

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014
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PREFACE

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BARBARA SYSKA
October 22, 2014

Question: This is a **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with Mrs. **Barbara Mikowychuk-chuk(ph) Syska**. I'll repeat that. Mrs. **Barbara Mikowychuk(ph) Syska**, on October 22nd, 2014, here at the Holocaust Museum in **Washington, D.C.** And I'd like to start out by thanking you very much to come to speak with us today. I appreciate the time that you're going to take, and the experiences that you're going to share. As I explained a little earlier, we start our interviews from the very beginning. We'd like to learn a little bit about your pre-war life, your family, the world you were born into, and so on. So I'll start with the very basic questions. Could you tell me the date you were born, your name at birth, and where you were born?

Answer: I was born in **Bialystok**, 20 – May 24, '27. My name is **Barbara Joanna(ph) sys** – sorry, **Mikowychuk(ph) Syska**, by my husband.

Q: So that means your maiden name was **Mikowychuk(ph)**?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. And you were born in **Bialystok**?

A: Yes, in the city – in the hospital there.

Q: Ah. Can you tell us – because some people will know what that is and where that is, others will not know. Can you tell us a little bit about the city?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: **Białystok** was the center city for the county of **Białostocka(ph) Voivoidsfa(ph)**. **Voivoidsfa(ph) Białostotsky(ph)**, that's come from **Białystok**. There was one hospital at that time. I lived, for the first year, somewhere on the ci – in the city. And when I was a year, or a year and a half, we moved to the part close to **Palac Branitsky**, is **Palace of Branitsky**.

Q: And where's that?

A: I-In there, on part, they were divided, so there was a fence between the one park and the other. One was the school, which was just ordinary school with the school for the teachers. The other was the ci-city of **Białystok** where – where **magistrat(ph)** is.

Q: Was municipal authorities?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay.

A: And at that part there was also a big lake where we used to slide during the night – du-during the winter.

Q: So it would be frozen over?

A: Why we moved to that part, which was the school, because my mother was a teacher. Both of my parents has only education up to the matriculation.

Q: What does that mean, matriculation? High school, or some college?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Twelve. High school, high school.

Q: High school. Gymnasium, and so, yeah.

A: They didn't have anything farther than that. So my mother was specialized in teaching the teachers, and because of that, she was teaching e-even in high school, the 10th and 11th – well, 13 grade. At that time the teacher, after 12 of the 13 grade. Otherwise, she has only the right to teach up to the ninth – sixth grade, sorry. The school was divided six grades, four grades and two top, and then you have the high school.

Q: So your mother was a teacher. Was your father also a teacher?

A: No. He was the – they met in **Wejherowa**, it's close to the sea. She was a teacher and he wanted to be the soldier. And she convinced him to leave the army. I have no idea what happened during the war on 20 for my father.

Q: In 1920.

A: Because he – in 1920, he was 22. So most likely he was in the army. They never talk about that. The only thing my mother convince him to leave the army. And because he was in the army before, he was the army reserve. So from time to time he had to go and learn a bit more for a week or two. Otherwise, he was a clerk. A – most likely he was an accountant. I didn't know much about it.

Q: I see.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And we lived in the buildings close to the palace.

Q: What's a **powets**? What's a **powets**?

A: Palace.

Q: Palace, okay.

A: Mm-hm. The buildings were built – when I visit after the war, the walls were most likely close to a meter wide. So it was always warm, but of course for the restroom we would have to go – share it with two other families and go downstairs somewhere. There was no hot water, and things like that, because the building at that time was already 150 years old.

Q: How was it that you lived in this palace?

A: Because my mother was teaching in the school. So we –

Q: And the school was located in the palace?

A: Yes.

Q: I see. Okay.

A: Oh, part of it.

Q: I see. I see.

A: And in the – there was a beautiful park, there were tennis courts, which are very, very expensive, but I was not athletic. My brother, four years older than I am, was in tennis and swimming and everything. In **Bialystok** there wasn't – there was a

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

river, but the river whose – which smells very, very badly, because **Białystok** is a town of industry for clothing.

Q: Textiles.

A: And every – textile. And everything went into that river, and vo – very small river. It used to be called **Bialka**(ph). Right now they call it **Biały Rzeką – Rzeką Biały**, which means **White River**. It was really nothing, it was smelly always, not transparent, but no – nor – no animals, no nothing.

Q: So it's polluted.

A: Enormously polluted. You can't imagine.

Q: Even before the war?

A: Before the war. They were going to put it into underground. What they did afterwards, I don't know. I visited **Białystok** only once from this country, and it was completely different. Before the war, it was 104,000 people. And apparently half of the population was Jewish. I thought it only about a third. Part of the poorest part was Jewish, and they were all – also little shacks where they were selling every – food and everything, so we would go there. And I'm sure that it was completely burned while eur – when the Jewish people were fighting.

Q: I see, so –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: But I wasn't there at that time. Why I say about my father and about the – his experience, because when the war started, he had to go to the army, and with his army, he was going back, back, back –

Q: Wait, excuse me, I'm going to interrupt. We'll come to that point. I'd like to leave the – the stories and the experiences about World War II to the side right now, and concentrate on – on what – what was life like pre-war. And I have a few questions already from what you were telling me, and they're factual kinds of questions.

A: One thing also.

Q: Sure.

A: My mother had a servant –

Q: Okay.

A: – who was taking care of me, and cooking, because she was a teacher. But she was paying a lot. It we – the servant lived with us, and she was paying 25 **zloty**. If you could somehow – I think that her monthly was 200, or something like that, her moth – my mother's. So –

Q: Your monthly – your mother's monthly salary was 200 **zloty**?

A: I think so, but I am not sure. I know that she was paying not 20, but 25 **zloty** to the servant.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Per week or per month?

A: For a month. For a month.

Q: Okay.

A: And most of the servants had very little education. For one, her daughter was somewhere, and I was writing the letter, which she was – so, she was completely – couldn't say anything.

Q: So she was not literate.

A: Not – not at all.

Q: So you would write letters for her to her daughter?

A: Yes.

Q: I see.

A: And so, that I know. We lived in a convertible place. My father, my mother, my brother, four years older, I and the servant.

Q: Can I in-interrupt right here then? Your brother – if you are born in 1927, yes?

A: He was born in '23.

Q: In 1923, okay. And his name was what?

A: **Antonyen**(ph).

Q: **Antonyen**(ph) **Mikowychuk**(ph).

A: Yes.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: And your mother's name?

A: She was from mai – her maiden name was **Czynska(ph)**.

Q: **Czynska(ph)**. And her first name?

A: **Selena(ph)**.

Q: **Selena(ph)**.

A: One name only.

Q: All right. And your father?

A: **Antony(ph)**.

Q: **Antony(ph)**. Were they – you said your mother was from the city of **Białystok**, yes?

A: No, no, no.

Q: She was not?

A: My father was from **Warsaw**, and my mother from **Przemyśl**. Well, **Warsaw** is west of **Białystok**, and **Przemyśl** is south. And I can tell you this story of my family.

Q: Oh please, please.

A: That's a most likely true story, completely.

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And the time is in 1683. **Vienna** was defending, and they ask king of **Poland** to – to c-come and rescue, and **Vienna** was defended. That was very important in the history of **Europe**.

Q: You mean when there was the **Ottoman Empire**, or the Turkish
[indecipherable]

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Forces were –

A: And at that time, the king would conduct a fight from the hill.

Q: Yes.

A: And once a day, he was standing on the top of the hill, and there was a Turk coming on his horse. And the boy who was at the – we – they bring all the food and so on.

Q: Who was bringing the food, I mean, I guess just the – a – a – a young boy who's been –

A: Young boy. And he saw that Turk coming, and he killed him. For that act – **czyn** in Polish, he was named **Czynski(ph)**, and the king ga-gave him somewhere – right now it's **Ukraine, Humanya(ph)**. He gave him a big place. And of course, he gave him – he was a nobleman, made a nobleman for that **czyn**. And he was **Czynski(ph)**. My mother is –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Czyska(ph).

A: – ma – was Czyska(ph) from that. But the leet – that – that young boy was Jewish. And to be a nobleman he cannot be Jewish, he had to be Catholic. And because of that his mother – most likely they were poor.

Q: Yeah.

A: And he was given a lot of land and being a nobleman for always, and she didn't like it, chan-changing her allegiance, no. So she curse him and – up to 11th generation. I'm his 11th gener-generation. So what – I have one in 2000 drop of Jewish blood.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: But I really respect her, that being from poor to – and this is most likely completely true story.

Q: Well, you know what is also interesting is that it is a story that was passed down through those 11 generations, to you. That is, it's something that stayed within the family –

A: Yeah.

Q: – as – as – as a story of how – so did your mother come from nobility? Could you say that she was born in –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Well, in **Poland** there is a custom that if a father had three sons or 10 sons, his property is divided equally, except if somebody goes to priesthood.

Q: Okay.

A: So they were pushing boys to priesthood so they would – and because of that, the noble people were sometimes have the piece of land just as m-much as the peasant. And the story, but I don't know, it was mo – most likely my grandfather – **Poland** was taken by **Russia** and – and so on, three times. And once, my grandfather as a baby, was carried through the border in a wash basket. So –

Q: From **Russia** into –

A: – then they didn't have – from **Humanya**(ph), which was **Poland** –

Q: Yeah.

A: – and right now is **Ukraine**, middle of **Ukraine** somewhere.

Q: I see.

A: I always hoped to – to go there and see whether there are any **Czynski**(ph) there.

Q: Yeah.

A: But most likely not. I don't know. But anyway, so they moved, and my mother was in **Przemyśl**, somewhere connected with [indecipherable]. My grandfather died when she was one year old.

Q: Oh.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And that's also story in the family. She was the younger – youngest of four from second wife. Of course, the first one died, no – not divorced. So she's – for a woman, my mother was born 1898. So at that time, to bring up four children, so my father wish her – I wish that he – that that one will die for you. That was my mother. Well, three is easier than four. She managed somehow.

Q: Yeah.

A: She gave good education for –

Q: All her daughters.

A: Good –

Q: Yeah, all her children.

A: Yes, yes. And she was working with a nurse na – nurse, servant and nurse. They were cooking and giving lunches to people who were coming, that's how she supported herself and four children.

Q: So that's your grandmother.

A: That's my grandmother.

Q: What – what a story.

A: Yes.

Q: What a story.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: So, we believe that wom – women are equal, but completely different. But we are equal.

Q: Yeah. Well, you survived, and –

A: Yes.

Q: – and she brought up her children.

A: Yes. So she was a teacher, and because of that we lived there. And she had a servant, she had to, but in comparison I can't – did – I didn't say how big was our –

Q: Yeah, tell me.

A: – apartment. Four of us and the servant, there were two rooms. One little room connected with two rooms, and kitchen, and so they couldn't be – that room could not be used for anything, only just storage of – cupboard. And the servant sleeps in the kitchen.

Q: Wow.

A: When the Soviets expelled us, a man came in and my mother says, well, we're here only, and [indecipherable] there no room. And he said, oh, in our country even **Stalin** doesn't have such a good room. And he believed.

Q: Yeah, he believed, yeah, yeah.

A: He believed. But it was really very small, but that was cheaper than – because of –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: She taught –

A: – it was only for teachers –

Q: Yeah.

A: – so it was slightly cheaper, I don't know how much it was.

Q: So, I got the impression – tell us again, there will be people who know geographically where **Białystok** is, and others who don't. Can you tell us where in **Poland** the city is?

A: It's halfway from **Warszawa** to – you say **Vilnius**, I'm saying **Wilno**.

Q: So it's halfway between **Warsaw** and **Wilno**, and **Wilno** is in **Lithuania**, so that means it's in eastern **Poland**.

A: Yes, right now it's very eastern, but is part of – biggest part of **Poland** was taken by **Soviet Union**.

Q: So that means that it's in the northeastern part, so –

A: Slightly north to the **Warsaw**, but it's not very far. I think, if I'm right, it's 110 kilometers. That means about 18 miles from **Warsaw**. And when my brother finished his middle school gymnasium, four years, that's the 10th grade, he decided to go and visit my aunt, which was in **Pruszków**, which is very close to **Warsaw**, and my grandparents were in **Warsaw** – on the bicycle. And he made it in

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

one day, but the more – most thing difficult was the first part, because it was not paved. It was just a road. And that's the main road from **Warsaw** to **Wilno**.

Q: Now, within **Bialystok**, were the roads paved?

A: They were something what we call **koci bur(ph)**, cat's heads. It's a –

Q: Cobblestones.

A: Cobblestone.

Q: Cobblestones, I see.

A: Mostly, and there will – will be some which wer – weren't paved at all.

Q: Tell me a little bit about modernization. You mentioned that in this city there was – there were textile factories that were – that polluted. Did people have cars? Did they have radios? How modern was a ci – was **Bialystok** as a city?

A: A – one of the teachers, they didn't have children, have a car. And we used to come and see how he was working with the car. You have the handle in front –

Q: Oh yeah.

A: – and move it.

Q: I see.

A: And that's how you start the –

Q: The car, that kind.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes, that kind. So I saw the car, and I saw the first plane, it was the first few days of the war. I was coming – I'm somewhere close to that **bielka**(ph) and the plane flew over it, very close. That was the closest to the planes.

Q: So that's the first time you saw an airplane –

A: Yes.

Q: – was when the war starts.

A: Yes, when the war st –

Q: That means 1941, or 1939?

A: '39.

Q: '39. So –

A: '39.

Q: Okay.

A: My daughter had the plane to – she used to [**indecipherable**] the plane. She still have it, I think it doesn't play. And my youngest son is a pilot since he was 17. He is in **Poland** right now. But I saw the first plane.

