

Lillian Bielski-Bell
August 25, 1992
In English
RG-50.030*0026

Notes: All information from interviewee, without correction. The interviewer is hard to hear. The information concerning Lillian's husband can be confusing, I believe they were married in the woods after January 5, 1943. In addition Lillian veils much of her story with characters she "can comprehend" for lack of a better term; i.r. her step-mother, her husband.

Tape 1

Childhood - 1942

1:02:40 Lillian was born in Blostok (ph), Poland on January 23, 1923. She lived in Goradock (ph), where her father was a successful supplier. She had one brother. Today people tell her of how much her father had helped those who had fallen on financial hard times before the war.

1:06:40 Lillian's brother was six years older than her. In addition many other relatives lived in Blostok and the surrounding area. Her father was a Zionist who wanted his children to know Hebrew, so both her and her brother went away to Hebrew High School, she however, did not finish.

1:10:03 On Lillian's thirteenth birthday her mother died. This was a turning point in her life. That summer her father got sick and spent the next seven months in a rest home. Since her brother was away at school she was alone except for an uncle who was taking care of her father's business, until she left for Hebrew High School herself.

1:13:25 While at school (and staying with an aunt) she was sick all year. That summer her brother came for her and she returned home to find her father has remarried. Her Step-mother has a son two years older than her. Lillian felt this woman, who she did not like, was taking advantage of her father.

1:14:43 This was 1939. Her father was being watched, restrictions were placed on what he could do, he had trouble getting workers, everyday he was given more trouble.

1:15:20 For a while everything was in a state of upheaval between the Polish and Russian occupation. It was not until the Russians came in and set up their government that she was able to return to school. Her father said [either] he was not going to support [or] supply them.

1:16:02 Lillian's stepmother brought her mother and two sisters into their town and Lillian's father set them up with an apartment, paying the rent for them. Lillian felt that her father was being taken advantage of.

1:17:58 This was in Leda, where they had moved. Her father had wanted to be a place where he could wait peacefully while not being recognized. The move was a drastic step down in living standard, and they had left non essentials behind, but there was no choice because her father wanted to hide. However, she was very young and recalls being very worried by neither the Germans or the war.

1:19:30 Lillian went back to school, and was happy to leave her domineering step-mother.

1:21:50 Her [future] husband, Tulvia Bielski got to know one of Lillian's step-aunts and developed a relationship with her. Lillian met Tulvia because he was a boarder in the house of a girlfriend of hers. She and her girlfriend spend a lot of time with Tulvia.

1:23:53 All of this changed when the Germans started approaching at the end of '940, beginning of 1941. The Russians left, and as the Germans came in much of the city was on fire. Lillian and her family had to leave Leda (ph) for a village for a few days because they were worried that the fire might spread to their apartment. Her husband [future] did the same thing, taking with him Lillian's step-aunt to the village of Stankavich (ph).

1:25:19 The first bomb hit the house where her husband [future] had been boarding, killing her girlfriend and her father. Lillian and her family returned back to their home after the city stopped burning. Her father did not feel they should be an exception in the community just because they had the means to leave. When they returned to their apartment much had been stolen.

1:26:13 When the Germans entered the city; they occupied a large building and made it their headquarters. They hired young women to do household type jobs, Lillian's job was to peel potatoes. The Germans were very nice to the women.

1:27:01 In the evenings she and her girlfriends used to gather on a porch, and the Germans would come, tell stories, and sing songs. For their work the young women were paid in bread and butter. The Germans at this point did not discriminate against the Jewish women, and some Germans even had affairs with them. Soon, however, the reality of why the Germans had come became apparent.

1:27:43 The Jews were given the yellow star and the city was divided into five boroughs. According to where you lived determined what borough you were in. Lillian and her family belonged to borough Coashavoa (ph).

1:30:25 They were transferred and three or four families were made to live in one room. Her step-brother who had been working on an engineering degree went to work for the Germans at their military bases. Whoever worked on the military bases was given a special shine (permit), which allowed him to more bread.

1:32:33 Lillian was a messenger for the uneret (ph), in her area. The uneret was a type of German consul for each section. There were no phones so the messengers were the means of communication. This was still 1941.

1:33:15 Her husband had Russian papers, so he could come visit them, although it was very dangerous. He was living in a village and he tried to get Lillian's father to bring his family there, but he refused wanting instead to stay with everyone else.

1:35:25 On May 8, at night the Germans came door to door getting people out for a selection. Lillian reminded her father that they could have escaped with Tulvia (ph). He said he does not want to

hide or live like an animal in the forest. She father told her he had dreamed she would be in the section that would live. She went to the selection in her nightgown and bare feet, it was snowing.

1:36:07 Lillian's step-mother's mother and sister went to the right, the rest of her family went to the left. Later she found out those who had been sent to the right were killed.

1:37:30 Later because there were half as many people they were sent to a closed ghetto. They did not have to be told that they were not allowed to leave and that there was a curfew. Five or six families slept in a room practically on top of one another. 5,500 people had been killed in the selection.

1:39:10 Everyone was made to work all day long. Lillian's first job was cleaning the bricks of houses. On Sundays the Germans let their dogs loose and an unlucky Jew would get killed by the dogs.

1:40:40 Her husband, Tulvia (ph) came into the ghetto once and told Lillian's father that he had said this would happen. Tulvia said in the forest the trees covered them.

1:42:39 Lillian later went to work in the fields. Her step-mother was a good friend of the man the Germans put in charge of the fields. Lillian remembers that there were always rumors flying around about what was going to happen. At night people used to gather in backyards to tell stories and sing Hebrew songs.

