

Transcript:

Zina Gontownik

A37

26m

Interviewer: I'm going to ask you a little bit about – we'll talk openly about your childhood in Poland. I want you to talk to me a little bit about... You were in the ghetto.

Zina Gontownik: Whatever. Ask me the question, I will answer them the [unintelligible 0:00:16.1] for.

Interviewer: Sure. What we're going to do – so you were in the camp.

Zina Gontownik: Not in one.

Interviewer: Hmm?

Zina Gontownik: Not in one camp.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm sorry. This is the first time I'm seeing this. You were in three camps, is that right?

Zina Gontownik: This place was in camp. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about your childhood in Poland. Am I speaking loud enough or too loud?

Zina Gontownik: In fact, it doesn't matter to whom I speak. They told me that I have to speak louder. They cannot hear me. So I think maybe they have hard of hearing. I don't know.

Interviewer: You were born in 1916. Tell me a little bit about your childhood in Poland.

Zina Gontownik: Well, they had been ten kids to my family, six girls, four boys; one boy died when he was one year old. We used to live like on a suburb. And everybody had a land except my family, they came later to that place. A priest gave the land to the Jewish people. There were just 18 families and they called it the "Jewish Colony." We had a school. We had a synagogue. We had a [habbah 0:01:44.6], if you know what it means and we were living quiet. We had teachers. They came from Vilna. And my two older sisters helped out in the school. We used to buy books every year. As for where we got the money, a lot of them had a lot of land and in the summer when we didn't go to school, we used to go work for families who had a lot of land and they paid us money and we collected all the money and we bought books. We used to live 30 miles from Vilna. Vilna is a big city, like Tennessee is a big state. We belonged to Vilna.

Interviewer: Did Vilna become a ghetto?

Zina Gontownik: Oh, yes. And in fact, people from the vicinity, they walked to Vilna too. But I was married then and I went straight to Vilna ghetto. I was married in '37.

Interviewer: You were married in 1937 before the invasion?

Zina Gontownik: Yeah.

Interviewer: You had a little girl?

Zina Gontownik: Yeah.

Interviewer: How old was she?

Zina Gontownik: In three weeks, she would be four years old when they took her away. Because when they liquidated the ghetto, I had been hiding with my little girl. My husband was not there already. They took away a lot of the men from the ghetto. I had a sister. She was a survivor [unintelligible 0:03:23.2]. Her husband has survived too. He made a place to hide and they've been hiding there maybe for 10 or 12 days. When we heard it was quiet in the ghetto, no shooting, we walked out. It was very hard to go out, not to go through the ghetto, to a basement. We walked out in the evenings, each one separate, not to be suspicious, the war was going on. So I walked out with the little girl and we were holding on with our arms and then when we came to the gate, the Lithuanian police they worked with Germans... and I turned around and I went farther. It took me a while to find that place. We called that place [unintelligible 0:04:25.9] is something like the people tailor and they made fur coats, things like that. This was for them. So when I went away from that guard, he was standing by the gate and he was Lithuanian. I went around and I saw inside the policemen. They were Jewish policemen and I knew him. He said, "Go farther." I went farther and then we saw the policemen... I [unintelligible 0:04:59.8] the policeman, the guard. So I took my little girl over the fence and I went after her and we were there for four months.

Interviewer: You put your daughter over the fence and you climbed over the fence?

Zina Gontownik: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you lived in that ghetto for four months?

Zina Gontownik: No. Not the ghetto. Not in the ghetto. This is a special place. The tailors, the people who used to make the fur coats—they get us liquidated already. We told the kids not to talk and not to cry. If the Germans will hear them crying, they will be killed. So when I came back later from the ghetto after the hiding, I started to talk to her. She said, "Mother, don't talk. The Germans will kill us." I told her the Germans are not here. And she had, like a quarter of a size, a piece of gray hair, red hair and gray hair on one place. From a child like this. She always used to tell me, "My daddy is not alive. My daddy is not alive. My daddy has been killed already." I used to tell her – her name was [Unintelligible]

0:06:20.6], I called her [Unintelligible 0:06:21.8]— “Don’t worry. We will go to the train and we will meet your daddy. Daddy loves you so much. Daddy survived but not yet around.”

