

1-12-1975

## Nathan Koblenz, transcript only

Nathan Koblenz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalworks.union.edu/berkoralhistories>

---

### Recommended Citation

Koblenz, Nathan, "Nathan Koblenz, transcript only" (1975). *Lucille W. Brown and Stephen M. Berk Oral Histories of American Jews*. 22.  
<https://digitalworks.union.edu/berkoralhistories/22>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections And Archives at Union | Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lucille W. Brown and Stephen M. Berk Oral Histories of American Jews by an authorized administrator of Union | Digital Works. For more information, please contact [digitalworks@union.edu](mailto:digitalworks@union.edu).

LB I'm going to start the tape, and if you'd be good enough, we'll start with your name. If you'll tell us..

NK My name is, the English name is Nathan Koblentz.

LB Nathan Koblentz. Did you have a different name in Europe?

NK No, its the same but my name in Yiddish is Naph<sup>ht</sup>ali.

LB Natanya?

NK It/s a Biblical name.

LB Naph<sup>ht</sup>ali

NK Yeah, Naph<sup>ht</sup>ali.

LB Yeah, that was one of Jacob's sons.

NK It's a Biblical name. Yeah. One of the twelve eh,... that's right. that is

So, my real name.

LB Uh huh. And could you, would you tell me what year you were born?

NK I was born in 1896.

LB 1896. And what town?

NK In ah, in the, in Lithuania.

LB In Lithuania?

NK Yes.

LB What city?

NK Smorgan. Vilna, Vilna guberny, that means the <sup>shtetl</sup> of Vilna.

LB Yes.

NK And the Shtetl was Smorgan.

LB Could <sup>it</sup> can you spell <sup>it</sup> do you think?

NK It's S-M-O-R-G-A-N

LB O.K.

NK Would be more like it.

LB Closest. yeah, o.k. Now, you were born in the shtetl in 1896 in

Lithuania. And at that time that was part of...

NK That was part of Russia.

LB Russia.

NK Czarist Russia.

LB Right. Was the Vilna-Gubernya, was that White Russia?

NK No.

LB It was not.

NK No, it's Lithuania.

LB Lithuania. I want to see if I brought a map with me. Yeah.

NK You'll find that, you'll find that in ah... (Looking at map)

This is Poland.

LB Yeah.

NK Lithuania on the top, in the north here.

LB Yeah.

NK East Prussia... It's between, there is Vilna,

LB Yeah.

NK There is Vilna and there is Minsk.

LB Minsk.

9, 10<sup>10</sup> NK And there is *Molodetsno*, so, it would be in between Vilna and *Molodetsna*.

LB O.K.

NK On the way to Minsk. Not between *Molodetsno* and Minsk, but between Vilna and *Molodetsno*.

LB O.K.

NK That would be in this, in this section here.

LB Section.

NK It's not... Minsk is White Russia.

LB I see. So you were on, you were actually...

NK On the border of White Russia and Lithuania.

LB Right, I see. O.K. And it was a small shtetl?

NK It's not a small shtetl. It was a industrial shtetl.

LB An industrial shtetl?

NK Yes, they, the main industry was leather.

LB Leather?

NK Yes.

LB Manufacturing?

NK Manufacturing leather.

LB And how many people lived in it?

NK There must have been about between 10 and 12,000. The majority, the majority of it would be Jewish.

LB About what percent?

NK Maybe about 75 percent, as far as I can tell.

LB Yeah.

NK 75 percent.

LB And what were the rest of the people that lived there?

NK The rest of the people Lithuanians and ah, White Russians, and Lithuanians. That's... well maybe, they spoke different languages. They spoke Polish.

LB Yeah.

NK And they spoke Lithuanian and Russian.

LB So you had all those languages around you.

NK Well I never spoke any Lithuanian and I never heard anybody speak Lithuanian in my part of the country.

LB You didn't.

NK But the fact is that all the gentile people, most of them spoke Yiddish.

LB Yiddish?

NK That's right.

LB Why is that?

NK Eh, because the connection between the Jews and the non Jewish was so close, in business and in working, that they learned how to speak Yiddish. And they spoke fluently Yiddish. Very fluently.

LB Now were these nonJews, ah, were they connected with the leather business too?

NK Yes. Workers.

LB They were working people?

NK Working people, yes.

LB Now who owned these leather ah, ~~businesses~~?

NK The majority of them was Jewish.

LB They were owned by Jews.

NK Owned by Jews.

LB Now were they hand made leather, or were there some kind of machinery...?

NK Machinery, no, no. There was, there was very little, everything was made by hand.

LB Yeah.

NK It is the... a tannery, you know?

LB Yes, a tannery, right.

NK A tannery. You take your raw, raw skin, and you put it in a tannery. And you have to, it goes through to various phases of procedure until it comes out a piece of leather, that it could be formed into a shoe or into a pocketbook or into something else.

LB Alright. So you weren't actually in the manufacturing end, you were in the making of leather. Not leather goods.

NK No, we were... the profession that I was working in was already, the leather was already partly...

LB Tanned?

NK Tanned and, and ready to make...

LB Goods.

NK to make a shoe.

LB To make a shoe.

NK A shoe or a, or a boot, or anything else. But in that part, where I was working, was already...

LB Manufacturing.

NK almost manufacturing the leather. It wasn't raw.

LB Yeah.

NK We had to cut it and, and bend it out, and you know in the old country...

LB YOU want a pen?

NK No, I got a pen.

LB You want a piece of paper?

NK Yeah, have you got?

LB Here write on the back of this then.

*2, 10/11*  
NK (Writes) I don't know if you are familiar that eh... no... *(draws on paper)*  
*lets assume* that this is a shoe, like, you see? And here used to go in a piece of rubber.

LB Yeah?

NK And, but we used to get a flat, a flat piece of leather, like that.

LB Yeah.

NK And we had to bring about to work it out it should have this form.

And then when this form is finished already, then it went to another shop of the trade that worked on sewing machines and put in, put in linings inside, and put in rubber inside, in order that the foot should be... it stretched out and the foot should go in in here. You don't remember, you never saw that kind of a shoe. It's very old.

LB Well, we had a shoemaker that used to live underneath us...

NK But you had with the, with the hooks in here... with the...

LB Yes I saw those.

NK Yeah, well that's a different make.

LB Is that...?

NK This is a different make.

LB Is that what you made? With the hooks?

NK No, no, no, with no hooks. That was... rubber inside, in here. Solid pieces of rubber. Like... and they would be put in there, and lining, cotton lining, would be sewed on underneath here, and then it was given there to a shoemaker and they would put it on a ...

LB Last?

NK On <sup>✓</sup>last and make a shoe.

LB So did you make just the tops of the shoe?

NK Just the tops of it, that's right.

LB Okay, I think I met one other person that just made the tops of the shoe.

NK You did? Yeah?

LB Yeah, I can't remember, It wasn't Lithuania though. I <sup>don't</sup> remember

where. I don't remember where he came from.

NK Well, he might come from another part...

LB Yeah, that's alright.

NK He might come from another part in Poland or in, or in another part from Lithuania. In Grodn or Suout. Suout you be, the city of Suout was a large city of leather manufacturing. Well known. Well known in those days.

LB Now, about how many leather connected establishments were there in your city?

NK How many?

LB Yeah. Do you have any idea?

NK Oh yeah, there was quite a few. There was quite a few. There must have been maybe about 50 Or so.

LB And they were all in different stages of leather manufacturing. Some would be working on leather, some on tops of shoes...

2, 122  
NK Yes. Some of them were preparing the raw leather to the, the *period where that...*  
LB Tanned.

NK Leather could be manufactured made for shoes.

LB Right.

NK And then it was in that particular phase, there was two different kinds... the ones that were sewing in the rubber and linings, and the ones like we did, to work out, to form out the leather in order to make it look like a form that the shoemaker should be able to put it on the last.

LB I see. Now, these establishments must have been different sizes. Like some might...

NK Some of them are larger and some of them are smaller. . . and some of them were contractors, like in the needle trade here in America. In New York like there was little contractors and they are working, they were working for big <sup>jobbers</sup>, like.

LB Yeah.

NK That time, but on a different scale. We had contractors and we had manufacturers for themselves. Larger ones. So that comprised the whole thing. And in the shtetl in conjunction with this profession there were shoemakers and there were tailors and, and ah, businessmen and so on and so forth. And that comprised the community of, social community and it was...

LB Economic community.

NK Economic and social and cultural. And that's how the Kahal, the...

LB Yeah, the community.

NK You know, Kahal, yeah... lived in that shtetl.

LB Now how wealthy, you know, relatively, I guess you could say, were the bigger ones? How many men would they employ?

NK Well in some instances they would employ about, from a hundred... as much as a hundred and less. And in some instances was they employed only



about 12, 15, 20, and so on.

LB Now we're talking about the period before the First World War.

Let's talk about...

NK Before the First World War, Yeah. That's right, before the first world war. There must have been, I understand, there must have been, somewhere<sup>64</sup> I mentioned before in Lithuania. Over there must have been enormous, large manufacturers of that leather. Because that leather was manufactured and sent all over Russia and I believe in England and in Germany. It was manufactured a lot of leather and sent to various parts of the country...and I suppose in every part of the world.

LB Of the world.

NK That's right. In those years, that was the only form of shoemaking, in those years. Only that one form. We didn't know about this kind of shoe making, like this one here now. The boots, you know...the boots...

LB Yes. The high boots...

