

Episode 8 — Celia Kassow — Part 1

Episode Notes by Samuel Kassow

For more on Celia Kassow's story, be sure to listen to Celia Kassow — Part 2 as well as our episode featuring her son, Sam Kassow, who tells a breathtaking story about the Polish farmer who saved his mother's life.

This two-part episode, which features the testimony of Celia Kassow, née Cymer, tells the story of a teenaged girl who grew up in a small town in a remote, underdeveloped area of prewar Poland. The word Holocaust often conjures up images of an impersonal bureaucratic juggernaut, of long trains carrying millions of faceless, anonymous victims to death factories. But, as Celia's testimony shows, there was another Holocaust, where in countless small towns and villages, death was up close and personal—where neighbors betrayed and even murdered old friends for a few trinkets, and where the guards who hurried Jews along to nearby shooting pits were often former classmates or longtime customers. And then there were other neighbors and friends who, at the risk of their own lives, were ready to extend a helping hand.

Celia's testimony also reminds us not to expect survivors always to give a totally accurate, chronologically coherent, and historically "objective" story. Historians who want rock solid evidence of "what actually happened" should use testimonies like this one with caution, not because Celia set out to lie but because she, like so many others, needed to tell a story that would help her come to terms with the past.

Many decades separated Celia's wartime terror and her 1980 recounting of it in a comfortable studio in New Haven, Connecticut. For some survivors, these interviews afforded a second chance to tie up loose ends, confront traumatic memories, and revisit decisions that left deep scars of guilt and shame. They offered the opportunity to refashion a narrative that would tell, if not the exact story, then an account of a journey that began in hell and ended with some semblance of stability and normalcy. Celia's testimony may well be such an example—a story where the victim created a kind of convenient bridge that would link the past and present in a way that was less threatening or painful.

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Celia was born in Szarkowszczyzna, Poland, in 1923. The Jews, who made up 80 percent of the town's 1,000 inhabitants, called it Sharkoystsene, while the Belarusians, who comprised most of the peasant population surrounding the town, called it Sharkaushchina. The town, which today is part of Belarus, is about 70 miles northeast of Vilnius (Wilno in Polish) in a region that the Poles called the Kresy (borderlands). For the Jews, this was Lite (Jewish Lithuania)—an area with hundreds of miles of forests, rivers, and lakes, with Polish manor houses and Jewish shtetls, and in between and all around, hundreds of tiny villages populated by Lithuanian and Belarusian peasants. The Jews of this region formed a special tribe, the Litvaks, who had a Yiddish dialect, cuisine, and religious culture that set them apart from the Jews of Poland and Galicia.

Celia grew up in a warm loving family of seven children, five girls and two boys. Her father, Shmuel, earned the nickname "Sam the American" because as a single young man, he had lived for a time in the United States, but he'd returned before World War I. Unlike the Italians or the Irish, relatively few East European Jews returned home, but Shmuel preferred to marry and raise a family in a place where life was less materialistic and more traditional. Once back home, he married a young woman from nearby Postov, Liba Cepelowicz. Between the wars, Shmuel established a relatively prosperous flax business with a partner, Hersh Berkon, who would head the Judenrat during the occupation.

The family's life was centered in a big house on the market square, where Liba ran a popular restaurant that, on Saturday nights, also showed films. Liba was the emotional center of the family, since Shmuel was away on business much of the time. She was a tall, forceful woman, who was also active in some of the local societies that helped the poor and the sick. Two of the older daughters, Merke and Dina, married.

Dina's son, Raful, was born in 1937. Her husband was drafted into the Polish Army in 1939 and never returned. Merke's daughter, Lea, was born in July 1941, at a time when the Red Army had retreated, the Germans had not yet arrived, and the peasants were coming from far and wide to start a pogrom, beat Jews, and steal their property.

When Poland collapsed in 1939, it was the Soviets rather than the Germans who occupied Sharkoystsene and the surrounding region. While almost all Jews naturally preferred the Red Army to the Nazis, many still suffered a great deal under the Soviet occupation. Since Shmuel was classified as a member of the bourgeoisie, he lost his business and the

Cymer family had to share their large home with unwanted guests, including local Communists. The Soviets deported many members of the middle class. The 300,000 Jews who were deported to the Soviet interior between 1939 and 1941 bitterly regretted what seemed to be a terrible fate. Little did they know that more than half would survive the war, while those Jews who were untouched by the Soviets almost invariably fell victim to the Germans. By rights, Shmuel and his family should have been deported but someone pulled strings and they remained in Sharkoystene. Shmuel and the boys found jobs, while Celia wangled her way into an elite boarding school in nearby Druya.