Q: You saw the first one.

A: Well, he's ple – flying helicopters, but –

Q: Yeah.

A: So the war – the world change very much.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Yes it has, hasn't it? It really has. In – in **Bialystok**, what would – was it a pretty city, or was it a very, as you say, if it was industrial –

A: I don't know where industry was. I was close to – well, from us it was very close to – to the main market there. And I would go with the servant to – when she was shopping in **Hahnyehki**(ph). Does – that Jewish part.

Q: **Hahnyehki**(ph)?

A: **Hahnyehki**(ph).

Q: Okay. Did you have any Jewish friends?

A: Yes. There were – there were two kids in my class.

Q: Okay.

A: And one was a boy, and one a girl. The girl, nothing special. The boy was the most intelligent and he usually didn't get the best grades, and I did.

Q: Really?

A: And I was completely sure that he was much brighter than I was. So – but the teacher was giving the boy less than me.

Q: Why would – why would that be?

A: She was divorced and my mother said that she didn't like the boys. But anyway, she recognize him and very often when the war in **Spain** started –

Q: That's right, the [indecipherable]

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: – she usually would say [indecipherable] say wha-what's happening in – in – and he was saying. He was completely sure. He was in second grade or something, and knew what was happening in **Spain**.

Q: The Spanish Civil War.

A: The Spanish Civil War.

Q: Civil War, in '37.

A: He was really a bright boy. Now, there was one child who was a – e-easter Orthodox. The – so three out of about 40. Our classes were large because it was – the school was called **Treitanufka**(ph), something what you learn how to do it. So they –

Q: Vocational school.

A: Vo – it was vocation for the teacher. The mother – my mother was teaching the grades. And the [indecipherable] pedagogic.

Q: Pedagogical, okay.

A: Yes, and those teachers had to learn on us. And since in the country there were big classes – usually, I think, in **Poland** were, in cities it will be 30 in class. But in ours it was 40, and once I was in a connected school, connected class, third and fourth grade together, 60 kids all together, so the teacher would learn how to do it. Only one year like that. So, there were big classes. And out of our 40, there were

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

three children who had the option – there was Catholic religion I think twice a week for an hour – they could stay, or they could go out. That was not discrimination, they a – all – all the children were very, very glad to leave and do whatever they want.

Q: Not have to be – yeah.

A: No, that was definitely not discrimination, they could stay and learn. Our – for instance, we start with the prayer. They would not have to pray with us, only they have to stand up on the very beginning and the very end of the school. But they would have to pass religion to pass to the next grade. So –

Q: Their own religion?

A: Their own religion. So the rabbi has to say that they passed the religion for the, say second grade, before they will go to the third. But what they learn, that was his only. He did not have to say what he consider good for the second grade.

Q: And you're saying this was true for the Orthodox children as well?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. And were there many Orthodox children?

A: In my class, only one.

Q: And that brings me to another question. You mentioned that you thought that the Jewish population of **Bialystok** was maybe 30 percent, but after – truly afterwards

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

you [indecipherable] half. So were there Ukrainians in **Białystok**? Were there other nationalities?

A: No. I don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't know. But there was a joke after the Russians came in, that people used to say when they were in **White Russia** or **Ukraine** – we call it **White Russia** –

Q: You're talking **Belarus**?

A: That they lived **Białosc**(ph).

Q: Yeah.

A: I can't pronounce it properly. They used to say that we're local, we're local. And they say afterwards that Polish people wanted – for 20 years wanted to make them Polish and they didn't, but the Russians came and did it in two weeks.

Q: Well, there is something to that, yes.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: I remember from learning about the region around **Wilno**, the people would say the same thing. Who are you? And they wouldn't say I am Polish or I'm Lithuanian or I'm Russian.

A: I'm local.

Q: They say, I'm **tutejszy**. I'm from here.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes, **tutejszy** it's local, yes

Q: Yeah, I'm from here.

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Q: Which is an interesting kind of identity.

A: Well, because it was under **Russia, Poland** doesn't exist for 150 years, and they felt Polish, so –

Q: Sort of. Kind of.

A: Kind of Polish.

Q: Yeah.

A: They knew that the – the others are strangers, the others are occupa – occupants.

Q: Yeah.

A: And don't – don't treat people the same ways. So – so, they were local.

Q: They were local. So let's talk a little bit more about religion, a little bit. Was your family religious?

A: My parents were not. They treat – well, I think that the – the problem was that they believed in regulation of birth, and that's against the ga – Catholic church.

[indecipherable]

Q: Oh, so they believed in birth control.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Birth control. I believe that was the reason, but I don't know. But they kept us, we were going to – to church every Sunday, and – and well, th-they try not to talk about that, but because of they believe in bir-birth control, they didn't try to go to church and pretend that they are good Catholics.

Q: I see. But you were – you, nevertheless, would ha – take religion classes in school, and did you go through the various stages of, you know, having a First Communion and a Confirmation, and things like that?

A: Yes, yes. There is only one thing. My mother told me that once a woman came to her and said, I don't want my child to be in a religion class. And my mother said, what – well, I'm an athe – atheist. So all through those years my mother was [indecipherable] something. There was one atheist.

Q: I see.

A: And of course her child, who would not go to religion class because that was – only she could not provide a certificate of any religion that he passed. So he was not learning.

Q: Really? Okay.

A: But one in years. So at that time it wasn't, it was la – and there is one other thing, people av – who say about anti-Semitism in **Poland**. I believe that there was no – not really anti-Semitism. It wa – came during the war, brought by **Soviet**

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Union. My husband was a mathematician, and he knew a mathematician in **Poland** who was very distinct in – in **Warsaw Polytechnic**. I forgot his name right now. And he was very respected, s-some grand or something like that, one year, and the second year they told him to get out of **Poland**, they allowed him. But he was married to a Catholic woman and had Catholic child. So he was expelled and not **[indecipherable]**

Q: And **[indecipherable]** sort of –

A: That was during the war. And he lived with us, he came to **United States**, he lived with us for a week or two. And right now, if he's alive, he's still teaching in an – **Ann Arbor**. But that came, that one year everything was – was bad, it was supposed to be bad because of Jewish people. And I think something was bad, people can't take very easily. So most likely right now there is the real anti-Semitism in part of **Poland**, not to everybody.

Q: Okay.

A: But it was definitely – I – I want to give you what was before the war. There were some –

Q: Tell me before the war, mm-hm.

A: Before the war there were some people extremist who were saying **bić Żyda**.

Q: What does that mean?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Beat the Jew. That – those were extremists, but hardly ever. And so that was not showing what the population was. But we have, don't buy in Jewish store. Last few years we e – if we could avoid. And the reason was economic, because before **Poland** received independence into ninet – 18 – Jewish people were taking part of commerce. Because for a nobleman it was not nice, so if he brings some food, somebody had to bring into the city. And that was what Jewish people were doing.

Q: Okay.

A: Then [indecipherable] Jewish population was very l-large. Out of 30 millions – no, 33 million people we had before the war, three million were Jewish. Because when in the western **Europe** in, I don't know, 15th 16th century, when there were a fight and they didn't wan – like Jewish people, Jewish people came, and apparently just past the e-e-eastern border of **Poland** there was a biggest population o-of Jewish people, because we accepted them. So that was only when **Poland** get the independence, and we started to modern life, somebody had to have the – the shopkeepers could not be only Jewish people. And because of that, Jewish people were fighting the new stores. Of course, that was economic fight. The whole part of was – some Jewish people were giving money to this storekeeper who was next to the new Polish store – not Polish, Christian store. Jewish people were Polish people. But they were giving him money, so Jewish store had everything cheaper. After a

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

time, after a year or two, the other one has to close. Then, the prices in Jewish store went up. That was known, and because of that we were, don't buy in Jewish store. But that was not anti-Semitism. This was justified of – as I said, the noblemen, since they gi – were giving to every son, then they were poorer and poorer. That was a cul – sort of culture. But –

Q: I want to – I – I want to go to – I understand what you are explaining, but I would like to – I would like to focus on, did this play out in your life at all? Did your parents talk about such things when you were growing up, about – did you – for example, when you went with your servant – by the way, what was her name, the servant?

A: They change, from one to the other.

Q: I see, so it wasn't always the same person.

A: Yes, for 12 – 12 years, there were two or three. The first one was the one which worked with my mother, providing lunches to people.

Q: Okay.

A: So she was my – my nurse on the very beginning.

Q: So – I mean, was – how did this play out when you were growing up? Did you know there was a difference between Jewish children and your – and yourself, outside of the religions classes?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: No, I knew something. For instance, I – I'm – well, I live in commun – community where is a lot of Jewish people. There are two synagogues. For me it was a surprise that there are different kind of Jewish – that they need two synagogues close to each other.

Q: That means in **Bialystok**?

A: No, no, here.

Q: Here, here, okay.

A: In **Silver Spring**.

Q: I see.

A: I live in place where there's a lot of Jewish people. But, for instance, I knew that – and I always wonder what – from me to the closest synagogue is more than 1,000 paces. And I learned that Jewish people cannot walk farther than 10,000 paces. So how can stretch it? They don't drive, of course. They go – walk to synagogue. But I knew about that. I knew about matzah.

Q: Mm-hm, about Passover, and [indecipherable]

A: Ye-Yes, I like it very much. I didn't know that it's a religious, the triangular cake, but we had triangle cakes with poppy seeds inside, and big one, no-not the short one, but short like –

Q: I think these are called **hamantashen**, I'm not exactly sure.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: I – I don't know, but I knew some things [**indecipherable**] that they had to wash the – all the dishes somewhere. So, we knew a little bit of the Jewish culture. And of course, my parents were very much against us. That was just before the war, there were some people who were against Jews very strongly, and my parents were saying that it's – it was completely silly. When we had to, during the war, under the Russian occupation, we had to go to **Warsaw**, to German – **Germany** [**indecipherable**]. So, my mother went to a friend who was a doctor, and she gave my mother a sign that my mother has a weak – weak heart, and have to stay at home for three weeks. That was in case we would not be able to pass through **Warsaw**, and she would have to come back, so she will be able to get her job again. Of course, that was something what she – it was be punished by whatever, maybe sending to **Siberia**. But she gave it to my mother. So –

Q: And she was a Jewish lady?

A: She was Jewish, yes.

Q: Yes, I see.

A: And also we have a doctor, h-he was Jewish. When we started to buy only in Christian stores, we didn't change him. So, it was a Jewish doctor. So I really believe strongly there was no anti-semit – anti-Semitism is always in all the world, but in **Poland** it was not strong.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: I see.

A: But people believe right now, but taking a bad thing is very, very easy, and since **Soviet Union** were saying that everything is fault of Jewish people, and so you know, it start.

Q: So let's – let's go back to – let's go back to the events of your life, and your family's life. You were – you were then – your father was working as a clerk, your mother was teaching –

A: A teacher.

Q: – you were attending the school, which was kind of like the children were the guinea pigs for teachers in training.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: And did you –

A: In – mostly were normal school. Only from time to time we had that –

Q: That sort of situation. Did your parent talk about politics at home?

A: A lot.

Q: Really?

A: Of course, we eat always in – i-in – around the table, not – not in front **TV** or something like –

Q: Yeah, there was no such.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: So, they were always talking. My father was very interested in social things. But I don't know –

Q: Were they – I mean, were they supporters of any one particular party, or any one particular kind of public –

A: I wish I knew –

Q: Okay.

A: – but I don't. There was only one thing. In **Poland** – here you have the names – I was so-so – it was so funny for me when I think he was the principal of the school somewhere in **Gloucester** where I live years ago, and the street was named by him. And so there was something opening, and I shake his hand. Why it was so funny for me, because in **Poland** there is no – right now there is a lot of streets named by – by the Pope. But otherwise – I don't know whether that changed, but in **Bialystok**, there was a street named by **Koscza(ph) Kowskei(ph)** was mi – misa – some – someone in government.

Q: Okay.

A: And my father objected to it. And because of that he lost his job, and for four years – that was eight years before the war – for four years he could not find a job, and then all the savings are – went down. He had one job somewhere in **Silesia**, and he – somehow he lost it, after he have a year. So it – we – we were really using all

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

the savings. And then he got the job in **Tarnopol**, which is **Ukraine** right now in that.

Q: In tarno – in **Tarnopol**, yeah.

A: **Tarnopol**, yes, there was a **Voivodswa(ph) Tarnopolski(ph)**. And so –

Q: Okay, so was the region of **Tarnopol**, yeah.

A: Mm-hm. He used to come to us for Christmas, and we were going for vacation down there.

Q: And so, if I understand this properly, your father had strong political views of one kind –

A: And because of that he's –

Q: – and that got him into trouble.

A: Yes, in trouble, because not that he cannot – there – there were no work. They did not want him to get work.

Q: So there really was blackli –

A: It was a punishment because he said the streets should not be called –

Q: After this minister?

A: Yes. **Koscza(ph) Kowskei(ph)**.

Q: And you do – **Koscza(ph)**?

A: **Koscza(ph) Kowskei(ph)**.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: **Kosza(ph) Kowskei(ph)**. And what political party did this minister belong to?

A: I have no idea.

Q: Do you have to –

A: You may be able to find it.

Q: I don't know. What did your parents think of **Marshall Pilsudski**?

A: That I don't know, because in school I don't think that they were with him. But anyway, he – **Pilsudski** was in school a very important person. And my mother, like she was teaching me to be Catholic, she was teaching me to good Pole. And that was – I'm not sure that they were with him very much. I don't know – I – I was too young to understand when he started some trouble, where they were in that –

Q: What they thought of it –

A: I don't know.

Q: Yeah.

A: No, I don't know.

