

Q: Did you have any sort of personal feeling that, about being on the outside instead of being on the inside?

A: Not really. I mean I was sent out, so I had the sense of, of duty to do things, and I knew that's important to do. I was happy to do it, you know. I was, it was a very good time for me. I felt needed. I felt that I am doing something important. You know what it meant to come to a hiding place where people, Jewish people, were treated like they were reduced to a status of pets and to bring them food, money, medicine, sometimes a newspaper. It was a feeling that you are really doing something good and it makes you feel good. You don't think about endangering your life at that moment. You know that you are doing...when I came to the Wyszkiw partisans, Randy, you have no idea what a feeling it was, hearing "Lodz is coming, Lodz is here, Lodz..." All of a sudden I was somebody. All of a sudden I, I had, I was doing something important, something really that, something that really matters. That was very good for my psyche.

03:52:08

Q:At the time of the uprising....

A:Which uprising?

Q:The Warsaw ghetto uprising, did you, I guess after the flames started dying down, did you ever go into the ghetto and see?

A:No. You couldn't get into the ghetto. You couldn't And after a week or ten days, we left Warsaw anyway. We went back to Czestochowa, but not to the ghetto anymore. And we found work what they call the Soldatenheim, a soldier's home. It was like a restaurant and hotel for Germans. Again we were assigned to the kitchen but I was promoted to do the laundry. And, after a while I became very good at ironing, especially the starch collars of the German nurses. And they were very pleased with my performance so that's how it was. And one day they came, they had, you know, patrons, this restaurant, from the German population in Czestochowa, and one day the kitchen chef made an announcement if some of the Polish staff would like to swap jobs from the, from the Soldatenheim to be a maid in a German household. And they promised to give us a separate room and more money that we got and some other fringe benefits and me and Julcia we decided we'll take it because we were hoping we could take with us that little boy that she brought from Warsaw. So, but when all the technical arrangements were taken care of I mean through the Arbeitsamt, through the employment... German employment office and when it came to, to start work, both her employers and my refused to take, to let, to take the boy in. Well, they were lying again. They always lied.

Q: Didn't you have any qualms about going to work in the intimacy of a German home?

A: Well, my main objective, like I told you, was to rescue that little boy because the boy stayed in a home, in a Polish home where he was working at the soldier's home and the landlady discovered him being Jewish. She, she took off the cover to see if he is circumcised and the little boy pretended that he is asleep, he didn't, and he was at that time five or six years old and he realized that his life is in danger so he ran away without telling his sister that he is doing it. He just ran to the railway station and started crying and asked people to take him to Warsaw. Some people had compassion and took him to Warsaw. So, we stayed in Czestochowa. We worked for these Germans until we escaped from there.

03:55:53

Q: Just tell me a little bit about what it was like working for this German family?

A: Well, it was an experience sort of. The work for me was very hard. Demands were unsurmountable to my physical capabilities, you know. I was still a very young girl. I was emaciated from the ghetto existence and the job to do was so enormous that it was beyond my physical capabilities and the demands that -- her name was Else Schulte...her demands were such that, you know, everything had to be done perfectly and there was such an awful lot of things to do. In a household there were ten rooms, it was a post-Jewish apartment consisting of ten rooms and all this I had to clean. I had to, you know, lit or make fire in ten stoves in each room, because it was winter time when I was there. I had to do the laundry. Everything that in a, in a well run household needs to be done. On top of everything, she

gave birth to a little boy and I had to take care of that too, you know. Laundry every day, ironing. I was working from six in the morning till midnight.

Q: Was she nice to you?

A: No, she was not. She was not nice she, and, and she didn't know that I was Jewish. She was treating me like a Polish girl. Her, her demands were exorbitant, out... You know, she would, I would clean, let's say, the bathroom. In comes Else, in German of course, "What kind of miserable job you are doing." She would wrench out the, the brush from my hand, get on her knees herself, start rubbing, showing me how it should be done. Okay, I tried to do it. After I dusted the rooms and the furniture, she would go with white gloves and slide through the furniture to see if some dust is left on her white glove. I start to remember a few details like that, but the worst part for me was the cleaning of the carpets, you know. I had to roll them up, to take them down to the courtyard. There was a scaffolding on the courtyard. You had to hang them on that scaffolding and with a dust beater beat these rugs and I was simply, you know, crouching under it. I couldn't...I couldn't, take them. I couldn't put them on that. And she was looking and observing me from the kitchen window and screaming at me, "Schmel, schmel." All the time, you know, was an abusive language of course, "You Polish dumbbell" or something like that, what are you, "you don't know what cleanliness is. You don't know what ordenem is." "You don't know what order is", ordenem is the German word for order, stuff like that.

03:59:51

Tape #4

04:01:04

Q: These Germans you were working for, were they Nazis?

A: Yes, they were, they were prominent Nazis. He was the Staatsanwalt of the city of Czestochowa which is the attorney general for the city. Yes, he was very prominent. This was her second husband. The first was also a prominent Nazi. Yeah. But you asked me what, what were my feelings working for them. It's paradoxical, but I felt safer in the German family than, within, with, than with, among the Poles. You see, the Germans didn't have that capability of distinguishing Jews from Poles, but the Poles were experts. They, they could smell a Jew just right away. So, in a sense it was safer for me to be in the mouth of the lions, so to speak. But there were moments which were very hard on me. Except for the physical exertion, cases when she would take me to the ghetto in Czestochowa. These prominent Germans were allowed to exploit the craftsmen within the ghetto. So, she had, there was a one famous tailor in the ghetto. He was, he had an opinion of the best tailors. So, she went to him and he was making suits for her coats or whatever and she would drag me along to be an interpreter. I'll come back to that in a moment. And this was very painful for me because I was afraid that the Jews would see that I am Jewish and, and maybe some murmur or whatever, you know, or some approach from, from a Jew. I was afraid to do it and besides it was very painful, you know, to see these people in that state of, of...of humiliation, and I couldn't help anything. When I started to work for the Schulte family, I pretended that I don't understand a word German because it was very rare that Poles knew German. Maybe only those who lived on the western part of Poland, which was bordering with German, Germany. They knew, some

of them. Not in Warsaw. So, everybody that understood German was suspected of being Jewish because Yiddish and German...I mean Yiddish is derived from German. So, I pretended I don't know a word of German. And I understood every word, but I had to pretend that I don't know any German. And after a while I let Else learn me a word or two and I developed a skill of talking in a broken German, you know, half Polish, half German, and she became very proud that she succeeded to learn that Polish dumbbell a few German words. In the mean time I could understand everything that was going on between them, especially when they invited their guests, you know. These were very hard days for me because I had to work doubly hard, you know, to prepare all these dishes and clean the mess after them. And they were real pigs let me tell you that. When they had parties they didn't behave in a civilized manner. They were drinking and eating like pigs and farting and, and this was the high society.

04:05:25

Q:Did they talk about the Jews?

A:Oh, yes, they did. How they septe the moral fiber of the German society and finally we are getting rid of them. Stuff like that, yes, it was a popular topic all over during these five years, among Poles, among Germans, and among the Jews. Yeah.

Q:It must have been tough to listen to?

A:Yes, very tough.

Q: You had mentioned that you saw some lists?

A: Huh?

Q: You mentioned that in the household you saw some lists?

A: Some what...oh yes, I did. When I was cleaning in his study I looked at his papers that were on the, on the desk and there were names that I knew from, from the time that I lived in Zarki on that farm. Yeah. But it was ridiculous, you see. He as, as a, as a...an attorney had to do the paperwork. The Jews were condemned to death anyway.

Q: How long did you work for them?

A: I worked for them from the fall of '43 till, till March '44.

