

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

LAURA OBERLENDER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Eileen Steinberg

Date: October 14, 1987

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Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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LO - Laura Oberlender¹ [interviewee]

ES - Eileen Steinberg [interviewer]

Date: October 14, 1987

Tape one, side one:

ES: Laura, please tell me where you were born and when and a little bit about your family.

LO: I was born in Poland in Tuszyn in 1934. And I had a mother and father and sister, who was killed. And I survived with my mother and father.

ES: What kind of business did your father have?

LO: My father had a wholesale flower place.

ES: In the town?

LO: Right, in the same town.

ES: What was your life like before the war, or before your life was changed by the Nazi victories in Europe?

LO: Well, from what I remember we had--we lived with my grandparents, my father's parents. And there were a lot of aunts and uncles in the house. And my mother had to help my father out in the business. So therefore we had a woman to take, was taking care of my sister and myself. And I remember basically on *Shabbas* they used to take walks and my father would go to synagogue and that's about it.

ES: Did your family experience any antisemitism before the Hitler period?

LO: I'm sure they did but I think I was too young to remember that.

ES: Did you or your family belong to any Jewish organizations or to a synagogue before the Nazis came to power?

LO: Well, everyone went to synagogue. I don't think you had to be members at that time to belong to a synagogue. You just went to synagogue. There were many synagogues in the, in town. And everyone went to synagogue. It wasn't just like on the High Holidays. You went every week or every day.

ES: Would you say your family was a religious family?

LO: Yes, yes. Everyone in town was.

ES: Did any men in your family serve in any national army?

LO: Not that I know.

ES: Can you tell me a little bit about your life in Poland in the early part of 1939, before the German invasion? First of all in 1939 you would have been...

LO: Five.

ES: Just five years old.

¹née Emmett.

LO: But I do remember. I remember in 1939 the Russians took over our part of Poland. And I remember the planes flying and dropping bombs and my mother, we were all running into the woods. And I remember at five years old hiding under a tree. And I had ribbons in my hair. And I said, "Tell my mother to take my ribbons off because the pilots are gonna see my ribbons." And that's what I remember. And then the Russians came over. And it was very dramatic. Because in 1938 my father was building a very beautiful home, because I guess we were wealthy. I don't know, I imagine. And when the Russians came in, my father was sure that we were gonna be sent away to Siberia because we had like maids and we had people working for us. So it was a very dramatic experience. And I remember that every night the whole family would get together and sort of say good-bye to us. And my parents had suitcases ready that, they usually used to come in at night and take you out and put you on trucks and send you away. At that time we thought it was, that was the worst. We didn't know what was coming, but that's the part I remember.

ES: What happened to you and your family during the weeks following the German invasion?

LO: Well, the first week when the Germans invaded our town, the, a few days later they were a lot of the gentile people that had grievances against Jews. So they formed a pogrom and they were going around killing and hitting and whatever, and robbing. And my father's name was not on that list. And it was on a Friday night. My mother had just lit candles. And they passed our house. There was like a whole bunch of people from the town, all from the surrounding areas, farmers, I don't know. And they had a few German soldiers with them. And they passed our house. And because it was such a beautiful home, it was just completed, the German turned around and he said in German, "What about this house?" And they said, "Come on." So my mother ran to the back to open the door they shouldn't be banging. And the minute she opened the door they hit her with a rifle over the head. And they started beating her and they threw her out into the yard. And my sister and I were standing there and we were screaming, I remember. And her, she was screaming horribly. And then when she stopped screaming and they were hitting her maybe five, six of them, with rifles and you could hear her blood gushing from her head. I'll never forget it. It was like zhzhzhzh, that kind of sound. And when they thought that she was dead they said in Polish, "Let's go into the house." And my sister pulled me away from the house, from the doorway. And that's all I remember. The next thing I remember I was laying under a bed in one of the bedrooms and they were looking for me. My father and my uncle, my mother's brother, they were calling my name. And I want--I opened up my eyes and I wanted to say, or I thought I was saying, "Here I am," but I realized that no words were coming out of my mouth. So I realized that I couldn't talk and I tried to pick myself up and I couldn't. And they were looking for me all night long and they couldn't find me. They finally found me and they put me on a, on the couch in the living room. And they thought I was dead. They covered

me up with a blanket. I don't know. And I was laying there all night long thinking that they're gonna bury me dead. And I was young but I remember that very distinctly. And my uncle was saying to my father, "You see that she is dead. Let's go and try to help," my mother. Because she had seven holes in her head and she was bleeding horribly. And of cour-, my sister wasn't touched. And I found out afterwards that my mother's friend, who was there visiting with a baby, was killed in the house. And my mother and I and, I guess in the morning they realized I wasn't dead. But I remember thinking, they put a Bible under my head and they, every once in a while someone would come and look at me and they said, "She's," they thought I was dead. I don't know. I was breathing, I guess, but they thought I was dead.

ES: And you were completely aware that this was going on but you couldn't talk.

