

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Erwin Baum

July 6, 1994

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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Erwin Baum, conducted by Randy Goldman on July 6, 1994 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Erwin Baum

July 6, 1994

01:01:00

Q: Can you just beginning by stating your name, date of birth, and where you were born, whatever your name was, if at all different at any time? Whatever your name was then?

A: My name is Erwin Baum. I'm born on April 15, 1926 in Warsaw, Poland. Attended only – unfortunately four years school. Why I say four years, I couldn't make it to the fifth grade because I was beaten up by the Polish boys too much, so I failed to go to school. I made excuses to stay home. So I failed, and had to go for two years to grade four, and finally I graduated to the fifth grade, which I never made it; that's when the war broke out.

Q: Okay. The other thing I was going to mention to you, is that you don't need to pay attention to the camera. You can just talk to me.

A: Okay.

Q: All right. Tell me a little bit about life before the war? What was your family life like? What was—?

A: I was one of seven children. We lived in one big room in Warsaw, opposite from Army barracks. My father was a tailor, concentrated on making suits, uniforms for the officers and higher ranks. We lived quite comfortably. It was approximately 1933, '34, until my father got sick. And my mother also ran a little candy store up in front. My father got sick and eventually he died at age 48. I don't remember exactly the year, '45. I'm sorry, '35 or '36, and life became very, very, very unbearable, very hard for my mother and seven children to take care of us. We had to leave the apartment because we could not afford to pay the rent. So a gentleman by the name of – I think of Grenholc who had a factory and an a and a wood plant, where they cut wood and sold in round packages for heating, and also a factory of making cement blocks for sidewalks. And he offered to my mother a shed where she would sell coal and wood by the kilo, and we could have our place to stay. And I remember we were sleeping in that shed with the leaking roof, we had to put basins to catch the rain. It was very unbearable.

01:04:00

At that time my mother learned somehow that there is in existence an orphanage on Krochmalna Street, run by Dr. Janusz Korczak¹. And when I speak of Janusz Korczak, I

¹ Janusz Korczak (1879-1942), physician, writer, and educator. In 1912 he was appointed director the Jewish orphanage at Krochmalna Street in Warsaw, Poland. Israel Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1990), s.v. "Korczak, Janusz."

would gladly give half of my life for him, that kind of a man he was. Mother tried to get somebody to – made an application, because she never learned how to read and write, none of us could fill out any papers. Finally, application was made, and very intensive investigation took place, and I was accepted to this orphanage. However, my mother said I'm the youngest child and she would like to keep me around her as long as she can. So my brother Icek, which he calls himself Joseph now, if possible he would go in. So he was accepted to go in full-term, and I went to visit him, and I never wanted to go back. I was always crying when I had to go back home. So they give me permission to be – they call it “half internat,” internat² was orphanage, that mean that I could spend the whole day, have my meals, go to school, but I have to go home to go to sleep. Again, every night I cried when I had to go home. And life was so wonderful; they served five meals a day, and Dr. Korczak and all the supervisors and all the counselors made sure that every child eats properly this. They actually stood over your head and made sure you had your meal, that you feel good, and went to school for – you see? And we were so respected at school, anybody that was from Korczak's home. Every month we went to a summer camp, which actually my brother was entitled to go for two months, but he gave one month to me. He went one month, and I went one month. Children had to be seven years old in the first grade, and they were kept until they were fourteen. When they reach fourteen they received two suits, two pair of shoes, a room and a job. Out, somebody else took place. When my brother finished his terms, I was accepted and I went in for the last two years, I think. And my life was just, just, just wonderful there. And then in 1938, '39 or '40, unfortunately the war broke out and everything became like turmoil, with the bombardments of small towns and some children started to come into our orphanage. And Dr. Korczak just could not refuse anybody. Before there were only 107 children. There were 51 boys and 66 girls³.

01:07:00

Q: I'm going to stop the you there a minute, because I want to ask you some questions about the orphanage.

A: Sure.

Q: But let's just go back a little bit before that. You had mentioned that there were children beating you up when you were a young boy?

A: Yes.

Q: Was this because you were Jewish?

A: Only because I was Jewish. Especially when religious classes took place. Jewish children

² Boarding school (Polish).

³ Later in the interviewee states that there were 56 girls in the orphanage. The latter number would appear to be correct, since 66 and 51 do not add up to 107.

had to step out into the hallway for that hour. And when the religion class was over, all the boys just walked up and say "You killed Jesus," and start to beat up on us. So since my mother had a candy store, I used to manage, for that day, to have some candies in pocket and bribe them, or a few pennies. But that was not the case always, so I always found an excuse to my mother when there was a religious class, I said I don't feel good, or there was a day off when the teacher is sick. I just didn't want to go to school because I couldn't bear being beaten up all the time.

Q: Now this was way before?

A: Way before the war; way before the war. Till I got into Dr. Korczak's home.

Q: Now, also were – I mean you lived in an area where there were a lot of gentiles.