Q: Did, in this time did you ever laugh, did you ever feel good? Did you have any enjoyment, any rest, any diversion?

A: Not really. The diversion that I could be myself was when I talked to Julcia, you know she was working...we worked in the same building only she worked for one family and I was working for another family, and on Sunday we were allowed to go to church. So, instead of going to church we were roaming the streets and, you know, talking and that was one way of relieving the tension. Another was, is, you know, after my day's work was finished, I got a separate room. So, I went to my room. I closed the door and I could be myself again, you know, leaning on the window sill and looking out and being myself again.

04:08:14

Q:When you were leaning out the window, thinking, daydreaming or talking to your friend, what kinds of things would you think about?

A:Well there were always things, you know, I had to make a decision at that time whether we are going to stay there or not, I mean with these families. Because at a certain point, Else, the German employer became so enraged with my performance that she started to threaten me with a concentration camp. You will go out of my household straight into a concentration camp. Also, my health deteriorated terribly because of that physical exertion. It was too much for my physical capabilities. I went to a doctor because I was starting to faint, and he said it's extreme exertion. You have to, to eat better, rest more, what doctors will tell you. And I understood that I cannot rest. I cannot have better care. I decided to run away, and we did one day. We ran away, both of us.

Q:Did, did you think in terms of you were going to make it through this and one day things would be okay again?

A:I wasn't thinking that far. It was an existence from day to day. If I made it through one day it was good. You never knew what the next day is holding in for you.

Q:Did you have dreams?

A:I'm sure I had dreams. I don't remember, but everybody, you know, you see the instinct of survival

is a very strong instinct, and when you are, and when your life is in danger, you want to preserve that life, especially when you are young, that instinct slightens with age, you know. When you get older the instinct of survival is still strong but not as strong as when you are young. You want to live, desperately. You cannot, you cannot think of dying. So you bury yourself in activity. You do things. You try to live one day after another. And of course you always looking for possibilities to, to, to survive, which will be better, which will be worse.

04:11:12

And you never knew which is going better for you or worse, you know. Whatever decision you made, it was like a blind decision, you know. But you had to make that decision. And there was nobody to advise you or to, to hint to you. You had, you had to use your faculties to make the decision and usually on a very short time. I remember when I worked at the German hospital at the Krankensammelstelle. One day I got a letter from the Gestapo to come to the offices. And here I am, with that letter in my hand and I had to make a decision right on the spot. Am I going to go there or am I going to run. Run, where am I going to run to. Nowhere to run to. Then you come and think if they wanted me to, to...if they would suspect me of being Jewish they wouldn't write me a letter. But you had to rationalize it. You had to use your faculties. You had to be smart and intelligent to make a decision. And I figured if they suspect me of being Jewish they wouldn't write me a letter. They would just come and grab me. So, before the appointed day, I decided to make the visit by myself to see what kind of offices and what's going on there. And when I came I saw that this is a clinic, a medical clinic, and again my goodness what do they want from me in a medical clinic, but I understood that its, that I am not be suspected of being Jewish especially when I saw that other girls on the staff get, got also these kinds of letters. And, and then I decided to go there

on the appointed day. But you see that day when I had to make the decision I had to, to, what is the English word...I had to squash the impulse to run. I had to subdue it and I had to force myself to think rationally when all your being is saying "Run, Leah, run."

04:14:00

But, when I came on that appointed day to that clinic, I was put into a room and all of a sudden I realized that I am in a room full of prostitutes. And I, first of all, I, I could hear the language, the way they behaved and some of them were naked under their fur coats. And, and over there I met my roommate from, from the early days in Krakow on the Aryan side, Marysia and she said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "What are you doing here?" And she explained to me that from time to time the Germans gather the suspected, these prostitutes and they check them out for venereal diseases. So, they were calling out by names one after another to an examining room and when my name was called out I came to the doctor and I started crying. I said I'm not a prostitute. I didn't have any sexual experience in my life. And he of course discarded it, as, as I'm just joking, you know, and beckoned me on the examining table. Well, it was a horrible experience for me, because I was really still a virgin and I, I was afraid, terribly afraid, what he can do to me, you know. But this I'm telling you this as an example of how you had to make decisions in a very short time, decisions which could affect your life one way or another.

Q: You and your friend Julcia, decided to leave the German families?

A: Yes.

Q:Where did you go? What did you do?

A:Well, we ran away. First we, we came to the railway station and we bought tickets to the first train that is going away. We said which train is leaving now, in a few minutes. He said this and this train, gate so and so. We ran to that train and we got back off. I didn't even know where this train was going to, but we went along. After an hour or so of riding on the train, we got off the train and we changed trains for a train going to Warsaw. And we were still zigzagging a few times because I was figuring we escaped six in the morning. It will take them at least an hour to two to discover that we are missing. Two hours could make us get away as far as we could from the place, and that's what happened, you know, zigzagging two's and...changing trains from one to another we arrived in Warsaw. They didn't catch us.

04:17:27

Thinking rationally it was maybe a stupid decision to run away. After all, this was a place which was relatively safe, but I just couldn't take it anymore and, you know, with young impetuosity you make a decision and you go on that decision. But the terrible point was when I came and knocked on the door that Julcia was in, she was asleep. You know, you couldn't blame her. She was young and she just didn't got up in time, but I had to bang on the door until I got her out. And when I was leaving, I left a key in the mailbox with a letter, and in that letter, I told them everything I think about the Germans. I gave them a good sermon, who they are and what they are doing. You see, I was reckoning. If they catch me, they will, it will be my end anyway, but this is a chance to tell them who they are. And I did it.

Q:What did you do when you got to Warsaw? Did you have friends there still?

A: Yes. I got in, she got in touch with her brother who was at that time in Falenica, which is a suburban small community near Warsaw. This was like a couple of months before the Polish uprising. And I was again active in the underground until the Polish uprising broke out on August 1, 1944.

Q: When you say "active in the underground" what does that mean?

A: What's that?

Q: When you said, I was active in the underground..."

A: In the Jewish underground.

Q: So, that was still happening in Warsaw?

A: Oh, sure. It was all the time. Yes.

Q: So, you knew people who were still there?

A: Yes.

Q: Of course now they were living in the, on the Aryan side?

A: Yes. Right.

Q:And you were taking things to different towns, or...?

A:Yes. You know, the regular jobs of couriers. Julcia was sent to Auschwitz because one of the members of, of Dror, Chavka Folman she was captured and sent to Auschwitz as a Polish girl, and her mission...Julcia's mission was to rescue her or to find out possibilities of rescue. She did not succeed and it...in the meantime the Polish uprising broke out. And I met Julcia after the uprising.

04:20:37

Q:When you went out to take things to the partisans in the forest, did you spend much time with them?

A:No.

Q:Did you understand what was going on there?

A:Oh, sure, I understood what's going on there, but I stayed there a day, not more.

Q:Were they pretty organized?

A:The camp was on marshes. You had to jump from one Hasag to another to get to the place. It was like, sort of, of a prevention in case the Germans would discover them, and they did discover them on several occasion. And they killed many of the partisans there. This was a group of

partisans of Jewish fighters in the Uprising, in the, from the Uprising, of the Jewish Uprising in the ghetto. And the partisans, they slept on the ground you know. In the winter, they had some dugouts in the, in the ground, you know.

Q: Did they get any help from the Polish people?

A: Yes, they did. Yes, they did. They wouldn't be able to exist without that help.

Q: Or from the Russians maybe?

