

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Rafael Wilschanski

March 25, 2012

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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Elaine Crandall, National Court Reporters Association.

RAFAEL WILSCHANSKI

March 25, 2012

THE VIDEOGRAPHER: Rolling.

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

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

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

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

Q: Okay. Your parents were from the Ukraine.

A: Yes.

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

A: Yes.

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

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

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

A: Okay. We were it was a very, very hard time. But I can't tell you that I felt it because I was very, very young. And, you know, when you are born in this in this atmosphere, you are used to to see you think that that's the way this has to be. That's what you think. You didn't see otherwise. It wasn't a Jewish school. I didn't go to a Jewish school. It wasn't a cheder. It wasn't a a yeshiva: So my father learned with with me, to read and to write He Hebrew and Hebrew and the the bible, the chumish and rashi, all these things. And zoy it was going. And it wasn't for a long time because you can't live in one place very long. So, when I was a about a year and a half, we left already Batumi. We left for another another little a little a town called Nevel. It's about I don't know exactly how how how far it is from Leningrad, from Petersburg. Because there, in this time, about in '26, '27, it was there still even it wasn't really really op openly, but it was still a academy for rabbinical academy. My father land before his before his marriage, he land in Lubavitch. Lubavitch now is in now is known in the world as a as a big community. But then it was only the little the original town of Lubavitch. Lubavitch was

a a little town that got only 400 Yidissha families, about 400 Yidissha families. And the most of the families lived around the yeshiva: Because the yeshiva, the Lubavitch yeshiva there, she was she was founded in 19 tuf, reish, nun, zayin it was about a about, 1917 no. Nineteen seven, something like this. Nineteen hundred seven.

Q: Uhhuh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A: Yeah.

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

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

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

A: When? What time?

Q: Right after after the first world war.

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

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

A: much later.

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

A: Before the second war?

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

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

Q: You mentioned the

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

Q: But everything worked underground?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A: I was in GeorgiA:

Q: Yeah.

A: They was in Kazakhstan.

Q: Yeah. Kazakhstan.

A: How long?

Q: How long.

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

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

A: Five years.

Q: Five years?

A: Yeah.

Q: The separation was five years?

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

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Six years. Six years.

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

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

Allow me to start a little bit from before this.

Q: Please.

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

Q: That was the teacher?

A: That was the teacher, yes.

Q: Huh, I see.

A: That was the yeshivA:

Q: That was the yeshivA:

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

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

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

Q: So this was for police uses?

A: What?

Q: This was for police purpose?

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

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

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

Q: Uhhuh.

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

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

A: What?

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

A: Everybody has ID. Everybody has ID.

Q: Was there a Rav in the city?

A: What?

Q: A Rav. A Rav.

A: In which city?

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

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

Q: The guardian.

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

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

A: Yes.

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

A: What?

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

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

Q: Right. But during during

A: I wasn't there already.

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

A: Tremendous what?

Q: A tremendous friendship.

A: Okay. Sure.

Q: Would you say it was a tremendous friendship?

A: Sure. We are brothers.

Q: Uhhuh. Uhhuh. And

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

Q: So you you were like brothers?

A: Huh?

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

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

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

A: Much better than now.

Q: Uhhuh.

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

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

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

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

A: Through Russia? In Russia?

Q: Yes.

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

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

A: Excuse me?

THE VIDEOGRAPHER: We're rolling again.

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

A: Now?

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

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

Q: Did they come to America?

A: Who?

Q: These boys that you're speaking about.

A: One one is here now.

Q: Uhhuh.

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

Q: Uhhuh.

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

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Not living in America:

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

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

Q: Uhhuh. Uhhuh.

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

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

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

Q: From the Germans.

A: Yes, we started to hear it.

Q: Okay.

A: We started to hear it already.

Q: Uhhuh.

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

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

A: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

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

A: I'll tell you, it wasn't about any thought in these things. We we knew that we have a a way to go. And that's it. Because, you know, like, this man that made this escape from from there from then, when we were in Necadayna, and then afterward in a in a

home for children, for and then they sent us from Necadayna to a children's home. And he said, we we brought through the flag of the of the Army, see?

Q: Uhhuh.

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

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

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

Q: But your immediate family

A: Huh?

Q: Your immediate family

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

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

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

Q: Perhaps

A: And then then we then we come together.

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

A: Okay.