Q: Okay. Were they – would you think though – I'm trying to get a sense of what was their political orientation. Were they more on a liberal side, on a – on a socialistic side? I – I only suggest that because you say they were for birth control. And in those years, very often –

A: That was progressive, very progressive.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Progressive, yes.

A: I know that there – one teacher had three children, and they were saying it's too much. And that time in – when my mother, during the war was teaching in – in the country, my friend was one of 14.

Q: Wow.

A: So that was the usual.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: So, one thing. My father, when he was in **Tarnopol**, he was away from the family. He was playing **Bridge**, which is how we –

Q: It's a card game, yes? He was playing **Bridge**, the card game?

A: Yes, yes, card game. And for a very small amount of money, but he also always winning and bringing money home.

Q: Really? So, he was good at it?

A: [**indecipherable**] very little. But apart from that, he had nothing to do. So he was apparently taking, at that time, everywhere in the country, people during the winter were just suffering, because they had nothing to work, nothing to eat, and so on. And so he was supporting the peasant – peasants' art. And apparently there was a shop cl – something for that opened before the war, already for a few years. And people were so grateful to my father, that they gave him an how – ho – handwoven

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

carpet, which was, when I came here I saw something close by – close to it, it will be a thousand or 2,000 dollars' worth here.

Q: Yeah, yeah, something that beautiful –

A: And they gave it to him –

Q: As thanks.

A: – for what he was doing.

Q: Yeah.

A: But what he was doing, I don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: So – so definitely he was for the people, but on the other ha-hand, my mother was paying that five **zloty** more than usual, the – that's way other people were taking this – her servants, taught by her, and so on. But, so was sort of equality for people, good, bad. Also the – I would say that it would be for everybody, strike your own, and help other people.

Q: So those were their values.

A: It was not – it was the values – not socialist values.

Q: Okay.

A: But still good for other people.

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And I think for both my parents.

Q: I see.

A: My – my mother was a teacher who – who would try to do everything for every child. It was not just working those hours, she was a really teacher.

Q: I want to ask something about – about your family in a pers – more personal way. Is – what was the family dynamic? Was your – were you closer to one parent than the other?

A: Another story. My father was at work when I was born in the hospital. And my mother somehow called by telephone. And the people around us, oh it's a girl – boy – girl. I lost my second boy. They wanted to have only two children, and I was a girl.

Q: Ah.

A: So, my father told me that.

Q: Yeah. Jokingly.

A: Jokingly.

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, right then he told them he lost –

Q: His second boy.

A: – his second boy, because he wanted two. But he told me. And I was his favorite.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Really?

A: Yes.

Q: Yeah.

A: Whether my mother had a favorite, I don't know. But I definitely was his favorite.

Q: And what kind of personalities did they have?

A: Is difficult for me to say.

Q: Were they outgoing? I mean, they sound like they were very – they liked being with people. If they – if their –

A: Yes, they must be, but to me they were perfect, really.

Q: Ah.

A: Let me say with the **[indecipherable]** because I will be most likely coming back also, to things other. When war started, my father had to go to – to the army. And he – everybody was going back, back, back, so they will re – reorganize and start to fight Germans, straight.

Q: So they were retreating in order to regroup.

A: Retreating all the time, because they were going to reorganize. We had pact – pact of **nieagresji**. A pact with **Russia** that we'll not be fighting each other.

Q: This is called the **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact** between Nazi **Germany** –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: No, no, no, no, you say between them. We had **Poland** –

Q: Oh, **Poland**

A: – had interaction –

Q: A non-aggression –

A: – non-aggression pact.

Q: – aggression pact, okay.

A: So we did not expect our friends to free – free us.

Q: I see.

A: So they came in – before that, there was a appeal to everybody, young man. My
– my brother was 16, but he – to retreat and form the army and fight back.

Q: Okay. I understand.

A: So he was retreating also.

Q: I want to – excuse me, I want to – I want to ask a few other questions about this,
since we're going to start into this. But before I left your family, I wanted to ask one
more question that was about the family, and then go on to the war.

A: Yes?

Q: And that was what kind of a person was your brother, and were you close to
him?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: I was very close to, he was my friend, not only my brother. Only four years older. He was teasing me from time to time, but we were really friends. And he was very athletic. I was – I was always choosing my food, and I was small, and tiny and not athletic at all. And he was in everything, and he was playing music – piano. My mother was – wanted me to learn piano, I was learning for four years, because piano you don't have to have good hearing to – to be able to play. But he was very good, one of the – had some concerts and so on. So by 16 he was known as good pianist, and good tennis player. We had that tennis courts, which that's a very expensive – because you don't ha – you had to pay for that, but since it was on the school grounds, we – we have it. So he was very, very athletic, and my best friend.

Q: Oh. So now this –

A: Even four years older.

Q: That's – that's amazing. I mean, there are very few sibling – I mean, many siblings are close, but such that they could say that – that ther – he's not only my brother, but my best friend –

A: Yes.

Q: – is – is quite a compliment. Now I want to go to the war in this way. Can you tell me – do you remember the day that it started? Do you remember where you were? Do you remember what happened?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Must have been during the night. No, I don't know.

Q: You don't know.

A: No.

Q: Do you remember, were your parents with you together?

A: No, definitely not, because my father was in army. I was only with my mother and my brother.

Q: And why would he be in the army? Was he mobilized before the war started?

A: Yes, because he was in the reserve army.

Q: I see.

A: He was the army when my mother met him. And because of that, he was in the reserve all the time. He was the lowest officer.

Q: So, he was a sergeant or something?

A: No, no, no, sergeant is under.

Q: Lower than that, yeah.

A: Yes. He's second lieutenant.

Q: Uh-huh. Second lieutenant. So –

A: And during the war he was – before the war in – in the underground army he was lieutenant, and then during the insurrection, captain. But that's important for our family, that he was retreating with his people. And here it –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Excuse me, excuse me I need to come before that, because there's a lot I don't understand. So, he was in **Tarnopol** while you were in **Bialystok**, and he was in the reserves from **Tarnopol**?

A: No, no.

Q: No.

A: He was assigned to **Modlin**, I think.

Q: And **Modlin** is where in **Poland**?

A: I think close to **Warsaw**, but west of **Warsaw**, I think.

Q: Okay. So when the G-Germans attacked, he was not on the western front, he was around **Warsaw**?

A: Somewhere there, yes.

Q: I see. And do you remember when he was mobilized?

A: A few – a few weeks before the war. I know that we shortened the va – vacation, and we came back to **Bialystok**.

Q: That's what I'd like to find out about. You were on vacation?

A: I think he in – on vacation always in **Tarnopol**.

Q: Got it.

A: Because it was before the school starts.

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: I think we came early, and I think that he has a friend in – it's called **Dvoika**. Is second. Tha-That's military spies.

Q: Ah.

A: And I think that he had a friend and that friend said that the war is coming pretty soon. I think so, I don't know. But definitely not a secret, but something what you can tell different.

Q: And so in other words, during that summer, there was already conversation that the war is coming, and people felt it.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay. And –

A: But only from the west, not from the east.

Q: Okay. So this talk about –

A: We had the – some pact with **France** and **England**, if some – **Germany** would have attacked us, they are going to go to war straightaway. And we still feel badly that they didn't til the fourth day, or something like that.

Q: So you were – your father was in the – taken into the reserves from **Tarnopol** and somewhere around **Warsaw**. You and your –

A: Yes.

Q: – and your brother and mother returned to **Bialystok**?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes.

Q: And you talked earlier about that first plane that you saw.

A: Well, that was during the war already.

Q: Okay, so that wasn't during the first days?

A: On 17th, when Russian attacked, we were still in **Poland**, free part of **Poland**. So, most likely I saw that plane on that day, maybe on 20 of September.

Q: It was a Polish plane?

A: Polish plane, yes.

Q: Ah, okay, it was a Polish plane.

A: Polish plane.

Q: And – and so the first days of the war, your father is someplace, and you don't know where.

A: I haven't seen my father from bef – from **Tarnopol** til February – you will be able to tell me better when I saw him, because he retreated all the – well, one thing only, we were always afraid of gas.

Q: Okay.

A: And we were thinking about being in the **cerl**(ph).

Q: In the cellar, uh-huh.

A: Cellar. That is safer, of course.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Yeah.

A: Bombs were not coming through. And once we went there, everybody was getting, it was in on the school somewhere. A-And people sa – started to say, gas, gas, gas. We went out, we were really afraid. And we found that one woman, since she couldn't wash her children's hands, she wash it with the cologne water.

Q: Okay – oh – oh, cologne?

A: Yes.

Q: **Eau de cologne?**

A: Yes. And the smell of that, and everybody thought it was gas. So –

Q: Oh my. How quickly people are afraid.

A: Yes. So we were afraid of gas, yes.

Q: So this is – were there German bombardments of **Bialystok** during those first two weeks?

A: Y-Yes, it was, and it went on the close – close to the hospital, somewhere where there were **[indecipherable]** under the train, there was a – passage under the train.

Q: Oh, you mean like when you're going onto a railway –

A: Yes.

Q: – railway track, an – okay.

A: And people – people get there and the bomb fell down.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Fell on that, okay.

A: And there was a lot of people. And my brother, who was helping there, as a scout, he put his body on his arm, and took it to the hospital, and it – it was a dead man. My brother was 16, so he's still not an old person –

Q: It's not easy, yeah.

A: – who take. And people started to – he told me that – started to say, how can you do that to an – without respect to a dead person? So he was helping as much as he could, but when there was a call for people to retreat to – from – he started to retreat as well.

Q: Was he inducted into any kind of military unit?

A: He was 16. No, no, no.

Q: No, nothing like that.

A: He was only the scout, very, very much in scouting.

Q: Okay, so was through the scouts.

A: Yes, through the scouts, he volunteered.

Q: I see. Okay.

A: And of course when – on 17 they started to come back, he star – he came back as well. He never saw my hu – father, because on gel – he wanted to be with us for

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Christmas, but after Christmas he went down, he was going through **Romania** to **France** to fight.

Q: That's your brother?

A: My brother. He was arrested on the border, we did not know about that. My –

Q: Okay, so hang on – hang on a second. Get – let me get a – a – a free picture here – a – a more accurate picture. Until the 17th of September, **Bialystok** is not yet taken over by the Germans.

A: No.

Q: It is still part of free **Poland**, as you say.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: What happens on the 17th of September?

A: The Russians started to come in.

Q: And was your father in – around **Warsaw**, or had he come back?

A: Well, you didn't let me talk.

Q: I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

A: But before that –

Q: Yeah.

A: How friendly were Germans and Russian at that time? First Germans come to **Bialystok** for one week.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Okay.

A: In the school there was Polish hospital –

Q: Yeah.

A: – because there – there was a big kitchen, and my mother wa – hated cooking.

But she volunteered to help in the kitchen. And I was wiping the – she wa – she wasn't cooking, luckily, for people. But she was washing the dishes, and I was

wiping it and going out and putting the water out. When Germans came, since that

was already hospital, Germans took it as a hospital for one week. And then they

retreated because Russians were supposed to, according to **Molotov-Ribbentrop**,

Bialystok was supposed to be in Russian. So they retreated, and Russian took the

hospital, and there was a hospital, with a vo – very good doctors. A – amp-

amputation of the leg or hand look awful, but it's one of the easiest thing to do. And

people were saying that if that one doctor there would cut the leg off, the person

would die for sure. It was a horrible thing. When the war started, all the stores had

to be open, whether they have anything to sell, or not. And that – the woman who

had the store with – with – I'm thinking in Polish when I am talking about that.

Q: It's okay. Okay. It takes a little bit of time sometimes to find the words.

A: Yes. Somewhere where you sell the medicine.

Q: Ph-Pharmacy?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yeah, pharmacy. The owner of the pharmacy had that pharmacy open. She told that to my mother, my mother told me. There wa – came a man, and she said, I'm sorry, but I don't have anything left. And, you really don't? What about that? And there were the – were the little baby, you put here in his mouth so he won't cry.

Q: Oh, you – oh, you mean the – I know the word in – in the wrong languages.

Thank you very much, a pacifier.

A: Pacifier, yes.

Q: Thank you. So, it was a pacifier, right.

A: A pacifier. And that was a Russian – I think Russian officer, but an – anyway, is Russian.

Q: Okay.

A: And she ask hi-him, you want one or two? No, all of them. And he bought 50. Everything what we had, it was really luxury for them. And –

Q: So you say the stores emptied out, is that what you're saying, when the Russian army came in?

A: Well, it was almost ev – empty, everything was sold, nothing brought in. So she said, I don't have anything, I – and only those pacifiers. And since there were 50 pacifiers, he bought 50 pacifiers. There were a time when we didn't have bread, when – and once we had **halvah**, you know what it is?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: We could buy a lot of **halvah**, and we were eating that **halvah**, because that's what brought to – was brought to **Poland**. And just the beginning of the war, Russians were going to the main square. In **Poland** there was – nuns had the orphanage. And they were going to take the orphanage, the whole orphanage or something. That was one of the first ma-main thing. People learn about that, everybody came to that square.

Q: Square.

A: Thousands of people, and we didn't let Russians take the nuns out. My brother was there, I wasn't.

