


July 2009

Jerry Rawicki oral history interview by Carolyn Ellis, July 1, 2009

Jerry Rawicki (Interviewee)

Carolyn Ellis (Interviewer)

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Dr. Carolyn **Ellis**: Today's date is July 1, 2009. The [Holocaust] survivor is Jerry Rawicki. The interviewer is Carolyn Ellis. We are in St. Petersburg, Florida in the United States. The language is English, and the videographer is Jane Duncan.

My name is Carolyn Ellis. Today's date is July 1, 2009. I am conducting an interview with Jerry Rawicki. The interview is being conducted in St. Petersburg, Florida, United States. And now, Jerry is going to read the statement on the release form.

Jerry Rawicki: I, Jerry Rawicki, acknowledge and agree that my oral testimony may be used by the Florida Holocaust Museum for all standard museum purposes. The museum may use this interview, including my name, photograph, videotaped image, and related written materials.

CE: Okay. Thank you.

JR: You're welcome.

CE: And now, we're going to start with you just telling us your name and spelling it for us.

JR: My name is Jerry Rawicki. J-e-r-r-y R-a-w-i-c-k-i.

CE: And the date of your birth?

JR: April 30, 1927.

CE: And your age at this moment?

JR: Eighty-two.

CE: Okay, and the city and country where you were born?

JR: I was born in Poland, in the city of Płock.

CE: Okay, could you spell that for us?

JR: P-l-o-c-k.

CE: Okay, thank you. Now, I just want to start with your childhood, and if you could give us a sense of just what that was like.

JR: My childhood was very wonderful. I remember a very loving parents, sisters, friends, relatives. We lived in a very beautiful town, an old town dating—oh, thousand years, back to the time when Poland embraced Christianity. It was a very picturesque town. I remember playing with my friends with abandon and youthful enthusiasm. But that, of course, I don't—well, it's not like I'm waxing sentimental about the place, because what I remember unfortunately most about is when I became almost an adult and the war broke out, and that erased all these beautiful memories of my childhood. That's—

CE: Okay, okay. Can we see if we can go back and capture a few of those memories?

JR: These good memories you are talking about?

CE: The good memories, yes. Like, who were your friends? Were they mainly Jewish kids, or—?

JR: No, no. As a matter of fact, I went to a Catholic school. Now, that wasn't because of my religious, you know, affiliation. I was a Jew practicing—well, we were assimilated, my family and I, as quite a few people in Płock were Jews, but the better schools were private schools. Not that we could afford it—I don't think we could—but for some reason, both my sisters attended Catholic school and I sort of—on the basis of their good grades and good behavior, I pursued the studies over there.

CE: Okay.

JR: And it was a very wonderful school. As a matter of fact, there were—in our class, there were three or four Jewish kids. It was a Catholic school, but very progressive for that particular era. What I remember was that whenever—I say progressive, because that school allowed us Jewish children to have a rabbi come in once a week when the other—when the rest of the class had catechism, we were leaving the room, and we had a special other room where the rabbi or assistant rabbi had us for an hour. And what I remember—to my chagrin, of course—that we hated that particular day, because our friends—you know, Catholics, with whom we played, with whom we interacted, whose houses we were invited to—when that happened when we were—our exodus from the class was met with what I would call anti-Semitic slurs.

CE: Okay.

JR: And it was so—it was embarrassing; that's why we hated it. It was maybe—because they were kids our age, and there was nothing—the anger was probably a product of the anti-Semitism that was evident in Poland for years, for centuries. And they didn't mean to maybe cause us any harm or maybe embarrassment, but they would say, “Oh, Jew killer, Christ killer,” something like that, almost in jest. Some of them, maybe they did mean in jest. But it was very, very painful, that particular thing.

But other than that, it was a very—we had very, very good—I have very good memories. I was, for example, participating in plays—Christmas plays, for example—as a matter of fact, I have a picture I brought with me that shows me in a class, and there is a faculty and there's a priest and all that. So, it was very, very nice overall.

CE: Were you a good student?

JR: I was a very good student, and that's what kept me in school, because I hope you don't want [to] ask me whether I was a prankster.

CE: (laughs)

JR: There was—I don't know whether or not this has anything to do with this interview, but I'll tell you. In that school, and I think in all schools in Poland at the time, we had what we called a black book. Everybody was issued a black book, and that book was a means of communication, of the teachers with the parent. So if somebody did something, you know, that was not acceptable, the teacher would write, you know, this black book. And the parents had to sign it.

Now, with my sisters and with others, that book was never used for a whole year. Mine was full at the end of the semester. (CE laughs) And I was accused of other things, you know; there was a vendetta (laughs) against me. But I had good grades, and that's why wasn't expelled.

CE: Did you feel anti-Semitism any other time, other than when you went to be with the rabbi?

JR: Not as a child. Not until maybe when I was—well, eleven, twelve years old. When they sort of—when we knew that the war was coming and the anti-Semitism, which was latent in Poland, you know; it was hidden. Of course as children, we didn't realize it. But there was a rise in anti-Semitism right in 1938, thirty-nine [1939], and it wasn't directed at me as a child but at Jews on the whole.

What was—this thing was heightened, that feeling of anti-Semitism. And the foreboding of what was happening for us was that my grandparents, who lived in Germany, in Hamburg—in a suburb of Hamburg, Altona—were displaced, were ordered to live—to leave Germany, and they came to live with us. And for the first time, of course, we heard first-person accounts of what was happening in Germany, although we didn't have to, because my father was listening constantly. He was a—like I am today, he was a news junkie, and he was constantly listening to the radio.

He bought, as a matter of fact, the most expensive—at that time—radio, which was always a point of contention between my mother and him. She says, “Why did you spend money on this? We could use the money for other reasons.” But it was a very latest German radio, and I remember there was a magic eye, that the voice was fluctuating—it was fascinating for another reason for me than for them. And so, he could listen—he would listen every evening to the harangues by [Adolf] Hitler or [Joseph] Goebbels or these other, you know, Nazi big shots. And he understand—of course, my father was bilingual; he knew German, and he would translate it to us.

And there was another point of contention between my mother and father, because she says, “Why do you listen to him? These guys, they’re just blowhards. I know Germany.” She was in Germany as a young kid, she used to be, and she was impressed by the German culture, by the beauty of [the] Alps and the music festivals and the universities she was visiting with her adoptive parents. She was an orphan, and she was adopted by a very rich family, so they traveled. And she says, “Oh, it couldn’t be! It couldn’t be like that!” And she was contradicting what my father was listening to.

So then, of course, to answer your question, this was when I started to feel Jewish and I felt the sting of anti-Semitism, because up till then, I was just a Polish kid, you know. I was a—

CE: Okay. Let’s talk about your family a little bit, like—so, who lived in the house with you?

JR: Well, we had a—it was my parents and two sisters. We were economically maybe middle class, lower middle class. My father was a—by trade he was a printer, but he was in management. He was working for an industrial factory; they were making machinery and tools—agricultural tools and machinery. And—

CE: And could you say his name for us?

JR: My father’s name was Abraham Rawicki. Abraham. My mother’s name was Sophie. And my sisters—

CE: Her maiden name was? Her maiden name?

JR: Her maiden name was Finkelstein. And my sisters' name—one was Stephanie; [she] was four years older than I am—was. And Felicia—was seven years older. She's the one who survived the war, and she lives in Israel now.

CE: Okay, so back to—your father was a printer?

JR: He was—he never practiced printing, I guess, because he was working for this outfit that the owners of that outfit adopted my—the parents of the owners of the outfit adopted my mother when she was orphaned; maybe she was one or two years old. And she was—when she became of age and my father married her, he was—he got the job in the factory, so to speak.

CE: And was your mother German, or was she Polish? She was Polish?

JR: Oh, no, no. My mother was Jewish Polish.

CE: Okay.

JR: They were all Polish Jews, yes.

CE: Okay, all right, every one.

JR: So, this was the—as far the family was concerned, we were—religiously speaking, we were assimilated. We were—we considered ourselves Poles, but by assimilation; it doesn't mean that we abandoned our Jewish heritage. We were—our parents were observing the Jewish high holidays, and we children were told to go to the synagogue with them, which sometimes didn't sit well with us, but we had to acquiesce. And so—so now I told you about our religious, you know, situation, our economic—

CE: Did your mother work, ever, outside the home?

JR: No.

CE: No.

JR: My mother didn't.

CE: Okay.

JR: She was not very well, I remember. She was very tiny. Her hair was—I'm told—of course, I always remember her as having gray hair, and I was told that she was gray when she was almost a teenager or something like this. And she had varicose veins, I remember, and at that time, of course, as you know, the medical situation wasn't as good as now, so she suffered through that. And she was frail, but very energetic as far as I'm concerned—sometimes too energetic. (laughs) When we got those—when she got that black book back, I can still—I was just shaking because I can still feel the sting of her, you know, hand on my face. Corporal punishment like this was common, you know. So, I was crying (laughs) before I give her the book.

CE: (laughs)

JR: But this was—so, that's how I remember my mother. And other than that, as I say, we didn't particularly—didn't have any luxuries that I can talk about, but we had a very, very good youthful life and a very loving family. And culturally, we were very lucky, because both my parents loved—liked music. Our house was always full of record—well, we had a record player, this old thing that you see sometimes in the advertisements of RCA [Radio Corporation of America], and we had records. My father had a very good voice, and he was singing all these songs that were number one at the time, and everything that was popular. He also listened to opera, to concerts, and things like that.

So in that respect, we were very lucky. We had a small library, you know; we had books that sometimes I was looking at and I wasn't supposed to. Again, I would be punished severely, because I found books that were—my sisters were supposed to read—and my parents—and I sneaked in and I saw that, you know.

CE: So why weren't you supposed to read them?

JR: Well, because I was—(inaudible) like *Vita Sexualis*, for example.¹

CE: Oh, okay.

¹ *Vita Sexualis* is an erotic novel by Ōgai Mori.

JR: It wasn't for me. (laughs)

CE: Right, you were too young.

JR: I was too young, but I heard it was good, (laughs) so I looked at it. There were other books, you know, that I remember. At the time where we were—the day, the night that we were expelled from our town, I was in the middle of a book. And I was reading it and it was very interesting, and I took it with me. And as we were walking down the staircase—we were in a third floor apartment. On each landing, there was a German soldier, and he hit the book out of my hand. I finished the book three or four years later, after I was in the United States. It was *The Citadel* by [A.J.] Cronin.

So, we had—our cultural life was, you know, on a par with whatever other people did in this town. The town, incidentally, was—for a small town; it was about forty thousand inhabitants. We had good schools, we had excellent schools. We had a theological seminary, which was very famous in Poland. We had a cloister, or a monastery, that produced, you know, theologians. So, we were very lucky in that respect. The town was very cultural, historical, and a nice place to live.

CE: And one last question: Did your parents emphasize your Jewish identity, other than going to high holidays?

JR: That was just about the extent of it, I think. Yes. Well, for—you know, I was—in 1939 I was preparing for my bat mitzvah—bar mitzvah—and then, of course, I had a special tutor.

CE: Yes.

JR: Like an assistant rabbi would come to the house, and at one—as a matter of—excuse me. At one point, I was going to a religious parochial school once a week to learn, but again, they [parents] thought better. I do it, you know, at home.

CE: So you didn't take Hebrew classes or anything?

JR: No, just—I did, just for the—

CE: Bar mitzvah.

JR: For the bar mitzvah. Yeah, yeah.

CE: Okay. Now, can you remember a point at which this all changed?

JR: Well, that changed when—it came to an abrupt halt when the Germans, of course, invaded Poland in September of 1939. The first thing that really affected us is—I mentioned to you that my father had a mid-level management position. His assistant, or maybe co-worker, was a gentleman by the name of Gross. He was an ethnic German, and in our town, there were quite a few ethnic Germans. As a matter [of fact], there was a Lutheran church, or Lutheran or Protestant church. And he happened to be an ethnic German, and I remember him.