LO: Absolutely. I thought they were gonna bury me alive. I kept, every time they uncovered me I wanted, I was like saying, "I am alive!" But no words were coming out of my mouth. So the next morning they took us away into a very, like a poor part of the town. They, in other words, they hid us, my father, because he was afraid that someone's gonna come and see that we are still alive. So my mother and I were laying in bed there and I couldn't speak. They realized I guess in the morning that I was alive, I don't know. But this was going on for weeks and months. I was paralyzed. I found out afterwards they must have hit me over the head. And I had a blood clot. It didn't open up. If the blood had gone out I would have been better off, if it was an open wound. But instead it, you know, it, I had a blockage on my right side and it caused paralysis. And then in the morning my whole face swelled up and I, my eyes were all closed. I was, I could not see. And, but I heard everything and I understood. My brain was working. And my mother was laying there bandaged up with--she was half dead. She had seven holes in her head. And she, her nose was broken. Her eye, her bone over the, her right eye was broken and she was like, her, she couldn't see from the eye. And she was all bandaged up and swollen all over the body. And if you looked, you know, if you wanted to get a medical help they would have killed you right away. So you couldn't get help. And my mother was praying to God that I should die already because I was blind and mute and deaf and paralyzed and everything. And, I don't know, somehow or other we, the two of us survived. And after a long, long time I started to walk. But my left hand, I'm sorry, my right hand, is still not, my father was working with me all the time, exercising and, as much as he could without any medical advice or anything. But till this day I do have a weakness in my right hand. And I had to start using my left hand. I was never left-handed, but now I eat with my left hand. I write with my right hand. And I'm not really left-handed or right-handed. So I'm a little bit confusing. But somehow or other, I guess you would call this a miracle that I survived, that I, I'm normal. And my mother had--she was sick for a very, very long time and she has a--her eye is, she's not blind but she had

lost a lot of the vision in her eye. And she has a lot of scars, still till this day. But she survived too.

ES: Where was this place that your father took you, the night after the night.

LO: He took us like into, in the same town, but like you would, you know, in the poor section of the town.

ES: In a house?

LO: In a house, but it was like very poor. In the poor section of the town.

ES: And you weren't bothered there?

LO: Well, the rich were--like where we lived in the homes was like one of the nicest in town, because it was new. And we were afraid to stay there because it was such an attraction.

ES: How long did you stay in this particular house?

LO: I guess it was months. I can't remember. Because afterwards, I think I remember we were going, we went to my mother's, mother's house. We were afraid to go back to the house for a long time.

ES: To your own house.

LO: Right.

ES: Okay, and then you stayed with your mother's mother.

LO: My grandmother for a long time, like I don't know how long, but I guess it was months, I'm sure.

ES: During this time when you were in the poorer section of the town, did any non-Jews do anything to help you?

LO: No.

ES: So you just depended on your own family?

LO: Right. Well it was the beginning of the war. And at that time they really weren't killing right out. It wasn't, it was just the beginning, when it was 19-, I guess 1939, the beginning of maybe 1940. I'm not sure. I think it was probably 1939.

ES: After you went to your grandmother's house, how long did you stay there?

LO: I imagine it was months.

ES: Was your father able to do any kind of work during this time or not?

LO: No.

ES: Nothing at all.

LO: No. During this time the Germans would demand--they formed, it was called a *kehillah*, like a little government--and they would come into town every few weeks or every so often and demand certain things that the *kehillah* should get together and deliver to them, whether it was clothing or furs or silver or paintings or whatever. And they had to go around and get it from the people together.

ES: The members of the *kehillah* had to go around.

LO: Right, right. And also a few weeks right after that pogrom that we had, they, that committee had to get together like the intellectual people in town. And they

didn't know what was the reason for that--which one of them was my mother's brother. And they killed them, all of them. It was like 20 or 30 people already. That was the first few weeks of the occupation, the German occupation. They killed them right in the middle of town, every one of them.

ES: All the intellectuals?

LO: Yeah.

ES: How were you and your parents able to survive during this time, and your sister? You were just able to live off the money that you had accumulated?

LO: I guess so, because there was no work.

ES: All right. You and your sister were not able to go to school?

LO: No. Well I was I think maybe too young to go to school. But there was no schooling, no.

ES: Did you and your family have any communication with the outside world, or did you hear any radio or, see any newspapers? Anything like that? Did you know what was going on outside of your town?

LO: Well.

ES: Did your parents know?

LO: People somehow knew. I'm sure it wasn't by newspapers or radio. It was just by word of mouth. Some people came into town and they said that they were doing certain things to Jews in different countries or different towns. And it was hard to believe. People did not want to believe that that they just, you know, that they had concentration camps where they were taking people in and they were killing them. And I remember men sitting around and talking about it all the time. And I think that they had a hard time believing that. They all thought it was rumors. And they all said that, "Well, it couldn't happen because they needed the Jews to survive because the Jews were such a vital part of whatever, the industry and everything. How could they manage without the Jews?" That they...

ES: You were aware, the people were aware what was going on but just didn't believe it.

LO: Right.

ES: Basically. To what extent did the Poles help the Nazis persecute the Jews?

