Museum of History and Holocaust Education
Tosia Schneider interview
Conducted by James Newberry
Transcribed by Mykael Letourneau, MHHE Intern Summer 2015
July 8, 2014

Full Transcript

Interviewer: This is James Newberry. I'm here with Tosia Schneider on Tuesday July 8, 2014 at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University. And Mrs. Schneider do you agree to this interview?

Schneider: Yes indeed, indeed.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. Please state your full name.

Schneider: My name is Tosia Schneider.

Interviewer: And when and where were you born?

Schneider: I was born in 1928 in a little resort town Zaleszczyki on the Dniester River, in Poland. Today this is part of the Ukraine.

Interviewer: Uh, could you tell me a little bit about your family, your family life?

Schneider: Um, in that little town lived my grandmother, my uncle, um uh Rosenbaum and two cousins. Uh my father worked in export and exported at the time. It used to be a beautiful resort area, they called it the Rivera of Poland they grew grapes in a town which was most unusual. I was a very happy child.

Interviewer: And, uh, you said, your fath-, what did your father do for a living?

Schneider: At that time he was working in egg export business.

Interviewer: And what about your mother?

Schneider: My mother was a teacher but when we were young she stayed at home with the children.

Interviewer: Okay, what role did Judaism, and your faith play in your early life?

Schneider: Uh, the early life all I remember is the hol-, actually one beautiful memory is going traveling to neighboring town of Horodenka my mother's home place for a uh Passover Seder for a Passover meal. And the whole family, my mother's family was there. My grandfather in a white silken robe as was customary, reclining on a, on a pillow. All the children and grandchildren were there. My grandfather gave each child before the service a tiny little glass cup for wine. And I was so proud that I had my own wine glass. I recall just reading and the songs, I fell asleep long before it ended, but it was one of the happiest memories of my childhood.

Interviewer: Did you go to a Jewish school?

Schneider: Uh, when we, when I was six we moved to my mother's hometown of Horodenka, at that time I started elementary, Polish elementary school every morning and every afternoon from three to five, Hebrew school.

Interviewer: And, um, did you experience, uh, Anti-Semitism in Horodenka?

Schneider: Uh, it was subtle but it was there. Uh, 1935, when uh, um, when uh, um, President Piłsudski died, and uh, the right wing party took over, uh there were some, um, laws propagated that were definitely, uh, anti-Semitic, like forbidden, uh, uh, ritual slaughter forbidden. Which for my grandmother was the very bad situation. Uh, um, by then what I recall really was really painful is one time seeing my father outside with a brush trying to get graffiti off our, our house. And on that graffiti was "Precz z Zydami," "Out with the Jews." And it was especially painful for my father because in 1920, when Poland was fighting for its independence, my father joined after fighting in the First World War, he joined the Polish Army. Um, to fight for Polish independence. And it was extremely painful for him to see this on our home.

Interviewer: So, that's because he was, he went to fight for Poland…

Schneider: Right.

Interviewer: …and then Polish people near were, were painting this sign on your house?

Schneider: Exactly, plus we heard that Po- or Jewish students at universities um, were, were discriminated against, they had special benches for them in the back and out of protest they used to stand rather than sit. Uh, it was, they um, picked up a great deal of uh, anti-Semitism and oppression for the Germans from across the border.

Interviewer: Could you talk about the numerous clauses?

Schneider: Uh, yes numerous clauses in schools, indeed.

Interviewer: And, uh, what did it do?

Schneider: First of all, a small number of students could attend universities and then, uh, the creed came that you could only sit in the back seat of the classroom. So, in protest they used to stand through the lectures and would not sit down.

Interviewer: The Jewish students?

Schneider: The Jewish students, yes.

Interviewer: Um, were there other examples of anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish feeling? Um, attacks on, you know, your Jewish school? That sort of thing?

Schneider: Uh, well, uh yes. I remember playing outside and there were some rocks thrown from the nearby, um, Ukrainian Church. Uh, nothing really very oppressive, just,

um, the feeling in the air, that there was anti-Semitism and prejudice against our people.

Interviewer: Was your town predominantly Jewish?

Schneider: Um, I would say forty percent. And, um, then there were the Ukrainian population and the Polish, of course.

Interviewer: Uh when did you become aware of the Nazi's rise in Germany?

Schneider: I had an uncle who lived in Leipzig, Germany and the letters were coming from him, uh, um, and, uh, the family would get together and worry what's going to happen. And he used to say that his boss was a Nazi but that, um, he would protect him. He liked him very much, well it turned out I think it was sometime in 1938, where they rounded up all Polish Jews, uh, who had Polish passports and drove them to the Polish border, and um, for a while there was very ugly because the Poles didn't want to let them in and for weeks they stayed in mud hut, and um, on the border between Poland and Germany and eventually, um, they were allowed to come into Poland.

Interviewer: And was your uncle one of them?