When I was five, six years old, I would sometimes come to my father's office, and he was there. And I remember the desks were facing each other—my father was on one desk—and he would take me on his lap, Mr. Gross, that ethnic German. And he—I loved the way he played with me. He let me play with the things—the abacus, you know; at that time this was for computing things—and with the paper punch—what do you—?

CE: Hole puncher?

JR: Yeah, hole puncher, that. And when the Germans came in, my mother—my father had to leave suddenly. It developed that this Mr. Gross, who's supposed to be our best friend, conspired—he says that my father, you know, did something—sabotaged, you know. And my father was just about to be arrested, so he left for Warsaw. So we were left alone, my mother and my two sisters. So, this was the first shock, so to speak.

The same—talk about this Mr. Gross. Before that happened, in the first few weeks, the Germans, of course, declared that Jews could not have many, many things, among them furs. Now, I mentioned to you that we weren't very rich, but we had furs. My mother's two brothers were furriers in London, so they would send her most expensive—well, at that time, you know, mink, seals and all kinds of things—I remember karakuls; that was a name for that. And when this decree told us that the Jews cannot have furs, naturally we stored them at Mr. Gross's and his wife, hoping that after the war we'll get it, but that was it.

So, this was the first shock. Then, of course, the restrictions, you know; the occupation was becoming more and more difficult. There were restrictions, there were proclamations, there were—then, of course, the most important thing is we happened to live in a Jewish section of town. But Jews who did not live in the particular sections were told that they had to move to the Jewish section. So naturally, the crowd—every Jewish family had to accept at least one other family, usually neighbors or possibly relatives. And we did—I remember one family that we accepted, and—there was—we were crowded, of course; we were completely out of our normal rhythm, as to speak—so to speak. But these were the things, but they were still nothing compared to what came later.

Right now the Germans were—we were in what I call Phase I of the German extermination, which was designed to make us completely out of our way of life. Made us so uncertain what was coming, we didn't know whether we were coming or going. The Germans were—the proclamations and these—all kinds of restrictions were coming fast and furious. Not as much, I think, to make us think, but to make us confused.

So today, for example, the printers over there must have had a mint—must have been making a mint, because in the morning there was a—there were posters plastered all over the place that we were supposed—for example, the curfew was at five o'clock. Three months—three hours later, there were posters that claimed no, it wasn't five, it was four-thirty, something like that. Just to confuse us. But this was still nothing that we really worried that much, at least we as the children.

But then, of course, came the deportation, which I mentioned, too. You know, that day that I was reading *The Citadel* and we were—may I use this for a second?

CE: Please, yes.

JR: (blows nose) We were told to take—I was going to say all our belongings—the belongings that we would carry with us, and get in front of the houses to wait to be transported. Where, we didn't know. And we were waiting in a drizzling rain—this was right after midnight, and I don't think the flatbed trucks came for us until maybe dawn, so we were standing there in this freezing rain. One of the things that, again, it's difficult for me to even talk about it, but I'll try to reconstruct it. The street that we lived on was called Broad Street.

CE: Broad?

JR: Broad Street, and it was broad; there was a strip of lawn greenery in the middle of it. And we were standing, waiting—we were waiting for these things. It was freezing, and the Germans were of course patrolling the thing. And right across the street, there was—a good friend of mine lived, and all of the sudden I decided—you know, I was bored with this. My mother was there and all that. And I said, “Oh, I’ll see my friend.” And I thought I would run over in my—I was arguing with my mother about other things, you know, while we waited—but then I said, “Okay, I see him.” And my mother right away says, “Come back!” And as she yelled, I also heard the German say in German—[at] that time I didn’t know it. “*Raus!*” I knew that he wanted me to go back and I came back, and he came over and he pointed a rifle at me. Of course, at that time I didn’t realize that, but now, I realize how my mother must have felt.

But finally, you know, we were—the trucks came in, flatbed trucks, and we were loaded on them and they took us away from Płock. We didn’t know where we were going or why we were—well, we knew why, but we didn’t know where. And we wound up, after a long, long trek in rain and sleet and all that, up in East Prussia, which was north of Poland. It was way north of, you know, our place. This was our first two nights that we spend outside of our home. And it was most notable thing for humiliation and cruelty that I can think of, considering all the other cruelties that I’ve witnessed.

We were housed for two nights in a big—it was either a school or a campus, some kind of a campus. It might have been a college, because it was big. And on the floor—there was no—there were classes—the classroom were open, but there were no chairs, no tables, just straw that we could lie on. And I forgot to mention to you that the four thousand Jews from Płock, we were divided into groups. So our group of about eight—six hundred people—were sent to this particular place in East Prussia called—the city was Soldau.

CE: How do you spell that?

JR: S-o-l-d-a—a-u. Soldau.

CE: Okay.

JE: As a matter of fact, this city—I don’t know if you happen to—there was a movie, *Valkyrie*, the other—a movie was just made, *Valkyrie*, about the—

CE: I haven’t seen it.

JR: —assassination of Hitler and all that. And there was something about Soldau in it.

But anyhow, we were housed there for two days. So, the classrooms were open—classrooms were open, but the restrooms were closed. And that was, of course, up—north of Poland—Polish border. East Prussia was almost, you know—very north. It was freezing. It was still sleet, freezing. There was a soccer field that was frozen; it was—maybe it was made into a skating ring or something. And that’s what everybody who to have biological function, they had to relieve themselves right there in open. So, this was the first humiliation that I remember out of many humiliations that were to come later, but this was the first one.

For whatever reason—of course, we still didn’t know where we were going—they put us on a train—on a regular train; it was not one of those cattle trains that we know. And we were heading south. I remember that the train stopped in Warsaw, and I looked out and I was never in a big city outside of Płock, you know, at that time. I was—as a matter—any city, except one down maybe three—twenty-five miles from us, for a day or so. But I was never out of Płock.

And here I was in Warsaw, and we saw the—we stopped at the railroad station, and I was thinking to myself, Oh, my, wouldn’t it be something if I could go out (coughs) and could see our father. Of course, we weren’t allowed to leave; the train must have been sealed. And we went—after this stop they unloaded us south of Warsaw, way south of Warsaw. And then once we embarked on the train, we were (blows nose)—we were transported by wagons, where horse and—

CE: Horse and buggy?

JR: Yes, you know, this kind of transportation, wagon driven—horse driven wagons for this way here. And again, our groups was divided because on the train was about five—eight hundred people, so maybe three or four hundred of us landed in a little place—I don’t know what they call [it], village, hamlet—named Bodzentyn, B-o-d-z-e-n-t-y-n. And we were dumped, so to speak, on a Jewish population maybe of hundred families.

CE: Did you know most of the people?

JR: Pardon me?

CE: Did you know most of the people who were traveling with you?

JR: No. I mean, as a kid I'd—well, neighbors and so on, but we knew them by name. My mother probably knew them; some of the sisters did. But I—if they were my friends, yes. There was three or four of them that were my friends, and of course them I knew, but that was about all I know, all the people I knew.

And that's where the hell broke loose. There were two rich Jewish families in that particular city; they were trying to help us, but the rest of them were what I think impoverished Jews. In Jewish language we refer to this location—as a shtetl; it's a small little town. And these people were just overwhelmed with our arrival, as we were overwhelmed with what we saw. There was not—we were housed in what was previously their storefronts.

For example, on this one street that we lived in Bodzentyn—in that one storefront, there were three families. We had four cots, you know, against straw burlap—you know, filled straw—straw burlap—burlaps filled with straws. I believe in this, our storefront that we lived, was a little cubicle that had a toilet. That's about it. We had no facilities to drink anything, we had no facilities to take a bath, and of course with that was lack of sanitation. If you combine this with the lack of food and the terror that went with it, I don't know what was the worst, whether it was the hunger or the epidemic.

We were covered with lice, and I mean covered literally speaking. We could not—the lice were just crawling. These were the types—we called it clothing lice [body lice] because I know even in this country people—there is such a thing as head lice, but you know, it's nothing serious because it can be, you know—if you have the medication and all that, you can get rid of it. These were what they call clothing lice that were in our clothing, in the seams of our clothing, and it was impossible to get rid of them unless killing them. And there were thousands in between our nails—fingernails. There was nothing we could do about it.

The problem is compounded—was compounded by the fact that they spread typhus. Typhus, of course, now is almost eradicated, but whenever it strikes it's deadly, and even if there is medical help. But, of course, we had no medical help. So we were decimated in this particular town by typhus and by hunger. If people did not even—people who did not die from typhus, they died from hunger.

CE: Did you get any food? I mean, what—

JR: We were—there was a kitchen, a communal kitchen that the Germans established. And we had these—every family, the head of the family—in [my] case, it was my mother—had a utensil, a pitcher. It was an earthenware pitcher. I still remember that pitcher. And people were trying to get as big a pitcher as possible, because they felt, you know, if the big pitcher, the soup—(laughs) it was soup; it was a euphemism for water—actually vice versa; there was nothing there. And we would line up over there and it would be ladled out, you know, whoever. In our case it was four of us, you get four ladle of that supposedly soup.

It was water that was boiled. Maybe there were—I don't know exact measurements, but just [to] give you an idea: If there was twenty gallons of water in this big kettle, maybe they put one pound of potatoes, and the potatoes got to a point where they were completely mushed together. And this was the thing. There was no nutrients in it; there was no caloric values. So as a result, there was widespread hunger.

Occasionally, we were helped by some of the locals. The most amazing thing is—and today when I was waiting for you I did my thing that I've doing it for the last five years. When this business was—this museum was established—I know this is a side story, but you might be—

CE: That's okay.

JR: —interested to know. I just happened to be looking at the library that was very small, you know—now, of course, we have quite a few books, but it was maybe one two shelves. And just by coincidence, there was a little book, yellow covers, this big. Coincidences only happened to me. Why? The, book lo and behold, was about Bodzentyn, and how we, the refugees, were thriving in Bodzentyn. The pictures of Bodzentyn was comparable to what you see now in Darfur, or used to see in Biafra, or used to see in Rwanda—I mean health-wise and hunger-wise. And here I see this book.

I remember when I got home I was stupefied, and I called up—you remember I told you there was one friend of mine who was in Bodzentyn with me. He's still in California. And I told him about this book, and he says, "Oh, come on, you kidding, just telling a story. You're lying." I say, "No, it is." A couple weeks later, I went back to get the book. I cannot find it. It's there somewhere. I was hoping that maybe one of these days there will be some bibliography, that will say—the book started with "Bodzentyn," you know—and (inaudible). Today, as a matter—I came in ahead of you. I got here an hour—and I was looking right there.²

² Referring to *The Last Selection: A Child's Journey through the Holocaust*, written by Goldie Szachter Kalib with Sylvan Kalib and Ken Wachsberger, University of Massachusetts Press.

CE: And you didn't find it?

JR: No.

CE: Maybe you and I can look together and find it.

JR: It's just—I think—

CE: Do you remember anything about the book?

JR: I think of course, but my memory has failed me before. It was a small book, like this, paperback, and I think the cover was yellow. So I'm looking at yellow everything, but who knows. But anyways, it was such a shock. And they mentioned the family over there, Szachter family. This was one of the rich families. When I saw this word—it was “thriving” or something to the effect—I said, “Oh, my God!”

CE: Could you tell who wrote the book?

JR: No, I couldn't.

CE: Was it a German or?

