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Interview with

BRIGITTE FRIEDMANN ALTMAN

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Place of Interview: Fort Worth, Texas

Interviewer: Keith Rosen

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Oral History Collection

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Mr. Rosen: **This is Keith Rosen interviewing for the University of North Texas Oral History Collection. This interview is taking place on December 19, 1989, in Fort Worth, Texas. I am interviewing Brigitte Friedmann Altman to hear her experiences during the Holocaust and how they affected her life and why she believes she survived.**

Mrs. Altman, can you tell me some autobiographical information about yourself? For example, state your full name, when and where you were born, your education and occupation.

Mrs. Altman: **My name is Brigitte Altman. My maiden name was Friedmann. I was born in Lithuania, in the ethnic German part of Lithuania, and the**

original name of my hometown is Memel. On the map today, it is known as Klaipeda. I was born in 1924.

Rosen: Mrs. Altman, when in 1924 were you born?

Altman: I was born on August 15.

Rosen: Can you tell me what your original name was in the old country?

Altman: It was Brigitte. The German pronunciation is Brigitte.

Rosen: Is it spelled the same way you spell it now?

Altman: Yes, it’s spelled the same way.

Rosen: And your surname?

Altman: Friedmann.

Rosen: It didn’t change either?

Altman: No, it did not.

Rosen: What was your educational background?

Altman: It’s rather sketchy. I had formal schooling all the way up to the age of twelve or thirteen--maybe longer, maybe fourteen--because after that, Hitler’s troops entered my hometown of Memel, and the day before the annexation of my hometown into Greater Germany, my parents and I fled.

Rosen: Just for the background information, your occupation today is what?

Altman: **I don’t have a profession *per se*, so I must classify myself as a housewife.**

Rosen: **Professional housewife.**

Altman: **That’s what I am.**

Rosen: **Tell me something about growing up in Memel, Lithuania. For example, what was life like when you lived in the city?**

Altman: **In my situation life was very orderly, very carefree. I was born into a relatively comfortable family. My father was well-to-do and provided for all the necessary comforts.**

Rosen: **What was your father’s occupation?**

Altman: **He owned several industries. He owned a flour mill and a sawmill, and he was in partnership with his brothers in a textile factory.**

Rosen: **What was your religious background?**

Altman: **My parents were brought up in a traditional Jewish environment. My grandparents were Orthodox, and I remember that both of my grandmothers wore wigs. At least one grandmother did. The other one, I think, had a little hairpiece that she classified as a wig. My paternal grandfather wore the beard, and he always wore a skullcap.**

Rosen: What was the significance of your grandmothers wearing wigs?

Altman: Orthodox women were not supposed to show their hair. It was a form of modesty to cover up natural hair with a wig.

Rosen: Even if they had their own hair?

Altman: Even if they had their own hair, yes.

Rosen: To have something above it.

Altman: That's true. Of course, our household was kosher. My mother observed the laws of ***Kashruth***, and the dietary laws were observed, if for nothing else [so] my grandparents would feel free to eat in our home, to have meals in our home.

Rosen: Would you say your religious background was very strong or weak? How would you describe it?

Altman: Actually, I was an only child, and I guess our family was not really strongly Orthodox. The holidays that were observed were the major ones like Passover, Sukkot, Feast of the Tabernacle. I must confess that my parents did not observe all the holidays as ritually as my grandparents did. But we also started entering a more secular epoch, so that explains that part. Of course, ***Rosh Hashanah***, or the New Year, and ***Yom Kippur***, the Day

of Repentance and Atonement, the Day of the Fast, were strictly observed.

Rosen: In those early years, do you recall any discrimination or any differences that you felt were prejudicial to you because you were Jewish?

Altman: Well, yes and no. My hometown had a very small Jewish population. Hence, there was no overt anti-Semitism. I did encounter some anti-Semitism, though, in school. I went to a private girl's school, and, in thinking back, the Jewish girls were always segregated from the Gentile German girls. But I think it was a voluntary social segregation. Perhaps not.

Rosen: You mentioned that you went to a private school. What kind of private school was this--the private girl's school?

Altman: It was like a lyceum.

Rosen: A lyceum?

Altman: It's like an academy. What is the required years of attendance of schooling in the United States? How many years?

Rosen: Well, I believe...

Altman: It's four and eight, isn't it? Four years of elementary school, four years of...

Rosen: Grammar school?

Altman: Well, then comes middle school. I think it's three years of middle school. And how many years of high school?

Rosen: Four years of high school.

Altman: I would say three of middle school, so that's seven. Plus four is eleven. Well, in my school there was an extra year. Of course, Latin was stressed, and Greek was stressed. It was a different type of education. But, anyway, I only made it up to the fourth year of private school which requires an academic curriculum of nine years.

Rosen: You mentioned the fourth year of private high school.

Altman: Well, there were four years of public elementary school, but the rest was private. I just forgot how many years it encompassed. I only made it up to the fourth year, I think, of the private school. That's where my formal education stopped. The rest I had to pick up along the way after the war.

Rosen: You mentioned that you started school in a public school.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: And you said how many years in a public school?

Altman: Four years. It's comparable to an elementary school here.

Rosen: In the public school, Mrs. Altman, were you able to mix freely with other students?

Altman: Oh, yes. We didn't encounter any discrimination in the public schools. I only encountered a subtle hint of discrimination, which became more pronounced later, in the private school.

Rosen: In the private school, was this a parochial school?

Altman: No, it had no religious foundation at all.

Rosen: It had Jews and Christians in it.

Altman: That's correct.

Rosen: You said that the discrimination became more pronounced in the private school later.

Altman: Yes. That's when Hitler ascended to power. In our hometown it was different in that it had, like I indicated before, an ethnic German stronghold. It had always been part of Germany up until 1918. It was at this time that the Baltic states were founded, and Memel, my hometown, was incorporated into the new Lithuanian state, and there was the

name change. That was before I was born. The ethnic population was still predominantly German, and the school that I attended was also a German school.

Rosen: You mentioned the ethnic group was predominantly German. Were your parents German, or were they Lithuanian or what?

Altman: Well, the language spoken at home was German. All of our neighbors were German, so we actually lived in a German environment in Lithuania.

Rosen: You seem to distinguish between a German and a Jewish environment.

Altman: It was basically a German-Jewish environment.

Rosen: I was wondering about that. Were you identified as what?

Altman: Well, they didn’t have a tag that identified us as German Jews. We were Jews. But culturally we also had a number of German ties. Religiously, of course, we always identified as Jews.

Rosen: The neighborhood you grew up in, could you describe that?

Altman: It was just a very quiet residential neighborhood, a tree-lined street with nice gardens in the back. I remember having a dog--a watchdog--of whom I was

very afraid. I wouldn’t even go near to feed him. Somebody else had to feed him. There are so many thoughts crossing my mind, memories of the house in which we lived. It was a two-story house with very comfortable rooms. There was a piano in one of the rooms. My father would come home for lunch, and my mother would engage herself in charitable organizations. We just led a very comfortable existence. My friends would come over to play. Friends would come over to visit my mother for tea. All of a sudden this peaceful existence was ruptured.

Rosen: Approximately what year was this existence ruptured?

Altman: It was in 1939 when Hitler annexed Memel and incorporated it into the Third Reich, which overnight changed us into refugees because there was very little that we could carry out with us.

Rosen: I want to back up for a moment, and we will come back to 1939 in just a few minutes. In the neighborhood you lived in, can you describe what the neighborhood was like religiously.

Altman: Well, most of the people were Lutheran because all of our neighbors were Gentiles and they were

German. I guess they were Lutheran. During Passover, I remember I would always take a little basket of *matzo* over to our neighbors--*matzo* and some wine--just as, I guess, a neighborly gift; and at Christmas they would bring over some sweets. It was just a gift exchange.

Rosen: Was there any discrimination in the neighborhood?

Altman: No, there was no discrimination in the neighborhood.

Rosen: You mentioned your father was an industrialist.

Altman: He was a very prominent man in the community at-large. He was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, and he was respected as an honest and a successful man. Socially, we really never had any interaction with the Gentiles--with his business friends or our Gentile neighbors. Socially, we had our Jewish group, I think, exclusively.

Rosen: Why do you think that was?

Altman: I think it was cultural segregation and voluntary.

Rosen: Voluntary?

Altman: Yes, in our case. Certainly, it was not imposed. It was just that people of similar backgrounds tended to socialize with each other.

Rosen: You mentioned earlier that in growing up your friends would come over and play at your house. Your friends, were they...

Altman: They were mostly Jewish friends, girlfriends. Mostly Jewish friends. We were invited to birthday parties, which were nondenominational, but when Hitler assumed power, those invitations stopped.

Rosen: Growing up before 1939, did you find any discrimination on the part of your friends?

Altman: Well, they would snub us during lunch--I noticed that--and the Jewish girls would segregate to one side of the lunchroom and eat their lunch together. The Gentile girls would eat and sit together in their part of the lunchroom. Perhaps the teachers became a little more unfriendly, and the feeling was quite obvious that we were no longer wanted in that environment.

Rosen: Are you saying in 1939 or before that?

Altman: Well, really in 1938. I started feeling it in 1938, but probably not before that.

Rosen: In mentioning that teachers became a little more unfriendly, perhaps by 1938, can you think of any examples?

Altman: No, I can't. It was just that in the past they had been very friendly, and all of a sudden their attitude changed.

Rosen: In 1938, can you identify any reasons why it might have changed?

Altman: Well, the reason was obvious--it was political. They all followed the philosophy of Hitler, whom they admired and revered, being German. They wanted nothing else except becoming again a part of the German Empire. Because Hitler had no room for the Jews--that is the phrase he used--his final diabolical plans were to have them exterminated from the face of the world. I forgot my train of thought. Yes, before anybody knew what his final plans for the Jews were, those German neighbors and teachers wanted to be reintegrated into the Greater German Empire.

Rosen: You seem to indicate that there was a strong identification with German nationalism among your teachers as opposed to, say, a separate Lithuanian nationalism. Is that correct?

Altman: Yes. You're reading me quite correctly. The point of the matter is that nobody liked the Jews. Deep down nobody liked the Jews. Perhaps there were a

few exceptions, because we did have some true friends. But the Germans didn't like the Jews because it was in the philosophy of Hitler, and Lithuanians didn't like the Jews because anti-Semitism was really part of Catholicism.

Rosen: As you were growing up, before Hitler invaded in 1939, were you aware of the events unfolding in Germany?

Altman: Yes, I was. But I was not as well-informed as my parents because I was just a very unmotivated teenager at the time, or even a pre-teen at the time. So I was not really interested in world events. At the dinner table, world events were always discussed, and I became more aware of what was going on in Germany because across the border in Germany we had relatives who had already gone through events like the *Kristallnacht* and who were deathly afraid of what was going to happen to them following that terrible event in which their homes were broken into and vandalized. They had made frantic phone calls to us to see if we could help them in any possible way. But they were across the border, and they needed to have visas to be admitted onto Lithuanian soil. So it was just a

terrible situation for them as well as for us because we could not help them unless they had visas to come to Lithuania, where we could, for the time being, give them temporary shelter.

However, there were many other refugees who were able to flood into my hometown because it was a coastal town. Often they came by ship, or they had visas. Those were the Vienna refugees, who had been caught in what was then known as *Anschluss*. It's a German word which means annexation. Hitler had marched into Vienna, I think, in 1938. I'm not sure of the date. They knew it was an untenable situation for them to remain, and they were able to get transit visas at least to stay temporarily in Memel, and that way my parents were able to offer help to them. Many of them would come for dinner, and many families who otherwise would have gone hungry at least were able to find a meal in our home.

The Jewish community went into action to help them along the way. Many of them were able to emigrate to the United States, but unfortunately I don't remember their names. One name was Neugeberger. He had been a film director in Vienna

and had relatives in Oregon. I don’t know what happened to them, but I do know that they were able to get out of Europe before the war closed in.

Rosen: **You’ve indicated, Mrs. Altman, that you were aware of problems that your relatives in Germany were having, that your parents discussed problems at the dinner table with you. How often did they do this?**

Altman: **I was listening in. It seems they talked about it all the time.**

Rosen: **What did you think about all that was going on, what you heard, and, of course, at this time what you saw with your family taking in refugees from Austria?**

Altman: **I don’t know if I had the sense to become concerned, because being a pre-teen or a teenager, I was probably more concerned about doing my lessons and thinking of where we were going to spend the summer holidays, instead of thinking of the grim future which was about to descend on us.**

Rosen: **Did you have any idea what the future was going to hold?**

Altman: **Not really.**

Rosen: Your parents, in listening to them, talked at the dinner table or wherever else. Did they seem to indicate to you any concern?

Altman: I became aware of the fact that my parents were really trying desperately to get out of Europe because there seemed to be a war on the immediate horizon. Nobody knew which way it was going to go. The fate of the Jews was already quite clear. If the Germans marched in, a very bleak period was in store for the Jews. In terms of what, yes, I guess we knew of their concentration camps in Germany and that political dissidents and Jews were being rounded up. We knew there were people being tortured and that their properties were being expropriated and that men were no longer allowed to go about their professions. Yes, there were some very grim days ahead of us.

It was impossible to get entry visas to the United States or Canada because the quotas were small and nobody wanted to accept the Jews. I will get ahead of this story by saying that my father was finally able to secure entry visas into Canada, but this was after we had already been left homeless. We had to flee our home, and we

found ourselves in Kaunas, the then capital of Lithuania. My father was able to get three entry visas into Canada; but unfortunately my mother had suffered a stroke, and we were unable to travel by then.

Rosen: What time was that? Do you remember what year that was?

Altman: It must have been either in 1939 or 1940.

Rosen: Was there any special reason why your father was able to leave for Canada or the United States as opposed to other parts of the world?