LO: They helped them a lot. Actually, they weren't really Poles. It was Poland when I was born but they were Ukrainians. And they were really vicious. They were worse than the Germans. They were very bad.

ES: Did you have any, or your family have any particular experiences yourself with them?

LO: Yes, later on in the war we did have, right.

ES: What happened?

LO: My father had, one of his customers was a very dear friend of his. He was a Ukrainian man by the name of Pavlo [phonetic]. And he lived three miles away from

town. And when he heard about that pogrom, what happened to my mother and me, I don't remember but my mother and father told me that he came to see us a few times. And he, I think he would bring maybe milk or butter, whatever, to help out. Because he was afraid for himself to be seen in a Jewish neighborhood. But I think he did come a few times. So, later on, towards the end of the war when they formed a ghetto in our town, they took like 40 homes in the poorest section of the town and they made, they put up a big fence, and they said that this is where the Jews have to be by a certain time and so forth. And everybody was moving in. And they were bringing in all the Jews from the surrounding villages into the town.

ES: Did your family have to go into the ghetto too?

LO: Yes. And my grandmother's house was in the ghetto. So we went with my grandmother. But while we were packing and all, there was a principal from Czechoslovakia--who wasn't Jewish--and they asked him, the Germans asked him to take a Jewish house for him to live. So of course he picked our house. And he came in. And we were packing to go into the ghetto. And he saw my sister. And they had no children. So he approached my parents, him and his wife, rather, and they said they would love to adopt my sister. And my parents thought it was ridiculous. And he said that, "You know you're gonna be killed. And maybe it's her fate to survive. And we don't have any children. We'll treat her as our own child." She was a very beautiful child. So, at first my parents wouldn't hear of it. And they didn't make much of, about that. Later on when we went to the ghetto and we saw what was going on, we saw all the Gestapo they were bringing in, and they had like a date, say like, tomorrow at 3:00 the gates are gonna, everyone has to be inside the ghetto and if they're gonna find any--they let you go in and out up to that time. And they said, "By such and such a date if you, they find you outside of the ghetto you're gonna be automatically shot to death." And I guess people knew what was coming and it was very obvious what the intent was. Because they were like putting in people all over. There was no room even to walk on the streets. There were people all over the place. And people, till the very end, were very foolish because they were bringing all their belongings with them, whatever they had--their silverware and all kinds of things, bringing them with them. And the gentile people were waiting outside the ghetto, a lot of, all the women and young people with sacks waiting. They knew that once the Jews are gonna be killed they're gonna fill those sacks with all the belongings that belonged to the Jews. So while all this was going on my father said, "Let's try to," so he thought of his friend Pavlo, the one that used to be a very good customer of his and he was a very fine man. And we tried to make a break for it. Because the ghetto was still open. So my mother and father and my sister and I tried to get over to his farm. Because he lived--he had a farm three miles away. And we made it half way. And then we encountered some 16-, 17-year-old boys. And we had to cross over a river. And they had little boats. So they got us in the boats and they tried to shake my father up for some money and more money and more money. And every time they said, "If you don't give

us more money we're gonna call the police." And the end was of course they did call the police and somehow or other we got out from the boat on the other side and we started running. And they called the police and they started shooting after us. And they caught us and they beat us up. And it was right, not far from the farmer. And they took us back--for some reason or other, I don't know why they didn't kill us right there and then. They took us back to the ghetto. And they said, "If you try this again it's gonna be an instant death." And I think that this farmer Pavlo must have heard about it. And he somehow, because it wasn't a very big town and everyone knew each other. And they, he must have realized that it was my father trying to get to him, trying to hide out. So in the meantime when we came back my father said, and my mother sat down and they discussed very seriously giving my sister to that principal. And they dressed her up and I remember saying to my sister, "Don't go." And she said, "Whatever, I'll do whatever my, you know, Mom and Dad say." And she, and they said, they kissed her good-bye. And my father took her over there to the principal. And he said, you know, "Take care of my child," and so forth. And my parents said, "If we survive the war we're not, you know, we'll trace him down no matter where he is and we'll get her back." And he came back. And when he came back, within a matter of maybe a half an hour, Pavlo came into the ghetto. And he brought peasant clothes for my sister and my mother and me. He said he couldn't take my father, but he'll try to smuggle us out as his wife and children. But my sister was gone already. It was just *beskert* [fate]. So, my mother and I, he dressed us in peasant clothes and he smuggled us out from the ghetto. And we were there.

ES: He took you to his farm?

LO: Right, to his farm.

ES: In meantime your sister has gone to stay with the principal.

LO: Right.

ES: And your father is in...

LO: And my father is in the ghetto. And they said, and this was like the day before they were gonna close up the ghetto, which they said at 3:00 they're gonna close up the ghetto. The meantime, the next day, we slept over at the farmer's house, my mother and I. And the next day my sister was supposed to come back say at 12:00 to say good-bye to the whole family because she knew at 3:00 they're gonna close up the ghetto. So in the meantime they changed the plans and they were gonna close the ghetto say at 12:00. So my father was afraid that she is gonna, you know, she's gonna...

