

**The Southern Institute  
For Education and Research  
at  
Tulane University**

**Presents**

**STORIES OF  
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS  
IN NEW ORLEANS**

**SHEP ZITLER**

**SHEP ZITLER WAS BORN IN VILNA, LITHUANIA, IN 1917. AFTER  
WORLD WAR I, NEWLY INDEPENDENT POLAND ANNEXED  
VILNA. SHEP WAS DRAFTED INTO THE POLISH ARMY IN EARLY  
1939. WHEN WORLD II BEGAN IN SEPTEMBER 1939, HE WAS  
CAPTURED BY THE GERMANS NEAR WARSAW.**

**SOVIET RUSSIA, A TEMPORARY NAZI ALLY, OCCUPIED EASTERN  
POLAND AND ANNEXED LITHUANIA. AS A RESULT, THE  
GERMANS CHANGED SHEP'S CLASSIFICATION TO 'JEWISH-  
LITHUANIAN SOLDIER' AND SENT HIM TO A GERMAN POW  
CAMP.**

**SHEP'S FAMILY WAS MURDERED BY THE NAZIS AT PONARY, A  
FOREST NEAR VILNA. HE WAS A SLAVE LABORER FOR FIVE  
YEARS AND SEVEN MONTHS. IN 1948, THREE YEARS AFTER THE**

**WAR, SHEP IMMIGRATED TO NEW ORLEANS WHERE THREE OF HIS UNCLES LIVED.**

**THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN INSTITUTE'S PLATER ROBINSON.**

**PR (PLATER ROBINSON)**

**SZ (SHEP ZITLER)**

**PR** Shep, thank you very much for coming.

**SZ** You're welcome

**PR** So I would like to start by asking you your name, and when and where you were born please.

**SZ** My name is Shep Zitler. I was born in Vilna, Poland.

***MAP OF POLAND, FOCUSING ON VILNA***

May 27th, 1917. Right during the First World War. Twenty-one years I was living in Poland. I had one brother, and four sisters, my mother, and my father and, of course, brother-in-law.

**PR** You're the only survivor?

**SZ** I'm the only survivor in the time of the war, since 1939, but I had a brother who left Vilna, my hometown, in 1933 for Palestine. Then I had a sister, an older sister. My brother was also older than my sister. I had an older sister and she left for Palestine in 1936, and because in her honor they made a picture in 1936 with the whole family, and I am in there, too.

## ***PHOTOGRAPH OF ZITLER FAMILY TAKEN IN 1936 WITH SHEP TO THE RIGHT***

So everybody that was staying in 1939, my three other sisters, with her husbands, with her children, my parents, none of them died a normal death. They were all killed by the Nazis in different ways.

**PR** Shep, you joined the Polish Army in the summer [winter] of 1939.

**SZ** First, I didn't 'join' the Polish Army. Why would I join the Polish Army? I hated the Polish Army and I didn't join. I was drafted into the Polish Army. I was twenty-one years of old and physically okay so they drafted me into the Polish Army, February or March in 1939. The war broke out September the 1<sup>st</sup> 1939. So I was already six months in the Polish Army, and then my hell started because of the tremendous anti-Semitism, which I didn't feel it as living in Vilna, but I did feel it being in Polish Army. And to give you an example: you had a Polish lieutenant by the name of Walchek, six foot tall, handsome fella, and he had a sign by his office, in Polish, and translated in English would be that 'For Jews and dogs, their entry is forbidden.' It was at that time that came up Passover. Poland was a democratic country and all the Jews had to observe Passover. We were then first year in the Polish Army, the draftees. It was to go on our own, for four miles from our camp, they made a Seder. And for eight days we marched to the Seder and we had a good Jewish meal and then we came back to barracks. So the sergeant says, 'It's not my fault but I have orders from the lieutenant and from higher that we have to give you a drill.' And all the other, all the Poles, were looking at us, and for three hours every day, we had a drill. And so it wasn't that nice to have, it was not comfortable to have that good meal and then we came back and had a drill because we were Jews. That he could do, he had to send us to keep the masks.