NK High boots and ladies shoes and men's shoes. Ladies shoes, as I told you, over there, the top was higher and this form, *the way I'm...* that was men's shoes.

LB Was it almost like a slipper? What we call a slipper?

NK It was not like a slipper. No. No. It was not a slipper.

LB Did it tie, or what?

NK No. There was no tie.

LB No tie. So it slipped on.

NK They slipped on. Because on top the rubber let out in order to let the foot go in you see. That's it.

LB Now you lived in the shtetel itself?

NK In the shtetel itself.

LB And how, how big a family did you come from?

NK I come from a big family.

LB You do?

NK In the shtetel, in general, this is a generality...that the poor people had big families. And our family was about...we had eight brothers and <sup>two</sup> sisters.

LB Three sisters?

NK Yes. Three sisters and eight brothers. Eleven.

LB Eleven children and your mother and father.

NK And my mother and father.

LB And did you live in the shtetel itself?

NK In the shtetel, yes.

LB All right, so...

NK I was born in the shtetel. The other children of our family were born in the village. Outside.

LB Oh, there was a village?

NK Oh, yes. Sure. Definitely.

LB What was the village?

NK It was a farm...farm village. Farm land like.

LB But that was not Jewish then, the village, was it?

NK There used to be two, three Jews in a village. But between Gentiles.

LB Yes. I understand. What was the name of the village?

NK Oh, where my father lived? I - let me see...

LB Well, the village near your shtetel. What was that?

NK Mother lived in Rudnye.

LB Rudnye? R-U-d-n-y-e?

NK Yes. or N-i-e. And ( phone rings. tape off).

LB Let me get this started. (tape on again) All right, now, you were born in the shtetel. There were eleven children and two parents. So that's thirteen people.

NK That's right.

LB What kind of living accommodations did you have?

NK Living accommodations were very poor. My personal life was raised in a poor family. Well, by the way, I want to say that, my mother was a second wife to my father.

LB Yes.

NK My father remarried. He had three children from his first wife. But we considered them as sisters and brothers. So...the house where I was born...and the room...there was one enormous room. There weren't different rooms in a house. But one enormous room, partitioned off for bedroom and that's all. And the rest of the family slept in one room most of the time. Just my parents used to sleep in that bedroom. I don't remember, I'm the youngest of the family...

LB You are?

NK Yes. I'm the youngest of the family. I don't remember ever seeing my older brothers...only one brother, the next that is older than me. I remember him living with us in the house. But the others, as soon as they reached a certain age, they went away for themselves.

LB Where did they go?

NK Some of them lived in the city, in the shtetel. And others went away to other parts of the country. In the surrounding vicinity. One of them went away to... deep in Russia, in the Ukraine. Not in the Ukraine, but Astrakhan. Astrakhan is on the Volga, maybe it was part of the Ukraine, Astrakhan. I know...I think it's part of the Caucas<sup>us</sup>. I don't remember.

LB We'd have to look at a map.

NK Yes. I'd have to look at a map of that.

LB About how old would they be when they left?

NK Well, they left from...as soon as they got Bar Mitzvoh.

LB As soon as they got Bar Mitzvoh?

NK Yes. That was the...al<sup>most</sup> in general, that was the procedure, that was the custom...not the custom, but in a poor family...

LB It was necessity.

NK It was...out of necessity, primarily. Primarily out of necessity. Because my father couldn't support them. They had to look for support for themselves.

LB So if they...let's say they went, let's say in the shtetel, would they be apprenticed to someone, or would they work for someone and live in that house?

NK Yes. Yes. No. They were apprentices. Well, some of them went away to another

little city about five miles away. Or....from our city. And they lived there.

Because my father's sister and other relations lived there, so they were ...  
found some work around there.

LB And whom did they live with?

NK By themselves.

LB By themselves.

NK Yes. And one, the older brother...then one of the older brothers went away to Vilna. And from Vilna he travelled away to...he wasn't...this brother wasn't involved in the leather goods, leather goods manufacture. They were...they didn't have that kind of trade. One was a dry cleaner. So he went away to Astrakhan, as I said. He worked in  
/ Vilna and then he went away to Astrakhan and worked in Astrakhan. And the other brothers...I don't know what they have done in the other cities. I don't remember even. I remember <sup>at</sup> then, when they came home to say good bye to my father before they left for America.

LB Did they all come to America?

NK Yes. All.

LB So, did you keep in touch with them here, in America?

NK No, they came to America first.

LB I know. But then when you came, did you contact...did you keep in contact with them?

NK Oh, definitely. They all, mostly everybody was living here in Albany.

LB Oh, I see.

NK Only one was living, two were living...well, they were in Albany all the time. Then they moved out from New York. One moved out to Boston.

LB In other words, just because they moved out of the house, you didn't lose touch with them?

NK No, no, no. Never. Never lost touch with them. But they just moved away from the house in order to provide for a livelihood for themselves.

LB Now, was your father in the leather goods business too?

NK No, no, no. He was a carpenter. He was a cabinetmaker.

LB A cabinetmaker.

*end 309*

NK Yeah, but he didn't make wasser av kasha. You know what I mean?

LB No.

NK you know that ... He didn't make no water for cereal.

LB Oh, for kasha? Oh, wasser av kasher, yes.

NK Wasser av : kasha, that's, this is a saying in our part of the country...

LB That I never heard.

NK If one couldn't make no living and they said, "how much do you make?", they said "I'm making wasser av kasha." That means he makes water for kasha.

LB Right.

NK You know what kasha is?

LB Yes I do.

NK Cereal, for cereal. That's it. And ah, well, one of them was serving in the Czarist army.

LB One of your brothers?

NK One of my older brothers, the <sup>oldest</sup> brother. And ah, then another brother was serving in the army. From all the eight brothers only three were serving in the army, including myself.

LB You did serve too?

NK I served in the World War Two... eh, World War One.

LB One. What about the other 2? Did they serve during any um, wars?

NK No, no, no. They didn't. They went away to America during that period of time.

LB The 1905 you mean?

NK In 1905 they went to America and, and another one went to America in 19, in 1912, I believe or 1910. But most of them went, <sup>came to</sup> America in 1905, 1904, 1905, 1906 and so on, up to <sup>1914</sup>. The last one went to America <sup>in</sup> 1914 just one month before the First World War broke out.

LB I see.

NK And I got caught there.

LB I see. So in 1914 you were, I'm going to do arithmetic,... you were 18 years old.

NK yes, I was 18 years old.

LB <sup>So</sup> you had already been Bar MITzvah.

NK Oh yes, I had been Bar Mitzvah and I was working in a shop. I lived with my mother.

LB You did stay home?

NK Yeah, I stayed home. I lived with my mother.

LB You were the youngest so there was, it was alright.

NK I was... yeah. And ah, if the war wouldn't break out in 1914 I would probably be, I would with my mother probably would be transferred to America. But the war broke out and we caught in there. Then in 1915 I was arrested and sent...

LB Who arrested you?

NK The Czarist , the Czarist police.

LB Why were you arrested?

NK Because I didn't... you see every young man had to, had to come to the authorities for conscription into the army. And I didn't. I failed to report.

LB Yes.

NK And therefore I was outlawed. And when they caught me they arrested me and they sent me into the army... as a soldier.

LB So you didn't actually enter the army until 1915?

NK 1915, yes. <sup>yes</sup> in the late 1915, around, yes, not late but I think it was about September or October. 1915.

LB Did you see fighting?

NK Oh yes, I was a prisoner of war.

LB Oh, tell me something about that.

NK For three years.

LB Where did you um,?

NK I was a priosner of war in Bulgaria.

LB Now wait, but first where, where was your... you were assigned to a unit...

NK I was fighting... Huh?

LB You were assigned to a unit...

NK I was assigned to a unit and then after...

LB Where was the unit sent?

NK To Rumania.

LB Ah ha.

NK On, in the Rumanian territory. Rumania was an ally to Russia, America, and England.

LB Right.

NK In the First World War... that were the allies. And ah, Russia sent some military forces into Rumania to help 'em fight the Germans...

LB Right.

NK And the Bulgarians. Bulgaria, although it's a Christian... ah, a slavic,

LB Slavic.

NK A Slavic country, a matter of fact was freed by Alexander the Second,

KB Yes.

NK And they were Slavic, but they had the Czar there was a German... King  
587. Ferdinand... a German. And he *dragged*<sup>m</sup> Bulgaria on the side of the Germans.

LB So that's where you were sent to fight...

NK So there I was sent to fight and I was taken as a prisoner in Bulgaria.

LB By whom, by the Bulgarians?

NK By the Bulgarians, yeah.

LB And where did you spend your time in prison?

NK In Varna. Varna, in Russek, Russe, Varna on the Black Sea,

Russek on the Danube, Danube.

LB On the Danube.

NK Danube.

LB How do you spell Varna? V-A-R- N-A?

NK That's right.

LB It sounds familiar but I can't place it.

NK Yeah, it's a well known, a well known eh... a well known resort, it is now.

LB That's what I was thinking!

NK Yeh, a well known resort place on the Black Sea.

LB V-A-R-N-A?

NK That's right.

LB So you spent... were you in a pri. on there?

NK Yeah, I was in a prison. I was in Russek first. Russe... the city of Russe but the old city under the Turks, when Bulgaria belonged to the Turks it was called Russek. And then when the Bulgarians took it over in 1961 or '62... in 1861, and '62...

LB Yeah?

NK They named it Russe.

LB Russe?