Altman: Well, I must confess that my father was not a Zionist, and he did not want to go to Israel. But even if he had been a Zionist, the borders of Palestine were still closed because it was under the British Mandate. Ideally, he would have liked to go to the United States, where he had a sister and my mother had a brother, and then there were several uncles on my father's side who were willing to sponsor our family if we had been able to obtain a visa to allow us to enter the United States. So ideally, yes, he would have liked to emigrate to the United States. He had filled out papers with a request, but it was impossible to

get a visa. Canada was equally impossible to get permission to enter because Canada had very strict immigration laws, also. But he was able, as I said before, to get a visa, but it was too late for us.

Rosen: You knew your father was trying to move the family out of Lithuania?

Altman: Yes, I knew that.

Rosen: How did you feel about that?

Altman: Well, I knew it was necessary. I was hoping that we would still be able to leave before the actual war started up. There were troop movements along the borders, and it was quite evident that [it was] only a matter of weeks before the German army would move in.

Rosen: Why don’t we pick up with the invasion by Germany of Lithuania? Talk about that.

Altman: At first, we had a Russian invasion.

Rosen: When was that?

Altman: I don’t remember the month; I don’t remember the year. I just know that one morning I woke up, and the Russian army was there. They were marching in, hundreds and hundreds of them.

In going back into the past, Keith, you really triggered my memory, and I remember what a

wonderful childhood I really had. Being an only child, I liked to be around my cousins. One of my uncles had five children, and the other one had two. Another aunt had three children. I also remember that I was the youngest of them, and it was so much fun to tag along after them even though they didn't want to be bothered with me. I don't know if I was a little pest or not, but I had a wonderful time just watching what they were doing or spending the night with them and being pampered in the morning. It was just a central part of growing up, being with my cousins. But I also must add that only one of them survived.

Rosen: How many cousins are you talking about, approximately, in all?

Altman: Well, I'm talking about the five cousins in one family and two in the other. That's seven. There were three more, three little boys. That's ten. Three cousins, one of whom survived and died a few years ago in Israel. The other cousin, Hilda Green, lives in Dallas, and she has a story to tell, also. Can we stop?

Rosen: Sure. [Recorder temporarily turned off]

Altman: Anyway, I don’t know if it’s central to my background, but, yes, I did have a wonderful childhood and wonderful summers that I remember spending on the beach because the beach was only thirty minutes away by ferry across the little waterway. They had a wonderful beach--the Baltic Sea--with white sand and the sand dunes and the walks through the fragrant pine woods. So when I think in terms of my childhood, it was just wonderful growing up there at that time.

Rosen: It sounds like a pleasant one. Do you think your childhood was very different from a childhood of any Christian girl growing up during the same time?

Altman: Probably not.

Rosen: But you have indicated also by 1938, you started changing conversations at home, and your father talked about looking to move the family out of the country for fear of what might have occurred. How did you feel about that?

Altman: Well, I became just as anxious to leave as my parents did. It had finally sunk in that the only thing to survive, to have a future was to get out

of Lithuania, be it under the Germans or under the Russians.

Rosen: How did you feel about leaving your home, your family, your friends? I say your family. You mentioned that you had many cousins and a happy-go-lucky life with them at this time, and that you used to have friends, mostly Jews, but Jews and Christians, that came to your home to play. How do you feel about leaving all of them behind?

Altman: Well, we were already refugees in 1939. Of course, we had to leave everything behind, and our circumstances had changed dramatically. No longer did I have a privileged childhood. I was now a member of the great refugee family. All of my cousins were refugees, also. We could not live in the same town. Their parents had chosen to move to a small town for financial reasons.

Rosen: Let’s back up here for a moment. You mentioned the Russians invaded in your hometown first, that hundreds came in one morning. Were you aware in advance that the Russians were about to march on your town and invade Lithuania?

Altman: Rumors had preceded the troops’ arrival, yes. It was just a question of days. I think it was

following the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin that the Russians moved into their sphere of influence.

Rosen: How did that change your life?

Altman: Oh, drastically! My father was able to rent one room in somebody else's home with kitchen facilities. My mother had already suffered a stroke, so she could no longer be active. I had to enroll in a new school. I was enrolled in a Yiddish-speaking school. I could not enroll in a Lithuanian school because I did not know Lithuanian as a language well enough to keep up with the curriculum. Yiddish was so close to German that all I had to learn then was the Yiddish alphabet. I was enrolled at my age level. [Recorder turned off]

Rosen: I'm going to back up here for a moment, Mrs. Altman, and talk about when the Russians invaded. You mentioned that your father rented a one-room apartment...

Altman: No, it was one room in somebody else's apartment.

Rosen: One room in somebody else's apartment for the three of you.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: You mentioned that your mother at some point had had a stroke. Is there a story behind that as related to the Holocaust? Was the stroke in any way brought on by events?

Altman: No, no, it was not.

Rosen: Just a coincidence?

Altman: Right. It was, yes. But it kept us from emigration.

Rosen: How did it affect the family structure? There were only three of you in your family. How injured was your mother?

Altman: Well, my mother was bedridden for quite a while, and she had difficulty getting around. My father was the main provider. I was busy in school, and he probably did the shopping. Other than that, the period is not that well remembered. I don’t know if I want to block it out or not, but it’s very hazy in my memory. It was really a fall from grace in so many ways. We were left with practically no means. The Russians were starting to evacuate people, and they sent to Siberia all the intelligentsia and former capitalists, of whom we were former members, so there was always the fear of being sent to Siberia. Life still had to go on,

but everything was very temporary. The rented room, we knew, was just a stopgap. Life continued. My father had to find a job, and that was difficult because we were strangers in this city of Kaunas.

Rosen: Let’s back up for a minute. The Russians marched in, and you’re forced to move into an apartment.

Altman: We have to back up more. I don’t know if I made it clear, but when the Germans annexed Memel, or Klaipeda, that’s the time that we became refugees, having to leave our home and having to leave everything that the generations had worked so hard to accomplish--just leaving behind a way of life.

Rosen: How did you find out about leaving your home?

Altman: Well, a few days before the German troops marched into Memel, there were rumors that the inevitable had come and that remaining there would be very unsafe. My father had friends in local government that said nothing would happen to us as Jews because we had always been friends. He had grown up with these people. They asked why would anybody want to harm us, and said that we were safe. It sounded so good, and it was so tempting just not to do anything and remain, but my parents knew how

dangerous it would be. Despite obvious assurances and reassurances, one day both of them packed whatever they could pack and took a few suitcases, loaded the car, and just left.

Rosen: Your mother was still healthy.

Altman: Yes, she was still healthy.

Rosen: When you say you left, you left your home in Memel to go to where?

Altman: Our first stop was my grandmother's village, which was right across the border.

Rosen: Across the border?

Altman: Across the Lithuanian border, because what Hitler took on the first grab, his first land grab, was just the province. He just took the province of Memel and nothing else. My grandmother lived on the Lithuanian side.

Rosen: Which was controlled by?

Altman: Which was controlled by Lithuania. That's where we made our first stop.

Rosen: What provisions did your father make for your home, your property?

Altman: We left everything behind. We closed the doors, locked the doors, and left.

Rosen: Earlier you mentioned that the Russians invaded first.

Altman: Well, I guess that the dates are hazy, but I do know that after my father locked the doors, the next day the Germans marched in. We were able to find safety across the border, on the Lithuanian side, which Hitler did not invade at the time. From the village where we may have stayed a week or two with my grandmother, we then went to the larger town of Kaunas, or Kovno.

Rosen: Before we got on here, what was the name of the village where your grandmother lived.

Altman: I didn't tell you? It was called Gargzdai, also known as Gorzd.

Rosen: In making the trip to your grandmother's, what thoughts were going through your head?

Altman: The thoughts were just to be able to get to Gargzdai in time before the German troops overran the city and not get caught and get out. Those were the thoughts.

Rosen: Do you remember how you felt?

Altman: Probably panic-stricken.

Rosen: Did you have any idea where you were actually headed for?

Altman: Well, the first stop was my grandmother's house. After that, no, I had no idea. We didn't have any long-range plans. I guess, yes, eventually, a larger city where there was an American consulate or some other consular agency there that could help us with emigration.

Rosen: At this point you were leaving, the three of you--your mother, father, and yourself. Were you bringing with you anything more than you could carry?

Altman: No, that was all.

Rosen: You say you spent about a week or two with your grandmother. What was life like during that week or two? What was said? What was talked about?

Altman: Emigration mostly. I don't really remember very much about that period.

Rosen: Do you remember your grandmother's reaction?

Altman: My grandmother must have been glad to see us, but she was still worried about our future. She wasn't really thinking about her own future, just our future, because she knew what we had left behind and that the future was still uncertain.

Rosen: Was this your paternal grandmother or maternal?

Altman: It was my mother's mother.

Rosen: Your mother’s mother. That’s your maternal grandmother.

Altman: Right.

Rosen: Describe what happened upon leaving your grandmother.

Altman: After we left there?

Rosen: Did you have a car?

Altman: Yes, my father had a car, but he never drove it. We had a chauffeur that drove us, and we no longer had a chauffeur. I think my dad sold the car. I forgot where the car was sold. But somehow we made our way to Kaunas, or Kovno. I don’t even remember by what means now, whether it was by train or by car. We left my grandmother behind, and uncles and cousins and aunts who lived in the village as well. They did not survive. None of them survived.

Rosen: Why do you think your grandmother chose not to go with you? Did she have the opportunity to go with you?

Altman: Oh, no, we did not ask her to join us because we did not have anything concrete in our future. We were on the run, and at least she still had her home there and temporary safety.

Rosen: You mentioned that you went to Kovno.

Altman: That is the Russian name for it. On the map today, it is known as Kaunas. In fact, it was known as Kaunas then, also, because it was the then capital of Lithuania.

Rosen: Do you remember how long it took you to get to Kovno?

Altman: I think it must have taken a few hours. Four or five hours at the most.

Rosen: In the course of one day?

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: Do you remember how you felt once again being on the run?

Altman: We were just very unsettled.

Rosen: Did you have any thoughts about your grandmother?

Altman: Oh, I was hoping that she was safe and would be safe for some time. I was really more concerned about ourselves and what we would find once we reached Kaunas.

Rosen: In going to Kaunas, what factor motivated your family? Do you remember?

Altman: Well, it was the largest city and had all the agencies which we probably would have to go to.

Rosen: Did you have any family or friends?

Altman: No, we did not. We were complete strangers.

Rosen: When you got to Kaunas, what did you find?

Altman: What did we find? Well, the first priority was to find a place to stay. For a few weeks, we stayed in a hotel, and I forget for how many weeks. It was several months, I think. That got to be too costly, so that was the time my father rented a room. I think that's when the Russians were already there. It was very difficult to find anyplace to rent. Housing had always been in short supply, so just to find a family willing to rent a room was a major accomplishment. We had no furniture and weren't even interested in renting an apartment--we could not have furnished it--so a rented furnished place was the best thing that we could hope to find.

Rosen: You seem to have implied that your father brought some money with him.

Altman: Yes, but I think there was not very much money that he had. There was very little liquid cash that he had because everything that he had had been tied up in industry.

Rosen: During this period in Kaunas, what did your father do?

Altman: He was able to secure a job with the help of a friend who was an administrator in some industry. Only because of that personal acquaintance was he able to find a job.

Rosen: Was this a new friend he made?

Altman: No, it was, I think, the nephew of a friend that he had had in Memel. It was a Jewish person.

Rosen: And your mother...during this time period, what did she do?

Altman: She was trying to recuperate from the stroke.

Rosen: Did she have a stroke during this time period?

Altman: Yes, she did. It happened while we were in Kaunas.

Rosen: And you?

Altman: I was already enrolled in the school. I was just going day by day, catching up with the curriculum, trying to make friends. It was a very trying period for everybody because even the people who had been living all their lives in Kaunas were encountering difficulties with the new Russian regime. So everybody was really struggling to make ends meet on a day to day basis. The future was uncertain for everybody--Jews, Gentiles, refugees, and people who had lived there all their lives.

Rosen: Do you remember any thoughts that you had at the time?

Altman: Mostly anxiety as to what would we be able to do--would we be lucky enough to get exit visas either to the United States or to Canada. The lines at the consulate were just...people were just lining up outside in the streets, and waiting to fill out applications for visas.

Rosen: Did you go to a consulate?

Altman: Yes. I remember being interviewed, but I forget which consulate it was. It may have been the American consulate. There was so much red tape. Even the Russians put up so much red tape with exit visas. Most adults were sitting in either the Russian offices for exit visas or in the offices of the American consulate just waiting to be seen. There seemed to be a period of endless waiting.

Rosen: Did you have any idea what your future would hold at this point?

Altman: None whatsoever.

Rosen: Do you recall a time frame when this was occurring?

Altman: It was around 1939, 1940.

Rosen: So now you are in Kaunas, and you mentioned a school. I think you mentioned it earlier.

Altman: Yes, I went to a Yiddish-speaking school. The name of it was the Sholom Aleichem Gymnasia, named after the Yiddish poet Sholom Aleichem. He was the writer of the original story on which Tevia is based.

Rosen: You are referring to “Fiddler on the Roof.”

Altman: Yes, you are right.

Rosen: You are in Kaunas, going to school. You said your father is trying to get the family out of Lithuania, if possible, and was going to the consulate. You said you went to a consulate. What happened?

Altman: Nothing happened.

Rosen: Did you have hope? Did your father have hope?

Altman: Oh, certainly we were all hoping, but the whole situation seemed to be so hopeless. War seemed to be on the verge of breaking out any minute, so it became quite obvious that the Germans could be invading and that we would become trapped. What would happen after that, we didn’t know. We didn’t know how grim the German occupation would be, and we had no idea about the ghetto that would be

built and the torture and executions that would take place and the mass murders. None of that we could envision.

