Sandra: Could you begin please by telling us your name and then go back in time a little bit and talk about your early life growing up in Vendzigole\(^1\) and Lithuania,\(^2\) what your life was like, and then how you ended up in Kovno and the ghetto there? If you could, begin with some of that information.

Sam: Just from growing up, I remember being six years old. I remember this: when my father [wrapped me in his] tallit,\(^3\) took me [in his arms], brought me to cheder,\(^4\) and he give me a kiss on my head, and he said, “Be a good student.” That is what I remember. What happened about two weeks ago, I couldn’t remember already because I’m too old already for that.

I grown up there in the [unintelligible; possibly baruntz] shtetl.\(^5\) That was a community what you live with them together, you sleep with them together, or you live with them together. You stay with them together or you been . . . The community was like one shprakh [Yiddish: language].

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\(^1\) Vendziogola (Lithuanian: Vandziogala; Yiddish: Vendzigole; Russian: Vendziagola) is a small village about 24 kilometers (15 miles) north of Kaunas, Lithuania. In 1940, the Jewish population was 350, or 58 percent of the total.

\(^2\) Lithuania is the southernmost of the Baltic States. Lithuania was an independent country from the end of World War I until 1940. Before World War II, the Jewish population was 160,000, about 7 percent of the total population.

\(^3\) A tallit is a prayer shawl fringed at each of the four corners in accordance with biblical law. The wearing of tallit at worship is obligatory only for married men, but it is customarily worn also by males of bar mitzvah age and older.

\(^4\) Cheder [Hebrew: room] is a Jewish religious elementary school for boys. Religious classes were usually held in a room attached to a synagogue or in the private home of a teacher called a ‘melamed.’ It was traditional for boys to start cheder at three or five years old, learning to read Hebrew from a primer and studying the Book of Leviticus. Girls did not attend cheder.

\(^5\) A shtetl is a small town, usually in Eastern Europe, with a significant Jewish presence in it.
Later on when I grew up a little bit, I been already about the age of 17, I went in Kovno. Kovno is the capital for Lithuania. I learned there some in a school. Later, I went to work. I been invited to be in a sport organization. You call it Hapoel. Later, I been in Zionist organizations, what was Hashomer Hatzair. This was what I was till I got to go in the Lithuanian army.

The Lithuanian army was . . . Lithuania is a little bitty country. You can be sure if I been the best, biggest soldier there, you can realize how little the country was. I finished the army and a year later in Memel-Klaipeda, when the Germans started the war to go fight against Poland to get back Vilna. Vilna I was going to die there because Poland was three times bigger than Lithuania. We couldn’t fight with Poland.

I remember my mother or my brother came in the middle of the night to tell me, “Geyn gezunt aun kum gezunt.” [Yiddish] They say, “Go well and come back well,” because we knew everybody now who going there now in the war couldn’t come back anyway. Later on, the

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6 Kovno (Yiddish: Kovne, Kovna, Kovni; Polish: Kowno; German: Kaunas and Kauen) is a city in south-central Lithuania. Between 1920 and 1939, it was the country's capital and largest city. Prior to the Second World War, Kovno had a significant Jewish population of 35,000-40,000, about one-fourth of the city's total population. Kovno had a rich Jewish culture with almost 100 Jewish organizations, 40 synagogues, many Yiddish schools, 4 Hebrew high schools, a Jewish hospital, and scores of Jewish-owned businesses.

7 The Jewish community of Kovno had many sport associations, including the Maccabee and Hapoel, which was an Israeli sport association established in 1926.

8 Hashomer Hatzair [Hebrew: Youth Guard] is a Socialist-Zionist youth movement founded in 1913 in Galicia, Austria-Hungary (later Poland). Hashomer Hatzair believed that the liberation of Jewish youth could be accomplished by aliyah (immigration) to Palestine and living in kibbutzim. By 1939, Hashomer Hatzair had 70,000 members worldwide.

9 Sam served in the Lithuanian Armed Forces for two years, from around 1937 to 1939. At the time, military service was legally obligatory in Lithuania.

10 Klaipeda [Lithuanian: Klaipėda] is a port city on the Baltic Sea, in a area known as the Klaipeda region or Memel territory. From 1252-1923 and from 1939-1945, the city was called ‘Memel.’ After World War I the area was nominally an independent protectorate but was essentially under the control of Germany. In 1923, the Lithuanians forcibly annexed it and renamed the city ‘Klaipeda.’ In March 1939, Germany pressured Lithuania into returning it to them. On March 20, 1939, after years of increased tensions between the two nations, Germany issued an ultimatum demanding Lithuania give up the Klaipeda region, which had been detached from Germany following World War I. The demand came just five days after Germany had occupied Czechoslovakia. With no support from other nations and under the threat of German invasion, Lithuania complied with the demand. On March 23, 1939 the Germans occupied the city and German warships arrived in the port.

