

I was born Chaim Wajchendler in December, 1928 in Wierzbnik, Poland which is now known as Starachowice. It is 100 miles south of Warsaw near Kielce and Radom. There were four children in our family, the oldest a girl and three boys of whom I was the middle one. We owned a two-story, twelve room house that my maternal grandfather built. We occupied four of the rooms and the rest were rented out.

My father at one time had studied law and was very knowledgeable. He counted among his friends all in the legal profession, including all the judges in town. He was very much in demand in the Jewish community for free legal advice and at times intervened on behalf of litigants so that trials where Jews had to participate would not be held on Jewish holidays.

My family operated a general store where we all participated, including my mother and grandfather. My grandfather died just two weeks before the war broke out.

My other grandfather whom I never knew was a shoichet and was strictly orthodox. He had a long beard as had my maternal grandfather. Father did not have a beard and we the boys did not have poyot. Father dressed modern during the week and on Sabbath and holidays wore orthodox garb. My sister attended a bait Yakov for girls and we attended cheder as well as the Public school which was compulsory. Education in our family was highly valued and we competed for good marks in school.

We were, I would judge, modern orthodox. All holidays were strictly observed and our house was strictly kosher. There lived about 5 - 6 thousand Jews in Wierzbnik of a total population of 18 - 20 thousand before the war. There was one church and one Bais Medrash to which was attached a Yeshiva. We had an official Rabbi and 2 or 3 other Rabbis, each with his own followers. There were also various Jewish organizations; religious, secular and political as well as sports clubs. There was also Jewish representation on the local town council. Thursday was marked day and most people took part since most Jews were artisans or storekeepers. Therefore this was the most important business day and people converged into the market square which was almost in front of our house.

The economic mainstay however was the government-owned ammunitions plants where no Jews were allowed to be employed. Jews even avoided going near the fences of these factories lest they be accused of spying.

Jews and Catholics lived a tolerable co-existence provided the priest in the only church was a decent person. But if he happened to be anti-Semitic, the relationship deteriorated, particularly just prior to the outbreak of the war and with the influence of German propaganda.

When the war started I was almost eleven years old and had just passed from Grade 3 to 4 with good marks and did not quite understand what it was all about. The first thing I remember after the town was occupied was that when it came time to start school again, the Jewish students were not allowed back to school. That is the only schooling I had - 3 grades. Even at that age I

realized that things were fast changing. Jews were restricted in their freedom and were not able to carry on with regular business or work.

On the first Yom Kippur in 1939 the Germans set fire to the synagogue. It was late at night and flames could be seen from far away. Everyone in the area stood outside their homes with some belongings ready to flee lest the fire spread and consumed everything in its path. Fortunately, it was contained and no one was inside the synagogue. I still tremble when I recall that event, especially on Yom Kippur.

As time progressed, things deteriorated. We were ordered to wear arm bands to identify us as Jews. Movement was further restricted, and we were ordered to surrender precious metals, jewellery and furs as well as give up radios under threat of death. So called contributions had to be paid in order to bribe German officials. Creation of a Ghetto, the rounding up and kidnapping of Jews for forced labour, the arrest of Jews and Gentiles never to be seen again and the constant search of houses took place at this time. The Jewish population of our town was considerably increased by Jews who were expelled from the cities of Lodz and Plock and all Jewish households had to accommodate them and share everything with them on a permanent basis.

One day a German soldier was shot and another wounded while on patrol on our street. A house was surrounded and some people arrested, and after some days a gallows was erected in the market square which was in the centre of town. The following Sunday, while the people were leaving church they were halted and made to watch the hanging of about 10 people. I was right in

front watching as it was right near our house. Amongst those hung were a young girl, her mother and her grandmother -- all Poles. I later found out that the hangmen were Jews conscripted for this task and bribes had to be paid to the Germans to allow the hangmen to wear masks in order not to be recognized and avoid acts of revenge by the Poles.

In our town there were large ammunition factories and it was said that people employed there would receive better food rations and would be exempt from deportations. My father and older brother amongst others, secured employment there sometime in 1941, and later on, obtained work permits for my mother, my sister and myself. These work permits were highly prized in all that they implied, and were much sought after by all Jews -- it was like a permit to life itself. Jews were allowed, even encouraged to work in the factories after the German occupation.