JR: No, it was somebody, and I think—at that time I was so shocked. It was some Jewish survivor, or somebody from New Jersey. He was in New Jersey. But I cannot offer you any more. And I'll tell you, of course, it is a Sisyphus work. I cannot do anything about it anymore. But every time I come to this place—and I come very, very often—I'm drawn to that library, because I figure maybe I'll find it. But I—this is a side thing. Anyhow, this is—

CR: How long—

JR: —an example of you—sometimes you cannot believe what you read or something; what was the saying? Excuse me; you wanted to ask me something?

CE: That's okay. I just wondered how long were you in this town?

JR: I would say in Bodzentyn we were probably—okay, we came in in winter time. Not quite a year.

CE: Okay.

JR: Or maybe a year. Was there—oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, a year and a half.

CE: A year and a half.

JR: A year and a half, because—that's right, a year and a half, because we had one winter over there. Yeah.

CE: So how did you spend your time there?

JR: Trying to disinfect ourselves, trying to get rid of the lice. I was hired—I hired myself to bury people who were dying from hunger and those, so I would dig graves from them. It was nothing; it was just absolute helplessness. And I told you about another thing there—certain things that are so etched in my memory, or maybe in my sense of smell are the memory.

We were restricted to this one street, you know. It was, of course, a ghetto, but without a wall. And there was a bakery somewhere on the outskirts of this thing. And the smell of fresh baked bread—when it wafted in, it was just excruciating. I can only compare from what I read and from what I know about narcotics, narcotic agent—addicts. You know, how they crave a fix. They don't know; they just get out of their mind, especially if it's hard narcotics like cocaine or whatever. It's there. That's how we felt.

So when you ask me what we did, I don't know, but there we were, just spending the time—dreading the time when the smell of the bread will come. And that was just nothing, waiting from—to get, you know, during the mid-day, when my mother had to go get that soup that was rationed to us.

CE: You just got that one time a day?

JR: One time a day, yes. It was just—oh, yeah, it was—and it was a piece of bread or something for everybody, you know, but it was just— But this was the extent of our life complete. And when I—when the people ask me, of course, then of course I will be telling you about when I—when we went to—when we landed in Warsaw.

If anything, of course, the Warsaw Ghetto—and large ghettos like Lodz, large Polish cities—primarily Warsaw is symbolic of the suffering, of the hunger, and of the disease and of the brutality. I think that the life in those small towns matched brutality for brutality, hunger for hunger, disease [for] disease, anything that was happening in a larger ghetto. Maybe more so, because in the Warsaw Ghetto, as I will tell you later, there was some help, self help that carried over from before the war.

In these small ghettos, there was nothing. There was just unmitigated brutality and hunger and death. Especially it was so vivid in my memory, because later in Warsaw—of course I wasn't a Warsawian, you know, I was born in Płock. But in this Bodzentyn that I've been telling you about it, I knew people. I knew our teachers, our doctors, our—you know, people, notables that we looked up to. We were supposed to—in good times we had the benefits of their—sometimes largesse, sometimes, you know—or friendship.

Now, we saw them skeletons, or maybe before even they were skeletons. They were reduced to just—they were eviscerated of every human attribute, and this was very painful to see. Before even I buried them, you know, with this—in this little cemetery that

CE: (sneezes)

JR: Bless you.

CE: Thank you.

JR: So, that what we—that was our life in this particular little town. I might also mention to you that there was no—because I mentioned to you—see, as I talked to you, now certain things come into my mind. I mentioned brutality right now. I mentioned to you that all I did is the hunger and the epidemic. There was no German garrison in this particular town, but there—the garrison that was—the town, was serviced, so to speak, by the garrison from a little town, Bielany, which was about twenty-five, thirty miles away.

But once a week, the gendarmes from that other place came into Bodzentyn, and it was a day of carnage. Nobody dared (blows nose) to go on a street when three or four gendarmes came in on this particular day. One of them—the name of one of them was [Dunkle]; I don't think it was a relation.³ But he—which was very unusual—he had a lame leg. And you know in Germany, if you were handicapped or something you were persona non grata; sometimes you were relegated to lower class and all that. But he was very valuable to them. He was a born killer, and when he came in to our town, we knew somebody was getting killed, one or two people. And, you know, it was a small town, so when two people get killed, you know, it was a—

I was telling you I remember when this German soldier pointed a rifle at me. There was a very similar—maybe, of course, worse situation with this [Dunkle]. You know, I was—because I was maybe not smart, or I was—it carried over from my prankster life. You know, before the war. I was happy-go-lucky. I didn't know half the time what I was doing. And when [Dunkle] and his guys came to town, all we had to do—we just were—the storefront, the floors had windows, so we were constantly looking at the street.

I don't know what made me jump up, out of the—we were allowed to walk in the street, because it was within the ghetto area, but not when [Dunkle] was in town. He spotted me. And my mother was at the window, you know; she saw that. And he took me by the collar, and he's pushing me—taking—pushing me somewhere. Around the corner there was a bar—a restaurant—bar, really. On occasions I used to go to this bar, and this woman allowed me to clean things, help and all that, so she do.

It was in the afternoon, I think, and the door opens to the thing and she sees [Dunkle] comes in with me over there. And without any, you know, further ado, so to speak, he takes out his pistol. As I say I was stupid, go-lucky. I don't think I realized what was happening. But she did, the owner of this, Ms. Bielanska. And she was—must have been petrified, because she knew what was coming. And she came out from behind the bar, and jokingly she said to him, “Hey what are you going to do? I just had my—I just had my floor cleaned.” And he had one of his hand on me—I was—and she said to him, “Come on, get a drink.” And to me, “Get the hell out!” and she kicked me.

CE: Wow!

JR: (blows nose) When I got back, I got a beating from my wife—from my mother, because she saw this.

³ After the oral history interview, Interviewee corrects: “This man's name was Dunkle.”

CE: Can we stop here?

JR: Sure.

CE: For a little bit, okay.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

CE: All right, this is tape two. Today is July 1, and this is an interview with Jerry Rawicki. Jerry, could we go back for just a moment, back to your childhood and talk about some of the activities that you were involved in?

JR: Well, personally, I was very much into sports. I was very good in track and field. As a matter of fact—I remember now you talk about physical training. You know, I follow tennis and other sports and I see how important it is to have trainers and all that. And I remember there was a type of—I was what, maybe ten, and I was participating in all these track meets. And I remember somebody—he wasn't a trainer; he wasn't getting paid for it, I'm sure, but I remember he told my mother that I should have before a meet chicken soup with rice. I don't know why. If I told these to trainers, you know, who train these tennis players now, he'll probably laugh at it. But anyhow, this was— (clears throat) but this is something that always I remember.

But I was very much also in gymnastics. We have a Maccabi team, which is of course—Maccabi even now is famous for its sports all over the world. And the Maccabi had a soccer team; of course, I was too young for that. But we also had a very gymnastic program, and I was very good on parallel bars and on the horizontal bar. We had weekly training sessions, and I loved it! And I was very good at it.

My coach—we didn't call him coach at that time; it was just an instructor. And I remember him. He looked like a [Arnold] Schwarzenegger; he was built like a Greek god, and we all worshiped him and all that. And he was saying to my parents that I had Olympic future, you know; of course he might have been exaggerating. But anyhow, I was good for my age and for my size. As a matter of fact, this is again—I loved it, and I almost—I was so excited about it, you know, every spare moment I remember of mine was devoted to gymnastics.

But after the war, I was—I had pleurisy, I believe, and I was sent to a sanitarium. I had a sponsor, was a guy that was a high-ranking officer in Polish army, and he made it—arranged for me to go to a clinic to recuperate after this pleurisy, I think; pleurisy or

something like that. And that clinic was full of Russian soldiers and officers. That's where I learned how to play tennis, because one time, there was a Russian officer—he was a Tartar or Mongol—and I saw him in pajamas over there, hitting the tennis ball over the net. So I figured I'd go down—I couldn't even speak Russian—over there, but we communicated. He gave me a racket, and the first time in my life I hit the ball back and forth without any problems.

But this—I'm not talking about the (clears throat) tennis right now. They also had a gym, and I saw in the gym parallel bars. And like a fool—for four years I haven't been on—five years almost—on the horizontal bars—I just jumped on. And I had the most unbelievable pain because I was skinny and everything, and the bars weren't adjusted, you know. I think that this was the cause of my problems ever since; you know, I had two operations on my rotator cuff. I had problems with this rotator cuff. I think that's what was caused—

CE: If you did that.

JR: But anyhow, this was what I was going to mention to you that—

Pause in recording

JR: As a child, gymnastic was a part of my life. I loved it, and it carried over to this—not gymnastics, but sports—even to this time. Also, I was telling you about—and this is important; I'm glad that I thought of that. I was telling you that I participated in those meets, the track and field, hundred meters and sixty meters. And I used to win quite a few of them, and that came very handily later on.

CE: I was going to say, I wondered if some of this didn't come into your life to help you survive everything that you went through.

JR: Yeah. Oh, yes, during the war and especially in Warsaw Ghetto, you know—I'll have a chance to talk you later about it. My speed was very important, saved me.

CE: Let's go back to—so, your time in Bodzentyn. You were there for a year and a half, you said.

JR: I was there for a year and a half, and my sister—the younger sister, older than me but—Stephanie—was stricken by typhus. And not because they wanted to help her, but they were afraid that, you know, that she was going to spread it everybody—typhus that was already incubated, you know, it was a threat to the whole community. So they took her to some kind of larger city to a clinic or a hospital. And she survived.

I remember the day when she came in again, on a horse driven wagon covered with straw. And she came in—she was a skeleton. And of course, she stayed in the same, you know, state of her health, because there was nothing to eat. She—there was no way of us to bring her back to some kind of health. So she was surviving, but as a skeleton. And the stories were becoming more and more frequent about the deportations to some other places, and we figured, you know, if we going to be deported again, it certainly wouldn't be just as good a paradise as our Bodzentyn, it would be probably worse. And I use “paradise,” of course, you know in what sense.

So, my older sister and I decided that we would go to Warsaw, while my mother and sick sister will stay. And when she gets a little but better—you know, she maybe gains some weight—we will be—we'll arrange for my mother and her to come to Warsaw to join our father.

CE: Had you any contact with your father at all?

JR: Yes, we had mail—there was occasional mail. And we knew that he was in Warsaw, but this was just about it. But there was no telephone—we had no telephone in this little town that we could use. So, my sister and I decided we would go to Warsaw. Now, I mentioned to you before that in that town, which was not a ghetto—but it was a ghetto; we were restricted as to our movements, and it was just about one street. It was a main street, Langiewicz Street, which we were supposed to—we could frequent but nothing else. Anything beyond that, if a Jew was found out—and this was, of course, the same thing in any other ghetto—once you were outside of the designated area, you would be shot; you would be killed.

So, we decided we'd leave the town. The town did not have a railway station. The nearest town was sort of an industrial town—a small industrial town about twenty-five, thirty miles. And we knew when we were sitting right here, as I was sitting in front of our storefront where we lived, I knew that that town—was called Wierzbnik-Starachowice—was there. That's all we knew.

My sister and I one night, one evening, decided to walk to this town, which we knew had a railroad station. And we knew some people, because I mentioned to you that we were—

when we sent south—you know, when we were divided—and some of our friends were sent to this other town. And right out—sort of the outskirts of town we had a forest, and we knew that on the other side of the forest twenty miles away is that other city.

And we walked. My sister and I— (coughs) excuse me. My sister and I walked one foot in front of the other one. (coughs) And we had no compass. We had nothing.

CE: And no food?

JR: No, no food. And we just walked. At the—maybe after walking for six or seven hours, we finally saw lights, and we knew that we already had a point where to go. We got to the house—we got to the station, and—I'm sorry, to that city. We found out that these friends of ours, they give us some money for the tickets.

CE: How did they have money?

JR: Well, he was—there was some people who had money; they had money in our town. They were—he happened to have money all his life. When he came to the United States, he had a jewelry store in Chicago. He gave—when we got married, he gave me the ring.

