Transcript:

Roman Mitelman
A23

39m40s

Interviewer: You said you escaped. You escaped in 1938?

Roman Mitelman: No. The war in the Soviet Union--

Interviewer: OK, Soviet Union--

Roman Mitelman: --started in June 22nd, 1941.

Interviewer: 1941, OK.

Roman Mitelman: Germany attacked Russia at 4 o'clock in the morning of that day. It was a Sunday.

Interviewer: Tell me…let me back you up just a little bit. Tell me a little bit about growing up.

Roman Mitelman: OK. I was born in Minsk. This was the capital of Belarus, now a separate state, but at that time, it was part of the Soviet Union Republic. And I was born in '35.

Interviewer: You were born in 1935?

Roman Mitelman: Right.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Roman Mitelman: And I remember prewar period, not everything of course, but many things.

Interviewer: Tell me about your family.

Roman Mitelman: My father was…he was actually a carpenter, but he didn't succeed in his graduation because he was moved from one place to another. Unfortunately, he, like many other people in Russia, was a member of Communist Party, ideological. He accepted all these ideas. Later, he became the enemy of the system. He went to, all the way from--

Interviewer: Your father was--

Roman Mitelman: --from supporter to enemy.

Interviewer: So your father was actually Jewish and communist.

Roman Mitelman: He was. He became member of the party in 1927.

Interviewer: Right.

Roman Mitelman: I discussed these problem with him many times. He said the ideas were very good and he liked it.

Interviewer: He liked it.

Roman Mitelman: At the beginning.

Interviewer: And how many children were in the family?

Roman Mitelman: I was only one, and because he was a party member, they moved him from one place to another and he couldn't graduate from university and work as a cabinet maker.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your first…when did you start to discover that something was not quite right? Were you aware of what was happening?

Roman Mitelman: You mean what's right in the Soviet system?

Interviewer: No, with regards to the war. When did you start to discover that there was an actual plan to exterminate, annihilate the Jews?

Roman Mitelman: OK. Before the war, I actually didn't know anything about Germany. I don't remember. I really didn't understand…you see, I was 5 or 6 years old to understand what the Nazi really--

Interviewer: Were your parents--?

Roman Mitelman: I read newspapers because I could read the Soviet Communist newspaper, but probably I read about what's happening in Germany, but I couldn't understand it. When the war started, people were very agitated at that moment. And I remember one thing what I did in the morning, I put everything what I had…what I had was a gas mask in a big pouch. It was for children. I put it on. I put my toy pistol. I had this sword that I made by myself and a toy rifle, and I have a cap from Russian Civil War. Everything, I put on. And we had a woman, the Polish woman, who was like my babysitter, and she took me to the store.

And I remember one woman came and said, “Now, we will not be scared of Germans because we have somebody to defend us.”

Interviewer: Which was you at 5 or 6 years old.

Roman Mitelman: I had realized that war is something very, very bad because at night, or early in the morning, I don’t remember – the next day, we went to shelter. And the shelter was very close to us because we lived near the opera building. Under this building, there was, many, many stories underground, shelters. We spent some time in the shelters, but Germans didn’t bomb Minsk at that time. And only was alarms like siren started at every 15 or 20 minutes because of reconnaissance plane was flying over. My father went to his military unit in [unintelligible 0:05:12.0]. He was 35 years old at that time and he went. But, he was lucky because he asked his commander for a couple of hours to do something with us. I want to stress one very important things that many people don’t know. But many people in Minsk, I mean, mostly Jewish people, and other people didn’t realize what happened because many people, 40 years old and older, they remember Germans who came to this place in World War I – there was occupation for a very short period. And I remember what they said. There was a lot of people. They said, “Oh, we remember the Germans. They used to come to our house.” And if he’s a soldier or officer, look on something, “ Oh, I like this item. I will take it.” And that is all. They didn’t curse people. They didn’t abuse people. That’s why nothing will happen. And many people didn’t want to leave because of that. And the second reason was that the Soviet propaganda was not very active against Nazi even from the beginning.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Roman Mitelman: In a period between 1933 and ’39, there was a big corporation between the Soviet Union and the Nazi Germany. It was trade and the corporation in the military field, exchange of officer and so on. That is why the propaganda didn’t work. There was one movie anti-Nazi, I don’t remember, a couple of pictures only. Made in ’39 or ’38. ’38 probably.