1:45:10 They were afraid all the time. Once before returning home to go to bed Lillian asked a man on the street what time it was. He told her and she went inside, however, within a hour he was back with the German police looking for her. Her father tried to divert the Germans telling them to kill him instead, but to no avail, they found her. Then it turned out the whole thing was just a farce to scare them, to show who was in charge.

1:46:07 This event prompted Lillian to criticize her father more for not escaping although they had the chance.

1:49:19 One day the man (a non-Jew) Lillian worked for in the fields asked her to work late. This presented a problem because if she was found returning home after six, she would be killed on the spot. The man in charge of the fields did, at the end of the day, tell her to go home with everyone else. Lillian later found out that her step-mother had begged her father for money which her step-mother had then given to the man in charge of the fields so that he would keep Lillian late and then send her home. "What for you need the Germans if your own people would kill you?"

1:51:52 One night Lillian's father woke her up and told her he has decided they should leave immediately; she, her step-mother, her step-brother, and her father. They crawled out of the closed ghetto on their stomachs, by the Germans, under the electric fence. On the other side Tulvia was waiting.

1:52:49 They went to the home of someone Tulvia knew to rest for a few hours. Then two brothers of Tulvia took them deeper into the woods. Seventeen others were already living there in the woods. No one from the ghetto knew where they had gone, or what had happened to them. They took nothing with them.

1:54:00 They remained in the woods until 1944. Tulvia had contacted her father once by entering the ghetto and another time by sending in a peasant (the man whose home they had first rested in when they escaped).

1:55:41 Lillian had not know they were going to escape before her father awoke her. She and her step-brother were very surprised. Lillian's memories of leaving the ghetto are of leaving her friends with whom she used to gather in the evenings in a backyard.

1:56:48 They lived in a bunker in the woods. In the woods Tulvia used to take care of her because he saw how alone she was. He would bring her warm clothes and books.

1:58:26 The first place they were in the woods was close to the ghetto and it was not well organized. Some of the people who had been in the woods before them objected to more Jews from the ghetto coming because of the difficulty of taking of them. However, Lillian's father took care of his family and rescued more Jews from the ghetto. People used to ask Lillian's father would he rather kill ten Germans or save one Jew, his answer was save one Jew.

Tape 2

2:04:03 When they arrived in the woods all the people were related to each other and they were hesitant to except more because of the trouble of supporting them. They went from door to door asking peasants for food. Tulvia was very good at languages.

2:10:00 Tulvia had once saved a boy from drowning. He went to that boy's parents house and they directed him to their son's home. The man welcomed and feed Tulvia and introduced him to him wife. Then the man's sister-in-law came and invited Tulvia to a dinner the next week. When Tulvia went there five Germans were seated at the table. Even though he was scared he managed to control himself and stay a while. Just before he left he asked the Germans what the events were. They said they would soon conquer the world.

2:13:00 A short while later Tulvia said that they had no chance in small groups and that they needed more people from the ghetto. He contacted a cousin of his who was in Noravetic (ph) to ask him to organize as large a group as possible from the ghetto for an escape. Tulvia new a farmer who had a son who was an officer in the ghetto. The officer became a messenger between Tulvia and his cousin, Yahota (ph) Bielski.

2:13:38 Seven boys and two women escaped from the ghetto a short time later.

2:15:45 Tulvia was at this time in his early thirties. He had been in the Polish army before the war and was now put in charge of the group in the woods.

2:18:00 In 1943 an attack killed Lillian's step-mother, her step-brother, and both her step-aunts.

2:25:42 After his second wife was killed Lillian's father decided to take revenge, Tulvia objected

but did not stop him. Lillian also tried to persuade him not to go, but he still left with others on a risky mission to get food. They all were killed.

2:28:38 They had to continually keep moving, because the Germans were always around. A Russian partisans which was also nearby, at first gave them trouble. Then Tulvia went to the Russians and convinced them that they were both fighting for the same cause, to help the Russian army. The Jews had a base and were armed, there base was called Stelle Bell, "the little city of bells."

2:31:10 There were 800 to 900 people spread throughout the woods. One time they went for ten days without food. They lived in tents. In the winter in order to cover their tracks they carried strainers to replace the snow.

2:33:25 In the winter they lived underground because of the cold. Everyone worked together to survive and those who could not look out for themselves were especially cared for.

2:36:03 Very few people were lost through the whole ordeal. By the end there were 1,250 people in the woods. In the beginning there had been a lot of young people, and there were even some children born. The children used to put on shows.

2:36:49 Lillian was in the woods from June 1942 until July of 1944.

2:38:34 In July of '44 on the last day before freedom the Russians move in and the Germans left the area. As the Germans retreated the Jews tried to take revenge and nine Jews were killed in the . Those Germans that were killed the Jews mutilated until Tulvia stopped them.

2:39:43 Tulvia led them out to Norvobotic (ph). They were each given a document stating they had served in the partisans. There are some of these documents in Israel today.

2:44:18 Lillian and her husband, Tulvia lived in several places throughout Eastern Europe after the war, trying to avoid Russians who recognized Tulvia. They were given permission to move to Israel in 1945. Ten years later they moved to the United States. Tulvia died in 1988 and was buried in Jerusalem.

2:54:34 Lillian shared several photographs taken after the war with the interviewer. Besides her and her husband in the pictures are Andrew "Kader" Movitch(ph), -- Beclovitch(ph), and a large group photo of some of the people who had been in the partisans, taken in Brooklyn in 1985.