HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SAMUEL YASSI

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Marian Salkin
Date: June 11, 1998

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SY - Samuel Yassi [interviewee]
MSY - Mrs. Sylvia Yassi [interviewee's wife]
MS - Marian Salkin [interviewer]
Date: June 11, 1998

Tape one, side one:

MS: This is Marian Salkin interviewing Mr. Samuel Yassi on June 11, 1998. Mr. Yassi could you please tell me where you were born and when, and a little bit about your family.

SY: Thank you. I was born in 1924, April 28 in Ostrow, Poland. Ostrow lies right halfway between Warsaw and Bialystok. That's eastern, big city in eastern part of Poland. There still is another distance like that to the Russian border, so we were not very far from the Russian border. In 1939, the war broke out between Germany and Poland, actually the Germans just simply rushed in and took over all of Poland within two weeks, and we wound up being occupied by Nazis, by the Germans, Hitler's Germany. My father at the time was a homeowner and did small things to make a living. And I was the oldest son and we had five children. At the time-- it was pretty scary because we were stopped every so often on the streets and asked for documents-- I didn't look specifically like a Jew-- I could mingle with Poles and be okay but, you know, sooner or later we knew that we are not, you know, this is not the way we are not going to survive. They're going to get us. So one day my father came and he talked to some Polish people that he knew-- they had a lot of respect for him because they knew our grandfather. And they, the one Polish family invited us to their village that we can live with them for a while and then-- they were Polish Germans, Germans that lived under Polish domination or Polish or the Polish in our country-- and they, when the Germans took over Poland, they took all those Germans back and settled them on the western part of Poland. And those houses and farms became empty. And we and some other Jews that found out then went and occupied the house like that. I became, at 14-15, I became the mason. I fixed all the stoves that needed fixing for other people and for ourselves, and I fixed windows, I fixed doors, whatever you know for house. It appears that the *Polaks* in the neighboring villages would vandalize and steal away the doors and windows from those houses and so we had to then replace them. So we wind up living in this place call Poprusch [phonetic] that's the German name for village.

MS: What was the name of this village again? Pop…

SY: Poprusch. But, actually that is a Polish name that is called-- what is it they call Poprusch, Syl?

MSY: I have to think about it.

SY: Oh okay. They used Poprusch here, we have it right here, but that is what it was called, anyway. Anyway, so we were there all through the winter, okay?

MS: This was the winter of 1939?

SY: 1939. In early spring, early spring, by then it was apparent that the Russians came and Germany and Russia made a pact and they gave part of Poland to Russia. They gave them because they then gave them all kinds of…

MS: I'm sorry what was it they traded with the Russians?

SY: For cows, for food, for all kinds of farm, farm-- they didn't, the Russians, the Russians didn't have enough to eat themselves, but they fed the Germans in order to make peace with them. And Stalin was very much afraid for Hitler. So he gave in to all that. So they gave, nevertheless, for looks-- they gave part of Poland to the Russians and that portion became Russian territory, where we were. Where our town was, was still Germany. And where we were became Russia, so we decided-- my father decided to go to the city of Bialystok, a big city, and from there we will see where we can settle, whether closer to the Russian border because nobody expected that the Poland's coming back. Poland lost the war and there was no way. Poland is sandwiched between Russia and Germany, the two longest borders, the eastern border is Russia, the western border is Germany. And each time Poland-- each time Germany attacks Russia or tries war, Poland comes first, you know they get occupied. That happened the First World War and it happened now. Now we-- my father hired a horse and buggy and we all got on to go to Bialystok. It started to rain on the way and we were all wet because we got rained on and when we came to Bialystok we took all our belongings and my father found a place-- he knew the people and they let him store it in their storage room, all our belongings-- now we ourselves found a place to sleep in a-- it's not a synagogue, they call it a *shtibl*. A *shtibl* is just a room where you go in to pray, but at nighttime we were all bedded out and slept in there. The town was full of people, refugees, all Jewish refugees who could run away, ran away. The problem was that not enough Jews did run away because they were still sitting at home and feeling comfortable in this was terrible conditions.

MS: Mr. Yassi, you said there were Jews who came into this town of**…**

SY: Bialystok.

MS: …Bialystok from different parts of…

SY: Poland.

MS: Poland, yeah. And were these people helped by the natives of that town, by the Poles of that town?

SY: No, no. The Poles didn't necessarily welcome us. The Poles would rather get rid of us. And although we knew Poles that had high respect and liked us very much because they knew my father and my grandfather and we, you know, got a lot of respect from them, but...

MS: So you would say that your family was the exception to the rule.

SY: No, no, they didn't mind Jews anyway, but they liked us. But the problem was and there were some Poles who saw in this an opportunity. First of all, they figured that the Jews are very rich and they can take everything from them and they did. They

took our properties. I lost a lot of property that my father had and I lost a lot of property that my mother had. My mother was from Warsaw and she left a lot of property. She also had three brothers and a sister and they had a large property like from their parents and all that was left to nobody, to the Poles. It's not just that, for some reason, this German education, German propaganda helped. What Hitler was trying to do was to get them drunk on the idea that the Jews are in the way, that the Jews are at fault. Everything that's wrong, whatever is wrong with you, it's your Jews.

MS: Mr. Yassi, when your family left your village, were they able to take, what were they able to take with them? What kind of personal belongings were they able…

SY: Only soft stuff. Only soft stuff, things to wear, as much as we could carry and-- well we had quite a bit because we loaded all up on this, whatever we could load up on that horse and buggy. Only when we left Bialystok, everything was left in that warehouse we couldn't go to, because we were arrested and loaded on a truck and loaded into a boxcar and we talked to the Russians-- the Russians loaded us-- and we talked to them and it was like talking to a wall, they didn't listen to us at all. Besides we didn't know their language as well either.

MS: Can you tell me about what time, about what period of time it was that you were put onto the boxcars?

SY: In the middle of the night.

MS: Yes, but…

SY: And you know the Germans would do that and the Russians did that. On Friday night was the time they came for Jews because they knew the Jews are home on Friday night.

MS: So they came and rounded up your family?

SY: Yeah, all I heard-- we were sleeping-- and all I heard was this banging on the door and they broke in the door and they said, "Everybody out!" and they chased everybody out. And there was in front a truck, an open truck and we climbed on the truck. They helped us get on…

MS: Were they Germans or…

SY: Germans. No, Russians.

MS: Russians. They were Russians that were doing this to you?

SY: Right, right. No the Russian excuse was that there was too many refugees and there was no-- that they can't keep control-- that there was going to be sicknesses and whatever in the city if they are not going to eliminate some of the people. Now what they do, what they were doing, what Stalin had in mind to take us to Siberia and turn us into lumberjacks. Little did he know that half of us couldn't make it, to be lumberjacks. There were people who never held a saw or an axe in their hands and they didn't know anything about it.

MS: Let me ask you this. When they, when the Russians came to round you up, they only took the refugees to that town, they did not...

SY: Just the refugees.

MS: They did not take away the…

SY: No, they took in place, they went to places where refugees would be, like the *shtibl*, like the synagogue, like the areas where-- but they took all those-- in fact, I remember that we were the only ones in Siberia and we had passports, five year passports, Russian passports. Now how did we have passports?

MS: Yes.

SY: Before we left the village, my father went to the Russians when they came and registered so he is going to be legal, so that they wouldn't come in force refugees, because we had a place to be, we had a house. But still no, they found a way how to go around that. We had passports and they weren't supposed to deport us, but then they told us we got to be 100 kilometers away from the border with Germany. Now our town was already Germany and so we were only like 18 kilometers from the border with the Germans. So we had to go to 100 kilometers that was that city. That's why my father went to the city. So now he thought he is safe, he has a passport and he's not a refugee and what-- and we came to the city. But the problem was we didn't have an address, we didn't have a place to live. So they still loaded us up and we came to Siberia. So no matter how you were doing it, you still were wrong.

MS: Well when you were packed into the …

SY: Boxcars…

MS: …boxcars they took you from Bialystok directly to Siberia?

SY: Six weeks in a car, 46 people in one car. We were laying, the floor didn't have enough room for us, space.

MS: Were you able to take anything with you, clothing?

SY: We didn't have, the clothing was away from us, and we couldn't go there to get it, because they didn't-- first they didn't trust us, they wouldn't go with us, they just didn't want to listen to us. We couldn't talk to them because they were talking Russian, we were talking Polish. There was [cough], excuse me, Jewish soldiers in the Russian army, but I'm sure they were afraid to even get involved, to get...

MS: So if there were any Russian soldiers that were part of this, they were of no help to you whatsoever.

SY: No help.

MS: And therefore, you only had what you were wearing in the middle of the night…

SY: Correct.

MS: …put on the boxcars and six weeks, did they stop-- how did they feed you?

SY: Okay, so we were in this boxcar, closed up and it was starting to get hot because there were so many people, and they didn't open the doors until the next night. Everything was done at the night. The next night they knocked on the doors, they opened

the door they said, "Two people and two buckets". Well who has buckets? So there was a whole turmoil. They found there were two people who had buckets, and they went with those buckets and they brought back food to eat. It was something like a soup. Now what it was, it was oats, cooked in water and that's what they gave us. Well you tried it and it had no taste, it had no salt, it was terrible. So everybody put it back in this bucket and they threw it under the train. Well the next night the food got a little better. They gave us like a like kasha. What is kasha?

