

Harry Woll

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Interviewed by Lucille Brown

*Harry Lawrence Woll*

Q. Mr. Woll, would you tell me when you were born.

A. September 28, 1898.

Q. Where?

A. *Gomel*  
~~Gommer~~, Russia.

Q. You were in white Russia, then?

A. Yeah, at that time it was Russia, <sup>the</sup> suburb was known as white Russia but it was <sup>one</sup> ~~Gommer~~, Russia.

Q. <sup>yes, but ~~it~~</sup>  
It was different because the different parts, at one time it was also Poland, wasn't it.

A. No, we were on the border of Poland, <sup>Not in Poland.</sup> ~~on the border.~~

Q. Let's look at the map.

A. It has to be scientific more or less, therefore, you have to be careful.

Q. That's right. It's better now than after it is in print. I'd rather find out now than later but even so <sup>rather</sup> I hadn't made that mistake if I am incorrect.

A. Bacha(?) was much closer <sup>\* 4</sup> to this town was much closer to Poland than we were.

Q. Your town was <sup>Gomel</sup> ~~Gommer~~. I've seen it on a map and that section was called white Russia?

A. That was called white Russia.

Q. And it was always Russian?

A. Always Russian. Always Russian.

Q. Did it never go back and forth between the two.

A. It could be at the time of <sup>Chmielnitzki</sup> ~~Ronitschy~~. That could be that but they over

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ran and took it over but I wouldn't consider that, they never did when I studied at the high school, the gymnasia and then in the college, they never considered this part of Poland that it belongs to Poland. It was white Russia. However, there were times when they controlled and then you are absolutely right.

Q. <sup>o.k.</sup> That's all I said, that it shifted back and forth.

A. They controlled. <sup>Chmielnitzki,</sup> <sup>Ukrainians</sup> Minitzky that was it and the Eucranians that was the time when they were.

Q. <sup>Now, and then</sup> Again after the first World War, right, so I'm not incorrect. You gave me a scare there for a minute, Mr. Woll.

A. We grew <sup>up with</sup> off 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 <sup>East</sup> European countries they have been capturing one the other then separating again so it's hard to tell. That was all under <sup>Chmielnitzki</sup> Minitzky. 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 408 now it is 737 but that was 408, we know it in Hebrew the expression Zana tauch and tauch(?) the <sup>was a whatever</sup> ~~was~~ happened, the misfortunes of these two years, 408 and 409, because the Poles masacred many Jews at that time. They over ran that's what they caused-but never controlled it. That's it.

Q. So, you were born in <sup>Gomel</sup> ~~Gomel~~ and what was the nearest, you said <sup>Minsk</sup> ~~Minsch~~ was the nearest big city. <sup>Minsk</sup> ~~Minsch~~ was the nearest big city, right?

A. That was the nearest big city, <sup>on one</sup> <sup>Minsk</sup> ~~alongside Minsch~~ and the other side, about the same distance <sup>Kiev, Ukraine</sup> ~~Kier~~.

Q. Is that right?

A. Yeah. About the same distance.

A. So that would be between north and south almost. Kiev was south of you and <sup>Minsk</sup> Minsch was north of you. That puts you right in the middle of the <sup>Pripet</sup> ~~crooked~~ marshes. Right.

A. That was known as <sup>Polesi</sup> ~~Polechy~~ and we were on the border of that. We lived there.

Q. Now was <sup>Gomel a shtetel.</sup> ~~Gomel~~ a ~~staple~~.

A. <sup>No, Gomel</sup> ~~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 instead of, you know that the Russian districts are named by <sup>gubernyi</sup> ~~Kubarney~~. We were <sup>Minski gubernyi</sup> ~~ministrative verney~~. We belonged to <sup>Mogilevskaya</sup> ~~Minseky~~ you see, <sup>Mogilev.</sup> That means <sup>Minsk, the gubernya</sup> ~~Minsch Kubarney~~ was bordering on Poland and that was the influence of Poland there. <sup>Mogilev</sup> ~~Maharev~~ is closer to central Russia so the Polish had no influence, although in each and every town, you had a big synogogue built by either a prince of the <sup>realm</sup> ~~realm~~ or the government and a Russian church, <sup>slavic</sup> ~~slavic~~ and a Catholic because you had Poles living there too. It was close, but still didn't belong to Poland.

