

Iser Cukier Interview

October 13, 1999

Okay, we're recording. I am getting ready to interview Iser Cukier, and it is Wednesday, October 13, almost 2:30 in the afternoon. Iser, go ahead and say something, so I can take a level here, to make sure that I'm getting you. What was your name at birth?

Iser.

And how do you spell it?

I-s-e-r.

And when were you born?

I was born 1909.

Ok. And in what city?

Crestochowa [*sic* Częstochowa] .

You want to spell that?

Ooh.

Ha, ha.

C- You have a pencil, let me write down.

C-r-e-s-t-o-c-h-o-w-a [*sic* Częstochowa].

Yes.

Ok. And that was in....

In Poland.

In Poland. Ok. And do you have an idea of the population of this city?

Yes, the population was about 80,000.

Ok, and what percentage was Jewish, do you think?

Jews were maybe 25,000.

25,000, ok. Do you...were you born at home? Or do you know?

I was born there.

You were born at home. And what were your parents' names?

Parents' name? My father was Moyshedoff and my mother was Rachel.

Do you have any idea how your parents met?

Parents, actually my parents and grandparents were farmers.

Your grandparents?

Farmers.

Uh, huh.

And they lived in, in a small village, not only the parents but the whole family were farmers. They lived in a village Skorków was the name, and it was only three Jewish families and about 150 Poles. And they have, they live over there, and my mother, I know she married when she was fifteen. And my father, was twenty-seven, and he was seven years in the Russian army in the Cavalry, by Tsar Nicholai. And they lived till they have four kids. They all grown up. So my father says it's not for Jews, Jewish kids. They were in the *cheder*. They had to bring our teacher, you know to teach them, and so when they were the twelfth, thirteenth *bar mitzvah*, he said, "We had to move to a big city, where there are a lot of Jews and there are synagogues," and so forth, so they went to Częstochowa, where I was born.

But now, did your grandparents stay?

I didn't know the grandparents. I remember just my young mother.

Okay, so now tell me, what did your father do for a living?

My father opened a little department of bakery. And it's not...this was a bakery, but they were making pretzels, crackers, not the bread. Such thin baking. And they were growing in the business. They had people working, about six, eight people, and they have sales people, and they were going all over Poland with merchandise. And this was before the

World War I. I didn't live yet, then. And they have five sons, and two daughters. I was the youngest.

Ok, so you were the youngest. Ok, tell me the names...

Hmm?

Tell me the names of all your brothers and sisters.

Brothers? One was Max, Meyer, Jacob, Hershel, and me. And the two sisters was Esther and like her name Tobele.

Tobele? Ok. And what was the age span?

Hmm?

He had, so there were seven children?

Five brothers.

Five brothers.

And two sisters.

Two sisters.

Seven kids.

He had seven kids. What kind of neighborhood did you live in?

Hmm?

What was your neighborhood like?

Neighborhood was mixed. Polish and Jews. But the same thing like Polish said. They were not mixing. This was exceptional antisemitic town.

Very antisemitic.

Not like Będzin, where your father lives, because it was the majority were Poles. And this is a very...this city is a holy city.

Oh!

The Mary...

Yeah.

the Mother Mary...

Yeah.

Jesus' mother, supposed to be over there, and she is over there, a kind of a...

A shrine?

Yes, a saint, and the whole Polish people are coming in summer, visit this church, and so on.

Now the, did you live in an apartment also?

An apartment. There, over there, nobody had any houses. It was a...everybody lives...the rich and poor.

And would you describe your family as middle class? Were you like a middle class family?

A middle class family, yeah.

Your father, it sounds like your dad was pretty successful. His business was successful.

He was very successful, yeah. Successful, and we.... I don't know, because my mother used to tell me how it was. I was not living then.

Oh, ok. Now, in the house that you grew up in, how many bedrooms was in your apartment? Or how many rooms?

We had two bedrooms, a kitchen, and was a living room, and then, they had the bakery in the same building.

Oh.

Yeah, and I don't remember too much about it.

So now, your mother, did she work in the bakery, too? Or she was home with the kids?

With the kids. Sure.

She didn't have time to work in the bakery.

We have a maid.

Oh, you had a maid.

Oh, yeah.

She came every day or did she live with you?

Every day. A live-in maid.

She lived in with you.

Yeah. Sure.

Ok. As a family, did you take vacations? Did you go anywhere?

I don't think so. It wasn't, it wasn't that time, you know, the style to go for vacation. Vacation, in my time, when I was already in Częstochowa, I used to go for vacations. Go for vacation, I went to the country where my family was living. But to the farms. This was my vacation. Over there was, they had cattle, horses, and even lakes with fish, so it was very, very....They were rich, because they have maybe eight, ten people working for them in the fields. So they were rich people.

Now, what language did you speak at home? Polish?

Polish.

Did you speak Yiddish, too?

Did you ask me what?

Did you speak Yiddish at home?

Who, me?

Uh, huh.

I spoke in the most Yiddish.

Mostly Yiddish?

The most Yiddish, yeah, because the whole family was speaking Yiddish.

Yeah.

But everybody knew Polish, because we had to know, knew in the country where we lived.

Yeah.

First of all, we were living among Poles. And the language was necessary to it; but among us, we was speaking only Yiddish.

What kind of school did you attend? Did you go to public school, or was it...?

Public schools.

Public school, so it was mixed.

First of all, I was going to a Hebrew school. And then a public school.

At the public school. So it was mixed with gentiles and Jews, right?

Yeah.

Do you remember, well how old were you?

Maybe three years old.

Three years old when you started school? Really.

That was the, that was the style.

Gosh. So how far did you go in school before the War? How far did you get?

How far?

Yeah.

'Cause we were going to *cheder*.

Yes.

Three, four years.

Yes.

And then, we were going to school. And we learned Polish, and history, Jewish history. Because the school was teaching only Polish. One day, we have...one day in the week, we have Jewish history and the religious, that was school.

So did you? Like how far, what was the highest grade that...?

Highest grade was seventh.

So did you make it through seventh?

Yeah.