MS: It's wheat, that's refined and cooked like a cereal.

SY: Yeah, cereal, that's it, cereal. So the next night we had the cereal, then the third night they gave us other things…

MSY: [unclear]

SY: No, we kept going but you see we didn't go that far. We were going pretty slow. Why did we go slow? First, they had to get the Russian army, whatever they need; they of course had to go first. The next one was the politicians got to go. I learned because when I was going back I wind up riding on the roof of a train to catch up to her because I got lost from her…

MS: Oh you are going to another part of your story now.

SY: Yeah.

MS: Let's stay with going to Siberia.

SY: So we finally, in six weeks we came, you know you couldn't recognize anybody with the way we looked in the, after six weeks, but we came to a city called Kotlas, that's a northern city. It's not far from Arkhangelsk. Now the port of Arkhangelsk is known to a lot of Americans because there was an American army when the revolution was going on. So this port of Arkhangelsk is not far from where we were finally. But we came to this Kotlas, now they unloaded us, we were two days on the outside sitting alongside this river and then boats showed up, large two story boats.

MS: Do you know what river that was, the name of the river?

SY: Vychegala [Vchegda River], yeah, Vychegala. That's a part of *Severnaya* Dvina [северная двина Russian: Northern Dvina]. Dvina, that's the name of the big lake. Well this is a very strong current lake, and I had a lot of experience on that, so I know it.

MS: On this trip, the six week journey that you had…

SY: Right.

MS: …did any of the passengers, the people in your car, they must have been ill. Did any of them die in this..?

SY: No, ill yeah, but not die; they were throwing up. The problem was, we didn't have much what to throw out with. We didn't have anything, you know. It's funny, I don't even remember toilets, I don't remember anything. It was very crude, and that was it.

MS: Alright, tell us what happened when you got to [unclear].

SY: Well we came, we came finally with this boat, we came too-- well, that's place in Siberia where they stop, they have boats that come and pick up logs. Now what do you call logs when they get tied up and dragged down the river. My memory is not working so good now.

MS: Is it where they elevate the boats, to different elevation…

SY: No, they put logs, they tie them up, and they put another row of logs and they tie them up, and a third one, then they pull it with a boat.

MS: Oh they pull the boat on, like…

SY: They put the boat pulls the logs.

MS: Oh alright.

SY: And we were there to cut those logs to bring them to this river, to [unclear] and in the winter time we would pull them right on the river and in spring when it thawed out-- first of all when it thawed out in the spring the ice was still about five meters thick. You could run a bulldozer on it. So they had to blast it and meanwhile, all of the area where we were living got full of water. And I didn't realize why houses, houses built of logs, log cabins, were off the ground, very high, like I would say the height of myself, were they off the ground with the floor because when it filled up with water, the water came through the floor.

MS: Let me ask you Mr. Yassi, once you came to this town and you were out of the boxcars, where did your family go to live? Did you stay together with your family at that point?

SY: Well, in all of this I still missed one of my brothers. One of my brothers when we were leaving this town, this village of Poprusch, one brother said he wants to stay with those people, they were very nice to us and all, and help them out. And my father agreed to that because it all looked so innocently. He's going to come and get him, you know, he's not going to leave him there. He's going to come and get him but for the time being we don't know where we're going and what's going to happen, so let him go and let him be there. So we let him be there. So when we came to Bialystok and what happened to us, then we had no chance to get my brother. But then later on, when the Germans came back they found my brother and his friend that was-- I don't know how his friend got there-- and both names were the same, Reuven.

MS: [unclear]

SY: They kill-- the Germans shot him.

MS: They killed him.

SY: So this is how one of my brothers got lost. But we didn't know at the time. We didn't have any information or anything. How did I find out? After the war, I came back to Poland, I left there on a *kibbutz* and I went to look for him.

MS: And you discovered…

SY: I discovered he was shot. There was a Polish woman who told me he was shot, and she wanted-- she almost saved him, she said. So I said, "What happened?"

They were going shopping some place in a different car. It was very tough to buy something, to buy things and they were going to buy food, and from what they tell me they already went very far when they came to where my brother was and they saw him, and they said, "Look when we come back, we'll take you with us," and he was glad to do that.

MS: Who was going to take your brother?

SY: Those Polish people. They would have taken him away from the village. They would have hidden him and then he would have been okay. Because in there he didn't know anyone except those people, and those people that took him, I understand that the old man died. I don't know, I don't have any idea of what happened then, you know. But what I know was that she saw him, and she said she has to go, you know, she has a long ways to go yet to where they were going to buy food, and then on the way back they would take him along. I know that this they might have been sincere because the daughter wanted to marry me right away, you know. And no matter how much I told her I have a wife, Neinershlayzen [phonetic], that's where the *kibbutz* was and I can't marry her, she kept, you know, after me and they were nice to me and all that but, I don't know what to believe.

MS: Now getting back to Siberia, your family was able to settle into a house, into a community there…

SY: Into apartment. A portion of those were barracks, built out of logs, logs barracks and we were given a piece of it where we can sleep, and that's all we have.

MS: Did the Russians give you any aid in any way?

SY: Well we get, we got food; they fed us. And of course, we had to go to work, and, to earn our food. And what the Russians were hoping is that we would stay there and the younger kids would get to become lumberjacks, because the older generation died, my father died in there. My mother…

MS: He died in Siberia. How long, how long after…

SY: After we were there, we were there only about a year and a half, and he died way before. What happened was this; while we came there I went with my father to the forest to work, to…

MS: What type of work did you do?

SY: And I took an axe and he took an axe and what they had the old people, the natives, they would go bend down and cut off the tree in no time at all by hand. They didn't have any power tools, no power tools. But they done it by hand and we would then chop off all the branches, and they would-- there would be another crew that would cut it to size, and then there would be those people without tools that would load it onto a truck. Now for some reason, I don't know yet, they would run those big trucks on very little gasoline and they would use wood that my mother would work on. There was somebody who would cut wood the whole day long, runt pieces, you know, like four inches wide, that's all.

MS: Little pegs.

SY: Little pegs. And then my mother would stay there and chop them up. And they would put that into a drying machine to dry it. Then they would load it into a kettle that was strapped to the truck, and that kettle would turn that into gas. It was like a wood gas. When they would let it out, it would be black. And that, they would run those trucks with that. Unbelievable, in those days it sounded like-- but the Russians were very good for various things, for the things they needed, they were good for, but they had a very poor system, a terrible system.

MS: Did every member of your family have to work once you got…

SY: No, no, the little kids didn't work.

MS: How old were the little children at that time?

SY: Well, okay we were over two years apart, so if I was let's say 15 by then, my first brother was 13, he was left in Poland, the next one was 11, so…

MS: He was with you…

[Tape one, side one ended]

Tape one, side two:

MS: …Mr. Samuel Yassi and we're continuing on side two, tape one of our interview. Mr. Yassi, I asked you about your younger sisters and brothers, if they had to work, and you were telling me of their ages, so would you repeat that again?

SY: Okay. I was about 15 at the time and my brother that was left in Poland was 13, my younger brother that was with us was 11, my younger brother was 9 and my sister was 7. Only I had to work in there…

MS: [unclear]

SY: …and the reason why I had to work was because-- well I went to school-- you see the first day we came there I then, a couple days later I went out with my father to work. My mother stayed home with the kids. But then I found that this was no work for me, so I found out that I can get the same ration. They were giving us rations…

MS: Rations.

SY: …bread, and rations, whatever all they give us was rationed. So I found out my ration was almost the same if I go to school. It was hard to go to school. I had to walk across this Vychegala, this river and that river is a very strong current river and their boat was very large and all that. But the first few weeks there was a guy, a man who did that. He was carrying people across to work, to us, to the place where I was, and to the villages where the people would go home.

MS: Did they take the children to school on these boats as well?

SY: No, for the little children there was school in there. They had schools in there. But for me, I had to go to the village to go to school. But I was very happy to go to the village because very quickly I found out that I could buy potatoes, people would grow potatoes in their gardens, everybody would have gardens to help to live on. And I would, they were very happy to sell those potatoes to me, and I would bring them, carry them to the boat and carry them from the boat and bring them home and I would make like another bag of potatoes as a profit. I made more money than my father did in the farms, and this is what they call speculating. That is what is not allowed and it's not permitted but being that I was going to school, and somebody did squeal on me, and NKVD whoever watched us from the police came and caught me. And he said, "You are a good boy and you are going to school, and look what you are doing. You speculate." And I told him, "Look, we have to live, you know. I'm going to school but I can't make any money. I have to live on it." So he said, "Okay, I'll let you go," and he told me, "Okay." So after he knew already I was free to go ahead and do it.

MS: And were you able to continue to do this?

SY: Yeah, I had to watch myself more because I didn't want to get too much in his eyes but I did go, I did do it, because it was so tempting, you know.

MS: And your younger sisters and brothers did attend the local schools then?

SY: The local schools.

MS: Okay.

SY: And then my father decided, he-- from there he had to go to walk to another village-- there was somebody who could write in English, okay?

MS: Alright.