A: There were some Russian groups, partisans or escapees from the POWs, but, but that was not the main thing. The real danger was from Polish partisans which cooperated with the Ukrainians and whenever they found Jewish partisans they would kill them off. There was a group called NSZ which is an abbreviation Narodowe Sily Zbrojne, they would kill you off right away if they discovered that you were Jewish, and they did. Some of my close friends from Zarki, that little town by the farm, they were killed by NSZ and by the A.K. which stands for the Home Army.

Q: Now, you had contacts with the Polish underground?

A: Only with one person who was a prominent communist. You see the Polish underground was not a united front. They had their political groups ranging from the extreme right to the extreme left and the leftist Polish underground, underground parties were more sympathetic to the Jewish cause than the rightists.

04:23:36

Q:How much did you know about the Polish uprising before it took place?

A:Nothing. I knew nothing. It came as a surprise to me. I had a meeting with Kazik (Simcha Rotem), and I came on that meeting. At that time I was living in Constanta, which is a part of Warsaw. And when I met him, Kazik said run back home quickly. On your way buy some food if you can, and stay there. Before I made it home, the uprising was already in, in action. They were already, you know, shooting and it began on my to the way home.

Q:Can you describe it a little bit?

A:The city of Warsaw which was a million inhabitants living in it was destroyed in, within a short time, you know. The uprising broke out on August 1, '44 and it ended in October the third I believe. And within that short time a quarter of a million Poles were killed. The city, from a European metropolis, was turned into a heap of rubble. Except for those sections of the city where the Germans had their strong holds and stayed in there, but the city was devastated. And when the Polish uprising was through and vanquished, here we were a group of Jews what are we going to do, you know? The Germans ordered the entire population to leave the city of Warsaw. Whoever would be found in the city of Warsaw after a certain date would be shot on the spot. So, where are we going? What are we going to do? We were joking, you know, what are they going to kill us first, as being Jews, as being partisans, as being up, you know, insurgents?

04:26:09

And we had to hide. We couldn't go to the Germans. The majority of Poles of course, not the majority, every Pole was leaving Warsaw. The Poles left the city. The soldiers were promised a treatment under the Hague Convention to be treated like prisoners of war, but the Germans didn't keep their word. They did what with the Poles whatever they wanted. Some were killed. Some were sent to concentration camps, some to work on the farms and factories in Germany. The, the older population was put in a, in a transitory camp in a place not far from Warsaw called Pruszkow. And from there the Poles were segregated, the young and the body abled were sent to Germany and the elderly and unable to be exploited were disbursed throughout Poland, you know.

Q:Now, this went on for two months. That's a lot of bombing.

A:Yes.

Q:What were they doing, hiding under ground?

A:During...after the Uprising?

Q:During, where were you. That's two months of bombing?

A:During, when the Uprising broke out, I volunteered and came to a, to a post where the uprisers were and I offered my services. I said I am young I, I want to participate. Didn't say I am Jewish. They didn't take me. They were already organized in groups. They didn't take me. I don't know for what reason. So, during the bombardment, because the Germans were

bombarding the city day after day, night after night, we, we lived in the, in the cellars and when for, in the intervals between shellings and bombing we went back to our apartments and tried to cook some food, you know. The food that I succeeded in buying on my way home when Kazik told me to run, sustained me through all these terrible days. I gave it to my landlady and she in return gave me one plate of soup a day. Again, hunger, but under different conditions.

Q: Was there an effort to get out of the city towards the Russians?

A: Yes, there was an attempt to do that because at that time, at the end of the Polish Uprising, the Russians were already in Praga, in my Praga, on the right bank of the Vistula. And the hope was that in a few days they will come and liberate the whole Warsaw, but it didn't happen. It didn't happen until January the 17, when the Russian offensive took on again.

04:29:25

Q: Did you try to get out?

A: Yes, I did. I tried. It was a terrible experience. You know, after, we knew that the Uprising collapsed. It was vanquished. We had to decide what to do, and we belonged to a fighting group of A:L., which stands for Army Ludowa which was the folk army not the Home Army. And these were mostly leftists, communists. And the, the commanders of the group that we belonged to told us that there will be an attempt to rescue the A:L. people through and, and take them out through the river to the right bank to the Soviets. But it didn't work out. It was a terrible experience. And at, you know, at a certain point in the evening we were

told to run towards the, the bank of the river, which we did, and along with the ex-fighters was the ex-insurgents, the civil population ran along, you know. I mean, civil is maybe not the right word. The regular population, women, children, just people were running along because they saw that the military is running maybe there is a chance for them too, to, to save their lives. Many Poles didn't want to go to the Germans, you know, especially young people. So, we were running, thousands of people. It was night already, you know, and at the moment when the people were running towards the embarkment, Germans were situated on the river bank with their machine guns and started to, to shoot at the people because they felt that there is a, you know, that the Uprising is, is getting momentum again, that it's not completely vanquished. So, the people who came very close to the German positions were killed right away and the people behind them started running back. In the meantime, people were still running forwards because they didn't know what's happening on the, on the bank, so there was a whirlpool of people, you know. Pandemonium. Screams, crying, children abundant, their parents screaming, Mama, Mama, and the shooting and the fires, you know.

04:32:34

Well, we came back to the place. Where we were waiting the whole day to be rescued and we decided to hide and we hid in a place on a, on a street which is, which is facing the river bank and the name of the street was Promyka. The house in which we hid, the number was 43 and we stayed there for a long, for a long time. Long weeks.

Q:One more question about the Uprising...Polish Uprising. To your knowledge, were many Jews actively involved with it?

A: Do you mean whether they participated in the fighting?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes, they did. You see the group that I belonged to, we came and offered our willingness to participate in the uprising. The A.K. didn't want us. The A.L. accepted us and we were fighting as a Jewish unit. That was the condition that Yitzhak Zuckerman put to the Polish underground. He said we are willing to fight, fight but as a Jewish unit. We are survivors of the Uprising of the Warsaw ghetto and we will fight as fighters, as Jewish fighters. They accepted us.

Q: So, a number of your people did actually fight in it?

A: Oh, sure, yes. Many people were killed. You know, the fate of the Jews in hiding was terrible with the moment when the Polish Uprising came about or happened. Because all of a sudden they were exposed. There was no hiding any more. It was the Polish authorities who were now ruling in Warsaw. And it was a precarious situation for many people. They estimated that about 20,000 Jews were hiding in Warsaw, and these people were all of sudden without any way of, of, of securing themselves some existence. Many were killed. Many were killed as Poles, you know, like together with the rest of the Polish population.

04:35:51

Q: This place you chose to hide on Promyka Street, you were there for how long?

A:I can't hear you.

Q:This place you stayed on Promyka Street , you were there for how long?

A:Oh, we were there from October the 3rd till November the 15th.

Q:How many people were there?

A:At the beginning there were 19 people. We had two Poles among them and after a while a part left at hiding and went to another hiding. And after a while we were discovered by Germans. I mean not the whole group. You see, we were hiding in a basement in the laundry room. Now, we went to a place of one of the people who were gathered together when the Uprising collapsed and she said that we can go to her hiding place, which we did. When we came there, there were four old women in the basement already, and they decided not to leave because one of the four was the mother of the owner of the apartment or of the house and she was paralyzed and she couldn't walk, and there were three Jewish old women who were there. And the hiding place consisted of another cubicle, another room in that basement, which was normally the laundry room. But instead they removed the door leading from the main basement room to the laundry and substituted the door by a shelf, by a, by a wooden structure with perpendicular shelves and they put all kinds of stuff on the shelves, books, cups, I don't know what there was, to mask the entrance to the laundry room, and that's where we spent terrible weeks, you know, without food, without water, without, with problems with a dog, with problems with excrements, you know, with problems with Germans coming down from every then and now into the basement because they were, you know, they were plundering in the, in the neighborhood, you know. The houses were, you

know, abandoned. There in many household where they could collect very valuable things. That's what they were doing in the neighborhood where we were hidden too. And they were coming down to the basement every time, but luckily they did not discover the hidden fighters behind that shelf.