Then what happened?

Then what happened? So after the War, the First World War, my father, first of all, during that time, they had to liquidate during the War, the business. Yeah.

During the First World War?

First World War, yeah. And they had to liquidate the business. And my brother, Max and Jacob, were already in the years, 18, 19 and this was the end of the War. They were accepted to the Polish Army. There was, I don't know if you know the history of that time. After the First World War, Poland, Poland was, before the First World War, Poland was under occupation of the Tsar, Russia. And they were liberated, and they made the Polish Army, and they fought, they fought the Russian to become a Polish country. So they took my two brothers to the Army. And at the same time, it was a pogrom in Częstochowa. There were killings; they were cutting my father head had a beard like that. They were cutting my father's beard to get them to come. And they came home, they said, we are not going to the Army. I will, they, my brother said "I will fight for Poland, and here they will kill my father and my family? I will not do that." In the meantime, my father got sick, pneumonia. At that time, wasn't any medication, and he passed away.

And how old was he?

He was maybe, middle sixties. So the two brothers left Poland to Germany. And I was a kid, that time, and I had two older brothers. One brother, and a sister, was married before I was born. My sister, I have a nephew in Canada. He is the same age with me. And my mother was pregnant, she was pregnant also. When I was born, in that time, there wasn't any bottles to feed. Everybody breast fed the kid. If my...my mother used to tell me, "Esther, *zeyg mir dos kind* [Yiddish: "nurse the child for me"] Feed the... me." So my sister, feed me.

Oh, my gosh.

And my mother was going for business or whatever it is. So that time.

Do you know how old your mother was when she had you?

My mother passed away, she was 69.

69. How old was she when she was pregnant with you, do you know?

I wouldn't know.

Ok. I was just curious.

She married fifteen years old.

Yeah. Was your family religious? Were they religious Jews? Were they religious? Was your household a religious household?

My father was religious.

Yeah, yeah.

In fact, he was very religious. When he was in the Army, and he was in the Cavalry, I ride the horse a bit, yeah. He was once injured in the War with Japan, Russia and Japan. So he was so religious, he came to the Army, had to eat *treyfn* [non-kosher food], you know.

Yeah. *Treyf*.

You know. It's kosher. So he didn't got any other alternative. He had to eat *treyfn*. When he finished his service, seven years, he was served in the Army, so to loo...I don't know how you say it. Because he wants to...I don't know how to express.

He had to....

To do *tshiva* [act of repentance]. You know what *tshiva* is?

No.

If somebody does something wrong, he wants to do something better. *Tshiva*. So he fasts every Thursday, through his whole life.

Because he ate *treyf*?

Treyf.

Huh.

How's that?

Gosh.

So, so as it is, and my mother wasn't so religious. They never did say to us. He...“You are so skinny, and you don't eat.” He said, “I promised myself, if I would get out from the Army, I would fast every Thursday.” And that's what he did. And this probably killed him.

That's unbelievable.

Yeah. But the rest of us were not...mother was not very religious. She was, you know, like mothers. That type.

But were you brought up to be religious?

Not especially. Because my father passed away when I was five years old.

Oh, you were only five.

I was left with my mother. And the two, the two daughters were married, and the two boys were married, and the two boys left for Germany and I was, with my older brother, left with mother because...without anything.

But did your mother, did you still celebrate the Jewish holidays? Did you still celebrate Jewish holidays?

Yes.

You did.

Sure. And we were in bad shape at that time. So we gave up the business because the brothers run the business. And father. And father passed away. And the brothers had to leave Poland. So mother left with two children.

Yeah so how did she take care of you two? How did she...?

I don't know. It was very bad. My oldest brother and sister, they were married, and they were with us. So they helped out. And then, my brother came to the United States, he used to send them...

Send money?

A little money. And the brother in Germany. He also helped, not too much. But this brother in Germany, was before the War, before the Second World War, he was a very rich man, very rich man.

Really, your brother.

Yeah. He had a business, which even a train came into his business. Very rich. And he survived with his wife and one daughter on *Arish* [Aryan] papers. They left through Belgium, and after that, they left as gentiles.

So they got out of Germany.

They got out.

Oh, my gosh.

And then, I supposed to study, go to high school. So my brother from the United States, said “Don’t do anything. You don’t need your Polish studying. You learn a trade, and I will bring you to the United States. You have to have a trade. Your Polish learning, it is for nothing.” So I used to go a half-day to school, and half day to learn the trade.

What trade?

Hum?

What trade was it?

It...tailoring.

Ok.

Yeah. Men’s tailoring.

Did you...did you personally select tailoring? I mean, did you want to be a tailor? Was it something you thought you would enjoy?

No, and later, I saw this, I didn’t have any other choice. I wanted to go to school, but I didn’t have any choice, and he promised he will send papers for me and mother to come over. So mother said, “Listen, you have to learn the trade. You will come over to the States, you have to know how to make a living. So the trade will be the best.

About what year was this that you start the trade?

This was in the twenties. The late twenties.

The late twenties?

Yeah, and I learned very fast, this trade, as a men’s tailor. But then, I didn’t like it.

Oh, you didn’t like it.

Didn’t like it. So I went to Lodz. Lodz was a big city. It was a fourth of a million Jews living. Big. You know there, my mother has a brother, was my uncle, and he was a lady’s tailor. So he gave me a job, and I worked in Lodz for two, three years, and I learned a trade as a...he was a exceptional lady’s tailor, very, very good tailor. And he was already living nicer as I live here. He was in good shape.

So you enjoyed that more.

Hmm?

You enjoyed that more?

I enjoyed more, because it was a different trade. And you could have more, you know, imagination to do this job. In men's tailoring, you made only one single breasted, [unclear] breasted. It's not for me. So then, I learned in Częstochowa this trade. Then I said, I have to become a designer. I don't want to be just a tailor. So I went to school.

In Łódź?

In Łódź. I learned tailoring and making patterns. It was not enough for me. So I said, "I am in this trade. I have to be perfect." So I went to Warsaw to another school. And I learned more technique over there about the ladies. And then there was a professor in Katowice. Another school. I learned another school. I spent my whole money what I made for schools. Finally, I was a perfect already designer in the tailoring. So, and I was 19, 20, I opened an entire shop.