Interviewer: What do you remember the general feeling about the Germans were--

Roman Mitelman: Let me finish a couple of words. In 1939, there was an agreement between Hitler and Stalin, and the secret part – the name was Agreement of Friendship and Border, this was the name of this agreement – and in accordance with this agreement, Germany took Poland in '39, the west part of Poland and Russia took the east part of Poland. And there was no anti-Nazi propaganda at all. And the Soviet people, they adjusted themselves to the situations of life. They believed what the newspapers and the radio said, the newspaper printed, and there was no anti-Nazi propaganda, all that we need to know. But not all people were the same way because we left the city the next day, June 23rd, because my father got tickets on the train on the next day and got some times in the middle of the day…I don't remember exactly now, it's so many years. And he came and said, "Now, we will take everything that we can and a couple of small suits and a bag," and so on, "and we will go." And we went on foot. The distance to railroad station was probably two miles and we spent about five hours to walk because every 15 minutes, reconnaissance planes and sirens started and we tried to find a shelter in entrances, in the building entrances to wait, sometimes half an hour. And finally, at 10 o'clock in the evening, we came to the railroad station and there was a train, a passenger train full of people. We entered the train and there was no place where to sit and nobody checked tickets. And finally, at about 10:30, so it was really dark, the Minsk latitude is high and it was June and the day was very long. And when we started to move probably in half an hour, it was dark and we moved to the east and in the morning, we passed 150 miles. And Germans moved very fast, unbelievably fast that I think faster than our troops now in Iraq. They moved 200 miles from Brest, in the border, to Minsk, exactly 200 miles in a week.

Interviewer: You said this was in 1941.

Roman Mitelman: It was 1941.

Interviewer: You were 6 years old.

Roman Mitelman: Yeah. And when we left the next morning, it's 4 o'clock, they started bombing of the city. And the city was built mostly from wood and the whole city burned. And people couldn't--

Interviewer: --before the bombing.

Roman Mitelman: Probably, our train was the last, I think so. I'm not sure, but I think maybe it's the last because the next day, only people who had some kind of transportation – people didn't have cars in Russia at the time, only a few people, but if you get some kind of truck from some company, they could manage because what I know definitely that people who left the city in June 25th, by foot, they came back. Because the Germans moved so fast. In June 28th, they were in Minsk.

Interviewer: I know you were only 6 years old--

Roman Mitelman: Yeah.

Interviewer: But, what did you think you were doing? Did you know what you were doing at that time?

Roman Mitelman: I understood that we were escaping from Germans. I understood what war is because when we started to move in this train, it was not very dark at that moment and the Russian anti-aircraft guns were shooting for the reconnaissance...

Interviewer: Do you remember any conversations you have with your parents about it?

Roman Mitelman: My father left that evening. He put us into the train and went to his military unit. And it was me, my mother, and a couple other relatives. What we discussed…All talking was about war because there was no other subject and people didn't know what will happen to them. We came to a small town, 150 miles approximately from Minsk in the east, and we stayed there for three weeks or maybe more than that because the Germans' advance slowed down. 'Cause in Minsk, there was no defense at all. They moved as fast as they could. After that, there was some resistance and they slowed down, and we lived for

about a month. My sister was born in this month, but she died later, three weeks later, because after that we started to move as refugees. They didn't call us refugees. They didn't like that word. Refugee in your own country?

Interviewer: What did they call you?

Roman Mitelman: In Russia, we were people who were under evacuation… the evacuated people, something like that. One word.

Interviewer: What did your sister die of?

Roman Mitelman: As I remember, when she was born, she was pretty good. But, when we started to move from this town, we moved in railroad cars for cargo. It was not a passenger... I remember the inscription on the car was" 40 people or eight horses." And they were overcrowded. Actually, as I remember, we didn't starve because we had some coupons that we can get some bread and maybe something else. And it was summertime, you could find something like potato, but the problem was the sanitation. You couldn't wash yourself and my sister died because of some kind of disease. I don't know how to qualify it. She was only three weeks old.

Interviewer: You remember--

Roman Mitelman: I remember a little bit. We moved for three months. We stopped in [unintelligible 0:15:05.4] in August. It was in August and spent about a month over there, and after that, we started to move to Asia, the southeast part of Russia. And in October or November or something, we came close to Chinese border in Kazakhstan.