Q: So, they were going to – they were going to –

A: To take that orphanage somewhere, all children from the nuns. I don't know exactly what, but I know that we went. There's another thing. The – the first – first half year of the war, we were sent to different classes, mixed together. People were saying – once my mother said, be very careful what you say, because somebody said that you said, when Polish ef – officers will come from **Lithuania**, we'll have free **Poland** again. That was be for me, 12 year old, would be so stupid. But somebody had to say something about me, and because that – they said that stupid thing. And my mu – somebody warned my mother, my mother say, be very careful

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

what you are saying. On the other hand, this first half a year again, we had in **Poland**, a cross in front of the class. We usually pray just before the classes and after the school end. And Russians told to take the crosses out. No crosses in school. So in my brother's school, they had the – not – not al-always one, but one of them would bring a cross every day, put it there, take it down afterwards. But during the classes, there was cross there. In my s – and in my school – and that was already mix, because I went to seventh grade from six, that was different school, and because of that, I knew half of half – they were specially mixed, so you will never know. And once, we were finishing the class where would – we would say the prayer. And we were saying the prayer even when there was a – I don't know whether we had a cross, or there was no cross, but we were praying into that direction. Oh, of course, in every class there was **Stalin** and somebody else there.

Q: You mean the picture.

A: Picture, yes.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So us – one of the girls, and that's already in that mixed school, say, are you going to pray to the **Stalin**? And without anything we turn around, and then after that, every day when we – was a prayer, we would stand up, turn around, so back to

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

this – to **Stalin**. So, that's the atmosphere. But afterwards we were always afraid, afraid, afraid.

Q: But I'd like to ask this. You mentioned of a story of, you know, where a Russian officer went – or Soviet officer went to a pharmacy. Did you see soldiers in the streets? Did you see any that you had any contact with?

A: They was – they were marching, the whole battalion or something, I don't know, and they were – were always singing. They sing beautifully, even in the army, they sing not one voice, but two voices.

Q: In harmony, yeah, mm-hm.

A: Like a choir. And I liked it, and I was so ashamed that I liked it. I was really ashamed that I would.

Q: Yeah.

A: But, 12 year old –

Q: Yeah.

A: – has no –

Q: And what was the behavior of the soldiers?

A: Once my mother – there was one man standing. She – she said, turn around and don-don't look there. He was masturbating on the street.

Q: I see.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And looking at my mother. Since she said so, I – I didn't know what it was.

Later on, when I was grown up, I learned. I remember it. People, as people, were pretty nice. Nobody complain about them. There were no – no excesses. But they do what they were told to do the – and that one told us to get out of th – our house to somewhere else, because even **Stalin** doesn't live so luxurious we did.

Q: And so, when did that happen? Did that happen soon after they came in?

A: They have – they happen – that happened '39, or was it beginning of '40? I don't know, but definitely I was in **Bialystok** less than a year.

Q: Okay.

A: So that was beginning of the year.

Q: So tell me –

A: But let me – let me say, because I have to speak about my father, because that's – that was –

Q: That was my next question. Okay, tell.

A: My father was going dow – back, back, back, and finally he retreated to

Lithuania.

Q: Okay.

A: And **Lithuania** was free at that time, so he was in the officers of – whatever it called, but camp for the officers.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Okay.

A: He was going to sit there for the whole rest of the war, because **Lithuania** was not in war. And then the Russians came to help the **Lithuanians**. And I don't know what month was that, February or March?

Q: Oh, when they came to – that was pretty early on –

A: But it was –

Q: There – the first battal – the first bases were in October, November of 40, of –

A: No, no, no.

Q: Oh, no no –

A: The very beginning it wasn't.

Q: No, no, no, that was the **[indecipherable]**

A: Because of that, there was a camp which was supposed to be in neutral country.

Lithuania was neutral country. It was –

Q: In July – in July 1940 they voted to – to join the **Soviet Union**.

A: Yes, but the Russians came earlier.

Q: Oh yes, they did. In the fi – the – the –

A: I think February or March.

Q: Okay, well –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: But anyway, my brother already went and already was arrested, which we didn't know. And the Russians then came to the camp, and the camp was not big enough, so my father knew the names of other people, as well. And the – they said, you can go back to your families, we'll give you permi – permit to work, and everything will be fine. So my – my father, first of all, he was jokingly said that he will – marry – married my mother because he wanted to have children. So of course he wanted to go back to children.

Q: Okay.

A: And he was the first one to sign that he is going to. And he told me that. He make a bid – big fuss when the first transport went out and he wasn't on that first. He was in the second transport, and since he knew the name, there was a third transport. First and third went to **Katyn**, you know what **Katyn** is.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: When they murdered the –

Q: Polish officers.

A: – Polish officers. But my mother – my father was in the second. They allowed him back to pol – to **Bialystok**. Didn't al – let him work, didn't do anything. And there was talk, people knew the – who – there were first policemen, or somebody

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

else send to **Siberia** and something like that. And somebody warned – I have to come back wa-was about the fear. That we were – will be the next in, our family.

Q: I see, to be deported, mm-hm.

A: Deported. And my parents packed everything what could be necessary. And then the gossip or true, came that young girls were taken to the house of prostitution for soldiers. So my parents decided no, we're not going to, we – we're going to try to get to **Warsaw**.

Q: So, get out of the Russian occupied area?

A: Yes, to German occupied area.

Q: Mm-hm. I see.

A: And at that time they were still friends, German and Russians. We – we went – the last night I even slept at my neighbors, because they were told that in case my parents will be arrested that night, to send me and I will be going with that part, through the – they were not.

Q: You mean, if they would have been arrested to be deported?

A: Yes.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But I want to come back also, because I said fear, fear, fear –

Q: That's right.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: – and then before that they show how young children, they were opposing it.

Q: Yes.

A: But once there was a man whose wi – a teacher –

Q: Okay.

A: – who was – his wife was pregnant. He was arrested, and for some reason [indecipherable] let – let go. From that time on, all the teachers, if their – if he would come close by, they would start to speak about weather, and things like that. Because everybody knew that if he was let out, it was because of pregnant wife, and somebo – the threat him so, not to speak in front of him, and –

Q: So, he could be an informer? In other words, he was let go –

A: He most likely was promised to be an informer and because of that, nobody blamed him, only everybody was very careful, because we did expect that he was an informer. And that was the fear all the time, fear who will say what, and what next. So, we – we were trying to cross the border. I had a fever at that – I – I was – some common thing which people right now are immunized against it.

Q: Flu?

A: No, no, no. One of the – what's it used to be called children's illness. Everybody pass it.

Q: Measles? Mumps?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: No, mumps I had later. Whooping cough, I think.

Q: Oh, whooping cough.

A: But anyway, I had something like that, and with that, first we went by train a little bit, then through – people used to have wa – wagon with horse drawn, with – it took us three or four days to come to the middle, between **Białystok** and the **Warsaw**.

Q: And there was only like 60 kilometers.

A: Yes, but you cannot go straight, you cannot dri-drive.

Q: Yeah.

A: No way. So we were trying, and we were caught. Those people who were leading us, never were caught before that, and that was 13th time. All the men, 16 years and older were arrested and sent to prison. My father was –

Q: Who caught you – who caught you, was it the Soviets who caught you, or –

A: Soviets.

Q: Okay. So y – it was not allowed to leave a zone of occupation.

A: Of course not. [indecipherable]

Q: Well, if they were friends, one would think that they – you could – you'd have permeable borders.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: No, it usually, people, if they cross the border and they were caught, they were saying, if they came – coming from **Warsaw**, they would say, we're coming from **Bialystok**. And because of that, they would be sent through. But this time they were looking for a spy, or somebody. And because of that, all the – our group was maybe 40, maybe 50 people. One child was always given something to sleep, and they –

Q: So they wouldn't cry.

A: And they came – and carried. So –

Q: And so you were – you went by horse-drawn carts –

A: Yes.

Q: – on the roads, but 40 people in a way that –

A: No, we met only in the gathering last – last place. Everybody went by himself.

Q: Okay.

A: But it was my parents knew about that, and I had that fever, and so I-I didn't even remember quite a lot.

Q: Okay.

A: And so women and children were taken to prison, which was dungeon where the pigs used to live. No light, nothing, for three days. And after three days, it was the third of May. The door opened, and we could see the light, and they said, come out,

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

come out. They led us all – we were close to the border, but not at the border, and I don't remember whether Russian or Germans helped us through the barbed wire.

Q: Really?

A: Because they wanted to get rid of us. So after that we – we joined in – we went to – my mother and I went to my – my father's sister in **Pruszków**, which is close to **Warsaw**.

Q: And what was going on with your father then? He was arrested –

A: He was arrested, he was in – in prison. Now, they were friends, all the time. My m – my father was in jail in bresh – you call it **Brezlitofsk**(ph).

Q: Mm-hm, **Brezlitofsk**(ph), mm-hm.

A: That was **twierdza** – some – somewhere where – it used to be somewhere, a big building which could be defending something else, or –

Q: A fortress?

A: **Twierdza**, yes, fortress.

Q: A fortress, a fortress.

A: But that was a – a prison. My father was going to be sent to **Siberia**, and then somebody came and just to be nasty, I don't know who – who he was, and say, good morning, fa – Mr. Officer. They did not know that my father was in the army

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

ever. So my father was interrogated again. And we saw him after the interrogation, a few months, and my mother said that he still had black marks.

Q: Black and blue marks?

A: Black and blue. And he was once saw a woman – pregnant woman being interrogated, and she was kicked in her stomach, and her blood came through the mouth. So that was the kind of interrogation. But anyway, finally his – they were asking him, where did you put the armament and – and how much and where? And he didn't, so he was saying no, no, no, and finally it was too much for him, after a week or two or three, and he said, I'll be talking. That my father told me. And I cannot say exactly what it was, but he – he said, yes, I am put in – there – there is a national park close there. In the national park I hid a hundred guns. And the man was still writing. Two hundred machine guns. He was writing. Four hundred cannons. He was writing. And something like that. Finally he said, and three planes. Then that man beat him once more, and knew that he wouldn't be able to get anything from him because he doesn't know.

Q: Yeah.

A: So the next day he was going to be sent to **Siberia**. That day, luckily – it was in '41, and the war started. Germans attacked in –

Q: June '41. Yeah, it was June 22nd, I believe, or 21st, 1941.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes. My – my father was in jail from the third of May to that day.

Q: So, the th-third of May of 1940?

A: Yes.

Q: So he was in jail over a year?

A: Yes.

Q: Until ni – oh, my goodness. In **Brest-Litovsk**.

A: And that day – yes. And in **Poland** Jewish boys are not circumcised.

Q: Truly?

A: Sorry, Jewish boys are circumcised –

Q: Yes.

A: – but the others boys are not.

Q: Okay.

A: I think that in **America** they are, if you want to. But in **Poland** you can see which boy is Jewish and which not.

Q: Okay.

A: So, when Germans got the **cytil(ph)** –

Q: The fortress.

A: Fort – fortress, they killed all the Jewish people, at least all the Jewish men. My father told me. And the rest, they had to dig the trenches. For three days they

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

weren't given any food at all, and in prison they were pretty hungry already. And then, after three days, they were let go. And good heart almost killed my father, because he was working somewhere, and the woman who was making butter, saw that he was from the prison, and gave him that big lump of butter, which she just made. And after three days of not eating and one year of pri – being hungry, he ate all that, and was very, very sick. Then he went to **Bialystok**, to where we used to be. And he was waiting that maybe my brother – he learn in prison that my brother was arrested, we – we thought that he was already in **France**. And so he wa-waited for about a month, and then come to us. And then he had that – that he could show that bla –

Q: Black and blue.

A: – black and blue.

Q: So he was able to get – okay, by that point –

A: By – by then, Germans were in **Bialystok** as well.

Q: Stock – yeah, yeah.

A: – because they moved forward. As –

Q: So you hadn't seen – excuse me – you hadn't seen your father from the time you tried to cross into what was German controlled territory, and he was arrested, and

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

that was in May 1940, until well over a year and maybe in the summer, sometime 1941, is when you see him again.

A: But my mother, when the war started – war between German and Russian, didn't want us to – to be separated. She found a job as a teacher in the country south of **Warsaw**, and I was staying with my aunt and traveling. That was also something I was doing already 13, but traveling every day to school, which was illegal. It was called – because after six years, it was only trade school. So my school was called **zabawkarska**, something prepared to make toys. So we had, I think nine hours of paint – drawing, and six hours of making something a week, a ye – a week, plus the normal courses. But of course the normal books were kept at home only. Teacher was saying and we were learning that way. But – and I was traveling from **Pruszków** to **Warsaw** every day, and then I – I know that I had to have a photograph for my license, or some – no –

Q: **I.D.**

A: I – **I.D.** And so if you are 13 and never did that, to go to do it, it was something, yeah.

Q: It was probably very frightening.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes, I know that it was. But when the war started, with the Germans attacked **Russia**, then my mother sa – came and take me to the country. For two years, I was learning from books, and –

Q: Can you hold – ho – excuse me.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: I want – hold that thought. Can we cut for a second **[break]** Okay, so as I explained, I'd like to find out, before I forget, the sequence of events for your brother. The last I understood is that he's a scout, helping people when there are bombardments in **Bialystok**, and bringing a man to – to a hospital, and someone criticized him for that. And then he's with the Boy Scouts, and they retreat – he was a scout, and they – they retreat and come back.

A: Let me say one thing, because we'll – we'll show the – what kind of upbringing it was. My brother started to smoke, and scouts were not supposed to smoke. So he was going in the fall, say I'm – I cannot be a scout any more. And my mother was in scouting, sh-she – she was smoking, she could not be the normal only was helping with camps and so on. But she was very involved as well. But my brother was going to say, I'm not going to be a scout because I cannot stop.

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And then the war started, so he, as a scout, went to help in that hospital, because he knew that's more important than that, but he was going not to be involved. But he was very involved in scouting. Then here, when the – there was appeal to young men, and see, he was 16 only. He went because he wanted to join the army.

Q: Yeah.