Where?

In this was already Zawiercie. This was 38 kilometers from Będzin. Over there was a very big city, with 40,000 people.

40,000 people.

Yeah, Jews were about four and a half thousand. And industrially, industrial city, facto - it was a lot of manufacturers over there. And I had the best clientele. And I was so growing, if a customer wants to help for me to sew, they had to wait three, four months till I could get him. And I had prices just high. You can't imagine by '38, I was dealing already to buy a building, a three-story building. I had already the money. And it was going pretty good. And I at that time was dating a girl for six years. And my mother was living still. And I support my mother. And we were already rich again.

Now, your mother stayed in the home town.

Hum?

Did your mother move? [Tape stops, then restarts.]

I was taking in three times in a year a vacation. I was going skiing for six weeks every winter. And summer I was taking off for six weeks, in the fall for two weeks. I lived better than I live here. Much better.

Did you have people working for you at the time?

Oh, yeah. I have eight, ten people working for me.

Eight or ten people. Did you experience a lot of antisemitism?

Very much.

All the time?

All the time. But, as a matter of fact, I have the most, 90% I have Poles, my customers.

Really.

Then we often, when you visited from the city home from the police, all the customers were mine. I was so known in the whole surrounding, over there, I was known one of the best.

So even as an accomplished tailor, or designer, you still experienced a lot of...

Yes, a lot of experience. Nobody could match me. You can imagine. It was tailors, they didn't have any, they couldn't make a living. The same city.

Now when you were on your own, were you religious? Were you a religious Jew?

Can you speak a little louder?

Yeah, it's my voice. Were you a religious Jew when you were out on your own?

No.

So you hardly went to the synagogue. Did you ever go to the synagogue?

Oh yes.

You would go to the synagogue.

Sure, we went to synagogue.

Every *Shabbes*?

Matter of fact, since I was eight, ten years, I was singing in the choir. Till I was twenty years.

And so of course, *Shabbes* was a big deal in your house?

Yes. Everybody, almost 90% of Jews were like, not religious, but keeping up the Jewish tradition.

Ok, we've been through this, let's see. [Tape starts, then restarts] 1938 now, right? And you're successful.

Yes.

So tell me what happens now.

I have a successful and I was dating the girl, and my mother passed away. So I was left by myself. And I had already my apartment. Beautiful [unclear]. And the most expensive stairs, with balcony with everything. Then I have my shop, with the people working. So the parents of the girl they called me and we were talking. And they said, "What are you waiting for? Before, you had your mother. So now, you don't have nobody. Why don't you get married?" I said, I was married, and late '38 we took our, we took our honeymoon for six weeks, skiing in the mountain.

Did you have... was it a big wedding?

Hum? No.

A small wedding.

A small wedding. Usually, in Europe, they didn't make big weddings like here.

Like they do here.

No.

Uh, huh.

And by '39, the war broke out. So the war broke out, the Germans came in, and the same thing, they, they announced that all men from 13 through 70 years old, come and register. They close us in, and over there was a big mill, which it was working 24,000 in one day. And they put in eight days, we go over there without food, without anything. They were killing, shooting, so finally, they start to call out who is a baker? Who is a meat...? And who is a tailor? So, little by little, they let us out. And everybody went home. And we were all at home. And it wasn't too bad in our town with the Germans. Then I still go working. Not with seven, eight people. Have only three. And make a living. I didn't need to work. I had plenty of money, so I could live without working. Finally, and this was going on, and later they made a ghetto. I had to leave my apartment with the whole equipments, and go live with another family. Because they were pushing in us three, four families in one apartment. Yeah. And by '30, by '40, my wife was pregnant.

But now, you still have the business?

Hmm?

You were still working?

Yeah.

Ok.

Small business.

So business was still ok?

Yeah, and I have a customer, a doctor, a lady doctor. She came up, and I said, “What shall I do? It’s war, my wife is pregnant, shall she lose the baby or not?” She said, “You know what? I am a medical professional. I was young, and I was pregnant. And I lost the baby. And since that time, I cannot have any more.” That time, was not like here, you know, the science was not so like that. So I would suggest that they have the baby. The war will last another three or four months. Let them have the baby. So she had the baby. And this was, ’40, 1940, they made the ghetto. They push out from our apartment, they set us into another family, with the baby, and I couldn’t work anything. Do anything. And everything was already rationed. Bread was rationed, potatoes was rationed, but I didn’t worry too much, because on the black market, I could buy whatever I could. Was still good off.

Yeah, and you still had plenty of money.

Hmm?

You still had plenty of money.

Yeah. And I was better off than anybody. So in ’41, when the war starts, the Germans with the Russians, and the minute the same day, when the...yes. I have to go back a little bit. And I used to have, before the war, and during the war, friends... studied... students from college were my friends, and they belonged to, to Communist party. And I didn’t belong to any party. And so when the Germans came in, and they, and the war broke out with Russian, they arrested all the people what just have an idea about Communism. And I was among that. And it was only five...and I was not a Communist. But the five Jews were there, and about 200 Poles. In the night, when I was sitting in my apartment yet, and matter of fact, you remember Goodman? You remember him?

Yeah, what was his first name?

Here, he was married to a girl in my, the apartment where I lived. And I have a big apartment, so the whole neighborhood came in the night because it was a how you call it? You couldn’t walk that hour. It was still

Curfew?

Huh?

Curfew.