CE: Wow! But were they in a ghetto situation in that town?

JR: Oh, they were also in a ghetto.

CE: In a ghetto situation. But this was money that they had taken with them from their home?

JR: Oh, yes, yes. And they got it—they gave us the money for the tickets.

CE: Now, can I kind of stop and just ask, so how did you get in to see them? Because wasn't it really dangerous for you to go into that ghetto?

JR: There was no ghetto. It was—there was no wall.

CE: No wall, I know.

JR: It was just—

CE: I know. But still, to be seen, to be—were Germans—

JR: It was very early, you know. Of course we did not—the person would not realize that we were Jews.

CE: Okay, right.

JR: By that time we—in Bodzentyn we used to have these yellow shields, you know. We

—

CE: You took those off?

JR: No, we didn't—no, we right then and there, we posed as gentiles.

CE: Okay.

JR: So we knew where they lived, these friends of mine, and we got there. They gave us the money, they gave us something to eat, and we went to the railway station. We had no identification, absolutely none, neither as Jews or gentiles. We offered the tickets to the conductor, which was—they were taking the tickets. We sat down. Of course, we spoke Polish; we had no accents to worry about. And we sat there. The train started to move, and we knew if there was some German or Polish conductor decided to question us, look for some papers, we would be doomed. But we were lucky.

We got to Warsaw. We debarked the train, and we decided how to get into the ghetto. We thought that was a problem, because there, of course, the ghetto was enclosed; it was in 1942. But we also had relatives—not relatives. Well, I told you that my mother was adopted by some—by these people whom we called uncle and aunt, you know, although they weren't our blood relatives. And they were also well-to-do, because they were owners of the factory. They had all kinds of money, I guess. And we knew that they were already established as gentiles outside the Warsaw Ghetto.

We contacted them, they helped us with some money again, and then we found out how to get into the ghetto. There were Jewish laborers that were working for German industrial sites—factories—outside the ghetto. In order to get into the ghetto was to get—to become members for a day or for two days with that working group so that you could go inside the ghetto. And that's how we did it.

I did it with one group. My sister, I think, went in first with one group, and then two, three days later I got in. Of course, you had to pay some money to the leader of the group, because at that time already in Warsaw, like in any other things, it was always bribing, it was always things that were done underhandedly. This was the way of life. But we got into the ghetto, and we finally met our father after two years.

CE: Can you talk—can you describe that? Can you describe meeting him?

JR: It was emotional, naturally. I don't believe whether it was—whether my sister was staying with him or not. I don't think she was. She found some people from Płock that were inside the ghetto. But I was closer to my father because I stayed with him, and it was just a life, like it was before the war.

I did not consider myself a victim for some reason. I still had the mind of this prankster. The whole world was just a joke. I was fast, I could run, I could do things that others couldn't do as a child in a ghetto and a child of the war. I guess I was just as any other young person was contemptuous of adults. We held them in contempt because we knew they could not—first of all, they could not provide for us. They could not offer the protection that we were used to—I'm not talking about personally but by and large, okay.

So, I was in a ghetto, and I continued to do what other Jews did. They volunteered for work outside of the ghetto, in order to—of course because they were paid a little bit for it, but the biggest advantage to being part of this group [was] you could smuggle in things out of the ghetto and back into the ghetto. So, if you were a successful smuggler, then it was a nice job to have.

Because I was so small, wiry, and fast and all that, I got the reputation that I could be depended on to smuggle things out—not necessarily as far as goods were concerned, but errands—run errands. Mail letters, for example, outside the ghetto to relatives overseas, and do things like that. And I—and also the Jewish fighting organization, which was fledgling at that time, at least—it was becoming bigger and bigger—used me as a courier. I was contacting people on the Aryan side and delivering all kinds of notes. Sometimes,

you know, I would just tell stories—tell them what they wanted to hear, what the organization wanted them to hear. And that’s how I lived in the ghetto.

My sister, through the contacts that I had with these quasi-relatives of mine, she became—she left the ghetto and as a gentile got a job and stayed outside of the ghetto for the rest of the war—for the rest of the uprising in Warsaw—not the ghetto uprising, but the Polish uprising. For a gentile—for a woman to live as an Aryan, as a Catholic, outside of the ghetto was easier than for a man. Male Jews in the United—in Europe, 99.9 percent were circumcised. And this was a giveaway, because if somebody suspected a Jew outside the ghetto and he was a blackmailer—and there were quite a few of those, because there was a whole new industry that developed, unfortunately, outside of the ghetto.

So for blackmailers, they called them *szmalcowniki*. *Shmalts* in Jewish is fat, you know, chicken schmaltz and all that. Well, *smalec* in Polish is fat, you know; it’s bacon and things like that. And bacon during the war was worth its weight in gold. So they acquired the name, these blackmailers, *szmalcowniki*, because if they found you outside of the ghetto—either give them something, they rob you, say okay. Well, most of them, they didn’t care about you; they wanted to enrich themselves.

CE: Right.

JR: They could—well, some of them, of course, would do that and then, of course, say, “Hey, there’s a Jew!” and that was it. But usually, they were—just wanted your money or your valuables, whatever.

CE: And these were Polish citizens?

JR: Yeah.

CE: Non-Jewish Polish citizens?

JR: Yeah. And of course, I didn’t look Semitic. I was blond and my speech was unaccented with Jewish language and all that, so I could pass as a gentile. The only thing that I had to be very skillful—you know, in Warsaw, we were supposed to wear these white armbands, and they had to be sewn in. Mine wasn’t, because the minute I got out of this group, outside the ghetto with that working battalion, we called it, I would slip it off and then mingle with the crowd that was surrounding us.

Now you ask, why the crowd? The crowd was surrounding us to barter for the things that we were smuggling out of the ghetto, because in the ghetto after people were deported, everything that they worked for all their lives, assembled, all their things—valuables—were left, the German organized an outfit called *Werterfassung*, which something in English would say like “acquisition of valuables,” or something, “registration of valuables.” And they would come in and they load everything up. They would take everything to the bare walls and would ship it to Germany. But we sometimes were faster than they were, and we would get there first and we would steal anything we could. We acquired another name, *szabrowniki*. *Szaber* is like a drywall, you know. Why were we called *szabrowniki*? Because we would take everything, up to the bare wall. Okay?

CE: All right.

JR: And this is how the ghetto [was] really sustaining itself, because what we took out—for example, Warsaw was very famous for millinery stores, factories and corsets, women’s girdles and brassieres and so on. And that material that used to work for girdles was like rubberized things, was—again, has its weight in gold. So whenever there was an action—you know, deportation—we would see were the shops, you know, that were making those girdles, because we knew the material was there. So we would cut up whatever we could around ourselves, and outside of the—once we were out of the ghetto, that bartering that—I call it the walking flea market—was starting. We would unravel our things and we would give them that goods, and they would give us either money or mostly foodstuff, you know; this was the thing. At the end of the day, we would smuggle the foodstuff back to the thing.⁴

Now, this was all contingent on the sentries that were guarding the gates, because when I say that we had these things on us and all that—sure, many times we could smuggle these things out, but many times we were inspected. If you think that there is now inspection when you go to the airport, you should see the inspection we had. And sometimes these guards were not playing ball with us. As a matter of fact, we did not use the expression “playing ball” back then, just “playing.”

We knew that the certain sentries, certain guards, we knew them by—not myself personally, but the leaders of our battalion, work battalion, they knew who they were. And they knew if they could be bribed or if they could be looking away, so that our enterprise would be successful. But sometimes, right away they told us, “Those are killers over there.” You know, such and such, “Don’t even attempt. You better take this thing and throw it on the street, because not only they’ll take it away from you, but they’ll kill you at the same time.” So we knew when the—we called it when the gate was playing, or when it was not playing.

⁴ Interviewee clarifies: “Back to the Ghetto.”

CE: Were the sentries getting something out of this? They were getting part of the loot, or —?

JR: Well, they were not supposed to. They were bribed sometimes, you know, because— but as far as when they were confiscating things from us—it’s a very good thing that you ask, because I forget about the very—often, some of the gates had a little—they built little—not huts, little enclosures that they could—that the guards in wintertime, they could go in and warm themselves up. So if they confiscated those things, they would put it in those things, and then the German *Werterfassung* could come in and collect it because it was a restric—we were stripped of it.

There was another thing. The guards were the German guards, usually two or three of them. There were two—one Jewish policeman. Jewish policeman sounds very impressive, but they were nothing; they were just helpers. Otherwise, if the German killer didn’t want to get his hands dirty, he would tell the Jewish policeman, “Hey, inspect him, take everything off him.” So this was their thing.

There were another people over there, Jewish people. They called them *śmieciarz*. *Śmieci* is garbage; they were called the garbage man. They were the ones who were collect—who were taking the things that were confiscated off us and put on wagons to be put away. They were very, very rich people. The garbage men—economically speaking, they were Brahmans; this was the upper caste of the Jewish people, because they stole some of the things. And to be a *śmieciarz* at the gate—oh, it was just like being an aide to the president of the United States. It was just fabulous.

CE: And how did you get that position?

JR: Oh, no, I wasn’t.

CE: But how did one get that position?

JR: Well, I guess it’s a matter of luck or something, but you know, it was hard work and all that. But *śmieciarz*, oh, they were just—

The other people who were also very rich were the owners of the funeral homes, because they were for a time—for a long time, people who died had to be collected and go to the

cemetery. Cemetery was outside of the ghetto. And this owner of this—one owner of the house, Pinker Funeral Home, they had the permission to go out of the ghetto to bury people in the Jewish cemetery. Now, you can imagine if one had a permission to go with the hearse, or sometimes with just with anything with corpses, things could be smuggled under that, too.

CE: Right, right.

JR: So he was thought to be millionaire. Of course the money didn't mean didn't mean anything, but he was very rich. So they knew that Pinker was—his name was Pinker; he was the most rich—the richest person in ghetto, plus the *śmieciarz*, the garbage men. So, I don't know where I was—but I was talking about—oh, yeah. So we were—I was going in and out of the ghetto—

Pause in recording

JR: One of my functions was, once I was out of the ghetto and we came already to the industrial side, I was—the one that I was most frequently going to was on a main railroad in Warsaw, not on a passenger area but the commercial things, where unloading things, loading things. But my function, of course, was not for me to work, it's to tear myself away. If I didn't tear myself away right away from that wildest turmoil that was going with that flea market—sometimes I just tore myself away and right—I didn't even go to the work site. Sometimes I was spotted that I was—somebody noticed that I was pulling this thing [armband] away from me, that I was really—

CE: That you were taking the band off?

JR: Right, and some of these *szmalcowniki*, these people, these blackmailers—they had, you know, hawk eyes; they knew exactly what was going on. And on one or two occasions, I thought I was safe and they approached me. On certain occasions, I gave him the few things that I had and they let me go. One time somebody spotted me, and I start running away and he says, “Hey, there's a Jew over there!” And right away there was three or four guys, because there were more than one. You know, there's very unfortunate things, because as I say, anti-Semitism was great. Warsaw—there was a war going on, people needed money. The combination of two made these blackmailers, you know, very active.

And remember that I told you that my training track and field helped? I started to run. I almost kept—I kept well ahead of them, but they were almost coming closer to me, and

they were yelling, “There’s a Jew running! Jew running!” And I kept saying the same thing. “There is a Jew over there!”

CE: Oh, that’s wonderful!

JR: And I slowed down a little bit, and some of them, as they ran past me, say, “Where, where, where?” I say, “There right around the corner.” (laughs)

CE: (laughs) Oh, that’s wonderful!

JR: Yeah, I was very slick.

CE: Wow. Wow.