Interviewer: What happened to your husband?

Zina Gontownik: My husband died about three years ago. He had Alzheimer’s. And my husband was working with the partisans and they had a meeting for the people getting together to make plans what to do, how to do in case something happens. They took him away with a lot of people to Estonia.

Interviewer: I want to back you up just a little bit because I want to keep up with what you’re saying. When the ghetto was liquidated, where was your husband then?

Zina Gontownik: He was already in Estonia. It took me a long time to find that out.

Interviewer: Okay. He was already gone and you were with your daughter.

Zina Gontownik: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. You were living where now?

Zina Gontownik: Now?

Interviewer: When the ghetto was liquidated, where were you living?

Zina Gontownik: Oh, when the ghetto was liquidated then we’ve been in the camps. They took us to Latvia to Riga, and then in different camps. They took us to Stutthof.

Interviewer: You were still with your daughter?

Zina Gontownik: No. They took away the kids. I forgot this point. They found out that there were some kids in the place where I was because the people who lived there for a while, they went to work with the clothes and suits and whatever it is. So one morning, they came. It was March the 27th, 1943; a Monday cold morning. They came and they told us that the kids have to be taken to the doctors for them to see if the kids are healthy. We believed them. And they took away the kids from us. Kids up to 15 years old. And let me see...yeah, they took them away. We wanted to go with them. They didn’t let us. “You’re still young, you can work for us.” Then the kids, they took all the kids. They took them to Auschwitz. I hadn’t been in Auschwitz. They took them to Auschwitz and they made big pits, maybe big as this, and they prepared wood and they made a big fire and they threw the kids in the fire. And the screaming, you can imagine, kids until 15 years old they were screaming so loud, you’d never think...and the neighbors around, for them not to hear it and then to tell the world what they did, what [unintelligible 0:09:42.9] the world would not know. And they burned them. At the pit, an orchestra, different men who played music. They had the doctors, lawyers, what not. They played loud music for the neighbors around not to hear the crying and the things that’s going on. And how do I know, I was not there? When Auschwitz was liberated some people came in the Displaced

Person camp where I was. They told me they came from there and they asked me and they stated that kids were over there. I said yes. And they told us how it happened and how it was with the fire, with the music with the musicians, whatever, you know.

Interviewer: You never saw your daughter after that day?

Zina Gontownik: No. One thing I did, anytime we came to a camp, you can change the name, I changed the date for my birth. I have the year, but the date. I have her date. See what I mean? She was born on this date, April 17th.

Interviewer: This was her birthday?

Zina Gontownik: Yeah.

Interviewer: You said it was your birthday.

Zina Gontownik: It's my birthday. She was not a small child. She was pretty, red-headed, black eyes, dark skin, little nose and little mouth and so smart. She used to tell me, "Beautiful [unintelligible 0:11:32.3]" – "mother." And she had curly hair, like a spot, like from a quarter.

Interviewer: Tell me where you went after that.

Zina Gontownik: Ma'am?

Interviewer: Tell me what happened after that.

Zina Gontownik: After that, after a while they sent us to Latvia, Riga, district capital and to put her there in camps. Then they sent us to different camps in Latvia. And then when the Russians came closer, they moved us farther to Germany. And we worked over there until they saw they were losing the war. They picked up from the vicinity where I was in the camp. I was—well, here, I have here my—a blue envelope, a little envelope. Here, Mühldorf KL—Konzentrationslager. This is the number.

Interviewer: This was the number you were issued in the camp?