SY: So he could write a letter to his sister to tell her where we are and things like that. So he decided and he went out and it was very cold that day and he walked to this village and wrote the letter and on his way back he decided to get a ride on this trucks that haul the logs out of the forest. But the guy, the chauffeur did not allow him in the cab; he wasn't allowed. So he had to climb up on top and sit on top, and that was worse because once you started to go he didn't hear him knocking or whatever he was doing, so he had to sit there and wait until he was done, until he came. By then, he contacted pneumonia, he got pneumonia and he only lasted a week. That was, my father passed away.

MS: About what age was your father, would you..?

SY: 43, yeah. My mother was 36.

MS: How did the family get along after your father passed away?

SY: Well we still got along. We were only kids, you know, and my mother was very protective and all that. And that's how she, that's when she-- when my father passed away that's when she went to work, but I told her that I'm going to drop the school and I'm going to go to work. Why did I have to go to work? Because somebody had to get the ration and then take the other people on their-- they call it support over there, to support. Because they give you only but you have to have somebody to start it, to give it, every family they have somebody, some working.

MS: In other words, what you're saying is that they gave you rations…

SY: Rations.

MS: But in addition to the rations you had to show that…

SY: No, no, we had to have somebody to go to get the first ration and then get the support for the others.

MS: I see.

SY: For the, those who can't work. Okay. But then my mother went out and worked, [unclear] and I worked. But my work was different. I was still too young to work. They couldn't make me work. So being I signed up to work, I picked what I want to do. So I picked a horse and I was tying on a log and this horse would move it from here to there, wherever they needed it to move…

MS: You were dragging.

SY: Dragging a log, yeah. Well one day this horse got off the path where he walked and snow gets hardened in and you can walk on it, it's like ice. But when he get got off the path, the horse got in up to his belly. He couldn't get out of the snow, and I couldn't drag him out of the snow. So I had to run to get help and a few guys came and they pulled out this horse from the snow, that I learned a lesson to watch myself, because

it was the same thing in the ice. In the wintertime it would be very busy out on the river because they would have-- they didn't have much as far as equipment goes but they had a bulldozer that would pull, push away the snow and then pull the logs on and then they would tie them up and they would make rafts. That's the work I was working for before.

MS: Rafts. Let me ask you Mr. Yassi, in this community that you lived there were other refugees from Poland as well, other Jewish refugees?

SY: All from Poland, yeah.

MS: Ah, did the community sort of band together, did the Jewish community…

SY: Well most Jewish community people did stick together because we were all in the same boat, we were all-- but there were among us, like the one guy decided to go and report me to the NKVD**.**

MS: Why?

SY: Because he was, I guess he was jealous. I don't know why. I never talked to the guy. Besides I was a young kid and he was a grown-up and what am I going go and argue with him? It didn't make sense. I make sense better with this NKVD to trust me alone then I could have made with this guy anyway.

MS: Now you talk about this person who was in charge, was it the NKVD?

SY: NKVD is the same as the FBI here.

MS: He was the government?

SY: Government employee.

MS: Employee, yeah.

SY: Yeah, he's a policeman, a national policeman.

MS: A national policeman. Alright.

SY: Because we were very far away and there was no police, no other police but the NKVD.

MS: Did the Jewish community in any way band together? Did they have any type of prayer services?

SY: We had some services at the time but very, very few I remember, because first there was the weather; the weather was terrible. It was very cold, it snowed. I remember one day I walked out in the morning and I didn't see nobody out in the street. And I ran to where I was working because it was cold, so I ran and while I ran my steam that came out of my mouth landed on my eyelashes and I kept, and it kept my eyes closed, I didn't-- well it turned to ice and I couldn't see and when I came to work I didn't find nobody there. I figured well where am I going to go and get the horse, there is nobody here, so I went back home and when I came home, then I found out that that day we weren't supposed to work.

MS: Because it was much too cold out.

SY: It was too cold.

MS: How did they...?

SY: They used the centigrade and it was 45 degrees.

MS: Below zero?

SY: Well below zero would be here because they use the Fahrenheit.

MS: Oh, I see.

SY: They don't have a below zero. They have zero is the same as our 32.

MS: I see.

SY: So you've already going 32 degrees. Well it's not-- it doesn't necessarily come out that way. See, by the way, I only made seven grades in Poland but I learned enough when I talked to people later in my life-- people who went through college-- and I was okay with them, I made out. You know, I knew my things.

MS: You felt, you stood up to people who had much higher…

SY: I did, in the building business too and engineering, you know. I didn't fall behind.

MS: When the family came to the, to Siberia and you had so little, how did they acquire clothing and furniture, to live?

SY: Well, you'd be laughing if I told you how we acquired. They didn't have any particular clothing. Their clothing was a very thin layer of cloth, material and then there's cotton sewed in and another material-- they call it cofeika [phonetic] that you wear, and because of the cotton inside, it's warm, but it wears out fast. But no, whatever we had, we had-- we had troubles when it came to clothing, you know. I went to work on the canal and they gave me the ration, so they gave me a suit. When I looked at the pants, I sold it because there were people right here waiting for you to sell it because everybody did sell it. Why did-- first of all, the pants were red, red-colored and then when you look it's like a [unclear].

MS: Marble?

MSY: [unclear]

SY: Gauze.

MS: Cheesecloth.

SY: Cheesecloth. It's like cheesecloth. And why, and this is why they had such a problem because there was no men to help. You, you-- anything they gave you, you dropped, you took. And then you couldn't use it anyway, it wasn't good for you.

MS: Somehow your family was able to survive all these horrible situations.

SY: We survived, right, right. And then, after a year and a half we were able to leave the place.

MS: Well, where could you go?

SY: Well we did. We went. We went-- first of all, we went south. Why south? Because it's warm.

MS: For-- into Russia proper?

SY: Russia, only Russia, because the Germans-- the reason they freed us to begin with was because…

MS: Excuse me, what year was this roughly, that you were able to…

SY: ‘40, ‘41…

MS: ‘41 that you were able to go south?

SY: Yeah, ‘41, close to ‘42, ‘41. Now what happened, why did they -- Stalin wanted to let us go, I mean-- Stalin, nobody can match Stalin on anything and here he let us go. What was the reason? He had to have it justified a bit and that was that we were not no longer prisoners, he lets us go, now he can draft us to the army. So I was too young for the army but there were a lot of Polish Jews who had to go to the army. What was the need for the army? Because the Germans attacked the Russians in one, what, couple weeks, they took over all the way deep into Russia because it is *blitzkrieg,* he managed. He was very good at that. He managed to scare everybody and those scare tactics, those *blitzkrieg* tactics.

MS: And the Russians must have lost…

SY: The Russians weren’t going to fight too hard for what they had. They didn’t have anything. Let’s face it. And somehow there was a lot of Russians anti-Semites too, but this didn’t matter in this case. It mattered that they weren’t going to fight for the Jews, you know, that’s one, you know, especially when you come to the Ukraines and White Russias, that’s western for Russia but eastern for Poland. No, they didn’t fight and they didn’t fight very hard. They took a lot of them to prison. The problem was later they found out that the Germans were killing them too.

MS: Let me ask you this [long pause] during this time that you went into southern Russia to some degree, were you aware of what was happening in the war with the Jews in Poland and the other countries? Did the word ever get out to your community that the Jews were being killed in the concentration camps?

SY: Well while we were in Siberia this didn’t reach us there.

MS: You did not know at that time.

SY: No, it was quiet but later on as it started coming out we’d heard about those things…

MS: About what, what time frame, 1941?

SY: About camps, about the killings and all that. It became so that the Russians themselves started to be afraid because they were being killed too. They killed a lot of Russian soldiers trying to get rid of them. They didn’t want to feed them, they didn’t want to watch them, so the easiest way for the Germans was to kill them. Hitler wasn’t very bright either, he didn’t, you know, he could have done a lot more if he’d be an intelligent person, but Hitler himself was a sergeant in the army. That tells you he didn’t have any high education because he would have been a lieutenant. So his own generals, his own army men were making fun of him and laughing during the war. The dedicated Germans didn’t care much for this *Führer*. And Hitler wanted to do his best to become this big god, this, you know. Stalin called himself Generalissimo and he wanted to call himself god or whatever, you know.

MS: What city, or what town, when you left Siberia and came into Russia?

SY: So you see we had to travel all the way across Russia and that from north to south to where we would be safe again from the Germans and where we would be safe as far as the climate goes and all that so we got…

MS: Did the Russians provide transportation?

SY: They…

MS: Did the Russians take you south?

SY: Yes, yes, yes, once they released us there was trains, boxcars…

MS: Again boxcars.

SY: Yes, and we could load in, well we didn't have much what to load but we could climb into the boxcar and we were going south. Now this time they didn't feed us. We had to find our own food. But then we found out, this big-- they had no more, now I forgot the word, no…

MS: System?

SY: …no system, they had no system. It was terrible. We went to the state in our boxcars on a train station. They call it, what do they call it? Fuels, where they keep those cars-- we sat there for a day or two and there was a pile of salt laying outside on the ground, so we filled up all the stockings, all the bins, whatever we could find, we filled up with salt because that was, the salt…

MS: Something you could sell.

SY: In two days later, a day later, after they start travelling again, we would come over and they stopped and we'd come off and for a glass of salt you can get a bread. They had no salt.