JR: But then of course—but if I didn’t have an assignment to turn myself right away and went to the workplace to this—let’s see, the main railroad—people used to give me money, and I would again leave that workplace. Again, the leaders, both the Germans and the Poles and the Jews, had to be bribed—not by me, but the people who collected money to bribe them so that Jerry Rawicki could go out and go to the marketplace, buy whatever I had to buy and bring them back. That’s what I was doing.

There was one time that I was not very successful, and I was spotted by some of these blackmailers. I had everything loaded up on a rickshaw to take back to this railroad station, and I was spotted. Two guys came over, and they said to me, “Hey, Jew, you get off.” And they took everything away and I was left there.

Worse even than that, somebody else saw me, saw this whole situation while the other guys rode away with that rickshaw. And now they came—another guy came up and says, “Okay, Jew, let’s go.” And he was a big—of course, I was very tiny. I was small; he was a big guy.

And he took me to a house, to a building right around the marketplace, and we went all the way to the attic and he says to me, “Take off your pants.” Because usually things were hidden, you know—I didn’t have anything on me because all the money that these people gave me I already spent, you know. But I had sewn in my underwear the number of the telephone of my sister.

I was hoping that he would take whatever I had, which I didn't have much—I might have some change maybe. I give it to him and I said, "That's all I have." And I thought this was it. And then I see two other guys coming, and I say, "Oh, this will be bad." Well, I thought this was the end of my—because one guy, you know, I could probably get away from him, but with two others? Well, it just happened to be [that] the two others were sent by somebody who saw what happened to me, and they sent them to rescue me.

CE: Wow.

JR: Well, they approached this other guy, and he was starting to say something. I don't know [what], but probably said, "Hey, this is my guy." And they started to pummel him. They almost killed him. And they said, "Get dressed and get out of here."

CE: So were they from the ghetto?

JR: No, that was outside the ghetto; this was in the marketplace.

CE: So who were the two people who helped?

JR: Well, this must have been the guy that I used to buy from. He never told me that he knew, but he must have seen how they took away everything I had on the rickshaw and they—he must have seen the other guy lead me away and he ended up, too.⁵ But this wasn't the end of it. When I got back finally to the workplace and I told them about it, they didn't believe me.

CE: They didn't.

JR: That was part of life. Everybody was suspicious of everybody. I told them the situation, they said, "Oh, no!" They demanded the money back because they thought I took the money.

CE: And what happened?

⁵ Interviewee added after the oral history interview: "I figured out I was in trouble."

JR: Well, I never dared anymore to go to the marketplace. It was the biggest marketplace in Warsaw; it's called the Iron Gate. And then, of course, they wouldn't probably trust me with the money anyhow, but that's what it was. This was a very, very traumatic day for me.

But the thing that bothered me most that I thought, "Oh, my God!" I was going to give him the [phone] number if he—I don't know. Of course, he couldn't possibly think of this thing being sewn into my underwear, but this—the whole time that he was trying to get—had me undressed and all that, all I was thinking that if he kills me, he kills me, but I hope that he never discovers what I had.

So, and that was a—as a matter of fact, after that I changed my workplace. I never went back. Maybe once or twice I went back to the railroad station, and then I decided to go somewhere else. So—

CE: Now, what was your father doing all this time?

JR: My father was—I was just about to—before you mentioned I was going to tell you another thing that I was—it's very difficult for me to say, it's almost like—

My father—well, my father was working for a tremendous—for a big German factory, Többens. There were two factories in the ghetto; one was Többens, one was Schultz. One was making uniforms for the army; they were—hats, among other things, so they called them the hat makers. The other one was making things for cleanings—you know, soaps and brushes and all that; they called them the brush makers.

My father was working for Többens; he was a hat maker. And to get a job at Többens—or Schultz, for that matter—was a plum job, because after all, they were making things for the German army. German army was at war, they needed the uniforms, so it was—I was telling you about the *śmieciarz*, the garbage men. Next to garbage men was to get a job at Többens. So, my father was working there.

At one point—of course, throughout the Holocaust the German brutality and the unspeakable cruelty always went hand in hand with deception. They didn't have to do that, because we were just like putty in their hand. They could do anything with us. We were completely—we were hopeless, we were helpless, we were unable to resist, but they used the deception.

Just before the ghetto was attacked by the Germans the word got around, and my father told me himself that Többens decided that the factory in the ghetto—it was scattered; they had two plans in two different areas, different streets. That wasn't very efficient, and they are going to be resettled to another place—you know, outside of Warsaw—where they were promised all kinds of things: better housing, better this, better other things, better wages, which—what they called wages. They were all taken there and machine gunned. It was just—we didn't know at that time that in—around Passover they were going to attack the ghetto to demolish it and to destroy it completely, but they figured, you know, well, maybe there'll be fewer people to kill, so let's get these Többens people machine gunned first.

But then you asked me about—this was, of course, how my father lost his life. Somewhere in fall or early winter in 1942, I was standing with my father. It was—again, I don't know why. It was drizzly, terrible, cold, running rainy day, rain with snow mixed. And we [were] waiting, Father and myself, to cross the street. It was a main street in the ghetto, Zamenhofa Street. And a hansom cab goes by, one of those enclosed *Droschkes*, you know. And my father waved, and I said, “What happened?”

I did not—it was raining and there was—there might have been something behind that glass window of that hansom cab, but I didn't know anybody who was there. And I ask my father, “Who was that?” And he mentioned a name of a guy who—my father worked before the war with his sister, and he mentioned the name, and I said to him, “What's he doing?” I asked him—no, I didn't ask him what he was doing. I asked him, my father, “What's his name?” And he mentioned the name, and as an afterthought, he says, “Oh, he is a leader of a group that works outside of the ghetto.”

One day I was on an assignment, and it took me some long time and I couldn't get to in time for the working group to join them and to go back to the ghetto. So I was faced with just—not able to get into the ghetto, because you just couldn't go in as an individual. So, I took a streetcar, and I walked and all that. I got close to the ghetto and I saw different work groups coming in. There was about two groups were delayed because the gate was not playing, so there was all kinds of problems there. So, I just went into a building over there, and I said, “I'll wait until maybe things quiet down a little bit.” It got so cold that I couldn't possibly stand any longer. I couldn't see because, you know, my eyelids were almost closed and all that. I was in stupor, because I must have fallen asleep or something.

Everybody was—everyone went through already by the time I woke up. It was late, and the whole area to the next to the ghetto—entrance to the ghetto was a big plaza, and it was lit like it was a sports event. And finally I saw somebody walking—saw something. Another group was coming in. So I regained consciousness, and I went out and I joined the group. The people, when they saw me I looked like a, you know—I was all with snow

and all that. They knew that I can endanger them, because if the manifest in the morning showing X number of people going out, [there] has to be the same number of people—

CE: Right.

JR: And they could have only also known—I don't know. These people know that the gate was not playing that night. So they started to yell and scream to “Get him out! He's a danger!” And some of them say, “Quiet!” Some said, “Let it go, because they'll hear from there.” You know, we were quite—little bit away from the gate, from the entrance. But they were kicking me and telling me, pushing me out and this and the other.

Finally, the leader of the group got a hold of the commotion, and he was at the front of the group. He comes back, and they were yelling to him, “This guy came in. He's going to get us killed!” And I—the guy, the leader of the group, grabs me by the arm, ready to pull me out. And I said my name. He could have been—name didn't mean to anybody. He could have been—anyhow, he was the man who knew my father in that hansom cab. Because when he grabbed me by the arm—by my shoulder—and just right [as] he pulled me out I say, “I'm Jerzy Rawicki,” you know. And I—

CE: And he left you.

JR: He—his hand—I saw him release his hand, and he pushed me back. He went to the front of the group, and I went through.

CE: And you didn't get—no one got into trouble for that? Lot of close calls.

JR: How—why would I say my name? Because there were hundred thousand people in the ghetto, but many of them were leaders of the group. I could have said the normal thing for me to say, “Please don't take me out.” But all I did was mention my name.

CE: And you don't know why you said your name?

JR: Once we got inside the ghetto, I wasn't even going to make an issue out of it, because I thought maybe he's going to ask some money of me or something. He asked me, he says, “Are you Abraham's son?”

CE: Wow.

JR: So these were the things that were, I think, supernatural, because I still cannot remember why I said that. And that didn't only happen only to me; other people that I know had—not similar, but also these supernatural—out of the almost body experiences. My own sister had that. She doesn't like to talk about it, but I just found something recently about it that was just unbelievable.

She—this may be something. Of course it doesn't—I may have mentioned it to you because it's very significant, too, because I say about the anti-Semitism, about the—you know, these blackmailers, such a cruel people. But here's another story.

My sister was, as I told you, working as a gentile in this coffee shop. And that coffee shop had a telephone that you could—use a telephone and then pay the person at the counter, you know. And she was at the counter one time. There was nobody other—sometimes she had a helper, but she was by herself. And two girls come in to use the phone. And she noticed—I just—she just told me the story a couple of months ago—and she noticed they were her girlfriends. One of them was from her class, and the other one was (...).⁶ And she [JR's sister] almost died, because she had false papers and all that.

And they used the phone, and one of them comes in and she looks at her. And my sister says, "Please don't tell anybody." So she paid for the telephone, and she walked out with her sister. My sister was already well established in this place; she was making money, she was living in the same with—her bosses had a house over there; she lived in her house. And she was—her life was made for the—

(phone rings) Is this mine or yours? Okay—

CE: That's my phone. It will stop.

JR: That's all right, let it ring.

CE: It'll stop in a second.

JR: Yeah. So, she did know what to do. She said to me—she said, "Well—" She had a terrible nightmare that day—that night. She didn't know what to do. She had a decision

⁶ Interviewee clarifies: "The other one was one grade higher."

to make, because this—the girl could have gone out and say, “Listen, there’s a Jewish girl—my friend, my school friend—living in there,” and that would have been it. But she didn’t. She [JR’s sister] kept working until the end of the war.

At the end of the war, my sister decided to go back to our town and look up the girl and thank her for saving her life. So, she gets to the house—she found out where they live, and one of the sisters opens the door and she says, “What can I do for you?” And she recognized her [JR’s sister] and said, “Oh, yes, you are Felicia?” And I say—and so my sister asked, “So, where’s your sister?” “Oh, she’s out of town.” So, she [the other girl] asked her, “What did you come here for?” So my sister told her, “Well, I was going to thank her for saving my life, because you remember you were in a telephone—you were making a telephone [call] in Warsaw and all that? And she recognized me, and I wanted to thank her for not letting anybody know.” [The other girl replied] “You know what? I never knew.⁷ She never told me about it.”

CE: Wow! Wow!

JR: That shows you that people—now, to her, it was an act of heroism, because she couldn’t even trust her own sib—not that she didn’t trust her, but she made a pledge to herself not to say it to anybody, because never knows. Maybe the other one—maybe her sister will say it in her sleep or something. I think this, of course, puts in balance, in perspective, that some people were really heroes, while some were scoundrels. And this, I think—I was going to say it as a complete different attitude of some people. Here were the people who were trying to blackmail people and the thrill of killing them, and here was a woman that was quite noble. So—

CE: Mm-hm. This is a good place to stop, I think, and take another break.

JR: Okay.

CE: Okay.

JR: I thought that I would tell you that because I think this is—to me, when I heard it from my sister I think this is very poignant, you know? It was small things, but I’m always—I’m wondering whether I’m too harsh on those blackmailers or those people that were such, you know, dyed-in-wool anti-Semites; they would do anything. And maybe I’m just prejudiced, you know, so whenever I find something that I can attenuate this thing, I always say that—especially I, who was saved by a gentile.

⁷ Interviewee clarifies: “She said, ‘I never knew that my sister recognized you.’”