When the Germans attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Celia, now 17, was in Druya. In the midst of terrible chaos and confusion, she desperately tried to get home, walking on roads jammed with refugees and fleeing Red Army units. A Polish schoolmate whom she had counted as a friend slammed a door in her face and called her a “dirty Jew.” When she finally got home, a bloody pogrom was raging. By early July, the Germans had arrived and quickly began a reign of terror. Jews were subject to random shootings and beatings. They were constantly required to do forced labor at a moment’s notice. In a few months, the Germans established two adjoining ghettos, one for “productive” and another for “unproductive” elements. Celia’s family was in the former. Since hundreds of Jews were dumped into the ghetto from surrounding villages, the ghetto soon contained 1,500 Jews and overcrowding reached unbearable levels. The Germans surrounded the ghetto with tall wooden fences topped by barbed wire. Since the official bread ration was 100 grams a day, there was a desperate shortage of food, even though the Judenrat did all it could to help the starving Jews. Celia became a waitress for the local German officials, who actually treated her well. Now and then, they even gave her food to take home, but Liba adamantly refused to allow non-kosher food into the house.

The new police chief in the town was Marian Danielecki, a Pole who had probably rebranded himself as an ethnic German. Danielecki had a longstanding grudge against the Cymers from before the war and now he saw his chance to take revenge on the family. One day he propositioned Celia, who slapped him. Danielecki then ordered the police to beat her with rubber hoses all night. The next day, she was dragged, more dead than alive, to the Jewish cemetery, ostensibly to be shot. The route passed by the ghetto, and desperate Jews tossed money and valuables to the police in an effort to ransom Celia. (Her own family saw everything.) Danielecki told his friends that if Celia begged for mercy and agreed to be his lover, he wouldn’t shoot her. When she didn’t, he aimed the

pistol right at her head but at the last minute he shot in the air. (This would cause permanent damage to her hearing.)

Celia returned to her job serving the Germans. The Judenrat asked her to observe everything she saw in the building and to report back anything suspicious. In mid-June 1942 the Judenrat learned that the Germans had massacred a number of nearby ghettos. On June 18, with tensions at the breaking point, Celia suddenly saw trucks full of Lithuanian police and Germans in a new kind of uniform. (These Germans were part of Einsatzkommando 9B, attached to Einsatzgruppe B. It was commanded by Untersturmführer Heinz Tangermann, who received a very light sentence in the mid-1950s.) The Judenrat had an emergency meeting and urged everyone to flee. Some Jews, including Celia's father Shmuel, decided that they would not run but die on the spot. Many of them also began to set fire to all the buildings in the ghetto in order to deny Germans Jewish property and to create a distraction to help other people escape. Celia later learned that a local Belarusian policeman shot Shmuel. He then chopped off his finger to get his ring.

A terrible scene of mass murder and total chaos ensued. The Jews rushed to the ghetto fence and started to run, but they ran right into cordons of heavily armed Germans, Lithuanians, and local Belarusian auxiliaries, who opened heavy fire on the desperate men, women, and children. Panic set in and families lost each other in the confusion. Masses of people fell wounded or dead while others had to run over them to try to reach safety. Celia grabbed her youngest sister Slava and ran right into a local policeman with a gun. The policeman, who had once been her classmate, raised his rifle to shoot her but the gun jammed. Celia held Slava tight and kept running.

By daybreak hundreds of Jews were dead, while many others were wandering helplessly through the nearby swamps and forests. Spurred on by German promises of vodka, salt, and Jewish property, the local peasants hunted down the fleeing Jews like wild animals. Celia and Slava saw their 15-year-old sister Chaya murdered, with her eyes gouged out. A short time later they watched a mother drown her crying baby.

Students of the Holocaust might remember Hannah Arendt's controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she criticized the Jewish councils and asserted that had they simply told Jews to run and scatter, instead of allegedly cooperating with the Germans, many more Jews might have survived. In Sharkoystene the Judenrat did exactly that, but in the end it made little difference.

After a few days in the forests and swamps, their numbers quickly dwindling, the surviving Jews heard that the Germans were offering an “amnesty”: all Jews would have a few days to voluntarily enter the nearby Glubok (Glebokie) ghetto, no questions asked. Although the survivors knew full well that they were putting their heads back into the noose, almost all of them, including Celia and Slava, went to Glubok. The only exceptions were a very few young men, including Celia’s two older brothers, Zalman and Hershke, who would later play a major role in Celia’s story.