Interviewer: Do you remember the day of liberation?

Roman Mitelman: Of my city?

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Roman Mitelman: I know the day. At that time, it was July the 3rd of 1944. And at that time, I was with my parents – my mother was very sick at that time because when we were in Kazakhstan, she'd gotten typhus, a very bad disease, and she couldn't recover. My father was in front. He was in Moscow area. He was wounded two times or three times. He was in the hospital in 1943. After that, he got a new assignment to work in the hospital, and he came to Kazakhstan and took us and the hospital was located near Moscow at that time. When the Germans moved, we moved to west and the hospital moved. And when Minsk was liberated in 1944, I was near Smolensk. Smolensk is the Russian city between Moscow and Minsk, approximately in the middle, and the hospital was located there. And I remember that my mother, she was very, very sick and weak at that time. And she said that I need to go to look what happened to the city. In three or four hours, the people from Minsk, they got in cars and they wanted to spend the day or so. It was in, I don't remember exactly, on July the 5th I think, a couple of days after liberation. And when she came back, she was absolutely devastated and she died a couple of weeks later.

Interviewer: She died. Do you remember what she died of?

Roman Mitelman: After this typhus, maybe not because her whole body after this disease was different, you know, weak and so on – consequences.

Interviewer: So you were 10 years old?

Roman Mitelman: She was 29 years old at that time and I was, in '44, I was 9.

Interviewer: So, by the age of 9, you had lost your mother and your sister?

Roman Mitelman: Yeah, my sister in ’41. I lost mother in ’44. I was lucky I had father. My father died in ’77.

Interviewer: Where did you go from there? Where did you and your father go after you lost your father?

Roman Mitelman: My father was in military service up to 1947. In ’47, he left the army and we came back to Minsk. And at that time, the city was in ruins. They started to restore. The first building they restored was the KGB building. You know what the KGB is? But he was in the Minsk Ghetto for three years and escaped. He told me a lot of things. He cannot be interviewed because he died about 12 years ago. But I talked to him a lot and my actual information that I have on this period in Minsk came from him.

Interviewer: I tell you what’s really important to us in this project and I like being the fact that you have the information is that we want to know about your story and what happened to you--

Roman Mitelman: Oh, well, it’s OK--

Interviewer: I mean just so you know that we--

Roman Mitelman: That’s OK.

Interviewer: We welcome all information. We want to know. In this particular project, we want to know what happened to you.

Roman Mitelman: OK.

Interviewer: I want you to tell me a little bit about postwar. After you were with your father, what brought you…how long did you live…you went back to Soviet Union?

Roman Mitelman: I was in Soviet Union. I was in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan was a part of Soviet Union.

Interviewer: OK. So you went back home?

Roman Mitelman: And I was there for up to 1947 when my father was in the hospital. They moved from one place to another, five or six different changes. And finally, in '47, we came back to Minsk and the situation in Minsk was very, very bad. There was no place where to live and at the beginning, we lived I remember there was like nine people slept in one small room. Can you imagine that? Some people slept under the table and others on the table.

Interviewer: And you remember that?

Roman Mitelman: I remember that. I went to school in 5th grade. And it was very hard because we couldn't buy clothes and what I had I could use for many, many years, but my father worked very hard. He was not very healthy man after this.

Interviewer: Do you remember any antisemitism?

Roman Mitelman: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you remember?

Roman Mitelman: I will tell you. A very nice story. Very interesting. I spent four months or so in orphanage. It was at that time my father and my mother was alive, but the hospital moved close to the front and they didn't want me to visit – stupid

decision – and they put me in an orphanage near Moscow. And this place was about 150 – 140, 150 boys, only boys. I was one of the youngest. And then, all of them, probably most of them except me were orphans. The situation in this orphanage was very, very bad. Lack of food…actually, we were hungry. I remember that I used to walk around, if I found some peel from potatoes, [makes motion of putting peels in his mouth]. My father left a couple loaves of bread and ask lady to give me when I need. But this – everything was stolen. They steal food. But what was the worst, the attitude to me from these guys, other boys, they understood that I'm Jewish because, in this country sometimes, it's very hard to understand who is who. In Russia, it's very easy. Your appearance, your name, and it was clear for them, and they humiliated me from the morning up to the night.

Interviewer: They humiliated you?