A: Then he came back, and he was in school a little bit – well, he was – I don't know, he was taking part in the – putting the cross on the wall. But I don't know whether it was **[indecipherable]** or there were others, it could be. He told me also, that's the first half o-of the – that's '39, that he joined some underground army, and a 16 telling her – his 12 year old sister, don't tell anybody, but I'm in that. And if they will tell me to shoot somebody, I'm going to shoot to kill. A 16 year old.

Q: It's frightening.

A: It's hard thing.

Q: Yeah.

A: But he – I knew that he was already in something. But then the Polish army was formed in **France**, and through **Romania** you could get there. He was pretty tall. He was 5'10" when he grew up. But at that time he was pretty tall, straight, athletic. And somebody stupid enough, who was going to take him through the border, told him to wait at the railway station. He was arrested there.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Excuse me, before we get there – so did –

A: [indecipherable] south of **Poland**.

Q: Yeah. Di-Did your mother know that he was going to be going? Did he tell her,
or was this all –

A: Yes, yes –

Q: Okay.

A: – it was arranged. That's why he went after Christmas, so we will have
Christmas together.

Q: So, it was all arranged, okay.

A: But he never met my father, because my father came, I think February or March,
home.

Q: From – from **Lithuania**?

A: Yes.

Q: Yes. So, your brother i – makes his way down to southern **Poland** to get into
Romania –

A: And –

Q: – and is – and is told to wait at this railway station.

A: Yes. And he was arrested there.

Q: By whom?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: By Russians.

Q: Okay.

A: And –

Q: Okay. So he's arrested by the Soviets then.

A: Yes.

Q: And what do they do to him?

A: He was in prison in **Stanislav** – **Stanislavov**. That's also a city south of **Tarnopol**. Is – right now is **Ukraine**.

Q: **Ukraine**, okay.

A: From then he was sent to **Siberia**. I know what's happened from him from 13 letters, and I come to the letters later.

Q: Okay.

A: And that's the only thing what I know. I don't know even where he was in **Siberia**. When the – there was a park between **Poland** and **Russia**. That was before **Katyn**, so at **Katyn** there, they started ignore us. But they allowed people to go south and form an army, **Anders' Army**, you heard that.

Q: So this was after – after the Germans attacked the **Soviet Union**, there were many Polish people who were – had been sent to **Siberia**, who were then released, in order that they could go back and fight the Germans.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes.

Q: And was he released under those kinds of conditions?

A: Yes, but I don't know much about it.

Q: I see.

A: But he went down – apparently that – that was thousands of miles, many people just walked , or – I – how he did, I have no idea. But there was a first transport to be sent to **England**, those people who wanted to join Marines and air force.

Q: Okay.

A: And he wanted to join Marines. But since they were on the ship for a long, long time, I think they had to go around **Africa**. A friend told him, join the air force. So he wanted to join the air force, but since he – he was hungry for long, long time, his eyesight was not very good, so he could not be a pilot, only the navigator. So he was a navigator, he was trained in **Canada**, and then –

Q: Let's break a bit, excuse me. **[break]** Okay, so –

A: He flew in **[indecipherable]** was na-navigator, 50 – 50 times. That's it – one tour. Later they changed to a hundred or 150, I think. But at that time it was beginning, it was only 50. So he flew 50 over **Germany**.

Q: Fifty missions over **Germany**?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Fifty missions over **Germany**. And he was only slightly injured once, that's what he said. Afterwards, he was sent to a school for officers, and that's usually in Polish army it's only when you have the high school finished, and he had only 10 – 10 grades, but he was sent that. And the war ended in **Europe** in May, I believe. In – since he was not in fighting army at that time, fi – fighting air force, air force was under the British command.

Q: **RAF**.

A: **RAF**. He was sent in a different – he was flying the mission in **Mosquito**. This, I think – believe two – two people plane. And he was flying in **Halifax** which is four people. They were flying to **Athens**, and he sent me the letter that he is flying for the first time to **Athens**. That was when he was coming back on 27 on July, same year. Most likely, lightning strike it, close to **Marseilles**, and they all died. The youngest one was 19. Survived the war, and –

Q: So he died after –

A: After the war.

Q: – the war. Did you ever see him then, again –

A: No.

Q: – from the time he had –

A: No.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: – tried to cross into **Romania**.

A: No, no. It was just '39. I always believed that he's alive. My parents thought that he died. Well, during – well, I have to come back to that. Maybe right now. When I was in – and my mother were in the prison of war camp, after the insurrection, and there was a list of people sent [indecipherable] on the Polish – part of Polish army [indecipherable] get freedom to our camp.

Q: Liberate.

A: Liberated.

Q: Okay.

A: And so the list of Polish women, it was close to 2,000, was sent to **England** and my father was – my brother was looking through it whether my mother was there, and he was surprised to find me. So we star – started to exchange letters, and he sent me 13 letters. So all I know about him is from those letters.

Q: You have those letters still?

A: Yes.

Q: Yeah. They must be very precious for you.

A: He wanted me and my mother to come to **England**, so he was trying – nothing happened, he wrote that he bought some stockings for me, and that was very

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

difficult at that – just after war. He wrote a letter to the queen, and in a week he get an answer from the secretary. So le – let's hope that everybody will work like that.

Q: Yeah.

A: And of course the letter was, I'm sorry, I cannot do anything about it. I – I hope that it will – so he never managed to get us to **England**. A-After he died, is the man who was in **Tarnopol** that told my father that – oh, by then, my – my father was in **Murnau**, that was camp for officers. He came to us. Everybody was going like that. **Autostop** through the ger – we – we traveled through **Germany**, everywhere –

Q: Yeah.

A: – even before that.

Q: Hitchhiking.

A: Hitchhiking, yes.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I – when – when – well, went to where people used to wear **[indecipherable]** to prepare – what's the name of that? **Amer-amer** – **Oberammergau**.

Q: Yeah, **Oberammergau**.

A: So, at that time nobody had birds.

Q: Passion play

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: [indecipherable] to prepare. So I went there. But anyway, so my father came to us, and at that time the man who was in **Tarnopol**, he was in **Scotland** with his wife and child, and he learn about my brother that – and came and tell us. So, they saw each other during the – the war, but my brother didn't like the girl, so – so – so anyway –

Q: What a story.

A: – so we decided it's not worthwhile staying, let's go to **Italy**. And my father was still allowed to join the army there, because it was after the war. My – I was assigned to the school where their school didn't finish, and my mother was helping with that school, not as a teacher. She didn't had the right – it was a Polish school.

Q: We're gon – we're going to break right now –

A: Mm-hm.

Q: – and come back to this second part of our interview, after lunch. Okay? But thank you –

End of File One

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Beginning File Two

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's** interview with Mrs. **Barbara** –

A: **Syska**.

Q: – **Syska**, on October 22nd 2014. Mrs. **Syska**, before the break, we were talking about – we were talking about many things, but we ended up with your brother's story, and how it was that you last saw him, early on in the war, even before the Nazi attack on the **Soviet Union**, when he tries to go to **Romania**. He's caught, he's then brought – he's then deported to **Siberia**, eventually released, and ends up with the Polish forces under the British command, and flies over 50 missions to **Germany** –

A: Yes.

Q: – to die in a tragic plane crash over **Marseilles**, just about a month or two after the war ends.

A: Yes.

Q: Let's go back now – you want to say something?

A: Sorry I made the mistake, he's buried in mar – **Marseilles**, but it was close to line – **Lyon**.

Q: It was close to **Lyon**?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. Have you visited his grave?

A: Yes, I visited, and two years ago, French people put a plaque in memorial for he – four of them, and one flier who flew in '39 and '40, Polish flier who joined the French forces. And it was close to **Lyon** where th-th-the crash was. It was an old cemetery where they were mem – monument for – to remember French people who died in the first World War, and they put the plaque there, and they invited everybody, but only I and one of my son came, because they couldn't find any others.

Q: Any other people from the other famil – from the others who died?

A: Yes.

Q: Yeah.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Let's go back now to what happened with yourself, your mother and your father. You've talked to us that he came back after the – from the second transport of Polish officers out of **Lithuania**, with the first and the third ending up in **Katyn**. And he ends up back in **Poland**. Your mother is teaching in – what was the town's name, **Pruszków**? Pr –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: N-No, no, no, **Pruszków** is where my aunt was, and where I lived. She was in **Kozietul**, beyond **Gruyetz(ph)**, which is south of **France**, in a big village. There were two – 2,000 people living there, it's one of the biggest villages.

Q: South of **Warsaw**?

A: South of **Warsaw**.

Q: Okay.

A: And so when the Germans attacked Russians, forget that they friends.

Q: That was a –

A: They forget –

Q: That was June 21st, yes.

A: Then she took me back, and I was learning from the books on there. A-And that taught me a lot. Something was usually – people, when they're at universities, learn how to study. I learned there. I lar – lar – learned to like learning.

Q: Really?

A: Yes.

Q: Under such circumstances – explain for us, explain to people why were these schools illegal?

A: Because ev – Germans said everything illegal after the sixth grade. Why? The low people like Polish people shouldn't learn any more. So after I came again to

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Warsaw, when my father brought me, it was the trade school. Of course, it was still illegal, we had books at home. And when we came to – there was advertising was one class. So we were talking, not looking at the teacher as well, because something for – for the schoolwork. But, for instance, mathematics. We had books at home. We had do this and that and that on the page.

Q: So you had homework.

A: And then we would come – yes, under German occ-occupation then. And the teacher would ask who had trouble with school. And somebody would say, I cannot do the third one. So come to the blackboard and we'll explain. That was the kind of le – teaching usually when you're in school you do not say that you cannot do something. There it was the opposite. And at that school – I should really come late – when I was in – in the country with my mother, my only problem, she didn't know Latin, and in Polish school you have to have Latin. So I had trouble with Latin later on when I was in proper school. But it was cold, it was a very old building, and it was wet. So my mother – it was on the second floor, we lived on second – that was where the teacher lived. And on the first floor my – my mother would go and teach kids, and I was in bed with my coat, and on the walls during the winter, there was frost.

Q: So you – on the inside of the walls of the building –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: It was still –

Q: – it was frosty.

A: Yes, we had only one out of – we had four rooms, I think, or two rooms. There was one stove, but we didn't had –

Q: Have heat.

A: [indecipherable]. And there was a small rail close by. So I – my mother and would go and that train was using coal, so from time to time something would fall, so we were looking for granules of coal. And yes, it was cold. But my father said no, you – you cannot be there, you have to go to school. How he found the school, through whom that they would trust me that they would be there, because of course, everybody could always say something. So my moth – my father –

Q: I'm sorry, I need to interrupt a little bit, just to clarify. Your mother is in this village outside of **Warsaw** and she's teaching legally, because the children are younger than sixth grade.

A: Yes.

Q: So she's earning a salary by doing it, and doesn't have to worry about this.

A: Except that the salary was roughly the same salary as before the war, and the prices went up.

Q: Of course.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Luckily, custom in the village is to bring two eggs, to bring an apple, to bring something. And we had a little plot of land where we could grow something.

Q: Okay.

A: Not too much, but something, as well.

Q: So when your father comes back from having been released from prison –

A: Yes.

Q: – in about the summer of 1941, does he find you and your mother in this village?

A: Yes, because he had sister in pr – **Pruszków**, which is close to **Warsaw**, and his parents in **Warsaw** itself.

Q: I see.

A: Sorry, not parents, my grandfather died in '39, where Germans was fighting about **Warsaw**. And my grandmother was very, very frightened of everything, and everybody thought that if you go to the cellar it will be safer, and everybody was going to the cellar, and somebody pushed my grandfather – by – by chance. He fell, and was unconscious til – til the very end of the – of his life. And that was soon after Germans took **Warsaw**. But my mo – my grandmother was very, very frightened, so she took him to – to his bedroom, second or third floor, I don't remember, instead of going to the cellar where –

Q: Everybody else was, yeah.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And she put, not to hear so much noise, she put her – what's – what do you call?

Something what you cover yourself in bed?

Q: Blankets, duvets?

A: Not blanket, but something fluffy.

Q: Something fluffy? A quilt?

A: Yes. She put the quilt into the –

Q: Windows?

A: – windows, so that she wouldn't hear so much, and stayed with him all that time.

Q: Oh my. And yet she –

A: She died soon after.

Q: Did she, yeah. And so your father, when he came back, he found you with your mother together –

A: Yes.

Q: – in this one – and how – did he move in with you, or did he move you to

Warsaw? What happened?

A: No, he went to **Warsaw** by himself, and joined the [indecipherable] army [speaks Polish]. That was before **Armia Kryova**. **Armia Kryova** is home army.

[speaks Polish] – when I joined, it was **Armia Kryova**. And after a time, it was beginning of 1943, he took me to **Warsaw**. And on the very beginning I had to have

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

some papers, safe papers, because without the papers anybody could be sent to **Germany** straight away. So I was working to Red Cross. I was in archives, so I learned how to put it. Everything was what finished, I was supposed to put in the sides.

Q: Okay.

A: I didn't know at that time, but the daughter of my boss, she was in **Armia Kryova**, so maybe that's where I – my father found the work for me. And another thing he said, that time there came a – through Red Cross, a letter, which I remember by heart. I'm okay. I only lack news about you. In Polish it was. And so I hope that – that came before that, about two or three months earlier. So –

Q: Who was it from?

A: From my brother. Through Red Cross you can get the message like that, it's open message. And it came to my aunt, because he knew – he didn't know that we were in **Warsaw** at that time. He didn't know anything about us. We didn't know – but th – for the first time we learned that he is alive. I always believed, but my parents thought that he didn't – that he died.

Q: They didn't know that he had been arrested. They didn't know that he –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: He learn – my father learn about him being arrested when he was in prison.

Somebody apparently was transferred from one prison to another. So my father learned there. Because we thought the he went to **France** and maybe he died there –

Q: I see.