**PR** That was to harass you and humiliate you.

**SZ** Absolutely.

**PR** And the war breaks out and you're on the same side.

**SZ** And the war breaks out, and I didn't know how to fight. My first enemy was the Germans and my second enemy was the Poles. Now I wouldn't say that everybody Jews in, from Poland, would feel the same way. But we came from the Poland, the Lithuanian Jews. We didn't spoke that well Polish, because before the First World War there wasn't Poland there. It was Russia. My parents didn't spoke that well Polish like people from Cracow or Warsaw. They spoke a perfect [Polish], but we didn't spoke, we had an accent, like I'm having an accent right now which is stumbling, but they don't mind my accent right now, but over there they hated accents. And they could see it right away that we were Jews and they gave us a hell of a time.

**PR** So in the beginning you were surrounded by the Germans with your friend Sanders.

**SZ** When we were captured around Warsaw, we were surrounded by a, I mean this is just a little story. We were surrounded in the forest by a field and behind the field were a little village or villages all around. And we were in the forest. And at night, three days before we didn't eat anything, just, I think, we find somewhere we onions, we ate small piece of onions. We didn't have anything to eat. Harry Sanders was a good friend of mine.

***PHOTOGRAPH ZOOMING IN ON HARRY SANDERS ON THE LEFT***

He still made it to liberation with me and survived at the same time. He went to the army, he's from Vilna, Harry Sanders, his name was Harry Sarniewicz, but he shortened it to Sanders, and we were together and we couldn't see anybody, but we could hear all the time there were wounded there were so many and they were just [saying]: 'Jesus. Jesus.' And you heard it all around and they were crying and it was going on. And then they were so hungry and so when we came out, a little bit light, we saw a tree about I would say about twenty feet, twenty feet from our forest. So Sanders says to me, 'Let's go.' We see little apples on the tree. 'Let's go and get the apples.' I said, 'Okay' and we went to see the apples. Of course, the apples were not ready to eat, but it's still better than you're hungry when you didn't eat anything. But we hear, we heard bullets right in front of us and behind us. 'Zoom, zoom, zoom.' And we got the apples and came back to the forest. And my friend Harry says to me, 'You know? We are going to win the war because the Germans, they don't know how to fight. They aren't shooting right. If I would be there, I would have already killed him.' He was a very good marksman. And in infantry we belonged to, marksman, was a very good. He had special, even being a Jew, he had special prizes for them because he was a very good marksman. I wasn't a very good marksman. That's what he said. Years after, I told him that and he said to me he doesn't remember that. I did remember it.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF SOLDIERS OUTSIDE, ZOOMING IN ON SHEP ON THE RIGHT SIDE***

**PR** Once you were captured, the Germans did not really know what to do with you because you were not a 'Polish-Jewish' soldier. You were a 'Lithuanian-Jewish' soldier. You 'slipped through the cracks.'

**SZ** When the German finally came and they surrounded us. "*Hands*

*hoch.*” “Raise your hands.” Suddenly I was in the uniform, the Polish uniform, and they surrounded us. For a little while I did escape and I was hiding but then I came back. But the point is that the Germans couldn’t tell that I am Jewish. They couldn’t tell. So the Poles already heard it, that they are looking for Jews especial. So they say, ‘Here is Jew. Here is a Jew.’ The Poles gave them away, so finally they got me as a Jew. In the time we went towards *Stalag* where they call it *Stalag 8*, but 7B we were going to two different *Stalag*. Then word came out that the French, we were building the barracks for the French and so on, and then of course Russia came but we were a group of 10 of us. Some of us, somebody disappeared in the ones, we were 10. All the time, they took the 10 of us wherever we go. So we belonged to the *Stalag*, but we didn’t stay there, we couldn’t survive there three months because we would be starved. But we went to work, and all different kinds of work, where they needed us and sended us.

**PR** So as a Lithuanian-Jewish soldier...

**SZ** That’s what we find out and we consider, because some Germans we overheard say, ‘They are Lithuanian Jews. Lithuanian prisoners-of-war.’ But it wasn’t all because we were really from Poland and in the Polish Army. So they are thinking, ‘Through the cracks,’ as you said. We just were lucky.

**PR** So when you were a POW in a German camp, for a number of years, you received letters from your parents in Lithuania.

**SZ** And because that time, that time, in one year, more or less in ’40, when my parents were living under the Lithuania. That’s how there coming back like that, so they wrote letters to me. They could, I mean, there was the lawyer. They could write. I told them to send them. I have all letters. I think nineteen, or twenty letters, and they

wrote to me and suddenly they wrote also to America to send, but I wanted is packages.