ES: She'll be stuck in the ghetto.

LO: She'll be stuck. And at that time they already actually closed the ghetto I think. That's what it was, they already closed it. They closed it ahead of time. And young boys were trying to make a jump of, you know, jump, to jump over the gates, I mean the fence. And they had Gestapo waiting there all around. Every few feet there was a Gestapo with a rifle. And people were being shot left and right. And my father was never a very good athletic. But here, you know, he was like standing there and he knew that any

second my sister is gonna come and they're gonna get her in and that was gonna be the end. So, like he said, he doesn't care, you know, he's gonna give it a try. He jumped over. And the time when he jumped over the fence I guess the Gestapo turned his head for that split of a second and they didn't catch him. It was something just *beshert*. And he...

ES: Fate.

LO: Yeah, and he ran into the house and sure enough my sister was getting ready to leave the house. And he told her what happened and not to go. And he also, you know, and he said to her, "We have all kinds of hiding places in the house." Because during the time we had the German occupation, until the ghetto, from the time they occupied, my father made all kinds of hiding places because they would come so often and we would hide. So there was all kinds of hiding places. He had one hiding place under the steps. And they were like fantastic hiding places. So he told my sister. He told the principal and his wife that he's going back to the ghetto. But he told my sister that he was gonna hide in one.

ES: In the house.

LO: In the house. So she knew that he was gonna hide. And when he left the house he like he slammed the door and he jumped into, under the steps. He was inside the house though. And...

ES: This is his own house now.

LO: Right, right. And my sister is in the house. Well, a few hours later the people--you only hear about the Warsaw Ghetto, you don't hear about this little ghetto, but it was the same kind of thing. The people decided that rather than to be slaughtered and have the *Goyim* get all their belongings that they'll put the whole ghetto on fire. So within a few hours it was like 60 or 70 homes. They put gasoline in. I don't know where they got the gasoline--and the whole ghetto started burning at night. And so the Germans could not get into the ghetto. They were just shooting and people were running. And that night they were, I forget how many, I think like maybe 2,000 people escaped into the woods. And we saw, and I remember the farmer, he woke us up and he said, "Look what's going on. There's a big fire in town." It had, you know, he knew it had to be, and you know, I guess it was three miles away. So they must have told him that the ghetto is on fire. And we were watching it. And he got scared already right there and then, Pavlo. So he said to my mother, "Well maybe we'll put you in the barn, not in the house in case the neighbors come or whatever." So he put us in the barn, on top of the, on the hay, my mother and I. And we didn't know what was going on. We were like crying. We were all upset. And so that's what happened. A lot of people were able to escape but unfortunately by the end of the war they were all killed. None of them, maybe just two, three survived, that's it, from the whole people that escaped. And my father, he was hiding there for about a week. And my sister, when she would have meals, she would hide a piece of bread under her, you know, in her sleeves. And then she would, you know, go down and she would throw him a piece of bread here and there, when she

could. And after a week or so the Germans said that, they wanted to get the Jews together again so they said that whoever survived they're not gonna do anything. And people had no place where to go, they had nothing to eat, they had no place where to sleep, so I guess they came back into town. They thought, you know, "They're not gonna do anymore, you know." Now they need them because they need them for work and for this, for that, whatever.

ES: So they came back out of the woods.

LO: So they came back. Most of them came back because they had no place to go. It was right before *Yom Kippur*, so I guess it must have been cold. I don't know. I don't know. So my father slammed the door again, he came in, like he made pretend like he just came into the house. And he told the principal that my mother and I are with a friend and he's gonna try to make his way there. And my sister, he was very happy for her, he said, "It looks like, you know, you're the lucky one." And she wanted to go with him but he told her that it would be foolish because we'll probably get killed. And she had such a loving home and they love her so much and all this. So she stayed. And he made his way. And like I said probably he had, it was his fate to survive. And he made his way to that farm. And he came and joined my mother and I. And the farmer Pavlo, he was a poor farmer, he said, "Well what's gonna be, you know? When are you gonna leave?" And my father said, "Well, let's wait a couple days, you know, and when, I'll make a plan where am I gonna go, what am I gonna eat, what's gonna be," and all this business. And he said, "I can't help you with much because I don't have myself. I don't have enough food for my own family." And of course a few weeks later they made another *Aktion* it was called. They killed all the rest of the people that came back. And they just, you know, well they still, now the gentile people I think probably the teenagers, it was their game every Sunday to go hunting for Jews in the woods. This is what they used to do. Because the German soldiers, they did their job and they were done. They wouldn't, they'd rather sit and you know, drink, whatever. They weren't gonna go hunting. But these, the *Goyim* used to. They used to take, they said a rifle was too good for a Jew. And they had, there was a party called, they called themselves *Banderivtses*², the name. I don't know if you ever heard this name.

ES: Yes, I have.