A: – fighting with the Polish army.

Q: Yeah.

A: But instead my father learn, and because of that, after he was released finally from –

Q: **Siberia.**

A: – prison, he went and waited in **Bialystok** –

Q: Your father.

A: – because he thought that maybe my brother will also come. But my brother was arrested half a year earlier. Almost half a year. So, he was already sent out to prison.

Q: So your mother, did she stay the entire war in this village, teaching in that school?

A: Up to the first days of insurrection in **Warsaw**.

Q: Okay.

A: In my – bef – well, first of all, my father – I thought that – about the father, you always think that he's old. In '43, he was 45.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Oh, that's young.

A: And he didn't know what his only son did, but he took his daughter, me, into the army. So I joined the a – joined the army, I – my solemn swearing was on the fifth of August, but much before that, I was already the messenger.

Q: So you were in **Armia Kryova**.

A: **Armia Kryova**.

Q: And your s – and your swearing in was fifth of August, 1943?

A: Yes, but I was much before that –

Q: Yeah.

A: – because during the summer I was working in those ar – archives, and I was definitely at that time already in the **Armia Kryova**.

Q: So that meant you were 15 years old, 16 years old, something –

A: Sixteen.

Q: Sixteen.

A: Sixteen.

Q: Sixteen.

A: And so what I was doing, I don't remember. First of all, my father was at the command of the **[Polish]**. Middle force, it was divided into, I think four pieces. And he was in the second on in the comman – command of the second one.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Uh-huh. The second sort of area.

A: And he was not the commander, he was in the command. He – one of his things was – jobs was taking care of the five messengers.

Q: Okay.

A: In between I was.

Q: And you were one of the five?

A: Wa – one of the five. And the whole structure, wherever it was possible, was the fifth, because you expect that if somebody will be arrested a day or two, he may survive the tre –

Q: Torture?

A: Torture. But you cannot count for always. And because of that, if it's only five people who know each other, then you can told this for disappear, because somebody is already there. And that way it was safer.

Q: So, did any of the five that you were part of a group, did any of them get arrested by the Germans?

A: No.

Q: Okay.

A: But one died, I have to tell you, because well –

Q: Please do.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: – if – instead of me. But anyway, just before the commander of that second [indecipherable], was – had tuberculosis. In a very bad shape, and he had to be in hospital. And of course, if somebody will say anything, so in hospital you cannot run away from it. So, he didn't have children – he survived the insurrection. Only his wife, his second-in-command and I knew where he was. So if something were – messages to him were going through me. Because if, for instance, my father did not know in hos – which hospital, nothing. So he was safe. He went out of the hospital, I think about a month before insurrection. And my biggest experience during the insurrection was, I was just trying to find out what – we know the date, but what day of the week it was. It was – insurrection started Tuesday. And we have in the yard of the house where was the command, we have the mass for soldiers. So it was not the first day. Is on a Sunday then. And after that he came to me and ask me, how do you feel in free **Poland**? And I looked at them, I remember that I did not know what to say, and I don't remember wha – after that I say. But finally I realize, this little piece of land is free **Poland**. And for me the whole insurrection was because of that, I was in free **Poland**. People were dying around me, I could die as well, but the – the important thing is, we are already in free **Poland**. That little piece is ours. And that changed my whole look at the – peoples say trad – tragedy, or something

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

like that. To me it was something, fight in free **Poland**. And that's what – what he said.

Q: Who was this person who said that?

A: He – he was the commander of the second –

Q: Ah, the one who had been in the hospital?

A: Yes, that's one.

Q: And so his –

A: And under him there were 2,000 people prepared. I learn later, from another – in his command there were a man who was taking care of something, as – I don't – don't know what's the in command, in – in – in military, I don't know. But he told me that there were two – 2,000 people in that place.

Q: Do you remember his name, the commander?

A: His sa – surname was **Litvin**(ph). Oh, I'll tell you later.

Q: Okay.

A: I – I know his name. And it happened that after the war he was in **Gdansk** and my – one of my aunts was there, and they met. So **[indecipherable]** **Abramovicz**(ph).

Q: **Abramovicz**(ph).

A: **Abramovicz** was first name – don't remember.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Okay.

A: **Litvin**(ph).

Q: So his last name was **Abramovicz**(ph)? His surname was **Abramovicz**(ph)?

A: **Abramovicz**(ph) and **Litvin**(ph) is his –

Q: A pseudonym.

A: – pseudonym.

Q: Yeah. Actually, it sounds like a Jewish name.

A: I don't think he was Jewish, no.

Q: No? I heard that quite a few people were a part of the insurrection, the **Warsaw** uprising, who were of Jewish background.

A: Definitely yes. And I'll have to tell you all about my little hero.

Q: Okay, tell –

A: Anyway –

Q: Tell me.

A: – I lived through the insurrection in that part of **Poland**, in **Warsaw**.

Q: **Warsaw**.

A: We – we never had to go through the nin – sewers.

Q: Mm-hm.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: So it was the safest. But anyway, one day somebody was silly enough to say that all people who went from old city, where the fighting was the worst, should sign that they – they knew. And they were gathering around the church.

Q: They should sign something?

A: Yes. They should be who survived and so on.

Q: I see.

A: And Germans were flying over that, and people were coming to that. And we were supposed to work there, our five. And the top of our five was a chemist, and she came after her shift, she came for me, and I was asleep. And she said, well, she's so fast asleep, I'll go back. And she died there.

Q: She was bombed?

A: They were bombed. Of course, when everybody is gathering, it's worthwhile.

[indecipherable]

Q: So do you think was done on purpose?

A: German did it on purpose.

Q: Yeah, yeah, but the – the –

A: No, no, that was a silly comment.

Q: I see.

A: People are always silly.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Unfortunately.

A: Once I remember I was going somewhere. There was a lot of blood on – and that was terrible, I never seen. There was somebody – we had **[indecipherable]** something we – when you, every day you say – say apple, and you have to answer pear –

Q: Oh, you had a password.

A: Passwords.

Q: Okay.

A: And somebody who came from old city, where the fighting was the worst, when they came through the sewers, which were – not everybody survived. And he thought, well, here is everything, you walk like that. And somebody ask him at night, what it is the –

Q: The password.

A: Password. And he didn't say. And the – the one who was asking was saying stop and so on, and he didn't stop because it's a safe way. And he was killed by that. But, it was right, they never knew what it. So I was in the insurrection up to the very end. And when Polish people managed to get the – Germans called us bandits, but **[indecipherable]** they really had trouble with us. We were prepared for, I think

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

three days of fighting and three days of ammunition. I have to back then, year earlier, to Holocaust as well.

Q: I want to talk about that.

A: Yes –

Q: I want to talk about the ghetto.

A: – definitely. But here I – I want to go to – to my little hero.

Q: Okay, come –

A: We were sent to **Sandbostel**, my mother and I, and my father as well. Then, the officers –

Q: What is **Zen Boston**, what is that?

A: The name in **Germany**.

Q: And what was it?

A: The camp for – soldiers camp.

Q: So you're talking about prisoner camp.

A: Prisoner camp.

Q: So you've jumped between – you know, you had three days of ammunition left?

A: Well –

Q: And then what happened?

A: The insurrection was 63 days.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Yes.

A: And at the end of that, Germans wanted to get rid of us, so they said, we are not bandits, we're soldiers. And from that on, Germans treated us properly, definitely properly, because we were in **Sandbostel**, somewhere and somewhere else. And my father, from that camp went to **Murnau**, where is only for officers –

Q: Okay.

A: – also. And I don't remember, but I think it was before the Christmas that we were sent to **Oberlangen**. **Oberlangen** is close to border of **Holland**, with empty space all around us. And they sent one after another, they sent women from other prisoners of war, which was definitely very safer for us. My father said that in **Sandbostel** they were – Polish men were prepared that if we will be freed, they will try to go at any place to our camp, our –

Q: Area.

A: – area, because there are men who are four or five years without women. So Germans took all the women. Before that they ask who wants to work in th – in the country, or something. I think it was volunteer everywhere, that m-maybe there was pressure on women, but definitely not pressure on the – physical pressure. No, not physical pressure, psychological pressure. Because a lot of women from the prisoner of camp went to work somewhere. But we went, just sent to that one camp.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: I want to interrupt you just for a second, just so that we have the chronology right. The uprising starts on August 1st, 1944, correct?

A: Yes.

Q: It lasts for 63 days, which means that by early October it has been quashed, at which point you're taken prisoner –

A: Yes.

Q: – and your mother is taken prisoner, and your father is taken prisoner.

A: Yes.

Q: Were you together at the time, all three of you, or were you separated?

A: For a day or two we were together. We were marched, I think about 20 kilometers to **Ożarów**, and then in a very big camp, and then men was separated from women.

Q: And then you were –

A: But we were taken as ordinary soldiers, already.

Q: And so then you were put on cattle cars, is that right, on trains to go to

Sandbostel?

A: Oh yes, yes.

Q: Okay.

A: That's not comfortable, but is nothing.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: So, when you get to **Sandbostel**, you are there for how long?

A: Most likely before Christmas, but I'm not sure whether it before or after Christmas. Then we were taken to **Oberlangen**, which was an empty space –

Q: Yes.

A: – with only us.

Q: Only women.

A: Only women, from a different camp. I was in the second barrack.

Q: And your – and this was still done by the Germans together, and this was done – did you know why they did this? What was the reasoning?

A: Why they took all the women together?

Q: And – yeah, and put them together?

A: I'm thinking because they thought that it was safer. They was done properly.

Q: I see.

A: And we were even received three – three times I think, a parcel from Red Cross.

On-Only three, usually it would be more, food or something. Once they sent hygienic things for women, and I learned then everybo – well, we had the little hospital there, for us, and so it was useful. But, more than half of women did not have the usual period, because of the –

Q: Stress.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Not only stress, hunger.

Q: Oh.

A: We were given food, but Germans didn't have much of that. We had to work in the kitchen for ourselves, so that's all again – according to a **Geneva Convention**.

Q: Okay.

A: I cannot say that – somebody once said that it was a special camp or something. It was the proper camp, they treated us properly. We had to go out to bring the potatoes, but I had unusual smell, and they ask me very often, what is in this soup? And I would say that the soup is with salt, or without. Sometimes they didn't have salt. I cannot say more salty or less, but salt, or without salt, I could smell it at that time. So they always ask me, I never made the mistake. So you see –

Q: That's amazing.

A: – it was so little –

Q: Yeah.

A: – that – that – well, we were doing everything. We could do during the day whatever we wanted to. The restroom were outside, of course, not inside. And in one empty hut there was water broken, and even the winter there, it was flowing there, so we would go there, or something like that.

Q: So the ice was broken, so there was some water.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: No, it was broken, ne-never repaired.

Q: Oh, you mean the fau –

A: But it was an empty one. So we were – walked around, there were ma-maybe 10 huts, and only four or five were occupied. Altogether we were close to 2,000, I believe. So –

Q: So how large was a hut? How many people fit into one hut?

A: About 200. And it was three – well, three level of –

Q: Well, they were huts, rather than buildings?

A: Of course, because – and we could wash at the end of the – but to the restroom, we would have to go outside.

Q: I see. I see.

A: But three levels, and of course there were wood, and shins – wood planks, and in the middle of it, there was a stove. And of course, from time to time we took one plank. And so sometimes it was difficult to sleep, no, not to fall down, because on that we had **shen-nikeetsa**(ph), big bag with straw inside.

Q: Mm-hm. Okay.

A: So – but – and how did I got the – it was close to Dutch border, I had wooden shoes, and for instance, one of my things was how to walk at night. How did I walk to that restroom there on night, so nobody would hear it? Try to walk in the wooden

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

shoes. So that was something what to occupy me, when we didn't had any pers – anything, we learn history. I started to learn – I-I started to learn English before that, but we had one book. It was [indecipherable] something like that, it – a some book on lowest level, about some murder or something like that.

Q: Like a detective novel or something?

A: M-Most likely detective novel. But the three girls who we-were learning from somebody who knew that, were on much better progress, so I was learning what is here, there, at, and things like that.

Q: So they were learning English from the detective novel?

A: Yes, because we had that detective novel. And it's still – in **Sandbostel** we used to walk up and down the corridor there. There we were in such a crowd that when we were sleeping on the floor, if we want to turn around, everybody would have to turn around. But there was a corridor on which we could not walk during the night, but during the day. And I and two other girls who were learning English – English was not popular in before the war, only French and German. Russian, we had to learn later, but wasn't popular. But anyway, so we were talking the whole Polish sentence with one word English which we knew, not to forget. But then in **Oberlangen** it was already something like that. And of course if we were bored,

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

and if somebody knew something about the subject, there was a conference about that and everybody would cool – come and so it was ordinary –

Q: Prisoner of war –

A: Prisoner of war camp.

Q: – camp.

A: And definitely Germans treated – well, sometimes we, if they couldn't count correct – nobody run away from the camp, I don't think so. But if they couldn't count everybody, because everybody would have to come –

Q: Right.

A: – but somebody sick maybe, we could stand for two or three hours. But that's the usual in camp. Opposite us, opposite this four or five huts, were the others, and there was that little hospital, which we had for – and also, during that morning and evening –

Q: **Appel?**

A: – count of us, there were boys. There were soldiers. They were – the oldest one, most likely 12 or 13, and he would say, on top, march, look that, and so on, because they have to be counted. They were soldiers. In my hut, there were two sisters –

Q: Also, prisoners of war.

A: Yes, prisoners of war.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Prisoner of war, too, okay.

A: They were, definitely.

Q: Okay.

