

Interviewed by Lucille W. Brown
Raananah Park, New York
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Harry Woll was born in Gomel, now Belarus, but Russia in 1898. Luck, wits and chutzpah got him out of more than one life and death situation. Here is his engaging story of courage and survival.

Lucille Brown: Harry Laurence Woll. Mr Woll, would you tell me when you were born.

Harry Woll: September 28, 1898.

LB: Where?

HW: [Gomel, Russia](#).

LB: You were in White Russia then?

HW: Yeah. At that time it was Russia. The suburb was known as [White Russia](#) but it was one Russia.

LB: Yes, but it was different because at one time it was also Poland, wasn't it?

HW: No, we were on the border of Poland. Not in Poland.

LB: And it was always Russian?

HW: Always Russian. Always Russian.

LB: Did it never go back and forth between the two?

HW: It could be at the time of [Chmielnitzki](#). That could be, but they overran and took it over. But I wouldn't consider that. They never did when I studied at the gymnasium and then in the college. They never considered that it belongs to Poland. It was white Russia. However, there were times when they controlled and in that respect you are absolutely right.

LB: It shifted back and forth.

HW: We grew up with the idea that White Russia had nothing to do with Poland because Poland was far away. It wasn't so close. But through the history of these east European countries, they have been capturing one the other then separating again. So it's hard to tell. That was under Chmielnitzki. As a matter of fact, we Jews have a good reason to remember that time because during the fight between the Poles and the [Ukrainians](#) in the Jewish year of 5408, now it is 5737, but that was 5408. We know it in Hebrew: the expression "Zana tauch and tauch". The woes or whatever happened... the misfortunes of these two years 408 and 409, because the Poles massacred many Jews at that time. They overran-but they never controlled it.

LB: So, you were born in Gomel and Minsk was the nearest big city?

HW: That was the nearest big city on one side- Minsk. And the other side, about the same same distance, [Kiev](#), Ukraine.

LB: Kiev, was south of you and Minsk was north of you. That puts you right in the middle of the [Pripet Marshes](#). Right?

HW: That was known as Polesi and we were on the border of that. We lived there.

LB: Was Gomel a [shtetl](#)?

HW: No, Gomel was by comparison a central city. We had no colleges but we had four high schools and we had a population close to 200,000 at the first World War. Later it changed a great deal. As a matter of fact the communists changed it. You know that the Russian districts are named by *gubernyi*. We were *Minski gubernya*. We belonged to [Mogilev](#). That means Minsk, the gubernia, was bordering on Poland and that was the influence of Poland there. Mogilev is closer to central Russia so the Polish had no influence, although in each and every town, you had a big synagogue, built by either a prince of the realm or the government, and a Russian church, slavic and a Catholic because you had Poles living there too. It was close, but still didn't belong to Poland.

LB: So you had about 200,000 population?

HW: Variable 160,000 to 200,000 population.

LB: Was there industry in the town before the first World War?

HW: There was no industry there.

LB: What did most of the people do? How did they make a living?

HW: The Jewish people, most of them were connected with cutting wood in the forest. Lumber, that was their business and some of them were occupied as tailors, shoemakers, artisans. They never had an industry there, but since Gomel is on the River Sozh a number of Jews occupied themselves with having freight ship boats heading south from Poland all the way to Ukraine. That was their business.

LB: I never heard that before- Jews being engaged in water freight. At the time you are speaking of, Russia controlled this portion.

HW: That's right. I was born in White Russia; belonging to Russia.

LB: The Jews who were engaged in freight by water, did they have to have a special license from the Russian government?

HW: Yes. They had to pay a certain fee for the right of doing this.

LB: And they were permitted to do that?

HW: Yeah. They were permitted.

LB: That was one of the avenues opened to them?

HW: That's right. You see there was one big factory in Gomel that belonged to the government, to the railroad. They were fixing up (rail)cars and trains that they had to. No Jews could come in there. They wouldn't accept a Jew there.

LB: That was government owned?

HW: That was government owned. As a matter of fact, this was the first and the only group in that neighborhood that was a working element and had consideration for certain ideals of justice and fair play.

LB: From this factory?

HW: From this railroad factory.

LB: Are you saying that it was organized...a union?

HW: The factory was conducted by the government, but we had in 1905 the first pogrom in Gomel. That was the first and then there was a second one. During the second one...

LB: When was the second one?

HW: If I'm not mistaken, it was right after the first World War. And groups of partisans occupied this town and were ready to destroy and kill a lot of us. They started a fire, and it was a fire all over. These workers came en masse and chased away. So that was the interesting thing. Labor had some chance, although they were [anti-Semites](#), but with a certain sense of fair play, more or less. And another group were the peasants from the villages. They came there. It was a divided group. Some of them came to rob, to take whatever they could. Others came to help out. As a matter of fact, they came with forks, with axes. They had no ammunition and they came in to save the city. Not to save the Jews, but to save the city. But this is something that, as a child, I was very much impressed and that moved most of us young people towards socialism and labor. We could see it in practice. They came and they chased away the bandits.

LB: Where were the bandits from?

HW: They were usually deserters from the army. And then it was - the war ended with the socialist revolution. Not the Bolshevik. The Bolshevik took over about three years later.

LB: No. We are talking about 1905 now. You are talking about the second [pogrom](#)? I'm a little mixed up.

HW: The first pogrom, it was merely anti-semitic. You see, one has to know the way of life for the peasants. The peasants were very poor because originally they would get so much land and then with the increase in the family, the same parcel of land was divided among them with the result that after three generations, they didn't have enough land. And they were starving. They were very poor and the czarist government supplied them with a lot of whiskey. They supplied them, so most of the time they were drunk and they didn't have anything. They were almost naked, so it was easy for them to fall prey to any kind of education, any kind of talk. And because of poverty and because of need they would go out and hear: Rob! Take!. Then there was something else. The people have inherited long before, from the time of Chmielnitzky... You see the Poles controlled at that time part of Russia, so what they did, they rented out to Jews the control of the church; the control of everything. And the peasants - the Russian peasants- (if his child died he had to bury him, he had to pay. Who collected the money? The Jew. The fact that the Jew had to pay almost as much to the Pole- that they didn't know. So they developed a certain hatred towards the Jew. There was no industry there. There were merchants- store keepers and small businessmen. So the Gentile, the peasant - not the city folk- would say: "There he walks around with his hands clean and makes me work and he gets the benefit". So that developed until it was easy, especially when the government was backing it. The government was backing this pogrom and it was done on purpose so the peasant wouldn't have time to think about his own fate. You had all kinds of people who couldn't find themselves and they would join these groups and that was the pogrom. In many places it was a massacre rather than just a pogrom. It not only ruined business but also killed people.

LB: But where the people in the factory came out and the villagers came out, that was already about 19...

HW: That was 1905. That was in the first and also in the second pogrom. Both.

LB: Both times they came out?

HW: Both times they came, yeah.

LB: Please repeat the date of the second pogrom.

HW: If I am not mistaken, it was in 1917. It was right after the war.

LB: Was it before the Revolution?