MS: So you bartered [unclear].

SY: This is how you start thinking and you start finding a way of how to survive. We had that same problem when we came from Russia to Poland. And I had to go to a market to sell or buy, whatever, but when I came back them trains took off and I was there, it was the train before and it wasn't there now. So I had to run to the passenger station which was always miles away and climb on a passenger car but the passenger car would not let me in. I don't have a ticket. I didn't even have any papers for that.

MS: Well wait, let's backtrack a little bit. Before this incident, you know, you were talking about having to, having missed your train, this was on your way into southern Russia, can you…

SY: I also missed my train. That happened there too. But you see to catch it again we had to get on a passenger train and let it run for a few hours…

MS: Did you lose your family in this-- when this happened?

SY: Yeah, you become, you know, you become by yourself.

MS: Well how did you catch up with your family again?

SY: Well from here I'm going to say. You get, you go to the passenger train. The passenger train is late there too, but it's more on time than those trains. They have

priority; otherwise what you have a set of tracks. So the first is the military goes on those tracks. The next one if there's any Bolsheviks or Communists that need to go, to travel, they'll be let through right away. Then they have all kinds of priorities, we are on the last on the line, there's no one else to go, they are going to get rid of us, and they let us go. Okay, so we, so what you go to the passenger train but you can't get in the train so what you do, is you climb up on the roof.

MS: Did you know..?

SY: And the roof is full of people.

MS: Did you know, did you know where your family was going? Did you know what town?

SY: Only south, only south. Only, I took the tracks that were going south, and there is no-- that much that they had very large trains and very wider, they had trains that were wider than the Polish trains and they go long distance because everything is like long distance…

MS: Yeah.

SY: …and of course, when you go south the trains go south. And of course, it's not that easy, it's just by luck sometimes you find it, you know, but we-- I managed, I found it. I would get pretty far, pretty far south and then get off this damn train and walk around and look for what trains are stopped until I find them.

MS: I see. So where did you finally settle in southern, in Russia?

SY: Well, I was in a lot of places and I learned a lot of languages. Like I said, I can probably make out maybe six or eight languages and then I have some other languages that I couldn't make out yet, but I was in Kirghizia, I was in Uzbekistan, Uzbek is a Muslim-- all those names I mentioned are Muslim people, they live under Russian domination and they, they sort of live up to communism but they are religious, very fanatical and just, they are Muslim. And they can't, Stalin couldn't change them and they, and they didn't change them now either. They're still back there. So the city I finally landed was Tashkent, that's where I met my wife.

MS: Yeah.

SY: Yeah, Eleanor Roosevelt was in the papers, I remember seeing her and she was in Tashkent. Now when the entourage of cars and stuff went riding through this wide streets-- they have nice wide streets in Tashkent-- to the street, a policeman stopped them for traffic and then he turned around and let them go. And that was laying in my mind, what the heck did he try to do, there was no traffic there, but he done it anyway.

MS: Tashkent was a pretty civilized large community. Was it well inhabited? A large …

SY: Yeah, they're Muslim, after that I think they're okay; they sort of like Asiatic people.

MS: Well, so how did you continue your life in this community?

SY: Well to begin with, okay, I came to a place where we were let down in a social farm, workers, social farms, so we went out, we were picking tobacco.

MS: They were like Russian cooperative farms?

SY: Cooperatives, yeah.

MS: Communes?

SY: Yeah, so they gave us a place to live, and we went out in the morning to picking tobacco.

MS: What's the climate like in Tashkent? Is it mild?

SY: It's warm there, it's like maybe North Carolina, South Carolina.

MS: Okay, it's a temperate climate then?

SY: Right, yeah but, you know but there's-- oh I'm sorry-- there's very little winter there. They didn't have much snow or something and that was just good enough for us. We didn't want…

MS: It was a big improvement…

SY: We didn't want to go where it was hot. Okay, so first I was in a place like that but then they moved us because they found that they had Russian people that-- you see things started to change fast. The Germans occupied areas in Russia and they had Russian people became runaways or…

MS: Yeah, they were refugees from…

SY: Refugees, okay you call them refugees. I call them [unclear]. So anyway they got better quality refugees so they told us to move and they put them in. They're not, you know, they don't make a big deal out of it and they took us to another place where it was tough. It was [unclear] it was cold in there, up in the mountains…

MS: Well…

SY: They call it the White Mountains.

MS: Was it still in the area of Tashkent or did they send you north again?

SY: No, it was in the area but it was in the mountains and that is why it was colder-- which reminds me we were very close to the border with Afghanistan. That's a different country but they have cold air mass and warm air mass. And so we decided to leave there. We went on foot and we…

MS: Well how could you, how could you just leave?

SY: They didn't care if we left them, because they thought that they supported us. We didn't do very much there. We couldn't do much, and so they-- we backed up and we went and they knew they're not going to chase after us.

MS: When you say we, who was that, your mother and your brother and sisters?

SY: Right.

MS: So you left Tashkent?

SY: Right.

MS: And went to, into the mountains?

SY: No, no, we went down the mountains. We went into, back into the area near Tashkent. Otherwise we weren't in Tashkent. This, we were, was Kirghizia and Kirghizia was a village and it wouldn't matter what it's called. It's called in a Muslim, Muslim name and I wouldn't remember.

MS: Well how did you, how..?

SY: We just simply walked out on the road and kept walking down the mountains and we came into a place where there was mines, mines, coal mines but I didn't want to go in the coal mines either so we got a ride from there. There was a train. We got a ride on the train and we went to the next town and there, was a…

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

MS: We are here with Mr. Samuel Yassi and we will continue at this time. Mr. Yassi you were talking about moving your family…

SY: From Kirghizia down back down to Tashkent. But we stopped in a place called Kubisy [phonetic]. They were building a factory and we got work. My mother-- they hired my mother and me-- the other kids were too small.

MS: What type of work did you get?

SY: What was it? We were carrying dirt, from one place, in a wheelbarrow, carrying dirt from one place to the other. They had a large mountain of dirt and we were digging it and carrying it away and flattening it down. So they can set the factory down because that was a mountainside, a mountain area. So we worked there and then they build up the walls of that factory.

MS: What type of factory was it?

SY: Well they were going, they moved a lot of factories from Ukraine, from eastern, from Eastern Russia, they moved a lot of factories when the Germans came they evacuated.

MS: Evacuated.

SY: A lot of machinery and stuff, and we didn't know but what they found, what we had, there was only one factory like that in the Ukraine and the Germans took it over, and they had a lot of machines from that factory that we were going to duplicate here. And what we done was we were mixing arsenic with what, with lime, with very high-grade lime and the whole thing had such a powder they would spread it on fields because in that area where we were, is where they needed it the most. And that was, a bug would eat a whole acreage of corn in no time at all. There was such a terrible bug in there and this would kill the bug. It was otherwise a…

MS: The arsenic would kill the insect that were eating the crops.

SY: Right, right and that's what they need it for. So they started to run it before they had a roof on. They didn't have any material to build a roof on it or to do it. So they just put up the machines and hurried and started to do it. And when it got windy or the weather changed they had a lot of [unclear] people on there. I had a lot of troubles, I worked on the outside what they called in the area of building, and I didn't have anything to do with the inside. Yet from the air, I got my skin on my forehead and between my arms, the skin came off and it was burning…

MS: This was from the arsenic?

SY: From the arsenic.

MS: And the lime too?

SY: And, well yeah, right.

MS: Because lime also burns.

SY: Right and they dried this up and made a powder out of it and that's what they would spray and then we had a lot of-- there were big places where they had fruit trees and those fruit trees got killed from the air because we didn't have a roof on the thing and what they got-- I remember we all got herring to eat and they made a whole big party because we filled out the [unclear]. We made our…

MS: You filled your quota?

SY: We filled the quota and Stalin himself sent us a congratulations. And there were some people there who were fit to be tied, they were so excited when Stalin gave us the congratulations.

MS: Were there other Jews that came with you that traveled in groups…

SY: No, we didn't find any Jews there. But there were a few Jewish people, Russian Jewish people that worked there.

MS: That were native to the area?

SY: They might, no, they came, they also ran away and they came.

MS: I see.

SY: They were refugees but they were Russian Jewish.

MS: Were you treated, were you treated…

SY: Well, yeah, like everybody else because they didn't make any distinction there, other than if you are boss or you some kind of politician than you higher up. Otherwise everybody's working.

MS: How long did you stay in this area?

SY: In there we probably stayed about two years. I know my mother went to visit my brother. You see there, finally I managed to get the kids, there were three kids and I got them into a home for children. But that was a Polish Jewish home for children. That's exactly what I wanted, but we couldn't pay, we couldn't keep them, but they had to go to a different town by train.

MS: Oh I see.

SY: But they went there and they stayed there. A home like that kept them 24 hours.

MS: Wasn't that unusual to find a Polish Jewish home in..?

SY: No, it wasn't because there was an awful lot of children without parents. The parents died away and there was children. And so they had and this one guy, a Polish Jew, managed to get correspondence with America and he got help. I understand that they would-- in fact, my brother came to visit me one day, I couldn't recognize him-- he had a full, a leather jacket with fur in the front…

MS: Fur.

SY: …three back.

MS: Yeah.