Q. So you had about 200,000 population?

A. About 200,000 variable 160,000 to 200,000 population.

Q. Was there industry in the town, <sup>Now</sup> I am talking about before the first World War?

A. Yeah, yeah, there was no industry there.

Q. What did most of the people do? How did they make a living?

A. I'll tell you. The Jewish people most of them were connected with <sup>cutting</sup> ~~trapping~~ wood in the forest, lumber that was their business and some of

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they were <sup>occupied as tailors</sup> classified ~~they was~~ <sup>Artisans.</sup> shoemakers, they never had an industry there, but since <sup>Gomel</sup> Bogart is on the River Souch that's the name of the river which comes in as I mentioned before, Kiev was not far, so a number of Jews occupied themselves with having <sup>freight</sup> ~~flag~~ ship boats heading south from Poland all the way to <sup>Ukraine</sup> ~~Euki(?)~~ that was their business.

Q. I never heard that before Jews being engaged in water freight. Now we heard it. <sup>There were quite some then.</sup> At the time you are speaking of Russia controlled this portion

A. That's right. I was born in white Russia, belonging to Russia.

Q. Now for example, these water freight people, the Jews who were engaged in water carrying freight by water, did they have to have a special license from the Russian government?

A. Yes, they had to pay a certain fee for the right of doing this.

Q. And they were <sup>permitted</sup> committed to doing that?

A. Yeah, they were <sup>permitted.</sup>

Q. That was one of the avenues opened to them?

A. That's right you see there was one big factory in <sup>Gomel</sup> ~~Grammel~~ that belonged to the government to the railroad. They were fixing <sup>up</sup> ~~at~~ whatever cars and trains that they had to. No Jews would come in there, <sup>They</sup> wouldn't accept <sup>a</sup> Jews there.

Q. <sup>They would not?</sup> That was government owned?

A. That's 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.

Q. From this factory?

A. From this factory, railroad factory.

Q. Are you saying that it was organized at all, <sup>a union ...</sup> was there some.

A. The factory was conducted by the government but we had in 1905 the first pogrom in Lomel. That was the first and then there was a second one. During the second one...

Q. When was the second one?

A. If I'm not mistaken it was right after the first World War and groups of partisans occupied this town and <sup>were</sup> ready to destroy <sup>and kill</sup> a lot of us, so this and they put fire, <sup>they started a fire,</sup> and it was a fire all over. These workers came enmas and chased away this so that was the interesting thing. Labor had some chance although they were <sup>anti-Semites, but</sup> ~~so much with~~ a certain sense of fairness, 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 <sup>take</sup> to ~~pay for~~ whatever they could. Others came to help out. As a matter of fact they came with forks, with <sup>axes</sup> ~~axes~~, they had no amunition 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 <sup>moved</sup> ~~most~~ most of us young people, <sup>towards</sup> ~~turned~~ socialism and labor, <sup>We could see it in practise</sup> ~~as a~~ \_\_\_\_\_. They came and they chased away the bandits.

Q. Now where were the bandits from?

A. They were usually deserters from the army, and then it was, you know the war ended with the socialist revolution. Not the ~~Bolshi~~ <sup>Bolshevik</sup> ~~The Bolshi~~ <sup>Bolshevik</sup> took over about three years later.

Q. No, no we are talking about 1905 now. You are talking about the second pogrom(?). Oh, okay. I'm a little mixed up.

A. The first pogrom, it was merely anti-<sup>e</sup> ~~s~~emitic, you see one has to know 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. <sup>with the result that</sup> ~~and then~~ after

three generations, they didn't have enough land, <sup>A</sup> and they were starving, they

were <sup>very</sup> ~~really~~ poor, and the government, the <sup>czarist</sup> southeast government, supplied

them with a lot of whiskey. They had these places <sup>where the government</sup> to go and then they sold

the whiskey, <sup>for a price.</sup> 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 <sup>need</sup> ~~need?~~, they would go out and hear, <sup>Rob! Take!</sup> ~~rough things~~ and then there

was something else, the people <sup>have</sup> having inherited long before, <sup>not only</sup> ~~it didn't come~~

with the government, <sup>but</sup> the people <sup>have</sup> having inherited from the time of <sup>Chmielnitzky...</sup> ~~Frenitsky(?)~~