Schneider: Yes, my uncle was among them, indeed.

Interviewer: And what, how did he feel at that point?

Schneider: Well, remember at the time I was only, uh, ten/eleven years old. He didn't exactly discuss that with me but, um, it was the general consternation in the family that something very ugly was going on.

Interviewer: How did your life change, uh, in sort of days leading up to and the days after the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939? (00:07:11)

Schneider: Uh, in 1939, as I said that I was eleven years old, and uh, our family happened to be vacationing in the Carpathian Mountains my grandmother, my mother, and my, myself, my brother was in a Jewish summer camp. Um, uh, life seemed absolutely beautiful. I, um, splashed in a brook, and, and, I just thought the future was full of promise. Uh, somehow in the middle of August a telegram arrived from my father, urging us to return home immediately, that war was imminent. So my mother woke us up, um, as we were walking to the railroad station, um, she found a tiny little store open. Uh, a grocery store. He didn't have very much there to purchase but she bought all the candy and the cookies that he had. And I said to myself, if the war start like this it can't be terribly bad. So I sat down on the train and munched on my sweets and looked at their very worried faces of my family and wondered why they were so concerned. Yet at every station we began to see Polish troops moving west to the German border. Uh, but what we did not know that at the same time, uh German armies were moving east. And on the trains they

had graffiti “We are off to Poland to thrash the Jews.” Hundreds of miles from my little town of Horodenka, they were setting to destroy our people.

Interviewer: Did, uh, refugees begin to move through the town?

Schneider: Um, when war broke out in September 1, 1939, uh, our town was bombed. There were a number of civilian casualties, um, and we heard stories of course that Warsaw, and many other Polish cities were severely bombed, yet on the third day we were very hopeful, we heard that France and England had declared war on Germany. And we thought surely it wouldn’t last very long. And yet we began to see the Polish government fleeing into exile to Romania. They were very close to the Romanian border. And, uh, they were leaving. Um, there was discussion at home that perhaps my father and brother should go. That we heard that Jewish men were taken into force labor. But we thought surely women and children would be safe. No one could imagine the horror that, that ensued. Uh, it was barely a week or so Russian tanks appeared in the center of town and the Russian occupation began. Poland was once again divided and in seventeen days Poland fell. The western part was occupied by Nazi Germany and our part by the Soviet Union.

Interviewer: And that was after the Pact between Hitler and Stalin?

Schneider: Hitler and Stalin, yeah.

Interviewer: So, how did the Soviet Occupation change daily life? Education? Society?

Schneider: Uh, first of all they nationalized all, uh, large businesses. Took over the businesses and stores and nationalized everything. Everybody worked for the government. My father at the time had been working in a large flower mill and as he was an accountant and he continued, uh, in the same fashion, and my mother got a teaching position at the time, they allowed, uh, Yiddish speaking school, Jewish school, um, and so she was teaching. Uh, we children went to school for the first time boys and girls in the same class. Because in Poland we were segregated, which was kind of fun. And, uh, I remember, uh, my father being concerned about what was going on in our town. I did not understand at all what Communism meant and at one time, uh, I came home with a red kerchief on my neck and my father was irritated. I was so proud of it, they selected me, the best students, to become pioneers. There, uh, organization, a Communist organization of, of young children and I thought that was great, I thought I was a good student. Um, my father didn’t like that at all and slowly we began to realize what it really, Communism, meant. Uh, we heard rumble of trucks at night and people were exiled to Siberia, uh, political leaders, religious leaders, both Jews and uh Christians and uh, the thing became more and more oppressive.

Interviewer: Did conditions for Jews improve at all, though, under the Soviets?

Schneider: Um, not really but though they did not…they did not distinguish between Jews, Pols, and Ukrainians. We were supposedly all on equal footing. Uh, but the whole period lasted so short it was not even two years and again I was very young at the time.

Interviewer: So was there…were there any other types of indoctrination?

Schneider: Oh yes, we were told we live in best possible world under Stalin and um, um but again we were very young children and we didn't really understand but I do know that, uh, suddenly, you saw the parents would stop talking when children entered they worried things would be said we innocently might repeat. Uh, my father was especially very irritated with that, uh, situation.

Interviewer: Was there any warning that Germany would attack the Soviet Union, later in that year?

Schneider: Not at all. Not at all, they were taken totally by surprise, uh, when they started bombing our town, uh, the Soviets were in total disarray and fleeing our cities. Some of the people tried to, uh um, escape with them, to flee with them. But it was total disarray I don't know what the hierarchy of the Communist party knew but at the local level it was a complete surprise.

Interviewer: And what type of battles took place in your town? (00:14:15)

Schneider: Um, there were machine gun battles, there were some civilian casualties, um

Interviewer: And then was there another occupation after that by the Germans?