Curfew. Yeah. And all the windows had to be closed, because they were afraid the Russians will bombard the light, it will be so.... And we were sitting, Goodman was in my

home, we was playing cards, about six people. And then, about ten o'clock, a knock on the door. We opened the door. The Gestapo. Who is Cukier? I stand up. And I knew, if they are taking you, then you are finished. I took off my rings, my wedding ring, my gift to my wife. And I said good-bye, and that's it. They took me down, and I didn't know for what I was arrested. Just me. It was sitting maybe eight people, just me. I didn't know. When I came down, and at the wall was staying a lot of Polish people and I recognize a neighbor what was a Communist. And I was talking, we was with our hands up to the wall, you know, and I said, "Listen. What's going on?" He said, "They are arresting Communists." I said, "I am not." Forget about it. And they took 250 people to the police, and they chase us down to a big cellar. They start to shoot their machine rifles. They killed one Jew, maybe ten Poles. Over there, and my wife was so...she was our hero. She left...that time, she couldn't, you couldn't go out in the night. Well that night, she left and went to a German, which the wife was my customer, and she begged this German, he was a big officer, the German to release my husband. Finally, in the morning, came in a Gestapo and they released me. And after two days, they all were burned in Auschwitz. And they that time they sent boxes with ash from the people and it was written...at that time they didn't want to notice they are burning people. He died of heart attack. So. And I was survived the only one. So this is one thing. So then, after two months, in '41, came in a delegation of the German Air Force. Two generals and other officers, and they were looking for making something chaps. Chaps for military, for the Air Force. So they found out this, this big mill it was two kilometers wide, and one and a half kilometers long. It was like a city. Enclosed, you know, with a big, how you call it, around....

Fence.

Fence. And they called it, and over there they were making in this mill, they were making fabrics. Velvet, any kind of fabrics. That beautiful machinery. 24,000 people and one shirt. So they took about 2,000 Jews with hammers and they told them to destroy the whole machineries. They broke everything, for *schmeltz*. I don't know what *schmeltz* is...for scraps. And send it to Krupp, to Germany to make tanks from the metal they had. And they were - so it was a empty place already. So they said they will...it's close to Russia, my town was close to Russia, so they will make chap, chaps for the German Air Force. It means from boots, on the, on the, how you call this?

Underwear?

Underwear, military, uniforms, everything what a soldier needs. And they took 4,000 Jews, installed them over there. They were already in the ghetto, but every day in the morning they had to come to work. In the evening, they went back to home in the ghetto. So they choose me as a foreman. They gave me three hundred people. They supposed to be tailors to make the uniforms. But there wasn't three hundred tailors. It was maybe twenty or twenty-five tailors in the town. So the people what didn't have a pass to work in this place, they sent to the concentration camp. So everybody wanted to have a pass, that he is employed in the *Luftwaffe*. *Luftwaffe* is the Air Force. So the rich Jews, they had before they were merchants, they didn't know the any trade. So they paid money to the Jewish community to give them the pass so they can work. So it means, I had two hundred and

fifty people. They had to, and I had to give the production to two hundred people and I had only 25 tailors and the rest were sitting and pretending....

(End of Tape 1, Side 1 - Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2)

Ok were ready

...All kinds of departments, separate, you know, over there, shoe department, was working a couple hundred or more, the sweater department, and the...so this was about, over four thousand people were working over there. And anybody that didn't have a passport or that he is employed in the *Luftwaffe*, in the Air Force, they were sent to the camp. So the Jews, the rich, they were paying money. So they can stay in this place and working. And we were working for one and a half year over there. And then broke out the Warsaw Uprisings. Warsaw Uprising broke out. And they were very, very mad, to see Jews can, can fight so much. Over there, they were fighting. Poland was fighting eighteen days. They lost. Over there, they were fighting for five weeks. And they couldn't, they couldn't took in the ghetto. So in Będzin was already the deported. Sosnowiec, this is maybe five kilometers, that's all I was living, were deported. Only we, the few thousand in our town, was still working over there. And, and the whole Poland was deported, only this town was still...because they need...they need the items to send to the front. And this was close to Russia, so they didn't, they had work in Germany, but they had very close, so they send it out. But it came an order from Hitler to the General of the *Luftwaffe*. *Luftwaffe*, this is Air Force. This, it must be cleaned out and the Jews. All had to be deported. But the people, it was two Generals, then it was also several big officers. It was majors and Captains, and they didn't want to go on the Russian front. They were, they want to keep this, because they had, you know, a hiding place over there, to keep the Jews. And they wanted to keep it. Because this was for them a hiding place. If not, they had to go on the front to Russia. So for them was this very convenient, you know, to [unclear] to keep the Jews. But it came, the order from Hitler, it has to be *Judenrein*, this means clean of Jews. Everybody is deported. So this is the story. So they were thinking about deporting, now they thought what to do with themselves the officers, with the generals, with everything, that they will lose this.

They didn't want to go to go to war?

So they were transmitting Gestapo, the jurisdiction of the Jews for the Gestapo. Nobody could touch any general, not nobody, just the Gestapo, was the head of the Jews what they could do, whatever it is. You know the Gestapo. So they were murderers. Think so they made a deal with them, and they set a deal to borrow out seven Jews and seven departments. You know what I am talking?

Uh, hum.

To each department they had the key people of the whole mill. And you, so they did agree, they did agree. And the deportation was for five thousand Jews, including my wife, the child, and the grandparents of the child. And we were staying, you know, on the *Platz*, on

the place where the Jews came. Let's see, like a football place. And then came out chief of Gestapo, and I just made a phone call for his wife. So they called up. "Mister Cukier," to come over there on the loudspeaker. I came over there, and he said, "Where is my wife's clothes?" I said, "I have it at home." "Why didn't you...?" I said, "It's not finished. How could I finish? They took me here." In the minute, came in a girl, maybe 16 years old, 17. So they put in the people, they segregated the old people and children to one side, young, healthy people on this side. And this girl came, said, "I don't speak German." And I spoke a good German. "I don't speak German, and my mother is 36 years old. They put her to the old people." The old people, we know they are going right away to the oven. Said, "Please ask this gentleman that my mother is young." And I told him, "Sir, her mother is a young, young lady. She is 36 years old." He took out, you know the gun, and maybe right in the heart of the girl, he shot her and she falls down. And he looked down, again in her head, and he is talking to me about the coat. I thought if I will die right away. Can you imagine what kind of murder this is? And so, finally, he said, "Go back to the crowd." Back to the crowd, but the evening, they called up seven people from each department. From the shoe department, from the tailor's department, from the, from all departments, seven people, took them out.