So something I say to myself, “Well, maybe I should be really extolling the virtue of people that helped Jews, rather than even mention those,” because the thing is this: unfortunately, the majority of people were against the Jews. Of course not—some were inactive, but the attitude towards the Jews was very, very negative in Poland. In other countries—

Part 2 ends; part 3 begins

CE: Okay, this is tape three on July 1, 2009, interview with Jerry Rawicki.

So, Jerry, I thought we would start with you—you’re in the Warsaw ghetto with your father, and to go back and talk about what happens to your mother and your sister, and then move and talk about anything else that you would like to talk about in the ghetto.

JR: Okay. Well, when my sister and I—older sister and I left Bodzentyn for Warsaw—I think I mentioned to you that we were hoping once my [other] sister is going to be capable of traveling, we’d try to make arrangements for my mother and for the sick sister to join us in Warsaw. But we found out many, many, many—as a matter of fact, possibly after the war, we found out that at the same time—just after we left, two or three days later, all the Jews were rounded up in this little town and they were taken to Treblinka and gassed over there—killed over there. So—

CE: But you did not know this while you were in Warsaw?

JR: No. No, we did not. The communication with this little town, Bodzentyn, was very, very difficult, so we did not—though we were still hoping that they live in this little town in Bodzentyn just like we do in Warsaw. But that wasn’t to be like that.

At that time, the news of what is happening to us, to Jews, was trickling in. You have to understand that we had no access to newspapers. Of course, there was no television. We were not allowed to have radios—of course, the underground had some radios, but it wasn’t for regular broadcast. So we didn’t know what was really happening. We’re constantly deceived by the Germans.

When we were being deported, from the very beginning of the occupation until the very end, the brutality was always accompanied by these false hopes that our—that we would be—our lot will be improved when they move us, when they resettle us somewhere.

Because they always had an excuse: the war was going on for strategic purposes; that we were of course not trustworthy citizens, to say the least, so that's why it is necessary for them to resettle us. For a long, long time, we didn't know that the end of these trains that were supposed to take us to "better places," quote unquote, were gas chambers and extermination camps.

But by grapevine—which was very, very good during the war in Warsaw Ghetto—we were learning of the truth. And the resistance forces, which were growing but growing very slowly, because we had no means of obtaining weapons. There were Polish underground organization outside the Warsaw [Ghetto], and they were better weaponized than we did, much better. So, whatever we could acquire outside of the ghetto in way of arms, we tried to get it, but it was very difficult.

To smuggle something—to attempt to smuggle something through the gates was suicidal, because if they found out as much as a little gunpowder in somebody's pocket, the whole group would be killed. Occasionally, when the sentry was bribed—when was playing, as I mentioned to you before—some small weapons could be smuggled through, but that was about it. Through the sewers, some machineguns were sometimes smuggled through, but that was very, very miniscule as compared to the firepower to the Germans had. You have to understand that there was a German army that almost conquered the whole world. They would pass Stalingrad. They were at the gates of Leningrad and Moscow. And here was a group of citizens who had sidearms, a few Molotov cocktails, few grenades, and we were supposed to defend ourselves against the onslaught of German army.

But it got to a point where we knew we either resist or perish. So the effort to arm ourselves gained momentum, and by the time January came, 1943—when the Germans planned on eliminating the ghetto in January 1943, there was resistance. Not as much a fighting resistance as refusal to get out of the houses, load—entered the—allowed to—allowed ourselves to be taken to those *Umschlagplatz*, the railroad siding that was to be taking us—that was to take us to the extermination places.

The Germans were really caught by surprise, because they expected fully well that being so successful—you know, piece by piece to eliminate, to make the—to diminish and kill the inhabitants of the ghetto for so many years, they figured that now we're weakened enough that we'll just completely surrender. Not only that we are weakened, you know, as far as fighting is concerned, but that our psyche, that our will to live, doesn't exist anymore. So, when they decided that we would just not—then they found that we [were] just not coming out of the houses and surrender, so to speak, they were surprised, and they gave up. We thought we scored a tremendous victory. We were euphoric about it, and we thought, "Well, things will happen differently now. We showed them!"

But this was just a pyrrhic victory, because what happened? They just changed their plans. They decided that they will try it again. We didn't know that at that time, but they regrouped and they attacked Warsaw Ghetto on a Passover night—eve of Passover in April. And it was very uneven fight, to say the least.

I was in the ghetto on the day that that happened, because I was—the day before, I was on an assignment outside the ghetto. And I could have stayed out another day, because my assignment called for me to be out for the following day, too, but I was enticed by some people that I knew to come in for the Passover Seder, for the meal Passover eve, which I did. And the following morning, I was hoping that I would go out with another group again.

But it wasn't meant to be, because right after midnight we noticed that the ghetto was surrounded by artillery, by machineguns, by armored vehicles, flamethrowers, and the assault happened. They did not even ask anymore. They were not even inside the ghetto asking us to come out. It was just firepower.

As I said before, we had very little to fight this overwhelming force. There were some instances—many instances—of heroism that is even difficult to imagine. People with sidearms were attacking tanks. It was suicidal. They knew that they [were] not going to be able to accomplish much, but it was just a matter of dying with honor. So, that's what happened. The resistance lasted for about—for all practical purposes, for about a week to ten days; after that there were just sporadic skirmishes. The Germans were incinerating house by house, building by building.

Those of us who were left without any ammunition, any weapons, decided to hide until we can possibly get out of the ghetto. I and two other young men were hiding for many, many days—possibly weeks—in a cellar there, in which the previous owners stored potatoes and apples. It was possibly somebody that had a vegetable store, or something. Everything was fermented. The apples were fermented to where they just were like alcohol, but the potatoes were liquefied, so we used it for drinking as well for eating, just a little bit. At night we tried at least—all of us, three of us at the beginning—to go out and to find a way. Maybe there was a wall that we could easily scale, or may[be] a wall that was probably damaged by the artillery barrage. But it was many, many times—many days that we tried, possibly weeks that we tried.

Finally, I was left alone in that cellar. The other two guys disappeared. I don't know what happened to them. One day, I must have been disoriented. Not knowing what I was doing, I got out of the cellar during the day, and I was caught by a patrol that was looking for wretches like me that were hiding and coming out—you know, like rats, to find a way

to get out. And we were being led to the *Umschlagplatz*; there was maybe fifteen or twenty of us in the group.

We were escorted by the auxiliary police, or army, that Germans used to use in the ghetto. They were made of Latvians or Ukrainians; they were not Germans. And as they were leading us—we were already within maybe hundred, two hundred yards from the *Umschlagplatz*, from which there would be—would have been no way to [escape], you know—somebody, possibly outside of the ghetto from the building over there, shoots; a shot rang out. Our escorts fell to the ground, because there were some German tanks and artillery still in the ghetto. The ghetto was already, you know, demolished, smoldering ruins. And they started to fire at this house from which the shot came out.

Our escorts fell to the ground. Everybody else fell to the ground, except me. I ran back to the ghetto, and I hid in the rubble of building. I was there for a long, long time, at night—already it was; I saw those beautiful night sky and the moon. And the rats were nibbling at me, and I got up and I was trying to again look at the wall. I knew where the wall was because it was near the ghetto, near the *Umschlagplatz*, which I knew the surroundings.

There was another guy—I'm sorry, two other guys—that I met over there. One of them had a grenade. And I saw that they spotted a few bricks missing in a wall. They threw the grenade. There was a big bang, tremendous explosion of it. We ran away, but—they ran away. I came back, and the hole was not changed. It was just too little, two or three bricks.

I decided to take a chance. Throughout this ordeal when I was in that cellar, I had a shirt with me, a clean shirt. I had a string around it, because I knew if I had to get out and see my sister—this was my incentive because I knew that she knew that I was in the ghetto. All I was thinking about [was] going and meet her, to tell her that I am alive. So I had this, and I saved this shirt like it was my greatest possession, because I knew if I don't—if I get out in rags like this, I'll be caught right away.

So I put this—my hand with this shirt first, and I squeezed myself through it. How, I don't know. I'm—I don't know whether I'm claustrophobic now or I got claustrophobic before that. I still see that opening in the wall. I was small, of course, naturally I am, but I don't know how it was possible to get through these maybe four bricks, regular four bricks. How can a man go through that?

On the other side of the wall was a railroad station, another railroad station. Not the one I used to work before; this was a commercial railroad station. It was already almost dawn, and there was a German hospital train parked over there; it was bringing German

wounded soldiers from the Russian front. The train was besieged—well, not besieged, but there was all kinds of hobos, winos. People were asking for cigarettes and things like that.

I noticed there was a pump at the station. I took my shirt off, whatever the rag was, and I threw it away. I washed myself up a little bit. I put clean shirt [on]. I went to the— towards the train. There was a young guy—I still see his face now—in pajamas, blue pajamas, and I asked him for something to eat. I knew—by then I knew enough German. I said, “*Etwas zu essen?* Something to eat?” And he gave me a canteen with macaroni and cheese. I had my first meal in weeks, courtesy of the German army. And after I had this meal—I gobbled it up; I made sure that I (laughs) didn’t look too anxious to eat—I went back, and I was very nonchalant about it. I went back to this guy who saw me swallow it and all that, and I said to him, “*Danke schön,*” you know, “thank you very much.” And I left to see my sister.

I didn’t have any money, and I was very weakened by then because I also had a tremendous—a very terrible skin affliction, scabies. It was so bad that my—things were bleeding. My finger—here in between fingers my skin was completely raw. So I had to conceal my fingers, my hands, and it was difficult, because how did I travel? I jumped on a streetcar. I didn’t have any money. I stand on the edge of the streetcar, and if the conductor came to say, “What are you doing?” I would jump off and wait for another streetcar. That’s how I got—that’s how urgent, you know, and Warsaw during the game—during the war use transportation, and I was adept at it.

When I came to my daughter’s place—

CE: Your sister’s?

JR: My sister’s, I’m sorry. She saw—she thought I was an apparition, because she thought it was—I was dead. Where she worked as the crow flies was about maybe two miles from the ghetto. At night, they all would get on top of the roof—on top of the building, on the roof—and see the spectacle of the ghetto burning. Many people, of course, were mortified by it, but there [were] some people who were making jokes, and she had to go along with the jokes.

For some time, of course, when she first saw me, she was speechless. Naturally, she just told me to sit down, and treat me just like as a customer, gave me a breakfast. Although I had breakfast already, I ate again. And for some time I would come to her place, and she would treat me as a customer and feed me. She would give me some money so that I sometimes would pay her for the meal.

But it was getting to a point where I was afraid I was endangering her, because I was just too frequent of a visitor, and at that time, everybody was suspicious. The air of death was everywhere, and I was afraid that I was a messenger of it, that people—I would always ask, “Do people look at me?” Of course by that time, you know, she gave me some money so I got better clothing, outside of the shirt. (coughs) And—

CE: Where were you sleeping?

JR: Everywhere.

CE: Everywhere.

JR: Yeah, there was—the place that she worked was a very nice part of Warsaw, Żoliborz. It was a middle/upper middle class neighborhood, and there were very nice buildings. Sometimes I would go all the way up to the upper floor—up all the way to the attic; some attics were open, and I knew which were open and I slept over there. Some of them—sometimes I slept in those gazebos; they were little places where people could sit during the day. Different derelicts would sleep over there.

You would not believe it, but I would get some alcohol—it was moonshine. I would drink it, or just wash my mouth with it so I would smell with alcohol, and I would sleep there, so that if I was ever spotted—and I was not; of course I always—I was circumcised. I always was—if somebody decided to examine me, they would find I was a Jew, but I could always say that I was faking drunkenness, and I could do it very well. I could stagger and all that as a young kid.