NK Russe. yeah. And over there I spent ... and then we were transfered to Albany... I mean to Varna.

LB Yeh .

NK And the rest, all the time I have been in Varna.

LB Now how was life in a prison camp?

NK Well it's undescribable. It would take too long time to describe . the life in, in... as a prisoner of war in, in... during the period of the First world war.

LB How long, you were there 3 years?

NK 3 years.

LB That's a long time.

NK From 19, 1916 to 1918. At the end of 1918.



LB Yeah.

NK The reason why... the war ended in 1918.

LB Yeah but the Russian war ended in 1917.

NK Yeah but eh, we weren't freed until that time.

LB Yeah.

NK Because theree was no representative of the Russian government in Bulgaria to take care. And on the other hand the civil war was going on.

LB Right.

NK All around Russia. In the far East, in the Ukraine, and in the North.

LB Yeah.

NK And in the South. All around.

LB Yeah?

NK And when we were freed in 1918 we couldn't go nowheres. Our desire was to go to Russia and not to fall into the generals army.

LB Right.

NK We didn't want to fight for the generals any more. The generals were fighting for the cause... for theCzar.

LB Yes.

45 NK And we were, some stichilili (?) unknowingly were against the Czar. And some were cultural and political right enough to be against the Czar.

LB Uh huh.

NK So, but the majority, the great majority were against to go to Russia and falling into the hands of the Czar.

LB You mean . whether th y were polit cal or not they didn't want any part.

NK That's right. That's it, they didn't want any part to fall into the generals' armies that were fighting for the cause of the Czar.

LB Now these were Jews and nonJews.

NK Jews and non Jews. But there , we had very little, very few Jews.

LB Very few Jews.

NK Very few Jews. There was a , , there was a few Jews in the, in the, in the army, I mean in the prisoners camps. But in my camp, where I was we were only 4 or 5 Jews.

LB Now how did you find being a prisoner of war with... you were mostly with other Russians then,

NK Yeah.

LB Is that correct?

NK That's right, yeah.

LB Yeah. And being a Jew with non Russians in a prisoner of war camp.

Did they make life hard for you? Or was it...

NK No, no..

LB That was not the problem.

NK That wasn't the problem, no that wasn't. It all depends... I'll tell you something, anti-semitism has been a part of the Czarist society. But it didn't ... probably alot of Jews will not agree with my opinion, but I found out that from my own experience,

LB Yeah.

NK that anti-semitism didn't have no roots among the common people of Russia. They were inspired by the Pope, by the Church and by the government. But actually the people, they didn't have... because the common people have suffered from the Czarist government, from the Czarist officials just as much as the Jewish people. The only thing is the Jewish people were *deprived* from their rights, from their civil rights.

7.57  
End Side 1

LB That's why I have to keep watching it. *(about tape.)*

NK Can you see it?

LB Yeah. Are you turning? I think something's wrong with this. . I don't see... You see that thing, it's not moving?

NK Where?

LB There's a piece there not moving.

NK : Yeah?

LB I think it will be alright now. You sit down. Watch your step. Alright, so what we talked about before was that your father was an orthodox Jew and he went to shul every day.

NK He wasn't fanatic.

LB But he wasn't a Chasid... a Chasid that...

NK He wasn't... I believe that he was a Chasid but he wasn't fanatic.

LB Right.

NK He wasn't a fanatic Jew.

LB Did he wear streimel?

NK No.

LB He didn't? Did he wear a kaftan?

NK No, he didn't wear no kaftan. What do you mean by a kaftan?

LB Well I mean the long... the long...

NK No, no, no, no.

LB But he wore his Tsisis?

NK Oh definitely, every Jew...

LB Every day.

NK Every Jew wore his tsisis like an arbaconfis, they called that.

LB An arba...?

NK Arba confis. That's a Hebrew word.

LB That's four...

NK Four corners.

LB Corners!

NK Four corners. Arbaconfis.

LB Right. Arba. Yeah, o.k.

NK And it symbolizes the holding of the world, like, the structure of the world. That symbolizes. And together, together with the, in the Tsisis there is different threads around... one of those threads is turned around, eh, there's eight threads in that eh, in that tsisis and one thread is the longest one, and that one is turning around in different ways so it symbolizes, but I forgot now, actually what it does symbolize. But there is a symbol in it.

LB I see.

NK It starts with 13 then 11 then 9 then 7. I don't know. And between those 13, 11, 9 and 7 is make... is knots, separates it. It symbolizes something but I, I can't remember actually what it is.

LB Alright. Now, so here you come from an orthodox parent... two parents are orthodox...

NK Yeah.

LB And you yourself are not.

NK No. I learned. I was educated in, until 12 years when my father died.

LB Oh, he died when you were 12?

NK When I was 12.

LB He died before your Bar Mitzvah then.

NK Before my Bar Mitzvah and as a orphan I had to get Bar Mitzvah at 12 years. That is the Jewish custom.

LB Is that right?

NK Yeah. An orphan becomes Bar Mitzvah at 12 instead of 13.

LB Hmm.

NK So I became Bar Mitzvah and I might add that the Bar Mitzvah in the shtetl wasn't as glamorous as it is in this country.

LB No.

NK You understand that I suppose.

LB Yes.

NK It's not spent 2 or 3,000 dollars for a Bar Mitzvah.

LB Yeah.

NK And, nobody knew that I, whether I became Bar Mitzvah or not. But I became Bar Mitzvah and soon after I left my study, and I went to work. For twenty... for 25 cents a week.

LB Now when you went to work for 25¢ a week, was that the end of orthodoxy for You?

NK Yes.

LB It was?

NK Not completely, but to a certain extent.

LB Now was this deliberate, or was it because of circumstances in life?

NK No, it's not deliberate, not deliberate perhaps the expression of it, but eh, the circumstances of life led me to it, to begin to think about, and also using my knowledge in Hebrew, and comparing it with reality it didn't...

It's ah,... it didn't make, to me, any sense.

LB What didn't make sense?

NK Religion.

LB Religion didn't <sup>make</sup> sense.

NK It wasn't... it was, actually in contradiction with reality. And then coming in contact with various books of literature, Jewish literature.

LB Tell me some.

7.6 NK Sholom Aleichem, Peretz, or Mendele Mocher Sforim. Those three are the outstanding Jewish ...

LB Writers.

NK Classics. Classic writers, they are considered in Jewish literature.

and Jewish literature is a tremendous, deep, deep, treasure. Or rather... deep treasure, that would take a lot of time to talk about it.

LB Yeah.

NK And ah, therefore I came to the conclusion that.... God, the hope of God, to rely upon religion was, .. didn't accomplish anything. I mean it didn't come to, to be a fact. And little by little I developed my own philosophy and what is real, realism, and what is not real. And you come to your own conclusion of the existence of the world. Then after when you come in contact with the Darwinism, or you come in contact with Spinoza, and with any other philosophy, and philosophers, even Jewish philosophers.

084? Like <sup>He Ramban</sup> and you come to the conclusion that not everything that is said in the Bible is true..., or rather let's say, it's legends. And to build on legends is not realistic. <sup>He Ramban</sup> says, and he was barred from the Jewish community, although he was a very religious man, he was very religious. He said religion, Gottheit is what you can understand, it's so deep of a, of a, eh..., philosophy, I mean it's so deep of a eh,... I don't know how to...

LB Experience?

NK Not experience.

LB No?

NK It's a, it's a deep learning.

LB Yeah.

NK : It has been created for so many years, for thousands and thousands of years, each one : generation, each epoch...

LB Umhum.

NK ... donated something to it. And he said that whatever your mind can observe is alright. And that what your mind cannot observe, cannot understand,

103 let it go. So, there fore I came to the conclusion that I can't understand it. It's , it's not under.... maybe I was too many contradictions, and I... that's why ever since. I learned till about 12 years, I studied Gemorrah,

LB You did?

NK Oh yeah. All the prophets, books, 24 books of prophets. And the Chumush, the Five Books of Exodus... whatdoyacallit, the Five Books...

LB Moses.

NK of Moses. This comes first, naturally.

LB Right.

NK And davaning, prayers, and that comes first when you are a boy of 4 or 5 then you know. And then comes the side writings from Shlomo ha Melecha, Solomon, King Solomon, King David, and then it comes the Prophets and so on and so forth. And ah, I was very good, I must say that myself, that I was good in it.

LB Where did you study? Did you have a tutor?

NK No. We had a public...

LB A cheder?

121 NK A cheder,

LB Oh you had a Talmud Torah.

NK A Talmud Torah, Talmud Torah means , it was, means... the Kahal, the...

LB Community.

NK Community was for the poor , for the poor boys.

LB It supported a school, Jewish school, for the poor boys.

NK Yeah, for the poor boys. And over there I learned everything. I learned there Yiddish, to read and write, Russian.

LB Oh you learned Russian?

NK Oh yeh, definitely, yeah. And...

LB Hebrew.

129 130 NK And Hebrew as far as davaning and Gemorrah and Tanach, so on. That's goes together with, with Talmud.

LB Yeah.

131 NK And very different. Shulehan <sup>Aruch</sup> that means the...

LB Yes.

NK The halocha... ha locha... that's

LB The law.

NK Huh,

LB The law.

NK Ha locha.

LB Ha lacha.

NK Ha locha, ha locha. I speak a different...

LB I know, well,

NK I speak a different...

LB Well the ha lacha I think is maybe Hebrew, I'm not sure.

NK It's Hebrew, yeah, it's Hebrew,  
But

LB ha locha would be in yiddish.