LO: And they would go out hunting Jews. And then as the weather turned colder and it was snowing, so when people had to, they were like in hiding places, they made holes in the ground in the woods, and with the, from the snow, the tracks it would lead right to the graves, I mean not the graves, to the bunkers where they were hiding. And so it was easy trapping for them to see where the people were. And gradually

²*Banderivtses* – refers to a band of Ukrainian partisans known as *Banderovtsy* (named for their national hero, Stepan Bandera) which was fighting for the independence of Ukraine, but known to have committed antisemitic acts and murder Jews (www.ushmm.org, Holocaust Encyclopedia, "Stanislawow" and Philip Friedman, *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*, Philadelphia: JPS, 1980, p. 257-8).

through the two years they were all of them killed, including my mother's sister and a few other relatives that we had.

ES: Now most of these teenagers were what nationality?

LO: Ukrainian.

ES: Ukrainians.

LO: They weren't Polish. They were Ukrainians, yes. In the meantime, to make a long story short, we stayed with that farmer until the end of the war. He kept us for 18 months.

ES: 18 months. That's a...

LO: Yes.

ES: ...very long time. It was a big risk for him.

LO: It was a very big risk for him, and he didn't intend to keep us. He, we still correspond with him till this day. He is, we call him our angel. He is the most wonderful person. He's just a marvelous, marvelous person. I mean he actually took his life, he said he didn't care for himself but he didn't want his children to die. He had five kids, and they would have been killed. And the Germans were coming in to looking for Jews all the time. And it was, he, I don't think he intended to keep us that long. It was always he didn't have the heart to send us out, from the very beginning, because he knew that the minute he would send us out we would be killed within days or maybe hours. So he always made up excuses sort of, for himself I think. He would say, "Tomorrow morning I'm gonna bring you some bread and some milk and, you know, you'll have to find shelter." And we were, at that time we were in his barn. He had a barn and he made us a hole inside the hay. And we would, you know, inside the hay. And of course there were mice and rats inside. And I was a child. And my father always used to have his hand over my mouth like to choke me because if I would, you know, I would scream or whatever.

ES: Scream.

LO: And we would climb out in, from the hole in the hay. And we would stand in the barn and he would say good-bye. And then he would look at me and he would start crying every time. And he would say, "Maybe you sinned, you and your wife, but this child has, that didn't do anything bad. Why does she deserve to be dead?" And he started, he would cry. And he couldn't send us out. And he said, "You know what? Today is a very cold day. Let's wait till tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow it's gonna be warmer." And that's how it went on for eighteen months.

ES: So he was truly a good man.

LO: Oh, he was an angel. And then there were many, many times where we were almost caught. There was, eighteen months is not eighteen days. It's a very, very, very long time. We didn't wash ourselves once in eighteen months.

[End of tape one, side one.]

Tape one, side two:

ES: Side two, Eileen Steinberg interviewing Laura Oberlender, October 14th, 1987. Okay, Laura, you were telling us about the eighteen months you spent out in this man's barn.

LO: Right. And also we were hiding in many different places in the farm, in the barn, and outside the barn. And one time we were in a stack of hay and we would climb in there and we would stay there for a long time. And the Germans once came and they were looking for Jews. And we could hear them very clearly and see them too. And every time we would see the Germans I would put my shoes on because I was afraid that when they catch us they'll be angry, they won't give me enough time to put my shoes on. So I would start putting my shoes on and getting myself ready to be captured. And one time they were sticking these long poles and they almost found us. And it was many times like that. Now the farmer, Pavlo, had a dog, his name was Brisko. And I think that that dog saved our lives many times because he never went near us until, he would call his dog over, he would whisper something to him, and then the dog would run around all over the farm. And then he would come back and he would like tell him that no one is around. It was unbelievable but it was the first time that my parents realized that a dog could be such a friend. And I'm sure that if it wasn't for that dog, he would be afraid to go near us. When that dog would come and tell him that it was okay to go near us, that's when he would come bring us something to eat. And my father, every night he would have to go out. We had a pot and he had the pot and that was a very dangerous thing to do. And again it was the dog, because it was night time. There were people all around. And if anybody would be coming, the dog would start barking and warn my father there was someone coming. And this is how it was for many, many months with the rats and mice. And we had practically no light at all. There was just a little bit of light till 3:00 in the afternoon from the, in the barn, you know, where they have the wood, in between the cracks of the wood?

ES: Slats, yeah.

LO: Slats. That was the only light we would have. And from keeping my parents from going crazy, he brought in wool. And my father had, he was always very smart in doing things. So, my mother would knit and he would tell him how to knit. And she made these beautiful suits for the daughters. And then they would go to church and they would want to know who made these suits for them. And then my father would ask him to bring him pieces of wood and he would carve shoes for the girls. And this, the same thing again. He would tell them that he went different towns, whatever. But they were just beautiful. And you know, it would, to keep them occupied. And I think from keeping me, you know, from going crazy my father would recite the whole bible to me all the time. And by the end of the eighteen months I could, when he would forget a word I would remind him. And I would tell him. And we would pray all the time and recite

different, you know, portions of the bible. Because it was a long day. There was nothing to do, and very little food with it too, because he just didn't have enough food. He had, he was a very poor farmer. And of course like I, I don't know whether I said it before that he didn't care for his life so much but for his children's lives. And he knew that if they would catch us they would kill him and his children and his wife. And the man literally went from a handsome man to almost, you know, nothing, from all the worrying that he, he was, in eighteen months of that constant. And the last six weeks were the worst, because his farm was near a river. And when the Germans were retreating, they made their last stand in--on that farm. Would you believe it? And they made their stand in the barn where we were hiding.