Schneider: Uh, the first troops that came were Hungarians right, um, there were some, uh, pogroms, some killing of Jews by the local Ukrainian uh population in the villages we heard. Then we began to see Hungarian, uh, civilians, Jews, being driven through our town. Uh, it was a very bad situation eventually years later we heard, they were all, uh, killed. Murdered. Some of the babies they left with us and we opened our town, a um, orphanage to take care of these children.

Interviewer: And what did these Hungarian Jews say about what had taken place before that as they were, as they were rushing through?

Schneider: They didn't say very much, they were uh, obviously devastated at what was happening. They said that there young men were taken to forced labor, the munka tower(?), as they called it. And they were just simply, uh, thrown out from their homes and had to flee and it was especially difficult on young children, uh, some of the babies as I said were left in town with us.

Interviewer: Did your family or friends have discussions about trying to flee?

Schneider: Yes as I mentioned when we saw…when the war first started uh, there was discussion at home because we saw that the Jewish men especially were, uh, in danger. But the strengths and the weakness of our family was that there was such

cohesion, we didn't want to split the family. My father worried, what would my mother do? Uh, and I, uh, they left. So there was our strengths and our weaknesses? Had we left them we could have had the chance to survive.

Interviewer: So after this, the German occupation began?

Schneider: You're right.

Interviewer: And what did that bring on?

Schneider: Well the first week that they were, uh, the erected eight gallows in the city center and just randomly selected eight Jews and hung them. Uh, they, uh, came to the Jewish, uh um, Synagogue and trashed it, burned the Torah scrolls and the prayer books, and the Rabbi who lived nearby they forced him to dance for them. Uh, there were atrocities all around. Uh, and then started the edicts now uh all the things, uh, Jews can or cannot do um, and we had to wear white arm band with the Star of David, uh, on our arm 'cause I always say to the youngsters that I speak to that, um, this was not a badge of shame for us. We loved that symbol and today is graces the flag of Israel, the free Jewish state. Uh, the orders were, uh, all men from the ages of, um, fourteen I think, to sixty had to register for forced labor. Um, the Star, we had to wear the Star and um, Jewish children cannot go to school and uh, I happened to live right next door to my Polish public school and some of my non-Jewish classmates passed by, I ran to my mother and said "Why can't I go? I was a pretty good student." I was a well behaved kid, um, she just couldn't explain that. Not only her children couldn't go to school, she couldn't teach as well, something she loved to do as well. But day after day more um orders were issued. All Jews must… no Jewish doctors and lawyers could practice. Jews could not enter stores, Jews cannot socialize with Christians, all gold and silver and furs, um, and had to be turned over to the German authorities, and that really got me very angry. I had a little fur muff and it had a little fur collar on my coat and I had to rip it off so they could not freeze in the Russian winter there. Um, day by day, new um, new proclamations and more oppression and then in October of that year, they formed a ghetto in our town. Uh, um, there were a few narrow streets in the Jewish section of town and we moved to my grandmother's house. And there's one thing I remember a, uh, horse drawn wagon came to pick up a few of our possessions, I took my little kitten and my mother said put her down you can't take her with you. And I asked well, why not? She said well there won't be enough food in the ghetto. I was in total shock what do you mean not enough food for a tiny little cat and it didn't take long to realize how right she was. The ghetto was closed starvation and hunger raged.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your father's boss, Mr. Muller?

Schneider: Mr. Muller well he was a middle aged man and my father used to say that he is, uh, a pretty decent man, that he treated him okay. One day, um, in the middle of the night I wake up and I see a German in uniform standing over me and

mumbling something in German “meine blonde Engel, my blonde angel” I didn’t understand it and um, my brother came in through the room and told me to dress quickly and he took me through the back streets to my grandmother’s house at the time I was more afraid of the darkness than of the Nazis. And the next morning I heard the story, that Mr. Miller, who apparently was a bit drunk at the time put a gun to my mother’s head and he wanted her to admit that I was fathered by an Aryan, just simply because I had long blonde hair at the time. Um, it was a strange, strange feeling.

Interviewer: So you didn’t fit the stereotypical…

Schneider: No.

Interviewer: …image that people thought a Jewish person should look like?

Schneider: Exactly. By the way, sometime earlier I spoke to a group of African American students and one girl asks me, “Well how did you know you were Jewish? The Germans?” and I said, “No, no German knew that I am Jewish but every Pole and Ukrainian neighbor knew and if they so chose they’d announce me.” And that was the horror too, of that situation.

Interviewer: So, your family had a pet dog as well?

Schneider: Yes, oh God you read my book I guess. Um, for whatever reason I will never know he was called Adolph, and then when the Germans came there was absolutely a nolo(?) we were terrified to call this poor animal. I don’t know what happened with him, we certainly didn’t take him to the ghetto. But we lost a dog and he lost his name.

Interviewer: So, your life in the ghetto was, was quite different could you describe the, the community in the ghetto and, and the conditions?