Zina Gontownik: Yeah. And then from there they picked up only people from the camps in the vicinity and they put us on the train. And then after they got liberated, on the train, we found out they were taking us to the Alps to be killed over there and nobody will ever know. So when the train has stopped, we were on the train, we saw the jeeps through the windows. When the train stopped, we ran down the road. We saw little yellow flowers that bloom in the spring. This is May the 1st. We ran down. I don't know from where did I got the strength to run. But then we were put back on the train and they brought us to a big building and this was the DP camp for us. They had a lot of places for men separate and for women separate. And then from the American Army, there were a lot of Jewish people too and one was a chaplain and he came to us after the war was

finished. And he told us, he speaks our language, "If anybody of you have some relatives in the United States, I can send a telegram for you."

Interviewer: At this time, did you know where your husband was?

Zina Gontownik: No. Wait. I will tell where my husband...

Interviewer: Help me out. I was just understanding something, how long had you been since you had seen your husband? At the time of liberation, how long had it been?

Zina Gontownik: I don't know. I think four years.

Interviewer: Four years? Since the ghetto?

Zina Gontownik: They took him maybe from the ghetto.

Interviewer: Okay. So you didn't know if he was alive?

Zina Gontownik: No.

Interviewer: Your parents had died in the ghetto?

Zina Gontownik: I did not know if he's alive. My parents...?

Interviewer: They died in the ghetto. Or were they killed before they were...?

Zina Gontownik: My parents got killed before. They used to live in the suburb and they brought them to a station. And they have to make – they give them shovels. They take out the gun. Told them to stand around this and they shot them and they fell in the pit. So my sister got the telegram from us, my sister and myself, she died already about 17 years ago. She was very happy. At the same time, I had a brother, I still have him. He got liberated by the Russians. Well, my husband got liberated by the Russians. But my brother came to Vilna before my husband. He was closer. He got liberated – he was far. In fact, my husband joined the Russian Army for a while – I have his suit. So what I want to bring it up or – so my sister sent a telegram to my brother to Vilna because they cannot grasp then because the war was over there. It's over. When America was not involved with the war, they just send the Army. I wished they would send a little bit sooner so more people would survive. So she told him in the telegram that Esther and [Gina (sp) 0:17:01.7] are alive in Feldafing, Germany. It didn't take long, my husband came to Vilna because this is the city where we used to live and my brother had shown him the telegram. So – let me see – and found that I am alive and my sister is alive and he came in November. After everything, it's been so fast. And my sister with her husband from Memphis made up papers for my sister with her husband and for me with my husband. If they are not alive, it can't happen. If they are alive, they will come. We came over here, made it in 1946, a year after the war. A lot of people are still looking for relatives and we were so lucky. And if we wouldn't come, I don't know if I would survive because I worked in a factory when I came over here, brassiere factory. And they took some x-rays from other people. They found something

on my x-ray. They found out that I have tuberculosis. After the war and after everything, I had tuberculosis. I was over there for 13 months.

Interviewer: Tell me about – I know you talked about a little bit, but tell me a little bit more about the day of liberation. You were liberated May 1st, 1945?

Zina Gontownik: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell me about that day.

Zina Gontownik: Well, United States – everybody knew it was the end of the war. We used to get packages from United States—food. We used to get clothes. I have a picture, I think, somewhere. I have a coat until today. They sent us those coats. In fact, my sister and me, we give them the food they used to bring from a special kitchen we used to cook. She's telling me, we used to give the food. We had a whistle and blow, "It's time to come to eat." And we give out also the clothes too. And we were over there, we had to something to eat. We had water and ways to cook, as long you were not scared. But it was very pitiful. After a short while, we organized a dramatic group. I was a member. And we used to have a place to play. People used to come and pay. They used to come and sit, to cheer them up a little bit.

Interviewer: Tell me about the DP camp.

Zina Gontownik: This is the DP camp.

Interviewer: How long were you there?

Zina Gontownik: Not so long. I was liberated before the [unintelligible 0:20:16.1]

Interviewer: Did you go to a displaced person's camp?

Zina Gontownik: This the the displaced –the DP...

Interviewer: Were you liberated in the DP camp?

Zina Gontownik: I was liberated on the train.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you write this? Is this your writing or did you read it to someone to write...?