HW: That was when the Revolution started. In fact, the [Revolution](#) gave a push to these people and formed all kinds of groups - fighting the [Bolsheviks](#) and groups that supported them. They were fighting. The Jew was the one who was never in the labor ranks. He was a small businessman so naturally he was the one who suffered the anti-semitism. He had stores. They were store owners, so the peasant wanted to get back just as you had in here when you had these negroes. But of course, they would also kill people. See, the second one was so pronounced that we never knew who was in control of the town or the city. They changed hands every day. Some group would conquer and kill a number of people and take over and then another group would come. There were all kinds with the idea that they were fighting the Bolsheviks. And that was it. So we suffered and went through all this and don't forget that when the Bolsheviks took over the country, the country didn't produce. The stores were almost empty. In order to buy bread, the peasant needed salt. He had bread. He lived on the farms. He lived in the villages but he couldn't get salt. So we all used to take with us bags of salt, go about 30, 40, 50 miles to villages, exchange it for flour and bring it home and have bread.

LB: Where did you get the salt?

HW: In the cities, we still had salt. So we used to do that and the peasant couldn't eat without salt because he had (illegible) the meat or the bread. [Without salt](#) they used to get a sickness known by the name tsinda. The jaws swell up and you couldn't eat and you die of starvation.

LB: You mean from the lack of salt?

HW: Lack of salt.

LB: Is that why salt is so important?

HW: Oh, yes. Salt prevents tsinda. Tsinda. That was the name.

LB: What language is that?

HW: I really don't know. I think it's Russian. It may be a corrupted expression. I don't think it's a medical thing. It was awful without salt. And then we reached the end of supplies, so we used to take whatever jewelry we had and go there and exchange it for salt.

LB: This was in 1917 after the Revolution.

HW: That's right, Oh yes. That was after the war.

LB: Let's go back a little bit. When you were born, your father was doing what? What kind of family were you in?

HW: My father had two jobs; two businesses. One during the summer and the other in the winter. During the summer he was - they call it in Russia *otpravilet*. It means a person who expedited the movement of certain goods from the railroad.

LB: Like a dispatcher?

HW: No, not employed. You see, Germany needed meat. They didn't have enough meat. So they would buy geese in Russia. So the Jews on the borderline with Germany became geese farmers and they would go into deep Russia, into actually Kursk, and all around the cities and buy from the farmers the geese. Load them in a carload; 1400 to a carload and send them towards Germany. But geese must stop. They cannot go without food or without water for more than a day and a half, otherwise they will die on the way. And the worst of it was, when a carload of geese would come to the German borderline, if they would find one goose dead they would condemn the whole carload because they were afraid of some kind of epidemic. So they had to be careful. So, when the geese came, my father had a big lot, about a block long that had places to keep carloads of geese, 1400 places with a fence.

LB: So they would let the geese out of the train.

HW: Yes. And they had water for them; a lake that they could swim. So he was this *otpravitel*. So the geese would come, they would unload them -let them down to the ground- and they would come about 15 to 20 carloads a day.

LB: That's more than 24,000 geese.

HW: Yes, sure. That's right. And feed them, bathe. And the following day, load them again and send them all the way out to the nearest stop which was in Brest-Litovsk. That's where they would stop. So that's the summer job my father was busy with. Winter, he used to buy stones, sell it to the city government to pave the streets wherever they had to fix. So he was supplying them with stones where he would buy them also somewhere away from small towns; away from the city.

LB: Was your family comfortable, financially?

HW: Yeah.

LB: Would you say you were middle class or lower middle class or upper or what?

HW: We were middle class. Don't forget, there were five brothers going to school and three daughters.

LB: You mean of the children?

HW: The children. And they had to pay tuition fees for each and every one. At that time it was about 160 rubles a person.

LB: So you had four brothers and three sisters.

HW: I had four brothers. We were five brothers and three sisters.

LB: Eight children and your mother and father.

HW: Yeah. And he had to provide them. The gymnasium cost a lot of money.

LB: And all the children had a gymnasium.

HW: All the children had a gymnasium. All of them graduated. Some went to college but then the War broke out. That's what stopped it.

LB: Were you the oldest or the youngest?

HW: I'm the oldest.

LB: In Gomel, no Hasidim. But your father was a [Mitnagid](#)?

HW: He was an [Ashkenazic](#) Jew. Not a Hasid, not a Mitnagid. But my grandmother belonged to a rabbi. She was... but it didn't matter because she couldn't influence anybody.

LB: Did you live in your own home?

HW: Yeah. It was a large house. I had an extra room for myself.

LB: You did? That was very unusual.

HW: That was unusual but I am telling you, we built a big house. There was a small house next to it which we rented out. It wasn't the rent so much, because mostly it was to help out a poor man in a small house. But we lived in a very big house. We had a master bedroom for father and mother. We had three rooms for children and I had a *kabinet*, a room of my own.

LB: Like an office. Did you sleep there too?

HW: Yeah.

LB: So were you the only one that had your own room?

HW: The oldest son. I had that. And a dining room and a living room and a porch with screens on to be modern, and a kitchen. And then we had built in stacks. Then, of course, we had the outside building of hay and a cow.

LB: Your mother had help, I am presuming.

HW: We had a girl whose job was to cook and a girl to take care of the house or the building and one man to take care of the needs of the yard, chopping wood. Mother was - I don't know - she may have been spoiled in childhood. She was raised not by her parents but by her mother's brother that didn't have any children. He was well to do, so they spoiled her. She didn't have to do anything and when she married, Father and Mother were cousins. So, when she married him, she thought that she could marry someone better yet. She was the frustrated intellectual. So she began to complain about illnesses and every time she didn't feel so good, they called the doctor. The doctor would come and finally said leave her in the room. Lock the door and don't mind. She'll be well. In other words, there is nothing wrong with her. But, of course, Father wouldn't do that and then she developed angina, heart condition. So that was quite a job. She couldn't stand noise. The pavement, as I mentioned before, was rocks. And the cars didn't have tires, so it would make noise and every time she would be surprised she would get that feeling of a heart attack. We didn't know about nitroglycerin tablets in those days. We used to take a pitcher of hot water with mustard and put her hands in that. We learned to take care of her. But to avoid these noises, Father bought hay and he got permission from the city - because he was supplying the city - and placed hay about a half a block one way and half a block the other. The house was a corner house, so the wagons would pass by it, wouldn't make any noise. That's how he took care of the princess.

LB: Well, then he did try to take care of her.

HW: Oh, yes, he did.

LB: But don't forget she also had eight children, which is no small job.

HW: Oh, yes. And of course, there were cousins. I told you, Father had money. And family on the other side wasn't wealthy. Nor was Father's side. It was up to Father and his brother and his uncle to provide with whatever necessary to members of the family, especially one sister. And

when Grandmother was alive, to support her. And then to support most of the family on my mother's side. They were his cousins. But they would come and stay with us one at a time or two, and help Mother for five or six weeks. So, he needed room for them, too.

LB: I see. So there was always a coming and a going. Plus eight children.

HW: Right. And then there's something else. I mentioned before the people used to come from the border towns of Germany to buy geese and they would send out people to do the buying: ten, twelve, fifteen, eighteen geese from each farmer. And naturally you had to cover a lot of ground and then bring it together. So these people, the peddlers with geese, who were coming, they needed a place so they would eat with us so that they could see Father and talk and see each other. So our house was like a big shopping center all the time. Noise and noise and noise.