ES: Oh my goodness!

LO: Yes. It was a big barn, and there was hay on both sides. And in the middle sometimes he'd take a horse in, you could put horses in. So the German soldiers would sit on, they would lay on top of the hay. We were underneath. We would hear the German inhale a cigarette. And I was a child. And my father had his hand on my mouth constantly, day and night. And what the farmer did, he tied the dog outside where we were laying, in case there was any kind of noise the Germans should think that it was the dog making some noise. And he also put the horses inside. And the German says, "Why do you do that?" And he says, "Oh, you know, it's cold out and you know it's better for the horses." Because this way he could like play around with the horses and maybe throw us in something to eat here and there. And this was six weeks we had the Germans. I don't know how we survived with the Germans on top of us. And I heard them inhaling a cigarette. I can still hear that, that noise. And of course they were talking and *kibitzing* around and you know, about the war and about girls, about this, about that. And finally they retreated and that was six weeks. That was, we never thought we could survive that.

ES: During this eighteen months that you were on the farm, was there any contact at all with your sister? Did you know what was happening?

LO: No, nothing.

ES: Nothing whatsoever.

LO: My parents were always saying they're so happy that my sister has a home and she doesn't have to live like that because our life, because we thought tomorrow we're gonna, he's gonna send us out and we're gonna be killed. It wasn't that we knew that this was a place for us to stay. We knew that it wasn't permanent and we knew that maybe tomorrow or the next day we'll, he'll eventually send us out. Because he just couldn't take it anymore. Couldn't blame him. And my sister had a wonderful home.

ES: When the Germans left, what happened? What year was it, first of all when the Germans left?

LO: I guess it was in '44.

ES: All right. Now what happened when they finally left?

LO: When the Germans left, the farmer came and told us. But he told us to stay where we are. And it's a good thing he did because afterwards they were still killing Jews. Because the populations stayed and they still hated the Jews! So, then about a week later or so he said, "In town there are five or six Jews that came." And I think he waited a wh-, I don't know how long he waited before he said, you know, we should maybe try to make it into town. Because he was afraid. He knew what was happening. And the five or six people that survived, they had a house. All of them lived in one house, right across from the police station, from the Russian police station. And at night there were incidents where they was shooting into the house. They came, the *Goyim*, and they started shooting. So...

ES: You're talking about the original townspeople that lived there?

LO: Well the, in the town there were very few gentile people. It was mostly Jews. But I, they had farms all around town and they lived outside of the farm. There were I guess some gentile people but I don't think many. They were mostly Jews. It was a small town. And of course during the war when the Jews were killed out the gentile people moved in into the Jewish homes. But...

ES: Now these are the people that still hated the Jews.

LO: Oh yeah, sure.

ES: The ones that were left and were still, even after...

LO: Oh yes.

ES: ...the Germans were gone...

LO: Oh sure.

ES: ...were going after the Jews.

LO: Absolutely. So, we finally, so my, we climbed out from the hole in the barn there. And it was the first time we stepped outside. And I remember the light was so bright that it blinded us. I couldn't look. And I was a child so I could walk. My father and mother could not stand. But he gave them sticks to hold onto and they must have weighed maybe, my father 60 or 70 pounds. And he was just, they were just like skeletons and they couldn't walk. And he took us, I don't even, I think they took us in a boat across the river again. And he helped us into, but he was afraid to be seen with us. He didn't want these, his friends, or his neighbors to know that he was hiding Jews. They would have killed him.

ES: Right.

LO: Because on his farm, on the same farm where he lived, he had a brother that I'm not sure that knew that he was hiding us. He was a very, he was afraid for, till this day he's afraid. I'll tell you why, because my father wanted him to, you know, to get the house that we had. And he didn't want it. He's afraid, because his neighbors are gonna say, "Why did Emmett give you the house?" So he didn't want to be connected that he saved Jews. And he didn't want the house. It's till this day.

ES: Till this day because he was still afraid of repercussions for what he had done.