NK No, ha locha is in Hebrew, but we, we speak with the old Hebrew...

LB The ashkenazi.

NK Ashkenazi, you are speaking the sephardic. You were brought up in a Sephardic...

LB I was brought up Askenazi but I...

NK Ashkenazi, but you learned Hebrew from... in Israel they speak Sephardic.

LB Right.

NK So that's... Shabbat and so on...

LB Now, but, then your formal education <sup>ended</sup> when you were 12.

NK That's right.

LB But you apparently did quite a bit of reading after that.



NK Definitely.

LB Yeah. That's what I was going to say.

NK I had quite an experience in... I learned myself mostly.

LB Did you do your reading by yourself, or did you go to independent study groups, you know?

NK No, we ah, we, mostly by myself. We had groups here, we had literary groups, we had ah...

LB I mean in Europe now. In Europe.

NK In Europe I didn't have no chance.

LB Uh, huh.

NK As soon as I became known as a man, I had to go to the army and then that cut off everything. That cut off even my Yiddish.

LB So you worked from 12 until 18?

NK Until 18, but not from 12, from about 13.

LB Yeah?

NK Let's say 13 or 14 rather. To 18.

LB You worked. And you lived with your mother.

NK Well, but I, I lived with my mother.

LB Did you give your mother whatever you made?

NK Yes, that's right. And they used to send from America, all my brothers and sisters were in America already then.

LB Alright. Then you got into the army.

NK Then I got into the army and I fell in the prisoner of war. In the army I was separated from Yiddish altogether. I was only one Jew in the, in the entire, oh, who is that? Shut it off.

(Tape Stops.)

LB . When you were in the prisoner of war camp, now you had Russian, you were surrounded by Russians, you lost touch with Yiddish...

NK That's right.

LB Alright. Now, were there any political discussions in the prisoner... in the, in the prison camp?

NK In the prisoner of war...? Very little. Very little.

LB Were you following, did you, were you able to find out what was going on in Russia at that time, because you were there during the whole revolution?

NK Yes, we knew, we knew what was going on.

LB How did you find out?

NK Through the papers.

LB Oh you did get newspapers?

NK Yes, we got the Bulgar... I as a matter of fact I spoke fluently Bulgarian. I learned to speak fluently Bulgarian.

LB While you were there?

NK Yes. I was there three years. And I was among the Bulgarians and spoke Bulgarian all way through. I was speaking Bulgarian very fluently and read, and read the Bulgarian papers. You see, it was very easy for me because the Bulgarian alphabet is the same thing as the Russian.

LB Oh it is?

(20) NK Yeah. It's (?)

LB Yes.

NK Yeah, and the language is almost, very, very, eh... not too much, but they had a similarity.

LB Right.

NK And it was for... knowing how to read and write Russian, I could learn very easily to speak and read Bulgarian.

LB So you were able to follow what was going on?

NK We were able to follow what was going on and we knew what we wanted. The prisoners of war knew what they wanted. We didn't want to go back to Russia

because we didn't have no choice where from which side to go. We had to go from Varna to Odessa. You see? From the South, Varna is on the Black Sea and Odessa is on the Black Sea. So we had to go from Varna to Odessa. In Odessa there was the Czarist generals, with their armies, in the Ukraine. And we didn't want to fall in <sup>their</sup> hands. They would surely take us in in the army, to fight against the revolutionaries.

LB Now how did you feel? Would you have been willing to fight for the revolutionaries?

NK Oh yes.

LB Oh you would? Does that include most of the people?

NK Most of the people, yeah, that's right, most of the people.

LB Now how did they... what was the feeling when <sup>Kerensky</sup> first... when the 1st revolution came?

NK We didn't know very much about it, what was taking place. The differentiation of the political life. I mean the political action there. We didn't know very much about it. But we knew only one thing,

LB What?

NK That the Bolsheviks are representing the masses of people. We knew that. We knew that from, right from the very outset because they put out the slogan, "Bread and Freedom".

LB And peace.

NK And peace. Those slogans appealed. Why those appealed to us more than anybody else is simply from experience, because we were the ones that were suffering from war. We were the casualties of war. And we realized that war is no picnic and it's a cruelly. We formed our own opinion about it. It's cruel. We formed an opinion that people are killing out themselves for no reason at all. Although its ...

(TAPE STOPS.)

LB Okay, I'm going to start this. Now you were telling me about the Bolsheviks and their slogan, "Bread, Peace and land". And that...

NK And Freedom.

LB And freedom, right. And that you reached your own conclusions about war, and the cruelty of war.

NK That's right.

LB And um, so in essence you could say, you correct me if I'm wrong, in prison you supported the Bolsheviks.

NK We were supporting... we didn't know the difference... we knew the difference between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks,

LB Yeah.

NK The majority... Bolsheviks means majority and Mensheviks means, in Russia, means minority. That was the Social Democratic party, the Russian Social Democratic Party split in 1903, in 1903. In Bolsheviks and in mensheviks. The Bolsheviks was the majority of the central committee whatever there was there, or the convention, or whoever, wherever... it took place in, it didn't take place in Russia anyway.

LB No.

NK It took place in Zurich, in Switzerland. So, perhaps we didn't know much of the difference. But we knew one thing, we felt by heart, that they are the ones that are really fighting for the interests of the masses of people. And then after it worked out already the ideology in itself gave preference in thinking...

LB Umhmm.

NK. which approach to the common goal is. The social democratic or, or Bolshevik.

LB Now which one did you favor?

NK I favored the Bolshevik.

LB You did? And did you read Lenin's writings, were you able to read him?

NK Yes, no, no, we didn't. We didn't, we didn't have a chance to read Lenin's writings, then, no.

LB Not in prison. Did you read them later?

NK Later on I read quite a few.

LB You did?

NK I read Marx.

LB You did read Marx. In prison or later?

NK No, no, in here.

LB Later?

NK Yeah.

LB Okay. Now when you were released, you were released in 1918...

NK I was released in 1918 and we didn't have nowheres to go so we remained in Bulgaria.

LB They let you stay?

NK Yeah. Some of us, some of the prisoners married Bulgarian women and they remained there as citizens. Some of them went away to different, from Varna, to different cities. Whether they remained there or not... a group went away to Russia. They took a chance. What happened to them we never found out.

LB You didn't?

NK No. A great... a number of them, I wouldn't say a great number of them, a number of them went back to France.

LB France?

NK Yeah, because they came from France.

LB So those were Frenchmen then, they were not Russians.

NK They were Russians.

LB Ohhhhh!

NK Russia had an army in France, during the 1st World War.

LB Oh, I didn't know that.

NK Oh sure. And after, and after when the Bolsheviks declared peace or they

signed the peace with Germany, which was a <sup>shameful</sup> peace, but they had to.

LB Yeah, the <sup>Brest-Litovsk</sup>.

NK The <sup>Brest-Litovsk</sup>. You are well acquainted with that period of time.

LB Not well, but I know some thing...

NK And the French, the Russian soldiers in France refused to fight because French was fighting, France and England and America was carrying on the war.

LB I didn't know about the French in France, about the Russians in France.

No. So somewhere...?

NK Did you ever come across a book from Andre <sup>Babusse</sup> Did you hear...?

LB I know the name, I've never read any thing...X

NK You've heard the French writer? . . .

LB Yes.

NK Andre Babusse.

LB Busse, b-u-s-s-e , yes I know his name.

NK Babusse. He write a book "From Fire" , or "in"...., excuse me,

LB That's alright.

NK or "In the Fire."

LB Yeah.

NK And he described, in that book, the treatment what the French government gave to the Russians who refused to go fight for...., in the war. Who refused to fight, to prolong...

LB Yes.

NK fighting, to extend the fighting in the war.

LB After the <sup>treaty</sup> was signed.

NK After the treaty was signed.

LB Yeah.

NK And they were treated there harshly, brutally. Some fellows <sup>they came</sup> became,

escaped and they came to through to Greece, they came to Bulgaria. And they told us. They put them in dug out, in the ground they dug out holes and they covered it up with sheets of heavy steel <sup>plates</sup> in order that they shouldn't be able to get out from there. They didn't give them no foods in order to force them to conscript to the French army and fight against the Germans. And they refused. Andre Babusse writes in that book about it, very, very cruel.

LB I see.

NK And we, we got that information and we knew all about it. As a matter of fact then came, after the war was settled already in 19, in the late 1918 I think, was it settled already,

LB Yeah.

NK And a group of Russians that were fighting with the French, they were fighting in the ranks of the French.

LB Yes.

NK They came to Bulgaria.

LB Yeah.

NK And there was almost one of the biggest fights between the two groups, the ones that escaped that didn't want to fight in the French army, and the ones that were fighting in the French army. There was a tremendous struggle in there.

LB In Bulgaria?

NK In Bulgaria. And we had, we had to be strong minded in order to hold back some hot heads. There would be a very big blood shed in there.

LB Hold them back from what?

NK From fighting between the two.

LB Between themselves, amongst themselves.

NK Between themselves, yeah. Because the, they hatred that they created... You see, there was a big army I understand in France, a Russian army. And they,

if the entire group, the army, would act anonymously they would probably wouldn't have to go to, to go through this severe punishment that the French government dealt with those who refused to. But as a group decided to go with them and this decided not to, so there formed a, already, a hatred between the two groups. And when those other came again to Bulgaria,...

LB Why did they come to Bulgaria?

NK They were, they had to, they headed towards Varna in order to get to Russia.

