

Ann Walters Testimony Transcript

My name is Ann Walters. I was born in a small town in Poland by the name of Radziłów. It's now very far from Bialystok. I come from a family of four children. I was the youngest of the four. I had a very, what I would say, happy normal childhood. I was quite young at the time when the war started. I was not quite seven years old. I had many cousins, and family members, uncles and aunts – quite an extensive family and everybody was very nice and I was playful and I really had a very good childhood. However, it did not last very long.

In September of 1939 the war started – the Second World War. And we were fortunate at that point because Radziłów was in a part of Poland where it was the German's gave over to the Russians as a result of a pact between Hitler and Stalin and - and after the first scare of having the Germans right there and seeing them and all this power that they possessed at that time, we left town then because we were afraid of bombings etcetera, but we returned as I said about two weeks.

And the Russians came to our area. It wasn't quite as normal of a life as one would think. My parents owned or they were partners to a flour mill. It was a family business and, as such, we were considered bourgeois – capitalists which is a big sin under a Russian regime. It was anyway and we were evacuated from our house. We were not allowed to live in a house because of that. The Russians took away the business from us. My father couldn't find another job because it was not a good thing to give a capitalist – to help a capitalist. So for a long time he did not work and yet he had to show that he had an income. But later on he found a job in another flour mill and, myself, as a child, other than knowing what was going on, my life was pretty good. I started to go to school in Europe at the time at the age of seven – that's when children started to go to school. And I enjoyed that and I enjoyed my friends. The Russians occupied our part of Poland for about two years.

When the Germans attacked the Russians without warning our family, our family we stayed in Radziłów. We were raided by – by the German, German soldiers. The Germans entered our home. It was at night. They were demanding money, gold, jewels – whatever we had we gave it to them and they were not satisfied and they started beating us up. Fortunately, the light went out and many of us did hide under beds or behind some cabinets. My mother was severely beaten because she was trying to protect her children. They tried to arrest my father. Somehow he escaped. They shot after him. We did not know if he was hit or not. It was a terrible, terrible night.

And then, an order came that adults and able people - the teenagers - they needed to go to the marketplace. And excuse was that it needed to be cleaned up. Our streets and they marketplace were paved with cobblestones so the grasses would grow around it etcetera. So the excuse was that it needed to be cleaned up. And so my parents went up there and my older

brother and sister did too. And Polish people were there and they were guarding so no one could run away. And many people were beaten. My father knew a lot of farmers – Polish farmers – because of the flour mill. They would do business and one farmer recognized my father and he said, “You don’t need...it’s not a place for you. You better leave.” He was going to lead him through the guard and to let him go home. But he said that his family was there too so he allowed him to gather the members of the family and my parents and my other two siblings came home.

No sooner did they get home two Polish young men came. And they said, “We came to take you back to the marketplace.” And my father said, “Well, we were just released. We were there and we were just released.” And they said, “Well, it was a mistake. You have to come back.” And my father started to explain and tried to talk them out of it but they just wouldn’t listen. And so at this time they wanted all of us including the other two children including myself. And my mother - she was stalling. It was obvious that something was going on – something terrible was going on. So she was stalling. She wanted – she said she wanted to take a sweater for me. I was still little and it was September or August the end of August 1942. And they were hurrying her along and then she, she was looking for the keys to the house. And they said to hurry up and “you don’t need to lock the door.” And, of course, we didn’t know exactly at that point what they meant.

But finally we started walking and my parents noticed that they were not taking us toward the marketplace. And when they were asked- where they are taking us? They said, “Well, you’ll see pretty soon.” And we were just going along and we heard a shot. And there were screams and the two men turned around and they said, “It’s too late. Go home.” And in the meantime we heard the screams and we saw smoke and it was in the air that something horrible was happening and we didn’t go back home. We just kept on running out of town and away from town. And it was, it was, it was horrifying.