LO: Absolutely, absolutely. And it was unfortunate because in 19-, at my son's *bar mitzvah*, when Steven was 13, I forget which year that was, somehow or other my father started writing to him and he asked him to come here to visit us. And he was thrilled. He said there were many, many things that he wanted to talk to us, that he didn't have a chance to talk to us. There were many things that he wanted to talk about, his life. I think that he was a very intelligent man and his wife was like a real farmer's wife. And they didn't have a happy marriage, I don't think. And he just wanted like to talk to us about many, many things. And my father went and made papers and it was such an exciting time. And everything was going with schedule. He was going to come for my son's *bar mitzvah* and we didn't know what we were gonna do. I mean, we just didn't know where to put him, you know, what to do with him. And the last minute the Russians backed out. They wouldn't let him go out. They said he could travel if he had a relative. Then again he was afraid to say that he is related to Jews. How could he be related to Jews? If he had a cousin here they would let him out, but just the friends, no, they wouldn't let him out. That was the last, that was eight years ago. So he couldn't come here. But he wasn't done with us yet. He took us into town or I don't remember exactly whether he took us all the way into town. But we got to the house. And it didn't take long, they took my father into the Russian Army. Because they didn't care. He was of age to be in the army, whether he could walk or he could crawl, they didn't care. They took him in the army, because they took everyone in the army. They went into a town and whoever was of age they took them. They needed manpower for the front lines. Sort of, you know, instead of, to preserving their Russian soldiers they would get the people that they, you know. So, my mother was, and at the time when they took my father, well everyone in the house had typhoid fever. Because there was one child who came and had typhoid fever and the whole house got typhoid fever. And my mother and I were laying there with a very high fever and nothing to eat. And again, Pavlo heard about it. So he came. And I remember he stood there, because we had a, my mother and I were laying in bed. And my father said to me before he left for the army--a soldier brought him over--to say good-bye to his wife and child--and he says, "Get your mother out of bed." And, who knows, I was that time ten years old. So I got her out of bed. I mean I would pull her, she was like burning with fever. And she was delirious. And I was *schlepping* her out of bed. And we had nothing to eat. So then Pavlo came and he brought us milk and bread and butter. And he stood there and he cried and like he couldn't believe it after all we went through. My father just left us and the Russian Army took him and we were there like left to die, without anything. And I guess the will to survive is so strong or whatever and we somehow or other came out of it. And my mother started wheeling and dealing with the German sol-, with the Russian soldiers rather. She would buy whiskey from the people there, I don't know. And then she would sell it to the Russian soldiers. And I remember

that she would have to entertain them, make them, like get him drunk, whatever to--so they would give her a few dollars and she could buy some food. And I was, I guess, very naive and didn't know what was going on. And all night long she was pinching me and I'd be screaming all night long. I had, you know, and I didn't know why she was pinching me. I guess the soldiers wanted to get fresh with her. I don't know what. And she was like saying, you know, "The child is crying," whatever, to get rid of them. But, I remember I was black and blue. She used to pinch me and I used to scream and I'd say, "Why are you pinching me?" But that's how she survived for a few months I guess.

ES: How long was your father gone?

LO: Well, I don't recall. He must have been gone like maybe seven, eight months. But then she sent him--it's unbelievable if you looked at my mother today to realize that she could do all that--then she sent him a telegram that I was dying and I, he should come to say good-bye to me. And this was in, I guess it had to be, I'm trying to figure out when my brother was born. It was in the, my brother was born October '85, I mean '45, so this had to be sometime the beginning of '45. And the war was still going on. The war wasn't finished. I mean, it wasn't, they were still fighting. And my father came. I don't know, and then they arrested him because he, they only gave him like say ten days. And by the time he got into town with all the, the trains were packed with people. So he's...

ES: Away without leave? He had overstayed his...

LO: Right. So they arrested him, and they were gonna put him in jail because he was a soldier and he, it was already past his, you know, the due date to be back in, where he belonged. So again my mother smuggled my father out because she knew the soldiers. She was entertaining them with whiskey. So then she said, "Let him come home for one night and you'll bring him, why does he have to there in the jail? Let him sleep, you know, at home and in the morning he'll come back." And that night we started running and we went to, on a truck and--when we were in Lodz, in Poland, they were still, the Germans were still bombing and there was still fighting. We were like running towards the Germans, away from the Russians, in fire, because we didn't know where to go. And...

ES: So you left your town and you started to run.

LO: Right, in 19-, it was I guess the beginning of '45.

ES: And you went toward Lodz?

LO: Yeah, and well, like I said, when we were in Lodz in the train station, they were bombing. The Germans and the Russians were still fighting. And then, I guess the, I imagine the Russians won that one because we stayed in Lodz. And we were there for a few months. Then they, we got in contact with some Israeli--they were in the British

Army, Israelis. I forget what they were called.³ They were like a, one unit of Israelis in the British, in the Pales-, in, it was, at that time it was Palestine. And they started recruiting, they had, to get us to go to Israel. So, they made, they gave us papers, like we were Greeks traveling. And we went to Austria. And that's how we smuggled all the borders from Czechoslovakia into Germany, into Austria. And that's how we wound up in 1945 in Linz, in Bindermichen [a refugee camp that housed 2400 Jewish refugees after the war].

ES: And that's you and your mother and...

LO: Yeah, and...

ES: ...your father.

LO: My brother was born there. He was the first baby born in Bindermichen. That's when my brother was born. My mother was pregnant the whole time we were smuggling the borders. Again, that was a very hard time too.

ES: And what about your sister?

LO: Okay, my sister, when we were liberated my parents went to the house and it was empty.

ES: That's when you first came back into the town.

LO: To town, right.

ES: After Pavlo brought you back into the town?