When Celia and Slava arrived in the Glubok ghetto in late June 1942, they were surprised to see that their mother, Liba, and their two older sisters, along with their children, were also there. Just a short time later, Piotr Bilevich, a young man from a Polish family that had had business dealings with the Cymers before the war, showed up in the ghetto with a horse and cart. He had come to take Celia away and hide her on his farm. (In her testimony, Celia called Piotr a “peasant,” which was not entirely accurate. Peasant families usually did not send their sons to high school, as the Bileviches did.) Celia did not want to leave her mother and sisters, but Liba literally pushed Celia into Piotr’s arms and told her to go. The leave-taking was harsh and traumatic. Celia would never see her mother again.

From the very first day on Piotr’s farm, Celia realized that her new life would require very strong nerves. She divided her time between the farmhouse and a deep hole that Piotr had dug in a barn to hide her in emergencies. By this time, Celia’s two older brothers had joined the first Soviet partisan detachments in the region and visited Piotr’s farm from time to time. On one occasion, they gave Celia a pistol.

Meanwhile, the brothers had also succeeded in moving Liba and the surviving members of the family from Glubok to Postov, where Liba’s family lived. But on November 23 (according to German documents) or December 25 (according to the Glebokie Memorial Book), the Germans suddenly liquidated the Postov ghetto. The execution pit abutted a large lake and there was no place to run. Celia’s mother, her older sisters, and their children were murdered. Her younger sister Slava lay on top of Liba, who, before she died, told her daughter to play dead and then somehow get to Piotr’s farm. Although grazed in the head and the leg by two bullets, Slava played dead, then swam across the half frozen lake, and in an incredible effort of will and endurance crawled the 15 miles to Piotr’s farm. She arrived in terrible condition—severely frostbitten, her wounds infected, more dead than alive. Slava had just turned 12.

Shortly after Celia and Slava were reunited, they went through a new ordeal. German anti-partisan units swooped down unexpectedly on the farm and established a command post in the barn, right above the hole where the two girls were hiding. They spent five days in complete terror, lying in excrement and mud as rats crawled all over them. Assuming that the Germans would eventually find them, they decided to kill themselves first, arguing over who would kill whom. But just when their nerves were about to give out, the Germans left. A short while later, they endured another evening of fear when Germans arrived at the farm with an interpreter whom Celia had known before the war. Luckily, the interpreter did not give them away.

By the second half of 1943, it was becoming too dangerous to stay on the farm, and Celia and Slava, with their brothers' help, joined the Soviet partisans, alongside Piotr. Although Celia fails to talk about this in the interview she spent much of her time in the partisans together with Piotr (a Soviet document from Yad Vashem lists Celia and Piotr in the Rokossovski detachment). They attacked German garrisons, blew up trains, and survived German search-and-destroy operations.

When the liberation came in July 1944, the Red Army drafted Piotr, while Celia, like many other survivors, fell into a deep depression that the struggle for survival had temporarily staved off. Did she want to wait for Piotr and spend the rest of her life in a non-Jewish environment? One will never know exactly what went through her mind but in the end, she did not. After a vain struggle to resume her education, she got together with Kopl Kossovski, a Jewish man she barely knew, and joined other Jewish survivors who repatriated from now Soviet Belarus to postwar Poland. Piotr returned from the war deeply angry and hurt. He even went to Lodz to hunt Celia down. But the two would never meet again.

Celia's marriage to Kopl, who had survived the Holocaust in Russia, was typical of many survivor marriages, where, to repeat a mordant and sardonic saying popular among survivors, the "marriage broker was Hitler" (in Yiddish, "Hitler iz geven mayn shadkhn"). People from different social classes, with totally different interests and personalities, sought to escape the loneliness and depression by finding a partner and starting a family. Kopl was a wonderful man, a caring and loving father, a hard-working bread-winner. But he and Celia did not have a good marriage. On the other hand they never divorced and tried to give their three children as good a home as they could.

Nine months almost to the day after Celia met Kopl, their son Samuel was born in Stuttgart, Germany. Celia was ambivalent, to say the least, about motherhood; when she was four months pregnant, she tried to commit suicide by lying down on trolley tracks in Lodz. Soon after giving birth, Celia became terribly sick with mastitis and the doctors gave her little chance of survival. Their newborn son spent much of his first year in orphanages and in the care of Celia's brother Zalman's young wife, Sonia. It took Celia a very long time to reestablish a bond with the baby.