Seven people from each department?

Hmm?

Seven people from each department?

Nisht [no]. One per...

One per department.

The seven people were key people in the department, like me. I had a group of 300 people. And the other one is the sweater maker, the shoemaker, the hat maker. So the key people. We didn't know what's happening. They call us up. Then, they took us in the room, away from the crowd, and we didn't see any more nobody. In the morning, we came out, nobody was already. Everybody was going to the concentration camps.

It was cleaned out.

Cleaned out. Nobody was there. Sigh. So we came out and the general came out, and he told us what's happening. And we started to cry. I lost my wife and chil...and kid. He was eighteen months old. A beautiful kid. I still have the picture.

A boy?

A boy. And I have my wife also, a picture. And what's happened is, he said "Why are you crying? This night, 40,000 people were dead, in Hamburg, from that...your brothers and sisters. They were bombed Hamburg and 30,000 people died. And here was only 5,000 people. What are you crying? So, that's it. Now, take your papers and throw it away, and

you will now on be Germans. You are not Jewish any more. Take off the, the *Juden*.” They called it *Juden* the Star of David. “And you are not Jewish any more. You will get passports as German. And you will work, the way you were working.” And they brought in French, Holland people, and even German that couldn’t go to war. Some sick, you know, so they brought in another 4,000 people.

So they brought them into that town?

Into that town to live in the middle where the shops were. They were substituting the Jews. And we were still the key people, but for managing the whole thing. I was in my department, and I had about 150 Germans working for me. In the other, in...it was two kilometers, you know. Each one was in a different department from us. And one, and we said ok, what can we do? So you have over there, nice rooms, and we have food, good food, money we didn’t need it, because you couldn’t spend, we couldn’t go out. Go out, yes. If I need a doctor or a dentist, I went to the general and I said I need a dentist to go. And I had my dentist in the same town from before the war. So he says, “I will give you a *passierschein* [pass], and go”. And I was afraid to go by myself because if somebody, the Gestapo will recognize me so I can be shot. I said, “Give me a couple soldiers with me.” So they gave me two soldiers. I went to the dentist, or to a doctor because I didn’t want to go by myself. And we, and we were living maybe a couple weeks in this place. They were the apartments also, but high-class employees were living. So we had everything, and we had bathrooms, we had everything living modern. We were living seven people together. One was also, one of the youngest was a radio mechanic, a radio mechanic. And, he has always to fix radios for the Germans. We couldn’t have a radio. A Jew or a Polack couldn’t have a radio. So we hear all the news what’s going on the war. So two weeks later, in the night, two young children came in over there to us in this place from Auschwitz.

They escaped?

Hmm?

Did they escape? Did they escape Auschwitz?

They escaped from Auschwitz. And they came to the town. And the town told them to stay over there. Seven Jews are over there. So and the friends was so high as here. So they had Polish friends. They put them one on the other. And they jumped over. And they came in. We noticed they were in Auschwitz. They came in the night. One nine years, and one ten years. Two boys. What will we do with children in a military place? So, we will hide them. We hid them, the two kids. We gave them food and everything, but we thought it will be a month, two, the war will come to an end. But we see it’s no end, but we will do with them. We made a delegate, two people, me and another. I have here the picture of him. And we will go to the general, and tell him that we have two kids, what shall we do? One day we went up to him, and said, “Dear so and so, there are two kids.” He said, “What? There are kids in here?” It’s impossible. They had to be shot, and that’s all. We cannot have here in a place like this, in a military place, kids. And especially Jews.” So we start to begging. Do us a favor. They are older, they can be useful. They can be that, that.... And he said, “I

will give you and answer tomorrow.” We came up tomorrow. He said, “I have already two soldiers with machine guns. They have to be liquidated.” He didn’t say shot. They have to be liquidated. I said, “Have mercy. These are two kids. Why do you want to shot them? To kill them? They can be useful. What can they do?” They can be *laufers*” [couriers, messengers]. You know what *laufer* is?

Huh, uh.

They...a *laufer* is, they have the briefcase....

A messenger?

Huh?

A messenger?

A messenger. They and said, “Ok, you are right”. So one general took one, and the one, and they were going after them like doggies, you know, with the briefcases, and it was ok. So they were living with us, and it was fine. They were safe. Well, you know what they did one time? A guy, the small guy brought them a cake? Where do you have a cake? Oh, I have a Polish guy, he works over there. He knows me. He brought me in a cake. In a few days, they brought in a chicken. Ah, a cooked chicken. So what chicken? Who lives the chicken? Even the general didn’t have a chicken. He brought us a chicken. His name, [unclear], where do you have a chicken? He said, “a friend gave it to us”. So good are the Polish, that they give you the chickens and cakes? We found out that they were stealing a [unclear], and spools of thread they were giving to the Poles and this was very expensive during the war, and for this they gave him. So finally, we found out, and we gave him, you know, a spanking, a little bit. And from that time, don’t you dare to steal, because we are responsible for you. You know, and over there they told us one is responsible for everyone, and everyone is responsible for one. So this was finally, the...we heard to the radio, the radio operator told us to hear in the night, the radio from the United States and from Russian, that the Russian are already coming close. So what can we do? We cannot run away and we don’t have places where to hope to run away because no Jews were. So I had, everybody of us has a Polish friend. I had a friend a Polish, and she was a customer of mine, his wife. And he was working over there in the office. And he told me “Mister Cukier, if it will be bad, if you feel, this is burning, come to us.” Ok. So any of us had somebody, too, but when we listened to the radio, since the Russians are approaching we went to the general, telling what we want to do. He said, “Don’t worry. There are a colony of tanks are coming. They will, they will push them back.” But we didn’t believe it. The next day, we hear that they are closer yet, going against the [unclear]. He said well, he wasn’t a bad German. He said, “If I will see it’s bad, I will tell you to run away.” I didn’t believe him, nobody. So we had a meeting in the night. We said, “Listen, this is the time we have to run away, no matter where in we.” So everybody was in a different department. Was far away one department. The other was maybe ten, twenty blocks. For that time, we needed to get. And we have to do this in one moment, all of seven. Because one time, it was in a, in a Holiday, and we was not working. And some soldiers in the place were playing