04:39:04

But one day they found us, not the whole group. They found me and one of the old women. Her name was Sabinka. We were those two, we were the two people who were going out day after day to find some food in the abandoned houses. And one day they found us. The Germans, there was a German patrol of SS police and they found us. Well, I can't go into detail, it's a long story. But, the point is that the next day they sent a wagon with a horse and a gendarme and they took me and the four old women and they took us out from Warsaw. It turned out to be beneficial because I was able to organize some help for the people hidden behind the shelf. And among them were the very important people that like Ichak Cukierman, Zivia Lubetkin, Marek Edelman, who were at the top of the Jewish fighting organization. Tovie Borzykowski and others, people that really counted. And help was organized. There was a rescue mission sent to that place and they succeeded to take them out.

Q: In reading...I don't need to ask you to go through all of the details of daily life there because you've described it very well in your manuscript, but there are certain aspects that were very interesting to me. One is that you, in spite of these very, very difficult conditions every day, you had ways to kind of keep your self, keep your spirits alive.

A: Well, and you want to know how I did it?

Q: Or how, as a group. How you kept your morale up, how you kept yourself mentally active?

A: As a group, there were different phases of the existence. Most of the time you know, depending on which time of the five years we are talking, there were times when I was completely on my own.

Q: No, I'm talking about in this house on Promyka Street .

A: Oh, oh, that was a very interesting period because you know we were like 15 people after the five left and we were, you know spread on the floor and here we are. We can't go out, so we used to stay all day long in that hiding and only in the evening we used to go out, you know, and, to relieve ourselves, to cook something if there is, if there was something to be cooked. And, you know, to shave or to wash, wash, if you had some water, because we didn't. And, like I said, we were often plagued by visits of Germans coming down.

04:42:41

But we found one way of relieving the tension, which was enormous, you know. You live with that pent up anxiety, was a pent up fear that you can be discovered any moment. And there were such moments because the Germans started to build a trench in front of our house. It was supposed to be a barricade before the onslaught of the Russian army. And the window from that basement, from that laundry room, was camouflaged by sacks of sand. But as they were building this trench, the sacks were falling off and the sand was coming off from the

windows and they could look into the windows and see us on the floor there. So, the danger became very eminent. You know, like I said at the beginning, I'm not a religious person, but, this was one of the miracles that happened, that people were not discovered. I don't know how the history of the Jewish uprising in the ghetto would look today if these people were caught and, and annihilated because you know history is made by, by what people tell you.

Q:What, so, what did you do to relieve the tension?

A:We established at one time a system by which every day a person would, would have a presentation, whether a lecture or talk about something. We had one guy in the group who was like our living calendar. A very nice guy. His name was Zygmunt Warman. He was a lawyer by profession. A tall, big guy. Unfortunately he became sick in that hiding and he was coughing constantly and he was a mortal danger when the Germans were coming out and there were situations when the Germans were in the main room where the old women were. The four old women were in a separate room. We were in the laundry hiding. Anyway, this Zygmunt became our living calendar. Each morning he would wake us up and said, "Hello everybody,"...let's say..."today is October 15, Wednesday, 1944." So, at least we didn't lose the track of time. We knew what day it was. And like I said, everybody would, would tell a story, you know, something. So, we kept ourselves this way. Somehow to die from boredom.

04:45:42

Q:Now, this may or may not be an appropriate question. But here you all are, 15 people in a very small space, day in, day out. Obviously there wasn't much privacy.

A: No, there was no privacy at all. And in the beginning of course, we were, you know, in a very awkward position, you know, because we, some of us didn't know the other people. But after a while when you live under this kind of conditions, you know, privacy flees out through the window...there was no window! Anyway, there was no privacy. You couldn't, you see, we had a sink in that room, being a laundry, we had a sink and it was a blessing, because you can go and urinate, but you couldn't do the other thing in the sink, so we had to wait till the night. And we were also dressed, very, in very weird costumes, costumes. I mean, we were dressed in what we could find in the adjoining abandoned buildings, you know, nightshirts or gowns or whatever it was. Some ball gowns, you know, we were looking weird, especially the girls, you know. So, when somebody was going to the sink, there were all kinds of comments and... No privacy, you are right.

Q: You've certainly maintained some humor, it sounds like.

A: What's that?

Q: You've maintained some humor.

A: Yeah, sure, I mean, usually people try to be people as long as they can.

Q: Were there, I mean I know that prior to this you talked about the fact that there were strict moral codes. But I can't believe that people living in this intimacy, so much need to relieve tension, that there weren't sexual relationships.

A: You are quite right about that, and the truth is that there were couples among these people, you know. Couples from before the war, and these people of course were together. Besides, you were lying on a floor of a small room in a way that one body touched the other body. There was no way you could escape it, you know, and there was some sexual activity among the people, in a surreptitious way, but there was. But like I said, the majority were couples anyway.

Q: But even those of you who were not couples there, it had to be...?

A: Even those who were not couples they became couples.

04:48:35

Q: For the time being?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have a boyfriend amongst them?

A: Yes.

Q: So, after a month and a half or so, you left with the Germans, but the Germans weren't going to hurt you, they were just getting you out of the city?

A: Yeah, well, they were about to shoot us, but there was a moment, again a miraculous moment

which saved us from being shot. When the Germans caught us they put us under the wall and the wall was facing the house in which the people were hidden. And they separated me from Sabinka, which was one of the older women and one of the Germans evidently the commander of the group came up to me and asked for papers, you know, documents, identification. Luckily I didn't throw away my, my id. Many Poles threw away their identification because it's the end of the Germans, it's Poland again. This euphoria of the first day of the Uprising was enormous, you know, such a burst out of Polish patriotism. So, many people were throwing away their papers. They don't want any German papers anymore. I was lucky not to throw away mine. And I showed them my papers, and another German was interrogating Sabinka a few yards away from me. He asked... the German who was interrogating me asked me, "Who's she?" I said, "She's my grandmother." Because we agreed among ourselves that if we are caught I would say that she is my grandmother. "She's my grandmother." "What's her name?" I didn't know what her name was except that, Sabinka, you know. I knew only her name, I said "Sabinka." He said, "Her full name?" I couldn't say that I don't know the full name of my grandmother. So I said any name that came to my head. At that moment, he came over to the other German and checked the papers of her and he saw a completely different name. He came back to me and started slapping me over the face. You little slut, you Polish slut. Slapping me on the face. You are cheating, you are telling lies.

04:51:26

And here I have in front of me, you know, we were under the, you know, against the wall and in front of us was a group of maybe twenty German policemen. All with their weapons ready to shoot. At that moment, Sabinka who was, she was, she knew German perfectly. She had an

excellent command of the German language, she pulled that, my interrogator by the sleeve and said she wants to tell him something. You know, the Germans were always impressed when somebody addressed them in the German language. So, he was listening to her story and it was a fantastic story. I don't know how she came up with that story. She told them that she's a virgin and she was at that time, 75 or 76 years old, but in the family it was a secret. They didn't want the children to know that she is a, a virgin, so they invented a name to say the children that she was married and the name that I gave is that invented name. The German couldn't care less about the whole story. What was funny to him that he has in front of him a 75 year old woman who says she is a virgin. And he called the whole group and he said, "Look, here is a 75 year old virgin." The point is that they started to laugh and the tense atmosphere, all of a sudden was, you know, the pent up tension dissipated. And the commander sort of changed his mind. He said okay you skunks or whatever he, epithet he used, tomorrow you are out of here. I'll send a wagon and you will be out of here, and that's how it was.