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, <sup>his</sup> ~~the~~ child died, <sup>he had to buy him</sup> you had to pay because who <sup>the</sup>

collected the money, the Jew. The fact that the Jew had to pay almost as

much to the Pole, <sup>they</sup> that, <sup>(?)</sup> didn't they didn't know, so they developed a certain

hatred towards the Jew. Then the Jew, as you said before, there was no

industry there. There were merchants, store keepers and small business-

men, <sup>so</sup> the gentile, the peasant, <sup>the</sup> ~~a~~ city worker, <sup>the</sup> ~~a~~ peasant, they would say

<sup>well</sup> he walks around with his hands clean and makes me work and he gets the

benefit, <sup>so</sup> that developed, <sup>fill</sup> it was easy, especially when the government <sup>was</sup> ~~could~~

<sup>backing</sup> ~~baking~~ it. The government was <sup>backing</sup> ~~making~~ this <sup>pogrom</sup> program, and it was done on

purpose, so the peasant wouldn't have time to think about his own <sup>fate</sup> ~~feet~~, so

you had all kinds of people who couldn't find themselves and they would join

these groups and that was the <sup>program</sup> ~~program~~. And in many places it was a masacre <sup>s</sup>

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rather than <sup>just a pogrom.</sup> justice It not only ruined business but <sup>also</sup> ~~mostly~~ killed people.

Q. But where the people in the factory came out and when the villages came out that was already about 19...

A. That was 1905. That was <sup>in the</sup> the first and the second <sup>also in</sup> ~~program~~ <sup>pogrom.</sup> both.

Q. Both times they came out?

A. Both times they came, yeah.

Q. Please again would you repeat the date of the second <sup>pogrom</sup> ~~program~~ so I could...

A. If I am not mistaken it was in <sup>1917</sup> ~~1913~~. It was right after the war.

Q. Was it before the Revolution or?

A. That was when the Revolution started. <sup>In fact,</sup> The Revolution gave a push to these people and formed all kinds of groups, fighting the <sup>Bolsheviks</sup> ~~Bulshovichs~~ and groups that supported them and they were fighting <sup>them</sup> ~~and~~ the Jew was the one <sup>who</sup> ~~the one who~~ who was <sup>neither</sup> ~~neither~~ in the labor ranks, he was a small businessman and that was the anti-semitism. He had <sup>stores, they were store owners, so the peasant</sup> ~~so the present~~ wanted to get back just as you had in here when you had these negros, the same thing, to get whatever... and that was the thing. But of course they <sup>would also kill people.</sup> ~~were also guilty~~. See the second one was so pronounced that the we never knew who was in control of the <sup>town or</sup> ~~kanon~~ of the city. They changed hands every day, <sup>some</sup> 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 <sup>Bolsheviks</sup> ~~Bulshovichs~~ and that was it, <sup>so</sup> we suffered and went through all this and don't forget that when the <sup>Bolsheviks</sup> ~~Bulshovichs~~ took over the country, the country didn't produce-the stores were almost empty, <sup>but in order to buy bread</sup> for this the stores were almost empty <sup>and</sup> in order to buy bread, the peasant needed <sup>salt</sup> ~~soles~~ (?), he had bread, <sup>He lived on the farms</sup> he lived in the villages

but he couldn't get salt, <sup>So</sup> 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.

Q. Now where did you get the salt from?

A. In the cities, we still had salt, <sup>We</sup> had salt in the cities, <sup>So</sup> we used to do that and <sup>the peasant</sup> a ~~person~~ couldn't eat without salt because he had to <sup>the survival (?)</sup> ~~eat~~ <sup>known by</sup> the meat (?) <sup>or</sup> of the bread. Without salt they used to get a sickness the name of <sup>Tsingat (?)</sup> ~~singa~~. ~~Singa~~ <sup>Tsinga</sup> is the Jews or the jaws swell up and you couldn't eat and <sup>you</sup> die of starvation.

Q. You mean from the lack of salt?

A. Lack of salt.

Q. Is that why salt is so important?

A. Oh yes, salt prevents <sup>Tsinda Tsinda</sup> ~~singa~~. ~~Singa~~ that was the name.

Q. What language is that?

A. I really don't know, I think it's a Russian it's a kind of it may be a <sup>corrupted</sup> expression. I don't think it's a medical thing.

Q. I didn't realize that it had a natural physiological basis in the body's need for it.

A. Oh singa, it was awful, ~~without~~ salt. And then we reached the <sup>end of</sup> supplies salt, so we used to take whatever jewelry we had and go there and exchange it for salt.