LB Oh, I see. They were on their way back.

NK Yeah, on their way back.

LB This was after the war then.

NK .That's right.

LB okay, now wait, now I... this is going to end soon and I'll have to put on the other tape...

What happened after you did get out then? So what did you do yourself?

NK I worked there.

LB In Bulgaria?

NK In Bulgaria. Various jobs and at the end of it I worked in a restaurant as a waiter. Because there was not... there, their form of tradition leather wasn't the same way as we were working, we were used to. It was entirely different process so I couldn't find no job in my trade. So I worked in different... I worked in a factory where they made oil, frying oil... what do you call it... Mazola.

LB Yeah.

NK From the sunflower, from sunflower. There was a factory owned by Germans. I worked in a sugar, in a sugar factory. Where they make sugar.

LB What city were you in, do you know?

NK I was in Russek.



LB Oh that's right, you mentioned that. I'm sorry.

NK And then in Bulgaria I was working in, as a waiter in a restaurant.  
I mean in Varna.

LB In Varna.

NK Yeah.

LB Now, was there any, did you make with Jews in Bulgaria  
once you were free?

NK Oh yes. Oh yes. Yeah, yeah.

LB You did?

NK Yeah, I made contact even when I was in the prisoner of war.

LB You did?

NK Yes.

LB How did you do that?

NK Well they found out, the, in <sup>Russchuk?</sup> Russett, the Jewish community found out  
that there is, before Rosh Hashanah, during the High holidays, they found  
out that there is some Jews in as prisoners of war.

LB Yeah?

NK So they went to the authorities and they took me out to the synagogue  
for the high holidays.

LB Oh they did?

NK Yeah, and the service meals. And at night we went back to camp. But during  
the day we were in the synagogue with, with guards.

LB Is that right?

NK Oh yeah. The guards were outside of the...

LB So in other words it...

NK A matter of fact I met a fellow from Vilna, living in Bulgaria.

LB Oh did you?

NK Yes a young man.

LB Now what was the attitude then of the Bulgarians towards the Jews?

NK In Bulgaria?

LB Yah.

NK There was no anti-semitism in Bulgaria, at all. I don't think they knew anything about what is anti-semitism. There is so many... so few Jews in there, there was... the greatest majority of them were the Sephardic Jews. And the Ashkenazi...

LB Is that right?

NK Oh yeah. The Sephardic Jews over there, naturally. And the Ashkenazic Jews were very little, very few.

LB Yeah?

NK I mean, I can't say very few, but...

LB Yeah.

NK But in a lesser percentage than the Sephardic Jews. Originally the Sephardic Jews they came, they immigrated from Portugal after the Spanish inquisition.

LB Yeah.

NK They immigrated from Spain to Portugal, from Portugal to Bulgaria, to Turkey, and to the Middle East.

LB Middle East.

NK Middle East and Asia. They immigrated in there and there they were, and they spoke their language. I never learned to speak Ladino. Did you ever hear of it?

LB Ladino, yes, yeah.

NK I never learned to speak Ladino.

LB So what did you speak with them? Bulgarian?

NK Bulgarian, yes. Some Hebrew, Bulgarian.

LB I don't want to miss any of this. Cause I've never met any one who was in Bulgaria and met Jews!

NK Yeah, yes, really, there was Jews, Mostly Ashkenazi....eh,

LB Sephardic.

NK Sephardic. Sephardic Jews.

LB But they welcomed you in?

NK Definitely, yes.

LB The Sephardim welcomed you in and the Bulgarians didn't make any problem.

NK Well as a matter of fact the Jews that took us for the High Holy Days were Ashkenazi Jews.

LB . . . They were?

NK Oh yeah. Those were from the Ashkenazi Jews. But I knew the others too. I met with them, with the Sephardic Jews.

LB Now did they, did they pray in different places? Did they go to different shuls?

NK I never, I never went there to their synagogue and see how they were going on with the praying, but I know they were praying the same thing as ours. They had their own way of praying. It's a different... like the reformed Jews here in America.

LB Yeah.

NK It's a different approach, different mehagin... that means another customs, different customs, something like that. But the belief is the same.

LB Alright but now, but the Bulgarian, the non Jewish Bulgarians, <sup>their</sup> feelings toward the Jews, you couldn't see any problem at all?

NK No, no problem at all. Absolutely not. And after the war...

LB The first war.

NK After the first war, there had been an occasion where the Bulgarian government found itself in a pinch, an economic depression.

LB Yeah?

NK And in order to, to get out of it they had to find some sort of a scapegoat, to put the blame for.

TAPE ENDS.

Side 3

000

LB Yeah, I think so, maybe not. O.K.

NK Oh, yes, I think it's time to start.

LB Now, you were saying, the Bulgarians after the war found themselves in an economic pinch and they needed a scape goat.

NK A scape goat so, what happened, in a very small scale, it didn't last long, they caught a peddler, a house peddler, that peddles around with odds and ends, of minor importance. They didn't get the one large manufacturer or a storekeeper there of a big store, but a little peddler that peddles around with needles and thread and other little things and so on. And they found him that he is the one that brings about the economic conditions. They arrested him. I remember, I remember...

LB Was he a Jew?

NK Huh? A Jew, yeah. In a little city. Not in Sophia or not in Varna, or not in a big city, but in a little city. And they arrested him and they said that this is the people that are bringing about the economic condition in the land. And the Bulgarians are suffering from it. Under a social democratic government.

LB Oh, is that right?

NK Under... yeah, under a social democratic government. And that was, the

astonishment was then, that it should happen, facts like that should be brought out in a democratic, in a social democratic government. And the social democratic govern.... eh, <sup>p</sup>arty was there <sup>a</sup> majority. After that happening the communist party came out in protest against that accusation. And to my astonishment, and it might be <sup>to</sup> your astonishment, and whoever would hear of this here, that the socialist party <sup>lost</sup> out half of their membership right after that happened.

LB You mean the social democratic party.

NK That's right.

LB Yeah.

NK And soon after, their government fell and the agricultural party took over.

LB Now by agricultural would that be communist party?

NK No. It was, it would be...

LB A rightist party?

NK A rightist, petty bourgeois, or petty bourgeois...

LB Conservative.

NK Conservative. And they were very reactionary. Took over then, but that particular happening, primarily they <sup>gain</sup> from this happening, the Communist party. Because in a year or so, the communist party gained so much prestige that they had mayors in the most biggest cities all through Bulgaria. Mayors of cities.

LB But you say there was a conservative government though.

NK Central government was conservative, in Sophia, in the capital city.

LB Yeah.

NK But in the, in Varna we had a communist eh....

LB Mayor.

NK Mayor and a communist board of, what do you call it, eh...

LB Like a council.

NK A council, yeah, council.

LB City council.

NK City council was communist. And eh...

LB Now how did the conservative government of Bulgaria, when it came to power, how did it, what was its policy toward the Bulgarian Jews?

NK It was no, no, much... it didn't have any... I wasn't there, after that I wasn't there.

LB Oh you weren't?

NK I ran away to America.

LB Okay. So you were, from 1918, after you were free you stayed till 1921.

NK 1921, And I came to America 1921. It's also, it's involved a big story about as to how I came to America.

LB Yeah, but let me first, we'll, I'll mark that down to ask you because um, because to me Bulgaria is like a fairy tale country.

NK Why?

LB Because I never met anybody that came from there. I don't know the language. I know, you know, Russian, enough Russian. But I never heard Bulgarian spoken.

NK It's a slavic language.

LB Yes I know that, but I never met anyone that came from there so I have no... I don't know its history. Except that it was governed, taken over by the Turks and then it must have <sup>been</sup> freed...

NK It has been under the Turks for quite many years. At the turn of the 18th century. Because they were freed from the Turks,...

LB You said, by the Russians.

NK By the Russians in 1862.

LB Okay.

NK By Czar Alexander the second.

LB So it was fairly, actually when you were there it was still a fairly new country.

NK Yes. I mean not a fairly new country as far as the country is concerned...

LB No but as an independent...

NK As an independent, they were, they were under the Turkish rule before, and this time they were independent, since, since . 1861 to '62 something of that sort.

LB Tell me something...

NK It's ... excuse me, they're an indu... an agricultural country.

LB Yeah?

NK Mostly, mostly agricultural country.

LB Did you enjoy living there?

NK Yes, very nice.

LB You did.

NK Yes. If you have all the... if you have the means.

LB The money.

NK If you have the means to live there, that's it. But it's very nice. The weather is very, I believe that the weather there is the, could be, to Israel, the same type of weather.

LB Is that right?

NK I don't remember having got snow or anything like that in the winter time. Not in Varna anyways.

LB Yeah. Well you were on the Black Sea though.

NK The Black Sea. Oh I liked the Black Sea.

LB I'll bet you did.

NK I used to go out in the morning to take a cold dip.

LB Take a swim, yeah.

NK Yeah, take a swim in the morning. Like I do here when I go to the ocean. I like the ocean. That's why, that's where I began to like the ocean is from

Bulgaria, from Varna. And now I read in the paper that Varna is one of the very famous resort, resort cities.

LB Yes.

NK And alot of people are going there from foreign countries, are coming there.

LB Yes. Now, you said that to tell me about your life in the prison camp would be too ah... too long a story.