Schneider: Uh, for me initially I thought it was great my…next to my best friend lived two houses away. Um, my grandmother, my aunt, and um, other uncle and aunt and sweet cousins were…we were all together. I didn’t think it was so terrible and as long as my father worked in the mill we had flour and we could barter for other things too. We weren’t starving as much at that point and then my mother decided, uh, to hold classes for us, uh, for me and my friends, which was strictly forbidden under the threat of death to teach Jewish children. So in a room in the back of the house she and my friends were sitting and studying, and um, literature and history and math and um, and to this day I marvel… I used to say sometimes I wondered why she didn’t teach us to how make a Molotov cocktail ‘cause that would have been much more useful. A lot of… I’m sure she didn’t know but later on I realized how wise she was. She wanted us to believe there was a future for us. She wanted us to believe that scholarship mattered. One by one, my little friends disappeared, actually they were murdered.

Interviewer: And, did you hear news from the outside world?

Schneider: Very little. There would be rumors that, uh, such and such town there was a po- there was mass killings, uh there were really rumors. It was very difficult to hear, uh, every now and then we heard somebody was cleaning the room and, and a German commander and the read the newspaper and they read how well they were doing on the Russian front, uh, so it was just rumors. It was completely…to have a radio was strictly forbidden. People were murdered for, for that. So it was really very little communication at the time.

Interviewer: Did you have any… did your family, friends, uh, your parents have any sense of what, what lay down the road?

Schneider: Not really, not in their wildest dr-, nightmares could they have imagined, uh, what was happening. They saw that they would take men for forced labor they would, um, take away all possessions, our homes and so forth, but mass murder was something beyond your imagination. And that could not imagine anyth…brutality. I remember my parents were seeped in German culture. They spoke the language well, uh, they loved the literature, and um the music. They just could not imagine barbarity from the nation, "this highly cultured nation" as Germany was.

Interviewer: Tell me about your mother's, uh, silver candlesticks.

Schneider: It was my grandmothers'.

Interviewer: Grandmothers'.

Schneider: It was already 1942, I think, it was very obvious at that time, that um, that survival was impossible. That, uh, we had to, uh, leave the ghetto. So my grandmother… when the order was issued to, uh, to give the Germans all the silver, she refused to part with them. So in the dark of night, as all the children and grandchildren stood around they were buried in the garden of my grandmother's house. Um, I hoped someday to retrieve them but I think, um, it is really an impossible hope.

Interviewer: So the Germans were deporting people and committing atrocities against people in the ghetto in stages.

Schneider: Yes.

Interviewer: Could you describe that?

Schneider: Well, the first "Akcias," they used to refer to it, was, uh, let me think…in the winter time, so it was in December, yeah uh. Yes, December fourth, the issue was ordered that all Jews must assemble in front of the great synagogue to be inoculated against typhus. It was, uh, raging in that part of the world, some of the people, like my father were skeptical. Why would the Germans suddenly worried

about our health? So, uh, he hid us in the attic of the mill where he worked, but a lot of people assembled that day and uh, suddenly they were surrounded by the Gestapo and the Ukrainian police, they were herded into the synagogue, they were kept there for two days and two nights without food and water, and uh, the situation there was atrocious and then, uh, they were taken away by truck. When the, uh, shootings stopped we made our way back to the ghetto, to my grandmother's house, um, the whole family was assembled there, um, except for my tall red head Aunt Mincia, her children, three children were crying. Her husband was…found out she was taken away, we didn't know where. Uh, my grandmother, was a very ailing and elderly lady, and she kept, uh, she was a puller of strings for us. She kept saying, "We'll try and find out where they've taken these people then we will send her warm clothes and we'll send her food and um, maybe we can buy her freedom." Uh, we went to sleep somewhat reassured only to wake up the next day and find out about the horror that befell our town. Half of the Jewish population: 2,500 men, women, and children were driven to the nearby forest of Siemakowcze, there they were forced to disrobe in a barn and a group of five approached, uh, the ravine where there were machine guns. Um, the clothes they collected from the victims, they were selling on the city streets. Public mourning was forbidden, this is our custom, uh, of seven days of mourning, men do not shave, any man that was found was severely beaten or killed if he was not shaven. Uh, it was, um, a horror story, we just couldn't believe that, um, such brutality could occur in our town.

Interviewer: And what did your family do, in, in, response, how did you…did you hide, um, did you look for ways…

Schneider: Yes.

Interviewer: … of escaping or working with the resistance?

Schneider: There was discussion in our home that perhaps, uh, that my brother should try to flee to the Ro- Romanian border, yet we heard many stories that, uh, people were shot by the border police, um, um, but most everybody, some people joined the underground, the resistance that fled into the forest. Uh, my father was too old, my brother was very young. But everybody, everybody built a hiding place, as we called it, a bunker, and so did my father, in the attic of our home. It was, uh, a room disguised by a bookshelf, just like one I saw in Amsterdam a not long ago, where the family of Anne Frank was hidden. So I remember my father carrying me in his arm, half asleep before dawn and took me to our hiding place. We had some, um, water, some dry crust of bread and we sat until the sun rose. They started and the Gestapo didn't arrive in town and we down another day in the ghetto began.