### ***PHOTOGRAPH OF PACKAGE SLIP ZOOMING IN ON HIS NAME***

I wasn't thinking about letters. I was thinking for them to send, and they did send a few packages and did get little bit of food packages, a little bit of food, sardines, which I didn't get 100% of the package, but I got 30% or twenty taken out. Maybe some of them I didn't get it and they were sending me a lot. That's what I finding right now, lately. I find out that I kept the letters they were sending to me all the time. I kept it. I don't know.

### **PHOTOGRAPH OF LETTERS ZOOMING IN ON THE TEXT**

I kept it I don't know why. I did kept it. And in the letters I could see how much love I had for my family. My mother was going every day, every day she was sitting and she wants me to make a citizen of Lithuania. She thought that if I would become a citizen of Lithuania, I could get out from prisoner-of-war Germany and come over there in Vilna. If they would happen like this, I would be dead like they are all. I mean, I did survive because I didn't, she couldn't do it. But she begged. She was trying and she even said it in the letter. I had letter from my cousins, and from my brothers-in-law, from my sisters, and so much love, that all the worry they had it was about me, and I didn't realize it then. Sixty years ago, I didn't realize. I was then worrying about the packages I was getting. That's all. I wouldn't care about the letters. It was written in Polish, and in German, not in Yiddish because they didn't allow it. And all the letters were translated right now to English and I could read one time only, and I read it, and really I could not get over myself. It's something new. It's something different. After 60 years, I found out how much they really, they loved me, and how much they really was worrying about

me, and so on and so on. And they didn't know anything about going on in the war.

**PR** Ironically, you were safer in a German POW camp.

**SZ** That is what I am saying. If I am going to the war in 1939 or I get killed, or I leave. Ironically, in my case, I went to the war, I survived. My whole family behind me, they were all killed. That's my Holocaust. That's why they call me a 'Holocaust survivor.' That is the definition of the Holocaust. Because they were killed instead of me.

### ***PHOTOGRAPH OF SHEP'S NIECE. ZERNA MORGENSTERN***

My niece, that's my older sister's daughter, the beautiful girl, 18 years old, and she was murdered by the Nazi Weiss in Ponar. That was a forest 6 miles from Vilna.

### ***PHOTOGRAPH OF PONARY FOREST AND DITCHES***

She was just talking to her, while her mother and her younger brother was already dead by the ditch. They told her to undress herself and if she wouldn't do it, they would stab her eyes out.

### ***PHOTOGRAPH OF SS OFFICER KARL WEISS***

That's what they told her, the Weiss told her. She was beautiful and he says to her, 'You are too beautiful to be dead.' And he want to, and he talked to her and then from the side pockets, he picked up his gun and he shot her in her head and he left and he, he pulled her out to the family ditch.

### ***PHOTOGRAPH OF JEWISH FIGHTERS FROM VILNA***



**PR** In Vilna, there was a famous resistance movement and there was a song born of that time, the 'Song of the Partisans.' And I wondered if you would be kind enough to sing it for us.

SZ Okay, it goes, it is like this:

### **HYMN OF THE PARTISANS**

**NEVER SAY THERE IS ONLY DEATH FOR YOU  
THOUGH LEADEN SKIES MAY BE CONCEALING DAYS OF BLUE ---  
BECAUSE THE HOUR WE HAVE HUNGERED FOR HIS NEAR,  
BENEATH OUR DEAD THE EARTH SHALL TREMBLE,  
WE ARE HERE!  
FROM LAND OF PALM-TREE TO THE FAR-OFF LAND OF SNOW  
WE SHALL BE COMING WITH OUR TORMENT AND OUR WOE.  
AND EVERYWHERE OUR BLOOD HAS SUNK INTO THE EARTH  
SHALL OUR BRAVERY, OUR VIGOR BLOSSOM FORTH!  
WE'LL HAVE THE MORNING SUN TO SET OUR DAY AGLOW.  
AND ALL OUR YESTERDAYS SHALL VANISH WITH THE FOE  
AND IF THE TIME IS LONG BEFORE THE SUN APPEARS,  
THEN LET THE SUN GO LIKE A SIGNAL THROUGH THE YEARS.  
THIS SONG WAS WRITTEN WITH OUR BLOOD AND NOT WITH  
LEAD;  
IT'S NOT SONG THAT BIRDS SING OVERHEAD.  
IT WAS A PEOPLE, AMONG TOPPLING BARRICADES,  
THAT SANG THIS SONG OF OURS WITH PISTOLS AND  
GRENADES.**

**PR** So when you were a prisoner-of-war, at one point you made contact in the prison labor camp with a Ukrainian girl who sent you a 'love letter,' and it was discovered by the SS.