LB: When you look back on it, Mr. Woll, was it pleasant or not?

HW: Was it pleasant? It was very pleasant for us, the youngsters, to sit and listen to the conversation. And Father used to always send us away: "Go on, do your homework! Go on and read!" Because he was afraid- and it is an interesting thing about our father- I never had a kiss from my father. Never a good word. But mother used to tell us that he loved us so much. But he never displayed it, never showed it. On the other hand, the children would never sit at the table before Father sat down. That was a natural thing with us. Father had his seat at the head of the table, all the time. Nobody would sit in his chair. That was Father's. And while we never saw a display of affection, nevertheless, we respected Father very much, thanks to Mother. She used to tell us how eager he was to see that we were well, and so on. But Father was always complaining: "Why don't you do this? Why don't you do that?" And I used to tell him I already did my homework. I have no more homework. "Sit down and write." And I, at that time, developed a talent for writing articles, compositions. And it was the case of [Beilis](#), when a Jew was accused.

LB: That was already 1913.

HW: Approximately, and I was about 15 years old. So, I wrote an article about attorneys and about the whole thing. And as a youngster, I poured out all I could; didn't even consider what one may say and what one shouldn't say. And one day Father said: "Why don't you sit down and write. You don't have to listen to these things." And we also had a tendency to go into the kitchen and listen to the cook and the stories that they would tell.

LB: Isn't that like children all over?

HW: That's right. Father said: "You stop going to the kitchen. You need something, call. She'll bring it to you. I don't want you to waste time listening to these stories that they keep on telling. He used to show this composition of mine to some of his friends and one of them said: "You want to go to prison together with your family?" Because should this paper fall into the hands of a policeman or an officer of the police, you're licked because at that time the government... So he tore it. But he was proud that I did. But by the same token, I used to also write in Hebrew. He would also pick up something I wrote. He wasn't a scholar. He couldn't make out head or tail. But he would listen to me reading it and he would go and if there was a big rabbi visitor, he would show it to him and that was it.

LB: I hear you saying that he was proud of you but you never heard him say I love you.

HW: No, never a kiss and never a good word. Never.

LB: Did you feel that?

HW: I inherited it. I am the same way. Although I know the fault of it, but that's how we were brought up.

LB: You know it and you can't do anything about it.

HW: I'd feel rather funny if I would all of a sudden. My daughter, I would give her a kiss sometimes, because she would kiss me all the time.

LB: You couldn't do it to a son. Could you kiss a son?

HW: My son, the same thing.

LB: Do you kiss him?

HW: Yes. Sometimes. But we don't display this type of affection, never. Which is wrong. We missed it, we wanted it and Mother kept on telling us and assuring how much he loved us.

LB: Was your mother an affectionate woman?

HW: Mother? Yes, she was.

LB: So even though she was a "princess", she was loving.

HW: Yeah.

LB: It's very hard on the children not to be told.

HW: Definitely. I used to argue with my father. Why don't you ever tell me it's good? You always tell me the other thing. He said: "The good things I don't have to tell you."

LB: But you do have to.

HW: I know, but that was their psychology.

LB: I know. I talked to one man who said his father used to beat him every day whether he did something wrong or not. The theory being that if he missed a day...

HW: ...he would be worse. When I was a child, Mother would spank me. Father never did and she would never say "I'll tell Daddy about it" because she knew that it would hurt him and he wouldn't do anything. So she did it. But Father would take us to synagogue.

LB: Was he a religious man?

HW: He was not, no.

LB: But you say he was a traditional Jew.

HW: Traditional Jew. But something happened, you see. When his father died and Grandma remained alone, he established there, not a synagogue but a gathering of a minyon to daven. And they kept on doing that for years until they decided it's no sense. She lived in a basement. The upper floor was rented out. She had her own house. (They) decided "let's build a synagogue". So, naturally, who did they talk to but the son, the oldest son of the family. And Father agreed and then they built a synagogue - a big one, a corner one. It's an interesting story, the way they did it without having money and collecting and selling seats to people and each and every one wanted to be at the eastern wall. They promised everybody: you'll get it if you give \$300. And then when they finished and completed it, it was some synagogue. They all came. Now we have to designate the seats and they have only 28 seats in the eastern wall. People- they yelled and yelled. But what else could they do? After all the big shots, only three of them were given certain seats. They were the noisiest ones. So somebody suggested: draw lots. And they drew lots. Lo and behold it came out, as luck would have it. They all shut up. No more. Even God himself said it was all right.

LB: You mean the three noisy ones got the seats by the eastern wall?

HW: Yes. They got it and not a word. We didn't have a chance to enjoy it very much because that was the Second War broke out. The Second World War broke out and the commander of the army, an uncle of the czar...

LB: No, the first one.

HW: That was the first one?

LB: You are thinking of 1905, then the first one was 1914, right?

HW: So they chased out all the Jews who lived in the towns on the borderline.

LB: That was the First World War.

HW: And since Father was always at the railroad station, he and a few others took to meet these victims of the law of the czar's uncle and sometimes take them off the train and place them locally. Because they were sent all the way into Russia where they wouldn't find a Jew and the result would be they would be lost there. Some of them rabbis, some of them yeshiva pupils. So they would take them off there and arrange for them. Where do you put a trainload of people? The synagogue. So the synagogue was given over to them. We couldn't use the synagogue any more and they moved in and they lived there.

LB: So these were people actually from further west. In other words, they were coming from this way towards you- from Poland and then your father and a couple of others took them off the trains...

HW: Not all of them, but whoever they could and that's how I managed to meet the greatest rabbis. They would come to our house.

LB: And they stayed in the synagogue. How long did they stay there?

HW: Some of them stayed a year. Some of them a little more and of course, there was the question of supplying them with food and clothing. Clothing, I took over. The government had certain organizations that would supply coats and suits and clothing. So I would come and get it. At that time, the Poles had a Joint Distribution Committee. I would go to them together with our rabbi, who was interested in it and helped me out, and they would hand it out. I was a youngster and I was able to work my way through and get it for them and distribute it. And so we supplied them with clothes and winter clothes. They didn't have anything.

LB: But we started this when I asked you whether your father was a religious man. You said no.

HW: He wasn't. I'll explain to you why.

LB: You mean in the traditional sense he was not.

HW: He had to sign a paper one day and it happened to be on Friday night and Mother felt uneasy. Here the children are sitting, it's Shabbos. He didn't mind it. So she said take it in the other room so the children wouldn't see. She was more religious.

LB: That's not what I mean by religious, but okay. She was more observant of the rules.

HW: More observant. But we had a home with Jewish (?) in the center. We observed every holiday faithfully and go to synagogue every Saturday. We had to go to synagogue.

LB: The whole family.

HW: The whole family- Father with his sons. And we lived at a time - Father was very proud of his children and especially his first born - me. And when I was about eight years old I began to read the Torah in the synagogue on Saturday evening. Saturday morning, they wouldn't let me. I was too young and it was too much, but this I would do. And one day, my father bought me a gift: ice skates. So I went out on the sidewalk and skated. I didn't go to a rink. We didn't have such a thing. But around the house. And one of the congregants of the synagogue saw me and he said: "Shame on you! You're skating like every non-Jewish boy and then you come to read the Torah." The skates were taken away.