11 Poland and Lithuania both claimed the city of Vilna [Lithuanian: Vilnius; Yiddish: Vilne] after World War I, and eventually the city was occupied by Polish forces and considered a part of northeastern Poland from 1920 until the beginning of World War II. On September 19, 1939, under the terms of the German-Soviet Pact, which effectively dissolved and divided Poland, Soviet forces occupied the city of Vilna, along with the rest of eastern Poland. The city of Vilna was incorporated into the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic until the Soviet Union ceded the city to Lithuania on October 28, 1939. Lithuanian authorities immediately enacted discriminatory policies against Poles and Jews. Anti-Jewish disturbances and violent pogroms immediately broke out in Vilna until the Soviet army entered the city and put an end to it. By June 1940, Vilna, along with the rest of Lithuania, was annexed to the Soviet Union. German forces attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and occupied Vilna just three days later.
Russians came in the middle of the night. I remember the Russians came and they said, “Who is there for Lithuania in the army? We don’t need you anymore. You got Vilna or you get the capital back but you dream of it for years and years and years to get Vilna back for the capital for Lithuania.” So I came back and I start again a new life. All of a sudden start the war.

When the war start, I see already all the Jewish homes. The Germans came in Lithuania and I see already in all the Jewish homes on the windows and on the doors, they put “Jude.” This means Jewish. I didn’t know what this is but I had a feeling if they put “Jewish,” something be wrong. I went right now I talked to my parents [and said], “Let’s go from here. Let’s sell everything. Let’s go in Kovno, in the capital.” There where I went to Kovno and after then, right now they were killing a lot.

Later start the ghetto. When the ghetto start, all the Jewish people . . . The ghetto was a little section. Slobodka they called it. This is like here Decatur or another [area]. We lived there and in this place they made the ghetto. We couldn’t move no other place.

Later on, I used my father in a table to go to work for the Germans. I was the only one. I have to help the family in the ghetto to bring something food. When I have to bring in food from out of the ghetto when they took me to work. I had to take something from clothes or something, shoes or anything, to swap with the Gentiles [non-Jewish] people for a loaf of bread or something for a piece of meat or any kind of food and bring in the ghetto. When I had to bring in the ghetto, you risk your life too. When the Germans catch you, they going to kill you.

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12 The Lithuanian military was disbanded under Soviet Occupation.
13 World War II officially began in Europe when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France responded by declaring war on Germany on September 3. Within a month, Poland was defeated by a combination of German and Soviet forces and was partitioned between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.
14 When the war started on September 1, 1939 Kovno was annexed by the Russians who then turned it back over to Lithuania. In 1940 the Russians re-occupied the area. They remained until June 24, 1941 when the Germans attacked the Soviet Union and took the area over. Immediately before and following the German occupation of the city on June 24, 1941, bands of Lithuanians went on bloody rampages against the Jews, attacking and brutally murdering hundreds of Jews in Kovno and the suburb of Slobodka. The Lithuanians carried out violent riots against the Jews both shortly before and immediately after the arrival of German forces in June 1941.
15 On August 15, 1941, the Jews of Kovno were forced into a ghetto in the suburb of Slobodka and it was closed encircling nearly 30,000 Jews. A poorer section of the city known as Slobodka in Yiddish or Viljampolė in Lithuanian that was in the northern part of town and had previously housed only 8,000 people would now house approximately 35,000. For the first two months, the ghetto consisted of two separate areas: a “large” along the Neris River and a “small” ghetto to the west, connected by a wooden footbridge. In the ghetto, all men aged 16 to 57 and women aged 17 to 46 performed forced labor in workshops established inside the ghetto or in construction sites outside the ghetto.
16 In the Kovno ghetto, all men aged 16 to 57 and women 17 to 46 performed forced labor. Jews worked in ghetto workshops and more frequently in construction brigades outside the ghetto. Several thousand left the ghetto every day to go into the city for work.
I remember when I put ... I brought sometimes for a shirt, somebody give me a little piece of meat. I have to cut the piece of meat somewhere in the backyard and I put around my leg one piece of meat here and one piece of meat here. When I came to the [ghetto] gate, they told me to raise my hands. They touch me and touch me [patting me down]. They didn’t touch my legs. I was lucky and I go in the ghetto with this. This is the way we have to smuggle in food because the hunger was so big. People starving every minute—not every day, but every minute from hunger—especially little children. That is what I went through in the ghetto.

Later on they make an aktion.17 This was the big aktion where they took my father, and my mother, and my brother—the little brother I had, and my sister. When they took my mother, my father say, “Who can hide himself somewhere, right away to do it, because we don’t come back anymore.” They took 10,000 people.