In 1949, after almost three years in the DP camp of Wasseraufingen, Celia and Kopl emigrated to New Haven, Connecticut, where Kopl became a tailor and Celia worked odd jobs, including waitressing and teaching driving. Their daughters, Linda and Cheryl, were born in 1950 and 1955, respectively. Kopl died in 1987. Celia Kassow died of cancer in February 1994.

Transcript

Celia Kassow: War broke out, and it was bombing. Constant bombing. And everyone was going towards east. The roads were littered with trucks and bodies. And I was swept with this tide of people. There was a Polish girl in my dormitory who was very good to me, who helped me out a lot. And I figured out, Gee, she's only a couple of miles away from here. I'll stop there and I'll get something to wear to cover myself. I had a flimsy nightgown on. As soon as I came down to her gate, she said, "Get away from here, you dirty Jew." And this is the first time that it hit me, that I really understood what it's all about.

My name is Celia Kassow. It used to be Cimmer—my maiden name, Cimmer.

Laurel Vlock: And you were born in what city and what date?

CK: 1923, October 23, in Poland.

LV: And the city? The place?

CK: It's a little city that you can't even pronounce—Szarkowszczyzna. It's very hard to spell.

Eleanor Reissa: You're listening to "Those Who Were There: Voices from the Holocaust," a podcast that draws on recorded interviews from Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. I'm Eleanor Reissa.

Celia Kassow was born into an upper middle class family in a small city near Vilna, which at the time was a part of Poland. Her father was a successful businessman. Her mother ran the family's restaurant.

When the Nazis attacked Celia's hometown in June 1941, Celia was 17 years old and living at a nearby boarding school. She had two brothers and four sisters.

It's now February 25, 1980, and Celia Kassow is seated against a dark backdrop in a television studio in New Haven, Connecticut. She's wearing a long-sleeved gray dress with a gray and red scarf at her open collar. Celia has a narrow face, set off by silver-accented brown hair. Her heavy-lidded brown eyes are intensely focused on her interviewers, Laurel Vlock and Hillel Klein.

In part one of this two-part episode, Celia explains that she managed to get home ahead of the invading Nazi troops, but she wasn't out of harm's way.

CK: When I came home, the Germans weren't there yet because they couldn't occupy every little city, but they set up some kind of a government with the local militia and they gave them orders to loot and to break—a pogrom—to the fullest extent. Just do as much damage as you can. And they started breaking windows, walls, floors, looking for valuables. They were destroying everything in sight.

And of course we ran for our lives to the woods. And at nightfall, when it became quiet, when we could hear no more looting, we came back to our, supposedly what once were homes. There was nothing left. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Everything was broken. What they couldn't cart away, they broke. And this is when my sister started giving birth. She gave birth amidst all this rubble and it was indescribable.

And then they organized the ghetto. They had to bring in all the Jews from the surrounding little towns. And our ghetto became the main ghetto for this region.

And our house was very large. We had a restaurant in it. And people were pushed in like sardines. And they kept on bringing more and more and more people every single day and there was no room anymore to put them in. The windows were boarded up. We were not allowed to look out a window, ever.

We were not allowed to go out and get water. Every day, there were different decrees. "Jews, uh, turn in your bicycles. Jews, turn in your valuables. Jews, turn in your winter coats. Uh, children are not allowed to go to school. Jews, don't walk on sidewalks."

We had no rights whatsoever. We could not walk where people walked. People—they meant Gentiles. We were scum. And, of course, whenever a German truck came or a car, they just ran us over, just like that. Just like that. No one ever had to account for it.

And we were confined to this ghetto, and every day there was a different decree. Today, they want 25 Jews. They take them out and they shoot them. Just for no reason at all.

And every single day, they used to come and take people to work, us included. And the work was just incredible. You see, the cars could not drive in the snow and ice, so they used to get us out of bed and give us jobs to chip away the ice, of course with no regard for our health because we weren't dressed at all. So people got pneumonia and died off like flies.

And my mother volunteered in the ghetto to bake bread for the ghetto since our oven was equipped to handle this large amount of bakery. We had a restaurant, so large ovens.

The reason she undertook to do it, she couldn't see the starving people in her house. She couldn't take it. She really added more water and more water every single day. She diluted it. That the bread finally wasn't a dough, it was like milk, and she put it in containers, but it wasn't enough. People had tuberculosis. People had pneumonia. Dozens of people used to die. My mother couldn't take it.