Q: Was your future husband Abraham in that hideout with you?

A: No. No.

Q: He wasn't with you at that point yet?

A: No.

04:54:02

Q:(Technical conversation) So, at that point, when you got out, just an impression when you were able to leave your hideout and you could see a little bit more of the city?

A:It was a ghost city. Can you imagine a metropolis of a million inhabitants to be all of a sudden empty of people. It's a thing that is hard to, to visualize, even to tell about it. You go through streets, which are torn apart by bombs, craters here and there, you know, caused by the bombs. Houses demolished, either by crashing bombs or burned out. Lots of people, dead people I mean, corpses, around the area. It's more than the human language is able to, to describe, you know. When I remember all these things, you know, it was, I think it was...sometimes people dream about terrible things. They have nightmares. This was a nightmare turned into reality. The reality was more horrifying than any nightmare. So we went through that, you know, they caught us on Zoliborz(Jalibusch) , which is, which is next to the Vistula, and in order to get to the, out of Warsaw, we had to go through the entire city. So, it was hours of traveling and I had this chance of see that devastating city, you know. It broke my heart to see so many killed children, you know, so many women, in most unbelievable positions how people ended their lives, you know. With swarms of flies and rats running around them. The terrible smell of burned domiciles of, of dead people. You know, sometimes in westernized movies you see ghost towns, they look laughable in comparison, what, what Warsaw looked like. Finally we came to a check point because some people had permissions to come into Warsaw to take out their belongings, but they were not allowed to take out jewels or money. Who was caught with that stuff was killed on the spot. When we arrived at that checking point, the whole area was strewn with corpses by people who were caught smuggling out jewels and money from Warsaw.

04:57:30

And I had money on myself, which Cyvia Lubetkin gave me in case I would be able to organize some help for them. I put it into my garter and when we arrived at that checking point, the Germans ordered everybody out from the wagon, except for the paralyzed old woman who couldn't move. We ordered to undress. So even, it was November, it was cold. In Poland November is pretty cold. We had to undress almost completely. I remember he was turning off the heels of my boots to see if I didn't hide there anything because many Poles hid their belongings, their money. And he was, you know, they were, he had the long whip in his hand and he was, you know, going through my body with that whip and he ordered me to, to stand with my legs spread out. He was checking me all over my body, but he didn't find the money in my girdle, my garter.

Q:He was checking you all over your body?

A:Yes.

Q:With a whip?

A:With the whip.

04:59:06

Tape #5

05:01:03

Q:The only thought I have between this period on Promyka Street and the time when you were liberated is, you had mentioned that you were able to help the people who were still in that cellar?

A:Yes.

Q:Is that something that you maybe should talk about a little.

A:Yes, well, yes. I found myself on the outskirts of Warsaw and there were different localities, you know, that were connected by EKD, which stands for Elektryozna Kolejka Dojazdowa, which was a train system which were connecting these places. And we disbursed along this line, hiding in different places and I was in one of these places and I was looking desperately for people to organize this rescue mission but where am I going to, to whom, to where. And again, a miracle, just by chance I met two Jewish women who were hiding on the Aryan side and one of them, her mother was in touch with a...she was a physician, and she got in touch with a director of a hospital in one of these suburban localities and the director of that hospital organized a rescue squad. There were six I believe people who were given orders to rescue people, not insurgents, but just people, from a certain point. And they came, and they came like fifteen minutes...you see, like I mentioned before, the Germans were building a trench in front of the house. And at mid day they went for a break, for a lunch break and the rescue squad came within these fifteen or twenty minutes of that break. Isn't that something? Miraculous. Yeah.

05:03:41

Q:Where were you at the time you were liberated? Tell me about that?

A:Well, I was in a, a small locality called Brwinow, which is not far from Warsaw. Me and Julcia (Ester) Fiks who came at that time back from trying to rescue Chavka Folman from the Auschwitz concentration camp. She was excellent, Julcia, in, in finding places. In melina, she knew how to do it very successfully and we rented a small apartment in a house and we came to live there me, Julcia and one of the persons who were in that hiding on Promyka, Tovia Borzykowski. And, like I said on the fifteen or seventeenth of January, the Germans came and liberated us.¹ The day before, I mean actually the night before, was a night of, of high anxiety because we didn't know what the Germans were going to do with the population. In many cases, you know, they retaliated. In many cases they would just expel the people to, to, for some reason and we didn't know what's going to happen to us. And, again, we are Jews, you know, and Tovia didn't speak good Polish. So, it was a night of great tension. We couldn't sleep of course we were waiting what the next day will bring. And the next day brought the Russians.

Q:Now, did you expect them that soon?

A:We didn't know when they will come, you see. We expected them to come when the, when the

¹ It was the Russians, not the Germans, who liberated them. Leah made an addendum to the interview release form, making it clear that the statement, "...the Germans came and liberated us," was a unintentional "slip of the tongue." Leah does not permit this sentence to be reproduced.

Uprising collapsed. We thought they will come in a few days, but that didn't happen. This was October when it collapsed and, and they came in January, in the mid January. It was such an enormous uplifting for me to see the Russian-German, the Russian soldiers coming into that little... They came on tanks. During the night, the Germans were running away, you know, because the constant noise of running cars and horse driven buggies, whatever they had. They were running like crazy. And it was a good feeling, you know, to see the invincible German army to run away.

05:06:29

And then this running away stopped and there was a very ominous silence. Quiet. It was night and you didn't know what's going to happen in the few next hours because you couldn't get out. I mean you didn't dare to go out and find out. But in the morning, we, we saw this noise of the, the tanks are making when they are approaching the place where you are. The thud of these heavy tanks. They had enormous tanks, much greater than the German tanks. And we looked out through the window and there they were the tshubarikis,² the Russian soldiers, and we couldn't believe our eyes. And you know, the constant suspicion that maybe they will go back, you know. The fear that maybe it's not yet. Don't, don't be happy yet. Wait. But as the day progressed more and more tanks and Russian soldiers were coming into that small locality, and around mid-day we ventured to go out, me and Julcia. Tovia stayed behind still in the apartment, and we went to the, to the local market place. That's where the Russians were congregating and some of them put up some make shift podium and they went on it and started to play their balalajkas and sing Russian songs. Randy, what can I tell you. It was a

² Tshubarikis: Polish term for Russian solidiers.

moment I will never forget. There were three such moments in my life that were really when I felt utterly happy, you know. The first was when I won that stipend to go to my high school to be able to study to learn. This was the second time when I was liberated. And the third when I gave birth to my second son, because I gave birth to my first son with a cesarean section and I was ready to have another operation with the second, but it turned out to be a normal birth and I was very happy when it happened. Yeah.

05:09:05

Okay, coming back to the war we finally were liberated. And we started to, you know, the Wisla, the Vistula was stuck, frozen, to an extent that tanks could go through the river. So, we went there and we wanted to get to Praga because her brother, Bolus, was in one of the localities on the right bank, Falenia. We succeeded to get there. And then the time, you know, of slowly, slowly people were coming together, you know. From, I mean, Jews who survived the war. We went to live in an apartment on Poznanska Street, number 38, and this became the gathering point of the survivors. People who were coming out of the woods. People were coming out from hiding. Those who were coming from Russia because slowly there was an influx of people coming from the east, you know. The Russians let the Polish population go. There was a great number of Poles who spent the war times in, in the Soviet Union. Among them, many, many Jews and they were coming back. All, excuse me, and all these, all these people were coming. You had to have a certain gathering point. It's important for people who were coming out from their hidings or from their places of interment to, to have a point, to have an address where to come to, you know. There was a committee established in Lublin, a Jewish community, and later on in Praga, so we went there and step by step we were coming back to life.