I took my wife with me in an attic there.18 We lay down there in the attic. We hiding there. If they found us, they found us. We took a chance. The Germans took 10,000. They count out 10,000 to kill and the rest of them back in ghetto. When I see them coming back, the rest of them, I see already my parents they took away. They took away my parents, my sister, and my little brother. I became ... I been in the ghetto—me and my older brother Isaac and my brother after me. [We were] the only three people [left in our family]. We been in the ghetto alive.

Later on they took me and my wife in a hard labor camp.19 This is a special camp. We stayed there almost about six or eight months.20 Later they carry me to Dachau21 and my wife

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17 On September 15, 1941, work passes were distributed to 5,000 skilled Jews, together with their families, who would allegedly be spared because they could work. On October 4, 1941, Kovno’s Small Ghetto was liquidated and some of the buildings were burned to the ground. Only those with work passes were spared. The rest of the Jews were taken to the Ninth Fort, a nearby nineteenth century fortification, and murdered. In the “Great Aktion” of October 28, 1941, all the remaining Jews were told to assemble in the central square of the ghetto. There they were separated by the Germans and by the end of the day 9,200 Jews, about 30 percent of the ghetto, were taken to Ninth Fort and shot. Thereafter, life in the ghetto for the remaining 17,500 Jews settled down somewhat. By the end of March 1943, there were around 16,000 Jews concentrated in the ghetto. Around 4,000 of them worked in 44 workshops inside the ghetto and another 6,000 worked in labor detachments outside the ghetto.

18 Ida (Chaja) Baron (1922-1995) was also from Kovno, Lithuania. She and Sam met sometime in the Kovno ghetto and by the summer of 1943 referred to themselves as married. Ida and Sam were reunited after the war and officially married in Munich, Germany on November 10, 1946.

19 In the summer of 1943, transformations began that turned the Kovno ghetto into a labor camp known as the Kauen concentration camp with a string of eight smaller camps attached to it.

20 On July 8, 1944, the Kovno labor camp/Kauen concentration camp was liquidated as the Russians drew near and the remaining Jews were evacuated to the west. The women were sent to Stutthof concentration camp, while the men went on to Dachau and other camps in Germany.
They carry to Stutthof. This was two concentration camps. In Stutthof was a crematorium but some of them was a selection. They put right or left. Right or left, who left go in the crematorium and who on right is going to live. My wife was lucky. She was young. They took her not in the crematorium, but especially the older people, the older women they took right down in the crematorium to burn up.

They took me in Dachau later. I been in Dachau number one. My brother they took to Dachau number two but we didn’t know for each from the other. Then this was cut up our life. Me from my wife and from my brother. We didn’t know [about] each other.

I didn’t have nothing in the world with me but I had a little picture from . . . He’s a little boy—my brother’s little boy what the Germans took him away. I hide only the picture. I don’t know why I had so many guts to keep the picture. If they found a picture, they’d kill me anyway. But I put in a place and I hold the picture. I cut up like a razor blades this small and with a little bit every day, with a piece of bread I make like glue and glue up here between the legs. I think if I will be alive I would at least I have from that little boy a picture. All of a sudden, we was short with people from one concentration camp number one and number two. They take from number two and they bring in concentration camp number one and there was my brother.

But first before when they brought my brother there, they brought me over to camp two the lager concentration camp two. When we see each other and I know he’s there, somebody told me he's alive and he's there. Then on that day we would go meet both this. What I can do? I had a piece of bread. I save up. I bring him there’d be a present what I going to bring him.

21 Established on March 22, 1933, Dachau was the first concentration camp established by the Nazi regime. It was located in southern Germany near the town of Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich. Over 188,000 prisoners passed through Dachau between 1933 and 1945. Prisoners at Dachau were used as forced laborers and thousands were literally worked to death. Between 1940 and 1945, at least 28,000 died there as a result of the harsh, overcrowded conditions, medical experiments, and executions.

22 Stutthof was established in 1939 near Danzig (present-day Gdansk, Poland), on the Baltic Sea. There were a series of sub-camps attached to the main camp, which acted as a reserve for slave labor for the others. Conditions in the camp were brutal and more than 60,000 people died there. From the summer until the fall of 1944 Stutthof received wave after wave of prisoners evacuated from other camps in the East that were about to be overrun by the Russians. Jews from the final liquidation of Kovno, Vilna and Riga work camps and Hungarian Jews were sent there as well. Some 25,000 Jews arrived in waves. Some were dumped there while others were sent on to other camps.

23 Dachau was divided into two sections—the main camp and a crematorium area next to it, which had been constructed in 1942.