SY: There was two pieces and a fur collar and it looked so beautiful and I couldn't believe it. And I didn't see things like that for ages, an admirable American thing, I mean the Russians didn't have anything like that.

MS: So this would have been like the Jewish com-- ah…

SY: No, I believe…

MS: What organization would have supported this home?

SY: ORT, ORT[1].

MS: ORT, okay, alright.

SY: ORT had a lot to do with this. I was then, when I was in Italy, I then took over to learn to be the ultimate care.

MS: This was after, after the…

SY: After the war.

MS: So your younger sisters and brothers [unclear].

SY: [unclear] they were studying and that was the main thing that they would teach them every day…

MS: I see.

SY: …and they were feeding them and they had living environment.

MS: And your mother, where was she?

SY: And my mother was with me, we were working. Well, I was too old for that, and I wouldn't leave my mother anyway, so I stayed there. But my mother from time to time would go to visit them and she would come so happy and all of that. And so one day, she went to visit them and she didn't come, and I couldn't figure out what happened. So I went to town where the train was, the train station to look for her. There was no mother and I didn't know what to do, and while I walked around like that, I saw a place and they said, I don't remember how, it was in Russian, and by then I didn't know much Russian but I remember, I figured out that this was for mortician, for dead people here.

MS: Like a funeral home.

SY: Yeah, and I walked up through the door and I saw her standing there. She was dead. She must have had a heart attack or something. Now then about a week later, I went and I saw my younger brother. And he said that Avraham, which was the older brother passed away. I said, what do you mean Avraham passed away. He said that somehow he went out on the market and he found some apples that he ate and those apples-- he got something in his stomach, he got dysentery. Because I had felgara[2] [phonetic]. Felgara is when your stomach dries out, and that's what they call felgara. But he had probably dysentery. So anyway, my mother must have found him dead. Because the way I figured out that was the time when she went to visit him. And she

[1]Organization for Rehabilitation through Training
[2]Probably an intestinal disease.

found him in the hospital and dead and she didn't make it back, and my brother didn't know now that his mother is dead.

MS: Your brother was in the home?

SY: Yeah, he was in the home but my mother was with me. So he had no way of knowing.

MS: Now which-- now which, now was it one of the other brothers that died, that was in the home?

SY: The older, the older brother, the youngest brother was left and the oldest brother was out there on his own and he died. He was in the hospital he told me-- see I didn't know all this, because we didn't have, it wasn't easy to go there on train, and we-- I know, I didn't have time when to go but my mother she went. She was not going to stop, and when she went there everything was okay. I imagine so. But then when I didn't get, I didn't find her, I didn't have anybody to talk to, I didn't know what happened until I talked to my brother and then I put it, I put the rest together. That she must have went there and she found out he's in the hospital, so she went to the hospital. She must have found him dead, and then she came home, she didn't make it.

MS: You think she died of a heart attack?

SY: I, I don't know. I'm not a doctor…

MS: No, but…

SY: Even so, you can't tell but I don't know what else. She was pretty weak by then anyway. It was too much, all this trouble…

MS: Well what happened to the family after your mother's death?

SY: Well after my mother's death those kids was left, there was two kids and they were left in that home for children. I wrote letters to them from [unclear] often and they-- I went one day and find out to go and work on a canal. Now what happened was this: I was in this-- first of all, I was in this building of the build the building. I was staying there and I was doing okay. But then when they started to produce the chemicals, I just couldn't stand it, I couldn't make it so I decided to run away. So I went to the city where my kids, where the kids were.

MS: Do you know the name of the city again?

SY: This city is called Fergana, that's what they called it. Before I was in Kubisy [phonetic], now it's Fergana. So I came to Fergana and-- I had a friend, he was, we were both sleeping bed to bed. And he had a mother in Fergana…

MS: A mother?

SY: Yeah, but he was afraid to run away and I said to him, "Look Yasha, come with me." I had nothing to lose and I didn't think he had more to lose. "Just come with me." So we both went and snuck on the train. He had to climb on a step, and my mother they would let inside but us, they didn't. We had to have a ticket. So when the train stopped moving we climbed on the step and we had to jump off on one station and then after that we climb on again, and when we come, we're already in the city, we just jump

off and that's it. So we went to his mother and I slept there a couple days, and then I went on my own. What I did first was, I went down to the police station and I told them that, "Look I'm Polish," and the way I talked they knew I was Polish. I didn't have to show them too much.

MS: You didn't…

SY: I spoke with an accent.

MS: Alright, you didn't have to have papers of any kind at first?

SY: Yeah, here, I'm telling you why I didn't have papers and why I went to the police. I went to the police and I told them that I am Polish and that I was all these years, you know, trying to live the best I can, but I want to go and get a job and I don't have a passport. So he thought, okay good guy, he wants to reform. So he said, fine, come in a week and you'll have a passport. I gave him my name but I changed my name because I was-- I just left a job and if he checks in-- and they were doing those things and they were checking after people as much, as much as they could. They had such mismanagement they don't know what the heck, they…

MS: Well the war was still going on at this time?

SY: Yeah the war was going on.

MS: And they didn't try to…

SY: No, I was…

MS: …enlist you in the army?

SY: Well I wasn't registered nowhere. So now I went but I was still too young.

MS: How old were you at the time?

SY: I was probably about 18, 17 I guess.

MS: Seventeen and 18, they would have taken you in the army by then.

SY: No, they didn't.

MS: No.

SY: Anyway I didn't--huh, because I was Polish, no that didn't do it. They took Polish people from the camps because [unclear] took them. No, okay, so I went to the police and I told them, look my name is Sholom Miller, before it was Sholom Yashenofsky, now it was Sholom Miller. So I knew they were not going to connect it, no way. So a week later, I came and I got a passport. So now, I walk on Main Street in the city, and I see it says the offices for insurance. Now who has insurance in Russia? There is no private insurance, because you're not allowed to have enough to insure. As a private citizen you're not allowed to have it to begin with. So they say *Shtrahawanye* [phonetic-- perhaps страхование] that means insurance but it's government owned and government, everything is government tracked. I don't see the, I mean no misunderstanding. But everything is government owned and is government tracked. But they need a helper, so I figure I'm probably going to clean their offices or I'm going to do something in town. So I walked in and this lady that was sitting near the door was very

polite and very nice, intelligent, very, she was well dressed. Well to me there everybody was well dressed but she was well dressed the way I remember, and she, when I told her what I came for she was all excited. And she knocked on the door and opened the door and told the boss who's here and he invited me in. Now I'm talking to the big boss of fire insurance company. You know in Russia that's very high. So I'm waiting for the job. So he said, we have a building area going on where we'll send you and we'll pay you a salary and when you get there, they'll pay you a salary. And getting two salaries in Russia doesn't sound too kosher, you know, it's not too good. But, you see if you're Polish and you don't know those tricks, you just get right hooked in. So I grabbed it and he gave me a paper and I went-- he told me where to go-- and I went and I got a pair of pants and a jacket and the whole thing was sold for nothing because there wasn't much there. Like I told you those pants you could see through, you know. So I sold that but I took the bread. I got Russian bread, a whole loaf of bread.

MS: Mr. Yassi, weren't all these communities in very bad shape because of the war?

SY: Everybody suffered from the war but the government didn't suffer yet. See the problem between the government and the people was this. The farmers have to deliver so much wheat to the storage. The farmer has to deliver whatever he has, so much to the storage. This gets spread out between the government people first before it goes to the public. The public can buy everything on the market, on the black market, if they want to because a lot of it gets thrown away, only the price is so high that nobody can afford it. Now what do you do when you go and buy and sell? You also can afford it, and I did that for a while but I was afraid I'm going to get caught and sent away again to some coal mine or whatever, so I figured I better go and get a job like that, because I didn't know what I'm getting, but I went and signed up and I took all the stuff and I went on the train station and then I realized that I'm being watched. There's a policeman with a gun sitting at the end of the train and watching. I can go in but I can't go out now. So I took whatever I had and you know, I went in the train and I made the trip. And it wasn't that far, a few hours, by train. But where did I wind up? They built the largest canal in Russia.

MS: I see.

SY: What did they call it?

MS: [unclear]

SY: No, no, this is the largest canal. It has a Uzbek name to it, it has a Muslim name, so…

MS: So in other words, this is sort of a hoax, they sent you…

SY: You know why they send me here, is why they send me. The government tells every factory, every business, every, every office to supply people to this work, to the canal. Stalin needs to build a canal and nobody cares what else happens. The canal is getting built and people were there one next to the other.

MS: Was this important to the war?

SY: No, not to the war.

MS: Not to the war.

SY: But they did, it would bring a lot of water, extra water and the next thing they were going to do was build an electric station.

MS: Generator.

SY: Generator, generator, yeah that's what it is, generator to generate electricity, so it was an important project. So when I came there by now, I learned that there is tricks. You have to be smart or if not, you're not going to get, so now I start thinking what can I do. I went out to the, they call it the *trassa* [phonetic]. They gave me a bag and I went in line and they loaded it up on my back. They loaded up a bag of dirt and I walk up the mountain. Imagine here you would have machinery, you know, doing yards at a time, yards, more than yards at a time. I used to operate machinery that take three yards. In there, you have a person with a little bag dirt, you know it boggles your mind…

MS: Yes.