So there was some tricks, you know, that I had to use. There was also—oh, yeah. There were—you know, when I was a courier, I sometimes—not very often—I would go to a very, very upper class neighborhood in Warsaw, near the theater plaza, to contact some people from Polish underground. And I was desperate, and one time I decided I’ll go and see them, because they knew who I was, and I would ask him maybe to help me, because I was afraid I was endangering my sister. I don’t know how they would help me. Somewhere in the back of my mind I thought maybe ask them to hide me.

So I went over there, and they were gone. Whether they—they were also in the underground—whether they were arrested, killed, whatever. The same day I came back, and I thought, Oh, there’s something. I saw a man that I saw before, and I suspected that

he was Jew. He looked very, very elegant. He had the three-piece suit with the vest and all that, with the tie, and I can still see that suit; it was like a very expensive suit. And I was trying to make eye contact with him, but he didn't respond, so I figured he was a Jew. But I figured—well.

The following day, I think, or maybe two days later, I was sleeping somewhere—I don't remember where—and I was (coughs) coming to my sister for breakfast. And I saw on one of the lawns—there was very much greenery, because it was a very nice neighborhood—there was a group of people standing over something. And I went over, and I saw him lying. His face was completely covered with ants. I couldn't see his face, but I recognized his suit and all that. So I was very much upset about it, and I just didn't have any appetite to eat or anything like that. And this was very unusual, you know, at that time.

So, instead of going to my sister, I got to a telephone, and I phoned [her]. I say, "I'm not coming over today," because I didn't want her to worry. And I decided to take a streetcar to go somewhere, and the streetcar took me to a place near a beach. So, I figure I'll go to the beach. I went to the beach, and I saw three guys sitting on the sand over there. They were fully dressed, you know—most of the people were at that beach, but some were in a swimming outfit. But they were sitting over there.

So I approached them, and I just introduced myself. I told them—they were playing hooky, they were hooky. They were from an under—they were going to—attending an underground school, but they decided to play hooky. So I told them I was going to do the same, and we clicked and we talked—they were about my age—talked about the girls, you know, conquests, and how they made out, this. So, I added my fantasies to it and all that.

And everything was fine, while I was afraid. There were many jokes around—Jewish—of the Jews of that time, and I don't know how I can keep my composure if the subject of Jews, you know, because the ghetto was already burned—burning and all that. Jews were on everybody's mind over there outside of the ghetto. But nothing like this happened. They had some food, which they shared with me, because I told them I got in an argument with my mother and I didn't want her food.

Well, we had good time for about two or three hours, exchange jokes, stories, this and the other thing. And the two of the guys left, and one of the—I was left with this other guy, and we talked again. And the talk was a little bit different, because we were joking. He asked me about things and I was inventing stories, you know, about where I was from.

And then, finally, he says to me, “Well, let’s go home.” And he got up, he collected his things, and he says, “Well, let’s go home.” And I was just sitting in the sand, and I was just playing with the sand and didn’t answer it. So he asked it once again, and then when I didn’t answer he was sort of annoyed, says, “Damn it, are you deaf?”

And then, when I looked up at him, I say, “I’m a Jew.”

And I expect him—you know, as I mentioned to you, that the air was the anti-Semite, the hatred. It was so—the air was so tense. For me to say, “I’m a Jew” to a stranger—and there was some people still on the beach. All he had to say, “Hey, there’s a Jew here.” And that would be—there would be probably somebody over there that would have [been] very, very happy to take me to the police station, or if it happened to be a German maybe kill me right then and there. It was unheard of. It was just—imagine that there is somebody right now, the most wanted person—on a most wanted list, and he spots an F.B.I. agent and he knows it and he says, “I am the one.” You know, that’s what it was.

And I expected him to yell, “Oh, there’s a Jew here!” And he bent down, and he says, “Mother of God! Mother of God, what are you doing here?” And he took me home. He told me we weren’t talking on the way back at all. He paid for the streetcar, although I had some money. (coughs) The only thing that he told me, he says, “My parents are out of work. I can tell my mother, but I don’t think how my father will [like the] idea. I’ll take you home and see if we can help you.” That’s all that was said.

But they lived in one of those nice new houses, you know, in this nice neighborhood. And they had a—in the cellar—in a lower level over there, they had like a shack, you know, like a cellar. And he said to me, “Go ahead. I’ll put you over there, and when my mother comes in, I’ll see how we can help you.” When I saw—I heard him [lock] the padlock on the other side, I almost died, because I was badly claustrophobic, and I thought, Well, [this is] the day I committed suicide.

But as night came, and I saw the padlock unlock. It was already dark. And he brought two pillows and something—buttermilk—and he says, “You can stay here. But you cannot come upstairs, because we don’t know how my father’s going to react.”

So, again I slept overnight. He came in, he unlocked the padlock, again he brought something to eat. I had—I took this with me, without ever saying anything. I was ready to leave, because I felt confined again, you know. Who knows, maybe he has something in mind; maybe tomorrow he’ll have the accomplice, you know. And he looked at me, and I took the couple—there were two or four steps outside, and I was at the third step. I was

already on an even level. And I was going to say goodbye or something, but in the same—at the—instead of that, I say, “Can I come back?” And they kept me like this.

I never told him that where he kept me, I was in walking distance from my sister. As a matter of fact, when I left that morning after I asked him if I can come back, the first thing I went to my sister and tell her that I’m alive, you know. Whatever he gave me to eat, I ate it at her (...).⁸ All she gave me was something to drink. I never told them about that, and that bothered me all my life.

CE: You never told him about your sister?

JR: No. It bothered me that I didn’t trust him. After the war, I was trying to find things about him. I went to Warsaw. The building was demolished because there was fight over there, you know; the Polish people up—rose up in August of 1944. I made some contact with Red Cross, and they couldn’t find anything. The communication was very, very sparse, you know, at that time.

I came to the United States and one [night], maybe twenty years ago—I was already in this country probably twenty, thirty years—I had a dream. I dreamt about this young—some young fellow, and I thought well, maybe I will resume my search for him. I did. And somebody told me that there was a Polish historian by the name [Regina] Domańska. She was publishing [at] the Holy Cross University—I think she was a professor at Holy Cross University. She was a historian, and she was chronicling the Warsaw ghetto—Warsaw underground.

I got a hold of the book, and there was a listing that Janusz Rybakiewicz was hung.⁹ Where was he hung? He was hung from the balcony of a building that was still standing in the Warsaw Ghetto, across the street from the Polish Supreme Court on such and such street. That might have been the building that I stayed in, because when I was in the ghetto, especially that night that I came in for the Passover meal, it was right across the street from the building of the Supreme Court.

Then, of course, I started a campaign to have him—because I thought he was just a—he was just—when he was young, he was seven—eighteen years old. For an adult to show this much compassion for a man, for another young man, for a Jew who escaped the ghetto, was one thing—and many did—but he was just a young kid. So, I started to—I

⁸ Interviewee clarifies: “I ate it at her place of work.”

⁹ JR is probably referring to Domańska’s book *Pawiak: więzienie Gestapo 1939-1944* (Pawiak Gestapo Prison, 1939-1944), which contains a list of names of Polish prisoners who were deported to Auschwitz from the Pawiak prison in Warsaw.

petitioned at Yad Vashem. I heard that they were seeking people like that, who were helping at the risk of their own life to save Jews, and I felt that he fit that role supremely well. But it was so many thing that I had to do, you know; they were so—it was—and the title of this thing was—these people who awarded this honor was Righteous Among the Nations. And to be declared Righteous Among the Nations, you had to undergo the same scrutiny if you applied for a Nobel Prize.

So just two years ago, I, after many, many, many years—I almost gave it up again, but I went to Israel four years ago. I went to the Yad Yashem, and again, a coincidence. There was a receptionist that I thought she would be just another person, impersonal thing. I was going to ask her, “Listen, I have applied for such and such thing. What’s happening with it?” Guess what? She was a survivor.

CE: Was what?

JR: A survivor.

CE: Oh, mm-hm.

JR: So she helped me. I told her the story, and two years later it came to fruition. So, sometimes I am considered a hero, a person who survived because of certain things. To me, some of the things that made me survive, that helped me to survive, were almost impossible things to—I sometimes talk about these things, and I ask myself, “Was that possible? Did it really happen?” And I think this is so—in the some of these things, I feel—one of these—every little episode that I talk about maybe doesn’t mean much. But some of these things, I think, describe the tragedies, the quintessence of the Holocaust and what people went through.

It is almost impossible, no matter how exhaustive an interview or a book or an essay, to sometimes express the feelings that one has about this things, because how does—as impossible and improbable [as] these things were, it is almost impossible to describe. The cruelty was design—by the Germans was designed. They could have done all these things to us in a less cruel way, but you know why they didn’t? Because they knew they could only get away with it if people (...).¹⁰ The normal human being says, “That’s impossible.” And that’s what happened.

¹⁰ Interviewee clarifies: “They could only get away with it if people could not believe such cruelty was possible.”

Of course, I'm not about to absolve people who haven't helped us in any significant way to survive. But it's natural. I don't know, if somebody told me sixty years ago that they are burning—that they are gassing people, men, women, children—I mean, for a human being, for a normal human being, it was difficult to take. And they knew that. And they say the more impossible, the more egregious, the more cruel, the more inhumane, they'll do it. Fewer people will believe it. And that's—

CE: So, how long were you with this—in this basement, or this cellar?

JR: I can't tell—during the ghetto, or when he's—

CE: No, with—when he—with this—

JR: I would say—

CE: —with this young man.

JR: I would say it was anywhere between four and six weeks, something like that.

CE: Four to six weeks.

JR: I would, and—oh, I mentioned to you that two—well, one thing bothered me all my life, because I never told—I never, because I have—I would have told him, look, it'll be much less strain on him. “Look, I have a sister here; you don't have to feed me.” I'm here, you know. (coughs) So I didn't say that, because you know this thing that I had in that—when they caught me and I had that telephone [number]? I was so protective of this, I figured—oh.

So, and another thing that bothered me that I never—he never knew what happened to me.

Pause in recording

JR: There was another thing that happened. After the war, after the ghetto was demolished, a rumor spread again. Lo and behold, the Germans declared an amnesty on

every Jew that was hiding or was hidden by whoever outside of the ghetto. “Let’s bygones be bygones. Whatever happened, fine.” But those who survived are lucky, because they made a deal with South American countries that were holding German prisoners of war, that they need to repatriate these German prisoners of war, and the only way that the South American countries will agree to the deal [is] if they will be exchanged for the Jews. So let the Jews come out, register in this particular hotel—the name of this was Polish Hotel on Długa Street—and that’s it, and they will be exchanged.

When I heard that, of course I was little bit incredible. I was—I couldn’t believe that, but you know what they say, nothing try, nothing lost. So, I went to this hotel. What I saw over there was so unbelievable that again, I don’t believe what that I saw. I entered that hotel and there was this beautiful—what do you call it? Not reception room, what is—the lounge. And the first thing that caught my eye was this tremendous coffee table with tropical fruit on it—bananas, oranges; there was some regular fruit, too. And I just couldn’t believe it. First I thought it maybe it was artificial or something, but no, they were real fruit.

Here I am, few weeks, maybe a couple of months away from the ghetto. I still see the pictures of the ghetto, of the burning—I almost smell the burning, you know, of the people and buildings. It was still in my nostrils. And here I see this thing, and I (laughs) had to pinch myself. Of course I’m not really going to pinch myself, but I thought, “Is this real, or is this something?” You mean, how lucky am I going to be, to go to South America. And I was always—as a kid I loved geography. I always imagined myself going high places, to the South Pole and all that. Wouldn’t it be nice to go to South America? I heard about South America. I know there’s Andes over there, Aconcagua. I say, “Oh, my God!”