Interviewer: So there were, there were more deportations after the first one?

Schneider: No, after the first one, uh was uh, people were dying of starvation, there was a lot of typhus going on, but no more deportations. But then, April I think, I'm uh, I don't recall the date any more. There was a second akcias, second round-ups, um, one more time our father his us in the mill where he worked, um, I'm trying to remember the um, the last one was in the summer of that month the second deportation, to uh…again people were caught and rounded, uh, they sent them to the rail- the railroad station and packed into cattle cars. I'm just trying to remember the date, and I don't at this point. And, uh, one more time our father hid us in the mill in the attic and I, um, recall waking up most plaintive whistle of a locomotive and I didn't know then, that my dearest friend Genia Reis was on that trip to Belzec extermination camp, um at the time, all the people were taken to Belzec, and Belzec by the way it was not like Auschwitz, you would enter the right or left to work or the gas chamber. In Belzec, in twenty-four hours, all the people were murdered by gas. And then the third and final akcias was fall, summer…fall of 1942, and again the people were called…were brought to the railroad station and were packed into cattle cars and then our city was declared, "Judenrein," which means, "free of Jews" and everyone had to leave within twenty-four hours to the neighboring ghettos. Uh, one in Kolomyja and one in Tluste were we wound up.

Interviewer: So the only Jews who remained in Horodenka had to have, um, work permits?

Schneider: Right, my father was one of them. They, uh, permitted sixty people to remain, those they needed for…to run the, uh, war effort. Um, my father worked in the mill as before yet the following October 1943, uh I think it was. The Gestapo came to pick him and his boss Mr. Muller said the books were not in order that they needed him so they said alright, they'll wait twenty-four hours while he finished his work. Then they took him away and to this day I'm not quite sure where they took him. He was probably perished in the Kolomyja or Scheparowce where they shot many people at that time.

Interviewer: How did you hear the news that your father was taken from the mill?

Schneider: At the time, my mother, brother, and I were in the ghetto of Tluste, uh, and every week or so we would steal our way to the only public phone and try to call him on the phone, uh, in his office at the mill and my mother used to do that all the time but one day, that October, my mother was not well and my brother and I went and as we were standing in that booth all I heard my brother say, "When?" and he turned very white, very pale and we knew that my father was gone.

Interviewer: Can you describe this second ghetto? The conditions?

Schneider: Uh, it's almost impossible to describe. If there ever was a hell on earth this was it. There were a few narrow streets in that ghetto, thousands of people were brought in from other surrounding towns and villages, uh, typhus was raging my brother had typhus at the time, and uh, hunger was raging it was a really horror place.

Um, that winter though my mother made a last attempt to save my life. She, uh…by the way, when I look back today as a grandmother and a mother I wonder what was it like to make a decision to save one child. But it was easier for the girl to pass, so they say. So she met a man who helped my cousin escape on Aryan papers. And we went to visit my aunt, and there he was sitting, he was from Kiev I think. Russian or Ukrainian, I'm not sure, and he took one look at me and he said, "Well she doesn't look Jewish, whatever that means, get her ready in two days, let her meet me at railroad station and I'll take her to a friend of mine in a remote village and I will tell them she's my cousin." My mother was absolutely overjoyed, she thought at least one of her children would have a chance to survive. So the next two days she tried to get some of my clothes together, she borrowed a little suitcase someplace. And all the time she was teaching me how to behave in church, she was teaching me some of the prayers, as a teacher in public Polish schools she was there when the priest came to instruct children, so she was quite familiar with all of that. And every time my resolve waned, she kept repeating over and over again, "Someone must survive to tell the world, someone must survive." And as you must know, that is the title of my memoir.

Interviewer: And did you, did you know that gentleman?

Schneider: No, I um, the second evening, in the evening I said goodbye to my brother and my mother and I walked to the edge of the ghetto which is where I was going to steal my way out and go to the railroad station to meet him and I stood there embracing her and it suddenly became more clear than ever that I would never see her again or my brother, why would I want to live in a world where our people were so brutally murdered, why would I want to live a life of a lie and I told her, "I'm not going." To this day I'm very grateful for her, I had a few more precious weeks with her. She died only three months later. Um, I was only fourteen years old but I had to make a decision and she did not force me to leave.

Interviewer: So, while you were in this, um, ghetto, did you, um, were you able to escape out and sell things on the outside, at that time?