Zina Gontownik: This is my daughter-in-law's.

Interviewer: Your daughter-in-law?

Zina Gontownik: She is our lawyer and her writing is terrible.

Interviewer: No. No. That's okay. That's okay. I was just – there were some things I was confused about. That's all.

Zina Gontownik: You have to pay attention. You have to learn... [unintelligible 20:52]

Interviewer: That's okay. Okay. I'll leave that and we'll just talk. Where did you go after the DP camp? Did you remember where you were sent after that?

Zina Gontownik: Nowhere. From there, I came to Memphis.

Interviewer: Oh, so you came to Memphis from there? Did they help you come over or did you pick Memphis?

Zina Gontownik: No. My sister was living over here.

Interviewer: Your sister was living here. This is why you came?

Zina Gontownik: Yeah.

Interviewer: You came and you worked in a factory.

Zina Gontownik: I worked in the factory. They headed over there, after we have been hiding from the ghetto.

Interviewer: Okay.

Zina Gontownik: Oh, no! I worked in the factory, brassiere factory in Memphis, Maidmold.

Interviewer: Right. And how long did you work there for?

Zina Gontownik: Till they found out I was sick.

Interviewer: What did they find you were sick with?

Zina Gontownik: Tuberculosis.

Interviewer: Tuberculosis. Okay.

Zina Gontownik: And I was there for 13 months. And when I came home, I have to have bed rest. And I was in bed.

Interviewer: And you had more children?

Zina Gontownik: Yeah. I want a child so bad that if I look maybe like I never lost it. So I asked the doctor. He said, "Yes, go ahead." So the girl, it was a girl, she was dead at birth. And then I went to the doctor and, "I want to go pregnant, this was a short time after I lost a baby." He said, "No, wait." I said, "No, doctor, I will not wait. My husband...I can do with him anything I want just to have a baby." I had a baby. I'm sad I don't have this picture. Beautiful. It's not just my son. It's beautiful. He's so popular, so everything there in the city. So I went and got pregnant. [Unintelligible 0:22:59.8] was born, Izzy Joseph and Izzy Joseph weighed 9 pounds with a few ounces. And I have another son.

Interviewer: You went and you had another baby? Two boys?

Zina Gontownik: Two boys.

Interviewer: When you looked back on your experience, what do you think you remembered the most?

Zina Gontownik: My child. She would have been 60 years old.

Interviewer: Were you religious?

Zina Gontownik: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you think your faith helped you?

Zina Gontownik: I think not the faith, but the courage that tomorrow will be better. I want to survive so much I did not know that people will survived to tell the world. And I was thinking, then I will go and talk for people to know. But then I got sick. So I thought – then after the war and everything, just to tell the world and then I didn't care for my life because the life is so cheap. Life is so cheap.

Interviewer: What do you want people to know about what happened?

Zina Gontownik: If somebody comes crazy to you, "Let's go and kill somebody." Don't do it. Do you want to be killed? But all the people went with him. What did the Jewish people do to them?

Interviewer: Some survivors have said that they felt more angry and betrayed by their neighbors than by the Nazis. Did you feel that way?

Zina Gontownik: No. Maybe I was not old enough to know. In deeper Poland, it's different. This is – Vilna now belongs to Lithuania. It was a mixture, you know, but the people from Lithuania they went to the Nazis. They used to stay by the gate in ghetto. If somebody has something, brought something a few potatoes or barley or whatever it is, they used to beat you up and throw it out.

Interviewer: How do you deal with the memories?

Zina Gontownik: It's very funny. I go for something, I forget what I need. Then maybe I just tell myself I need potatoes or I need a pot for the kitchen. Maybe this is the beginning for Alzheimer's, I don't know. I hope not.

Interviewer: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to add? I know your daughter-in-law is sending me more paper work, but is there anything you'd like to add?

Zina Gontownik: I don't know what you like to know. If you will ask me the question, I will know what to say.

Interviewer: No. That's okay. That's okay.