LB: So life was pretty restrictive in that sense.

HW: Oh, yes. It was restrictive and we lived in a certain limit. We were taught a number of things that we had to take care of. On the other hand we had also experiences very pleasant for us because it was customary in Russia, especially in the cities, that the poor people - the very poor- they would go and beg. They wouldn't beg in the streets, but they had their homes that they knew.

LB: Were these the ones with the chains and the shirts? Are you talking about Jews or non-Jews?

HW: Non-Jews. But the beggars were Jewish. But they didn't have any chains. The Christian beggars were something else. They were starving, but I'm talking about the Jewish beggars. They would come to our house every Thursday and mother would send out to them coins. Each one, they would come about 40- 50 and she would hand out coins. When I was eight years old

she took me, gave me some of these coins and said: "Hand them out." And at that time I knew the value of a coin because for a penny you could go and buy a piece of cake, although we were never permitted to go and buy these things. Mother provided. There was candy in the house that Mother would hand out. She taught us that money has value not only for what you can buy, but also what good you can do with it. And that I appreciate. I learned that lesson as a child of eight. We were not allowed to play cards, but on Hanukkah we would all sit with Father and Mother and the relatives and all of the children and play cards. It was a certain game and win a penny. It was just to show to the children that's the way Hanukkah is. And we would have Hanukkah gelt so that's what we used. Father noticed that one of my brothers is too eager. He is not just playing but he wants to win. No more.; the whole idea of cards out. We didn't play because he was afraid he would become a gambler. That's how we were restricted. But at the same time, when I grew a little older, I became involved in socialist activities. We had to have meetings. Where are we going to have them? So we used our house.

LB: You did.

HW: Yes, with Father's permission. And Father would stand outside and watch if a policeman would come. He would make sure that he wouldn't notice. He wouldn't come in there.

LB: Was your father politically oriented in any way?

HW: No, no. He had a little shop. Father wanted to help out a relative and he established with him a shop in our yard in a building. What was the shop? Making powder to sell.

LB: Powder?

HW: Face powder.

LB: You mean for women?

HW: That's right. And would pour in a little perfume and two girls were working packing it.

LB: What was it made of?

HW: Talc and a little perfume and sell it to the peasants. The city folks would go to the drugstore and buy there. So one day my younger brother - the next one, passed away already- he came to Father, to the table after dinner. We had dinner at home always and lunch at home. With Father, even in his business he could come home and eat. And he said: "Father, you have to raise the salary of the two girls, otherwise I'll pull a strike. So Father jokingly said, "Okay. I can't afford to raise so instead of giving your tuition fee, I'll give it to them as a raise. That's all.

You want to call a strike.” But I could see that the way he spoke, with a smile on his face, he enjoyed it that his son had such an attitude towards this thing. And they got the raise. That’s besides the point. But he jokingly said: “I have no money. I can’t afford.” But this is how he was.

LB: Did you speak Yiddish at home?

HW: Yiddish. You see, there, too, my answer is incorrect since we had a nyanya.

LB: A Polish nyanya?

HW: Russian. She would talk Russian to us. So we would also talk Russian. But among ourselves with our father and our mother it was only Yiddish.

LB: So you learned Russian easily because you had nyanya.

HW: Sure. Well, I wouldn’t call it Russian. It was white Russian or what they call *kohkhlatsky*. A peasant is called *khokhol* so it was *khokhlatsky*. A kind of language that is grammatically wrong and it has all kinds of idioms. That was what we learned from the girls.

LB: But there is a Belarusian dialect.

HW: That’s what we were. That’s white Russian.

LB: That’s the one you learned. It looks like Russian but there is something wrong because there are certain combinations of letters that didn’t look similar to Russian. What’s the university in White Russia?

HW: In Minsk. Grodno has no university. It is already Lithuanian. Minsk had it. You see, I grew up without knowing the white Russians had a language of their own. We knew that the peasants speak a language that is grammatically wrong. For instance, to give an example: In Russian the sun is *solntze*. You don’t pronounce the L in there. They say “sontze” but you don’t pronounce it. The time that we began to realize that and learn about it was after the Revolution and every small nationality began to put out whatever they had and that’s where I found it out.

LB: So you spoke Yiddish. Now you must have had a Hebrew education.

HW: Yes. I went to [*cheder*](#). I had a very bad experience in cheder. The rebbe, the teacher would sit at the head of the table and had a cane in his hand. We were learning about Jacob taking the right of the first born from Esau. I was so much engrossed in it and that he cheated, so I said:

“What a cheat!” And the rabbi with his cane, hit me over my head and I knocked on the table and broke here the nose.

LB: That’s a very upsetting story, that Jacob and Esau story.

HW: About these stories we can tell a lot of things. Our sages find it difficult to justify, so they cover it up with the idea that the world would be different if Esau would have the right of first born. But this is like written with a fork on water - doesn’t stay. The fact of the matter is that this is what he did. There are many things that you start thinking and seeing when you grow older. So, I came home and caused a job with my nose and so on. We used to go to *cheder* from morning until evening and in winter time (the sun) sets at 4:00 and you would have to go in the dark. So Father decided, no more cheder. He engaged a teacher who would come to our house and teach me and my brothers three hours a day and would get extra pay. And that was when I began to have a different kind of education. Frankly, the teachers changed every two or three years. Some of them were doing an excellent job. One of them, I recall, decided rather than to teach me and my brothers the things you were supposed to, he would play chess. So we played chess.

LB: Nobody told your father.

HW: No. One liked Hebrew composition and he detected that I had ability. So all I did was write compositions and he would read and make corrections and tell me to keep on writing. So instead of learning anything, I did writing. That’s how I got my Jewish education.

LB: Was this supposed to include religious instruction as well?

HW: Yes. There was only one kind. Religious. There was no other kind.

LB: At that time you weren’t learning modern Hebrew yet.

HW: That was the Hebrew that we learned.

LB: Scripture Hebrew. What about spoken Hebrew, modern Hebrew?

HW: We developed it ourselves.

LB: You did.

HW: Sure. We didn’t have the vocabulary that later on we developed and we began to read modern literature. But that was it. I’ve had experience here with my job issuing licenses to

teachers; Hebrew teachers. Giving exams and issuing licenses. One day a man from Israel came and I asked him what he had- papers and all this. I told him what he is to do and, speaking in Hebrew of course, I see he sits and looks at me. He doesn't budge. I said: "Why are you looking at me?" He said: "I'm listening. You are speaking the language of the Bible." It wasn't the language that he was accustomed to. It was the bible because we have no other source, just the bible and that's all. No literature. We don't use it daily. Now, we begin to use it daily, too.

LB: So he was astonished at your speaking to him in biblical Hebrew.

HW: Yes. He said, you speak the Tanach. I find it difficult now to accept some of the expressions in Hebrew they use in Israel.

LB: The modern Hebrew, you mean.

HW: Not modern, it is illiterate. But that's how they talk. I disliked it very much. But they needed new terms and they're creating and they keep on changing, modifying them to give it a special Hebrew thing. And they have a lot of Arabic words now in there and I find it difficult very often, even though I became here a professional translator of Hebrew. I get paid for that.

LB: And you still have a problem.

HW: Yes.