Perhaps we envisioned the same situation that had been experienced by our relatives in Germany, like, not being able to go about your profession, and not being able to engage household help (which we had nothing to worry about at that time), not to be able to go to school, not to be able to have medical attention by Gentile doctors, not to be allowed to be a patient in a Gentile hospital. I'm sure food rations, curfews, all that we envisioned would come to pass for us, too, but nobody envisioned the ultimate evil, total destruction. Can we stop?

Rosen: **Sure.**

Oral History Collection

Brigitte Friedmann Altman

Interviewer: Keith Rosen **Date: December 20, 1989**

Place of Interview: Fort Worth, Texas

Rosen: We are picking up the interview on Wednesday, December 20, 1989. Mrs. Altman, could you give me some time frame for the period you were in Kaunas?

Altman: I think we were in Kaunas from 1939 through the Russian occupation and the starting of the German occupation. Just to recap, I want to mention that the Russian occupation started in June of 1940, and exactly a year later, in June of 1941, Germany attacked Russia. Consequently, the Russian troops that had occupied Lithuania and other Baltic countries were in retreat.

Rosen: You were there during that whole time period?

Altman: Yes, that is correct.

Rosen: How did you see things change when the Germans came, or did you see a change during that time period?

Altman: Oh, there absolutely was a drastic change--a bad situation. Soviet occupation became a worse situation, but it became a terrible situation when the Germans and the Nazis assumed control.

Rosen: Can you describe what it was like under the Russian occupation, and then how it changed under the German?

Altman: Well, Russian occupation differed in one way from the German occupation in that no Jews were killed. There were deportations to Siberia, as I mentioned before, of people who had either been...most of the time it was people either in the sciences or commerce or the intelligentsia in general. Those people and their families were deported to Siberia. Other people had to make do with just inconveniences, like, having to give up their nice apartments and taking in additional tenants. Housing was very difficult to obtain, and food rations were limited. But in comparison to what was going to happen, those were very minor inconveniences.

Rosen: While the Russians were occupying, what were your feelings?

Altman: My feelings were that I wanted to get out of that place. My parents, even under the Russians, were still trying to get the necessary entrance visas to the countries I mentioned before--the United States and Canada.

Rosen: You had gone to Kaunas, as you mentioned earlier, with your family while you were fleeing the Germans. Now you are in Kaunas, and the Russians occupy the town. Do you feel the need to flee any further?

Altman: Well, that’s a very good question because a number of people did join the Russians while they were in retreat, hoping to find a safe haven in the Soviet Union and just to get away from the Germans. In our situation we couldn’t do that because, for one reason, my mother was barely ambulatory. So for physical reasons, we could not have left with the Russians on the heels of their retreat. A number of people were successful in fleeing the Germans, thereby saving their lives. Others were not so successful, and they had to turn around and come back.

Rosen: You mentioned how your mother had a stroke during this time period in Kaunas and was left infirm thereafter. Did that affect your plans, your father's plans, in choosing where you were going to live at that time?

Altman: No, it did not have an effect on that.

Rosen: You mentioned life changed when the Germans marched in in June of 1941. How did life change?

Altman: It changed gradually, but every day became a worse nightmare. First of all, there was the decree that all the Jews would have to leave their present homes in the city and find lodging in a specific area set aside for the Jews, which was called the ghetto.

Rosen: Before we go on, roughly how long did it take the Germans to drive out the Russians?

Altman: Oh, I'd say it was instantaneous--overnight.

Rosen: Did you see any fighting?

Altman: I didn't see any fighting personally, but I could hear gunfire, perhaps machine gun fire, and bombs being dropped.

Rosen: The signs of war that you heard, were they within the town of Kaunas, or were they outside borders, to the best of your knowledge?

Altman: They were very near the city. We knew that bombs had fallen on the airport. Where the other military targets were, I don’t know. They were very close to the city.

Rosen: Had you heard the sound of warfare prior to this time?

Altman: No, this was the first time I had heard the sounds. My father, having served in World War I on the German side as a German soldier, was very familiar with the sounds of war. He picked them up immediately.

Rosen: How did you feel about this?

Altman: I felt that another period of uncertainty was descending on us.

Rosen: Can you describe your emotions?

Altman: Oh, terror! Terror!

Rosen: So the Germans, as you say, marched in rather rapidly. Was the town destroyed very much?

Altman: No, I don’t think the town had any noticeable material damage. Let me add, though, something. As frightened as the Jews were by the German invasion, the native Lithuanian population was jubilant that the Germans were coming, because the Germans had freed them from Russian occupation,

which was their main concern. They turned their jubilation...they mixed their jubilation with...let me think a minute. They turned against the Jews. I'm not saying that every Lithuanian turned against the Jews or became a partisan to pursue and kill the Jews wherever they found them; but bands of partisans sprang up immediately, and they would charge into private homes and wreak great destruction.

Rosen: It sounds like you're describing terrorist groups among the Lithuanian people, vigilantes who decided to take the law into their own hands or create the law. Who did you worry more about, then--the Germans or the Lithuanian people?

Altman: I think we worried more about the Lithuanian "partisans," who had taken the law into their own hands, and we were afraid to leave the safety of our room. But we had nothing.

Rosen: You were renting from whom then?

Altman: We were renting from a family who owned an apartment in Kaunas.

Rosen: Do you know what their religious background was?

Altman: They were Jews.

Rosen: Did you see any fear that they lived in?

Altman: Yes, they felt great fear. They felt great fear, and we saw it in their eyes, too. I know they did not survive. I remember one thing about that family. They had a son, a teenage son, who was severely handicapped, physically and mentally. Perhaps today he would have been described as an autistic child. Even while we lived in that home, I personally was afraid of him. I know this is perhaps not relevant to the story, but if I encountered him in the corridor, I quickly retreated into our room. It turned out later that whoever had a disabled person within the family was among the first victims to be rounded up by the Germans and deported and executed later. This was what happened to this family afterwards. Very shortly after the ghetto came into existence, I never saw or heard of the family again.

Rosen: It is interesting--the point that you were making--that the Germans were welcomed by the Lithuanians as saviors as opposed to conquerors; and also that even within the Jewish family you lived with, you were thrown into a situation you wouldn’t otherwise have been in anyway, and it made you feel threatened.

Altman: Well, this is true to a certain degree. The young boy was really not threatening, but it was just that it was something that I remember about this time period.

Rosen: How long was it before you were relocated to a ghetto?

Altman: I think we were given about four or six weeks' notice to relocate to the ghetto. The reason I remember the official closing date of the ghetto was because it coincided with my birthday. It was on the 15th of August in 1941.

Rosen: So you had just a few weeks or so, two months, after Germany and the Soviet Union go to war.

Altman: Right.

Rosen: Actually, I think you meant the opening of the ghetto in August of 1941.

Altman: No, it was the closing. By then everybody had to be relocated. Whoever was not relocated was being deported.

Rosen: Okay, let's back up here because I'm a little confused. You lived in Kaunas, and the Germans invade in June of 1941.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: The Germans issue a decree that all Jews are to move into the ghetto.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: Within six weeks approximately.

Altman: More or less. Attempts to move into the ghetto area are made right away.

Rosen: So the ghettos are opening within six weeks.

Altman: Yes. So what that entailed was the rest of the Lithuanian population that lived in Slobodke, which was the designated location of the ghetto. Slobodke is referred to as Vilijampole on contemporary Lithuanian maps. It was also the seat of a very famous Yeshiva, a Jewish theological seminary. What happened then was that the majority of people who lived there were Jews. Consequently, the dwellings were primitive and poor. These places were so primitive that very few had functioning toilets or bathrooms. There was running water, and there was electricity. Certainly, there was no central heating as we know of today.

Rosen: Did you have hot and cold running water?

Altman: No, there was just cold running water, and there were additional wells.

Rosen: Do you know what happened to the Christians who lived within the area defined as the ghetto?

Altman: Yes. They had to move out. The Gentile families--this is the native Lithuanian families--were very happy to trade their modest homes for much nicer homes in the city which had belonged at one time to Jewish landlords, who at this time had to relocate and find a place in the ghetto. So they just swapped.

Rosen: So you, your father, and your mother moved into the ghetto sometime approximately in the summer of 1941.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: When you reached the ghetto, what did it look like? For example, was there a fence around it of any sort?

Altman: The fence was being built as we moved in, and it was very difficult for my dad to find lodging because we didn’t have a home to trade, and we didn’t know anybody who lived there. Even those people who had been able to trade their own city homes for a primitive home in the ghetto knew that it would not be possible for them to be the sole occupants of the place because there were so many

people being crowded into the ghetto, and there was certainly not enough equivalent living space available under the circumstances. So these people who were fortunate enough to find a place to live, because they had been able to trade their homes for a place in the ghetto, now had to take in other people. They had to take in other people because they knew they would be assigned other people eventually. At least they could choose among their friends who didn't have a place to live and fill the living spaces. There were always several families to one room.

Rosen: **For a moment let's go back to the fence. You said they were building a fence around the ghetto, and you moved in. Could you describe what kind of fence the Germans were building?**

Altman: **Well, it was a wire fence, a barbed wire fence.**

Rosen: **Did you find in the ghetto...you've indicated that there was insufficient housing in the ghetto for all of the Jewish families moving in, and that there would have to be more than one family per home.**

Altman: **Per room.**

Rosen: Can you describe now the conditions that you found. Do you remember how you ended up where you did in the ghetto?

Altman: Well, at one point it looked rather hopeless for us to find a place to put our heads down. It looked like we were just stranded in the streets. Then my parents discovered that the couple who had originally been the pharmacist in my grandmother's village had been able to trade their home for a place in the ghetto. Even though there were many other people who had already spoken for some of the living space in that little home, there was some attic space left, and the pharmacist told my parents that we could have one of the small attic rooms, which consisted of some unfinished rooms. It was not insulated, and I remember the rafters, open rafters. We had a little window and a door that led to another attic room.

Rosen: Do you know, Mrs. Altman, approximately how big that room was in terms of feet?

Altman: In terms of actual area, I'm not very good at describing dimensions, but I know it held a single bed which was shared by both of my parents, and then there was a little cot alongside the bed,

which I had. Then there was room for a chair, and there was room for a sewing machine, which was our only material possession. I forgot that that sewing machine had been rescued from our original home, and we had brought this into the ghetto because we thought perhaps it would serve a purpose. Neither one of us could sew. Neither my mother nor I could sew, but we thought perhaps somebody might be able to put it to good use. So we used it as a table for the time being.

Rosen: Did you have a place for anything else in there? Any other furniture?

Altman: No, that was all the furniture we had.

Rosen: Do you remember roughly how tall the attic space was that you were in?

Altman: I think it was just a little taller than our heads.

Rosen: So you stand...

Altman: I am 5’5”, and my father probably was 5’10”. It may have been six feet.

Rosen: A very small room for three people.

Altman: Yes, very small.

Rosen: How long did you live there?

Altman: We lived there probably for a year-and-a-half.

Rosen: So we're looking at about roughly August of 1941 to maybe January of 1943.

Altman: I can't really give you a time frame because my memory is so hazy. There are certain landmarks that stand out and certain terrible events that took place, but the time frame is really very vague in my mind.

Rosen: You described a room that the three of you shared in the attic. Let's talk a little bit about the conditions at that time. For example, what was your source of heat in that attic?

Altman: There was no heat.

Rosen: Just body heat.

Altman: Right. It was fine in the summer. In the winter--during the day everybody worked, with the exception of my mother who was mostly bedridden--at night, we had blankets and quilts to keep us warm.

Rosen: Do you remember roughly what the temperature would drop to, approximately?

Altman: Well, the temperature in the Baltic countries drops very low in the winter, so the attic temperature must have been often minus ten degrees.

Rosen: Minus ten degrees Fahrenheit?

Altman: Right.

Rosen: You're talking about being in an attic, and you mentioned that you have rafters as your ceiling. Were the walls of your room the exterior walls of the house?

Altman: I think the walls were all interior walls.

Rosen: They were all interior walls?

Altman: Maybe.

Rosen: So you had some insulation then.

Altman: I'm not sure.

Rosen: What did you do for food?

Altman: Ration cards were issued. Every working person was issued a ration card. I think it came down to about two slices of bread per day. Once a week loaves of bread were issued to the head of the family. There were tiny amounts of sugar and tiny amounts of meat, often horse meat, if it was available at all. The food situation was grim, and that's when the only source of food that reached the ghetto was by way of workers who worked on the outside who were able to trade items for food. And then there was also some bartering across the fence.

Rosen: How did you prepare food?

Altman: The food was prepared on a stove in the communal kitchen which was on the first level, if there was any food to cook. Otherwise, it was just bread. I remember that once in a while we would have a piece of bacon, even though bacon is certainly a food item that the Jews are not allowed to eat, because it was a pork product. But because of the dire circumstances, these laws were not observed. The primary objective was to stay alive from one day to the next.

Rosen: Bathroom facilities?

Altman: There was an outdoor privy. I think we took turns cleaning it. The inhabitants, the tenants, whatever you want to call them, took turns keeping it clean. But it was outside.

Rosen: So you had to use that all year long.

Altman: Right. It was terrible in the winter.

Rosen: When you mention a privy, could you describe what that entailed?

Altman: Yes. It was an outhouse. I don’t know if there was one door or two doors. I don’t even remember. But it had a wooden bench and several openings.

Rosen: What about bathing?

Altman: I think that was done with a washcloth in the kitchen, and the tub was brought in. Sometimes the water was heated, and privacy was insured because the tenants would take turns using the kitchen. The kitchen was the largest room, and it was the closest room to the well from where we drew the water. This place, the first place, actually did not have running water.

Rosen: During the winter, did you have to go to the well to get the water?

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: Did it freeze?

Altman: It probably did, and someone would have to chop the ice and lower the bucket into the water.

Rosen: Once you got the water from the well, you mentioned that sometimes you would heat it and take a bath. So there were times when you took...you implied that there were times when you took baths when the water was at room temperature.