A: Um-hum.

Q: Did you have any good friends or nice neighbors who were not Jewish?

A: We had neighbors, but I could not have any Polish friends, they were just – I think it was the finger is always pointed the at me, "Zyd. Don't play him with him he is a zyd."

Q: And did this change or get worse once the war began?

01:08:45

A: Yes, it got worse when the war began. When the war began, for instance when the German walked into Warsaw they came in with trucks and handed out loaves of bread. So right away a line; and wherever it was a line, I stood in the line no matter what the reason was, because I knew I was going to get something. And if the Polish kids they pointed to me and said in German, "This man is a zyd." So I had to run before I got beaten up.

Q: Do you remember the day the war broke out? Do you remember what was happening?

A: The war broke out when we came back from the summer camp⁴. And I remember one of our neighbors came running to my mother and there was headline in the newspaper. "War started." And I say it in Polish; it said "wojna rozpoczeta," in Polish.

Q: When –

A: A tenant that was friendly with my mother, she lived on the same floor where we lived,

⁴ September 1, 1939, war is declared when German troops cross over Polish frontier. Charles Messenger, *The Chronological Atlas of World War Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 22.

and she was friendly with my mother because my mother was the first one that got – how you call it when you, you put the laundry through to –

Q: To wring it?

A: To wring it. A salesman came and sold to my mother to pay one zloty a week to him. So this lady borrowed always from my mother.

Q: And this was a non-Jewish?

A: She was non-Jewish, and she was friendly because she could, you know, she was friendly with my mother.

Q: So you found out that the war broke out?

A: Yes.

Q: And what next signs did you see?

A: The reaction was exciting because we didn't know about war. And matter of fact, the feeling of war existed prior to start of the war, like being in the camp⁵; we had a big place where we played in sand, building airplanes, building boats, building different things. That summer we told everybody not to play, we are going to play war, like we made Polish Army and German Army. Me and other boy, we had a Polish army, and there was another boy by the name Mojzesz was the German Army. I was called Froim in the orphanage, I was also called Maly⁶ Icek. Icek is my brother, I'm the small Icek. So there was the army of Moses and the Army of Ariel and Froim – Ariel was the second general. And we prepared bunkers and all these things. And for bullets we would save chestnuts, and when the war broke out, we start throwing chestnuts. When we got hit three times, had to be carried out, so that was the feeling that naturally Poland lost, and Germany won. So then after the war – when the war started, naturally our building was one of the first to get burned down because they had announced that Solna number eight, where we have a room, is a point of refreshments for soldiers. A little bit later a bomb came down; an airplane was just cruising about, and they couldn't stop the fire or anything, and the building went down.

Q: Where were you?

01:12:20

A: We were in the apartment, and we ran out when the fire started. We ran out and just

⁵ children's summer camp sponsored by Korczak's orphanage.

⁶ Small (Polish).

crying, you know. We didn't have time to take any bedding or anything because it was full already. And then we marched off to one of my sister, which was married by then, she lived near the airport. We walked over there. And then couple days later, the they marched in the soldiers marched in.

Q: Do you remember what you were thinking, or were you terrified?

A: Not terrified; kind of excited. Because the notion was that Jewish people and the German were getting along because, basically more or less understood the language, could communicate more or less. So we believed it wouldn't be too bad.

Q: So you didn't have much information in terms of what was happening in Germany?

A: Not at all, not at all. Not interested, only to satisfy them, our hunger, because when the war broke out, right away everything was – all the stores were closed. There was no food available. And even in the orphanage, you know, it became rations like, you know. Food was available; Dr. Korczak saw to it that we get food, but – it appeared on the blackboard: Two slices of bread, or three slices of bread; as much as we can. And I will never forget, Dr. Korczak used to stand over us in good times. I remember good times and I remember bad times. In the good times he used to go behind the children and make sure they eat. And as a joke, if somebody was holding a piece of bread, he used to pull it out, grab it and put it in his mouth. Now I also remember when it appeared two slices each, also for Dr. Korczak two slices, but he never ate his two slices, he gave to another child. Every day he gave his bread to somebody else. And we stupid children, we took it. We never realize that the man grows thinner and thinner and thinner; that kind of man he was.

Q: So you hadn't heard anything about Kristallnacht or –

A: No.

Q: And the Polish community, were they generally supportive of what the – of the Germans?

A: Oh, yes, they cooperated, and gave them all the information that they want.

Q: Okay. Back to the orphanage.

A: Yes.

Q: You went in there, you think probably around 1937, '38?

A: '38 and '39, that's for sure.

Q: Tell me a little bit more details about your life in the orphanage. How it was organized? About some of the staff?

A: Well.

Q: If you want I can ask you a specific question.