A: And in my camp, I learned later that bo-both went to **Israel**. We knew they were Jewish, we can hear a Jewish accent. It's a some sort of accent, I don't know whether I would be able to recognize right now. Jewish people had that accent, and the best educated had the best Polish, no accent at all. You hear the much better pronunciation than others. But the just ordinary people had some sort of accent which we could recognize. They definitely had, and the older one looked like Jewish girl. So – with the f-face. Nobody ever mentioned that they were Jewish, of course, because we never knew whether they – even as prisoner of war, whether they would not be taken out. And I was talking to that little one. I think that she was about 10. Apparently, she joined the insurrection, and was a messenger, as I was. And she said her biggest trouble was that when she was sent with messages to people [**indecipherable**] somewhere in there, and she should not ask people where to go if she mistake it. And she could not read, so she was putting the messages in between her fingers to remember to whom she has to go and show, if she ge-get more.

Q: She didn't know how to read?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: No. Apparently she was in ghetto. There was no schools. Because she must have been –

Q: Very little.

A: – at least nine, but I think she was about 10. And so that's was a soldier, that's my little hero – hero.

Q: Aye aye, aye aye. So she would in – because she didn't know how to read, she would put –

A: She was putting in t – in between her fingers to remember, because she could not ask somebody on the street. She would never know who is that person. So, what she did before, for that year, I don't know. Maybe she was singing in the streetcars, or so on. There were some songs against Germans, which the – the streetcars were so crowded, and nobody would s – would [indecipherable] anything. What they did before, I did not ask. And apparently – I don't think that she would be alone with her sister. I don't know whether it was her sister, they used the same name, last name. But they were so different. One was – my little hero was blonde, and the other one was dark. Everybody liked the little one, we didn't like very much the other one. They completely different. Most likely they just lived together, maybe they were sisters, I don't know. But definitely – I don't remember where I heard, there was a list of people who – women who were in the camp. But then with the

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

age, but I couldn't find someones who would be – I didn't know exactly what their age. But le –

Q: Were there more Jewish young women who were in the ca – in this prisoner of war camp?

A: I don't know definitely. I'm sure that there were more, but this two were in the hut where I was, and I – somehow I talked with that – that little one.

Q: And do you remember her name?

A: No, I don't.

Q: Mm-hm. And the – and back in **Warsaw**, during the insurrection and even before in the resistance activities, did – did you see any people who were Jewish, who were part of these activities?

A: No, I was not close to it.

Q: I see.

A: People in **France**, for instance, people would be punished, but not us in **Poland**.

In **Poland** you must have heard about many people who kept Jewish people hiding.

And if they would find, the whole family, including small children, would be killed.

I was not close to that. Now, I lived in **Warsaw**, very close to ge – ghetto.

Q: Tell me, what did you see there?

A: Excuse me?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: When you lived close to the ghetto, what did you remember seeing?

A: That I have to tell you, the ghetto was fighting. First of all, there was a very big wall with the barb wire –

Q: Barbed wire, yeah.

A: – on top of that. I think eight feet, or something like that. On the other side I was walking very often **Żelazna**.

Q: **Żelazna**, mm-hm.

A: And so that was – and I think, but right now I don't remember, but I think that the gate, very often before the insurrection in – in the ghetto, the little children sometimes were walking here and there, maybe begging or something, and I think that Germans allowed that.

Q: To walk outside the gate, into the –

A: A little bit.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: A few steps. But I don't really know whether I remember it right. I think that it was that it was possible.

Q: Were you ever inside the ghetto?

A: No, why?

Q: Well, sometimes when you –

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: I wouldn't get out.

Q: Yeah. In the early days I have had some other people say there were streetcars that would go through, and so they could take the streetcar in. But that was in the early days of the ghetto.

A: There was small ghetto and big ghetto.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't remember next to **Żelazna** where I was walking, whether that was big or little one, right. And in between there was a street, so you could see it, and people could go from one ghetto to another over that. And that was – now, one of them, the one which was farther away from me, started to fight a few days earlier, I don't remember. And then I was walking – we were shocked [**indecipherable**] we knew that they cannot survive, nothing will – there was a Polish underground and Jewish underground, there were some connection, but we didn't have a lot of ammunition or anything, even for – for our-ourselves, so we didn't have later. So we couldn't help, we just had to look helplessly. And we were sorry, looking at – at people who were dying there. But on the very beginning, on that – that other ghetto, other part was fighting and this one not. When I was going through **Żelazna** street, and over that big wall, I could see a woman – it was April, it was warm enough, she was looking through the window down there. They were not fighting. And she was

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

maybe even smiling. She was definitely not – not horrified, not frightened. She was talking to somebody with – it couldn't – you couldn't say joy, I – I don't have the word for that. But I was horrified. How could she be so calm, when she is going to die pretty soon? Where her people are dying? It took me a few years to understand that she was proud. She knew what's waiting for her, and I s – I still can see her how it was, and she took it nicely. She was glad that – that they fighting and not – not allowing to be martyred by – by themselves. It – it give me a – an impression, because we were horrified.

Q: Well, that stayed with you.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: That image has stayed with you.

A: A few weeks or months later, my father – I used to go by streetcar next to all get – the ghetto was always closed to us, afterwards as well. There was streetcar, and he said, don't go by streetcar today, not this one, because Germans put – hung some people and so high, so you could see it from streetcar, and there were dead people there. So Germans weren't nice to us. And we learn only that during the insurrection, that there was a prison there, and some people were –

Q: Were hung? Were executed?

A: Re-Rescued then.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Ah, I see.

A: And we didn't know that there was a prison there.

Q: Which prison was it? There's a **Pawiak** prison, I remember.

A: No, no, **Pawiak**, he was somewhere else. It was after – after ghetto da – it was – after the Holocaust –

Q: I see.

A: – there was a prison there.

Q: Within the – within the area of what the ghetto had been?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: I see. Had you – you know, did people outside the ghetto know of the transports? That is that –

A: On the very beginning, we didn't. I knew quite a lot because of my father pretty high position in – in the army. So, for instance, when Russians were coming and are close to **Wilno**, people were saying we're **Armia Kryova**. At first they were treated nicely, but then they were prison there, something. So, before the insurrection, we knew already what was really expecting us, that unless we'll be strong enough to get **Warsaw** before the Russians would come in, but they stop, and they didn't want the allies to – to come in **London**, whatever, once more they –

Q: Yeah.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: – they did whatever they –

Q: Excuse me for a second, we've got people talking out here. **[break]** We're going – we're going to repeat some of the things we were talking about now, because there was some background noise. I was asking you, did you know of – of transports of Jews outside of the ghetto, while you were in **Warsaw** proper. What was happening to them?

A: Maybe later we knew. On the very beginning, nobody knows. When ghetto was starting, some couple which were Christian and Russian – and Jewish, they could choose the – at least the wife could stay outside. They usually would choose to go to ghetto together –

Q: Yeah.

A: – because nobody expected that. They expected that people will be separated, but not that. Later they knew and most likely we know. But for quite a time Jewish people didn't know that when there is a transport, the transport is to be killed.

Q: So did you know the na – did the – did the terms **Auschwitz** mean something in 1942 and 1943? Did the term **Treblinka** mean something?

A: I don't know when it's come. Before the insurrection, before the ghetto up-
prising, we already knew, but –

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: – how long before that, I don't know.

Q: Okay. Okay.

A: Because we – we knew that German want to kill all the Jewish people.

Q: So you did know that. You did know that there was – there was –

A: But not on the very beginning.

Q: Okay.

A: On the very beginning we didn't.

Q: Did you ever, or did your father ever see any Jews being taken from the ghetto to the train station for such a transport?

A: No, no, no, no.

Q: No, no.

A: And I never – well, walking around in there, there was that gate. I never seen it, no.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: So, most likely they were already driven by some – something. I don't know.

No.

Q: Okay.

A: So during the war I was not involved with any Jewish peop – person trying to get away, or anything like that. I think that I knew the name of a person who was most

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

active in ghetto. If you say the name I will tell you that, yes. But – so we know that there is a underground there, but we knew that everybody is helpless. The – our insurrection was prepared for three days only, because we didn't have the ammunition for everything.

Q: Oh, so when you were telling me about three days, it – and it ended up being 63 days –

A: Yes.

Q: That's what you were explaining. Got it.

A: Yes. Some was taken from Germans, some was – but very little from the – being thrown by allies, but not Russians. The Russians, on the very end, helped and they s – threw some bread, I had some bread.

Q: Oh really? Some bread?

A: Yes. Completely dry.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: We were hungry, but it was the ammunition which we needed. And they did not let the allies planes land on their side. And because of that there was a lot of people lost because of that.

Q: So, were – were –

A: Russians stopped, because they wanted us to be killed.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Y-You mean the Russian forces were already at **Warsaw** and they –

A: Close to **Warsaw** –

Q: I see.

A: – yes, and they stopped.

Q: I see.

A: The –

Q: And had the – and were the insurrections, the people from the uprising, were they expecting the Russians to come over the – and help out?

A: Definitely, because they were our allies. We were not in good – in terms with – with them, because of **Katyn**, and that time only **Katyn**, not – not the other camps. So it was broken without us, but I think [indecipherable] went to see **Stalin** just before that, and **Stalin** didn't say anything. And no di – they were definitely wanted us to – to be killed off.

Q: So tell me a little bit – I'd like to get a sense of how – by the time the news about **Katyn** was revealed, when the Germans found the site of the massacre of the 4,000 Polish soldiers – Polish military men, were you already in **Warsaw**?

A: I was in **Warsaw**, I don't remember when it was.

Q: Do you remember learning about **Katyn** in – while you were in **Warsaw**?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Straightaway, because we knew. The Germans allowed the Polish Red Cross, because they wanted everybody to know what Russians did.

Q: I see.

A: So, there was all the news we knew, and since people were killed in – with their all uniform, there were some papers and things like that, so –

Q: So they had identification with them.

A: Identification. We had not di – doubts that it was the Russians who did it.

Q: And were you working at the Red Cross when this news came in, or was this before that time?

A: I think it was later, could have been later. I don't remember when it was.

Q: Okay. And you mentioned to me earlier when we were not taping, that your father recognized some names. Can you tell me about that?

A: First of all, the – he was the first one to sign that he wants to come back to his family. And –

Q: That's when he's still in **Lithuania**.

A: In **Lithuania**.

Q: Yeah.

A: And then the first transport went out, and he was not on that, so he went back to, most likely the camp – Polish people in the camp, who signed him, and he said,

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

why not I should be? And then in the third one, I'm sure that he knew the names, because there was a ter – transport from there. I think that **Katyn** was not only from his camp, but from the others as well.

Q: Course.

A: I don't know. I don't know what the name of his camp was, but definitely he was in the second transport, not the first one.

Q: Okay, and so when – when you learned about **Katyn** –

A: We knew what it was.

Q: Yes –

A: Only then we learned, because we – before that we didn't know.

Q: Did he recognize some of the names of the people?

A: Yes, he did.

Q: I see. So when he – when the identification list was made, he recognized that some of these people had been in this camp with him?

A: Yes, because he would not know that the – there was a thir – third transport. They could be from everywhere, but he recognized it – he knew that third one went there as well.

Q: I see, I see. So there was no – no doubt in your minds that this was not just German propaganda, this was actually true.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: We knew, we knew, because Germans wanted everybody to know, and because of that they allowed the Red Cross, Polish Red Cross to go there.

Q: Yeah.

A: And recognize. And there were letters and [indecipherable]. Yes, we knew.

Q: So let's go back to **Oberlangen**, where you are, you know, you're – you're there with about 2,000 other women, prisoners of war, and it's now like the winter of 1945, the war is coming to an end. Did people in the camp n – have that feeling that it's not going to be a lot – long now before it's all over?

A: Yes, we believe that. And it was funny incidents, there were people in Polish army under British command, and they stopped not close to our camp, and Germans ask, why do you stop here for the night? Why your women are there? Because Germans knew. And so they went. I think we were rescued about five or six o'clock in the afternoon, because they did not know that there was camps.

Q: So you were liberated by Polish forces?

A: Polish forces, yes.

Q: Oh, that must have been something.

A: And that was before the end of the war, about a month, I think about a month. It was April.

Q: It was April?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Okay. So that's the first time you're free.

A: Yes.

Q: Aside from the time you were in free **Poland** in that little courtyard.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: This is when you were – what happened to you? What did – what –

A: Well, after we learn in July that my s – most likely it was beginning of August that we learned that he died, on 27 of July, we decided to go and join our **Anders' Army** in **Italy**. And the detail –

Q: Excuse me, I'm sorry. Your mother was with you in **Oberlangen**?

A: Yes, and my –

Q: And where was your father?

A: – father came.

Q: To **Oberlangen**?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay, mm-hm.

A: Just to tell the news.

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And we went there, and it was the last month when somebody could still join the army. The **Anders' Army** was mainly from **Siberia**, but also quite a lot of people came who were taken to German army, and they would go through the – to Polish – Polish people who were under the occupied person, and they were forcibly joined the German army. So a lot of people came like that, to them. But, since the war was over, they was not taking any new people. But – and at that time we could not go to **England**. My brother was trying and didn't before he – he died. And so we're – we were in **Italy**. I was in **Porto San Giorgio**, and that was [indecipherable] **Italy**. And there was a school for girls who didn't finish. So there were some from the Polish insurrection, some were through ho – went through **Siberia**. One of my friend was a tall, well-built woman – girl, at that time. She was in **Siberia**, she was working in the forest cutting the trees. So that's not exactly a woman job.

Q: No.

A: But otherwise we – we didn't talk a lot. One was – most of them were driving trucks to supply there. And one of them said that when it was very hot, th-they would put wet sheets on them to – to cool themselves. But otherwise they didn't say how –

Q: What their Siberian experiences were, huh?

