

Interview with Leonid Litvak, December 12, 2010

Attending: Mara J. Fulmer, Mott; Irina Yufa, JCS; Sara Yufa, High School student/ translator; Ann Pintar Curtis, Mott GD student; Veronica Creed, high school student; Alexzandra Caldwell, high school student.

Introductions:

MJF: My name is Mara Fulmer, a professor of Art at Mott Community College.

VC: I'm Veronica Creed and I'm a senior at Grand Blanc High School.

AC: I'm Alexzandra Caldwell and I'm a senior at Flint Southwestern.

SY: I'm Sara Yufa and I'm a senior at Carmen Ainsworth.

MJF: Behind the camera is Ann Curtis who is a "senior" at Mott Community College.

Leonid: My name is Leonid Litvak.

VC: Can you tell us about your family and how old you were before the war and things like that?

LL: Yes, I can tell you. Before the war I was 8 yrs old. We lived from Odessa, about the same distance it is from Flint to Detroit. There was me, my brother and my mom. In 1937, the KGB took my father to jail.

There was also my grandma who was my mother's mother, and my grandfather. We had a garden and a nice house.

Irina_Y: Why was your father taken to jail?

LL: Actually my father wa a communist. And in 1937, they had a cleansing of the party. When they were all sitting there, he told a joke. And for this joke, he was put on a "trial" you could say, with three people. He was convicted and sent to Siberia for 10 years.

In 1957, they found him not guilty. He had died in Siberia without cause. They sent families some official papers saying he died in jail but that he was not guilty. So many families had received these papers, and to the American Embassy they showed this.

AC: I was wondering what life was like while your father was in jail?

LL: My father was the director of a factory. And in 1934, they sent him to Vladivostok, to the northeast to start a new factory. In 1935, the family joined him.

MJF: About how old were you at the time?

LL: I was 4 yrs old when we went to Vladivostok.

IY: What happened over there?

LL: Usually when someone is arrested as an enemy of the country, the entire family is supposed to be taken as well. So my mother, my brother and me were also supposed to be taken.

The next day my mother asked our neighbor to go to the station and buy a ticket to her sister who lived near Odessa, but not from the station in Vladivostok, but instead from a nearby smaller station. So in the middle of the night, on horseback, a Korean man took us to the smaller station and we boarded the train. Because, they were already watching us. So if we'd boarded the train in Vladivostok, they would have caught us.

We didn't come to the place we lived, we went to my mom's sister's house. We told them that it was just for a visit. Because, at the place where we'd lived, there was already a telegram sent out that if we came home, they were supposed to arrest us. And since they didn't know where we were, we were kind of hidden.

VC: Can you tell me what that felt like? What did your mother tell you? What was your understanding at that age?

LL: We didn't ask our mother because we knew what was going on. In 1937, I was already 6 yrs old and I could understand and my older brother told me. At the time if anyone was taken away then the kids were kicked out of school. And if you worked anywhere, you were fired. We knew that if we didn't run away, we would have been taken to jail.

AC: Where did you run away from?

LL: In Odessa.

MJF: How long did you remain in Odessa before you encountered the first Nazi occupation?

LL: While were there in 1937, it was about 3 years. We lived really close to the south of Ukraine near Moldova. About a month after the war started, they began bombing us, about 1941.

When the war first started, the border army went through our city. At first they were very organized and had their weapons. But later on, they were very battered and messy, having only parts of weapons. They told us to run away or we would all be killed.

In 1941, my brother had just finished high school. They had a group of school boys who would give weapons to, and they would help exterminate spies, or help with anything needed for. My brother became part of this group. My mother's brother went to a nearby village and bought two horses. It wasn't just us. Everyone in our city got ready to leave, and we all left.

For just two horses and the wagon that they pulled, there was me, my mother, her brother, his wife, their two kids, and the wife's parents, all on just one wagon.

I remember very well that morning. We had breakfast. And then got all of our belongings ready and put them on this wagon. And when it was time to go, my grandparents came out and they saw that it was so loaded with all these people and my uncle's newborn baby, they said "No" that they would stay. And so they took all their things off and stayed behind.

IY: What happened to them?

LL: When we came back in 1944, they told us that a month after we left the Nazis came in and began organizing the Jewish ghettos. And my grandmother went to the ghetto and my grandfather, who was a very big strong man, disappeared and no one knows where he went. And three months after my grandmother was in the ghetto, the Nazis marched them to another city. While they were walking, the Nazis shot them all, old people, very young people. They told us that there were 16 Navy men, 20 soldiers and 50 elderly people. They ushered them all into this cave that was used to get the materials for bricks and they shot them all.

MJF: You mentioned your brother identifying spies. Were they looking for Nazi spies?

IY: Yes. Russians gave him a gun to find Nazi spies. He was Jewish. Only 17 yrs old.

MJF: What happened to him?

LL : They wouldn't let these guys go home. They changed the army age from 18 to 16. They weren't quite soldiers yet, but they were enlisted, like helpers.

IY: What happened with him next, during the war?

LL: We left in the afternoon and by the evening we had arrived in this little village. The entire city that we came from, all had left at the same time, we were all together. When one stopped in the village, everyone stopped there for the night.

When we got closer to this village, people got near to my mother and her brother to tell them to stop here. But they said "No", that we would keep going.

When we were 3 or 4 streets passed where everyone had stopped, Nazi planes came and they bombed the area where everyone behind us had stopped. It was just horrible, children, horses, elderly people... torn to pieces. It was so scary.

There were dead children, live children laying there. Everything was terrible. Now that I remember, I think that with these events, I had a nervous breakdown and I stopped talking. I was so young, I was only 10 yrs old. For 12 days, they laid me down. I only drank water. I didn't eat, I didn't speak. I only drank water.

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