

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### BUT IT WAS NOT TO BE.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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