Schneider: Yeah, um, I had a distant cousin, who at once upon a time had a store with notions and he would give me needles and, and thread, I took off my arm band and again that blonde hair helped and I would just go among the peasants and sell this stuff because we were starving desperately and um, the rations that they allowed was extremely small and we used to go to the Judenrat to the Jewish community and, and get uh, get some food but uh, I was trying once to describe to my grandchildren what starving means and I tell them sometimes I catch myself talking to a friend and I will say, "You know what, let's go to lunch I'm starving." And I say, what have I said? Starving is something entirely different, starving is where every, every. It is just devastating. You are craving for food, uh, you get lethargic and I remember sleeping a lot um, it's very painful.

Interviewer: And you said that typhus was raging…

Schneider: Yes.

Interviewer: … through the ghetto, and your mother had contracted it and you did as well

Schneider: Yeah, we slept in the same bed and uh really don't remember very much of that except that um, the day my mother died, I had a raging fever and all I remember is my brother kneeling by the bed and saying, "Our mother died." And then I tried to look, she was um, covered with a white sheet on the floor and there were candles around and, and they were sort of flickering in my eye and it all went dark for a number of weeks.

Interviewer: Now at this point there…the Germans emptied the ghetto there and what did you and your brother have to do? (00:41:08)

Schneider: They sent us to the ghetto, the Lisowce labor camp of Lisowce, this was um, a group of five agricultural villages were as the Germans had a group of forced labor Jews working in agriculture and so did my brother and I, um, it so happened that, um, the commander of our camp, Mr. Frank, uh, was a pretty decent man. We did not starve as badly as we did in the ghetto, uh, and the fact that being in an open field you can always find something edible, a carrot, or a potato, or whatever. Um, the work was difficult but the situation was better than it was in the ghetto.

Interviewer: What sort of work was it?

Schneider: Um, we would, um, work in the corn fields or the potato fields, and there was some things that the Russians brought in that were called Kok-saghyz which was like a rubber plant and the Germans were supposedly trying to get a plant that would make rubber, to make rubber out of. All I recall that it looked like a tobacco plant and had some kind of a white substance, uh, when you took the leaf off. It's about all I know about it.

Interviewer: And where did you sleep?

Schneider: We had barracks and we slept in the barracks.

Interviewer: So, who were some of the people you worked alongside there, who were imprisoned with you?

Schneider: Of course my brother was there and um, a number of people. Some of them I still keep in touch. One of them lives in um, New Jersey and one in Israel and I still keep in touch with some of the people.

Interviewer: Can you describe the um, experience when you were approached by the Ukrainian Police and the um, SS?

Schneider: Oh yeah, at one point kept always telling us that he had a very good friend, uh, a Ukrainian man who he served in the First World War. He was disorderly and every now again he would come to visit and he would put me on his knee and tell me what a great guy my father was and what a good friend he was. So when we were escaping from the ghetto in Horodenka he was driving a horse drawn wagon through the next town um to Zaleszczyki, where we used to live before. And my father kept always saying what a good friend he is, I imagine, I don't know. We gave him some valuables that we had and so when things got pretty bad, um, I tried to… I'm actually going ahead of myself because this was before my brother was killed, right, um, that summer we were working on threshing machine around the, around the clock and um, one time the um, group was working the day shift and my brother worked at night and suddenly we heard shots all around uh, and then they assembled us all around a grave that the um, men were forced to dig and when suddenly our Commander Frank came riding at us screaming that we needed to complete the harvest and that the first time in history that a akcias said stop and the Gestapo left. So that was a time there I was um, left all alone, my brother was gone and all I could think of was my father told me he had this good friend and all I wanted to tell him, that I'm… what they did to my brother and to my family so I changed my clothes to a peasant outfit and I walked through and was stopped and there was Ukrainian Police and the Gestapo, at that time I spoke the language pretty well and I just uh, was allowed to pass through and I went to this "good friend," and he saw me and he just turned pale, he said "What are you doing here? They just killed three Jews in the village." It was not a very friendly encounter and uh, he told me that he will allow me to stay in the barn overnight but that I will have to leave the place, and so I stayed there overnight, I hardly slept uh, it was so painful to think how wrong my father was, how totally deluded he was that this was a friend. Um, my feet were bleeding, I was just walking barefoot and I asked him if he had some old shoes, goulashes, or something I could wear to go back. All I wanted to do was go back to my people and stay together with them today and he said no, he didn't have any shoes and he had. All my uncle Rosenbaum's um, medical equipment and a lot of valuable things were given to him but he didn't have a pair of old shoes for me. He did give me half a loaf of bread and I left. I remember the bitterness to saying…the total sense of the lack of compassion or care for somebody who, um, supposedly was a friend.

Interviewer: So, when you returned to the camp and you um…and this was after you lost your brother…

Schneider: Right.

Interviewer: …what was your motivation at that point to, uh, to carry on?