24 Sam’s brother, Isaac (Izchak) had married Rachel Lager in Kovno in 1936. The couple had one child, Chaim, in 1938. On March 27, 1944, in the Children’s Akction, the Kovno ghetto’s remaining children under the age of 12 were rounded up. During the two-day action, German troops and Ukrainian auxiliaries went from house to house tearing the children from their parent’s arms. Chaim Wise was among the 1,300 victims of the "Children's Action," who were either shot at a nearby Fort or deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were gassed.
He got the same thing only he save a potato for me. The Germans see how we cried both when we meet both. He became emotional—the German—when he see me and him going there in for talk. We came there, right in the woods. I took out a piece of bread. He say, "Isaac, I got for you a potato." A potato he hid. Potato was big but is not a minik [Yiddish: species; type or kind of]. The miniks from them was. Oh, we cried both.

My heart didn’t . . . I couldn’t tell him right away what I got for him the little picture. I say, “Isaac, this is not what I give you the present. I have for you other present but I don’t know. I keep this still now. I don’t know if you can keep this or have it.” He didn’t know what I was talking about. When I took out the little picture, the German not to see, I said, "This is your little boy what the Germans killed him. They took away from you." This was a moment what I couldn’t tell him what was. There’s only the tears talk, the hearts talk, everything talk, but not the mouth. Only what we cry. That’s all.

Later on they took my brother from [camp] number two and brought in my camp, number one. Since then, we been together there. After then, we stayed there together. Anything what we had we divide together and everything.

I had an uncle. He was there with me in camp but he was not . . . He never worked hard in his life or never did nothing. He was the worse off of camp of everybody. I was young. I used to trade. I used to make for the . . . we had a woman camp, too in Dachau. The women would make what they smoke there sometimes. I make there what you put in the cigarette to smoke. I don’t know how they say this in English. They give me from what they got the piece of bread. I give her whatever; she give me a piece of bread for this. That’s what they take. For the woman, I make tobacco. I take tobacco leaves and I cut with a little razor blade what I had. [It] looks like tobacco and you smoke this. They give a piece of bread for this.

From them piece of bread, I divide for me a piece and I broke always for my uncle. My uncle got so sick and he got so . . . It pains me. He was like a skeleton. I brought him everything any time. [He asked], “Sam, when you can bring me an onion?” When somebody got an onion, they think this is the biggest medicine what can help him. I found some onions and I brought for him an onion. Everyday I brought for him an onion.

He want to make good me something. I give him always a piece of bread when I had left over and everything. He wants to give me something. He got a bowl of soup what they give him every night. He save half. When I came from work, he gonna give me half his soup. When he see
me coming to the gate, he going with his soup. He fall down and the soup was on the floor and everything. He couldn’t get up already. With excitement and everything, he passed away.

What you can do? You see that. For me, that’s nothing. They passed away—the men—from hunger, or from beating, or something like this. It was from G-d knows every day. You see this thing every minute. You go by dead people, been beaten like animals. Like that what you’re going to be like animals. You forgot the names. [The Germans] didn’t want to hear somebody call them with a name. You got a number. You don’t think. You don’t have a name.

I used to write. Before, I used to write a lot of poems, songs, or something else. What I did in the concentration camp, I used to sing for them and I used to . . . poems I couldn’t write there because it was . . . when they found a piece of paper or a pencil, they will shoot you. It was a death penalty. But I had it [in my head].

One time came Yom Kippur. . . . In concentration camp, there was almost for us every day Yom Kippur because you don’t have [anything] to eat anyway. But on Yom Kippur everybody who believed saves a little bread to break the fast . . . They came to me on Yom Kippur. I remember this. I’ll never forget it. They say, “Sam, we don’t have any siddur [a Jewish prayer book]. We don’t have any religious thing. But maybe you remember how to daven for us on Yom Kippur; Kol Nidre?” I say, “I sure do.”

We put two friends by the door and two on the other door only not the Germans to see we are doing something. When somebody pass by, we everybody lay down on the floor like making sleep. I make for them Yom Kippur. I told them the Kol Nidre. On Yom Kippur, we sing together.

Later, I make for them a poem. Like in ghetto [on] Yom Kippur night, everybody going in shul [Yiddish: synagogue]. All of a sudden, the Germans walked in the shul. They say, “Not one word I want to hear. You got in shul a spy. If you don’t give another spy, we going to burn you up.” This was my poem there. What was from me. Nobody a spy. How can be a spy in shul when that’s the holiest day in our life? He say, “Maybe you by yourself [are] a spy.” He say, "I don’t want to look by yourself. You got to look. If not, I am going to burn up your whole synagogue with you.”

25 Yom Kippur [Hebrew: Day of Atonement] is the most sacred day of the Jewish year. Yom Kippur is a 25-hour fast day. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting yizkor for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine forgiveness, and listening to Torah readings and sermons. People greet each other with the wish that they may be sealed in the heavenly book for a good year ahead. The day ends with the blowing of the shofar (a ram’s horn).