Altman: Oh, yes, yes.

Rosen: Including in the winter?

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: I'm trying to imagine--and maybe you could help me with it--what the temperature of the water that you would be sitting in in this tub would be like.

Altman: Well, the tubs were not like the tubs that you envision. These were small washtubs, and a person would stand in it--you couldn't sit in it--and use the washcloth to sponge oneself.

Rosen: And that's how each of you would bathe yourself?

Altman: Right.

Rosen: You mentioned that privacy was observed in the kitchen when one wanted to bathe himself. How was it observed?

Altman: Oh, either you would check with the neighbors in advance and ask them if it would be all right if the kitchen could be reserved for purposes of hygiene for fifteen minutes. Nobody would come through.

Rosen: How often would you have the opportunity to bathe and clean yourself?

Altman: I would guess about once a week.

Rosen: In the house you mentioned that your family was in the attic. How many families shared the house you were in?

Altman: There was the elderly couple in whose house we were living, and there were two other couples downstairs who shared living space with the owner. These two couples were related. It was a brother and a sister and their respective spouses. Then there was one single woman. The way I remember, they all shared one large room, which was partitioned with curtains suspended from the ceiling.

Rosen: So in this one house...

Altman: No, it was downstairs.

Rosen: How many floors were there in this house?

Altman: There was the upper level, which was the unfinished attic, and there were stairs leading up to it.

Rosen: Basically, it was a one-story house with an attic.

Altman: Well, it had been conceived as a two-story home. I called it an attic. Perhaps it had originally been designed as a future second story, which had been left unfinished. But to me it was just like an attic.

There was another family living next door to us on the second level, and that was a family that consisted of the two parents and one daughter of

college age and a young son who was then about eight years old. This family was remarkable because every one of them survived, including an older brother who was already married at the time, who lost his wife and a baby but who, himself, survived. He lives in Chicago now.

Rosen: In the house that you were in, you mentioned that there was a single woman; there were a couple of two different couples that were related; there was a pharmacist and his wife, who were the owners of the house.

Altman: They were the pharmacists.

Rosen: All total in one house, can you remember how many people were living in it?

Altman: Yes. Of course, if we totaled them up, there were three of us; and the four next door; the single woman downstairs; and the three couples. That’s fourteen people.

Rosen: Fourteen people in a one...

Altman: One-family house.

Rosen: You mentioned the people next door, and I was wondering if you could clarify that, the people next door.

Altman: The people in the room adjoining our room.

Rosen: That's a lot of people in one house. You'd grown up in a house of comfort, as you had described earlier, when you were living in Memel. Now you are living in an attic with your whole family as opposed to a house where you used to have a chauffeur to drive you. You now have no car and no house. How did you feel about what was going on and in contrast to the way that you had lived?

Altman: I don't think that it entered my mind too much because we were so busy staying alive, and that was the most important thought that occupied anybody's mind. Nobody was looking back as to what had been, but people were worried about the future and what it would bring and would there be a future.

Rosen: At that point what were your impressions about the future?

Altman: Being young, I was still relatively optimistic and perhaps too naive to worry too much. I never thought that I might become one of the future statistics.

Rosen: At that point, were you aware of people being killed?

Altman: Yes. Roundups had already started taking place. I saw one from the window as I was walking out. I forget the date, but it was in the very early stages. I think it may have been in September...when did I say that the ghetto was...

Rosen: 1941?

Altman: The ghetto was closed in 1941. It may have been September. The decree had gone out a few days earlier.

Rosen: Could we back up one moment? You're saying the ghetto was closed in 1941. What do you mean by closed?

Altman: Nobody was allowed to move into the ghetto after that point.

Rosen: So it was opened that summer for Jews to move in and then closed to future occupation?

Altman: Right.

Rosen: Those terms were confusing me when you were talking about being created and opened...

Altman: Well, there was a period set aside just to move in, and when that date expired, nobody was allowed to move in or to move out.

Rosen: Okay. You were talking about...

Altman: A decree had gone out euphemistically called an invitation to work in a better workplace. The qualifications that were mentioned in this work order were for well-educated males, or perhaps for well-educated young males. The nature of the workplace was left somewhat indefinite, but the type of work was described as clerical. Between two or three hundred of our best-educated young men volunteered for this work, hoping that it would give them some sort of stability, perhaps a pass to life. They volunteered and they reported at the plaza, which I could see from our window. Some of them I knew personally. They were put on trucks ostensibly to the new place of work, and nothing was ever heard of them. We were told later not only that they were executed, but also where they were executed.

Rosen: When you say that you were told later, where did you get that information?

Altman: The grapevine.

Rosen: Did you see any people attacked while you were in the ghetto?

Altman: Yes, I did. We are going to take a big jump to that time. I only saw it once, but if I tell you

about that now, it would skip a very important event.

Rosen: Okay, we will come to it later then.

Altman: Okay.

Rosen: You mentioned earlier that your father and you both worked in the ghetto. What did your father do?

Altman: My father worked at the airport in Aleksotas. It was the only military airport...it may have been a civilian airport as well. There was large construction in progress, and most of the men in the ghetto were doing construction work at this airport. My father was one of them.

Rosen: Was this outside the ghetto then?

Altman: It was outside the ghetto, and all the people worked there, women included. They probably walked two hours just to get to the workplace. They worked six days a week from sunup to sundown. My father would get up very early, probably at 4:00 in the morning, and report at 5:00 at the gate with the rest of the people, and they would get to the workplace at 7:00.

Rosen: How old was your father at that time?

Altman: He was either in his late forties or early fifties.

Rosen: You mentioned that he would get to work at approximately 7:00 in the morning. What time would he get back home?

Altman: He would usually get home about 6:00 in the evening.

Rosen: You worked in the ghetto. What did you do?

Altman: I had a much better workplace than many other people because, for one thing, I was working in the ghetto itself. I didn't have far to walk, and my supervisor was a Jew. I didn't have to worry about being coerced to work harder or faster by a guard with a gun behind me. What I was doing, I worked in a nursery, a greenhouse, where we were growing a variety of vegetables for the SS.

Rosen: What were your functions or responsibilities there?

Altman: It was doing ordinary gardening, planting seeds, watching seeds grow, weeding, harvesting.

Rosen: How common was it to have Jews in supervisory roles?

Altman: You didn't have many. But in this particular case, no Germans were needed. It really was, under the

circumstances, a wonderful arrangement, and it was one of the best workplaces in the ghetto. Certainly, it was one of the safest.

Rosen: **How were you so fortunate?**

Altman: **I think I was fortunate because my dad knew some people who were instrumental in assigning work. Even though he was not that fortunate in his own work assignments, he was looking out for me and my safety.**

Rosen: **You were paid for this employment?**

Altman: **No, I don’t think we were paid. We got our ration card as a result, so we could draw our bread rations and whatever else was available. We weren’t allowed to take any of the vegetables home. They were strict. Our supervisor was responsible that everything was turned over to the SS. I don’t know what safeguards they had in ascertaining that everything was properly turned over to them, but I remember occasionally we were allowed to take home the green tips of spring onions. That was just such a wonderful treat.**

Rosen: **If I understand correctly, you got ration cards with which you could get vegetables.**

Altman: **Not vegetables. They were bread ration cards.**

Rosen: Bread ration cards. As far as vegetables, they just were not available for you?

Altman: That is right. Sometimes the people who worked on the outside, like my dad at the airport, came in contact with Lithuanian farmers and found a safe place to make a trade. Sometimes a German guard would look the other way. Then they would bring certain items, like, clothing or whatever else might have been available for barter, and they would trade it for potatoes or carrots or maybe a piece of meat or eggs. They would bring that food home to supplement the meager rations that we had.

Rosen: You mentioned that sometimes the German guard would turn the other way to allow for an exchange to take place. Did you have much communications with the Germans during this time period?

Altman: No, not as an ordinary person living in the ghetto. The only people who had regular contact with the Germans were the Jewish elders, who were part of the Ghetto Council. They did have contact with the Germans.

Rosen: How long did you live in this house, in the attic?

Altman: We lived there until the major tragedy struck the ghetto. It was in October of...I think it was in

October of 1942. I remember the month of October so well, and I don't remember the year. Looking at some notes, it says that it was in October of 1941.

Rosen: **You mentioned that you had entered the ghetto in August of 1941.**

Altman: **Yes, so this must have happened shortly afterwards. It seemed like such a long time occurred between the entering of the ghetto and this tragedy, and not just a matter of a few months. Anyway, this was when this tragedy happened.**

Rosen: **What is this tragedy?**

Altman: **It was known as *Die Grosse Aktion*--"The Great Big Roundup."**

Rosen: **What was this?**

Altman: **This was a roundup of all the residents of the ghetto who had to assemble in a certain assembly point, and approximately ten thousand of those who were assembled there were separated, taken away, and subsequently--the next day--were shot at an adjacent fortress.**

Rosen: You mentioned ten thousand Jews. Do you have any idea how large the population within the ghetto was?

Altman: I can only make a wild guess. I would say around thirty thousand.

Rosen: So you're talking about roughly one-third of all the residents were rounded up and executed.

Altman: Yes, yes.

Rosen: Were you involved directly in that?

Altman: Well, I'll tell you how it progressed. There were public notices posted throughout the ghetto with the decree that every Jew living in the ghetto had to come to this designated plaza--I forgot the name of the plaza--and that everybody had to be assembled there very early in the morning. Let's say it was by 7:00 in the morning. The little house that we were living in was very near that square, very close to the square, so we didn't have far to walk. It may have taken us ten minutes to get there. But from 5:30 on, that morning in October, while we were still slowly getting up, we would hear the footsteps of hundreds and hundreds of people--the solid tramping passing our house. I'll always remember the footsteps--such an

ominous sound. It was such an ominous morning. The dawn was just breaking; it was dark, cold, and very damp. I don’t remember if there was snow on the ground or not. Maybe just a smidgen of snow. But that cold just penetrated every bone in you.

Rosen: You heard the sounds of these people marching into the plaza. The name of the plaza was Demokratz Aikste in the Lithuanian language, meaning Democrat Square.

Altman: Yes, to the square. Then it was our time, and my father, my mother, and I bundled up the best we could, and we got to the square.

Rosen: At this point your mother was no longer bedridden?

Altman: Well, she could walk, but with great difficulty, so both my father and I supported her on her left and on her right, and then we started walking. She was propped up between the two of us. We got to the square, and at the square there was the ghetto police; and there were the foremen from the respective work details, those who worked at the airport and those who worked in the city, and they were lining up with their groups of people who worked for them or with them and their families.

So the people who were assembling on the square were standing with their fellow workers.

Rosen: So the people were organized by their occupations, in groups.

Altman: More or less, yes.

Rosen: Did you, your mother, and father, have to split into three different groups?

Altman: No, we stayed with my father’s group that worked with him at the airport.

Rosen: What happened?

Altman: Very soon, the German SS man in charge...his name was Rauka. I don’t remember his rank. He had been one of the German SS people in charge of the ghetto, as far as I remember. He did not carry a high rank either. I think he was a noncommissioned officer, but he certainly carried such great power that was not commensurate with his low rank. But he seemed to be the person in charge there, giving orders left and right and separating people left and right who would pass in review before him. Each family would have to pass before Rauka and his henchmen, and it very soon became apparent that the able-bodied were sent to one side, and the less able-bodied and the elderly or families

with small children were sent to the other side. At this point I don’t even remember which was the so-called good side and the bad side. Was it to the right or was it to the left?

I remember that a Jewish man my father knew--I don’t remember at this point who he was--seemed to have some influence on the square. He led us...I think we passed before Rauka, and my mother was propped up between the two of us. We passed before the Germans as quickly and as best we could, and the Jewish man intercepted us and just led us to one side. It turned out to be the good side because we were not marched away.

Rosen: How long did this procession past Rauka take?

Altman: Well, the procedure just took all day, and it was late in the evening before we were dismissed.

Rosen: So you had to wait outside in the elements.

Altman: Yes, we had to stand outside.

Rosen: And after all this was done, roughly one-third of the people were...

Altman: ...were led away. I want to add one more recollection to this, even though it may not reflect positively on the three of us, or perhaps on me. Before we were led to be reviewed by this

German, the elderly couple--the pharmacist and his wife--tried so hard to attach themselves to the three of us because at least my dad and I looked like able-bodied people. They felt that if they attached themselves to us, we could pass as a family, and they would have a better chance to be saved. As soon as they would get near us, my father and I felt...I know I felt very uncomfortable to see them near us because I knew we would have a lesser chance of survival. We tried to distance ourselves from them. I don't know whether we lessened their survival chance, but we certainly did not want to lessen our survival chance. I will say that they were taken away.

Rosen: You made it clear that you recognized in the division the people, the elderly and the infirm were put in one area, and the healthy, the able-bodied, were put in another. Did you have any idea what fate or future might hold for either of those two groups at that point?

Altman: I think it was quite apparent already that those who were taken away would not live to see another day. The survival instinct was so strong in every

person that it was almost as if it was a commandment, a divine commandment, to survive at any cost. I want to say that every...let me see how I can say it. Personal survival was almost held as a supreme commandment versus the responsibility to assist someone who might depend on an able-bodied person to help with the less able-bodied person's survival.

Rosen: **You mentioned the elderly pharmacist and his wife in desperation trying to attach themselves to you and your family, and the three--at least you and your father--want to keep your distance at least for your own survival. What did you think about your mother at that point?**

Altman: **Well, in my mind was just that if we were to be separated as a family, we would probably stay together.**

Rosen: **We being?**

Altman: **The three of us. Whatever happened, for us to stay together.**

Rosen: **So that if your mother was put on the side where those would be...**

Altman: **She would not have been abandoned by the two of us. Certainly not by my father. I cannot speculate**

what might have happened, but I don’t think that I would have left them either.