LB: When you had these teachers coming to the house, all five boys were being taught.

HW: The oldest two. The youngest two, they still went to school. The oldest two just had the private teacher.

LB: There should be three. Weren't there five boys?

HW: Altogether, five boys. But the youngest one was born much later. He was 14 years old when they came to America. He was the younger one. Of five, only one remains. I. Four of them died.

LB: In the Hebrew, you learned [Tanakh](#), and to pray - [davening](#)- and then reading and writing. You did learn Talmud. You also had a secular education?

HW: Oh, yes. I went to gymnasia.

LB: In order to get into gymnasia, you had to have something else, didn't you?

HW: At home, I learned to read on my own. We used to get a paper- a Russian paper. Father subscribed and the name of the paper was Brezhevnik Vedemost. So I heard the words and I began to read the headings. So this is big- that is how I bothered Mother and I finally learned the alphabet and I learned to read.

LB: What's the name of the paper?

HW: Birzhevia Bursa. In Russia, it's Bursa... you know, the exchange?

LB: So it was a commercial newspaper that your father read. Was it Russian or white Russian paper?

HW: No, that was Russian. White Russian, hardly. Before the Revolution they didn't even know there was such a thing. No writer writes a book in that language. It is a peasant expression of the Russian language. So I learned to read and then time was to go to gymnasium. Gymnasium was all day and the Hebrew teacher would come in the afternoon.

LB: Did you have trouble getting into gymnasium?

HW: That's what I am going to tell you. There was the government controlled gymnasium and we had, in Gomel, a privately owned Jewish gymnasium with certain restrictions. I'll explain to you what they are. The two of us, I and my younger brother, together we learned Hebrew and together we prepared for the exams to enter the gymnasium. To enter the gymnasium- the government run gymnasium, where the tuition was very small, there was a numerus clausus. If a Jew wanted to enter he had to pay the tuition for fourteen non-Jews so that they could take in the Jew.

LB: Fourteen?

HW: Fourteen non-Jews. Pay their tuition, make them go. Pray to God that they go, so his son would be admitted.

LB: Is that what numerus clausus meant in action? I thought it just meant that they wouldn't admit more than a certain number.

HW: No it meant you were going to get a percentage and the percentage was 14 non-Jews to one Jew.

LB: But the Jew had to pay for the 14.

HW: Of course. If you couldn't get any 14... otherwise they didn't have it. In addition to that you had to have high grades. We took the exam, my brother had high grades and he happened to have the 14 non-Jews without having to pay. They were registered. He was accepted in the government gymnasia. I, who had lower grades than he, I was accepted into the privately owned Jewish gymnasia. The difference was, that at the end of the fourth year and the sixth and the eighth year, we had to have special exams. Teachers of the government gymnasia would be delegated to give us exams and if we passed we used to call it *deputatski exameni*. The *deputat* teacher is a delegate and they naturally hated Jews and they hated our going to colleges and so they were asking questions, not necessarily part of what you studied. You were responsible for everything and tuition fee was much higher there.

LB: At the private school.

HW: At the private school. It was a Jewish owned school. So, I had the fourth year exam, the sixth year and then the eighth, which gave me the right to enter college. And there again, the same story with the numerus clausus. There you had what you used to think it was- you had a certain percentage of Jews. But the Revolution broke out. I only began to go to medical school and I had to cut out.

LB: You wanted to go to medical school.

HW: Yeah, I wanted to go to medical school. I heard that my parents are in trouble; that some of the rebels against the government are trying to, as I said before, they used to come- bands- so I had to come home.

LB: You weren't home?

HW: No, in [Kharkov](#) at the university.

LB: So you started.

HW: Yeah. I started and my brother started. He didn't have the difficulty, but he, too, had to give up in the middle. He almost got through there. He had to finish when he came here and get his degree as an engineer. So he got his degree here and he got immediately a job with the Federal Power Commission in Washington. So, that was it.

LB: But the gymnasium was in Gomel. And you went to the gymnasium until what year?

HW: I don't remember.

LB: Was it during the war?

HW: During the war, yes. I think it was.

LB: We can figure it out. You were born in 1898 and when did you start gymnasium?

HW: I think in my eighth year.

LB: So that's about 1906. And gymnasia is eight; so it's 1914. So you would finish it just about when the war started. So you were not home.

HW: No. Then I was home and I went to Kharkov.

LB: Do you remember being home after the World War started? The first war?

HW: After the First World War started, I didn't leave home. I was too young.

LB: You were still at home, so you must have still been in gymnasia then. Do you remember anything about the war itself- how it affected Gomel?

HW: Well, the First World War had an effect that I wasn't able to remember. I was just too young.

LB: I mean in the city itself.

HW: Bringing new people to the town, that's all. The population increased.

LB: People fleeing.

HW: Fleeing and, not only that, but Jewish families in a village, they found that safety was with the rest of the Jews, so they fled. But then there was also restrictions on the part of the government in the business of the Jew in the village. Certain things he couldn't do that he used to do before. For instance, a Jew used to make a living from selling whiskey to the peasants. The government took it away. He wasn't allowed to do it anymore.

LB: During the war?

HW: Before the war and during the war. So they had to run. They had no business. Then there were other difficulties made. Some of them found- when there were five or six families- it was more or less safer this way. So they come to the city. And then some of them had children. They wanted them to grow up Jewishly, so they had to come to the city. So the population increased before the second war. That was a different story.

LB: How late were you in Europe?

HW: I left Gomel in 1919. I came here in 1920.

LB: I don't want to go past this time. So, Gomel itself, as far as you remember, was not affected by the war; wasn't occupied.

HW: No, it wasn't occupied.

LB: And it wasn't shelled or bombarded. But there was a population increase.

HW: Population increase and that's about all.

LB: Was there any food shortage, or any other kind?

HW: No, during the first war there was no food shortage. No problem.

LB: Did you have Russian Jews coming into your city?

HW: Russian Jews?

LB: Yeah, coming from the East.

HW: No, no.

LB: So the war goes on and then comes the collapse of the Russian government and the [overthrow of the Czar](#) and [Kerensky](#). In your family, was there political awareness of what was going on in Russia?

HW: Yeah. I was active and my brother, too.

LB: That's right. You were a socialist. Which party did you belong to?

HW: The Jewish party of the [Labor Zionist, Poale Zion](#). My brother didn't agree with me and he joined the [Socialist Party of the Bund](#). He didn't want to accept the theory that the Zionists have that when we come to our country (Palestine) they will have all the problems solved. He said, "I want to solve them right here". So we went different ways. Then, of course, friends influenced a great deal. At that time we acquired a number of friends and we became active, each one in his own way.

LB: So he was active in the Bund and you were active in the Poale Zion. But neither of you were active in the Social Democratic or the Socialist Revolutionary party.

HW: Yes, as Zionists we were active. We participated in that, definitely.

LB: Were you following what was happening in the whole Socialist movement at the [International Congresses](#) and so on? The split?

HW: I didn't attend, but I followed that.

LB: Now when they split- who was it? The Bund left the party, the Socialist Party and that left Lenin control actually?