SY: …but the people are wall-to-wall people, there are so many people they brought in from the social towns, from everywhere, everywhere they get. Okay, so I…

MS: It was practically like slave labor.

SY: Right, so I was there too and I got two salaries. So at least I got two salaries. So what can I buy? I can go out on the market and buy some cheese and some little things to eat and that was a big thing then. Anyway, I start thinking this carrying dirt up the hill is not for me. So the next morning I go into the office where they call it *Commandere battalgana* [phonetic] that means he's a commander from a battalion.

MS: A battalion.

SY: They give it a…

MS: An important name.

SY: No, no, a military flavor so they can-- if you don't do what you're supposed to, anything, they can get military justice on you. They keep you, they know what they do. So I told them that I'm a stone mason, they call it stone mason in Russian but it's a bricklayer. So this woman said to me, "Okay, read." Because she seemed to have urgency to it yet too. Now what was it, we were sleeping in dugout dugs, you know, in the ground. Dugout dugs in the two, and the roof was out of straw and mud, and the sides needed to be closed on both sides, the gable ends was supposed to be closed. So I was going to lay the brick to closing the gables. I never did any brick work or didn't see it either, but what they needed I was a perfect…

MS: You could do that job.

SY: I figured out that I can do it no problem, and I did it. And this is how I went through all this, this trouble till one day my brother showed up. I must have wrote him a letter, I don't remember. But I had to write him to tell him where I was. And so he

came to visit me. He was a little scared. I said, look I'm doing okay. I'm *takeh* [Yiddish: indeed] here and this is a place where people rupture themselves and getting carried away. But I didn't rupture myself. I was working on the bricks. I didn't have any management. I didn't have anybody to look after me, when I worked, I worked. When I didn't work, I didn't work.

MS: There was no one-- you didn't have to…

SY: No I was just by myself. I was my own…

MS: No supervision.

SY: Yeah, if you'll excuse me you're going to have to [machine off and on]. Okay, well, while I had some time on my hands I looked around what's going on and I saw there were a lot of problems there. People had problems because it was hard work, and then I acquainted a Jewish doctor. He was Russian-Jewish and of course everybody there was from someplace else because they ran away from Eastern Russia. And he was very nice to me and all that and we had some talks and I told him, you know, everybody complained about the back. So I told him my back's hurting me and he said, "Okay, I'll write you a release," and he did. He write me a release and I was free to go home and leave the job. So I went back to Tashkent and I don't remember, wait a minute. I went back, oh, and they wanted to send me to a coal mine. I came back to that office and they said they don't have any work for me. That was the only job they had for me. So now they were through and I was through. So I went and I told-- I was actually caught on the market, speculating.

MS: Was this…

SY: Yeah, the shoemaker. No, that's what I'm coming to but I was caught on the market and speculating.

MS: When were you caught? Not when you were working on the canal?

SY: No, no, no, after I came back to the city, I came back to the city and I came back to the office where they hired me. They told me they don't have any work for me. Well I wasn't-- I didn't know Russian and I didn't know to work in an office and they wouldn't take me anyway, so you know, they didn't want a refugee in the office. So the whole thing didn't work out but that-- they always took me for the purpose so that I would cover them as far as their person. They were to send a person to the canal and I was the person they sent, and that was why they hired me. So I went back on the market and I was speculating and I was caught.

MS: What happened to you then?

SY: Well they took me to the police station and I remember sitting there in a-- it was an enclosure with a whole bunch of guys, speculators sitting there. And they took us to the train and they took us to the city of Tashkent-- that was the main capitol of Uzbekistan, it was a big city. Well that was something new for me anyway, in a big city like that and the trust, the trust of the company. They called it trust also, it's like a corporation. Although it belongs to the government again, everything is government

owned and operated. The floors were marble floors, beautiful. You come into this building, you're not going to believe it. You think you're in General Motors or something like that, company. And this was the company for the coal miners. The coal miners worked in the mines barefooted, hungry, without clothing, you know, torn up clothing but the bosses sit in an office like this.

MS: Was this your-- was this the way that you were being punished for being black market…

SY: No I wasn't…

MS: They said you had to go work in a coal mine?

SY: Right.

MS: That's what they wanted you to do.

SY: Yeah, but you see, they didn't send me directly to the coal mines. They sent me from there-- the police sent me to the trust of the coal mines.

MS: Alright.

SY: Now the coal mines decide where I'm going.

MS: Okay.

SY: But I'm going to a coal mine, that's as sure as anything else. Anyway so, while we were there all spread out on this marble floor-- it was at night time when we arrived-- and then two guys showed up. And while they was walking up and he's unlocking the door, he's was talking in Yiddish to this other guy and he says to him, *"Hey, ayb dee vest gefinen a sheester, loz eem iber.* [Yiddish: I found a shoemaker, let him alone].

MS: What does that mean?

[Tape two, side one ended]

Tape two, side two:

MS: …tape two of an interview with Mr. Samuel Yassi and we'll continue at this point.

SY: Okay, so he told him, "*Est gefin a sheester*." [Yiddish: I found a shoemaker] and "*eekh bin geven der ayner sheester*," [Yiddish: he is the only shoemaker] and I was the only Jew who understood there probably, because I didn't see any other volunteer understood what he said, so I waited. And he called in one at the time and what he asked me was, my name, my age, where I'm from, what I'm doing? So when he asked me what I'm doing, I said, "I'm a *sheester*." I'm a shoemaker. And when I told him I'm a shoemaker he said to me, "The whole gang is going to go in the morning. You stay here. You don't go." So I said, "Okay, but make sure they don't take me anyhow." So he said, "No, don't worry," he's going to tell them. So I walked out and laid down and slept. Next morning, pretty early, they came and they load them all up and another guy, a Jewish guy came and got me. And now while they going on the trucks again to the coal mines, I'm walking with this guy down the street, and you know where the old city was? You know where the Trust was, just in the beginning of the new city like. And all we had to do was go downhill in the old city and a few buildings, and then we walked in upstairs and there was a big shoemaker shop, and they were sitting there and banging shoes. So here you had a whole bunch of people, a lot of people making shoes, where they have, what do you call it *cupeter* [phonetic]. Oh gosh I forgot the name. Anyway they were making shoes for the people in the mines that he could take with the teeth and rip them off. And while he was making shoes for the people in the office, they were made like normal with wooden cleats and stuff so that they last a long time. So why did they have to have such good shoes on the marble floor while in the mines they didn't. How do I know they ripped them off at the teeth? He told me that I'm not a shoemaker. He looked at me; he told me I'm not a shoemaker. Well he's-- first of all, he's, he has to be a good shoemaker, he is a professional, number two, he looks at my hands and he sees I wasn't making shoes, so…

MS: Did they do anything for the army, for the, did they...?

SY: No, they made shoes just for the, for the coal miners.

MS: Coal miners.

SY: They had nothing to do with the army. They had people who made shoes for the army also like that, but then they made good shoes for the army. The army they watched more because it was important to them, the coal mines was not important to them.

MS: About what time, what year was this now that you're talking about?

SY: Well, I must, it must have been the next year '42.

MS: '42?

SY: Yes, because all this year went through pretty fast and, I was only months at that canal and then I decided that before winter comes, I'm not going to sleep in the underground there because you get-- actually I must have gotten arthritis I'm sure.

MS: I'm sure many physical ailments came from…

SY: From the dampness and the cold and all. It's not really that cold underground but the dampness and all. Okay. So finally, he said, I'm not a shoemaker. I said, "I'm a shoemaker". So he said here's your *cupeter* [phonetic], your and he gave me whatever I need, everything and I said I'm going to make a pair of shoes. And while I made the shoe he took the shoe in his mouth. He took the sole in his mouth and he ripped it off. So I know all those coalminers have similar shoes because-- what I did while I was talking to him, I was watching the next guy how he was doing shoes and I didn't do them that much different but no-- I didn't, I wasn't a shoemaker. So he, what he decided-- he didn't decide to teach me-- by the way, he was a Jewish guy, the whole thing was Jewish. He decided he was going to put me up and I was cutting logs to make those…

MS: Cleats?

SY: …for the shoes. And that's what I did. I was there a long time.

MS: So do you think this Jewish supervisor then was able to help you. He was able to keep you on. He didn't send you…

SY: He didn't send me back, no. First of all, they would have a big problem, he himself would have more problem then he wanted to…

MS: I see.

SY: It's not because it's his fault or wasn't his fault. The problem was there that if you involved in something, it's already your fault. You have the problem. How do they explain it? They aren't going to send a police guard with me to send me with a train, to send me to [unclear], to some coal mine, and to what purpose? What would I accomplish? I mean, the whole thing didn't make any sense, but I was not-- see I was working for the coal miners' union or coal miners trust, but I was not in the coal mine. Well, I wasn't too excited on that either, but would you believe I sat in the after hours or in the day of, I sat, in my place where I was sleeping-- by the way, the people who made, like I said the top piece**,** they called it *zatofka* [phonetic]. But in Polish or Yiddish it's *kamachis shteper* [phonetic].

MS: It's like designer.

SY: It's the tops.

MS: The top part of the shoe.