Rosen: Go on with the events.

Altman: Well, the events are nearly in a blur. It was just such a terrifying feeling. I know everybody was chilled to the bone and that everybody was shaking throughout the day. It is a terror that cannot be described--adequately be described.

Rosen: When you returned back to your home that evening...you mentioned that you were there for the duration of the day. After that, what did you do?

Altman: Well, we returned to the house to see who would be back. Everybody was there except for the pharmacist and his wife, and there was a very old woman sitting in a chair whom nobody knew. We talked to her, and we found out that she, like everybody else, was on her way to the square and that when she had no more energy to walk, she just walked into the first house and sat down. Nobody came to search the building, and so she survived--a lonely, lonesome woman. When it was all over, she left and went back to where she had come from.

I forgot to tell you one more thing about the elderly pharmacist. The next day we went back to the plaza, and we found him slumped over in a little folding chair that his wife had taken along the day before because she knew he would not be able to withstand the rigors of the long day. He was in his chair--dead. He must have died of exhaustion during the day. There was no trace of his wife, so she must have been led away. And there was that chapter.

Rosen: **You saw the pharmacist dead there. Had you ever seen anyone dead before that?**

Altman: **No, I had not.**

Rosen: **It was your first direct encounter with death.**

Altman: **That’s right.**

Rosen: **How did you feel?**

Altman: **How did I feel? I was so numb that I didn’t feel anything.**

Rosen: **Did you think about anything at that time?**

Altman: **Well, I probably did. It was just such a terrible event. The angel of death had been there in person. We had been granted a brief reprieve. Nobody knew how long. The situation was pretty desperate. Also, I remember the terrible tragedy**

that we had seen the day before, with so many families torn apart. Children who wanted to stay with their parents had been torn away, weren't even allowed to go with their parents, had been forcibly removed. Children crying. It was just a terrible, terrible time.

Rosen: **I'm going to take a break, turn over the tape, and continue. [Tape turned over.]**

We're continuing with the interview. Mrs. Altman, why don't you talk some more about your experiences in the ghetto.

Altman: **Well, life just went on. Some of my friends tried to escape, and other people tried to escape. Sometimes they were caught. They were shot on the spot. What I really want to say is that after this *Aktion*, as it was known, the first big one, the casual optimism that some of us still had displayed in the past--that things would change as we were hoping for the Russians to come back and defeat the Germans, that it would not be too long before the Allied victory would destroy the German machinery--all these optimistic hopes were dashed by this first big *Aktion*. The attitude and the frame of mind became very somber. Again, the**

people were trying to stay alive from day to day, but the reality had sunk in that so many people who were there the day before were gone--friends, family-- never to return again.

Let me also say something about my relatives. There were two brothers of my dad's who were living in the ghetto. One, Uncle Leo Friedmann and his wife, Jenny Epstein never had any children, so the two of them were struggling along the best they could. Uncle Leo was working, and I forget where his wife worked. I had another uncle, Uncle Joseph Friedmann, his wife, Rachel Goldwasser, and two little boys. The children were, I think, four and six years old at the time, maybe a little older. They were very worried about what would happen to the children. They were trying to have a Lithuanians acquaintance hide the children. It was very difficult to find a Lithuanian family willing to give shelter to any Jew because it was dangerous. Some who were willing to do that were afraid of the consequences, so it was a very hopeless situation. One of my friends, whose name was Reletta Solsky, a more recent friend, somebody who I had gotten close to after my family moved to

Kaunas. We were in the same school. She was a sweet girl, and she had one main advantage. She looked so Gentile. She could have passed as a Gentile without any difficulty, and she would also slip out of the ghetto occasionally by slipping off the yellow star, which everybody was required by law to wear then, and...[telephone interruption]

Rosen: **I just want to backtrack for a minute, you said that she looked real Gentile, could you describe for me what you meant by "so Gentile?"**

Altman: **Well, she had almost white hair. It was very, very blonde; she had blue eyes. She had very Aryan-looking features, and for those reasons she could slip out of the ghetto, maybe when she was on a work detail, and do some bartering, because she was the sole breadwinner for her family. She had a little brother who was less than ten years old and who was too young to work. Schools were no longer in session, so he was left to his own devices. Her mother was somewhat infirm, could not work; and Releta was very healthy-looking and a healthy girl who was the breadwinner because her father**

had been taken away in the early days, never to be heard from.

The reason I am talking about Reletta is because her family had many Lithuanian friends in the country, in the villages, who sometimes would send them things--food--that they badly needed. One time they had even offered to take Reletta in because she did not seem to present any danger, and she spoke Lithuanian very well, so she could have been passed off as another young peasant woman. She had a grave decision to make because she felt so obligated to her mother and little brother. She knew that if she left them, they really had no way to support themselves. But they prevailed upon her, she went into hiding, and she came back. She said that it was a combination of reasons for coming back. First of all, she was confined and depended on others to bring her food. She was not allowed to move openly in the small village because everybody knew each other. She was dependent even on bathroom facilities. People had to bring her a chamber pot so that she could relieve herself, and it would have to be taken out. All of that was just too much for her to

bear, but mostly the responsibility for her mother and little brother. So she came back. But this was just one of the few Lithuanian families that was willing to take somebody in. She probably could have saved herself that way, but in the end she perished, too.

Rosen: You mentioned that she was able to take off her badge or Star of David. I think you used the term badge, but I'm not positive on this. Could you describe this Star of David?

Altman: It was a yellow piece of cloth that was cut into the form of a six-pointed star that had to be sewn onto the left side of the chest as well as the left side of the back, and it became mandatory as soon as the Germans marched in.

Rosen: If I understand correctly, one was able to perhaps rip them off, and then sew them on later.

Altman: Yes, or pin it on. But to be found walking about without this badge, the yellow badge, could bring the most severe penalties, even shooting.

Rosen: You mentioned that your friend, Reletta, was able to escape from the ghetto and to return. Do you remember how she was able to escape from the ghetto?

Altman: I think she went out with the work detail who worked outside the ghetto and just did not come back with it. Even though there was always a meticulous count at the gate leaving and coming back, she must have had a friend in that work detail who somehow covered up for her.

Rosen: Did you ever consider trying to escape?

Altman: Perhaps. But probably not because there was no way and no place for me to go to at that point. Eventually, I did escape, which was with help and was carefully planned.

Rosen: Let's move in that direction. What transpired in the ghetto over the next month that you observed?

Altman: The following month, so many things happened. I'm not even sure of the exact chronology or sequence, but at one point, maybe after the first big ***Aktion***, or big first roundup, the ghetto was greatly decreased in size. People were moved out from the peripheral parts and were moved inward, and they were moved into the places that had been vacated by the people who had been taken away and killed. So there was a little more room. It also affected us because the little house where we had been living was returned to Lithuanian people, so

we had to find a shelter now in a much smaller part of the ghetto.

I will say that during this last *Aktion* our immediate relatives, who were living in the ghetto, had not been deported yet. There was my widowed aunt and her two daughters, one of whom is now living in Dallas. She was spared, and they had to find new accommodations again. And my uncle and his wife and two little boys and the other uncle and his wife, I think, were all able to find temporary accommodations in the other part of the ghetto. Anyway, my dad and I moved into another space.

Rosen: What about your mother?

Altman: Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. My mother had died. My mother had died shortly afterwards. She had died just before Passover. I think it was March. I remember the Hebrew date. It was the 11th day of the Month of *Nisan*. I think it was March, maybe April. *Nisan* on the eleventh day according to the Hebrew calendar.

Rosen: About March of what year?

Altman: 1942.

Rosen: What did she die of?

Altman: She died of a lung complication, and her poor heart just gave out. It was a combination of malnutrition and just that her body gave up. There was no medication to treat her for the lung complication. I remember that I was trying to surprise her with the Passover bread which is called *matzo*. There was at that point still a Jewish bakery inside the ghetto that made *matzo*. If you brought flour, they would bake it for you. I remember standing in a very long line to have them take the flour from me and then give me the *matzo* in return.

Rosen: You brought your own flour?

Altman: We brought our own flour, which we had saved from our meager flour rations. I was going to surprise her. So I was gone for a whole afternoon. She was already very, very weak and very, very ill. I had not told her where I was going. I felt badly leaving her. I left her with a friend, and I wanted to surprise her with this *matzo*. When I came back, she was barely alive. I didn't tell where I had been. Not that it would have made any difference. Perhaps I did tell her. This is very

vague. I think she died that evening, and we had a funeral for her the day after.

Rosen: What did you do with her body?

Altman: My father asked a man from the Burial Society to come and sit with the body according to the Jewish custom. He sat with the body in a small room in the house where we were living. The next morning she was wrapped in a shroud according to Orthodox Jewish custom, and she was taken to the makeshift cemetery. I think there was an emaciated horse that was pulling a wagon with the body. There was a very short service at the gravesite. The grave was dug by gravediggers and covered up. As it was in March or April, the ground was frozen. There was snow on the ground. Our sad procession made its way back to the house.

Rosen: How did you feel?

Altman: Numb.

Rosen: Was it within the ghetto?

Altman: Yes, it was within the ghetto.

Rosen: During that time period, did you see many people die?

Altman: Oh, they just disappeared. I don’t know if they died of hunger. I remember in particular the

mother of one of my friends who was left all by herself. Her children either had been taken away or had fled. She didn't know where they were. All of a sudden, I didn't see her anymore, so I don't know if she had been taken away or had starved or had died. People just kept disappearing without others knowing what had happened to them.

Rosen: How was your morale at that point?

Altman: It was pretty low. Some of our Jewish able-bodied young people were trying to join the partisans. The partisan movement was gaining momentum, but the Jewish partisans were not liked by the Lithuanian partisans. Now they were not the same as the first Lithuanian nationalists, who also called themselves partisans, who charged into Jewish homes and were killing and shooting wildly. These were more pro-Russian, but by the same token they didn't like Jews or Jewish partisans, who could have helped them. So there were some Jewish partisan groups that formed. Some of them joined up with the Lithuanian partisans, and in some cases they were welcomed, and in some cases they were not. In some cases the partisans turned on them. I do not know if they were actually killed,

but they were certainly not given any protection, and they were discouraged from joining the pro-Russian Catholic Lithuanian partisans. Some came back to the ghetto, and some just stayed in the woods.

Rosen: You mentioned that you moved into another home, that you were displaced within the ghetto, and it was smaller. You and your father searched for a new place. What was that like?

Altman: Again, it was a two-story wooden house in which there were a number of families. I knew one family on the upper level. Among others, this family consisted of the mother, who was the head of the family, her grown daughter, who was married to a doctor, and a very small baby that they had. I never saw the baby, and I never heard the baby, even though I lived on the lower level. The mother of the baby, I found out later, was also very ill and unable to work and was bedridden most of the time. There also was a young man, the younger brother of the doctor's wife, whom I met as a result of living in that house, and we became good friends. He is the writer of the book that I mentioned before. The book is called ***Kaddish for***

Kovno. So I knew that family, and there were other people living with them whom I never saw, never met, and did not know.

On the lower level...this was just, I think, a primitive farmhouse. For the one family that lived there originally, it was a comfortable home. They had the wood stove in the kitchen, and there were some kitchen cabinets, I remember, and then there was one large adjacent room. This is the room that my father and I shared with two other couples.

There was a young, newlywed couple. I remember the husband had been a student at the theological seminary, and his wife. They did some sort of work, but I don’t even know where they worked.

Then there was another couple, and they were elderly. Because they were elderly, they did not have a permanent workplace or work group, and the way they survived was by sawing and chopping wood for other people who would bring small logs home from their workplace. Wood was always needed for kindling because what little food that was available had to be heated. They also had with

them--this elderly couple--a little grandchild, a little girl. She may have been four or five years old. She shared the same bed with the grandparents, and whenever they left for the day to do some type of menial work, like, cutting or sawing wood, she would go with them. I forgot the time frame when we moved to this place. It must have still been winter. I was working in this nursery, and my dad was still performing his ditch digging or other construction work at the airdrome. Even though he was now a supervisor of a group, he still had to do some manual labor, too.

I know I am rambling, but the good part about his work was at noon he would get hot soup, and that soup was pretty good because it had chunks of meat and potatoes and vegetables. He was always able to bring back a container of soup that he would bring to me so I could have a good meal, also.

Rosen: You were working still in the...

Altman: In the greenhouse, yes. Everybody just followed their routine, and this routine was interrupted sporadically when the Germans were surprising us at different times of the day, just charging in

and harassing people and issuing decrees that they needed so many people for different work details. People did not want to volunteer anymore, so the Jewish police sent away people at random--drawing up lists and coming to the homes. Those who were found at home were often those who did not have a regular workplace, or they would round up their quota in the mornings before people would leave for work. There were certain exemptions that even the Jewish police would have to honor. This was just a very dangerous period in the life of the ghetto.

Rosen: You mentioned the Jewish police would come. These Jews who worked as police were working in collaboration with the Nazis?

Altman: They were not collaborators in any way. They had to check every decree with a Council of Elders, and the Council could certainly not be described as collaborators. But they knew that if the quota of people to be relocated or to be sent to different workplaces was not met, then the Germans would just retaliate by perhaps doubling the amount of people for deportation. So the Council of Elders really tried to fill those quotas that

were expected of them, because doing otherwise, not being in compliance, would have been even worse.

Rosen: The Jewish police, were they armed?

Altman: No. I don’t know if they even had sticks. They may have had, but I don’t remember.

So the days went by, and it was just keep-your-nose-to-the-ground type of existence, barely surviving, and only hoping for things to turn around on the military front, which we hoped would cause a sudden German defeat, so they would have to retreat and perhaps in that haste of retreat the ghetto might survive.

Rosen: What knowledge did you have of world events during this time?