HW: Lenin was in control. That was why he was called Bolshevik. They wanted the maximum. And the Mensheviks, Plekhanov and the rest of them, wanted at least a minimum for the time being. And Lenin came in and that is when he declared the Revolution and told the army - we were still at war with the Germans - and he said: "Go home." And the army went. And you witnessed a remarkable thing. Soldiers, fighting soldiers, those who were on the way home were angry with the soldiers who still went to the front. And they were fighting each other in every town, whenever they would meet - Russian soldiers. And chaos set in. There was chaos and the war stopped and the Revolution was declared. And around the outskirts of Gomel there was a big estate of a prince of the government and the people weren't allowed to come in. The Revolution broke, so we all went there to see the palace. After five days, not a single soul in Russia worked. There was no work. Everything stopped; everything. Completely.

LB: When was this?

HW: That was when the Revolution broke out.

LB: Do you remember which days it was? It was in October.

HW: I would have to look it up. But the first five days, I walked the aisles of the park up to my knees in - you know, we have the black seeds that we eat in Russia; semke, semochke.

LB: Sunflower seeds.

HW: Sunflower seeds. There was so much. I walked - this is no exaggeration- up to my knees in the shells of sunflowers because people walked down. Of course, after a week you wouldn't recognize the palace. Whatever there was, they tore it down. But then they realized that to keep going you have to eat. The bakers didn't bake. You couldn't get anything. Nobody worked. It

was a holiday. But then the communists began to demand more and more and that's where the fighting began. On one hand you had the Bolsheviks taking over and on the other hand you had bandits, supposedly fighting the communists and, in the meantime, robbing and fighting the people. It was an unreal life.

LB: Did your family suffer during this period? You were witness to these things. You were walking knee deep... that must have been an awful lot of people and an awful lot of days just sitting and eating sunflower seeds.

HW: That's right. The whole town. Everybody was there walking and eating sunflowers. I'll tell you, I'll never forget that picture. There were a number of pictures that my eyes saw in connection with the Revolution.

LB: Like what?

HW: I told you, the palace. The first day there were walls with paper, walls covered with beautiful things. And on the fifth day they tore it down because it seems that somebody said the Russian expression "grabne, grablenoi" - Rob the things that the others robbed before you take it away. So whatever they couldn't take, they destroyed. Then they began to force people to go to work. There was no other way. You couldn't get food.

LB: This was in Gomel, itself.

HW: In Gomel. It was everywhere. They had it in their own way quite different. Because the echoes of the Revolution came there.

LB: Only the echoes. You are saying the Revolution itself came.

HW: Yeah, we saw it when we were meeting the trains.

LB: What do you mean?

HW: Trotsky came to Gomel to address and we went to see him and we were Revolutionaries.

LB: What did you do as a Revolutionary?

HW: Before the Revolution, we had meetings and made plans and argued and discussed all kinds of political resolutions that we were going to introduce. And we were going to do this. Some questions which some of us thought that the Garden of Eden is coming down to us. That's my sister. Before the Revolution we kept on thinking and believing that everything will be

resolved. But then the Revolution came and we saw a different story. First of all, it didn't happen immediately, but during the time there was a shortage of food. Lenin had to permit small businessmen to go out and do business in order to bring food and that was where we used to go with our bags. The trains were impossible. Weren't running on time. All you needed was a jacket of leather and yell: "I am a commissar!" and you would get anything you wanted. I myself used that from Kharkov on the way home.

LB: You did?

HW: Yes. I couldn't get a train. I got stuck in a station with no train. And I had no choice, I had to get out. There were a few women, landmen - people I knew from home. They saw me and (said) let's get out. They were staying there already three days and I was rushing home because of the report I got about the dangers to my father and mother. I also heard something else: that at the university, while I was absent they (found out) there that I am against the Bolsheviks. I'm a [Menshevik](#)- a Socialist. They condemned me to death. I was told ahead of time so I fled from there, because they would have gotten me. In those days there was such disorder that people had guns carrying with them - those who were entitled and those who were not entitled. And anything wrong, the saying was "Exchenkya", against the wall and kill right there and then. There were no two ways about it. So I was rushing home and then I came into the man in charge of the station of the railroad. I told him I am running from the Ukraine to the frontier near Minsk - the white Russian frontier, and I had my staff with me and I must get out as fast as I can. When is the next train? He said there is an army train passing by here in about an hour. All right. See to it. Of course, he thought that I am next to Trotsky so, lo and behold, he cleared a place in a car and I had these old women and a couple of men- that's my staff. They overheard soldiers saying: "who in the heck is he taking?" but questions were not asked anymore because you couldn't get an answer that was correct. Anything went. I went home like this, in a special train. There was no other way. All you could do is bluff your way through, otherwise you had no chance.

LB: You had no chance if you couldn't bluff.

HW: If you couldn't bluff, you couldn't get food. If you couldn't bluff, you couldn't get by. You couldn't get from place to place. Everyone had to have a special permit every time he is traveling. Try and get it. You have to stand in line for days and then they start asking questions. So you travel without.

LB: You take a chance then.

HW: You simply appear, as I said, as a second to Trotsky or Lenin's brother. So, a lot of nerve. On the basis of your nerve you were able to get by. And I did that. I had to use it.

The second time, it was different. The second time I was also traveling home from Kharkov and I came to that station. That station is only one building for the depot and the rest of it is field. And the field was covered with people. Each group had a fire and were sitting around the fire. It was a fall night and I had traveled two days already. I was tired and hungry. I came near one fire and I sat down there and I think I fell asleep. All of a sudden somebody hit me. "Get up!" I woke up. "What's the matter?" A man sitting next to me said: "These are very bad times. You have to keep away from traveling. And don't fall asleep." The rumors there were very bad, ugly. And I didn't wear an army uniform. I wore a coat which meant that I am a civilian. So naturally, first to go would be the civilians. So I thanked him and I didn't sleep any more. Then we got into a freight car. There was no other car to go. We got in there. It was dark, and there were some people there already from preceding stations and he sat near me. Who he is or what he is, I don't know.

LB: You still don't know.

HW: No. He is going also to Minsk and I am going to Gomel. It's on the way and dark and I didn't know what or when. We were sitting up all night long, approaching my hometown. I could recognize the lights of the suburban homes and I became very eager to get out of this already. And he held me back. He said: "take it easy, take it easy".

LB: What language did he speak?

HW: Russian. As we approached, we heard from the outside a man standing there. It was less than about a mile from the depot. We heard someone saying: "Everybody out!" And then as they came nearer, the man standing there with a rifle questions: "A Jew or not?"

LB: Russian?

HW: Russian. And there was a couple of Jews ahead of me. No sooner did they say yes than they were hit with the rifle right there and then. I was lost what am I to do. So he held onto me. He followed me. He was next to me. And the same question: "A Jew?" He answered: "No, we both are gentiles." "Go ahead."