NK Yes, the life in the prison camp would be too long story, and... it's a very sad story. And I don't, I don't think it... the gener<sup>ations</sup> is to come would learn anything from it, unless they would find the entire problem of wars, how to abolish, perhaps it would help. I mean to use that... those experiences and those happenings and so on and so forth. But I believe that as long as we live under a society that is built, that does not exclude war from their programs,

we're still going to have wars. Unless they'll come to senses. That war today is destructible for all sides. There cannot be no winning side in todays, with the modern warfare.

LB Right. Now tell me something, when you, during this time, how you were gone from home from 1915, essentially until 1921, from Russia.

NK That's right.

LB What happened to your mother during that time?

NK My mother died in Russia when I was a prisoner of war.

LB She did.

NK Yeah. I didn't know about it. I found that out when I came to America.

LB Isee. And your family, actually your brothers... what happened to your sisters, where were they?

NK Here in Albany.

LB No, at that time.

NK In America, in Albany.

LB So you were the only one left?

NK I was the only one with my mother there, left. That's what I said at the



very       outset!

LB I see. I thought you meant only your brothers. Of the whole family you were the only one left. So was she left all alone then when you went?

NK That's right. And she died in... we were chased out from our city, during the first world war. The Germans, because it was close to the German border, the Germans eh, got in in our city. And then the Russians chased them out back again. They were fighting in our city.

LB Yes. Were you there during that time?

NK Yeah, I was there. I was, as I told you...

LB You were hiding.

NK I was hiding. I didn't go.

LB So you saw this part?

NK Yes this part I saw. And then when the Russians came in back again they chased us out. We were, what do you call it?, refugees.

LB Yes.

NK We were refugees. We went to Minsk.

LB Oh you did?

NK Yeah, we went to Minsk. And from Minsk, and in Minsk they arrested me.

LB I see.

NK Because I couldn't... in our city I could hide,

LB Yes.

NK And when we came in Minsk there was no place of hiding no more. In our city I knew every way and every little road and everything and the woods there. The woods was 20 miles long, 30 miles long on both sides of the city. Not like... I haven't seen in America that kind of woods. It's eh,... oh there woods it's the pine trees, tall pine trees, I don't know how many feet.

LB Tell me something, when you were in your home town and the Germans came, how long were they there?

NK They were there for a few days.

LB Only a few days.

NK Only a few days.

LB So you really had no chance to observe them.

NK No. No, actually we didn't. I spoke to them a couple of times. But very little conversation. And they were, they were very manly, I mean they didn't embarrass anybody.

LB They did not? People said they were correct.

NK Yeah, they were at that time, yeah.

LB Yes, they were talking about that time.

NK Because whether they were like that from their standpoint of view of intelligentsia or anything else, I don't know. But perhaps they wanted to find sympathy among the population. But then after when they were chased out back again the Russians came in and the city was evacuated. And after that I heard, but being in the army already I heard that the city was destroyed completely.

LB By whom?

NK By both sides.

LB By both <sup>S</sup>ides.

NK Because they were fighting...

LB In the city.

NK In eh... the Germans were on one side of the city and the Russians were on the other side of the city and the city was inbetween, caught in between, and it was wiped out completely almost.

LB How did the Russian army behave?

NK Not too, not too good.

LB Not too good.

NK No, no.

LB How would you describe it? I mean if you had to give an example.

NK Well we cannot... perhaps I cannot compare the Russian soldier to the

German soldier, or to any other soldier.

LB Don't compare them, just tell about him.

NK They are uneducated.

LB Yes.

NK Ignorant, <sup>in</sup> the greatest majority, and whatever the officials told him, he was doing. Whether he created his own opinion, its very hard to say. Whether they were rational or they were irrational, it's hard to say. But when I lived among them...

LB You're talking about in the prison Now?

NK In the prison or in the army, in the army, in the Russian army.

LB Okay, let's keep the, because those are two different circumstances.

NK Yes. Two different circumstances. <sup>But</sup> In the army...

LB Yes.

NK They had an antagonistic attitude toward Jewish.

LB They did?

NK Because they were brought up like that already, for many generations.

Whether they knew what it meant, I doubt it. I doubt very much if they knew what it meant. But I was one in the army. One in the whole battalion. One Jew. I lived with them and they didn't embarrass me at all.

LB But you said, but they didn't like Jews.

NK They didn't... they didn't know whether to like him or dislike him. I mean, that's what I said before, whether they were rational or irrational. I mean the irrational part of it. toward the Jew was, was, came from ignorance.

LB I understand. But it seemed to me you were saying two different things and I want to clarify it. First you said that there was no difficulty, then you said that they didn't like the Jews. Then you said there was no trouble.

NK Perhaps under varied circumstances, or because they <sup>with</sup> raised up for many

generations under a government and under a society that breed, that bred anti-semitism, something was left over.

LB Yes, I understand. Now did you feel that?

NK Oh yeah, I felt it. I felt it to a certain extent. But after I got close ,  
close <sup>with</sup> them I lost any feeling.

LB Ah, okay.

NK You see?

LB Yes.

NK It's the very beginnig when they didn't know me...

LB Yeah?

NK They expressed antagonistic attitude towards me, or kidding me around, and using some sort of a language...

LB Like Zhid?

NK Zhid or laughed at my, they used to say "You can't shoot, you are afraid to shoot." A Jew was considered that he wouldn't shoot with the rifle.

LB Okay.

NK He couldn't shoot the rifle. But when I was in practice, when I proved to them that I could shoot better than them, they changed...their opinion about me was changed already. So therefore I say that in the very beginning they were trying to kid, to make joke, jokes about me. But then after when they found out that I am better than them... First of all I knew how to read and write Russian, they didn't. I became already when... one time that, not the first class, the, but the... what do you call it?

LB The sergeant?

NK No, no lower than the sergeant.

LB Corporal?

NK The Corporal, the corporal. Had a group of 25 and there was a corporal the teacher. He took sick and he couldn't come out for the exercises. So I took over to exercise them. And there comes the officer, the Lieutenant, the Captain

rather. The captain of the whole thing. And he sees me that I am, I am taking...

LB Charge.

NK Charge of the exercises. And he said "Who are You?" And I told him who I am and I told him the reason why. And he looked surprised, he was amazed to find that... and he told them "You see? He is a Jew."

LB He did say?

NK Oh, yes. He did say "He is a Jew, you see, and he knows. And you are Russians and you don't know anything." So he told me "Go on." And I did. And ever since then they had respect for me. Whether it happened all over in the entire army that is a different. I'm telling you only what it happened with me.

LB (Laughs) Yeah.

NK I had that experience.

LB Now how about the prison camp?

NK The prison camp, I was with them, I didn't have no trouble with them at all. I was with them as equal. No, no different at all.

LB You were all miserable.

NK We were all miserable, definitely. All miserable. And there was lieutenants, and there was corporals and there was sergeants and eh... and the ... ordinary soldier. There was no difference.

76 LB But you see, it seems to me, and you tell me if I'm wrong, even in a prison what you get, you get a kind of hierarchy, you get higher, highest, higher, high...

NK Among the prisoners?

LB Yes.

NK No, we didn't have that *anything* *like that* no.

LB <sup>no?</sup> And it doesn't have to be the captain who's the highest.

NK No we didn't have, we didn't have anything of that experience.

LB No?

NK None. You might have it in the American army, but in the Russians we didn't. First of all the, those Russian prisoners from the Lieutenant up, as soon as they admitted that they are officers, they were taken in a separate quarters. And they were treated like officers.

LB OH.

NK In our camp there was a Lieutenant but he never acknowledged. He was a little bit off set, off his mind. He didn't want to admit that he was a Lieutenant but we knew that he was a Lieutenant. Not from <sup>our</sup> group, of, not from our battallion. (That's alright, that's alright.) Not from our battallion.

LB Yeah. So your officers were actually quartered somewhere else?

NK Yes. The officers were quartered somewhere else. And those who were in the camp, in the prison camp with us, were all equal. There was no one higher or lower, anything at all.

LB No, what I mean by higher and lower is not a question of rank, but how the life organizes itself, in a prison camp. Somebody has to be the leader.

NK A Bulgarian. Bulgarian guards and the Bulgarian command, the commandant, of the camp. And eh, Bulgarian guards, they were the ones that were....

LB They were the power.

NK The power. Nothing among the... there was no privileged among the prisoners of war. There was no privilege.

LB OK

NK For a certain time, for a certain period of time I was in a "tolnitchya", ( ) that means a, a... a translator from German to Russian.

LB You knew German?

NK Oh yes, I spoke German.

LB Where did you learn German?

NK You know, every Jew knows a little German.

LB (Laughs) Okay.

NK So, so, so I learned, being one Jew among those Russians and we were working for a German outfit, see? We were building a railroad there.

LB In Bulgaria?

NK In Bulgaria. There was...

LB Oh I see, I see, oK.

NK The, the...

LB So they put you to work actually?

NK Oh naturally. We worked, sure.

LB OH!

NK Sure we worked, oh, a prisoner of war, we worked! Sure!

LB I see.

NK That's why I didn't... That's why I said there's too much to talk about it, being a prisoner of war.

LB I thought you spent your days in camp, you went, they put you to work.

NK Oh, no. They send us on different hard work, hard labor. Hard labor work. And how.

LB What kind of work did you do?

NK Everything. Common laborers.

LB Like what? What did you build?

NK We built a railroad. We dig ditches. We built roads, concrete roads. WE do the hard labor.

LB So that was way . you came in contact with the Germans too then?

NK That's a big... That particular enterprise, building the railroad across the Duna.

LB Yeah? The Danube.

NK The Danube, I call it Duna.

LB Yeah, alright. But it's for people who listen.