Altman: A very good question. Very little knowledge because all our radios had been turned in. I think only one or two people, at the risk of their own lives, had retained their radios. Nobody knew who they were. At least I did not know who they were. They must have had short-wave and were able to let at least a couple of Elders know what was going on and perhaps let some friends know what was happening.

Rosen: You're in the ghetto. Now you're in the second home. Do you have any idea roughly how long you have spent there?

Altman: Yes, I do. But let me backtrack with regard to news. Yes, there were some Lithuanian newspapers that were published in the city, but they only reflected the current news scene through the eyes of the Germans, so there was great distortion in the dissemination of news with the exception of the one or two short-wave radios that were hidden in the ghetto.

But it became clear that the ghetto would be liquidated, that more mass deportations would take place. I think the ghetto population had already heard of mass executions, of extermination camps in Poland and Germany, including Dachau in Germany. The question was, which camps would be chosen for deportation for the remnant of Jews in our ghetto.

Well, my father already was thinking seriously of finding a place for me to hide, and perhaps for himself, because he knew people--Lithuanians--who perhaps might be able to help

him. But it took another catalyst to really bring this to a head.

We had another *Aktion* that took place in March of 1944. I know I have skipped over several events and many months, but this event is really indelibly imprinted on my mind forever. This was the case where two thousand children were taken away and never to be seen again. This was what I remember from that day. I forget what day of the week it was, but it was a workday. I was supposed to go to work, as I had done in the past, and work in the greenhouse. I had a little cold, and I thought, "Well, my Jewish supervisors are not going to get after me too much if I miss one day, and I'll be much better the next day and make up for the work that I didn't do today." So I decided to stay in the house. Little did I know what was going to happen an hour later.

All of a sudden, I saw a number of vans and lorries with SS soldiers parked down in the street, and they charged into every door. Soon they were at our door and demanded that every person come out and present their work passes, so that is what we did. I was there with the rest of

the people who were at home at the time, and I think it was only the elderly couple. Having seen the buses and the lorries parked down the street, they had to find a hiding place for the little girl because it was evident that she was the most vulnerable to be taken away.

Rosen: What little girl?

Altman: The little girl, the little granddaughter, who was staying with them. There were no hiding places there, no hidden chambers, no hidden attic spaces, so they had her crawl into the bed and covered her up with blankets and bedding. It took no time for the German SS to ruffle up all the bedding and look under all the tables and under all the beds, and they found the little girl. They dragged her out, and the grandmother was running after them, crying, moaning.

Rosen: The grandmother?

Altman: Yes, yes, the grandmother of the little girl.

Rosen: How old was the little girl?

Altman: She was four or five--sweet little girl. Nobody had ever been aware in the room that there was a little girl there because she was always so quiet. The grandmother wanted to board the bus with the

grandchild, but the Germans kept her at bay with their drawn guns; and they clubbed her, and she fell down on the ground. When they had rounded up all of the children they wanted, they drove off.

Well, I will tell you what happened to me. When the Germans came to the door and made everybody show their documentation, they measure me from head to toe, then asked me what I was doing at home, and I really did not have a good answer. I think I told them I had a cold and was going to go back to work tomorrow, and they just gave me a stern look and left me alone. But I think that it was about the closest call that I had had, because it could have gone either way. They picked up people at random, or I should say they picked up people randomly. There was no reason they should have left me, but they did. So, anyway, they got their quota, and the trucks left.

Everybody who had witnessed that was numb and felt nothing, just panic. The panic would not go away. The people who came back that night from work outside the ghetto did not know what had transpired during the day, and here men and women were coming back and finding their families gone.

They wailed and cried, and they mourned and blamed themselves for not being there with their children. I don’t know if my dad knew that I had planned on staying at home that day--I forgot whether I had told him or not--but we were just caught up in the grief of the rest around us. It was that event that really triggered my escape from the ghetto.

Rosen: Talk about that escape.

Altman: Well, my escape then had to be planned. My dad got in touch with a Lithuanian man who was married to a former bookkeeper of ours, who had been a very trusted, loyal, and devoted employee who had proven herself over the years. We had lost contact with her because we had been confined to the ghetto, and she had married a Lithuanian in the meantime.

Rosen: Was she Christian?

Altman: She was a Gentile, yes. She was a Lutheran. Her maiden name had been Dorloff. When I was growing up as a child, I would visit the office, and she would let me play with the typewriter and just tolerate me in a very nice way. So I had only very pleasant memories of her. My dad got in touch with

the husband, who also was connected in a minor way with the labor force in the ghetto. At this point I don’t know what his connection was, but I do know that on rare occasions he had permission to enter the ghetto.

Rosen: Let’s go back to where you said your father had contacted this former employee.

Altman: The former employee’s husband.

Rosen: The former employee’s husband. Do you know how he made contact with him?

Altman: He probably heard that this man had permission to enter the ghetto on some occasions, and he must have found out with whom this man had dealings.

Rosen: I was wondering if you had mail service of any kind?

Altman: No, there was no mail service. There was no telephone; there was no mail service. There was no electricity.

Rosen: So this was just by sheer luck that your father knew someone who could help.

Altman: Who might be able to help, yes. How this meeting was arranged, I don’t remember. I don’t even remember whether it was a face-to-face meeting or

whether it was through an intermediary based on a written message.

Rosen: At this point you're how old?

Altman: I'm still in my teens.

Rosen: Is your father acting on motivation from you, that you told him that you wanted to escape, or was he acting on his own?

Altman: It was a joint decision.

Rosen: Was this a joint decision for both of you to escape then?

Altman: First for me. Certainly, I would have encouraged it because it was the dream of every person in the ghetto to find a place to escape to. The problem was not the escape itself, which also was difficult and risky, but to have a place to come to.

Rosen: So your father made contact with the husband of this woman employee.

Altman: Yes. Over a period of weeks, this man sent word back to my father that he and his wife would be willing to give me temporary shelter provided that I could make the escape. Because they lived in the city in Kaunas themselves--Kovno--they would not be able to keep me there for very long. But as

soon as they had made arrangements for a more secluded place for me to be taken to outside the city, then they would let us know the date for which I should plan this escape. So a date was arranged for my escape and also the location where I would meet up with his wife, and then he would take it from there. My dad had good connections, because I really did not know anybody of importance in the ghetto. My dad apparently had a number of friends, people who knew and respected him from years past, on whom he could call to facilitate this escape from the ghetto for me.

The best way that was deemed appropriate was to join a work group that worked outside of the ghetto, leave the ghetto with this group, and then distance myself from the rest as they proceeded to their workplace with their leader. The best group for this purpose was one that crossed into the city by boat across the small River Neris. This was one of the work groups that had been successful in bringing in food on many other occasions because they were not as closely guarded as the other groups that had to leave through the big ghetto gate, mostly the thousands of people

who worked at the airport doing construction there. This was a small group, and the way I remember, I think they crossed in two boats, or maybe just in one. The group could not have been larger than fifteen or twenty people at the most. I don’t even know what kind of work they performed outside of the ghetto. I don’t even know who the group leader was, but it was someone whom my dad knew personally and someone whom he could trust. This man was told that I would be joining the group on a certain morning and that I would not return. He was given the responsibility to bribe the guard. I think it was a German guard--guard or guards. He was given the appropriate bribes, hoping that the guard would not turn, which had happened perhaps not with this group but had happened in other groups. If all went well, I would then cross the river with the rest of the people in the little boat. I think it was a row boat, certainly not a motorized boat. I don’t know for sure. It must have been a row boat. Then I would have to find somebody who worked in this work detail to remove the yellow star in back of me, which was pinned on, and I would remove the

star in front by myself. But I had to trust somebody to do this for me.

Also, I would like to mention that I knew that I could not tell anybody about this escape because I would endanger their life as well--any friends in the ghetto. Even family, I could not tell, and my father impressed upon me, also--he was very adamant--that I was not supposed to tell anybody.

Rosen: **Did you want to tell anybody?**

Altman: **Yes, I did want to tell. I wanted to tell Reletta, my friend, who was still in the ghetto, and I wanted to tell the young man upstairs who had become a good friend since then, since we moved into this new place. I wanted to tell him. Really, I felt disloyal toward my dad because he had gone to all this trouble, to arrange this tremendous amount of logistics, just to bring this escape about, but I did tell these two. It was a confidence. It was the ultimate confidence. I had the ultimate trust in them. I knew that they would not betray the trust because I just didn't want to be gone the next day and the next week without having told them. But I didn't tell my cousins, my**

aunt, or my uncles. They were to be told later. So the day of the escape came and...

Rosen: **Do you remember when that was?**

Altman: **No, I don't even remember the day, but it was shortly after the children's *Aktion*. It may have been just a matter of weeks. It may have been less than a month. I went to the place of assembly, the bank of the river, and I joined the group. There was a very nice young woman there whom I knew, whom I could trust, who had been one of my mother's nurses in the past, and she was happy to help me and wished me well in my escape. In the boat she was sitting behind me, and she took off the yellow star. I know my heart was trembling all across the river crossing.**

Once ashore--maybe a few hundred feet from the shore--after I had stayed behind discreetly, hiding or trying to hide behind a tree or a bush, I walked out into the street and walked a few hundred feet, and according to plan our friend, the lady, the former bookkeeper, was waiting for me in a hired cab, with a horse and buggy. There she was, and I quickly jumped in. We hardly exchanged a word of greeting, and we took off. She

must have told the coachman, the driver, where to take us, and he took us to her place. She paid him, and we went upstairs and just collapsed, both of us. That part of the escape had gone well.

Rosen: When you were planning this escape, what were your feelings?

Altman: On one hand, I felt so fortunate to be able to have a prospect of a successful escape and a place to hide. On the other hand, I felt very sad to be leaving my father behind because I didn’t know what his future was going to be. At least I had a chance at life, and I didn’t know what his chances would be.

Rosen: At this point, in making the escape, your father had been encouraging and helpful in this, in planning the escape for you. Did you know if he was planning an escape for himself?

Altman: No, not at that time because they were afraid. The farm family that I was ultimately going to be living with was afraid to take on a Jewish male adult.

Rosen: So at this point, you only knew that you would survive. You had no idea if you’d ever see your father again.

Altman: That’s very true.

Rosen: How did you feel about that? What I’m trying to ask you is that at this point you had no family left. Your mother had already died; you have no siblings. Your cousins are maybe somewhere in the ghetto. Yet you’re going to stay with some people who are friends or business associates...

Altman: Or strangers.

Rosen: ...or strangers. How did you feel about what your future held?

Altman: As uncertain as the future was, those people who had a chance of escaping certainly had a better chance of survival, and that was everybody’s most fervent wish.

Rosen: You mentioned your most fervent wish. Something changed in your attitude there, a new perception over the years, because you mentioned that when you feared that your mother would be sent to the side where people would be condemned to die, you would have been willing to die with her. But now you were willing to leave your father and whatever fate might await him. So there you were taking the action to save yourself.

Altman: Right. Let’s stop a second so I can think. [Tape turned off] It became the ultimate imperative to save anybody regardless of family ties, because it was better to save just one person. Why do I have such a hard time expressing myself? It was better that one person should live than for a whole family to die.

Rosen: It sounds like your attitude toward life, then, had changed.

Altman: Well, survival was still everybody’s ultimate objective.

Rosen: Mrs. Altman, had you been closer to your mother or to your father?

Altman: I think on balance, I had been a little closer to my father, not to take anything away from my mother. Maybe it’s because--this may not even be true--daughters sometimes get closer to their fathers, and sons sometimes can be closer to their mothers.

Rosen: And was that the case back then?

Altman: I think so. On balance, perhaps. It weighed a little heavier toward my father. And I loved my mother dearly.

Rosen: Okay. You made your escape after the roundup of the children. That was in March of 1944, so your escape was sometime in March or April, approximately, of 1944. You chronicled how you ended up with a family on a farm. What happened at that point there?

Altman: At first I stayed in the city for a few weeks. My hosts were socially quite prominent, and they often gave parties. They couldn't just hide me away forever, and, also, they had to take in a German SS woman as a tenant because housing was so tight. Even the SS personnel couldn't always requisition whole apartments. Since she was a minor official, probably a non-commissioned officer, she was just assigned a room in their very spacious and very nice apartment in Kaunas. They couldn't just hide me away, so I took on the new identity of being their maid, which was the reversal in roles, which was something that I had absolutely no objection to because I was eternally grateful to them for just taking me in and assuming such a great risk in harboring a Jew. So what I did, I helped clean the house, and I helped to prepare the meals, and I helped prepare

refreshments if they had a party. I remember two incidents that look funny in retrospect. Once I was mixing up mayonnaise in the kitchen, and my hostess had a visitor, a good friend of hers who was going to be a guest at the party and who was also German. She was a civilian German who worked for the German government. She certainly was not a Nazi because my host and friends were not Nazis either. What she said to my hostess was, "So I see you have a new maid. She seems to be very good. She also seems to look somewhat different, and she seems to look very intelligent. Where did you find her?" I didn't even wait for the answer. My face just turned red as a beet, and I hurried out of the kitchen as quickly as I could. Once I had composed myself, I came back. Nothing was said, and I just resumed my work. I don't think my hostess told her who I was, because even though she was a trusted friend, it was just a little too close for comfort.

That prompted my host family to find transportation to the village as soon as possible because it seemed too dangerous to have me stay in

the city, and I had no papers, forged or otherwise.

Rosen: You said that you had two stories that came to mind.

Altman: Yes. The other one was when I went to clean the room of this German woman, the young non-commissioned SS officer. She was such an arrogant, brazen person who looked down on anybody who was not German, Jews or otherwise, as just a sub-human race. I pretended that I didn’t understand a word of German. She had left a baby behind, a child born out of wedlock, I found out later, because that was Hitler’s quest--to breed the superior race. He was pairing up eligible females with eligible males for the survival and propagation of this super race. Since I pretended that I didn’t know what she was saying, she would talk down to me as if I were a stupid, illiterate, Lithuanian peasant girl who did not clean her room properly. But she would show off the picture of this baby and how proud she was of the baby and Hitler and the master race. She tried to communicate that at a very low level to me. She, herself, was a rather uneducated person, and it seemed so incongruous

that here I was cleaning her room. But, anyway, that is just an aside.