26 Davening is the act of reciting Jewish liturgical prayers during which the prayer sways or rocks lightly.

27 Kol Nidre is an Aramaic declaration recited in the synagogue before the beginning of the evening service on every Yom Kippur.
One fellow—he was 93 years old [and] blind—he say, “I am the spy. I going to die for all of you.” The end of the poem was when they took him—the old, blind Jewish 93 years old [man]—in the field and they shoot him. I told them, “The whole world don’t have heroes like that old man.” That’s what they . . . Everybody, we cry and we pray. This was our Yom Kippur. This is what I remember and I never forget it. Especially in Yiddish it sounds better because Yiddish is my first language. This is my memory.

After then, I got sick and they took . . . This was five days before the war ended. They took all of them who very sick and who is dead. They took in a truck to crematorium to burn up. They came and the place was . . . The American army already blocked. They didn’t know what to do with the thousands and thousands of dead bodies what you see in the picture what they show you this. They think I dead, too. They threw me out between all the thousands of dead bodies. This was only two hours [before the American army reached the camp]. If the American army wouldn’t came in two hours, I’d be dead already too.

[The Americans started to] make movies. On their shoulders, the cameras. Some of them—the Americans—see some of them dead bodies, some of them moving. They said, “Maybe we can take somebody out and bring somebody alive.” They took out three—me and two more. In fact, one, when I came here in Atlanta, I found one what was liberated with me together. But I didn’t know. I’d been over there unconscious. I’d been already in a coma or something like this. When I opened up my eyes, I didn’t believe my eyes. I see around me soldiers and nurses [in] white, everybody with the white bed, and I think, “What kind of dream is this? This is a dream.”

The soldiers . . . I [had] never seen [an] American uniform. I thought the Germans found out I’m still alive and they come to finish me up. I start to holler, “Töte mich nicht!” [I yelled] in the German language, “Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me!” The soldiers [were]

28 The war in Europe officially ended on May 7, 1945 when German General Alfred Jodl signed an unconditional surrender to the Allies in Reims, France. The following day, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel officially surrendered to Soviet forces in Berlin.

29 The evacuation of Dachau began in the last days of April 1945. On April 26, 1945, 2,000 mostly Jewish prisoners left by train and around 7,000 were sent on a death march from Dachau to Tegernsee far to the south. The SS personal fled the camp on April 27 and 28. The 42nd and 45th Infantry Divisions and the 20th Armored Division of the US Army entered Dachau on April 29, 1945. As they neared the camp, they came across thousands of dead and dying prisoners as well as more than 30 railroad cars filled with decomposing bodies that had been brought to Dachau and abandoned. Inside the camp, approximately 32,000 survivors remained. Several thousand dead lay on the ground inside the camp. Although there was a crematorium in Dachau that served to dispose of corpses from the concentration camp, by the end of 1944, their capacity was no longer enough to cremate the scores of dead from the camp.
standing [around me]. <Sam pretends to hide his face> I put my head in a pillow and I hollered, “Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me!”

All of a sudden came one American major. He was about fifty, fifty-five [years old]. He gives me a kiss on the head with tears in his eyes. I holler, “Don’t kill me!” He started to talk to me in broken Yiddish.30 [He said], “Ich a Yid. My momma a gut Yid. My father a gut Yid.” [I am Jewish. My mother is a good Jew. My father is a good Jew.] I holler to him, “Don’t kill me!” All of a sudden, he open up his blouse and he took out a mezuzah.31 When I see a mezuzah . . . For me, a mezuzah was . . . I used to go . . . I been in a Yeshiva.32 For me, it was a religious thing. [It was] everything in the world. When I see the mezuzah, I start to cry, and he cry, and all the soldiers around cry. Then I see the soldiers take out from anything what they had in their pockets something . . . milk, cookies with crackers . . .

The major say to the soldiers, “You stay here till I come back in an hour,” or something like this. We stay with the soldiers and the nurses around me. He came with three German doctors what the American army had them already as prisoners of war. The man say, “You see them skeleton? If you can bring him alive, you be alive. If not, we do this to you what you did to them.” These three doctors work on me around the clock, 24 hours. The first thing they say [is for them] to take [the food away]. [They said], “He don’t see any food here because if he going to touch something from them, he be dead like this.”33 I don’t know what they did to me. Only I feel like thy drop me every second, every minute, something they drop me, they stick me. I don’t know what. The major came maybe about five times a day to see how I got on.

<End tape 1>

<Begin Tape 2>

Sandra: Finish being in the hospital and then we can go back to the poem on Yom Kippur.

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30 Yiddish is the common historical language of Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. It is heavily Germanic based but uses the Hebrew alphabet. The language was spoken or understood as a common tongue for many European Jews up until the middle of the twentieth century.