LO: Right. And then we found out that she was killed. And then my mother didn't, and father didn't believe it. They thought that they were hiding her and they ran away from town. And it took them a long time to realize and to believe the story that after a few weeks she, they said if they find Jewish children in Christian homes they're gonna kill the whole family. And she knew that my father was going to look for my mother. So she said, "Go find your parents. And go join your," you know, "go join your sister and parents." And she knew where we were, because my father told her where he was going. And so she started walking towards us and one of her schoolmates recognized her as being Jewish. And she called the police. And they, and I understand they tortured her terribly because they knew that a child was going someplace. I guess at that time she was maybe, I don't know, ten years, not ten years old. She was, in '31, it was, I guess it was '40, yeah, she was around ten years old, or maybe, I think she was twelve when she was killed. I'm not sure, either ten or twelve. And they killed her. But my parents did not believe it for a long time. They were trying to find out where the principal went and this and that. And it took them a long time to accept that she was killed.

ES: So she was actually on her way to join you...

³Jewish Brigade Group of the British Army, which fought under the Zionist flag, was formally established in Sept. 1944. It included more than 5,000 Jewish soldiers from Palestine, organized into three infantry battalions and several supporting units. After the German surrender some soldiers from the Brigade conducted organizational and educational work in the D.P. camps in Austria and Germany, and prepared refugees for "illegal" immigration to Palestine. (<http://www.ushmm.org> USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia, "Jewish Brigade Group")

LO: Yeah.

ES: ...at the farm when...

LO: Yeah, when she was killed.

ES: ...a friend turned her in.

LO: And she was tortured before she was killed too. And I always said if it was me I would have probably said. She must have been very brave, knowing that we were hiding someplace. And they told her that if she would tell them where her parents were they wouldn't kill her. And at ten years or twelve years, a child not to say that, she saved our lives really.

ES: Yes, she obviously did not tell them where you were.

LO: That's right. That's right.

ES: You and your parents, and of course your sister, went through terrible trials and ordeals. What do you feel helped you to go on? What strengthened you to continue to live?

LO: You mean after the war?

ES: No, I mean while you were going through.

LO: Well, first of all I'm, I really can't say because I was a young child. And I guess you're just thrown in into a situation and...

ES: Do you think your parents' religious faith helped them to keep going?

LO: Well, I, of course they were religious, but I don't think that it really had so much to do with religion. I think that it was up to Pavlo. He saved our lives. He, we had no choice. We were in his hands, actually. And we were there. My father didn't plead for him to keep us, because he knew that he, it's something that he could not demand, you know, ask for something like that. So, we were just left in his hands. And it was his choice. And we just did, of course we were thankful for every day that he kept us. And I'm sure that my father prayed to God every day that we would stay there. And he prayed for my sister and they always talked about how easy she has it compared to how hard we have it. And I guess that's what kept us going. There was just no other way.

ES: During the time that you were at the farm, did you have any knowledge of anything else that was going on outside? Was Pavlo able to bring you any kind of news of what was happening to anybody in your family or general conditions in the area, what was going on?

LO: No. We just knew that the place was free of Jews, that, we thought that we were the only Jews left in the whole Europe. And my father would say, "Where is America? Where is the world? How come, you know, something has to happen." I mean, we just didn't know what was happening. It was a very depressing time and we thought we were the only Jewish people left. We didn't think there was anyone left. And there was no communications. I don't think that he knew what was going on, just that, I imagine at the end when we realized that Hitler was losing the war I guess we had some hope of maybe surviving it.

ES: After you finally got to Austria, how did you get from there to the United States?

LO: That was easy. At first we were gonna go to Israel, because my father has two sisters in Israel. And we were being prepared to go to Israel. They had teachers from Israel and they taught us Hebrew. We spoke Hebrew, all the children. And this was in '45, no, it was in '46 or '47 before Israel was declared a state. And everyone knew there was gonna be a big war in Israel. And my mother said she just can't stand any more wars and she wanted to come to the United States. My father had family too. And at that time I think Truman had a quota how many Jews were to be allowed in. So it wasn't that hard to get into United States.

ES: So you already had some family here?

LO: My father had a step-sister and his, oh not a step, a half brother and a half sister in Chester, Pennsylvania.

ES: And you came and joined them?

LO: Well, we joined them for just a little bit. One was very poor, the other one was very rich, and both of them weren't too much of a help.

ES: But you finally, they finally made it on their own.

LO: Right.

ES: When you went to Austria, how many years did you stay there?

LO: Three.

ES: And it was really, actually during the time that you were in Austria that you had your first formal schooling?

LO: That's right.

ES: Because you had never really been to school before.

LO: I started from scratch, and it was, like I said, all Hebrew teachers, I mean from Israel. And in the three years I made seven grades. We had maybe twelve subjects. We had algebra and geometry. They really piled everything in. And when I came here I skipped three grades. And when I graduated high school I was not even 18.

ES: So you made up the education even though you really didn't have it as a child.

LO: Yes, that's right.

ES: When you were supposed to have it.

LO: Yes. I made it up.

ES: You have told us a very fascinating story and I appreciate very much you sharing it with us.

LO: Thank you.

[End of tape one, side two; end of interview.]