Rosen: You sound amused by the incident.

Altman: Yes, it was amusing at the time because here was a very uneducated German woman in uniform who all of sudden had become a member of the master race and was giving orders to all the sub-humans she had the power over.

Rosen: It is interesting that you could find humor in a situation that could be a very frightening one. If you were caught, the consequences would have been severe.

Altman: Well, the consequences would have been severe, but she didn’t suspect anything other than that I was the new maid.

Rosen: When you were living there in the city, how did you feel about your security there?

Altman: Well, I was worried about my security, but I was also worried about my host’s security. I certainly did not want to endanger their lives, and I understood the great sacrifice that they were making in even giving me this refuge.

Rosen: Were you able to get any information about your father or what was going on back in the ghetto?

Altman: Yes, yes. The man was able to bring back word from my father that he was fine, that he was really very relieved that I was no longer there in the ghetto. At the same time, he was hoping that another place could be found for me in a more remote area so it would lessen the danger to all of us.

Rosen: I want to backtrack here for one moment and go on with your tale. You mentioned that when you escaped from the ghetto, there were two people that you told--your girlfriend, Reletta, and the young man who was above you. Was there any romantic interest involved in all of this?

Altman: Well, we had become very good friends, and perhaps there was a little romance, just in its beginning stages.

Rosen: Do you know whatever became of him?

Altman: Yes, I do. He survived, and he wrote a book. His book is filled with incredible details about his experiences in the ghetto. Unfortunately, I don't have such recall. He called it ***Kaddish for Kovno***. It's still in print and very good.

Rosen: All right, on with your story. Because of the potential for you being caught, you mentioned that

the host family was looking to move you to a village, to a smaller area?

Altman: Yes, that is correct. The host family, the husband, had originally come from a small farm, and this farm was now run by his brothers and his mother. So that was the decision made, and it was part of the original plan that I would be taken to that estate. It was a really good-sized farm because they called it an estate. So one day his driver, a truck driver, came; and my host and the truck driver and I set out on a journey to this farm. I don’t know how many kilometers it was from Kaunas, or Kovno. I don’t remember how many hours we traveled, but it seemed like a long journey. Maybe we were on the road four or five hours.

Rosen: Do you remember when this was?

Altman: No, I don’t even remember the month.

Rosen: Do you have any idea how long you had been with the host family in the city?

Altman: Oh, I was there maybe two to three weeks initially.

Rosen: The city that you were in with the host family, what was it?

Altman: It was still Kaunas [Kovno in Russian]. It was outside the ghetto.

Rosen: So you were with the host family for, you say, about two or three weeks?

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: So we are looking at sometime in the late spring or summer of 1944 then.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: So you make this trip to the village.

Altman: Yes, I think that it was in the early spring. I had a real shock when I got to this farm because there I was pressed to go to work immediately doing farm work, which I had never done before. I had never been around farm animals; I had never baked bread before in great quantities; I had never fed the chickens; I had never gone to the river to bring in buckets of water for washing or cooking purposes. So I quickly got my lesson in farm work. The family consisted of the oldest brother there, who was running the farm, and his mother, who was the reigning matriarch and who was really assigning work as well as her oldest son.

Rosen: This is the oldest brother of the...

Altman: Of my host, yes. Then there were two younger brothers. They were unmarried, and I think they were both in their twenties. Life started taking shape. I was assigned a little room. I also had another surprise there.

I found a little Jewish girl there. She was about five years old, and her name Manya. I found out later that her last name was Stein. At least that's what she was called there. Was she called Manya, or was she called Marite? I forgot. Well, she had been told that I was coming, and I didn't like that because I didn't want anybody else to know that there was a Jewish person there on the premises.

So even though she was very glad to see me, and she kept asking...she was the most precocious child because children in the ghetto matured very quickly and beyond their years. For all I know, she may have been six years old or maybe even seven. So when there was nobody else around, she anxiously started asking about her parents in the ghetto. I would say, "I don't know what you are talking about," and, "No, I don't know them." I finally started impressing upon her never to ask

these questions again, never to mention words like “ghetto” again; and never, never, never to ask me these things again. I also told her that I would take care of her the best I could, but that was one subject we could never talk about again. I think she tried once or twice more, and then she never did it again.

When I found her, she was in such a sad state of appearance. Her clothes were torn, and I don’t know if she had shoes or not. Yes, I think she did have shoes. But she was full of lice, head lice. I think she had lice in her clothes, too. I found out very quickly that everybody who lived on the premises was lice-infested because sanitary conditions there were nonexistent. It was strange to say that even while in the ghetto, where many people had already been infected with lice, I had still been able to keep myself clean, as far as lice were concerned. The minute I set foot on that farm, the lice got the better of me, but I figured I could deal with the lice. They wouldn’t kill me, and they didn’t.

Rosen: It sounds like you and the girl had a special bond.

Altman: Yes, that is very true. We did have a special bond.

Well, let me tell you about the farm work. The farm work was back-breaking, not because I was a novice but because work started at dawn and ended at dusk. The food that was given the field hands, of whom I was a part, was very meager. The family ate quite well and didn't eat at the same time as the field hands. Among the field hands, there were, I believe, four or five Russian prisoners of war, and they had been deserters. They were Ukrainians. I suspect that they were Ukrainian deserters, with the exception of one. Then there was an old farm worker who had lived on the estate for all of his life. I guess today you would call him in indentured servant.

Rosen: You mentioned the Russian POWs, and then you say Ukrainians. Were you just being more specific? There were Ukrainians, not Russians.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: I see.

Altman: Then there was a tenant couple, a husband and his wife. I think he was the assistant manager of the estate.

Rosen: And the work you performed...

Altman: Well, the work consisted of feeding the animals. There were horses and cows, and I was learning how to milk the cows. I never became proficient at that. Even after many tries, I was the slowest worker. The other people had to help me with the milking of the cows. I did the laundry, the big homespun linen sheets, and that was done in the river, and they were hung outside to dry. That was done for a large family, but sanitary conditions were not really that important to them, so laundry was not done that often.

Rosen: At this point in 1944, you are shortly before your twentieth birthday. You're nineteen years old at the time. How did the family treat you?

Altman: I didn't have a close relationship with anybody except Manya. Later on, another woman came. She was a sister to the brothers. I feel sort of uncomfortable to say that, on the one hand, she was very good to me; but on the other hand, I think she was a lesbian. Since later on I shared a bed with her, she did try several advances toward me. But I could live with that as long as my life was not in danger. She also was very good in that

she asked me if I had any friends that I felt would be able to escape, and she would certainly be able to provide shelter for them. She had been a teacher in an adjoining community, and she was very well-educated. She had excellent connections. She knew all of the parish priests, and she could obtain forged documents. She was able to obtain a forged document for me that gave me a different identity and gave me some legitimacy. So even though she did have lesbian tendencies, she was very good to me.

Rosen: And your relationship with the other people on the farm?

Altman: Very distant. Very distant. Speaking about the teacher, I told her about my friend Reletta, who had returned to the ghetto after not being able to cope being away from her family, from her mother and brother. I told her that perhaps I could persuade her to try it one more time. Reletta was really the only one I could think of who would be able to blend into the environment because she would not have a language problem and also could be passed off as another farm girl. So I do want

to emphasize that the sister tried to be helpful. So, yes, she treated me in a friendly manner.

The others in the family did not deliberately mistreat me, but it was just that the workload was so immense and hard. I wasn't used to working without any reprieve in going from one job to another and baking every other day these huge loaves of bread and the churning of the butter and, when it came to harvest time, in the field and the food preparation. It seemed to be too much for one person, but, by the same token, I knew I still had my life. I still knew I could get six hours of sleep and wake up in the morning without a gun behind my back.

The field hands got very little food. We did have our bread and our warm cereal in the morning, but very little meat. Very soon I started losing some weight and also showed some signs of malnutrition. I developed open and running sores in my legs which are caused by malnutrition. In a way it was ironic that all the time I had been in the ghetto, I had not developed any signs of malnutrition, had not suffered the infestation of lice. Then I came to this place, and I started

showing signs of malnutrition and was infested with body lice.

Rosen: Did you ever think about returning to the ghetto?

Altman: No! Oh, no! I knew that what I had was far superior than what awaited me in the ghetto.

Rosen: Mrs. Altman, how long did you spend on the farm?

Altman: I think it was about five or six months total.

Rosen: Which would take us to late 1944.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: What happened then?

Altman: Well, this happened during the time of the reversals for the Germans on all of their frontiers. Even though I didn’t have a radio, I could sense that the Russians were advancing, and that was my hope, that the Russians would advance quickly enough or fast enough to push the Germans out and for me to be alive when they came.

Rosen: On the farm what were your living conditions like, as far as the room you stayed in? Did you have a room?

Altman: Well, really, I had a cot. At one time I had a cot in the room that I shared with Manya. I had a straw mattress and a blanket. It was very cold. So those were the living conditions.

Rosen: Was this in the main house?

Altman: Yes, it was in the main house.

Rosen: You said you lived on the farm for approximately five or six months. You hoped that the Russians were coming. You didn’t have a source of news, as far as a radio was concerned. Did you have any sources of information about the Russians driving back the Germans or about German defeats?

Altman: Well, there were some telltale signs on the farm. Some city relatives started arriving with their families because they were afraid that the Russian offensive would find them in their homes. They did not want to be caught by the Russians a second time. They were planning to retreat with the German military when the time came.

Rosen: You mentioned caught by the Russians a second time.

Altman: Well, the first time was in 1940.

Rosen: In 1940?

Altman: Yes. The Russians were in occupation for about a year.

Rosen: Okay, so you had more family members moving to the farm. Did you hear any news from people talking about the war?

Altman: Yes, I probably caught snatches of conversation indicating that it was a question of days before the Russian army would advance and occupy not only the capital but the neighboring communities.

Rosen: The farm that you were working on, did it provide food solely for the people on the farm, or did it provide food also for others?

Altman: I believe that the food was for the sole provision of the people who owned it.

Rosen: I was wondering if maybe the farm output or what you were producing was going toward feeding the military.

Altman: No. It is conceivable that they also had to provide the military with whatever they had. I personally was not aware of that, but it is quite conceivable.

Rosen: What happened that you left the farm?

Altman: What happened after I left the farm?

Rosen: Well, what happened that caused you to leave the farm?

Altman: Oh, I didn’t.

Rosen: Well, you’ve gone to late 1944. You said you were there for five or six months.

Altman: I stayed there until the Russians reoccupied.

Rosen: So Russia reoccupied Lithuania, or this portion of Lithuania, in late 1944?

Altman: No, early 1945, really.

Rosen: Really.

Altman: Yes, either late 1944 or early 1945. Well, let me tell you about the host family. The relatives who came to the farm from the cities to find shelter from possible shelling had left with the Germans as they were retreating, and the only people who stayed were the elderly mother and the daughter.

Rosen: So you were pretty much abandoned on the farm by most of the members of the host family when the Russians approached.

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: How did you feel about the impending invasion by the Russians.

Altman: Oh, I was extremely happy. I was jubilant because there was no more danger to my life anymore.

Rosen: When the family was moving in, that is, members of the family from the city, did that create any tension or hostility?

Altman: Yes, I could feel some tension, I think. Some of them suspected that I was not an ordinary field hand. They probably knew that the host family was

harboring at least one Jew. I don’t know if they knew about little Manya, who was...what am I trying to say? Her occupation was...you’ve heard of a shepherd. Well, instead of herding the sheep, she was herding the pigs. I think her cover was the fact she also spoke very good Russian, that she was at least a Russian waif who had been lost during this constant turmoil of war. That was her cover.

Rosen: Did Manya stay with you, then, when the Russians came?

Altman: Yes. Yes, she did. Among the first occupying forces, there was a Russian military hospital contingent which had a number of Jews on its staff. There were several doctors, there were several nurses, and there were several pharmacists. Because it was a large field hospital, they chose this farm as their headquarters.

Once they found out that there were two Jews that were rescued--they had heard about the atrocities already--they just embraced us like long lost sisters. They could not do enough for us once we told them what had happened to us. We

could shed our forged identity. They showered us with food and gifts and did what they could for us. But they were in a temporary field position, also, so they could not do more than what they did. They wanted us to stay in touch with them so we could call them. Once they got into a stable position, they could perhaps look out for us again.

The reason all the young people had left with the Germans--our hosts had left--is because they were afraid of the Russians. Perhaps some of them had been German collaborators. I don’t know. But they certainly were no friends of the Russians. They felt that exile to Siberia was the best thing that they could expect to happen to them. Perhaps they were also afraid of some revenge from the Russian-Ukrainian prisoners of war because they really abused them so much. They had worked them like slaves.

Rosen: You are talking about the other field hands?

Altman: Yes, the Russian prisoners of war. Yes, those who were working on the farm--the field hands. These were not the Lithuanian field hands. I didn’t feel

that the Lithuanian field hands were abused as much as the Russian POWs.

In fact, the Ukrainians suspected me of being Jewish, and they taunted me occasionally: “What’s this Jew girl doing here on the farm?” I was really very afraid of them--that they would give away my cover. Fortunately, there was one of them who, I think, was a White Russian...I know that he was not a Ukrainian. He may have been a Communist, whereas the Ukrainians are known for being very anti-Russian because even now they want to secede from Greater Russia. They were nationalists. I don’t know anything about their background--whether they had belonged to a Ukrainian renegade division that actually aligned themselves with the German side during World War II. I had a feeling that they held no good feelings toward me. Also, I was aloof enough so they could not banter and joke around with me like they would’ve done with the ordinary Lithuanian field hand. That did not please them. The only one who would look after me was this one Russian, whose name was Vassily. I don’t remember the last name.