Now, even in the ghetto, there was discrimination. There was a rich ghetto and a poor ghetto. Whoever had some kind of, I would call it prestige, I don't know, was housed in the ghetto where we were. Better housing, although we were packed like sardines. Better working conditions, supposedly.

I worked in the *Kommandantur*. This I like to mention because I think I helped the ghetto a lot—myself and a cousin who worked for the Germans. They needed someone to serve them three meals a day. And they were looking for someone clean, and what they called pretty, and well-mannered, and so on. So from about several thousand girls, they picked me.

I used to come in there three times a day, serve them their meals. Of course, my nails had to be polished. I had to be very clean, very neat. They gave me soap, they gave me all the cosmetics to be nice and clean. My hair was shiny. I had to look well, because they entertained a lot. And this gave me the opportunity to spy. And I reported everything to the ghetto.

I could read German very well. I could see and hear what was going on. And this is how we found out that the action will take place in the ghetto. We knew the date and the time. We knew that the Lithuanians are coming in in truckloads every single day, more and

more. And we knew it spelled trouble. The only way they come is for extermination of the ghetto.

And when we saw them come in at night, we were on guard in our house in the attic. We had guards watching the *Kommandantur*, which was across from the ghetto. And when we saw them jumping off the trucks, we were all pushed towards the back of the ghetto and we all ran in the woods.

Hillel Klein: And your family?

CK: My family—my father died in the ghetto. He didn't want to run. He remained in the ghetto. He was shot there the same day. I would be shot. I turned around and I saw a classmate of mine who was a policeman and his rifle jammed. He looked at me and I looked at him and that's the only reason I'm alive. His rifle jammed. He couldn't shoot me. So I escaped.

I found myself in the woods with my youngest sister, the one that's alive now. And we were in the woods and we ran into a lot of people. And one was asking the other one, "Do you know who is alive? Do you know who escaped?"

It seems that my sister and her baby and my mother were in one part of the woods and my other sister and her little child of four and—yes, two of them—were in another part with my younger 15-year-old. And my 15-year-old went out to get some food for this child and she was killed together with the mother of my cousin who is here in New Haven. Their eyes were gouged out and they were left on the road.

And then a peasant told us that he buried them and he showed us the place. And my other sister with the little baby was nursing her at that time... At eight months, she couldn't nurse her anymore, so they had a few gold pieces with them—watches, rings, whatever. My mother and sister decided to send the baby to Glubok, there was another remaining ghetto.

So they put a nametag on the baby's neck in five languages. My father was very well-known. And they sent the baby to Glubok, which, uh... The peasant took the money and the baby and he brought the baby to the ghetto and he threw her over the fence. But then... Anyway, they were killed in the next ghetto. But he did bring the baby to the ghetto.

When we were in the woods, coming away from the ghetto, we were all little groups of Jews in woods. We heard crying here, we heard crying there. And then I ran into a group of Jews, maybe 12, 15, and there was a cousin of mine with her children, a little girl of 4 or 5, and a little boy of maybe 8, 10, 11 months. And he had a voice—it was such a raspy voice, it was impossible. And in the woods, when a child cries, it really rings out, and the

Germans would really come very fast. So the group of Jews said to her, “Look, Teibel, you can’t be in the woods with this child. Either get away or kill him.”

She became wild. She looked at me—“You!” She said, “You’re a big healthy girl and you’re my cousin, you are the one who is going to do it.” I said, “What? Why did you choose me?” I said, “I’m only a child.” I always used to say, “I’m only a child, please leave me alone.” Anyway, she had to do it, there was no choice. She wanted... She has a little girl and herself to think of. I saw her put the child in the swamp, put her foot on his neck. She drowned him. I saw it with my own eyes.

There were a lot of incidents like this, that little babies were killed off because they were crying and they were endangering the life of other Jews.

You couldn’t live in the woods anymore because you were hunted down like animals. So a lot of people started going towards Glubok, including myself and my little sister.

Glubok was very large. It was close to 10,000 people there. They told me that the day before, the Germans told everyone to come to the Schlossplatz, and they told people from 16 to 25 to step aside, which they did. They were killed. Two and a half thousand people from 16 to 25, including the children of my first cousin.

So when I came into the ghetto, this woman went berserk. She started hitting me and pulling at me and clawing at me. She said, “What right do you have to be alive and my children are all dead?” And she started hitting me with such force. So she said, “You should be dead, too. My children are dead.” Well, we were the same age. We went to school together.