For my younger brother, all necessary arrangements were made so that he be hidden and cared for by a Polish family. Since our town expected the same fate as befell all the Jewish communities in regards to expulsions, we were hoping against hope that it wouldn't happen to us because of the great numbers that were employed in the ammunition factories.

BUT IT WAS NOT TO BE.

On October 27th, 1942 as I was on the way to work, I was stopped by unfamiliar looking soldiers and ordered to go to the market square where all Jews were to assemble. Instead, I ran home and alerted everyone, and together we left for the market square, still hoping that our work permits

would save us from being expelled. My younger brother, who was 11 years old at the time, went in the opposite direction towards the place where he was to be hidden as was pre-arranged.

The square was filling up with great commotion. People who were slow to follow the orders were being beaten and shot -- families were being separated -- children and adults were crying -- the feeble and invalids being shot in their houses -- It was an experience that I still have nightmares about. As the day progressed an order went out that all those who were holding work permits should step out and assemble at the edge of the square on the sidewalk -- men and women separated. My father and I were the first to comply, but on the way I was stopped by the chief of employment, a German (Herr Shwertner) and he questioned me about my age. I stood to attention and told him without hesitation that I was sixteen years old as my work permit indicated and that I worked at the smelter. He hesitated and called over an official of the Jewish council - Judenrat (Mr. Birencwajg), who happened to be nearby and asked him if what I said was true. He stepped over and asked me in a low voice, "Who are You?" I told him my father's name and that I was sixteen years old and where I worked. He stepped back to the German and said "Yes, it is true" and that I was a good worker -- then he gave me back my card and let me go by. (I wasn't quite 14 then.)

Many of my friends of my own age who also had work permits were not so lucky. Their permits were taken away by this German and they were not allowed to join us. I was most fortunate to be standing near a gate when I saw him looking for me because whenever he came by, I hid inside the gate so he couldn't find me. Just as our column was about to be marched off towards the

factories, I noticed my younger brother in the market square, and I knew that the people who were to hide him had betrayed him. My older brother was working the night shift and was detained in the factory, and therefore, was safe.

My mother, my sister, and younger brother, together with all the others assembled in the square (about 7 - 8 thousand Jews), were marched down to the railway station, packed onto a train and deported. That's the last time I saw my mother, sister and younger brother. Friends, relatives, neighbours, a whole community just wiped off the face of the earth in such a tragic and brutal way, deceived into believing that they were going to be resettled on abandoned farms in the Ukraine. I can just picture some of our neighbours and townspeople -- whole families -- and not even one person survived.

Our column was marched away under heavy guard to the camp that was made ready for us, about five kilometers away, but first we all stopped at a place where a ranking German made a speech and ordered that all money and valuables were to be surrendered and placed in a huge box on the site. All lined up to throw in their valuables. After a few people passed, they were asked if they had fully complied and then they were searched, and if they were found to have something hidden, they were shot in front of all of us as an example. This of course put fear into the rest of us and we gave up everything. A few weeks later I found a 100 zloty note still hidden in my jacket that my mother had sewn in. Luckily I was not searched.

After more were beaten up and shot we were assembled and marched off to the camp under heavy guard. We were assigned barracks and being almost in shock, I slipped into a bunk where I stayed for three or four days and didn't stop crying. The bunks were so shallow that when you wanted to turn around you had to slip out first, and slip in on the other side.

Then my father located me and took me to his barracks where things were better -- he showed me how to get rid of the Lice -- he made sure that I ate my soup and reported for work. The work I had to do was very hard and I had to keep up with the grown ups. But since most people knew me, they didn't complain and helped me when they could. After a while my father arranged for an easier job for me and I worked the day shift. Conditions in the camp varied as time progressed. In the winter we were short of warm clothes. The barracks were cold, there was little food, and sometimes we worked double shifts. The distance between the camp and the factories was far, and we had to walk. The guards were mostly Ukrainians with German Officers in charge. Those who got sick were not getting better due to the lack of medical attention. Although there was a doctor amongst us, there were hardly any medicines. Those assigned to the hospital block just withered away and died or were shot. Here we had to adapt fast or perish . The food was bad, the barracks were infested with all kinds of bugs and we hardly had any change or replacement of clothing. Sometimes people escaped, and as a result they shot people in reprisal.