And I see these people sitting over there luxuriating in this opulence of this lounge over there, and I’m told that—go upstairs and talk, register for their thing. So I went upstairs, and there is a—as a matter of fact there’s a—if you double this, it was just like here, almost the same color of the table. And there were ten guys sitting like a board of directors, and they asked me. “Well this is—of course I want to go.” So, they gave me some money, gave some money. I said, “Well, I also have a sister, who—” I took money for her.

As I was coming out, I saw two notorious—one German and one Jew collaborator come into this hotel. When I saw it, my heart stopped almost. But right—I was little bit—I wasn’t sure that I was going to go to South America, that I wanted to go via this particular way. But when I saw these two my mind was made up, and I couldn’t wait to go to the telephone and tell my sister, because she knew what I was doing. Just forget about it, we’re not going anywhere. And when I was—as I left that hotel, I was always aware of the fact that these blackmailers, you know—remember I told you

szmalcownicy? These blackmailers, where would they congregate, where would they try to find somebody to blackmail, if not a Jew coming out from the hotel? Because they knew—everybody know.

CE: Right.

JR: And I was in such stress. I had money with me, and I thought there were two guys over; they eyed me, you know. So I gave them a slip, and I left. I got on a train. I left Warsaw. And I never told him [Janusz]. He might have waited for me that night.

I communicated with my [sister]—after that, I never came back to Warsaw. And when the war was coming to an end, I found my way to a town that was already liberated by the Russians, Lublin. It's the place where that very notorious Majdanek concentration camp was—death camp. Majdanek, on a scale of brutality and killing machine, was probably just beyond Treblinka and Auschwitz. And I was—I found—as a matter, I got a job with a security firm over there. It was sort of quasi-military thing. As a matter of fact, I think I mentioned to you before one of the commander—the commandant of this detail was the one who helped me to get to the sanitarium when I got sick.

And we were guarding four prisoners, German prisoners. They were just—looked like normal human beings. We got friendly with them, they got friendly; they were very nice. We were nice to them, they were nice to us. And they were working very hard. We felt very sorry for them because they were dismantling industrial printing plant or something, and they were loading and unloading this machinery, heavy machinery. And it was warm; it was July or something like that. And we felt very sorry for them, because the Russians were getting everything back to Russia.

One day we got four other people, and we ask our foreman, “What happened to the other ones?” “Oh, they're on trial.” “On trial for what?” They were guards from the Majdanek concentration camp, they were—caught prisoners. And I went to this trial. It was the most unbelievable experience. I went through four years of hell and I thought I knew it all, but what I found from the witnesses that were brought on in stretchers—you know, half alive—were testifying against them—

They were sentenced to death, of course, by hanging. The hanging was in public on the ground of the Majdanek concentration camp, which I attended also. But what I remember—and I will remember it for the rest of my life—that the judge who sentenced them to die, in pronouncing the sentence, he said something to the effect that he knew that was not done. Nothing like this has been done ever in a history of jurisprudence, but he'll add—he would like to add as his wish to the sentence, and he said, “I wish that when you

catch your last breath, when the noose is tightening around your necks and your sight is affected, is become—against the opacity of your eyesight, you will see a picture of a mother with a child in her arm being pushed in a gas chamber.”

And I think that if nothing else you can talk about the Holocaust, you can bemoan the tragedy, the death of the death of the people. But what he said in one sentence was the quintessence of this thing, because what greater sacrifice is there for a mother knowing that she is going to witness execution of her child? And to me, this is something that—there are certain pictures that I always remember, I always will remember, and there are certain sounds that I always have in my mind. And this is one of those things that I always remember.

CE: Is there a message that you would to put on the end of this to people?

JR: Well, what I—well, if I had my way, if I could, for example, pronounce something that would carry weight—and I said that I wrote this once before long time ago. And I think now that I think about it, I think that we should write a new chapter in the human ecology, and I don’t mean a human ecology that deals with humans interacting with nature. It’s the ecology of human spirit where humans will interact with other humans.

Because we have come to such tremendous achievements scientifically—I mean, we don’t need any more discoveries that will tell us how subatomic particles travel with a greater speed than light. We have enough of that. We should be able to have understanding between one human and the other one, because if we don’t achieve that, no physical spectaculars in science, in medicine, in biology will help us survive. I think if we can possibly do it, that’s what we have to work: to eradicate the hatred, the misunderstandings, the misconceptions. And if we have accomplished that, I think this will be greatest achievement ever for humanity at this point.

CE: Do we have another couple minutes? Two minutes? Okay. Then I think we’ll—let’s stop here for now.

JR: Okay.

Part 3 ends; part 4 begins

CE: This is July 1. This is tape four, interview with Jerry Rawicki. So, Jerry, let’s start, then, with liberation.

JR: After I attended this trial of those four concentration camp guards, I was so happy. I was so ready to leave Lublin. The Russian army was poised at the eastern side of the Vistula River, and on the other side of the river, the Poles rebelled against the Germans. There was that—I think it was—the rebellion was going on for many, many months now, and the Germans—the Russians had the capability of crossing the river. There was a whole Russian army [ready] to liberate Warsaw and could help the Polish underground against the Germans. But the Polish underground in Warsaw at that time was affiliated with the Polish government in exile in London. And they [the Russians] decided not to intervene. So, there was political push and pull. And they were waiting to cross the river to make a final assault to continue all the way to Berlin, until the Germans quelled the uprising in Warsaw.

So, when they finally built the pontoon bridges and all that, I hitchhiked with the Russian army, and I went to Warsaw. I looked up the place where my sister worked and where I was rescued by my rescuer. The whole neighborhood was demolished, and I continued, all the way to the Polish recovered territories, because in a deal between the Allies, Russians and the Western powers, part of eastern Poland was ceded to the Russians, and part of the western Germany was ceded to the Poles. One of the cities that was in that recovered territories that Poland recovered, that historically were supposedly belonging to Poland, was the city of Wrocław—German Breslau.

I resumed my studies, and I was working and studying. We went there just a couple weeks after the Russians liberated that particular part of Germany, now Poland. Germans were so scared. Those who were Nazis, of course—and most of them were—they just fled. They didn't want to be caught by the Russians. And everything was left as they avoided the Russians.

We had our choice of apartments. I and a friend of mine acquired an apartment with a Bechstein piano, a very, very wonderful apartment. There were—everything was left just as they lived, two or three days before. In that building, in that area, some of the Germans were left, but they were so scared of us. I was eighteen years old, nineteen years old; my friend was a little bit older. At night, they were so afraid that we would come to their apartment and tell them to get out that they were banging on pots and pans. There was such a din (laughs) that almost annoyed us, but this was their way of—I don't know, saving themselves from our intrusion.

And I was thinking about it, how ironic it was that we could have anything that we wanted because they inflicted such pain on us—of course, they didn't know that we were Jews, because they thought Jews were already gone. But they thought of Poles, as Polish people, and they knew what they did to the Polish population, too. So, as I think of it now, it was eerie. You know, we could get everything we wanted. I remember there were

—this apartment that we took, this was the first one; then we took another one somewhere else, because then I lived in one and my buddy lived in another one. And it was a beautiful—one was—I know the names of the streets, and it was just unbelievable.

At one point, my friend knew how to ride a motorcycle. I didn't even know that he did. But I [remember] one day—he comes in and says, “Rawicki, let's go for a ride.” I said, “What do you mean?” We found a motorcycle, so we got a motorcycle. It was just unbelievable. And this shows you that—what they say, what goes around, comes around, or vice versa.

It was just unbelievable. And I said to myself, This is exactly what the Germans did. The movie that I saw, the Polish movie *Border Street* [*Ulica Graniczna*, 1948], there was a street—there was a scene where they just told the—they found out that the Jewish doctor was—that the doctor was a Jew, and they told him, “Get out.” They appropriated the apartment and everything else. We did the same thing to them, but of course on a smaller scale. We didn't hurt anybody.

So, then I worked and I attended school. We had an accelerated course that led to my entry into university. I had one year of law school, and the Russians insisted that I either give up my passport, because I was waiting [for a] visa from the United States, from my family—from my aunt—or I just leave. Which I left, because I figured that I could resume my studies in the United States, but it didn't happen.

So, when I got to New York and I was hoping that I would prepare myself so that I can enter university, I came across a professor who was a dyed-in-the-wool communist. And he had a real vendetta against me. Why? Because I left that socialist paradise and came to these bankrupt, terrible United States. So, I was heartbroken I couldn't, you know, pursue my studies, what I wanted. I always wanted to be—ever since I was a little kid, I thought I would study law someday. And I decided to be—went to a trade school, became an optician. One of my assignments took me to manage an optical department in Pittsburgh. I met my wife. I got married. I had a wonderful two children, a daughter and a son, and that's how my odyssey ended.

CE: What are their names, your children?

JR: The daughter is Susan, and son is Andrew.

CE: And tell us about Susan, where she lives and what she does.

JR: Susan lives near us. She has a daughter, a twenty-one year old daughter. My daughter Susan is an assistant principal in Osceola Middle School. I'm her father, so I'm a little bit (laughs) prejudiced, maybe, but she's a wonderful person. She just—she has more friends than I know people. She is just very, very—she's just a wonderful person.

My son—again, I'm prejudiced, too. He's a very nice guy. He is in—he lives in southern California. He's a petroleum engineer. He started as a—he's a graduate from Penn State University. He started as a roustabout on an oil rig, and now he works in (inaudible), where he has an upper management position with Chevron. And he has a wonderful family. He has a wonderful family, which has—he has three sons, two daughters, and he has one foster child—I'm sorry, one adopted child, and now he has one foster child.

CE: Wow.

JR: They are so loving, and they are such wonderful people, again. People, when they talk about my children, they say, "They just don't make them like this anymore." And I agree with them.

CE: Lovely, lovely. And let's end by your just telling us about your sister, where she is and how she's doing.

JR: Oh, yes. My sister is a very integral part of my life. She's [born in] 1920; she's eighty-nine years old. She lives in Israel. Two years ago she lost her husband, and they were married for about fifty-five years. She's the most wonderful person. Her mind is as clear as a nineteen year old. I talk to her every week, and we start with politics, we end with sports. (CE laughs) It's just unbelievable. She's so—and now she became—within one year, she has become a great-grandmother. So this is—of course to her, it's a joy to see these great-grandchildren.

She is an English—she is a dual citizen, because when I came to the United States, she went to England, where she married an Englishman. As I said, they were married for fifty-five years. She has two children: a son, who is a lawyer in England, and a daughter, who is in Israel working in public relations. It is so amazing, because her son and her daughter are almost carbon copies of my children, as far as the personality, and it's just the most amazing thing. I can sometimes listen to her tell me about her daughter, and I think she's talking about my daughter.

So, I think this tells you what my sister is. She's a joy. And every Sunday morning, nine o'clock—it's two o'clock at her place, and I say to her, "Good afternoon," and she says to me, "Good morning." And we just—the only thing that we don't talk too much about is about the Holocaust.

CE: And I guess you don't really need to talk about that.

JR: Oh, no. We used to, but now she's getting older, and I think it's painful. We did talk about it—I don't know how it happened, but just a few months ago she told me about this incident that she had when she was working in that coffee shop. And I was listening to it, and sometimes I wished that she didn't tell me, because I knew the pain that she went through. She's just as emotional as I am; same DNA, I guess.

CE: This has been just wonderful. Thank you for sharing your life story with me and with everyone who will see this in the future. It's quite a gift.

JR: I'll tell you—well, you know it is—I don't want to use the word pleasure, but it was so wonderful to be able to share with you my story. And I hope it falls on a fertile ground, so that people will—some young people, older people, especially young people who twenty, thirty years from now will say, You know what, this guy was right. And maybe what I did, what I said, and what you do will contribute to a better world, because you have a stake in it. You're doing as much as I do by keeping the flame, you know, alive, burning.

CE: Thank you. Thank you.

JR: Thank you very much.

End of interview