NK Yes, Danube. That was under the auspices of the Germans. The Germans were

were the leaders, I mean those who...

LB The Bulgarians were over you but the Germans were over the Bulgarians.

NK The Bulgarians... the Germans were over the Bulgarians. And we were working on the railroad, building the railroad under the auspices of the Germans.

LB I see.

NK It was Bulgarian guards. But the whole project was made by the Germans.

LB I understand.

NK And there was a German corporal, or sergeant, he was the head of it. And I was a translator, in ,from German into Russian... for a short time of being. And the Russians didn't have no, didn't feel no antagonistic attitude towards me at all.

LB Alright, now how were the Germans there?

NK The Germans were very friendly as far as, towards me is concerned.

LB How did they behave to the Russians?

NK At that time they didn't, . . . they behaved very, not too bad. Not too bad. But the relationship was different in various camps.

LB Yes.

NK It was different. In many camps there was... you see, as I told you before, Bulgaria was freed from the Turks.

LB Right.

NK There was a number, a great number of Turkish, Turks as...

LB Bulgarian citizens?

NK Bulgarian citizens. During the war they didn't take the Turks into the army. They took them in the army but they didn't send them to the front because Turkey, Turkey was on the side of Russia I think. Or on the side of England, or on the side of Germany? In the first world war. But I know one thing that the Turks weren't in the army. They were serving as guards in the camps. And those Turks carried an antagonistic attitude toward the Russians.



LB Toward the Russians.

NK Yeah. That was a, as you would say a...

LB Left over.

NK Left over from years and years ago. For two reasons. First because Russia was fighting Turkey to free the Bulgarians. And on the other hand Turk... Islam and ah...

LB Russian Orthodoxy.

NK And Russian Orthodox is two different religions...

LB There's also the Crimean War there.

NK Yeah, that's it. The antagonism between Russia and Turkey and the <sup>Tartars</sup> was very bad for many generations to come. So that was the reason for it and we... the Turks were very bad people against the Russians.

LB They were?

NK Oh yes. They done the most brutal things that ever could be thought about in the camp.

(Phone Rings)

LB I must say, I don't know anybody else that has had these experiences.

NK Well, many different people that you'll come in contact with you have...

LB Different, right.

NK Different experiences.

LB That's right.

NK You know how Shakespeare said " The world is a ...

LB Oh, The World's a stage.

NK A stage

LB And all the men. and women...

NK And all the men and women...

LB Are actors on it.

NK Are actors.

LB Right. That's right.

NK And we are playing a part. And each one plays its own part. And each one takes its own place in that part. So that it's so a variety of occasions, a variety of happenings and so on. I would say that there is perhaps people that experienced more than I did, in a different way.

LB Yes.

NK I went through a lot. I must say that. I went through alot. I suffered alot. When I came to America I began to work here and I began to make my livelihood here and my social, pick my society. And cultural work and activities, and various activities, in literary and cultural activities. And I made myself busy participating in affairs and learning. Reading alot. And that's how, people are wondering, I am in the Center now, we read, as I told you before, that we read the Jewish short stories from Sholom Aleichem and I read, I follow in Yiddish, and they are wondering, professor Katz was very much amazed at how much education I...

LB So am I.

NK "You must have alot of education." I said " I never went to school, I never went to college or gymnasium, or high school or anything like that."

I never, I didn't have that kind of education. I had a little, till about 12 years, a Hebrew education. That's all. But all the rest is self education, and I told him the other day. We have a new one now that reads the stories, a fellow by the name of Ficker. He's a Hebrew teacher in the, I think he's a teacher in the...

LB Academy?

NK In the Hebrew Academy. And he told me last Monday, he says "Nathan", he says "You are amazing, you have so much knowledge about it." And as a matter of fact, between you and me, I mentioned something of the Gemorrah, from the Talmud. He didn't know. He never heard of the book in the Talmud. Of a certain book I mentioned. I was surprised because...

LB He was probably never educated in that.

NKs No, because anybody that studies Talmud, that's the first book in the Talmud.

LB Well maybe he didn't study Talmud.

NK Maybe he didn't. I don't know.

LB Sure. What comes to you as a matter of course...

NK So we were talking about it, and he likes to hear I read Yiddish. And I explain certain words and the others that are around. So, that he was, he mentioned, he says to me "How come you have so much knowledge?" I said...

TAPE ENDS.

Side 4

000

LB Now we were talking about, you were talking about...that some of the Turks...

NK When we'll decide to talk some more about it, I would like to talk about life <sup>activities</sup> in the shtetel and the development of what was our . How we created, how the social and cultural, the social and cultural level...how did we reach to have an enormous Yiddish treasure of literature.

LB All right, but now I want to go back to the prison, O.K.? Because that's where we seem to be concentrating <sup>on</sup> /here. Now you told me about the Turks, the relationship between the Turks and the Russians.

NK ...and the Russians are very, very bad. Listen, <sup>it's from tradition.</sup> /it's a traditional antagonistic attitude.

LB But you said it was not the same in every camp.

NK Well, I don't know if the same happened in the other camps, whether there was the same guards. In my camp, there was many camps...there wasn't only one camp. There were camps in every city, almost different cities in Bulgaria. I don't know what kind of guards they had there. But where I was, I'm speaking of the camp where I was, there were the Turkish soldiers.

LB And they were miserable to the Russians.

NK They were miserable to the Russians.

LB Now, how were the Germans?

NK The Germans were...not...I wouldn't say that they were very bad. But, their attitude or behaviour was not <sup>out</sup>spoken as the others, the Turks. The Bulgarian soldiers were very friendly.

LB To the Russians?

NK To the Russians.

LB They were.

NK Very, very friendly. The people of Bulgaria were friendly to the Russians.

They kept, they were holding the Russians as the liberators. So the people... but the government was drawn in, there were Russophiles and Germanphiles. The country was divided into two camps. The Czar and the German philes took hold of the ruling of the country. But the great majority was very friendly to the Russians. Unless, they created an antagonistic propaganda against the Russians, so that perhaps a number of Bulgarians changed sides.

LB Who created? The government?

NK The government. Yes. But when I was there, and what I could observe, to me it seemed that the majority of the Bulgarian people were friendly to the Russians. They called them <sup>bratushka</sup>, means brothers. Not little brothers, but brothers. Bratushka  
In Bulgarian, brother is <sup>^</sup>

LB Oh, it is? It's not brat?

NK Brat. Like brat in Russian, is bratushka in Bulgarian.

LB Were you at any time, ever, in your feelings, a Zionist? During that period?

NK A Zionist? No. I don't think so. I had no occasion to find out what Zionism represented. We had, in the old country, in my shtetel, had Poale Zionists, we had Zionists; various shades of Zionists <sup>Tsaire</sup> <sup>zion</sup>, Poale Zion, some others, (?)

LB I don't know that one.

NK That means United Workers. And everything from a social standpoint of view. I mean everybody had a social relationship. Social. Social Democrats and Poale Zion, and so on and so forth. And all of them had one <sup>thing</sup> in common, one problem in common, to free themselves from oppression and to free themselves from the Czarist government and Czarist oppression. I didn't have any knowledge about Zionism.

LB You didn't...you weren't interested in Herzl? You weren't interested in Ahad Ha-am?

NK Ahad Ha-am.

LB Yes. Were you interested in him? Did you read anything?

NK No, I didn't read anything. I heard <sup>about</sup> him.

LB All right. In other words, and you tell me again if I'm wrong, your attempts or your thinking about freeing yourself from Czarist oppression took rather, a Bolshevik turn, rather than a Zionist turn. Because both wanted the same thing.

NK That's true.

LB But they chose different paths.

NK That's true. That's true.

LB Am I correct?

NK You <sup>are</sup> correct. You are correct. And I'll tell you why. I am internationally speaking inclined. My approach is, the way...there is a saying...not a saying, but...one of our classics, Yud Lamed Peretz, said, Alle menshen zeinen breider. Schvartze, veise, gelder. Misht gefarben ois zuzammen.

LB That I don't understand. Farben is to make. <sup>Isn't it?</sup>

NK No, Farben is the color. Farb is a color.

LB Oh, mix the colors all together?

NK Yes. Misht die farben ois zuzammen, alle menshen fun ain taten fun ain mamen.

LB All the men are from one father and one mother. All mankind.

NK This kind of an approach appeals to me. From the very outset, I would say.

LB Stichistili,

NK Stichistili...that means naturally. It seems to me that I was born <sup>wish it</sup> . . . I didn't have that somebody should propagandize to me. A certain form of a philosophy or

of a ideology, without that I shouldn't think about it and decide on my own what I am and what is right to be. Nobody. I'm trying to read...If I read today a certain article, political article, or a social article, I try to read it between the lines. And to make...to form my own opinions. So that I shouldn't... I wouldn't be impressed or, they call it in America, brain washed, from one ideology. That a certain ideology would brainwash me. I don't think that I could be brainwashed. Because I'm using my own impression. I'm using my own way of thinking. I apply my own philosophy. As I said, Alle menshen zeinen bruder, fun ain taten, fun ain mamen.

LB Now, do you... in the years that have passed since 1918 and we're now in 1976...

Do you still have the same feelings toward the Bolshevik point of view?

NK I have.

LB You do.

NK But I disagree with them in certain terms, or in certain happenings.

Which is, what happens, it seems to me that it's out of scope, out of the scope of internationalism. If you know what I mean. They are doing things there in Russia, that does not coincide, in any way, with Marxist ideology. Perhaps it will...