soccer. And they didn't, in soccer you need 11 people to play soccer. So they have only seven, or eight. So they asked us to play with them soccer. We played soccer. And the general came on a horse, riding by. He didn't say anything, but in the morning, he called us down to the office, and he gave us hell. "You don't have anything to do, to playing with German officers? Your parents, your children all are dying over there in Auschwitz and you are playing around here?" I said, in that time it was everything already disgusting. We didn't care for nothing, because we didn't have anything. And I said, "If you don't like it, we are not better Jews, send us where our parents and our brothers and sisters are." "Oh," he said, "No. You will be finished here. You wouldn't get out." Because they had an agreement with the Gestapo. They borrowed us for a certain time, from the Gestapo. And they have to give us back to them when we will teach all the other nations, nationals, nationalities to be, to be key people, so they wouldn't need us. That time, the Gestapo was afraid, this... the high honor, the, high, the hier...

Hierarchy?

...The hier... yeah, would find out that they didn't, they didn't, uh, do the orders from Hitler. Because it has to be, we had a [unclear].

[Tola Cukier interjects]

No. This...

Tola Cukier: "What are you talking about?"

This was just... they borrowed us to the Air Force. You understand?

Yes.

And they had to give us back to the Gestapo, and the Gestapo not to worry about us, since we, it will come out, that they hid seven Jews, they will be in trouble. It will be, for them, it will be also a death penalty, you know, for this order, for the Hitler's order. So we found out this, we don't have any choice. So why we were in this place? Everybody was organized a gun. And each of us has a gun, laying right away under the pillow. If a Gestapo will knock in the night on the door, we will open fire, and that's it. And we will escape. But, it didn't happen. And we heard that they are already about twenty kilometers, so we called in the two kids, and we told them, go to this and this department. Tell them it will rain. We had our word this rain. It means, we have to run away. So they didn't know, the kids. Go to the shoe department, go to this department, and tell them it will rain. It will rain. And we know already. So, we run away. Whoever, because I would not tell you how we run away, and I went to this guy what told me, if you, it will be bad, come to me. I went over there to him, and he prepared for me a cellar. Open, it was open oven door. And I went down, and I will make short. It will took a day and the Russian came in, and we were liberated. This was the end of the war. And then we got together all seven, alive, and that's all. And I went back to my apartment. So...

Okay. So after the war, when the war was over....

It was not over, the war.

The war wasn't over yet.

Tola Cukier: "[inaudible]"

Yeah.

It was the fourteen of January, and eighth of May was over then. The Russian came in the fourteen of January, '49... '45. And the war was going on.

Ah, the war was going on, still.

Yes, yeah. And we were liberated because the Russian came in and occupied.

Uh huh.

Tola Cukier: And the Russians came in from the East. [unclear]

Right. Yes, I see. So you went back to the town where you had your business.

Yeah.

And the Russians had already come through there, too? The Russians had liberated your town already. They had already come through your town.

Tola Cukier: "Yeah."

They went to the...I went to my apartment, and nothing was there.

Everything was gone? They took everything

Everything was gone. Everything. Just empty. But anyway, the kids survived, the two kids.

Yeah.

We sent them to a big city. And the city, it was already a Jewish community. They sent the two kids to Israel. And they live now in Israel.

Oh. Do you keep in contact with them?

Hmm?

Do you keep in contact with them?

No.

No.

No. But we knew, because one of our yeah...who told us to get ready to run away is one of our boys, seven boys. The youngest was the radio operator. He had a girlfriend that was on the telephone switchboard. They were in love. She... and we had a telephone line, hidden telephone in our room. And she knew just the Gestapo comes in to look for us.

Yes.

So she call us to run away. That we run away. Matter of fact, an hour we were on our way, the Gestapo came. And almost they didn't shot the General. Because they asked, "Why did you let the Jews go?" So he said, "I didn't know. That's all." And they didn't have any time anymore. The Russians were approaching and this was that.

So how long were you in your hometown until the war ended?

Before it ended, I was waiting first fall to the end of the war. And after the eighth of May, people started to come home. Some people. And I asked somebody from my family or somebody is alive? I had to find out where it is.

Yeah.

So and my brother found out that I am alive. From, from New Jersey. So he sent me papers to come to the United States. So I went to Warsaw, to look for a consul, consulate, the American Consulate. It wasn't any yet. They told me this in Paris, there's a American Consulate. While I was in Warsaw, so one military man approaching, you know, on the sidewalk. He was a tall, elegant officer, I saw, and all of the sudden, He looks at me, he said, "Cukier, what are you doing in Warsaw?" It was a friend of mine. He was in college as a lawyer. I said, "I am looking for the American Consul. They told me there isn't any." I said, I have to go to France. "Oh," he said, "I have friends, I have family in France. And I remember the name, and the street and everything. I will give you a letter. Let's go to the hotel and sit down." And he write a letter, he gave me the letter. And I saw nobody's coming from the camp, so what are you wait? I will go to the United States. So I have to go to France. And I went over there to Paris without, not too much money, no language. So I had a little money, but not enough. So I came over there and start to look for a job. Start to work. Then I met a man, and...another designer. He was a designer. Matter of fact, his father has a designing school in Łódź , in Poland yet. And I made a little factory.

In Paris.

In Paris. And we had maybe fifteen or twenty people working for us. And it was already three, four months, and I didn't, I didn't, I didn't give the letter to the people. But I had.

So I said, "It's time, now," because I didn't have the money that time. And I was struggling, you know. And I forgot about the letter. So I said, I will go and deliver the letter. So I took a cab, went over there, and I know the people over there had a son and have a daughter. See, these people. A son and a daughter. And I came over there, knock on the door. Girl opened the door, and I said, "*Je voudrais parler avec Monsieur Rothenberg.*" Uh, I am doing French.