Roman Mitelman: Yeah.

Interviewer: How?

Roman Mitelman: Many ways. I can explain one. It's hard to understand. These anti-Semitic people, they had some impressions and I don't know why it happens, but Jewish people cannot pronounce sound "R", okay? And what they did they just asked me, "Say corn." Corn in Russian language "kukuruza." It means that Jewish people cannot pronounce that and they will pronounce it not "kukuruza" but "kukuwuza." And when somebody does it, this was a big fun for them. They didn't give me chance to sleep. If I wanted to write a letter, post card, I need to miss my school, not to go to school because they will not allow me to do so, and many, many other humiliations. I remember what I said. I was so naïve at that time, I was 9 years old. I said, "You know, I will complain. I will write a complaint on you and I will send this complaint to Stalin."

Interviewer: So, how long did you live in Soviet Union after the war?

Roman Mitelman: We left the country in '79.

Interviewer: 1979?

Roman Mitelman: Yeah. I was 44 years old.

Interviewer: And did you come straight here? To Tennessee?

Roman Mitelman: Actually, we spent some time in Italy a couple of months.

Interviewer: What brought you to Memphis?

Roman Mitelman: Memphis? Accidentally. I found a job here.

Interviewer: You found a job?

Roman Mitelman: Yeah. You had a question. Why I left the Soviet Union? Okay, good question. From 1948, as I remember, my family, my father, my uncle were involved in some kind of personal activities. We were listening foreign broadcast. The reason for that was because we wanted to know what is going on in the world, and we didn't trust the Soviet system at all. We hated the system. My uncle was arrested in 1950. I remember the day exactly three days after the war in Korea started. The KGB people came and arrested him, and he spent five years in…you should know this word – Gulag, what is it? -- concentration camp that Stalin and even Lenin created. He spent five years and he was lucky because Stalin died in '53, and two years later, he came back. Why he was arrested? I will tell you why. Because he was a chemist and worked in the factory with American equipment. Everything was American to make penicillin drug, medicine. And the American helped with factory in Minsk. And he said that the American equipment is very good, but this was in 1948, '49, with all this campaign, and the cold war started. You see, in Russia – many questions, I cannot spend much time on them – the KGB was everywhere. If you worked in some places in a group of three people, one of them will be KGB informer and

you need to be very careful what you are talking about with them. And my uncle was a very open-minded man and he could say everything that he wanted. He was a free person. And this informer, KGB, put it down. (makes motion of writing) Another thing he said before the war, German, Nazi Germany is very close, 200 miles and they started to build aircraft factories. He said, "What are these stupid people? What are they doing?" And also at that time, he said, "Oh, I would like to go to leave the country to go to Israel." And somebody informed of that, they came and they arrested him. And the family has three kids, small kids, when he left and without any sources of survival.

Interviewer: When you think back about the war, especially the time that you were escaping with your parents, your mother, what do you remember the most?

Roman Mitelman: What I remember the most from this period, I remember, first of all, that life in Kazakhstan, it was very hard. I remember that my mother wanted to go to work to do something, but she was…before the war, she worked in the office of transportation. She graduated something like a state tech here. But in this village where we lived, there was no work for her, and at one time, she went to the field and that field was probably six, seven miles to walk in the field and back, the same distance back to pick up poppy.

Interviewer: So, she walked seven miles to pick up poppies? 14 miles.

Roman Mitelman: Poppy, they used it for medical purpose, not as a drug.

Interviewer: Right.

Roman Mitelman: But she could do it only for one week. She was absolutely exhausted and she couldn't… This was a very hard life. And I remember one thing that we lived in one room with another family, a woman with a small boy my age. She was from [unintelligible 0:30:12.6] and this woman had flour, like a big bag of flour. We didn't have that. And one day, she started to make some kind of rolls and left the room for a minute and I needed…she didn't want to give me one and I came, I picked up one and the next moment, she came back, and became so angry, and I escape. There was a big stool. I jumped over, and she wanted to

catch me. This is what I remember. But many people were good for us. Some people in this area or even in Siberia, they'd never seen Jewish people at all and there were many of them, when they see Jews the first time, they said, "Oh, we see normal people. We thought Jewish people were different. They have horns." You see?

Interviewer: So, these people in 1940's were still believing the old myths?