I escaped on two occasions and both times, had to smuggle myself back to the factory -- fearing that if I was found missing, my father and brother would be shot plus 8 others. Both escapes were not planned.

In the summer of 1943 a typhoid epidemic broke out affecting almost all the prisoners -- resulting in a great loss of lives. In the camp adjoining ours most of the people that were sick were shot. Jews from other camps were brought in to replace all the victims.

In the summer of 1944 as the Russian front was nearing, they started to dismantle the factories and we were no longer deemed useful, so we got transferred to a nearby camp. From there people started to cut the wires at night and run away to the forest. This was going on for a few days which resulted in many casualties. Then one day in July, 1944 we were assembled and packed on a train and shipped off under very heavy guard. We were very crowded, had no food, and worse, no water and many people suffocated along the way. After travelling for a few days (but what seemed like an eternity), we arrived in Auschwitz. We were ordered to disembark and were marched off. We arrived at some empty barracks near the crematoria and ordered to undress and our clothing was taken away. We were still dazed and shocked from the journey -- and we were prepared for the worst. We lined up to be showered believing that this was the end. Luckily we got showered and not gassed. We were given striped clothing and the men were marched off to what was known as the Gypsy Camp where we lined up in alphabetical order to register and had our arms tattooed with a number and then assigned a barrack on one side of the camp. On the other side were housed the gypsies, whole families together. During that night we heard a lot of commotion and loud noises and when we went outside in the morning, there wasn't a single gypsy left. During that night the trucks backed up to the barrack gates and forced all the

gypsies onto the trucks. They were taken to the gas chambers and gassed and the crematoria was going full blast in the morning.

In early September my brother was sent to another camp. My father and I transferred to the adjoining camp, B II D, all within Auschwitz where we were assigned work. In October, my father was picked to be sent away to another camp -- and that was the last time I saw him.

I stayed in Auschwitz and did all kinds of work -- road building, picking up clothes from the storage barracks and sorting them, and I also worked on the receiving ramp where the trains came into the camp. I was there when the Jews from the ghetto of Lodz came in. I was there and watched their selection being made and I watched as they were marched to the gas chambers.

It was quite common to watch beatings, hangings, people committing suicide by throwing themselves onto the electrified barbed wires that surrounded each camp. I saw people being drowned in the camp pool where water for fire fighting was stored. There is so much I could tell you about what took place in Auschwitz, but it would be too unbelievable for anyone who wasn't there to even imagine.

In January of 1945, as the Russian front was nearing, we were assembled and marched out from Auschwitz. It was bitter cold and we must have marched for about a week. On the way we were joined by other prisoners of all nationalities and it was a most terrible march. Anyone who couldn't keep up was shot and along the whole route there were bodies lying about. When we reached Breslau (Vroclaw) we were put on an open freight train half filled with snow and whisked

off to Buchenwald. Many people froze to death along the way. When the train came into Buchenwald, I had to get off the train without my pants. They had frozen and stuck to the ice, so I used a piece of blanket for cover.

In Buchenwald there was a similar reception routine as in Auschwitz, but not as strict because the camp was overcrowded. I did not work in Buchenwald, except when I volunteered to clear up the rubble from the bombings in the nearby city of Weimar. While in Buchenwald I searched for and found my brother and I managed to get him transferred to my barrack. (As it happened, Eli Wiesel was in the same barrack with us.)

We were there until April 1945, when we were again evacuated. We marched to the city of Weimar where we were given two days of rations. We were packed onto an open freight train and shuffled to and fro, depending which way the front was moving. There were about three thousand prisoners on this transport, mostly Russian prisoners of war. We shuffled like this for four weeks on 2 days of rations and it took a very heavy toll. It was the worst time ever since entering the camps and the first time I saw cannibalism take place. When we were near the end of the journey and the war was coming to an end, we were near Terezin in Czechoslovakia and people were throwing bread and other food to us. By then I was so weak and indifferent that it hardly mattered, after having been badly beaten up for committing sabotage. Czech partisans took pictures of our transport and some of our boys can clearly be identified at the end when we got to Terezin. There were only about 500 - 600 left alive out of about 3,000 prisoners.