I still remember the feeling when we got out of town we were running down the road and a farmer was coming toward Radziłów – toward the town. And, again, someone that knew my father and he asked him, “What’s happening?” And my father said he doesn’t know, but something terrible is happening. And the farmer suggested we should get off the road. We were so confused and we couldn’t even think straight and no sooner did we get off the road and down into the wheat - it was before harvest – and we heard another horse and buggy coming down the road. So, we laid down in the wheat. And I still can remember how it felt. I - I couldn’t get close enough to the ground. It was as if I tried to get down into the ground as I could so no one could see me. And we were so close to the road that these two farmers met and we could hear them talk and they were exchanging information and what was happening in town. And, in the meantime, a man on horseback came riding from Radziłów, and stopped these two men and was asking if he saw the Finkelstein family. And he said, “Well, they captured all the Jews and they put them in a barn and they set the barn on fire and they by mistake, the only family that got away was the Finkelstein family – and if they had seen them anywhere. And the first miracle

happened as far as we were concerned is that they said no, they had not seen us. One of them did.

We walked through the field to a village – the name of it was Konopt [Konopki-Blonie]. We went there. My father took me along. He wanted to go into the village without the whole family. And my family remained in the field. And I remember we got to one house. This man – he was the head of the village. And he was sick at the time. He had some problems with the leg. I think his name was Bullock. And I couldn't follow everything – the conversation – but my father really asked him if he could help us. There were some other people and the first comment that there was from those people was, “As Jews we cannot help you - if you promise to convert then we will try and help you.” Of course, my father agreed. Then we went back and my family saw – well, my father left me with the farmer and that was a sign for my family to know that my father was offered some help. So the rest of the family came and this particular farmer, even though he was powerful and he was influential, he still was afraid and he wasn't sure. So they took us into the field among some bushes.

And we stayed in the field for about a couple nights – two or three days – and then we were taken back to the village. And we were divided among different farmers and each one of us stayed with another family. We were with the farmers a few months. We were a few months until the Germans started to liquidate the ghettos in Poland. Then came an order from the Germans that we needed to report – or rather they did not even communicate with us – they communicated with the villagers that they should bring us to town – as a matter of fact, to Bialystok, because in our town there were no Jews survived really. There were no Jews. So they were to bring us to Bialystok – to the ghetto in Bialystok. And we ran away. We just, the Poles, thankfully, they did not run after us to capture us and they allowed us to run away. And from then on we went in complete hiding. Hiding meant – we, we barely saw the light of the day. We were in bunkers. We were in barns. We were in cellars, in attics. We were extremely fortunate that the Poles, as dangerous as it was for them too, they were willing to help us. I must say, many of them, didn't do, didn't help us because of humanitarian reasons alone.

Nevertheless, of course, thanks to all of them we survived. Without their help, we had no chance. Our flour mill was intact which meant that there was some financial source – if not immediate – then for the future. There was, there was my parents, who had lived through the First World War, they had some experiences. So, as far as what kind of shortages there are during a war etcetera. So the money that they had, they invested in fabrics. And they took it out to ah one farmer that they knew. And when we were hiding my father would go and get a piece of fabric and give it to the family so they could, you know, have some help - because the Poles, it was extremely difficult for them too.

We, we changed many, many hiding places. Some places we were able to stay a little longer and some places we could stay only a week or two, some places only two of us could stay at a time – sometimes all of us.

Interviewer: How did you know when you needed to move on?

Well, we tried to keep it a secret when we got to a particular home or farmer and either they were scared – the family was scared. If they were scared, we had to leave because all they needed to do really is to go out and tell a German that here are Jews and they wouldn't suffer. They would get us, of course, but they wouldn't suffer. Otherwise, they would have been shot and killed just like we would have been if they were found that they are helping a Jew.

My parents, especially my mother, when we were laying in hiding in darkness, especially when the situation was very, very tense – and those were times when the Germans would find somewhere a Jew hiding. The Poles really, it was very, very tense and they were very afraid, and there were times that I remember one time the farmer dug – it wasn't even a bunker – it was like a hole in – I don't know how to call it – in the barn where they keep the straw and hay for the winter for the livestock – there is a paved part of it in the center where they work – they used to – it was quite primitive they used to put the wheat on the ground and beat it with a some sort of a lash of some kind to separate the grain from the straw – so under that - the farmer dug a hole big enough for us to crawl under just on our bellies, really.