A: No, no.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Yeah.

A: Nothing like that.

Q: But it brought you all so much together, all these people who had such different – different destinies, different hardships, different –

A: And we didn't talk about our experiences at all. It was the school and what – how to do it. And under the – under our school, there were food magazines. And so we had lot of rats. And in **Italy** you have, in Polish it's [**indecipherable**] it's a sort of – something like a – a – over your bed when you sleep, so –

Q: A mosquito net.

A: Mo-Mosquito net. And she put her leg out, and the rat bit her once. My other experience from there was I couldn't sleep, I went there, and down there, there was – we have military in – people who were taking care of the food under that, and th – about us, and somebody who was passing by, another soldier, came and say, oh well, you have a good – so many women around you. And he th – the one who was there said no, there are good people, good women there.

Q: So, in other words, there were people who were looking at you in a different way.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Well, some other people thought that well, when there are women and whatever happened. But no – no, it was – it was not. And the man who – who was there said so. So I heard it. But –

Q: We – were these soldiers?

A: Yes, Polish soldiers.

Q: Both pole – yeah.

A: Polish soldiers.

Q: I-I have a question about – about General **Anders' Army**. Why would people be joining the army, his army, after the war is over? What would have been the reason for that?

A: We didn't want to go to Soviet **Poland**. **Poland** was not free.

Q: So in other words, it would have been now to fight the Soviets?

A: Well, there were some – I think my daughter-in-law father was in **Poland** still, after the war, after the insurrection, and he was fighting there. How he got out, I don't know, because we didn't talk about those things. But he was one who was still fighting Germans and Russians and he – he was a – we did not fight Russians, because they were allies, so he was still fighting Germans. And there were some people left and in **Poland** a lot was arrested and killed and so on.

Q: By?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: It's not – not – for us, the war did not stop there, even for somebody – we could choose to go out of **Warsaw** as a prisoner of war, or as a civilian. And many people decided to go as civilian. If they were found later by Russians that they were in the underground army, they would be arrested, killed.

Q: I see.

A: So –

Q: So even though they were allies, having fought in an underground army, they were threats.

A: No, no.

Q: Yeah.

A: They were not.

Q: Okay.

A: This – right now when I am looking at the **Ukraine** it's exactly what's happen in '39 in **Poland**, [indecipherable] their people.

Q: Yeah.

A: Whatever. They don't mind. So –

Q: What happened to you after **Italy**? What – what happened after that?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: After a year I wanted so much to go to **England** when my brother was alive – we had to go to **England** and to be resettled. So I was in the camp there, and another year of school, and so I have my matriculation in Polish system. And –

Q: So in other words, you, while your brother was alive, he wasn't able to get you to **England** –

A: But then I had to –

Q: – but after he died, you could go.

A: I had to go. After a year, all the Polish soldiers were there, and tried to be resettled there.

Q: I see. Was there any effort to resettle you into **Poland**?

A: Whoever want to go, could go. And out of – we were in [indecipherable] this is – there were about 30 girls in [indecipherable]. Two of them went. And if you consider that they were mostly young women, because it was the – we were in school, so it was from say 16 to 20, 22, only two decided to go to **Poland**.

Q: Yeah.

A: And that was why there are so many people stayed outside. We didn't recognize the **Poland** as it was.

Q: Yeah.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: And I ne – I thought I send my children when they were grown up, to **Poland**. My oldest one, I told him, if somebody will ask you something, answer in English, not in Polish, so they will treat you as a foreigner. Because that was at the time when it – it could be dangerous, I didn't know. He was 16 at that time. But I never expected that I will be able to go to **Poland**. So, we never expected that, and we – we didn't expect that at our lifetime, **Poland** will be free.

Q: Yeah.

A: But right now is still after **Ukraine**, what would be next is **Lithuania**, and **Poland**, they – they were mentioning that at – at first. But both **Lithuania** and **Poland** are in **Europe** right now –

Q: In the European Union.

A: – and **Ukraine** is not. So, hopefully they won't be able to.

Q: I want to ask about then your later, your parents, did they go to **England** with you?

A: Yes, yes, because they were in the army.

Q: Okay. And –

A: My mother was still teaching. Na – no, she was helping, she wasn't teaching in school. We had proper teachers, with good education, better than my mother. And my father, he was going to be sort of expert. I don't know what he was doing before

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

the war, but when the National Health Service was starting in **England**, he was supposed to help as an advisor, even without the English language. And then he got tuberculosis and a heart attack. He died on seven heart attack at that time.

Q: Oh, my.

A: He died when he was 64.

Q: And this was in what year?

A: That was in **London**.

Q: And this was in the 50s? In the 1950s or 1960s?

A: That – it was – no, no, at ‘60 my husband and I came to **United States**, and I hoped to show the house and everything to my parents, and my father died two years later.

Q: So in the early 60s.

A: They were still in **England**.

Q: Okay.

A: In **England** they – they were given the social health, because my – both – well, if my father could not be the expert –

Q: Right.

A: – in his [**indecipherable**] my mother was teaching in Polish schools. The – we have Saturday Polish schools everywhere, always. So she was helping with that.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

But she could not work without the language. And when you're older it is very difficult to learn.

Q: So you – you spent a good decade or more in pole – in **England**, in the
[indecipherable]

A: Thirteen years.

Q: Okay. So –

A: And then my husband – there was Polish university – college. He was a year ahead of me, and after a time they said we were under the **University of London**. So we had to pass the exams once a year, and that was a college. And my husband still can – could go in Polish only. I had – I was a year later, in English, and I was not good in English. I failed five times, so I didn't finish it there. But I wanted to finish it, so when I came to this country, there – in **England** there is no – nothing. How – you don't call grades is – for each one you have one or two what – I lost the word, I'm telling you

Q: It's okay. So for –

A: But anyway, I could not pass whatever I already learn in engli – in **England**, only I had to pass it by exam.

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: So my husband was teaching at the **University of Maryland**, and I was studying there. And I finish my study, I have my bachelor at 42.

Q: Congratulations. Congratulations.

A: It wasn't easy. I just wanted to finish.

Q: And he – he – was it – and so if I understand it properly, it was that he was able to pass his exams in **England** in the Polish language –

A: Yes.

Q: – which made it easier. And by the – and you, coming a year later, had to take those exams in English, even though you knew the subject matter. Then, because it was in English, it was hard for you to do.

A: Well, I had to pass five exams. One was most likely mathematics; physics and something like that. Lab. And I was passing four, and the fifth was English, which I could not pass. I think five times I failed.

Q: I see.

A: So then I was studying by myself with the books, which – at home. But that gave me knowledge, but nothing. And when we came to this country t – first two years I didn't do anything. And then I join and – at **University of Maryland**, my husband was teaching there, we wer – lived in **Maryland**, but they said, you have to pay as much as a foreigner. Not lower as Marylander.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Wow.

A: So I was really angry with that – them. But later I was going to get my bachelor and then fight by-laws with that. And [indecipherable] some Chinese or somebody else did it before me.

Q: Okay.

A: So it was changed. But it was hard on us, because we didn't have money, and here I had to pay a li – right now is very, very little, but it's – it still was a lot for us.

Q: It was – yeah.

A: We came to this country with four children, two were born in this country.

Q: So you have four children? That's was my next –

A: Six children right now.

Q: You have six children?

A: Mm-hm. Twenty-three grandchildren, and 17 great-grandchildren.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: Yes, I am rich.

Q: How wonderful. How wonderful. I take it your husband is also po – was also Polish?

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes, we lived in **Warsaw** a few blocks away, but we met in **England**. He went through the insurrection, through **Italy**. In **Italy** he was studying at **Turin University**. How he did, I don't know, because he did – didn't know span –

Q: Italian?

A: Italian. So maybe that's where something in English, I – I don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: But he –

Q: And why –

A: – was studying there for a year.

Q: – why did you leave the **U.K.** to come to the **United States**? What was the reason?

A: My husband started to study in **England**, higher degree. Somebody advised him to – to go to one place, and to do [**indecipherable**] engineering, and he finish master in engineering. And he hated if somebody will call him engineer. He wanted to study mathematics. And his professor in Polish university told him, you are too old for that. He finish, he got the doctorate in mathematics. And apparently, it was so well thought in this country about the degree he got in **England**, that he went with somebody he knew from one of the meeting of people with – whatever their interest. He took him and my husband got seven offers of a job.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Q: Wow.

A: And he choose, like that, **Maryland**, and we are in **Maryland** ever since.

Q: Oh my. And you said you have six children?

A: Yes.

Q: And we talked about this a little bit earlier, but tell me, have – do your children know your story, your history, your experiences?

A: I know that my daughter once said something was so – so out of reason. So apparently we didn't talk enough about it.

Q: I see. I see. Do any of the grandchildren express interest or curiosity about these things?

A: Sometimes I talk, but I think they don't think it's very important. I don't know.

Q: Okay. What would you want younger generations to understand about what your generation went through, what your parents' generation went through?

A: Somehow I'm dissatisfied with people who right now go out and there's no – not enough work in **Poland**, so when they can go anywhere in **Europe** to – to work, they do. I – they don't really think of coming back. They don't think really that they should belong to **Poland** and not to be outside this. And it seems to me they're – they're a completely different generation. I lived in free **Poland**, which was under 150 years when we were not free. And right now some people are – in **Poland** are

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

mixed up, and they don't recognize that they were not free under the Soviet occupation. There is a lot of progress in the country, as I – I think I mentioned to you that my brother wanted to go on the bicycle to – from **Białystok** to **Warsaw**. And that half of main road was paved and some half wasn't. Right now, even in the village where my mother lived there, everything is paved. There is electricity. Right now there are a lot of trees, say cherry trees, which are si – small. So it's easy to pick. So you have to –

Q: They've been – they've been raised that way, yeah.

A: – start – raised like not – not only it's a different kind of cherries, not the big one. So that had to be change, you don't change it from year to year, you have to do it. And there, in that village where my mother was teaching, there was about 2,000 people, and one – one with higher education only. So education was allowed, but also some people were pushed, and they should not have the – that higher education. But definitely everybody has the – much more opportunity. So, the villages went up, and because of that, some people from there don't feel that we were not free for so many years. We – us being outside, we knew what was happening. They accepted what it was, and it wasn't a free **Poland**. So –

Q: And so you'd want people to have a – have a greater understanding of what freedom means.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Yes. And maybe it's coming. Some people say that schools are not as – as good as it used to be. I know from my mo-mother that after we got independence in **[indecipherable]** the schools were – they were supposed to be like the schools in **Switzerland**. That was the example for us. But my mother wa-was going with some inspector, wh-who – who he was I don't know, about once a year for three days, to different schools in the country, where the teacher would have to pass an exam to be –

Q: A teacher, yeah.

A: – a teacher there. So some people were not very well educated, and the schools went – the level of schools went up and apparently they say that right now is going down. I don't know why.

Q: It happ – you know, the – it still is countries in development, after – after such changes, it takes a while for – for systems to work, and to improve.

A: Yes. There – right now there are changes there – in **Poland**, children start at seven, they start at six or something. And they – I don't understand what, but –

Q: I wanted to ask – yeah.

A: – something is not – not very good.

Q: I wanted to ask this question in a different way. What would you want young people, and younger generations from other countries: from the **United States**, from

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Canada, from the **U.K.**, from **Germany**, and even from **Russia**, and from countries outside of the European experience, what would you want the children of these countries to understand what you and your family, and the people in **Bialystok**, and the people in **Warsaw** went through? What do you think you'd like them to be able to get about that?

A: I don't think they would learn by themselves if the – if something will happen. But what I am not – people – other people are always dissatisfied, I don't like what's right now common in the world that the countries are not religious countries. **Poland** was definitely Catholic country, but there was tolerance to everybody. And as I said, th-the kids who were going out of religious classes, they enjoyed that. And they could stay and learn.

Q: Right.

A: Not pray, but learn.

Q: Right.

A: And it seems to me that only religion, when you believe – we believe in the same God, only different, and of course, I – I believe it is better than **[indecipherable]**. But is the same God. And people need to – to believe in God, whatever it is. If they don't know, they even form belief that in several gods, or whatever, I don't know what Buddhists believe, and so on. But there is a tolerance, and it was tolerance in

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

Poland. But here, right now, I – I – is my – my own saying, that et – atheists are not tolerant. They cannot tolerate cross somewhere on the street and somewhere.

Maybe they feel guilty that they don't believe in God, but I don't see tolerance in this country, and everywhere. And **Poland** right now is – is separate of state and – and – and I think it's going the same direction, lack of tolerance. And I'm very dissatisfied with that, so I don't know whether people can change it again, back to religious tolerance. Well, we have Muslims in **Poland**, some gathering, they – they have the – right now they moved from east to west and so on, so it's more difficult, but those people were – **Poland** was always fighting Turks and – and Tartars, they were Muslims. So those people were taken prisoners, or were – they were always – they started as our enemies, fighting us. And right now we consider them just any other people. We don't have problem with – with Muslims right now in **Poland**.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But we are tolerant to any religious, and it seems to me that if – well, with Muslims it's difficult because not all of them are – are fighting.

Q: That's right.

A: But it seems to me I would like young people to believe that religion is the base of the social work.

Q: Okay.

Interview with Barbara Syska
October 22, 2014

A: Social –

Q: Cohesion, in some ways.

A: Yes.

Q: Of society.

A: But that's my thing. I-I don't know what else I would like for the children, I don't – I do want them to – to believe in God.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you, thank you, Mrs. **Syska**, for sharing your life, your thoughts, your experiences with us today. I'm very grateful for it. And this then, concludes the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with **Barbara Syska** on augu – on, excuse me, October 22nd, 2014. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you.

End of File Two

Conclusion of Interview