Rosen: **He was the White Russian?**

Altman: Yes, I think he was a White Russian. He kept the others in check, so he must have had a much higher rank than the other four, and they still respected that even though they were in captivity. Vassily kept the others at bay. He was a very fine man. He was a medical student. I don't know how many years of medical school he had, but he was able to tend to my running sores and the infections that had taken place. I don't even remember what he used, whether he just washed and cleaned them. Life was so primitive there that even hot water was often a luxury. I want to say one thing about Vassily. He never laid a hand on me. He was a *true gentleman*. Again, he was the one who protected me from the rest.

Rosen: You mentioned that in the field he didn't lay a hand on you. You imply that perhaps others might have tried or wanted to. Did that happen?

Altman: Yes, it did happen. One of the brothers--I think that he was next to the youngest--on several occasions tried to rape me. We were all sleeping in the main house, and on several occasions he came into my room. He didn't rape me or try to rape me in the room that I was sleeping in, but he

tried to make me follow him to his room. I was in a terrible situation. I certainly didn't want voluntarily to follow him to his room, but, on the other hand, I didn't want to shout and yell in the middle of the night and wake up the whole household because I didn't know what the consequences would be for me. So on two occasions, I had no option but to follow him to this room where he did try to rape me, and on both occasions I fought him off. He did not fully rape me, but certainly was trying to.

Rosen: How unfortunate a position, when you had both brother and sister going after you.

Altman: Yes. The sister, I could cope with; the brother was really much harder to fight off. The sister, I just submitted myself to her--that I could cope with. But it was a very strange situation, in addition to everything else.

Rosen: The Russians came in early 1945. You mentioned they liberated the farm, or overran the farm, and then a medical team with a number of Jewish doctors and medics came in and provided attention to you and Manya. But they were a mobile unit and

had to go on further, following the troops. So where does that leave you?

Altman: That left me on the farm. The mother and daughter were still there--the schoolteacher and her mother--and they were hoping to reap the benefits of the two Jewish souls that they had saved that now we could receive food on their behalf from the Russians. What evolved was that the mother asked me if I would travel to the next county seat and look up Vassily, who had become something like a commissar for the whole district. Since he had a lot of power in his new position, I could get certain privileges, and they wanted me to get certain privileges for them. I don't remember exactly what kind of privileges. There were rumors that landowners would be deported again to Siberia, so they thought that because they had saved two Jewish girls, that would be in their favor. The other privileges included rationing cards and whatever might have been the case. So I said that I would be glad to intercede for them.

They loaded up a horse and buggy and gave me a driver and filled it with wonderful rare delicacies like vodka, smoked bacon, and smoked

meat--the like of which we had never seen before while we were on that farm--and they sent me off with their fervent hopes that I would be able to intercede in their behalf. I made the trip--it may have been an hour trip, or maybe it was longer because, after all, it was a horse and buggy--and I got to the county seat. I was ushered into Vassily's office, and he was very glad to see me.

Rosen: What city was this?

Altman: The city's name was Marijampole. The city may be a medium-sized city of perhaps 55,000 people today. Then, it may have been half that size.

I was ushered into Vassily's office, and he asked what he could do for me. Anything he would have gladly done for me, but I said that it was not in my behalf that I came to see him but on behalf of the owners of the farm. He got so angry; he was furious. He said, "Of all the people, you are coming to me to ask for favors for them? Don't you remember how they mistreated every one of us? And you are here to ask for favors for them? I will not lift one finger for them!" I said, "Well, look, they did endanger their lives in hiding Manya and me." He said, "Whatever they did for

you, you do not owe them anything." I was disappointed, but I could not change his mind. I got back from a mission that I did not accomplish. So now the two women were very angry.

Rosen: Angry with you?

Altman: Angry with me. They said, "Well, in that case you will have to pick up and leave now." So I got Manya, and I don't even know if we had a suitcase or not. Between the two of us, we didn't have many belongings. We walked to the next major road and just hitchhiked our way back to Kaunas. We didn't know what we would find; we didn't know if there would be any Jews left or anybody who would give us shelter. But we were hopeful that, as long as nobody was there to shoot us, we would survive whatever lay ahead.

Rosen: Did you know if the Russians had already marched through?

Altman: Yes, we knew that the town was already secured. That I had found out from Vassily.

Rosen: When you got back to Kaunas, what did you find?

Altman: Well, the situation there was pretty much like the situation that you would find after a battle. All city services were disrupted. People were milling

around in the streets--many homeless. I was holding Manya's hand, hoping to find a link with a Jewish agency of some sort, somebody who could direct us or could give us shelter and some food. How we did that, I don't even remember exactly. I know I found some friends who briefed me on who had survived, and they also briefed me on the fact that the people in the ghetto had been deported and that the women had been sent to one concentration camp called Stutthof near Danzig, or Gdansk. Stutthof was one of the most diabolic camps that one has ever heard of--that was possibly imagined.

The men, including my father, had been deported to Dachau in Bavaria. I also heard that my dad had tried to break away from the crowd as they were being loaded onto the cattle cars, and that he was wounded in his futile attempt to escape. I didn't know whether it was a superficial wound or whether it was something more serious, so I didn't really know what my dad's fate was--other than that somebody had seen him and that was reported.

Eventually, Manya found one of her mother's cousins, who took her off my hands because I didn't have shelter and I didn't know how to provide for myself. I didn't know how to provide for two of us. Her cousin didn't want to take her because she didn't have shelter, and she was in the same predicament that I was in. She was pretty angry with me that I wanted to give up responsibility for Manya, but that was the case. I don't know, if Manya sees me today, how she would feel about me.

Rosen: You never stayed in contact with her?

Altman: I never was able to locate her, but I understand that she is now living in Israel.

Rosen: You heard that your father was deported to Dachau, and now you are left alone in Kaunas. What's your next move?

Altman: My next move was to find a job to get a ration card. The only way to find a job under Russian occupation was if you had friends who had friends. So I had a friend of a friend who knew someone in a Russian clinic, in a railway clinic, a clinic that took care of railway employees. She was a doctor there, and she needed somebody--I think

that it really was make-believe work, for it was really made-to-order for me--who needed to check the soup kitchen for the railroad employees to make sure that they served nourishing soup to the employees--to railroad watchmen, to the engineer, and whatever other train crews. I had this wonderful job of going from soup kitchen to soup kitchen checking the soup and, in the process, feeding myself. I found shelter in a friend of a friend's house, where I was assigned a very small sleeping space. At least I had a roof over my head.

Rosen: How long did that last?

Altman: That may have lasted less than a year.

Rosen: Most of 1945?

Altman: Yes.

Rosen: What did you find out about your father?

Altman: Nothing else. Just that he was deported to Dachau, if he made it that far.

Rosen: Did you try to find out what had happened at Dachau, if he in fact had gone to Dachau, and, if so, what had happened to him?

Altman: There was no way to get any news from the American sector, even after the war had ended. There was no

mail, no telephone, nothing. At least it was not available to the ordinary citizen.

Rosen: **You had mentioned earlier that you had several cousins in the ghetto. When you came back, you obviously found that your father was gone. Did you find relatives alive?**

Altman: **I found a very distant relative about whom I'll say something later, but my close relatives were deported. The uncle and aunt who did not have children were deported to a camp in Estonia, where they perished while I was still in the ghetto. It was during one of the smaller so-called *Aktions*. My widowed aunt and her two daughters, I found out later, had been deported to Stutthof with the rest of the women. My aunt and one of the cousins died there, and the other cousin lives in Dallas. The uncle with the two little boys and his wife were separated. I don't know where the aunt and the younger son were sent--which camp they were sent to--but my uncle and the older son were sent to Dachau. I heard that my little cousin was able to survive for a short period in Dachau, where he often went to work with the men; but during one of the searches, he was singled out and taken away,**

not to return. The uncle did survive, but in the process he had lost a wife and two young sons. I did see him after the war. He was a very broken man.

Rosen: Did you ever find out what happened to your father?

Altman: Yes. My father survived. Apparently, the bullet that hit him only grazed him. He was able to join the transport, and somebody bandaged him. The transport in itself, I understand, was a gruesome, gruesome journey in which many people died. Dachau in itself was another more gruesome experience, but he and his brother stayed together most of the time. I think that by giving each other moral support, that helped both of them. Both of them survived.

Rosen: How long was it before you found out about your father’s survival?

Altman: It was a long time. I had already made my way to Italy, which was another episode. This odyssey may have taken six months from the time I left Kaunas with the help of an underground Jewish network. They helped those who did not want to remain in the Soviet Union and, more often than not, wanted

to emigrate to Palestine. Those of us who were helped by this underground network made our way either to Italy or Austria or Germany. I happened to make my way to Italy. When I got there--again, I have lost complete track of time when that was--that's when I found out--let's say sometime in 1946--either through the Red Cross or through the grapevine that my father had survived and that he was looking for me.

Rosen: Did you ever get to see him again?

Altman: Yes. We connected in Italy.

Rosen: In that same time period? Same area?

Altman: Yes, it must have been 1946.

Rosen: You wanted to leave through an underground that took people off to Palestine. Was your goal at that time to leave for Palestine?

Altman: Yes, it was.

Rosen: Why didn't you want to stay in Kaunas?

Altman: There was no real future for me. I probably could have completed my education, but, even so, it was a very bleak existence. I had no family there. Also, from my previous encounters with the Soviet occupation--I was already old enough to understand

this--if there was a better future someplace else, it was not a good idea to remain there.

Rosen: Why Palestine?

Altman: Well, it was the rallying point for the future home of the Jews. It would've given all of the homeless a home again.

Rosen: Did you end up making it to Palestine?

Altman: Not quite. When I connected with my dad, I originally was on a model training farm, which is known as a *kibbutz*, for youngsters my age to be trained for future work on a *kibbutz* in Israel, where we would be doing agricultural work. He stayed with me on this *kibbutz*. He was welcome to stay there. It was not really a *kibbutz*; it was only an imitation of what might be in Israel in the real setting. But he did not feel comfortable in that setting. His main hope was to see his sister again in the United States and perhaps try and make a new life for himself and hoping that I would make a new life for myself in the United States as well. In the beginning I was really not too keen on doing that because I had very strong Zionist leanings. In the final analysis, I did not

want to be separated from my father again. He had done so much to ensure that I would survive.

Rosen: Looking back on your time in the ghetto, I've read where a number of people have often given up hope for survival. Did you ever give up hope for survival?

Altman: Well, I may not have ever given up hope for survival, but I wanted to prepare myself for the moment of death if it did occur. I wanted to accomplish that for myself. I didn't have poison, but I did have a razor blade that I kept in a little coin purse. But every time I opened my coin purse, I would cut myself, so finally I threw it away.

Rosen: It seems like you did more harm to yourself accidentally than intentionally. I don't know if you ever felt like you were on the run from the Nazis when you were in the ghetto.

Altman: Well, that was the feeling all of us had. In the ghetto there was always the feeling of just being a hunted deer or a hunted animal.

Rosen: Looking back now, why do you think you survived? You talk about several incidents where maybe you just got lucky, perhaps, when the Nazis came in

and found you at home that day and were rounding up children, when you could've been rounded up at any time or turned in. Why do you think you survived?

Altman: I don't have an answer for that. This is not for me to answer, I don't think.

Rosen: Did you ever see anyone commit suicide, or do you know of people who committed suicide?

Altman: Yes, I heard of people committing suicide. I did not know them personally, but they were friends of friends.

Rosen: Where was this?

Altman: That was in the ghetto.

Rosen: What did you think about that when you heard of people committing suicide?

Altman: Well, I could rationalize it. I could very well understand it.

Rosen: Why not for yourself?

Altman: Well, because I was still hoping for another chance.

Rosen: It seems like your hopes got you through.

Altman: Oh, yes. Everybody hopes. Most everybody hopes for another chance--or a chance.

Rosen: When you made your escape, it seems like that was a turning point in your time in the Holocaust--not only in terms of gaining some sort of freedom but also in terms of your own attitude to take action as opposed to submission.

Altman: I don’t know how to reflect on that, because the action was taken for me. I didn’t help with the planning, but I was an actor in the play. The rest of my behavior was dictated by the circumstances.

Rosen: When you made your escape, was it your idea, or was it someone else’s idea?

Altman: Yes, it was certainly my idea. Also, it was not enough to have an idea. One had to have help to carry out an idea.

Rosen: You were an instigator here. You were a motivating factor. It’s not like forces were playing on you.

Altman: Everybody, every single soul, in the ghetto wished to escape, so I was no different from anybody else in wishing to escape.

Rosen: But you were different when you took action.

Altman: I was different, but I had the advantages that others didn’t. That’s how I was different.

Rosen: I think you’re being modest. Well, we can wrap this up soon, and I want to thank you for

participating in this interview. I believe that this interview will help others to learn more about the Holocaust--not only how it occurred but how one deals with it.

Altman: I thank you, Keith. I am very grateful that you asked me to participate in this venture. There are, of course, many incidents which are never mentioned, and they may have been sort of personal high points or personal low points that were connected with everybody else. It is my wish, too, that this tragic major event that was perpetrated on the Jews by one madman should never have a sequel. It is for this reason that we must remind others of what happened, and what might happen unless we don’t let it happen again.

Rosen: Mrs. Altman, you said one thing I’d like to ask about. You mentioned the one madman. Do you hold any bitterness toward anyone? If so, whom and why?

Altman: I hold bitterness to the generation of Germans who were actively involved in carrying out the orders of Hitler to destroy the Jews. I don’t hold any bitterness toward their children or descendants. I am often asked if I can forgive them. Even though I may be tempted to say I can forgive for myself,

in my name, I certainly cannot forgive in the name of those who have no voice.

Rosen: **Thank you.**

[End of interview]