And until things quieted down, my mother would talk to me. All the talk was in whisper because we could not take the chance of being heard. She would talk to me - being that I was the youngest and I didn't have much education yet – she would tell me about the Jewish history and heritage. And she wanted to be sure that I know who I am and who my people are. And she tried to instill in me the pride of being Jewish. And not to think that because we are exterminated and treated the way we are that we really deserved that. And she would tell me stories from history about some heroic, especially heroic events that took place. And she would tell me that if in case I am the only one who would survive, to be sure to somehow get away to a center where there are Jews and to go to Palestine and go on with my life.

Interviewer: We'd really like to get to know a little bit about your day to day life in hiding.

The food we would receive from the people who were hiding us – it was irregular. And many times it was very difficult for them to prepare the food and bring it over, because the farmers lived, you know, close by and they would visit one another. And, of course, they knew if they cooked another pot of soup, let's say, they knew that something unusual was happening. And also to bring it over - if it were across the street - that was a problem too. So many times only under the cover of darkness they would bring over a pot of soup and spoons. They would bring over a loaf of bread. There were times that really – we did not have any food. There was a time – like six months before we were liberated where the Russian Army was close enough to where we were hiding and they stopped so the local population was evicted. In other words – they have to go back and we had to stay in the bunker that we had at the time which was really a bunker the entrance was through a barn – oh a pig's oh– where the pigs stay.

Interviewer: A pig sty.

Right. And so we were staying there and the farmer - I remember twice - he endangered his life and he brought us a loaf of bread each time. And other than that it was in Fall and my younger brother would go out at night and get us some vegetables at night because the farmers were not there to gather their crops - and it was a dangerous situation because it was so close to the actual war and the German soldiers were marching back and forth along through the street and he would have to wait until he would pass one way and he would go out and gather some vegetables – carrots and rhubarb or something like that. And the bread that we got on two occasions, we kept almost like a medication, like a survival source. We'd take a small piece and we would put it in our mouth when we would feel faint really.

There was one time I remember – it was my father, my sister and I, we changed, we had to leave the hiding place where we were, and go to another one. Which by the way, my mother did a counting on how many times we had to change hiding places. She came up with a number of 52 – which we revisited some of the hiding places. But there were a lot of people involved. We never told the people where we came from or where we're going to – a little bit for their security and they should think well, maybe my neighbor helped, then why shouldn't I? And also it was more secure for us.

When we were at this bunker, that I mentioned before, rain started coming down – it was Fall. And the bunker was on the outside – it was covered but it on the outside it was not under a roof. And the water started dripping through the mud on us and we were actually sitting in mud and we just saw we had no choice. We had to get out of there. And when we got out of there – most of us couldn't even walk. My mother fainted. And it was in the middle of the night. Usually we changed our hiding places in the middle of the night. Even if the moon was out it was too light. It had to be real dark and if the weather was bad, in a way, we felt safer. Nobody was there to run into us. And as far as clothing, we had a coat from home yet. The farmers would give us a coat or so or a blanket. My younger brother one time was very sick. He caught a cold – he probably had pneumonia maybe – I don't know. It was hurting in his chest. And somehow, my father was laying in the bunker – many of the bunkers, by the way, weren't tall enough to even sit. I, as the smallest, and I always was sort of short for my age, some of the bunkers, I was able to sit – some of them I was able to sit, not all of them, some of them. But anyway, my father held my brother close to him and he sort of kept him warm and he got over it.

My older brother was bitten by some sort of an insect – or I don't know what it was but it was he had a blood infection from it and there this red line coming. And we didn't have any first aid, whatsoever – not a band-aide – even if they had band-aides in those days, the way we know them now. And it was - it was critical – it was critical. There was no way that he could go to a doctor. And my sister went to another part of it was in the hay – like in a barn – the top. And she went to another part where we were and she was crying, because it was obvious that he wasn't going to make it. And she found a piece of lard – not the melted type but the actual slab

of the lard – a small piece from a time where people that kept us brought us with a loaf of bread whatever and a kid – you know, we ate only as much as we had to and then we would save it for later or for next morning, because we didn't know what we will have next morning. And a kid found it and it stole it from us so we didn't have it at the time and, you know, we just felt it's gone. And he kept it against his wound and somehow he survived. I had a problem with a tooth – that was in the beginning first stages of our hiding and one farmer took me to a – so-called dentist – obviously he wasn't a very good one because all he did was he just broke off my tooth and the root continued to give me a lot of trouble to the point where I had a – what do they call it – a fistula or something – it sort of ate through. And that was so much pain – so much trouble – on top of everything. And there was nothing we could do. I was taken even to that dentist I was taken in the middle of the night.