**SZ** Yes, we did see her when, you know, we did like each other. I was young I guess. I spoke a little bit at her. I couldn't be in touch with her. We couldn't see each other. I maybe did see each other if there was a little, if there was a rain, and then we had to work in the, in a farm, inside, to bring the hay or something else, you know all kinds of work. So we saw, maybe we could talk a little but very little. That's right, and she wrote me a letter. A letter in German, 'a love letter.' If the war will be over, you know, and then we are going to meet, and we are going to have a good time and so on.

**PR** And that letter was discovered.

**SZ** The letter was discovered, that's right, by a German. And, of course, he thought that would be German, because it was German written, and if it would be a German, I wouldn't be right now talking to you.

**PR** If it would be a German girl?

**SZ** If it would be a German girl, I wouldn't be talking to you. But they said it was Clara. Was her name Clara?

**PR** So what saved you in this instance?

**SZ** Then the, it saved me. Then he find out that it wasn't German. It was a Russian, and he didn't care about the Russians.

**PR** But, also, weren't you a valuable worker?

**SZ** Yes, but that was another one. When this officer, I don't know, an SS came, and he want to shoot me. And he took out his gun, and then the inspector, or they called the 'big chief' from the farm, just came from nowhere, with a big cigar, and he told them, 'Wait, he's a good

worker. Don't shoot him.' So he slapped my face and he drove off. That was almost, the war was almost over. Maybe another month or so.

**PR** During the war, Shep, when you were a POW under the Germans, did you hear rumors of the extermination of the Jews in the east?

**SZ** We did hear, but that already was by the end, by the end. I would say then in 1944. We heard, and rumors went, then, they have exterminating in *Auschwitz*, in a camp. I mean, we didn't know. We did hear this, we did, you know things like this goes around. We did, but we didn't hear exactly how they did it. How it happened.

**PR** So you were with, really, the same group through much of the war.

**SZ** All the time. The same ten people.

**PR** I wonder, you know, surely you derived strength from one another.

**SZ** Well, I would imagine so. I would imagine so. We were, that's right. We were together. We were, I mean, everybody, everybody had a partner. My partner was Harry Sanders.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF SHEP AND HARRY ZOOMED IN FROM THE WEDDING PHOTOGRAPH***

If you find a little - like one time he did get a soup that was in camp and he had a big bone, a big bone like this, and he was licking, so he gave me a couple of times to lick. He kept this bone maybe for two weeks

**PR** A bone?

**SH** A bone, a bone, that's right. A bone, a bone from meat. And the bone was already dry. But I will never forget it. He kept it and he was my partner, so I could have a lick. He could have a lick.

**PR** Was there a moment where you almost gave up?

**SZ** It was all the time. We were, it was, we went through. I went through a cycle of hell for 5 years, 7 months. That's what it was. But we went through. It reminds me: I was stuck about 15 years ago in an elevator for an hour and a half. It's a terrible feeling when you are stuck in an elevator, a terrible feeling. But when you're free, you forgot all about it. Isn't this, isn't that funny? I think about my being in Germany for 5 years and 7 months. It's think that I cannot understand how I made, how I survived 6 winters in Germany without Tylenol or aspirin, which I didn't have it. Not good shoes, either. I don't know how. But I did survive. I'm here. You see me right now. I'm here. I did survive. How? I don't know

**PR** When did you learn that your family had been killed?

**SZ** We learned that right before we, before we were liberated. We know it. Nobody in Vilna, we were all 10 of us from Vilna. We did decide it that we're not going back to Vilna because nobody was left there. Nobody. There's no use to go back to Vilna. We all want to go to Palestine. That is a different story. We all want to because everybody - I had a sister and a brother older than me they were living in Palestine, which I didn't know their address. I didn't know what happened to them. But we already had an inkling, except by any miracle, but nobody from our family. There wasn't enough for us to want to go. Not one of us. All 10 of us didn't want to go back to Vilna, Poland. Back, we didn't want to. We were asked by the Russians because we were liberated by Russians.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF SHEP ZITLER SMOKING PIPE***

**PR** After the war, Shep, you didn't want to marry?

**SZ** No! No! Who would want to marry? No. We all said, we all 10 of us, when we came a month after the war, we were liberated. Two things we are not going to do: we are not going to marry; we are not going to have children. Who would want to see Jewish children tortured like they saw it? And who would want to get married? But we got married. We got children. We have grandchildren that are giving back to the society. Life goes on. You got it.