Q:What was it like, this return of all people from, all these people, from different areas and different experiences and horrors. What was it like everybody coming back?

A:Well, it was a very intensive time, you know, because like you said, different kinds of people were coming and each of them had a hair raising story to tell. So, we were constantly hearing all kinds of stuff. Things that now everybody knows because in hind sight you, you learned a lot of things. But at that time, certain things we heard for the first time, like what was going on in concentration camps. I was never in a concentration camp, but there were people coming from these camps and starting telling their stories.

05:12:11

And slowly, you know, step by step, the terrible reality of the five years of German occupation began to unfold. And people coming from Russia they had their stories too, you know. Soon, we started to organize ourselves and I was assigned we were, we did...I mean...again our commanding people, I mean the people at the top of the group, like Yitzhak Zuckerman and others, I mention his name more often than others because almost all the leading people of Hashomer Hatzair died in the war except maybe for Chaika Grossman and well, we started to organize not only to, to have a gathering point for Jews to come to, but also to send out people to look for liberated Jews, you know. Because when people were liberated by the Soviet Army, the first impulse of people was going back to their places. That was the natural instinct, to see if somebody survived, if the house survived, if something can be rescued. So, I was assigned to, to do that with another girl. Her name was Krysia Biderman. Actually her real name was Sarah Biderman, Krysia was her pseudo name during the war. And we were

traveling criss-cross Poland looking for surviving Jews, and we found them. And sometimes these meetings were so packed with emotion I lack the words to describe it, you know. Because the idea that we are really survivors couldn't sink in yet. You were full of apprehensions that maybe it will change again, you know. For, for years you were...lived like a hunted animal. It, it gets into your psyche. It's very difficult to get rid of that feeling that you are not in danger anymore. All these self defense mechanisms are still with you, you know, and in many cases people were reluctant to admit that they are Jews. In many places, places they didn't want to talk to us. They didn't know who we are. But there were also cases when we came and we got such a warm welcome. I remember...I don't even remember which place, what was the name of the place, but we came to a small place and there was a Jewish family there and we got a very warm welcome. We were tired, you know, traveling constantly and the ways and she gave us a good supper and she put us into bed and we could wash. And it was real Jewish hospitality that was known before the war which was absent during the war and again, you know, it was like slowly coming back to life.

05:16:02

And a year later, after the liberation, there was a terrible pogrom in Kielce, a city called Kielce. It's between Krakow and Warsaw, yeah. And after that it was very hard to, to...to make people believe that they are out of danger. The nightmare was coming back, and this time not from the Germans but from the Poles. And many people didn't want to talk to us so we were leaving the address in case they would change their mind and in case they would decide to leave and if they come to Warsaw or to Lodz, or Wroclaw, we gave them addresses where they could come and get instructions and help and if they wanted to get out of Poland. And within the first years after the liberations, thousands of Jews left Poland. There was an

organized exodus and there was a clandestine exodus called Bricha, but people were leaving Poland. Of course there was always a number of Jews who stayed, you know, but not many. Out of a population, of a Jewish population of over three millions, only 240,000 registered after the war. That should give you an estimate.

Q: Did you come in contact with Polish people after the war and were they civil to you?

05:18:06

A: Sure I came in contact with Polish people because one of the contacts was that I wanted to resume my, my studies, you know. For five years a book didn't come into my hands. My studies stopped when the war broke out and this was during my formative years, you know, when normal people study and, you know, prepare themselves for life. So, the first thing I wanted to do after the war was to resume my studies. I always like to study. Till this day, I regret that I couldn't study more than I did because I had to, to work to sustain myself and my family all the years after the war. And the contact was with the Polish school, you know, all of a sudden I have Polish friends, Polish teachers and I was in touch. But learning from the Kielce pogrom I didn't go back to my real name. I kept my Polish name. You know, to be on the safe side, so I was studying until I left Poland in '48 when the first -- by that time there was already a Jewish state established. It was established in 1947. And after the establishment, in '48 the first Arab Jewish war broke out. At that point I decided to leave Poland and to join again the fighting Jews. But by the time I came to Israel, the war was over.

Q: Were you studying in Warsaw?

A: Yes I was...no, I was studying in Lodz. First I did my matriculation and I did it in a school for, for adults and I could get into this school because, if you remember, my papers made me three years older than I really was. And after that I even had a year and a half at the university in Lodz.

Q: In what field?

A: I studied history and English because I knew that I am going to, to Israel and Israel being, you know, a territory under the English rule I knew that English will be important. I studied English.

Q: Did you work with the Bricha at all?

A: Yes. Sure.

Q: Doing what, finding people?

A: Yes.

Q: Was there any danger in working with the Bricha?

A: Sure there was danger, but it was not, you know the most extreme danger was out. We knew that they will not kill us. They could jail us by crossing illegally the, the frontier, but we knew they wouldn't kill. So, it was dangerous but it wasn't so terribly dangerous.

05:21:45

Q: Was it very organized?

A: Yes, it was organized, and again it was the Zionist organization, youth organizations who organized it.

Q: This was out of Lodz?

A: Out of Lodz, out of Warsaw, out of Wroclaw (Breslaw), the main cities, you know.

Q: Some of the same leaders or...?

A: Yeah, and new people came in, you know. There were important people coming from the Soviet Union. Many important partisans came to the service, you know, sure. There were at that time there were also people from Israel coming to Poland, from the Israeli Yishuv³ coming to find out what was left, who was left.

Q: Now, you were bringing people back to Lodz or something. You weren't smuggling them onto boats?

A: No, all I did was give them the addresses where they can come, and many came.

³ Yishuv: (Hebrew), Yishuv literally means "settlement" but here it refers to the period in Israeli history when the land was being settled when the state of Israel had not yet been established.

Q: You know, one thing sort of surprises me in all of this story and that is, you know, you were in between a number of towns, for five years. How you could, how you were able to keep finding your friends and your colleagues.

A: What do you mean finding your friends and colleagues.

Q: Well, I mean you hadn't seen someone in six months and you find her again, or, you know, you would go to Krakow and you would come back to Warsaw and you would know where everybody was, even though everybody was hiding?

A: Look, as a member of Hashomer Hatzair I was always in touch with other members of Hashomer Hatzair. This was one contact, but there was a time when I was left alone without any contacts, but people, other members knew where I am, you know. It was different, different times, at different periods. It was different.

Q: And after the war while you kept your Polish name, but people knew you were Jewish?

A: The Jews knew who I was.

Q: But the Poles did not?

A: The Poles finally they did know. They did know.

Q: But they were nice enough...?

A: Well, it was a different time now, you know, especially when you are young and among young people and the, the imminent danger the German danger is not around, people are people, you know. I was an excellent student. Other peoples like good students, and when you are attractive and young and a good students, people like you.

05:24:51

Q: When you went over to Israel in 1948...

A: It was '49 by the time I came there.

Q: Do you remember your impressions on arrival?

A: Sure, I was so happy to be there, you know finally the dream came true, because you know, we were dreaming about having a homeland of our own. And finally I came, you know I remember walking in the streets of Tel Aviv and seeing inscriptions in the Hebrew language. My goodness, it was like a, like a dream. This, it was Hanukkah time by the time I came to Jerusalem and in the show windows of the stores there was Hanukia, the candelabras and all of a sudden the memories of my childhood, of my grandmother, everything came back to me because during the five years of the war there was no Jewish holidays for me. So, all of a sudden it was coming back. I had to change my, my image again. First I had to change from being a Jewish girl to a Polish girl. Now I had to, to crawl out from the Polish skin and crawl back into my Jewish skin. These are psychological processes which are not easy.