Q. This was in 1917 after the Revolution.

A. That's right oh yes, that was after the War.

Q. Let's go back a little bit. Now when you were born your father was doing what? What kind of a family <sup>were you in?</sup>



A. 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 otpravitel. It means, a person who expedited the movement of certain goods from the railroad.

Q. Like a dispatcher?

A. No, not employed as. Not employed. My father was involved, you see Germany needed meat, they didn't have enough meat, so they would buy geese, geese were in Russia, so the Jews on the borderline with Germany they <sup>be-</sup> came ...

Q. Geese farmers.

A. Geese farmers and they would go into deep Russia into actually <sup>Kursk</sup> ~~Kursch~~ and all around the cities and buy from the farmers the geese, load them in a carload, 1400 to a carload and send them to Germany. But geese <sup>words</sup> ~~was stopped~~ <sup>must stop</sup>. They cannot go without food or without water for more than a day and a half.

Q. Otherwise they will die on the way.

A. Die on the way, and the worst of it was, when a carload of geese would come to Germany it would just enter the borderline, <sup>IF</sup> 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 come, my father had a big lot, about a block long that had places to keep carloads of geese, <sup>with a</sup> 1400 places ~~to the~~ fence.

Q. So they would let the geese out of the train.

A. Yes and they water for them, <sup>a lake, could swim</sup> that they ~~would swim~~ so he was ~~the~~ <sup>this</sup> ~~proprietor~~ <sup>otpravitel</sup> so the geese would come they would unload them and they would

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come about 15/20 carloads a day. They would unload them, <sup>l</sup> set them down to the ground.

Q. That's more than 24,000 geese.

A. Yes, sure. That's right, <sup>back</sup> and feed them, and the following day load them again and send them all the way out to the nearest stop which was in ~~Brestsweto~~ <sup>Brest-Litovsk</sup> 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, city government to pave the streets <sup>wherever they had</sup> to fix, <sup>so</sup> he was supplying them with stones where he would buy them also somewhere away from small towns away from the city. <sup>so</sup> that was the job.

Q. Was your family comfortable, financially?

A. Yeah.

Q. Would you say you were middle class or lower middle class or upper or what?

A. We were middle class. Don't forget, <sup>T</sup> there were five brothers going to school and three daughters.

Q. You mean of the children?

A. The children and they had to pay <sup>tuition fee</sup> for each and every one. At that time it was about 160 <sup>rubles</sup> ~~rubbles~~ a person.

Q. So you had four brothers and three sisters.

A. I had four brothers. <sup>we</sup> ~~There~~ were five brothers and three sisters.

Q. Eight children and your mother and father.

A. Yeah and he had to provide them. <sup>Like the gymnasia.</sup> The gymnasia cost a lot of money.

Q. And all the children had a gynmasia.

A. All the children had a gymnasiq, all of them. Some went to college <sup>Graduated.</sup>

but then the War broke out. *That's what stopped it.*

Q. Were you the oldest or the youngest

A. I'm the oldest.

Q. *you're the oldest.* In ~~Gomel~~ <sup>Comel</sup>, let's see if I can guess, no ~~hasidim~~ <sup>Hasidim</sup> (?) but your father was a Mitnagid?

A. He was an ~~eschenautic~~ <sup>Askenazic</sup> Jew, Not a Hasid, not a Mitnagid. But my grandmother belonged to a rabbi (?) she was ... *but it didn't matter.*

Q. She did, it didn't matter?

A. It didn't matter because she couldn't ... *influence anybody.*

Q. She had no control *over anybody.*

A. That's right, it didn't matter.

Q. Did you live in your <sup>own</sup> home?

A. Yeah.

Q. It had to be pretty large then.

A. It was a large house.

Q. Can you describe it?

A. It had, I had an extra room for myself.

Q. You did, that was very unusual.

A. That was unusual but I am telling you, <sup>a</sup> We built big house, there was a small house next to it which we rented out, <sup>It wasn't the</sup> ~~couldn't get rent so much,~~ <sup>a poor man in a small house.</sup> because mostly it was to help out, <sup>but</sup> 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, used to call it a <sup>Kabinet</sup> ~~cobanet (?)~~, a room of my own.

Q. Like an office.

A. Yes.