On the way to the railroad station, to the depot, that mile we heard noises from there. Drunken noises and yells and shouting and crying. We were stopped a number of times and everybody the same question: "A Jew?" Because I wore civilian clothes, I realized that I had to keep quiet. He did the answering. Finally we reached the station. We walked into the room of the station. I see people sitting and a number of Jews standing among them. My uncle. I turned. He held onto me. Sit down, sit here. And again I sat down. And again people around us were peasants, soldiers, gentiles. A group of gentiles and there are Jews. So, when I just made a motion to my

uncle, he recognized me and he probably wanted to say something. And I saw how they hit him right there and then. So I realized I am in danger and I have no choice. He (the stranger who had befriended him) began to talk to me aloud and addressing me. In Russian, you address by name and father's name. He was addressing me with a Russian name: Stephan Ivanovich. I realized he was doing it on purpose. And I answered him. He thought that tomorrow we'd probably make an end to the town because we could hear shooting. And we sat that way all night long, the rest of the night until dawn came. It became a little light and I said: "I will go now." He said: "All right. I will take you to the outside, to the door." He said: "Promise me you won't travel anymore. It is not the time for you to travel."

LB: He said this to you?

HW: He said to me I should promise. All I want, I said, is to see my father and my mother. That's all I need. I wouldn't travel; I have had enough of it already. And he said good-bye; we shook hands. I thanked him, not knowing yet his name, not knowing who he is or what he is. In front, outside the station house is a big open place, about five blocks open. It's for taxis to drive in and so on. I joined a group of peasants and I went with them across this big open space.

LB: Like a *ploschad*.

HW: I was in a dark coat and they wore the regular peasant coats that they had. These sheep skins. And as they were walking, I heard a shot and the group spread. They were shooting towards me because they saw a black coat walking and that's a civilian. In the city we could hear bombs and all kinds of yells. Finally, I reached home. I came into the house and Mother said: "Hide in the hay because we already had three groups that came looking for money and trying to kill. They see a young man, they'll kill you." So I hid in the hayloft, in the hay. And sure enough they came, but they didn't try to look in the hay. They looked around and they took whatever they could. In the morning, a little later when they left I went down and I said: "Let's get out." We couldn't travel, but let's get out. We couldn't. And that's when the peasants came and chased away the bandits. So that's how we were saved. The peasants came and chased a group of bandits who took advantage. They killed a number of Jews in town and they controlled the town for about two days prior to my coming in. That's when the peasants came and chased them away.

LB: Now what year was that? Was it after the Revolution?

HW: That was the first year of the Revolution.

LB: About 1918.

HW: Approximately. And that was that.

LB: And you never found out the man's name.

HW: No. But I told Mother about it and she said it must have been an angel. Because to go out of his way to protect me... and that meant danger for him too because there were no questions asked. They would kill people without asking any questions. They did whatever each one wanted.

LB: Do you think the man was a Jew?

HW: I have no idea. I have no idea. He told me he is a follower of Tolstoy. We had to talk about something in the dark, so we are talking of things cultural. He turned out to be a cultural man - quite intelligent. He said he was a follower of Tolstoy.

LB: So, he could have been either a Russian or a Jew?

HW: Yeah. I had a lot of these experiences.

LB: When did you leave Gomel and how?

HW: I went to visit her (his wife) and I came couldn't go back. Stayed there for the year.

LB: Where was she living?

HW: White Russia, not far from Gomel. Just about an hour by train and then an hour by horse and wagon. I stayed there a whole year.

LB: You couldn't get out?

HW: There was no place to go. The Poles were fighting the Russians. The Russians were fighting the Polacks. So we decided to get out and we developed a fear, feeling knowledge of God. In the morning you would look at the houses and have the feeling the houses are sad. They are crying. Trouble is brewing. Come out and see, the houses look bright. Nothing will happen today. We could see that we are exposed in a small town to almost any kind of piracy and vandalism.

So, in the meantime, a niece of my wife whose husband went to America in order to earn a few dollars to bring his wife and child. She lived also with a niece of hers. And he made money and he sent a delegate from there to pick up a few people- also his wife. He couldn't reach us. He

was already in a distant town away from us, so we had to get there. We got married and hired a Polish soldier and he took us in a wagon and took us all the way to that little station town so that we could board the train.

LB: Where was the station town?

HW: That was Capaterish. You wouldn't find it. It was north between Volhyn and Poland. On the way, he was stopped a few times and the answer was: "I am taking prisoners." Because prisoners they wouldn't bother.

LB: You were lucky he didn't turn you in. He could have changed his mind and turned coat.

HW: He could have. That was life there. We came to that little town. There was one Jewish house; we knocked at the door. It was early in the morning and the owner came out. "Please get away. The Polish major is sleeping now." God forbid. And all around us soldiers. The front was getting closer and closer. Polish soldiers. Well, there was no place. We couldn't stay there because if you stayed in the open you were open for every soldier to do what he wants.

A freight train came. We got into a car of the train: my wife, I, a niece and daughter and two other women of that town who also the delegate brought money from their husbands to take them. We got in there. During the year I spent with them in the small town, the Poles controlled the town. The Bolsheviks were on the other side. There was a Polish major. There was a Jewish doctor and he used to come to this doctor's house. A single man, not married. They played cards to entertain the Polish major. I don't know what happened but this major told someone in the office that it was I that helped to put a bomb under a railroad bridge to blow up that the Polish train coming to the border. And he accused me of being a leader of a communist group. He told it not to my face, but he told it to some of the others in the upper echelon. And as we traveled, just about one or two stations, somebody came over to the car and told us to get out. "You're so and so. You're under arrest." And he told me what I am arrested for. He is taking all of us to the nearest larger town, Lunyentz. And we heard that over there was a police station of the military police that no one ever came out alive. We had a friend in Moscow who was a living communist who wrote us letters. So we began to save the letters while traveling by night and throwing them out on the road so they wouldn't find it with us. (The arresting officer) brought us to a stable and put us in the hayloft. There were also two other peasants whose guilt was that they had been driving the Polish soldiers from the villages all the way out, spending days with them and they wanted to give up the whole thing. They wanted to go home. So they were arrested and they were brought here too under accusations. And here is not a soul. Nobody is coming. Nobody is saying.

LB: Whose jurisdiction is this? Polish?

HW: Polish jurisdiction Now, before that I was very active in Pinsk; a big town. There was a committee to help the Jewish people all around and I was active there. So there was a soldier whom my wife knew, who used to be a neighbor of theirs. She asked him to go to Pinsk to these various people and tell them that they arrested me, so that they could do something about it. On the walls of that place there were inscriptions: "Please notify my wife and children that on that day I was taken out to be shot." The name. "Please notify my parents that on that day I was shot." There were dozens of these inscriptions. People who were there and were killed. It was a famous police station. A military police: Deviunte Postearnich- that's what they called it. Postearnich is in Polish. A department. Deviunte is the north. That was the army. Well, we realized where we are. What do you do? At least to notify our relatives, our parents where we are. So we stayed there all night long. No bread, no food, no lavatory. No nothing. And you hear the women and the men. A hayloft. So the children began to know; they sensed the fear. They began to cry loud. My wife was sitting and looking out of the small window in the hayloft and the noises of crying, I suppose, attracted a woman. So she told her: "Please! We need bread, we need water. Give us. And we don't know where we are." She wouldn't budge. This went on all night. In the morning the officer of the military police came over. I said: "Let my wife go and buy bread for the kids." "Will she come back?" I said: "Of course, I am here. We're all here." Then I told her: "You go and see the rabbi and tell him to notify our parents and also buy bread." They allowed her to go. When the kids went downstairs, out in the yard they actually felt like kissing the earth; that's how they were. I began to talk with this officer, a young officer. It turns out that we were in the same class in college in Kharkov. We had the same professor, so we were colleagues. Now we can talk friendly.