Interviewer: [When and where was your liberation?](#)

We were liberated in August of 1945. It was in – we were all scattered at the time – that was the time after we left the bunker where we were sitting in the mud – about a month or a little over a month after we escaped after we left the bunker. I was still with this lady – this kind lady that took care of me. My brother, my younger brother was somewhere else by himself – again that was a different situation already. My sister was with my parents in one place. It was still in the same area – they were not far from Radziłów, really. We were liberated, as I said, by the Russian Army and my father tried to gather us. He knew where we were and a day after that there were two other Jewish people from Radziłów who survived– a father and son – they were also in hiding. We never had any contact with them before. And as soon as the Russian Army came, they picked themselves up and they went to Radziłów. And they were caught by the Polish people and they were killed.

Interviewer: [Did you go back to your home in Radziłów?](#)

In Radislow, no we did not because as soon as we heard about those two Jews who were killed, my father engaged a farmer who took us in his horse and buggy in middle of night and it was January, cold snow, in the middle of the night he took us to Bialystok. Bialystok was liberated six months before we were. So there was some sort of Jewish community – some sort of organized Jewish community. Our aim was to leave Poland as soon as we possibly could. Our aim was Palestine. But we couldn't because first of all many of the members of our family became extremely ill and we just couldn't go on. And then it wasn't a matter of buying a ticket and go. Palestine was under the British mandate and they controlled who and how many Jews did go to Palestine if any.

And so it took us a long time to get to Palestine. We travelled – again, we our family was split up. Myself and the younger of the two brothers– we joined a youth Aliyah. There were some centers through Europe where young children were able to go and my parents felt again, they were anxious for us to have some sort of normalized life and some sort of education, which

in those centers they did have classes and so we joined Youth Aliyah. We ended up – we couldn't just go from one country to another. We had to still borders in Europe. And we ended up in Italy – in Selvino. My older brother and my sister remained in Poland for a while and they were instrumental they worked in the organization where they tried to organize the survivors and the young people. My parents were in a group of adults. They called it a Kibbutz. It didn't resemble very much to what we know a Kibbutz in Israel is but they had an opportunity to go to Palestine illegally because the certificates of the people who could go legally to Palestine were very, very scarce. And my parents thought that as young children we would be one of the first to go legally to Palestine and by so doing reducing the dangers involved. So they got to Palestine in 1946. They were caught by the British and they were put in some sort of confinement. I don't know if it was exactly a prison, but some sort of a camp. And they were kept there for several months and then they were let go. My brother and I, with Youth Aliyah, we were in Italy for a year and then finally, in January of 1947 we embarked on an illegal trip to Palestine and we were caught by the British and at that time they had erected by then they had erected the camps on the island of Cypress. After six months, as I said, we finally got to Palestine.

Interviewer: Ann, how and when did you come to the United States?

Well, I lived in Israel from 1947 – to I was in school and I went to the Army – I was in Israel for ten years. I was quite happy to be in Israel. I came to the United States in December of 1957 and I never dreamt of leaving Israel. But love entered my life at that point. And it was this young man also from Poland, also a survivor. He was in labor camps and concentration camps and he survived and after the war he immigrated to the United States. And his papers were for Kansas City and ah but he had a brother in Israel - in Haifa. And he, at a certain point, he decided to take a trip and go and see his brother. And it so happened that his brother and my brother – my older brother – were friends. So we met and he was very nice and very pleasant. And I thought um it's a shame that he doesn't live right here in Haifa and lives all the way in the United States. And I forgot about it. Well, to make the story short, we were married and I came to the states.

Source: Ann Walters video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/waltersann/>