Q:But, did it feel good?

A:Well, it felt good to be in a Jewish state, but the reality of life in Israel was very harsh. It's one thing to be euphoric about coming to your own country, and, but another thing is to meet the harsh reality, and the reality was very harsh. I was right away taken into the army and I served in the ID forces.

05:27:18

Another reality was, you know, economic shortcomings. The country was just, you know, came into existence and there were food shortages and again hunger. But not starvation hunger, it was a different way. You could subsist on that. But the most hurtful thing, the more hurtful thing, was the attitude of the local Jews towards the immigrants. The local, they called themselves sabra, those who were born there towards the olim hadashim, which means the new immigrants. It was a condescending attitude and it hurt like hell. They didn't even want to talk to us. I remember I enrolled at the Hebrew University, I had people, young people, Jews, nobody wanted to talk about what happened to me in the war and they knew that I was a, a Holocaust survivor. This was extremely hard because it's very hard to, to face intolerance and misunderstanding from another ethnic group, but it's doubly difficult or maybe triply difficult to receive it from your own ethnic group, you know. And here that's how it was. And there was a terrible economic hardship for me because, you know, I came without anything, you know. I could go to a kibbutz, but I decided not to do it because the kibbutz would send me to higher education if they found it necessary. If they found it would be beneficial for the kibbutz, and I had this urge to study to learn. It was something that kept me going all my life. Like I said before, I would like to study now too, but in all my mature

life I had to work hard, till this very moment, I'm over 70 and I'm working a full time job and I didn't have time to study. I mean I studied as much as I needed to, to keep my profession, to, to earn some money.

05:30:00

Q:When did you, or how long did it take for you to feel at home in Israel or for people to accept you, or...?

A:I don't think that people accepted me. There was a chasm, a chasm between the local population and the newcomers. Now, after so many years, it may be different, you know. I left Israel in '68, so many changes took place there, but when I was living there...but one thing I must say. The Jewish state straightened out my back as a Jewish person, you know. I didn't have to hide my identity anymore. I didn't have to be ashamed or afraid of being Jewish, and that made a big difference. For a hunted person like myself, who had to hide their identity for so many years, to be able at least, you know, at last not to be afraid to say who I am. It was a very, very beneficial thing for me. To this very day, I think the best thing that could happen to the Jewish nation is the establishment of the Jewish state.

Q:When did you meet up with your future husband?

A:When?

Q:When did you meet up with your future husband?

A: Oh, I met him in, in Israel. Because he succeeded to wriggle himself out from Poland while the war was still going on. He smuggled several frontiers from Poland to the Polish territory next to the Reich from there to Slovakia, from Slovakia to Hungary, from Hungary to Romania, and in Romania I think he came on some boat from Constanta, other port in Romania he came to...it was at that time still Palestine when he came.

Q: How'd you find each other in Israel?

A: Well, we established contact even before, I was in Poland. You saw, like I told you I came to Israel in '49. And in the meantime there were delegates coming from Israel to Poland and I heard from these people, you know, about him, that Abraham is alive and he is in kibbutz Beit Zera. So, we established contact and when I came we married in Israel.

Q: It must have been something seeing him after all of this?

A: Yeah, it was something. Yes.

Q: And you stayed in Israel for how long?

A: Twenty years.

Q: And then decided to move over here?

A: Yes.

Q: Your whole family?

A: The whole family.

Q: Which included?

A: My husband, my two sons and myself.

05:33:34

Q: Let me just ask you a couple general questions. At what...if you had to think about this, what do you think got you through this five years of hiding often by yourself, what gave you the strength, the courage?

A: I don't know. You know, in terrible times like those, you live from day to day. You cannot plan ahead unless you are in immanent danger and then you have to act on the spot. You have to make a decision right there. But I think that really what, what held me together, I mean in a sense that I didn't give in or break down was the deep moral principles that I acquired in the youth organization. You know, I hear some, not sometimes, but, we have plenty of crime here in America among young people, and I was thinking, you know, why aren't they organized in, in youth organization which would give them an, an aim in life, an objective, a purposeful aim. We had this aim, and we were instilled in good humanistic principles and in time of a crisis they come to your rescue. The only thing I was terribly afraid of was that if I fall into the hands of the Germans that I would not betray my friends, you know. That I wouldn't tell them who they are, where they are. That was one of the terrible moments when

the, the German police caught us in Warsaw after the fall of the uprising. The incident with Sabinka. The commander sent a few Germans down to check out the basement and in these moments I was so terribly afraid that they might discover these people there. I would gladly at that moment exchange my life for their lives, but they wouldn't ask for it, you know. And luckily, luckily they did not find them. You see, sometimes a stupid shelf, which was nothing but a wooden frame with perpendicular shelves, could save the lives of prominent people. That's something.

05:36:53

Q:Is there something unique about the spirit of resistance that drives you on, that's motivating?

A:Look, the self preservation instinct in a person is terribly strong, especially when you are young. As you get older, this instinct diminishes, it slacks down. But when you are young, you want to live. You don't want to die. It's one of the most intensive drives in a human being, self preservation.

Q:But a lot of people didn't fight?

A:Yeah, they didn't. Every person has a limit or a threshold, to say at which point they break, you know. How much hunger can you take. How much humiliation can you take. How much physical pain can you take. All these things are individual but I know that Arie Wilner, for example, under terrible tortures, they were putting needles under his, his nails and they were burning his feet and they were beating him until he was unconscious, he never betrayed his colleagues. That's where moral principles come in. Some other person would say to heck

with principles, I want to save my skull, and the Germans would always promise you, if you tell, we'll let you go. We want to help you. Of course they were lying. They were always, they were perfect liars. They always lied, but in order to get what they needed they would promise you. So, if you asking what kept me, it was these humanistic principles. You know, there is a paradox because our youth organization was instilling into the young people humanistic, good principles, but when this, this situation changed, we the loving peace people had to turn into fighters. We had to forget about not lying, not stealing. We had to do it ourselves. We had to, to change.

05:39:45

Q:And that came naturally?

A:And in the ghetto it was very hard to, to make people understand that it is necessary. People till the last very moment did not want to believe that they are doomed, that it's doomsday. They didn't want to believe it, you know like normal times. If a person gets afflicted with a deadly disease like cancer or AIDS, or whatever brings death, the first reaction is no, it can't be true. It's, it's impossible. Why me? Not me, maybe it happens to others but to me. The first reaction is denial. That's what happened in the ghetto, too. When the Jewish fighting organization tried to convey the idea of the necessity of defending themselves, it met with disbelief. People would come up with all kinds of, of rationalizing. Ah, it happened in the eastern part, there in, near Vilna and Ponary because they were aiding the communists. Ah, it happened in another place because they caught some smugglers. People didn't want to admit the terrible truth that they were facing. Some went to the gas chambers, to the last moment they did not believe that they are going to be annihilated, until it was too late, of course.

Q: You started to talk about becoming human again, sort of resurrecting yourself after all of this. Was that, was that difficult?

A: Not when you are very young. You see, you bounce, sort of bounce back you know, the vitality of young people is enormous, you know. You have a reserves. You can bounce back. It's much more difficult for elder person.

Q: Can you talk (technical conversation)...I'm sure that all of these experiences had a lot of impact on you for the, you know, afterwards?

A: Sure.

05:42:33

Q: Are there certain sights, or are there certain smells or sounds that give you bad memories?