31 A mezuzah (Hebrew for ‘doorpost’) is a parchment scroll often contained in a decorative case that is fixed on the right side of doorpost of a home. The parchment scroll made by a scribe contains the handwritten text of the first two paragraphs of the Shema.

32 Yeshiva [Hebrew: sitting] is a Jewish educational institution for religious instruction that is equivalent to high school. It also refers to a Talmudic college for unmarried male students from their teenage years to their early twenties.

33 Liberated camp survivors were often so weak, emaciated, or sick that thousands died in the weeks after liberation. After liberation, camp survivors faced a long and difficult road to recovery. Eating foods that were too rich or complex for survivors’ bodies to handle could exacerbate years of malnutrition and starvation, resulting in sickness or death.
Sam: On Yom Kippur. . . You want the poem on Yom Kippur that I made? Okay. When everybody came to me back, they asked me, “Sam, do something or pray. We haven’t any siddur. We haven’t nothing.” I told him I got a poem from the ghetto. I tell them the poem in ghetto in Yiddish. I start the poem.

<Recites poem in Yiddish and Russian.>

That’s the poem.

Sandra: That is wonderful.

Sam: In English . . . It’s even better in Yiddish. I could do that only. That poem, when I say this, everybody, we kissed each other. We pray and we cry. After then and tomorrow, we ate the piece of bread with everybody. Somebody had brought a little piece of cheese or somebody had brought a little bread. We make all together for everybody like. But not today get too much. Little for everybody got to me. This is the story.

Later, when the family . . . I been in hospital. That my weight [was] 29 pounds, they never believe. They never believe I be alive. But they stay 24 hours. They give me some drops, and drops, and drops. All of a sudden, came about two, three months, I became so fat that my legs didn’t hold the body. I got to crawl like a baby. I couldn’t stay on my legs. But this was not fat. I was swollen. When they give me the food with everything, everything came out.

My brother didn’t believe I am alive because he see how they carried me out with all the dead people. But the people what they came know me already, [saw that] I am alive. They want to tell him, my brother, [but they wondered], “How we can tell him?” These people think [if they] tell him right now, “Isaac, your brother is alive,” Isaac can get heart attack or something like this.

Came my friend there to where my brother was liberated and he say, “Isaac, did you think somebody thinking that people are dead, but maybe they are not? Maybe somebody’s alive what you don’t know?” Isaac say, “Maybe it can be.” [The friend said], “But let’s say when we will say, ‘From your family, your brother is alive.’ Do you believe it then?” [Isaac said], “This I couldn’t believe and don’t speak to me like this. Don’t make fun for my brother. I seen how they carry him to burn up in the crematorium.” They say, “Isaac, I don’t . . . Hold. Look, I know your

34 Just three days before the liberation of the Dachau camp, the SS forced approximately 7,000 prisoners, including Sam’s older brother Isaac (1910-2002), on a death march south toward the Alps. During the six-day death march, anyone who could not keep up or continue was shot. Many others died of exposure, hunger, or exhaustion. Sam and the surviving prisoners reached Tegernsee on May 2, 1945 and were soon liberated by American troops. Isaac was recovering in a former military hospital when he learned of Sam’s survival.
brother is alive.” He said, “Don’t talk to me like this.” They came [with an] American Jeep and they took Isaac with the two people what they came to him. They brought him in my hospital. They put a bed right beside my bed for him. This is the way [we learned each other were] still alive.

Later on, the American government and the Russian government make a list whom they liberate, with names. They hang up everywhere. I found my wife’s name and she found my name in Russian. I found it in the American zone in Germany. Later, the American was ... not amazed about somebody ... what you did everything for the peace. They say, “Do you want to bring your wife from Russia to you or do you want to go in Russia to your wife?” I say, “No. I want them to bring my wife here in Germany, not in Russia.” They brought my wife there.

Right in Germany, there we got married because before we didn’t marry legally because [the Germans had said], “Who going single, we going kill them and who is got married and got a wife we will let stay [as] couples together, for a while anyway.” We came there in Yiddish community there, in the kehillah [Hebrew: community]. We say, “Look it up. Give us a paper. We are married only to be alive.” We stayed there both in one camp and a hard labor camp all together. Later they carried me in Dachau and her in Auschwitz-Birkenau. When we came both alive, we found each other. Then we got married in Germany by a rabbi legally. There is where [my daughter] Saba was born. That’s my story.

Sandra: Did you then search for other family members?

35 From 1945 to 1949, Germany was occupied by the Allied forces and divided into four administrative zones by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and the United States. Much of southern Germany fell within the American zone of occupation, including Munich, which was near Dachau. Sam’s wife, Ida, had been liberated in Poland, which was occupied by the Soviets.