**PR** Do you think it could happen again?

**SZ** Not our Holocaust, like we had it. Burying the Jews, burying the people. No, and I will tell you why: because, plainly, we have Israel.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF SHEP ZITLER AT THE WAILING WALL***

***SHEP WITH MAX FUSKMAN AT WAILING WALL  
IN JERUSALEM***

If we have Israel, it cannot happen again. Because I don't think that we would have, I don't think they would burying the Jews in *Auschwitz* if Israel would be there. We have an Israel right now. Very strong Israel. They wouldn't let it happen. All around the world, it cannot happen

***PHOTOGRAPHS OF SHEP SPEAKING AT A SCHOOL ZOOMING  
IN ON SHEP***

**PR** You travel and speak to schools, we have been together, and I know the emotion, you know, that accompanies your presentation. When you speak to kids, what message do you want them to get?

**SZ** Oh there's one clear message with everything. What I want to get to them is the message: quote the Holocaust in my opinion cannot be understood. Nobody in this whole world can understand the Holocaust. But I want them to remember. I owe it to my family and to my people. And then they will grow up and somebody will come and tell them that the Holocaust never exists, they can tell them, "That's not true because I heard Shep Zitler speaking, and I touched him, and I hugged him, and we shook hands, and the Holocaust did exist." And that's, that is the message, that is my purpose, and that is my main objective to come to talk. That's why I'm getting up sometimes early in the morning and I drive 60 miles. I don't get any money from them. It's just because I want to tell them that the Holocaust, to know, that the Holocaust did exist. And I don't want them to come like [Holocaust-denier David] Irving right now in England, and the commies saying that the Holocaust never existed because if it never existed, and I have more, because I have proof. I have proof through a picture that accidentally, just by chance, I was there in that picture, the whole family in 1936 because of the, because of the, other than my older sister went to Palestine, and that's why they made the picture and I got a picture right now which I can show it to you.

**PR** Please.

**SH** It's my whole family.

**PR** Please.

**SH** Here is it. And that is, if the Holocaust never existed, where are they? This is me, right here

***PHOTOGRAPH OF ZITLER FAMILY, ZOOMING IN ON SHEP AND THEN ON THE OTHER MEMBERS***

I was 17 years of age. That's my mother. That's my father. That's the sister. She did survive because she left for Palestine, right in the middle. That's why they made the picture. But here is my other sister, my older sisters, my other sister, my youngest sister, who at that time wasn't married. But during the wartime she got married, and she has a husband and a child. And she was killed and I can tell you about the child, how was killed at the time if you have the time but I don't think so.

**PR** How was the child killed?

**SZ** The child was born in 1943 [1941], in the ghetto. Her husband was already dead. And her husband's brother's child was also born. Two boys. Then a peasant girl, a Polish woman, want to take them into hiding but the one stipulation: they shouldn't be circumcised. So the other one, she kept it, my sister's brother-in-law's child [Shalom Levin], and she went to my father, my sister went to my father and she said, 'What shall I do?' And my father's like, 'He's Jewish. He has to be circumcised.' So he was circumcised, luckily, in 1943 [1941] and they were all killed.

**PR** Shep, was it the right thing for your father to do: to insist on the child being circumcised? Knowing that...

**SZ** That's what he was saying, that it was very, very religious. But I wouldn't say it was the right thing, and the circumcise. If I would be saying, I would say, 'No,' and he would be alive. But



for him it was right, I guess. My parents were very religious, through both of them. But none of us siblings were. None of the siblings. None of my brother, my older brother, or of my sisters were. They weren't. Not me, either. So that is my story in short. This is my family. I have letters now. I find out from my mother, from my father, from my little sister, and from my brother-in-law, he's Morgenstern and Mikhail and, and I can prove it: that the Holocaust did exist. This is not by talking, but this is by facts. Where are they?

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**&**

**Legacy Interrupted, a history of the Zitler family written  
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**Shlomo Ben-Asher.**

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