Then, all of a sudden, my mother comes up—I didn’t know she was alive—and she said to me, “What business did you have to come here?” My mother, to me. She said, “I fed you and I clothed you for so many years and now you’re a parasite. Out you go.” She knew I had a chance to go and hide because there was a peasant who wanted to hide us.

My mother was really vicious. And then she broke down. She started crying. She said, “Look darling, I do love you. You know I do. The reason I want you to go is because at least one person should remain alive of the family.”

I said, “No, Mama, if you go with me, I’ll go. If you don’t go, I don’t go.” She said, “Look, you see your sister with the baby? You see the other sister with the child? How can I leave them? Your father is dead. Your younger sister is dead. Please go.”

So the farmer that offered me his home risked his life. He put on a yellow star, entered the ghetto. He came and he found me. He said, “You’re going out with me. I have papers for you.” And I didn’t look very much Jewish at that time. I was blond. He said, “You’re

going with me.” Sure enough, we took off the stars—him and me—and the two of us set out on the main highway.

And, uh, we hear a horse-driven buggy behind us and, uh, two men in it, and they say, “Hop in, hop in.” I said, that’s the end. It was the, uh, secretary of the governor with a friend. He said, “Why don’t you get a ride with us?”

And while I was on the highway in this wagon heading towards the guy’s farm, I see someone walking that looked very familiar to me. My brother walks in a very peculiar way. And I noticed he’s walking and staring at me, and I knew if he’ll say one word to me, this farmer and his whole family will be tortured to death.

So I went like this to him. He shouldn’t say anything. And this is the first time I knew that he is alive after the ghetto. I didn’t know. And all of a sudden, I see him alive. He passed us by and he went to the ghetto.

Anyway, the farmer and I and the two *Sonderführers*, whoever they were, they decided they’re going to stop in a village. There was a dance going on. And I had to dance the whole night. I danced. I danced the whole night and sang. And you can’t imagine how I felt like singing and dancing but I did it the whole night and no one found me out.

And in the morning, we went and I landed in the farmer’s place. Now the life on the farm is—I can’t begin to tell it because what it meant to be in hiding. The guy made a hole under the floor in the barn. The hole consisted of maybe as wide as I was—two feet—and as long as I was. You couldn’t turn. If you crawled in on your stomach, you remained on your stomach. If you crawled in on your back, you remained on your back. Sometimes, when it was quiet, he would pull me out by my legs and give me a chance to straighten up my bones, and give me a little food.

But it was harvest time, and the barn was full of workers. So sometimes I remained for a week and 10 days in one position under the floor in this hole. There was no other way.

And the rats were so big. The rats are indescribably big. And they used to chew on me. And you couldn’t—we learned not to scream. You just remained in this hole.

The Germans, at that time, deprived people of salt. And salt was such a commodity that they would risk a life for a bag of salt. And I used to hear the peasants, “How many did you get today?” They used to pass by the barn. There was a main road. They used to pass by the barn with Jews. They use to catch five, 10, and for each Jew, they used to get a sack of salt.

When it was quiet, when there weren’t any workers in the barn, I used to crawl out. And the barn was built of timber, very large timber with little grass in between. So I poked out

the grass, and I could very, very... By narrowing one eye, I could really look through it, and could see them passing by with Jews in the wagon tied hand and foot.

So the feelings? There were no feelings. You were completely numb. You didn't cry. You didn't communicate with anyone. The only thing that you thought about is, I like to survive, I like to see what will be the end of it.

HK: Let us go back to the relation between you and the peasant. What did you think about the peasant, that he's saving you...?

CK: Oh, my peasants were extremely, extremely fine people. This family, they...

HK: But what was his passion, this family?

CK: Well, they were Poles, and they were very kind people. Not too many like this existed. The guy knew me when I was in school and our families did business together.

He came to our ghetto in Szarkowszczyzna. And before the extermination, he said to us, he said to us, "Look, I know there's something cooking. Your ghetto will be liquidated. Why don't you come with me, as many as you want?" And my mother and my father said, "Oh, come on, don't be crazy." I mean, people never believed it's going to happen. They never believed. My mother used to say—and she was an intelligent woman—"They can't kill off a whole race. It's just impossible, impossible." And they refused to go.

ER: This isn't the end of Celia Kassow's story. We'll be back next time with the second half of Celia's testimony. In it, she describes escaping from her underground hiding place to join the Soviet partisans.

"Those Who Were There" is a production of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, which is housed at Yale University Library's Manuscripts and Archives Department.

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