36 Some 15,000 Jews deemed fit for work and their families were left alive and thus temporarily spared during the “Great Aktion” of October 28, 1941. It is unclear when Sam and Ida met or when they began to pretend to be married, but it is probable the ruse was a result of the “Great Aktion.”

37 In an interview with the USC Shoah Foundation (which can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWIEGvKtrA), Sam says he was in a subcamp of Kauen concentration camp called Schanzen. Schanzen was established in December 1943 southeast of the former ghetto. The camp was completely surrounded by two barbed wire fences and conditions were brutal. Prisoners worked for a variety of Wehrmacht establishments. Schanzen was closed on July 12, 1944.

38 Auschwitz-Birkenau was a network of camps built and operated by Germany just outside the Polish town of Oswiecim (renamed ‘Auschwitz’ by the Germans) in Polish areas annexed by Germany during World War II. It is estimated that the SS and police deported at a minimum 1.3 million people (approximately 1.1 million of which were Jews) to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex between 1940 and 1945. Camp authorities murdered 1.1 million of these prisoners. On January 27, 1945, the Soviet army entered Auschwitz and liberated more than 7,000 remaining prisoners, who were mostly ill and dying. Auschwitz-Birkenau is approximately 530 kilometers (329 miles) south of the Stutthof concentration camp, where Sam’s wife, Ida, was taken in July 1944. At least one transport of women and children from the Kauen concentration camp (formerly the Kovno ghetto) was taken to Stutthof in July 1944 and from there were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.
Sam: I searched everywhere and I couldn’t find nobody. I didn’t find nobody. Only what I know is what I been on a gathering in Los Angeles [California] one time. People came from all over the country. They say, “You are Sam Wise?” “Yeah,” I say. [She said], “I been with your parents in Estonia when they kill them and they burned them up.” They had a hard life there. They took them in the woods. They put wood. They cut up wood. They put a line of wood and the people [laying] with their faces down. They shoot them. They put again wood and they put again a line of people. They shoot them. They took about 8,000 or something like this and they kill them. This woman see this because she became alive and she came in there. [She told me], “That’s what I been together with your parents and I see how they killed them.” That’s what I know.

Sandra: Can you talk a little bit about coming to America—how you were able to come to America and what you had to do? Did you come with your brother at the same time?

Sam: No.

Sandra: How did you choose? Was it America or Israel you wanted to go to?

Sam: My brother went with eight months before me from Germany to America because he had there relatives—his wife’s relatives. I been packed already to go to Israel. My cousin came and he say, “Sam, look there.” He was from Canada. He say, “Sam, look there, you got two brothers only what live. Why one brother got to be in America and the other one in Israel? Why you couldn’t stay together? Why you got cut up the family when there are only two? Go to your brother in America. From America to Israel you always can go.”

That’s why I got somebody in Chattanooga [Tennessee], a man what he had a factory. He give me a guarantee that the American government don’t have to help me out with charity, or

39 Before World War II, the Jewish population of Lithuania was 160,000, about 7 percent of the total population. By the time Lithuania was liberated, about 90 percent of Lithuanian Jews had been murdered—one of the highest victim rates in Europe. Within six months of the German occupation of the city, the Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators had murdered half of all Jews in Kovno. Less than 100 managed to survived in Kovno after its liquidation on July 8, 1944. Tens of thousands who had been transferred to other camps died in camps or on death marches. Meanwhile, the Vendziogola ghetto had been liquidated on August 28, 1941 by local partisans and Lithuanian policemen. According to one report, 252 Jews (42 men, 113 women, and 97 children) were shot in a nearby forest. In another interview, Sam and Isaac report 134 of their family members were killed during the Holocaust.

40 From its establishment until its transformation into a concentration camp, almost half of the Kovno ghetto population died in mass killings or were deported to other camps in Eastern Europe, including Estonia.

41 Sam, Ida and Saba Wise arrived in the United States in New York City, New York on November 9, 1949. From there, they travelled to Chattanooga, Tennessee and on to Atlanta, Georgia, where Sam’s brother Isaac and his family had settled.
welfare, or something like this. He will take care [of me]. I didn’t know the name. I didn’t know the man even at all. I came here in America to my brother.

The Federation did everything for me. The Federation picked me up from New York when I came on the ship to New York. Saba was three years old. I think the Federation brought me seventeen one-dollar bills to buy for the baby milk in the train. I didn’t know how to ask for any milk. I didn’t know how to speak about milk in [English].

Only what I know when I came here in the United States, when everybody tried to help me, to make me welcome and everything, everybody [would pat me on the shoulder and] say, “Don’t you worry. You’ll be all right.” I came to my wife. I say, “Do you see something [on my shoulder]? What do you see? Everybody say . . . Maybe I got something and I haven’t [realized it]. Everybody say I’ll be all right.” She didn’t know either. She [looked and said], “I don’t see nothing.”