On May 8, 1945 we were liberated by the Russian Army and there was jubilation, but most of the prisoners were by then reduced to dazed, walking skeletons, easily falling prey to epidemics and diseases, and since we were not used to eating, we succumbed to diarrhea after being fed by the soldiers and that too took its toll. Most of us, however, recovered and after a while we started to search for relatives. In my case, only my brother Harry, who now lives in ^FTilford and I survived the ordeal.

From amongst the Ghetto Terezin's population, the young ones were assigned to a special youth house where I think we were given special attention by the Russians and recuperated faster. By July - August 1945 we, those under 18 years of age, went through a Red Cross Commission and were destined to go to England. Those who were still ill and did not pass the health test had to stay behind.

We got to England sometime in August after waiting in Prague for the R.A.F. Lancaster bombers to ferry us, a group of about 300 youths, mainly boys, and now known as "the boys".

In England we were housed in a vacated industrial hostel which was formerly occupied by aircraft workers in Windermere. There everyone had his own room or 2 shared a room. We were given very good care by very dedicated and caring staff mainly made up of former Jewish Refugees who came to England before the war. We were given everything we needed including schooling, medical and dental attention and new friendships were forged. I think we terrified the local population by behaving so un-British. We all have fond memories of Windermere. As time

passed, groups were formed and assigned houses or hostels in different parts of Britain which were properly staffed. These groups were determined mainly by friends, or religious leanings.

My brother and I chose a group that was sent to a hostel at 32 Princess Road, Liverpool where we stayed until we found out that we had 2 aunts in London who were willing to take us in. After going to London we still kept in touch with those boys who occupied hostels in the London area particularly the ones on Stanford Hill and Loughton. Our relatives treated us very well and also welcomed all our friends for meals and lengthy visits. All this was supervised and funded by the Jewish Refugee Committee operating out of the Bloomsbury House. We were reverting more or less to a normal existence, and had to acquire new skills in order to cope with daily living. We were afforded opportunities to go to school and learn English and to apprentice in certain trades. Not wanting to be a charitable case, my brother and I chose to go to night school to learn English and go to work during the day. My brother was able to obtain a position in a diamond factory and learn diamond polishing. I apprenticed for a very short time as a cabinet maker, but later changed and joined my brother after he pleaded with the owner, a Mr. Morgenstern, of the Paramount Diamond Cutting Company, of 11 Hatton Gardens. I was liked by my teacher, Harry Saperstein, an expert diamond cutter. I was very eager to learn and was making very good progress. How good, I was only to find out after 1 1/2 years when the chance came for me to join a group to go to Canada. When I started to work I was earning 10 shillings weekly. Occasionally I got a little bonus, and at the end of 1-1/2 years I was earning 1 Pound a week. One day I received a letter from the Bloomsbury House informing me that I didn't qualify for a scheme to go to Canada. Because I wanted to prove them wrong, I was able to be included in the

group and was assured that if I settled in Canada and liked it, my brother would be able to follow. Prior to leaving, I made an appointment with my governor to give my notice of leaving and to express my appreciation for giving me a chance to learn a trade. Apparently he had followed my progress at the factory and was very satisfied with my work. He tried to talk me out of leaving and offered me 5 Pounds a week instead of 1 Pound if I would stay on. However, I had my mind set on leaving, and since he couldn't change my mind, he wished me well. Since I had only worked for 1 1/2 years, yet had completely mastered my trade, he gave me an excellent letter of reference. I still found it odd that if I was worth 5 Pounds a week, why was I only getting 1?

In Canada I immediately found a job as a diamond cutter and later changed to become a self employed jeweler and diamond setter, from which I recently retired.

In 1951 I got married to Elsa who was also a Holocaust survivor and who had come to Canada in 1948 and was able to go to school here. Elsa is a school board Trustee with the North York Board of Education, an elected position and she has been continuously re-elected for the past 15 years. We have four children, three daughters and one son. All are married and independent and they have given us four grandsons.

We belong to a Conservative Shul Adath Israel where you were once a guest speaker. Also, we belong and are active in various Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. We own our own home and also have a summer cottage by the lake, a great gathering place for the whole family.