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

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

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

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

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

Q: To come out.

A: To go through. What?

Q: For it to come out.

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

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

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

Q: You left the Soviet Union and went where?

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

Q: Where in Poland?

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

wait to change to change trains from this from this time a aboard; aboard other times. Even the the how you call it, the you have to tell because the the the lines

Q: The train tracks.

A: The tracks are different.

Q: Right.

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

Q: Old.

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

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

A: Oh, yeah.

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

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

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

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

Q: Four sections.

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

I started with him. And my family, in meantime and my father was shochet there, too, in Paris. And we start about the papers for Australia: In a about a year about a year after when we came there, come the whole yeshiva from Peking, the whole group, the most group, come in Paris. In meantime, the office which I helped him, we got to prepare houses houses. Places for for them. So we from our office, I was going to to look people from American Jew to find places in hotels and this to place the oncoming group. When the yeshiva come, I I wrote Lubavitcha Rebbe, to the previous Lubavitcha Rebbe, his father the fatherinlaw, this Rebbe, and I told him, all my chaverim are here and I wanted to go back to to yeshiva, to learn still again more.

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

A: Yes.

Q: To Paris.

A: Yes.

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

A: Why did they have to be in Pokey?

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

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

Q: Paris was a stopping point?

A: Yes.

Q: A station?

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

Q: Uhhuh.

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

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

Q: How long were you in Paris?

A: Twentyfive years.

Q: Twentyfive years in Paris?

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

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

A: Yes. Yes. Yes.

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

A: Okay.

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

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

Q: Huh.

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

Here we are the the students, to say say like this. Here I am. This is I am here. And I was in this time, I was the youngest one of this whole group. And when this that was taking this photograph, I was I was teves 13 years and three months. Thirteen years and three months. And it was in December, 1937. We were sitting in a little shul, in a little shul. That's the guardian of the shul. We were sitting in the basement, but not a basement. It's a cave. We were sitting all together with our teacher. That's our teacher. He came

from BelarusiA: And he knew everybody knew that this very, very dangerous to learn with kids, when this Soviet government has to learn communism. And that's his contribution. Contribution. But that was the goal of of giving over to the coming generation. And that was the the mission with the Lubavitcha Rebbe gave when a when he left Russia: Not to leave the religion to go out. And it has to go do without thinking about themselves.

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

Q: It's a very interesting photograph.

A: Nu.

Q: Very special photograph.

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

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

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

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

A: I see that the one thing that helped us to go through all this difficult times, for us, us us youths, us kids, and then with us young boys, and later, is because we were very, very strong with the way that the older generation made it for us. All the prescriptions, I say, the terror, the rebbeshte, the Rebbe, Lubavitcha Rebbe, was always holding us in das in the in the hardest times. It was the only the only wish, that once it will come that we can be together and practice our religion openly without any persecutions, without any difficulties. And that's it. That's what holded us. And when you we came in a free land. It's much difficult more difficult than it was there to see you. Because you you you know how the Talmud say, the eyes see and the heart want it. There you you know that you can't go left or right. You have to go in the right way, in the

middle way. And that has the younger generation generation to look and to learn from the older ones. We learned this from before us. Say later I'm not too much learn from us but still, they can look it was every generation has to look for the other. And, most of all, we have we have where to go. We have an open way, a very, very wide way and a good way. And that what holded us for the thousands of years and that's what hold us now. And that's the biggest miracle in the world. The Rabbi gezucht, you wanna make revenge, the Yiddish word from Hitler, go in the Jewish in Jewish way; that will be the biggest vengeance, zestas (ph), against Hitler, a yemach shemo v'zechrai. I have a an anichle. And he's now in in Milana, in das. And there in Milana a family is a man and a wife and an aunt. That's a family. Not us. And he, Baruch HaShem, have four kinderlach. Then maybe he got three. And he come in tram train. Come here, kinderlach. No, tati, tati, tati, tati. In Italiano, "Lady, nu, that's all what you have? That's it? Yes? And you you plan to have more"? "Yeah." "How much? How much?" Das. "Six million," he told her. And that's all your your fault. Yiddin doffin nissin, doffin gein in de richten de vag. And that will be the biggest, the biggest revenge against our enemies. And, Zecher, with HaShem help, that we will be the victorious. We will das, das.

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

A: Thank you, Mr. Lustagazaler.

Conclusion of Interview