Later they asked me when I came with them . . . It was Chattanooga. In Europe, you don’t [pronounce or] spell it like here—Chattanooga. The men there what I came said to me, “Where you going?” I said, “In Hakanukah.” He looked at me and said, “Hakanukah? I think there’s no such place in the United States as Hakanukah.” The other fellow came and said, “That man going to Chattanooga.” That’s the funny thing.

Later on when I came already, the [Jewish] Federation came a woman there speaking Yiddish and everything. What they give me seventeen one-dollar bills and say, “This is to buy for you on the train to Atlanta. Maybe you want to buy some food or, for the baby, milk.” Anyway, I didn’t know how to ask for milk. I didn’t know how to buy food. I came to Atlanta without the food, and without the milk, and without everything.

Later the Federation took me to make them the papers, the first papers to fill out. They asked me my name and later they say, “How many children you got?” I say, “Seventeen.”

42 An Affidavit of Support and Sponsorship was among the criteria applicants seeking an entry visa into the United States during the 1930s and 1940s had to meet. This required two sponsors who were United States citizens or had permanent resident status. Sponsors had to provide proof of their financial status (Federal tax returns and an affidavit from their bank and employer) to ensure that the immigrants would not become dependent upon social welfare programs.

43 The Jewish Federations of North America represents 153 Jewish Federations and over 300 network communities, which raise and distribute more than $3 billion annually for social welfare, social services and educational needs with the objective of protecting and enhancing the well-being of Jews worldwide. After the Holocaust, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the “Joint”, or JDC), the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and other philanthropic organizations that later merged to form the JFNA worked together to support Jewish survivors. Refugees from displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy received funds to help them resettle in places like the United States or Palestine and create new lives.
Everybody started to laugh together. The woman that was making the papers almost fall down like this laughing. The president of the Federation was Mr. Cohen. He speaking perfect Yiddish. Only here, everybody laughing here. He say, “What’s going on here? What you laughing for?” He said, “Mr. Cohen, that man came from Europe just now and he got seventeen children in New York.” He say to me, “You habe zibetsn kinder?” I say, “No, I got seventeen dollars,” and I put the seventeen dollars on the table.

The girl was Mickie Eisenberg. She was a young girl then. Any time till now even, when she see me in the street or in shul area, she say, “Sam, you still got 17 children in New York? Tell me the truth.”

_Sandra:_ Did you go into business in Atlanta with your brother?24

_Sam:_ The question was, everybody who come in Atlanta and he want to go in business, the best work for him is groceries because groceries you don’t have to talk. You don’t have to . . . You take them and pay and that’s all. You don’t have to use any kind of language. That was the way.

I didn’t know what . . . I never seen in my entire life so many canned goods. In Europe, no canned goods. Everything is fresh. Canned goods like soup in there. What I did, I took a piece of butcher paper. I write the names. At least I got to know the names, how to ask for it. I put, I take a can of pork and beans: _khazer und bedlah_. I make a list. Chicken noodle soup: _hindl loksh mit luchen_. I put in Yiddish everything. When a customer came for pork and beans, I forgot where I put it. [The list] was so long. I looked and I looked. When I couldn’t find it, right away I was nervous. The customer say, “That’s all right. I come later. That’s all right. I come back.” She had lost her appetite already!

_Sandra:_ If you could leave one message about your experiences to your family or to the community on this tape, is there something that you want to say about what happened to you and your survival? One statement?

_Sam:_ What kind of statement?

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24 Miriam "Mickie" Greenberg Eisenberg Krinsky (1925—2018) was born in Atlanta, Georgia, where she and her first husband, David Eisenberg, helped build the foundation of Atlanta's vibrant Jewish community. Mickie was a passionate leader for many years at the Hebrew Academy of Atlanta, the Jewish Federation, Hadassah, and Congregation Shearith Israel. After David died, she remarried Joseph Krinsky.

25 Sam and Isaac Wise opened Wise Brothers Grocery in northwest Atlanta. About eight years later, Sam opened his own grocery, Windsor Red Dot.
**Sandra:** Your view of what happened to your family, how can you learn from what happened to your family, how your children might learn about what happened to the Jewish people during the Holocaust . . . If you could say one statement, would you want to?

**Sam:** I tell you what. I never . . . I didn’t want to tell my children what happens with me in concentration camp, or with my wife, and with my family. Because my wife—she didn’t want me to talk to them about it. She say, “If we suffer and we are having a hard time and everything . . . Don’t tell them. They don’t have to . . . “ This was the biggest mistake. I had to tell them. But now I found out, they know more [than] I told them. They found out more [than] I told them. This is the truth. I didn’t want to tell them everything—how they kill the children, how they doing to me . . . It gets emotional.

**Sandra:** Okay. That was wonderful.

<End tape 1>

**INTERVIEW ENDS**