That's good. [laughing]

I would like to see the family of her. She say, "*Il est n'est pas la, viens ici, asseyez vous.*" Come in and sit down, they will come here. And I got to see the daughter. He told me. And so we have a sitting, waiting for them. So finally, the daughter came in, asked me from where I am. I said, I am from Poland. "Where Poland?" I said so and so. She said, "I am also from Poland, south Poland." And said, "What are you doing here?" I said, I have a brother in the United States, and I would like to go. She said, "I have also a brother in the United States, and I want to go." And I already made a suit for the French Consul's wife. And I went over there, and asked him for a visa, and he said "I cannot do anything. You have to wait, to wait till the Consul will decided what to do." Till the Consul decided, I was so good off already, in Paris, I didn't want to go to the United States.

Sure.

And I went to a model school, over there, for modeling again. In the evening. Daytime, I worked, and I went to, to a college it's a, University of Designing. So I was working a half-year, and I learned what I needed. Then I was offered to be a teacher, designing over there, and I was employed by the government of France as a teacher, designer teacher, all for night courses.

But you had to learn how to speak French.

Hmm?

You had to learn how to speak French.

I spoke already.

You already spoke?

Sure.

But you were, in Poland you learned how to speak French?

No. I learned.

You learned that quickly?

Yeah, sure. I was over there seven years.

Seven years, you were there.

Yeah.

Oh.

Tola was eight years in Paris.

That's right. I see.

Yeah, she speaks now beautiful French.

It's wonderful.

Yeah. I am not so good in languages because I had always in my, to take care of my trade. So I was teaching and I had and I made good money. And I was asked two or three times from the Embassy of America if I want to go. I said, "No. What for do I go? I was good off, and I had already money. I made money and I live a beautiful life in France." We had the baby there, and the people what adopted Tola was the grandpa and grandma. And it was...

So when you met Tola was it like love at first sight? Were you attracted to her right away?

What?

When you met Tola, were you attracted to her right away?

Well, we were talking, you know about Polish, would talking Polish and French. I spoke already French, and she was, she's very good in language.

Yes.

She caught up French that nobody knew that she is a...Pole.

Really.

Tola Cukier: "I don't know, I have a..."

[Tape stops, then restarts]

So, finally, it start to getting the war in Korea. The next day, you couldn't get any bread, any butter, nothing in the grocery store.

About what year was that?

In '52.

'52.

'52.

So you already had...well, let's back up a bit. When you got married, and you had a small wedding?

A small wedding. About ...

Tola Cukier: They wouldn't ...[unclear].

Yeah. So the Rothenbergs threw you a family... Excuse me, threw you a wedding. Was the wedding in a synagogue?

No.

Tola Cukier: No. They [unclear] home.

Usually, they in Europe, they were making at the home.

Yeah.

Tola Cukier: Those people met in the king's quarters, kings quarters. And they had gorgeous rooms. A gorgeous place.

How lovely. So you were married in their home. And then...

Tola Cukier: And she gave me her dress, that she wore when she was a bride.

Ok. What did you wear? [lauging]

Hmm?

Did you wear one of your tailor-made suits?

Yeah.

Tola Cukier: He wore something dark, black.

So then...

Did you have a honeymoon? Did you go anywhere?

Tola Cukier: No.

No. So then you stayed there until '53.

'52.

'52.

She was 46, 43.

Tola Cukier: Who?

So I...three times I reject...

Tola Cukier: What is he talking about?

I don't know.

Three times I reject...

Tola Cukier: Iser, well, he was talking about, how old was I?

No, when we left.

When you....

Tola Cukier: How old was I? That was in '52?

Yeah.

Tola Cukier: I was, I think I was 26.

26.

Tola Cukier: And Jeanot, Now, wait a minute. Jeanot was born in 19...when was Jeanot born?

In '47, '48.

Tola Cukier: 1948. Ok.

'48.

Tola Cukier: In 1948, I was 23 years old. You know, he doesn't even know how old I was.

He didn't care. [laughing]

So twice, I rejected the visa to the United States. And the third time, I got a letter....

Tola Cukier: One time, I couldn't go because I had on my lungs. I was sick with my lungs.

So the third time, I had a letter....

Tola Cukier: How do you know?

From the Embassy...

I don't know, but I know that they wouldn't let you come if you had something showing on your lungs.

Tola Cukier: I had trouble with my lungs. I had to wait a whole year. And I was scared, of course. And I was scared because right during this, the Korean War broke out.

Yes. And that because of the Korean War, you decided that maybe you should go to....

Tola Cukier: I didn't want to... He didn't decide. I didn't want to...

The third time, the third time, I have a letter from the Embassy. If I wouldn't go this time, never in your life you can go to the United States.

Oh, really!

Tola Cukier: I don't remember the things he remembers. You know....

Yeah.

So if you turned it down, that was it.

I would never able to go the United States.

Tola Cukier: Maybe he... men of a certain age could go.

So I said, this is the time, let's go.

Tola Cukier: ...you could go till a certain age.

That could be.

Tola Cukier: So they could have sent a letter.

And we wait till the last minute, the visa got out. Yeah, the last day. So we didn't have a boat, which was second class. So we had to take first class.

Too bad. [laughing]

Tola Cukier: So we came by first class. We came by...

So you had a...was it a pleasurable trip, coming over?

And I didn't come here....

Tola Cukier: My husband was sick.

I was sick, there.

Seasick?

Tola Cukier: Seasick. Yeah. My son had a ball.

She, too.

He had a good time. And you were miserable.

I was miserable.

Tola Cukier: Our son was the toast of the whole boat in the first class. He was so beautiful, and he was so amiable, you know.

Um, hum. Everybody liked him.

So finally, I didn't come to the States a poor guy.

Yes.

I thought that if....

Yeah.

Tola Cukier: [unclear]

He was better off than most....

And my brother prepared for me...

Tola Cukier: An apartment.

...an apartment. And I was in, in two months, I was a owner of a...on 7th Avenue, a store. And it was going fine. And then, she said, "I'm not coming back."

Tola Cukier: Because she would see.