SY: The top part of the shoe. There was a couple Polish Jews who had a separate office or separate place and they were doing that. They were Polish Jews. And once I started talking to them, they realized I was a Polish Jew too so they said, here, and he gave me a pair of the tops, and he gave me some lacquer. And I went down to this other Jewish. He was probably from Romania or Slovakia, the way he was talking I could tell by his slang. And I told him what I need and I-- he gave it to me and I went

home and I made a pair of shoes. Now what do I do with the shoes? I take them out to the market and they're very expensive. Shoes over there are terribly expensive and people have to pay their last dollar to get shoes, [unclear].

MS: So you took a chance then, you took the shoes…

SY: I didn't have to take a chance, they gave it to me.

MS: Oh they gave it to you.

SY: I could always say they gave it to me. They, they took a chance more than I did, but I wasn't going to be caught.

MS: Well how did you remain there and what type of work did you have?

SY: I wasn't there too long because you see what happened later was they didn't necessarily want me and I didn't necessarily want them. Even though…

MS: Well how…

SY: Even though they must have found out-- well they realized that I was selling shoes on the market because they've given me parts and I don't wear them, I don't wear any of these shoes. So they realized probably what happened. So what happened one day came a Jewish guy, and he took me into another place and it was very scary because it was in an area where all the Uzbeks live. Because they had those, let's say we have a house-- they would have a fence built out of clay, that high. You can't see through it, you can't see inside the house.

MS: What were these people doing?

SY: Because their women were not allowed to…

MS: Mingle…

SY: To see, to see-- men shouldn't see them.

MS: Okay, this was the Muslim society?

SY: Yes. They were [unclear]. [machine off and on] Well he took me there and it turned out that while I was there they were building a big kettle into, into an oven. They built in a kettle into the oven.

MS: The big kettle into the oven?

SY: And what that turned out to be was a salt manufacturing kiln. This was one of the best businesses I ever knew. I learned to make salt there and I became a real professional, because the guy was an old man. He had no choice but to teach me. Why? He would wake me up at five in the morning. I would, I already had chopped wood. I would start a fire, and he would load up the kettle, and he would then say goodbye, and he would walk away. And I knew where he went because once he told me. He's going to *daven* [Yiddish: to pray].

MS: Oh really.

SY: *Davenen,* to pray.

MS: Yes, pray.

SY: So he went *davenen* and I watched-- he told me what to do-- you see while he told me, he didn't want to teach me or anything like that, but he had to tell me what to

look for or what. I then added up to myself, I added up, you know, after a period of time, I could run this kettle and I didn't need him. If he didn't come right away, that's okay too, you know. So he used to-- and he was an old man. He had the daughters and you know and so. He was from Vitebsk. A Jew from Vitebsk.

MS: What?

SY: Vitebsk. That's a city in the Ukraine, probably now.

MS: Yes.

SY: Anyway, so, so…

MS: Was he also a refugee? Obviously, to…

SY: He was a refugee there. His son-in, son-in-laws, two son-in-laws got killed in the war and that was the problem. A lot of Jews got killed. Anyway so I was doing the salt with him like that and then came the, well then came-- I think he got sick or he gave up-- I don't know but the guy who brought me there to begin with came back and I didn't see in a long while. And he said that he's going to run the place and I should be the salt maker. Somehow he already knew that I know because he must have watched me.

MS: Alright, so he was going to be your supervisor then?

SY: Well he was my supervisor anyway.

MS: And you continued in the same job?

SY: Yeah, and I was the salt maker…

MS: And how long were..?

SY: And then he was going to learn from me. Well we were there not too long, not even a year when he came and he said he has a new job for me. I said, what is that? He said, making salt but we're going to make it in another place. Why did he want to make it in another place? In here, he was an employee of the coal mines. Yeah, of the coal mines. In there, it was *artair* [phonetic]. *Artair* means private investments and government investments. There means private investments and government investments. What that meant is they can do whatever they want. They're like a, it's like a…

MS: That's private enterprise?

SY: An enterprise, but you can't call it that way.

MS: Yes, in the Soviet Union, how can you call it private?

SY: I don't know, so they call it *artair*. *Artair* means government but they do whatever they want. He had money invested because they had to buy oil. They had to buy-- you see, he used to buy seeds-- there's a place where they grow a lot of cotton. So by the ton they have cotton seeds. So they squeeze the oil from the cotton seeds.

MS: So they make [unclear].

SY: No, that's too good for salt. But the government thinks that's what they're using to make salt, or they're telling the government that they doing that, but what we would do is whatever gets squeezed out we refined it, it's oil-- and whatever was left that

we used for salt. But then we go and buy like, they clean skins like, you ever seen sheep skins? They have a lot of fat on them so they scrape it off.

MS: It's like a, it's like a tanning process?

SY: No, what we were doing is getting the fat from the sheepskin…

MS: Okay.

SY: …buy it by the ton and put it in the salt. And then we would give the government their amount of salt they need, and then whatever was left over we would sell on the market.

MS: I see.

SY: We would also sell the refined oil on the market. A little bottle of oil was a 100 rubles, that's a, that's a half a month's salary…

MS: Oh my.

SY: …or more. Some time, some people didn't even make it a month. [cough]

MS: And that was used for cooking purposes?

SY: For cooking purposes, of course. I mean who would have thought-- they would put a teaspoon of oil into a pot of soup, because how much can they afford?

MS: That's right. So how long did you stay?

SY: In that, I think a couple years. I met her I was still there. You know…

MS: Your wife, yeah.

SY: You know what happened, I met her it was a year after the war.

MS: So the war ended in 1940…

SY: '45.

MS: '45. And you were still in…

SY: May 3, 1945.

MS: And you were still in this business?

SY: In this business, yeah.

MS: Okay.

SY: But it had gotten tougher then. When the war ended they started to look more. And it made it tougher to do it, but anyway, I met her a year later, in '46.

MS: What is your wife's name?

SY: Sylvia.

MS: Okay. [chuckle]

SY: Shura.

MS: Shura, right.

SY: You think I'll forget her name?

MS: I just wanted to get…

SY: I forget a lot of things. I'm afraid to forget her name. Anyway, so I met her and they called it the house of the Red Army. What they had, they had a dance in that place, so they provided music in that place and we came to dance and so we met.

Somebody introduced us, and I walked her home, and what was I going to say this. A week or so later, I took her a gallon, you know those glass gallons, and filled it up with oil and gave it to her. Take it to her home. Of course, they won't allow us to have it. I wasn't allowed to transfer it, but I had a bicycle and I was going pretty fast and who's going to chase after me. Besides that I had it covered so it looked like, you know-- I knew how to do it because we were doing this constantly-- helping people and letting people buy oil and carry it away. There was a Uzbek woman who would go with a glass that looked white from milk, and yellow milk but she had two cans full of oil. And she would sell it on the market. Of course, she made a lot of money. She made more money in that then who knows.

MS: So the black market was really thriving?

SY: That was the only thing, the only way. So her mother was blind at the time. She probably opened her eyes when she touched that gallon of oil, you know, I'm sure she did. She tried it, right? I'm sure she did.

MS: But you didn't get caught doing this?

SY: No, if I would have got caught I would be in jail.

MS: Well how long then did you remain in...?

SY: Not too long because it was, it had gotten dangerous. Another thing was, when I met her…

MS: When you met Sylvia.

SY: Sylvia, I was already-- oh I see, I better use the name because it's going to be confusing-- when I met Sylvia I was already registered to go back to Poland. I knew that I would die there. I wouldn't stay there.

MS: This is after the war?

SY: After the war, I had other plans, other thoughts but first things first. I had to go back to Poland. But here I met her and I wanted to take her with me, and the first transfer was already gone from Tashkent, the whole big transport took…

MS: Refugees going back.

SY: Again, refugees going back to Poland. Well, I was on that list but I declined to go. I said I'll go on the next line, but there was no next line. So what happened, in meanwhile, it gave me time anyway, I went to work on her papers. So I went to the Polish committee and find out what I'm supposed to do. So they told me what I'm supposed to do. Meanwhile her father tried to get somebody that he knew to pay 5,000 rubles. That's a lot of money.

MS: Yes, an enormous amount.

SY: To, to make her papers.

MS: Was Sylvia from Poland too?

SY: No, she's from Russia.

MS: Oh alright, so you had a problem then because you were Polish, she was Russian.

SY: Well that wasn't the problem. The problem was if I would register-- if we got married, that means I can take everything.

MS: But you would have to get married first.

SY: We had to get married, but then I had to get her registered to go, a year ago and that, that was the problem. That was the only problem.

MS: So that meant you had to…

SY: To get married all, all I did-- here's how we handled this. I wanted to prove to the guy at the office there, I dealt with them a lot because I was in this here crooked business all the time. In this oil business, salt business, all, they used to pay policeman. We went once on the Main Street, Karl Marx Street to go to a movie and somebody on a motorcycle, you know, in a police uniform, stopped right in front of me, and they, his guard in the back of him, stopped in back of him there and you know, and he started talking to me and she got white, she's scared, you know. And I knew who he was and what he wanted, he wanted some money. And I told him I'm not working any longer, for a while. And I said, I don't have any money because I'm not working.

MS: Did he accept that excuse?