LB: But he was a Russian - no he was a Pole?

HW: Before the war he was in Kharkov just as I was there. He asked: "What are you arrested for?" I said I don't know. I didn't do a damn thing. We don't know why. "Come into the office."

LB: He was not a Jew, was he?

HW: No. We came into the office and he wrote out certificates that they checked. And this says that we are perfect and devoted and dedicated to the interests of Poland. And he gave it to me and said: "Go." I got it and said: "Let's go everybody! He gave it to all of us. Let's go." And as we went actually we met soldiers. And, by the way, we heard already that the doctor in her hometown- they tied him to the tail of a horse and dragged him until he died. That's what they did.

LB: Who did that? The peasants?

HW: The Poles. Not the peasants. The army. So we came there and again an army train. We showed our papers. "Go ahead", because with such certificates nobody could prove that we were no good. And we got into the train and we went on the way to Brest and from Brest to Pinsk and from Pinsk we drove to Warsaw. And, lo and behold, in the Brest station I noticed this officer who used to play cards, who caused the whole trouble. He noticed me too. He began to run around looking for me. Luckily the train moved. So we went away. We came to Warsaw. We went to a hotel. There we were, free people in a big city.

LB: This was now 1919? So for them the war was over. For them it was a new Poland by that time.

HW: So we came there and had to get visas to get to America.

LB: That's where you wanted to go.

HW: We met the delegate and we had the money already. But to get visas you had to stand in line day and night. We stood there for a week, couldn't get a visa. And here we are in bombardment and the Russians are coming closer. Warsaw was filled with these would be passengers - immigrants to America. These women came here. All the delegates were there to collect the money. Nobody took them out, otherwise they'd be cut off. We felt that the first obligation we had was to get her niece out, her husband sent money and he wants her. We bought a false visa for her. Looked like a real one, but it was false. At least she is safe. Everything cost money. We decided to go to Danzig and we went and there is long story about our trip there.

Finally we came to Danzig. No visas. Polish passport, but the Polish passport had my occupation as a doctor. I told them I am a student but they put doctor down. That did us a great deal of good in Danzig and that's how we got out.

LB: Danzig was a free city at that time?

HW: It was a free city. It was German and you had to go through the borderline.

LB: Danzig was German at that time?

HW: That's right.

LB: It was in German territory but a free city.

HW: Later it was a free city. It was a German city and Germany was about ready to have the revolution then.

LB: Their post war revolution.

HW: I became acquainted with two doctors in Danzig. There were about 50,000 immigrants. There was a prison camp and they used that to keep us. There was no room, so people slept on the street there in the open in the rain. It was awful. Because (my passport indicated I was a doctor) I came and took a chance. I came to the doctor and I said that my wife is not well and another one (?) I would like to put them in the hospital. And that was the worst thing one could do. There was the rumor if you were in the hospital you are a sick person, so why should they let you come to America? But we came in a clean bath and you had your freedom. The next day I became acquainted with the doctors and one of them said why do you go to America? Why don't you go back? Russia is coming soon. From the history of religion they will be here.

Well, a nurse comes over to me the following day. They have a patient and the doctors want me to come and advise them. I had no choice so I came there. There was a youngster, the son of an immigrant, who was lying in bed. The doctor didn't know what was wrong with him; a Jewish fellow. I asked the mother what he had to eat. They used to give us there a box of one pound of some kind of jam and bread. That's all they could have. And this fellow ate a pound of jam. So, naturally, he didn't eat anything today and he didn't eat anything yesterday. But the day before yesterday he had a whole pound. It was sweet and he ate it. I said: "Give him an enema," and walked out as fast as I could, praying to God. Nothing happened. Lo and behold, they gave him an enema and he became well. Some people who were in the holocaust, the only way they could get by and come out alive is through chutzpah. That's what they used to do. Otherwise, when they came here they didn't trust anybody. It played havoc with the younger ones. They wouldn't trust anybody because that is how they managed to get out.

LB: By not trusting anybody.

HW: By not trusting. By being alert and watchful and not telling the truth to anybody. Just keep on doing for yourself. That's how they managed. Many couldn't anyhow, but this is the only thing that saved them. I had a pupil who came here to New York. She was raped and she wouldn't trust any men anymore. No matter what I tried to tell her to make her feel good and so on.

LB: Mr. Woll, you were a socialist, but you were not a Bolshevik.

HW: I was a Menshevik.

LB: So that was part of your problem there.

HW: That's right. That was why I was condemned by the Bolsheviks. I was a leader among the students in the Mensheviks.

LB: When you were living in Gomel before the war, and even up to the Revolution, the non-Jews in Gomel were what? Were they Russians? They were not Poles and they were not Ukrainians.

HW: Maybe some of them were Poles but to us they were all Russians. They may have been Poles and Catholics. They may have been what they call a Russian Prayoslavnic. Gregorians.

LB: Do you know what they considered themselves to be? Not who governed them.

HW: Russian.

LB: Did they speak Russian?

HW: Yes.

LB: What was the percentage of Jews in Gomel?

HW: It was less than half but quite a community.

LB: Did you experience real anti-semitism before that time?

HW: The mere fact about the gymnasia (numerus clausus mentioned earlier). Socially we never met with the Russians; didn't have anything to do with them. Two separate worlds. We had a neighbor, a gentile, and we couldn't make up our minds: Is he friendly or not? At times he would be friendly.

LB: So who were your friends?

HW: Only Jews. We had no friends with the gentiles.

LB: In your father's business, did he deal with non-Jews?

HW: Yes, he did. He dealt with non-Jews too.

LB: Like the geese people who would come and eat in your house; were they all Jews?

HW: Jews. Only Jews. But dealing with a non-Jew it was a priori known you have to pay graft. So Father, dealing with the railroad people, used to give gifts around them so they were friendly. How friendly they were, I don't know. Across the street from where we lived, there was a gentile woman who used to have quite a garden and we used to buy lettuce from her. We called her friendly but her son was an open anti-semite.

LB: So it was different than in the shtetl in a way in dealing with your neighbors. Were they on a level with you in income or were they lower?

HW: They were on a level. There were some as intelligent as we were. Some of them. But the average were lower in culture.

LB: Was the difference as great as it was in the shtetl between the Jew and the villager?

HW: Oh, yeah. That was a definite difference.

LB: Was that true in Gomel? Everybody was more urban.

HW: That was a different kind of breed because they went to a lower grade school. They didn't go high, but they went to a lower grade. Then they had a newspaper they read. The peasants didn't know how to read. These were in town, so they knew. But anti-semitism was prevalent among them too. The basis was that the Jew didn't produce anything. He used what somebody else produced to sell it and make money on that. And that was the basis of Zionism. We felt that as long as we are not producing our own bread we will always be dependent. In America now we have it about energy, about oil. You never heard so much said about becoming independent; producing your own energy, because otherwise we were dependent. That was the idea of Zionism.

LB: I was thinking to myself how could you be a member of Poale Zion and at the same time be a communist. That would be like a contradiction almost.

HW: Of course it was. That's why we were persecuted with it.

LB: I understand. Thank you very much.

HW: You're welcome, I'm sure.