Roman Mitelman: Maybe some Orthodox religious people that are--

Interviewer: Why do you want people to know about what happened? When people say to you, "How could this have happened?"

Roman Mitelman: What you do mean? The Holocaust?

Interviewer: The Holocaust. What do you tell people? How do you explain it?

Roman Mitelman: Why it happened and how?

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, people want to know. How did it happen? How could it happen? How could people systematically--?

Roman Mitelman: I will tell you this. As I understand, today, it's still a question because it is so hard to answer the questions and maybe even Elie Wiesel, who is the biggest specialist in Holocaust, will not be able to answer the question, how this nation, I mean, German nation on this so high level of development, how they came to that? This is so abnormal that the normal people like – we cannot…even me. You see, I have this experience and when I asked this question, how it could happen, I don't know.

Interviewer: I know you escaped. We have a couple of survivors that escaped before Kristallnacht or before the invasion of their country and the growing feeling during that time is guilt. Do you feel any guilt?

Roman Mitelman: Me?

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Roman Mitelman: Hard question. Guilt, maybe, because…maybe, my father should feel some guilt, and I will explain to you. Because his understanding of the situation was very, very good. And Russian propaganda couldn't make influence on him. He understood that the first step should be to save the family. Maybe, he should do the same thing for other people. But on the other hand, he couldn't do it because he was 35 years old and his military prescription was, "We will start in 30 minutes to an hour, go to your military unit and that is all." Am I guilty? I don't know. I was so small.

Interviewer: Even now though, looking back, you escaped, you were small, you didn't go to a camp, you weren't on deportation, is there a part of you that does wonder how—

Roman Mitelman: You see, I was simply luck. You know, the statistic, statically, if you look on everything mathematically, in the situations that I was, I had probably 98% or 99 to become a victim, and only 1% to escape and 1% to survive.

Interviewer: So how do explain the 1%? Luck?

Roman Mitelman: Only luck and maybe…I don't know. Because, you see, look, if my father didn't have a chance to come and to put us in this train, will we leave the city? Probably not. Like most other people.

Interviewer: Luck, a little bit of faith, good timing.

Roman Mitelman: I think this was a luck, yeah. Well, people in Kiev, for example, in Ukraine, they were in different situation because German came in Kiev after one and a half months or so later. And they had the chance to escape and most of them didn't. And that's why they had the Babi Yar ones, 30, 50 thousand murdered. Because of the Soviet propaganda and they didn't understand the reality of the situation. And on the other hand, the evacuation of people in Russia was organized so badly. Compare with what happened in Denmark...

Interviewer: Right.

Roman Mitelman: You know, I will not explain.

Interviewer: How do we make sure this never happens again? What do you think?

Roman Mitelman: Can it happen here?

Interviewer: No, what do you think will keep it from happening again?

Roman Mitelman: I will tell you one thing. If we are vigilant enough, and I mean not only the simple people, but on the governmental level. Look what is going on in France now. This country and some other European countries, they don't want to fight terrorism. The main threat today is from terrorism. I don't need to explain here because you understand that and we need to realize the situation and to use all our experience and to do everything in the world that we used for many years and decades, never again, with a big, big and deep sense, right? And now, after what we had in 9/11, can we use anymore? I don't know. We have it. And probably, we will have something else. We don't have any guarantees that tomorrow some terrorists will do something unpredictable. We need to fight terrorism any place in the world because there is no different between Nazi Germany, their ideology and the ideology of Islam and Nazism what they call it. It's the same thing. But many, many people don't understand that and they

don't want to understand that. This is what makes me very upset. But I will not go deep, because you know what I'm talking about?. You don't have a big time for that. But we need to work, to work hard than what you are doing. I think it's very important. We need to combine this, what happened 50, 60 years ago, and what is going on today and can happen in the near future. That is why actually we're doing this to prevent the same thing in the future.

Interviewer: When people talk about the Holocaust, some people say it's hate, some people say it was evil, some people say they have no idea what it was. Do you?

Roman Mitelman: Evil. You see, I think that evil exists, really exists, and we have many, many examples of that. Can we eradicate evil? I don't know. But we need to work.

Interviewer: Thank you. It's been an honor to talk to you.

Roman Mitelman: Thank you very much. It was nice to talk to you.

Interviewer: It's been very important to us and we appreciate that.

Roman Mitelman: I had an opportunity to talk in English because my Russian is still better than…