SY: Yeah, he took over, what can he do? He didn't catch me doing anything so he can't say nothing. But meanwhile he was the one that broke the law. He was asking for a bribe. I didn't…

MS: That's a bribe…

SY: I didn't ask him for a bribe. Anyway, so, so we had things like that. So I knew how to deal with him. So what I did, we went down to Sax, that's where you get married, to sign up. Sax.

MS: Is that like a City Hall?

SY: Yeah, well it's not a City Hall there. It's a marriage office.

MS: Yeah, okay.

SY: So we went in and I-- there was a young Uzbek girl and I said to her, "Listen I have a problem," and since I was a young guy and she looked at me and she thought she can help me and, you know, I wasn't in a hurry to tell her but I, I have a problem so let it sink in a bit. And then I told her, "Listen her mother is against me. She doesn't want me," so I want to show it to her mother that I'm married a whole year. "So why don't you put last year's date on it?" So she did and I gave her 100 rubles. And that was it and we walked out and we were married a year.

MS: Alright.

SY: So then I went to the office to, that was the big-shot-- the big-shot was this tall but he, but he was the big-shot.

MS: A short man.

SY: Yeah. A lot of short men like to be big-shot, but he was…

MS: Psychologically.

SY: I went out, first of all you have to sit there and wait forever. You call up and you tell them that you are waiting to see him. And some woman answered and finally they let you go up and you go up the elevator and you come in this big office with the little guy and he says to me, you know, what I want and I tell him that I'm married to this girl and she was away-- oh, before I went there, I went to my old boss and I told him, listen, I need a piece of paper, they call a *sprofta* [phonetic], a piece of paper, that my girl, that my wife was away, you send her away to another town for work and so she was away and she, and, and she wasn't in Tashkent, she was in Cu. So, so he gave me that and I paid him. He was my boss but I paid him this time. So anyway, and I took those two pieces of paper and I told them, listen my wife was away. They send her away and she couldn't register. Now I'm having problems I can't take her with me to Poland, I have to go home. So he looked at me and looked at this and looked at that, and I think he made troubles for this Jewish guy, something like that, because he might have, but he didn't make any troubles to me. He just gave me a, and he said okay…

MS: So he had the authority to…

SY: And a week later she was on the list. That's all it took.

MS: So how long then did you have to wait until you were able to leave Russia for Poland?

SY: Only a few weeks, we only knew each other-- a few days that's right, we had to run, yeah.

MS: Well how did you get to Poland from that town?

SY: Well we went by train and then I got lost and I changed it…

MSY: What kind of train, what train?

SY: The same train. They only travel-- you see the only passenger train is a normal train but it doesn't go on trips like that. If you go on trips you have to go in a boxcar.

MS: Oh so you went by boxcar?

SY: We went by boxcar. We had a shelf, this time we had a shelf to sleep on but in a boxcar.

MS: And, but you were able, you left the country then and how long did this trip take you to get to..?

SY: Six weeks.

MS: Six weeks again?

SY: We was-- we stood around a lot.

MSY: You take off from the main railroad on the side yard.

MS: Oh yeah, you stayed on that.

SY: On the side yard.

MS: On the side yard and waited and waited. So it took you six weeks to get back to Poland and you went back to what city?

SY: We went all the way across Poland from east, from east to west and we wound up in Krakow.

MS: In Krakow.

SY: And from there we took another train and we went to what is called Niederschlesien [lower Silesia]. That was a German area, a German town, but now Poland took it over. Because Germany lost the war so…

Unidentified voice: [unclear]

SY: Mednitza [phonetic] was one town. There were a few, there was Lotolya [phonetic], there was Rudnitza [phonetic], but the area is called Niederschlesien.

MSY: Kibbutz.

SY: Yeah.

MS: And where, so how-- what happened at that point?

SY: Okay, we went in, we went into a Jewish kibbutz to go to Israel.

MS: Okay, it wasn't a Jewish displaced person camp was it?

MSY: Okay, no later.

SY: No, no, first we went into this kibbutz. She stayed there and helped out and I went traveling. I went to Lodz and then I went to Warsaw and I found my brother and my sister. I wanted to ask-- first of all, my first question was, do you want to come with me or do you want to stay home? And my sister started to cry. She must have had a boyfriend or something, I don't know what. She started to cry because she was afraid that I'm going to make her go because there was some that made them go, but I wouldn't do that because I didn't know myself where I'm going yet. I knew that I would have to go through all this and we go and other things. So I knew we had a tough ride and I didn't want to pull them along unless I knew they wanted to go. So my brother had to stay with my sister, she wanted to stay, okay. So they stayed and I told them goodbye and I remember I gave them some money and then I went back.

MS: You went back where?

SY: To Niederschlesien, to her, yeah. So then we found out a short time later that she was pregnant. So meanwhile, I received a, a, what they call it?

MSY: [unclear] to go to the army.

SY: To the army, to sign up to the Polish army. In the Polish army, you stay for a lot of years, they…

MS: Well why would you go to the Polish army after the war?

SY: Because I was registered in Poland. So they wanted me in the army. I was 21 years old, I was just the right age for them.

MS: But the war was over.

SY: They still wanted an army. Anyway, I wasn't going to argue with them and I wasn't going to even talk to them. What we did, was we talked to the guy in the kibbutz and made them aware and they find out we are what we packed ourselves and we went away and we took our…

MSY: [unclear].

SY: Yeah, well we have Jewish people all the time, they to go to Israel, they went illegal. First border between Poland and Czechoslovakia was illegal but we went by train at nighttime. I think we made the first time we made through.

MSY: No we didn't.

SY: No wait a minute, I told you where we didn't. That was the second zone. That was Austria, we didn't. In Poland we did, we came through okay. We came, remember we came to Minsk?

MSY: [unclear], sent us back?

SY: No, you're not listening, just listen please.

MS: Did you have...?

SY: We went from Poland in a train through Czechoslovakia into Austria.

MS: Right.

SY: And that was okay. We made it.

MS: How did you, how did you manage with papers?

SY: We didn't, I think they paid off.

[Tape two, side two ended]

Tape three, side one:

MS: … an interview with Mr. Samuel Yassi and we will continue at this time.

SY: So we went through successfully through Czechoslovakia at nighttime in that train, and we weren't stopped and we came to Austria. In Linz near Salzburg we stopped. We were there…

MSY: That's right. Okay.

SY: We were there a few days in a camp near the mountains and well, we had all kinds of problems in there. But then we wanted to go farther and while we were going through the French zone, Austria then was divided then between the Russians, the French and the Americans, but we wind up in a French zone and they stopped us and they sent us back.

MS: Back to where?

SY: To Lin-- Salzburg, where we were, to the camp in Salzburg. Well a few days later we tried again in a truck and we came to a place near a big mountain, and they let us out, and we walked in the snow and remember Sylvia was pregnant. And we walked in snow up to our knees and farther and deeper, all up the mountains. And when we came over this mountains, we had the Alps. We have a picture, a small picture taken right on the top of that Alps. And when we came down on the other side, we were in Italy. And that was we were already enough into freedom because the Italians allowed us to go into a camp and we stayed three years in Italy before we got our papers to come to the United States.

MS: Was this a, a…

SY: A DP Camp, a displaced persons camp.

MS: Operated by the American government?

SY: Probably, yeah. By UNRRA[3].

MS: UNRRA.

SY: UNRRA.

MS: And you had to remain there three years?

SY: Yeah, well it took that long before our papers got there, in order.

MS: Was your family in Souderton responsible for getting the papers to you [unclear]?

SY: Yeah, they sent us the papers, yeah.

MS: And then of course, you came to the United States.

SY: Okay.

MSY: Truman helped.

SY: Truman helped, yeah.

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[3]UNRRA - United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, founded in 1943 to provide relief to areas liberated from Axis powers after World War II.

MSY: The president, Truman, helped the refugees to come in. He would have waited on his Polish, he was registered as a Polish refugee and I was a Russian refugee.

SY: She could go a lot faster because there wasn't too much on the quota for the Russians but the Polish quota was always overfilled.

MS: [unclear], yeah.

SY: So we couldn't have come until…

MS: And you got in quicker because.

MSY: Truman helped us.

MS: Well that was very fortunate. Was there anything else you care to say Mr. Yassi, about your experience?

SY: Well, I had all kinds of experience and things that I learned all kinds of languages. I learned all kinds of trades. I don't know if I'm a better person for that or not, but at least I can understand problems and I can understand hardship and I'm trying. I'm 74 years old and I'm still trying.

MS: Well I'm-- it was really a very, very heart rending experience that you went through Mr. Yassi and…

SY: Because they a lot of things that I just had to slip through because we would have been here the whole night. I had a lot of problems.

MS: And how did your sister and your brother fare that remained in Europe?

SY: Okay, so they went, they went in Israel finally, you see, because by the time they were ready to leave Poland, Poland didn't let them out and nobody let them in and they had troubles to get out until they finally went to Israel. And when they came to Israel, I sent them the papers and they came here. To a brother and a sister, they could come faster and so they came here. And they're living in New York. My brother is a nautical engineer and my sister's a chemical engineer. They married, they have families, thank God.

MS: Well thank you very, very much for your interview Mr. Yassi. It was a very interesting one and…

SY: My pleasure.

MS: And I'm happy you were able to give it to the Archive. I do appreciate it very much. Thank you.

[Tape three, side one ended, interview ended.]