LB Work out.

NK it would work out. It's a transition. If it is a transition, it is a wrong transition. I have been raised in a humanitarian socialism. I have been raised, brought up, not brought up, but I acquired a humanitarian way of life, in a humanitarian society. And anything that's done against those principles, I'm against it.

LB Did it ever occur to you that maybe, this point of view, this humanitarian point of view, was something that you actually learned, maybe, <sup>from</sup> studying the Bible and so on, until the age of twelve? The Prophets?

NK Perhaps it is. I would say maybe there was left over some from [Isaiah] Hanove.

From Elihu. There were more progressive prophets than Isaiah and Jeremiah. There was <sup>?</sup>, very progressive prophet in those days. There was Amos, a progressive. And their philosophies, perhaps, something was left over. Like Amos said, in a certain spot, I remember, that, Damned be the man who informed my father that <sup>a</sup> son was born to him.

LB Damned?

NK Damned be the man who informed my father that a son was born to him. That he was born.

LB Yes. Why...I don't understand that.

NK Because in that epoch, that he lived, the ruler of the Kohanim in the Temple was so severe and oppressive, the people were suffering under it tremendously amount, that he couldn't stand it. He couldn't understand it. Why is it allowed? That things like that should happen? So he cursed that man that told his father that a son born to him. He cursed, in other words it means, that he cursed the day that he was born. That he became a human being.

LB I see.

NK I draw from this remark, I draw my own conclusions. That the oppression, the suffering of the majority of the people, was so bad, that he cursed his date of birth. And that, if you study the Bible, you find out that that is true. When the Kohanim ruled over the Jews in Jerusalem, in Bes Hamidrash, before the destruction of the first Bes Hamidrash, the first Temple, it was like that and then after the second. And the fact is this, <sup>in a certain period</sup> that the Kohanim and the rulers in the Bes Hamidrash, sided with the Greeks, with the Hellenists and with the Romans. They sided with them. Judah Maccabee had a struggle with those people. He was fighting the Romans. When the Maccabees...when they fight for the Maccabees. I think I'm right. I don't...

LB I suspect that you are. I don't see anything wrong. Now let's see if there's any question other than the shtetel, specifically, that you wanted to...you wanted to talk about that at a different time. We have probably about fifteen minutes, and then well...

NK All right.

LB Now, in your town, in your shtetel, there were some people who were rich and some who were poor.

NK Yes. The majority was poor.

LB The majority were poor. We're talking about Jews now.

NK What?

LB Let's talk just about Jews now.

NK Jewish. I'm talking about Jews, yes.

LB Did the rich Jews and the Poor Jews have much to do with each other?

NK Yes. They had to do together much. Yes. But...it was a distinction among them.

LB How was it felt?

NK The poor people looked upon the rich with...sometimes with disgust, sometimes with antagonistic attitudes, and because they were the machers. They were the...

LB Operators.

NK The operators of everything. They were the people gave the orders or...

LB They controlled.

NK Or they controlled. And whether they controlled or not, but they had the <sup>same</sup> as it goes in America, Money talks. So they had the same. They had the good seating in the synagogue, in the East Wall, by the...that was the...by the East Wall was the ...considered as the honor, to sit at the East Wall. And the ordinary people were in the back. There was a differentiation. But naturally, when you live in a society, in a small society like a shtetel, it's quite natural that everybody should know each other.

LB Although yours wasn't all that small.

NK Well, it's not that small. It's a small, but...twelve thousand, fifteen thousand people was considered...maybe less, I don't know. It wasn't considered a big city.

LB Actually what you're saying is that it was not a big city. But it wasn't just a Klein shteteldik.

NK But it was more a shtetel than not. Yes.



LB There were smaller.

NK Oh yes.

LB All right, So you felt differences. Now there would be differences in <sup>education</sup> too. Is that correct?

NK Oh yes, definitely. There were differences in education. The rich boys had a chance to go to school.

LB Now where did they go to school?

NK First of all they could go to cheder. Private tutors. And then whoever desired, they had a chance to go to a Russian school, to a gymnasium.

LB They had to pay for that.

NK Oh, naturally. Yes. They had to pay for that.

And then, if they had the ability...not only if they had the ability, but if they had the knowledge, the desire, they went to study in the university.

LB Although even <sup>that</sup>, at one point that wasn't too easy for Jews to do.

NK Not in Russian universities. Very little. Very little in Russian universities. They used to go to Germany, to Switzerland, France.

LB OH, you're saying, if there was money they could go someplace.

NK Oh yes. They could go <sup>abroad</sup> somewhere and study. There was quite a few from our city that went to study <sup>abroad</sup>. Some of them went to study in another larger city, in university or in the gymnasium. I want to tell you this. The ratio of, if I express myself right, in education, the Russian is higher than the American. The...gymnasium...

LB Oh, I understand...is higher than the high school.

NK Is higher than the high school. You see, therefore, <sup>if</sup> you finish gymnasium, so many classes of ~~gymnasium~~, you're already higher up in education. But whoever ... remarkable, is one thing. That's what I wanted to talk with you on that. Even from the poor, if their fathers had some sort of <sup>possibility</sup>, of means to support their sons, they used to send them to the Yeshiva.

LB They did.

NK Oh yes. In Yiddish.

LB Yes, I understand.

NK In the Yeshivas. This is the Hebrew teaching. And in the Yeshivas they, some of them, I would say a great number of them, secretly, acquired a broader education.

LB A secular education.

NK A secular education. And a liberal, or progressive or a modern, let's say, according as we say, <sup>they call</sup> the Western civilization. the Western civilization is higher than the Eastern civilization. I don't know why, but that's what they call it. So they acquired the foreign, Western intelligentsia. They formed a group of intelligentsia. Now that intelligentsia built the Jewish foundation of culture, the Jewish culture and Jewish literature. Jewish leaders.

LB You mean, these people. From these people came...

NK Dr. Chaim Weizmann, Moshe Sharett, Ben Gurion, Meir...

LB Golda Meir.

NK Golda Meir. All those. I mean, all. Except this Rabin.

LB Well, he's a sabra.

NK Yes, he's a sabra. Kotscher. He is one. I mean, and those who died before...Sokoloff.

LB Levin.

NK What?

LB Shmaryahu Levin.

NK Shmarya Levin. All of them. All born there in the shtetel and going to Yeshivas and coming out men of great talent and leadership and everything. I don't have to tell you about /Dr. Chaim Weizmann, he was exceptionally known in England

But together with Dr. Chaim Weizmann, a friend of mine, not a friend, I know him from Vilna...he was a friend of...they, together, were studying in Switzerland, in ...Chaim Weizmann and Karl Malmer (?). One of the greatest Jewish men of knowledge in our lifetime. Karl Malmer (?). He has a son, a doctor. We called him the walking encyclopedia. That's how much...that man was...he could be a rabbi, a ruv.

LB He's from your shtetel?

NK Not from the shtetel but he was from Vilna. From around Vilna anyway. But he was learning in Vilna. He came from a little shtetel. He came from a smaller shtetel...from a village. His father lived in a village. He was a farmer.

LB Well Vilna was the center of...

NK Yes. Vilna was the center of our civilization. Secular civilization and also religious, civilization because there were a lot of Yeshivas in Vilna. And you probably heard about the Vilna Gaon. He was something. The rabbi in our shtetel was a well known rabbi.

LB He was.

NK Oh, well known. He wrote the book that had been used at the trial of Beilis in 1912.

LB Is that right?

NK Yes. He was a very learned man.

LB What was his name?

NK Gordon. Yehuda Lev Gofdl on.

LB Oh!! Gordon.

NK Yes. But not the Gordon...there was another Gordon, the dramatist. There was another Yehuda Lev Gordon, yes. But this one...the one that's from Israel is a different one. He's also a writer. I know. I heard of him. Political writer. But this was a ruv. He was a ruv that anybody that looks at him, had respect, had to form a respect...

LB What did he write about Beilis?

NK He wrote a book. Because on account of that...of the nature of the trial. That was a ritual trial, he wrote a book in Russian that it is ridiculous to accuse the Jews of using Gentile blood for matzoh.

LB What's the name of the book?

NK I don't remember actually, what the name of the book. But they used his commentaries and naturally they brought...

LB Was he a lawyer?

NK No, he was a ruv. A rabbi, yes.

LB What did he write in? Russian or Yiddish?

NK He wrote in Hebrew but he wrote in Russian too. He must have written it in Russian in order...

LB And they used that at the trial.

NK Yes, they used that at the trial, his knowledge, his commentaries that he brought out from, naturally from the religious standpoint of view and from the humanitarian standpoint of view. He brought out <sup>with</sup> the facts from the Torah. From the Talmud and so on. He was a great learner. He was speaking Russian like anything. And the governor of Vilna, he was a general, a Russian general. He was a big man. He came out from Moscow, from Peterburg, he used to travel to Vilna. He stopped in our city. And when he came in our city and they made a gathering in the big synagogue and this rabbi had a speech and after that speech that governor came over to him and embraced him, like he would kiss him, to express his gratitude for what he said, for what kind of a learner he is.

LB Do you remember the governor's name?

NK Uh, let me see. That was...General, he was a German...

LB Well, don't worry about it. It will come to you.

NK He was a general. I don't recall...a big man, in the Russian army. Every governor there was a Russian. He was either a...from the nobility or a high general. Everyone of them.

LB You know what, Mr. Koblenz? I think I'm going to stop and say thank you very much.