Schneider: All I wanted is really to join the resistance. All I really wanted was a gun in my hand so I heard that there was uh, a group in our area, uh, a Jewish group the Partisans that they were coming the following day to pick up a sister, one of them

had to join the group and uh, I met with them and I talked to them and they said yes, that they would take me that I should go to this little village next to the um, water pump or whatever and that they will meet me the next day and we will all go together. Um, as I started walking I saw across the railroad, the Ukrainian Police with a gun over his shoulder, I was sort of skeptical, I was a little concerned but I kept moving and as I came to that place where I supposed to meet, there was nobody there and I realized that he must have seen the Ukrainian Police as well and I returned back to the camp, very disappointed only to hear a few days later that they were all killed. They were poorly armed, they were um, they killed the Ukrainian Policeman in the process and one German but they all perished.

Interviewer: Do you remember when you first knew that Germany was beginning to lose the war? (00:49:00)

Schneider: Um, I think it was uh…rumors went around. Th- there were some people who we- were working for the Germans and they would read the newspaper and they were always uh, uh saying um, strategic withdrawal. And from what city, what town, you would begin to realize…and we heard rumors that Stalingrad had fallen to… the Russians took over Stalingrad again. And then we heard rumors that there would be strategic withdrawal one town or another and we realized the Front was coming close and we began to hear the big guns shooting from far away.

Interviewer: And did that motivate you or…

Schneider: Yeah, yes we were hoping the end finally had come.

Interviewer: So can you describe uh, being liberated?

Schneider: Well, before the uh, liberation um, th- there was- were five agricultural villages the Jews worked. We decided all to come to one of the larger ones in the town of Tluste, where the ghetto was, um, for our safety. And strangely enough, um, the man- the German Commander of that camp, Mr. Facke(?) was trying to be quite protective and he would not allow any of the, the Ukrainians to come to the uh…inside the area where we were and when he left we began to see German troops withdrawing and each time uh, another group was coming through and yet he told them, that this is his people, they are not allowed to hurt us or do anything. Um, I remember one instance where I was sleeping in a barn and again a total disruption of food services, we were starving there was no… it was chaotic and a young German soldier came in and saw me and he tried to give me a chocolate bar, I was so hungry, I haven't eaten for days but I would not take it. I would not take it to clean his bloody hands with a chocolate bar and I just walked away. I thought he was going to shoot me, he didn't. Then we began to hear uh… they took us to the railroad station where there was uh, there was the flat bed cars moving continuously and they had us throw everything on, grain, animals, uh

pigs, chickens, whatever and everything to go back to, to Germany. And then suddenly, um, Russian tanks appeared and um, we were, we were free. Finally.

Interviewer: How did you feel when it was, when it was over?

Schneider: First it is the elation of well, it wasn't simple. They- that we were liberated um, they flew eight Stuka planes over the camp and throwing incendiary bombs. These um barracks were burning very fast and they didn't want any survivors, they didn't want any eye witnesses to what had happened. There were many people that were severely burned and, and killed in their attack and finally the Russians came into um, the town and um, we were free. The first sense- revelation and then the realization for me at least was that I was left utterly alone. I was hoping that perhaps some of my family had survived in Horodenka uh, but I knew of course that my immediate family was gone.

Interviewer: What were you wearing at the time?

Schneider: Filthy clothes we wore to work to sleep, summer and winter for two years. When I left the ghetto, my mother told me to put my best um, dress on uh, we were totally destitute, barefoot. I didn't have any shoes in the wintertime so some friends made me wooden shoes um, we worked outdoors without gloves, without stockings in sub-zero temperatures in Poland, yet the strange things um, people should do some research about it, I was never sick for a day.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Schneider: There was some kind of, I don't know, your body reacts in a strange way, I mean if I walk out today, anybody without shoes and stockings working for twelve hours outdoors, you'll die of pneumonia the next day. It didn't happen, I don't know. Some kind of self-preservation mechanism, something.

Interviewer: So what did you do in the days and weeks immediately after…?

Schneider: The liberation? I hitchhiked with a Russian truck to get to my hometown, Horodenka because um, before we left the ghetto, we heard that my uncle, who was a chemist, and his wife dentist, and her partner, dentist were being hidden by a Ukrainian peasant. So I was hoping, that just maybe he had survived. When I came there, there was only a handful of Jewish people there and they told me, don't stay overnight, it's dangerous to be here. And your uncle and his wife were murdered by the very peasant who supposedly was to save them.

Interviewer: Did you soon go to a camp? Like a displaced persons camp?