A: Definitely, definitely. You know, you cannot go through hell and remain untouched or unshaken. I went through hell. Of course it affected me, and it affected any other person who, any other survivor, whether you were a survivor of a concentration camp or of a ghetto or a partisan or a soldier in an army. There were many Jewish soldiers in different armies.

Q: So, are there certain sounds, certain sights, certain things that bring it all back for you?

A: Well sure, sure. I'm sort of obsessed with the Holocaust, you know. It's part of my life. I can't

detach myself from it anymore. And it's a great hardship of my sons you know, because children usually get the messages from their parent through wordless osmosis I would say. You don't even have to talk to them, but they get the message sooner or later. When my children were small in Israel, they went in a kindergarten and they, they were, you know they had parties for Hanukkah and for other holidays, and the, the parents of these children were, would bring their parents, the grandparents of the children to these parties. My kids would come to me and say, "Ima," Ima is the Hebrew word for mother, "why don't I have a grandfather or grandmother? Where are they?" Now, what can you tell to a five year old boy? That they were murdered? That's the reality you have to face. And later on when my sons grew up, and it's very difficult for young people to be the so called second generation, to be children of Holocaust survivors because none of us is normal in the sense, you know, that like other people live in normal countries, you know. It's a cataclysmic experience.

05:45:10

It was a time there was no rule that could protect you. On the contrary, the, the law was against you, you know. The only law was the German law, and under the German law you were not even a human being. To be Jewish at these times was a criminal offense punishable by death. No matter what you did. You could be productive for a time being until they could take out from you what they could. But, in the end, you were doomed.

Q:I'm trying to understand how that affected you. I know that you're obsessed with this. Of course it's normal. But when you say it's hard for my sons or because we're not normal. I'm trying to understand how your interaction is different. How those experiences impacted your values or the way you live that, that sets you apart?

A: You see, in a family, there are things you, you couldn't tell young people what the real reality was because you were afraid it might warp their emotional growth. You couldn't tell them about Aktions and killings and killing centers. So, you were keeping it from them. But kids are usually very smart. They would listen and they would pick up here and there an article, or here and there a book and they as they grew they realized and they had to face a terrible reality. Because all of a sudden their parents were not normal parents. Like, by normal, I mean like those in Israel who, you know, didn't make, didn't...those who were local Jews who didn't go through the Holocaust. And we were different. And childrens don't want to be different. They want to be like anybody else. So, they hold a grudge against us, you know sort of, you know. " Why, why do you always have to talk about the Holocaust." And how can I not talk about it when not only my immediate family perished in it, but the whole Jewish-Polish-Jewish community in Poland was destroyed. How can you forget a thing like that and not talk about it. But it takes courage to face it, and the truth also is that after the war, people didn't want to hear it. They didn't want to know about it. There was a time when it was taboo. In Israel, in any other places, and it was only later years that sort of...I think that the film Shoah made a big change in the attitude and people started to think. Besides, I think that people needed a certain distance from, in time, a perspective. It was all too fresh after the war to come to certain conclusions or to certain, what would be the English word, to certain understandings.

05:49:27

Q: So was this painful for you that people didn't want to talk about it?

A: Yes it was, it was, you see because in addition to being a Holocaust survivor, once you are being transplanted from one geographic entity to another one, once you become an immigrant it's very difficult to adjust to a new country. Even though, theoretically, you know that this is your state it's a Jewish state and everybody's Jewish, but you are still an immigrant and an immigrant is automatically a half idiot. You come to a country. You don't know the language of that country. You cannot express yourself. You, you start, you acquire a few basic words and you come to a store and you're a laughing stock because instead of, of buying... I came to a store and I bought a pair of stockings. I came home and realized that one is damaged. I went back to the store and I say in Hebrew, you know, you don't understand Hebrew, ah well... anyway, instead of saying I want another stocking I said give me another "men" Of course she was laughing her head off. What do you want? Getteb and Gebber... you know, the consonants change. Yeah, it was difficult. And then I had to go through that process again when I came to the United States. I was again an immigrant, and again this transplanting process. It's very difficult. Again a new culture. Again a new adjustment. Again a new language, new habits, new environments, new requirements at work.

Q: I'm curious why you came to the United States?

A: I came, that's a very personal question, but to answer your question, it was not because of political reasons, it was because of personal reasons. My husband couldn't find any work and we were on the thresh of poverty in Israel. I was the only breadwinner in the family. Well, let's not go into it.

05:52:13

Q:Is there anything else that you want to add right now? Because I think I've probably, I mean I could ask you more questions but you've given me a wealth of information and insight and I'm wondering if there's something else you would like to say?

A:Well, I would like to say that I'm glad that people slowly begin to understand what the Holocaust really was. There is a whole range now of excellent researchers and people of, of science who study these things. I lately read about this excellent book by David Goldhagen. He has an excellent point, you know. His point is that it was not only the Nazi regime, but it was...the title of his book is the willing, "Hitler's Willing Executioners" and the point he's making is that not only the regime but the whole German population was part of that terrible thing that, you know happened. That they were part of the annihilation of Polish or East European Jewry. He's not the first who came up with that principle. Before him there was another excellent book by Christopher Browning, "An Ordinary Man", and he gives an account of how these so-called ordinary Germans became mass killers and it's all based on German documents which makes these publications important. Because the other documentation coming from Jewish sources, the non-Jews or anti-Semites would say the Jews have a tendency to exaggerate. They are always see themselves as victims, but not with the German sources. Here is black and white and they could not deny them. Although there are those who denied that the Holocaust ever existed, you know, but... You know, that reminds me of a Polish saying, if I translate it into English, they would say, "If you spit on a prostitute, she would say it's raining." That's what happening to all those who denied the Holocaust. They would say that. How can you deny obvious things. You cannot. But there have always been Jew haters and there are still Jew haters. As long as there is hate in the world there will never be peace. We see it not only on the Jewish case, look what's happening in ex-Yugoslavia, what's happening Biafra, what's happening in India. What's

happening in other places. You would think that people would learn something from it, what happened, but in my opinion, people didn't learn a thing. History, if you don't learn from your mistakes, you are bound to repeat it. Some people would ask me do you think that the Holocaust is possible again. My answer is yes, it's possible, because you see the German ideology killed not only people it killed moral principles. Before you can kill people, you first have to kill the moral principles. Then it's possible to do and you can see in the world today, where are moral principles. People became sort of indifferent to calamities, and that's a dangerous thing. That's what I would like to add. If you ask me.

Q:Thank you.

A:Thank you.

Photographs

A: This is the picture taken on the farm in Zarki. Zarki was a small locality some twenty kilometers from a big city Czestochowa.

Q: From left to right will you tell me who's in it.

A: The people in it are left to right, Motek Weinryb, he's still alive. He lives in Germany now with his family. Next to him is Srulek Warszawski, the one with the armband on his hand. Behind him is a Polish guy, I don't know his name, a local Pole from Zarki. Next to Srulek Warszawski, in the white blouse, is myself. Next to me is Chagit Ester. Next to her is -- there are Jews, two local Jews from Zarki. I think the one next to Chagit his name was Burofsky (ph) but I'm not sure. The other guy I don't know his name and driving the car is Abraham Silverstein. And, standing there akimbo with his hands on his hips is Arie Wilner--Jurek.

This is a picture taken of myself and Ester Fiks, her pseudonym was Julcia. It was taken right after the war in 1945.

This picture was taken right after the war and we are here a group of people on the place where the bunker on Mila 18 was located. We are here, of course, on the, on the, on the rubbish of that place. From the left side there is Kazik, Simcha Rotem, is his real name, and I'm on the, on the white blouse standing next to that obelisk, or whatever that is, remnant of the war--of the wall.

Q: That's O.K. It's hard to see. That's fine.

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06:00:06