We have to tell the tape what happened. Because this was a different tape we told. [Seems to be referencing Tola's earlier interview.]

Oh, yeah.

So Tola, and your son went to Kansas City to visit relatives.

Yes.

And she was just here a few days, fell in love with Kansas City.

Yeah

And...

Tola Cukier: I want to say something. I did mention to you about....

Comes to Kansas City, loves it...

Yes.

...and tells you, this is where we're living. You were happy being in New York.

Yeah, I have more, a bigger opportunity to be in New York.

So you, you decided to move to Kansas City, because Tola's family was here, and she felt more comfortable here, and this seemed the place to settle.

Tola Cukier: A smaller city.

A smaller city, and even if you had an established business,

Yeah.

You decided to settle here anyway. So you come to Kansas City, and what was the first job you had?

First of all, we saw also, saw a brother saw in the paper a it was a ad, Phil Jacobs need a designer. I knew designing in maternity like you know designing. I didn't know what...because there wasn't any clothing in Europe about, special for woman what were pregnant. So I came up, but I looked around, and they told me to make a dress, I have some little idea.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2. Beginning of Tape 2, Side 1]

So you worked for a maternity...

A maternity...

Uh huh.

And the boss was very successful.

So everybody's making money.

Yeah. When I left, he had three factories. And I was approaching from...

Tola Cukier: You were approached.

Approached from Mr. Fashionbilt, Prezance. You knew Prezance?

I know who they were.

Fashionbilt. They offered me a good job, and doubled the money what I have over there. Five years?

And then, where did you go?

And then I went to Youthcraft.

Youthcraft. And how long were you there?

Eighteen.

Eighteen years. And then where...

With the interruption...

Uh huh.

...two years in Los Angeles.

Oh, you went to Los Angeles?

Tola Cukier: Two years.

For two years? And Tola, you stayed here?

Tola Cukier: I was going back and forth.

Back and forth?

Tola. Cukier: For about three months here, two months there, four months here, two months there.

Oh I see, and then you came back here again?

Tola Cukier: After two years.

And who did you work for?

They [unclear] our [unclear], that Tola was over there. So...

Huh? What happened?

Tola Cukier: They, they... [unclear].

Oh interrupt... we don't want to hear about that. So you came back, and you remained....

Yeah, I went back to...they called me back from Fashionbilt, no not Fashionbilt, Youthcraft. I went over there until they closed the factory.

Ok. On this tape we have to mention that you have a son.

Yes.

Tola Cukier: Oh, my God. And that was the most....

Of course. And he was born in Paris in 1948.

Yes.

And how do you spell his name?

Tola Cukier: Jeanot. J-e-a-n-o-t.

Yeah. And what does your son do?

Professional.

Ok. He's a surgeon.

He's a surgeon.

Ok.

Ok.

Your experiences during the war, coming to the United States, and settling in, did the...what happened during the war, did it affect your attitude toward religion? Do you still feel strongly about Judaism?

Judaism?

Yeah. I mean how did the war affect your attitude towards religion?

Well, yes and no. Because....

Tola Cukier: But you did have one experience. That you thought that this affected you in a good way, because you were never religious. And when it happened, out of all the people, they let you out on Yom Kippur.

Remember what I told you about when they arrested me? That they...

Yes. Right you were saved.

And I was survived among.... So then the Gestapo, I was in Yom Kippur at *shul*. It wasn't a *shul*, it was private. I remember because it was at that time, *shul* was closed. And while I was at 10:00 at praying, the Yom Kippur. A friend came up to me, he says, "Two Gestapo are looking for you in your apartment." And that time, if the Gestapo was looking for you, that is the finished. So, I was afraid. I left to my house, friend, or he was my old boss, and I was hiding over there, for a whole day. I never fasted in my life before. And I had forgotten...I was so scared, I had forgotten that I had... I didn't eat. A whole day and a whole night. In the morning, I stand up. Oh, my gosh. I never fast in my life. And I gave my [unclear] a promise...

Yeah.

If I survive, I will fast my whole life on Yom Kippur.

In Yom Kippur.

Tola Cukier: [unclear]

So, so then, your attitude and your feelings toward God?

Well, everybody of the survivors were asking the question? Is God there and see the misery of the people what's going through? Is there a God? And this was the question, not from myself, but the question from any survivor.

And?

And...

What is, what is your answer?

My answer? Well, yes and no.

So you question?

I practice Judaism.

And how, what do you think... What do you attribute your ability to adjust to a normal life, after the war?

After the war, actually, I went only the miserable things I went through when they took away my family, because, I had everything in the, in the *Luftwaffe*. I didn't have hunger. I had... If a German need a piece of sausage, he came to me. If an officer, a German officer need a drink of vodka, he came to me, because in my...not refrigerator, but I had, everybody of us had a special, how you call it?

Tola Cukier: Cupboard..

Huh?

Tola Cukier: Cupboard? Cupboard.

Cupboard.

Yeah, I had sausage, I had ham. I had butter and sugar.

But you had, you had your whole family was taken away from you. And you saw some terrible things. You witnessed some terrible things.

This was terrible thing what I had. Take away my son. Just 18 months old, a lovely baby. And my wife which I dated, a nice few years before this was.

Yeah.

And my whole family. My brothers and sisters, and nephews and everybody was gone. I was by myself, and my brother here what was left in the family and the brother in Germany. The rest were gone.

What, what allowed you to, you know, put all that behind you at some point, and just continue on, continue your life?

I have to adjust my life, and, and live a new life.

And do you think...and what lessons do you think we should take from the Holocaust? What lessons do you feel we should take from the Holocaust?

I don't know, what I think...I didn't went through special what my wife went through, or my closest family went through, so I was not so miserable, just the one.

Tola Cukier: [unclear]

Ok

Everything is relative. What can you know, we learned a lot what life is about and why we went through the worst thing what the history can tell, never in the history of mankind, happened like it happened the Holocaust. And this is in our heart, in our mind, in our brains, and we live with it, we sleep with it, we think of it, and...

Tola Cukier: In the long run it's not up to us.

The long run is a different world. And we pray that it won't happen again.