Schneider: No, I went back to this town of Tluste in the ghetto, there were a handful of people, we all stayed together, one home for, for one house, one um, empty house for safety. And then somebody said that across the border in, in Romania there was food, then maybe we should try to get some food because we were afraid to go to the villages, we were totally as I said, destitute. So, with a Russian army

truck, we made our way to- across the border to Romania and there I remember being very tired and falling asleep on the floor of some empty apartment. I remember waking up in the morning and looking in the window I thought I died and went to Heaven, I couldn't believe it. That there was street cars running in the street, people were properly dressed, um, women in lipstick and high heels I just couldn't believe it. Only forty miles from where I was, such devastation and here life was more or less normal. So a few of us bewildered Jews came and we stood down in the street and some other Jewish people surrounded us who had family across the border. There were a lot of families on both sides and they wanted to hear of course of what happened in Poland. We didn't bring any good news at all, yet one of the people who was there was a cousin of my mothers'. And he took me home with him. So that's how my, uh, roaming started. I stayed with them, they tried to adopt me and I stayed with them for some years. We made our way to the American zone in Germany and there um, I had a cousin in Peekskill, New York and she sent me papers to come to the United States in 1949.

Interviewer: Did you have to wait for more than a year? Was it a long process?

Schneider: Yes, I, I was in high school there in, in Germany which was… I could write another book on a Jewish kid in a German high school and of course none of them knew anything that was going on but the thing I remember most about that period is that I was very close to Nuremberg. Some twelve miles and I did attend some of the Nuremberg trials uh, of the Nazi, of the top Nazis.

Interviewer: Could you describe that? (00:58:19)

Schneider: It was a horrific thing, um, every country that was occupied, had a delegation. And the Polish delegation issued tickets, not tickets, they were permits to go in and as we were walking in, there would be one in "P" and one of the "Q's" was standing as close as I'm standing to you. I saw these ordinary, ugly people, who in their…decided to murder innocent people by the millions, and tortured them. It was just beyond belief that these, look like human, and they were the murderers on the large scale.

Interviewer: So you immigrated to the United States in 1949…

Schneider: Yes, in 1949.

Interviewer: …and could you describe that trip?

Schneider: Well we started off in, in Bremerhaven, um, and I remember we were on the um, SS Marine Flasher was my ship um, great hope being- hoping to start a new life and as we- after I got pretty sick after we were crossing the channel was fine and I was approached in the Harbor of New York and we saw the Statue of Liberty, it was really a feeling of, of a new life beginning. Perhaps a life of freedom and um, and then I went to Peekskill, New York and um, my cousin was very kind, very nice person but one thing she told me, is forget about the past and start a new life

as though that was possible. So I never talked about it, people didn't ask and I didn't tell.

Interviewer: Did you complete your education?

Schneider: It was very… it was here and there in Germany. I completed what would have been two years of college in America there in ubershool(?) and my cousin told me that to be able to work in America, you have to have a high school diploma. So I went back for three months um, to big school- to high school and they put me in eighth grade to see how my English was, in three months I took the Regents Exam in New York and passed it.

Interviewer: And um, when did you, uh, meet your future husband?

Schneider: Oh that was way back a, in Poland, he was my first English teacher. Frankly enough, of course I was seven- sixteen and he was eighteen but there were no schools, it was 1945 and everything was destroyed and uh he happened to have the best education during the ghetto because Czernowitz was where he was, the Jewish professors couldn't teach so they got together some of the best four students and Fred was among them and uh, gave them private lesson and by the time the war was over he had best education. He had no trouble completing he already here he speech…he was a professor at Georgia Tech for a number of years and then at MIT, he was a professor. But that's how we met, we had no common language. He didn't speak any Polish and I didn't speak any German, and I hated it with a passion anyway. But that was a long time ago. We are married now, sixty-four years.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your family?

Schneider: We have three sons and five grandchildren. Two of them, uh, let's see… um one of them just graduated from Amherst and granddaughter is a starving artist in New York. She graduated from UGA in Fine Arts. One in theater, we still have one in school, studying chemistry.

Interviewer: So you're a member of the Congregation of The Temple…

Schneider: Yes.

Interviewer: …on um, Peachtree Street?

Schneider: Indeed, I taught Hebrew there for twenty years.

Interviewer: And is it correct that you started that Hebrew school?

Schneider: Yeah.

Interviewer: And when was that?

Schneider: Uh '75, '76.

Interviewer: And um, when did you start sharing your, your experiences in the Holocaust?

Schneider: Um, I remember the Bremen asked me once to speak and I went with Alec Ross and she spoke in high school and I said no, I can never do that, this is beyond me. And then, um, as time passed by I decided I really need to write down what had happened. I had to keep the promise I made to my mother and tell the world, so I wrote the memoir and at that point they kept asking, the Bremen, to speak to schools and so I did. All over, KSU, West Georgia, Emory, you name it.

Interviewer: And, has that uh, uh, been a good experience for you or…?

Schneider: It was a promise kept, because, as I said my mother kept insisting that someone has to tell what happened and I felt that was something I needed to do. As a survivor I was eyewitness to this and I needed to tell the world. Unfortunately, it's still going on in other countries as well, genocide is not over.

Interviewer: Could you show us your book?

Schneider: Yes indeed, this is the English version and it's been published in French as well.

Interviewer: Thank you very much, Mrs. Schneider.

Schneider: You're very welcome.