01:15:41

A: Well, it was Dr. Korczak and there was Stefa Wilczynska⁷, she was the head, and there was Mr. Aleksander Lewin – whom I met in Poland in 1988 – and there was Misza Wroblewski who were the staff. Strictly, I mean staff for the good of the child. Just see the child. We got in the morning when the alarm clock rang everybody had to go up, get up. If somebody overslept, they had to go to bed seven o'clock the next day. The beds had to be made. Everybody had to do their chores. Everybody had an assignment. You see, like my assignment was to wipe the tables, prepare the tables. And then we had a chance to change our assignments every second or third month. We had our court. We had a court run by children. It was run by children. If a child did something wrong to another child, you could sue him. And the judges were children. Even Dr. Korczak got sued by one child. He did something he put, I think he put a boy into a bottle of water, just as joke, and the boy didn't like it and he put him to court. And he received paragraph 100. Paragraph 100, it wasn't so terrible, but he didn't act properly. Since then he have the name setka – hundred. Setka means a hundred in Polish, so his name was setka. If any of Dr. Korczak's is still alive, we ask how they call Dr. Korczak it was setka.

Q: What did that mean, paragraph 100?

A: Just paragraph 100 means, translated, did not do right. Paragraph 300 was receive for dishonesty.

Q: What were the – what was a typical punishment for one of these?

A: Well, if you accumulated certain paragraph you were deprived of something. Like a bicycle was given; and every child could ride that one bicycle at a certain time. But if during the year you accumulated 2,000, no bicycle. Okay. There were certain privileges taken away for getting too many paragraphs.

Q: How did you feel about this whole system?

A: Nice. It's involved. It's like a – it's like you were programmed to be good, you wanted to be good, you wanted not to have – see like one boy went – everybody had a little drawer in a big, big cupboard and you kept your things, you know, whether it's a comic book or

⁷ Stephania Wilczynska (1886-1942), head teacher and co-director of Korczak's orphanage.

some cards or chestnuts, we used to play a lot of chestnuts. And that one boy open up my drawer and steal some chestnuts. And, actually, I sue him and he received a paragraph 300 that was for dishonesty. Now one boy was an invalid. I remember very well his name was Alter (ph). He stole a pair of swimming trunks from somebody. He received paragraph 2,000. You know what that meant? He had to leave the home, dismissed. His mother in no way could afford that boy, but it was given by the court, by the judges and that nothing could be done. He was thrown out of the orphanage. So we knew, we children knew you can't mess around, you have to obey. We were put in four categories, category one, two, three and four. Category number one was neat, clean. When we used to go Saturday to visit our parents, one parent our relatives, whoever was there. We received little bag of cookies, and Mrs. Wilczynska stood up front make sure the shoes were shined, hands clean, you could go. Seven o'clock you had to be home, you didn't come home by seven o'clock you didn't go next Saturday. Now category one and two, if somebody – everything was donation food, rich people. People donated material. If a lot of material came in, category one or two received a new coat or a new suit. Category three and four already, you know, got something was a little bit used. So it gives us always the inspiration, you know, your bed should be made nice, you know, behave nice, clean.

Q: Did the discipline seem strict or it seemed fair?

01:20:30

A: Not strict, not strict at all. I mean the punishment was normal, but you could live with it. You knew, don't do it unless you have a reason. Like, when we were in the summer camp, you were allowed twice a month two visitors. Now I remember one time when my brother was there, it was in the first month of the summer, I went, my mother and my sister. So I figured my mothers, my sister were legally to visit my brother, and I, because I was part of it going to half time, I had the right to come. But it wasn't so. One girl was walking around, she saw three people and she wrote it down. Nothing. When my turn was there, I was not allowed any visitors. See, so you just know. The rules were made, you obey them. And everything went fine.

Q: Everybody get along well?

A: Very much so, very much. There were no fights, everybody had a big brother when you step in. You had a big brother, like he took care of you and says if anybody is going to say something wrong to you or do something that you don't like, come and tell me, he told us. As a matter of fact, I had one big brother, his name was Sammy Gogol. This boy was gifted playing the harmonica. Never took a lesson in his life, but he could play anything you want, any opera, anything he could play. So he was my big brother. I enjoyed him very much. When I was – I mean, we lost contact with each other, you know. I didn't go to the orphanage. I walked in, I went out, I went in, I came back, nobody saw me, nobody asked me. I was torn apart. I didn't know whether to stay there

or to go to my mother. Since I was a hustler, I used to know how to jump out of the ghettos. I was begging for food. So I brought – sometimes I brought something for the orphanage, and I wanted to see that my mother was – had something to eat.

Q: This was while you were –

A: While I was in the orphanage, but I was kind of – I took it upon myself, I saw that there is no more discipline, there is no more control, because instead of 107 children, there were at that time over 200.

Q: How come there was so many?

A: Because Dr. Korczak could not refuse anybody, you see.

Q: This was the after the occupation?

A: Yeah. The gentleman I gave you the name before, David Kohl, his parents were shot, were killed. And somebody brought him there. How could he refuse him.

Q: This was after Germany had occupied –

A: If after the occupation, this is – I am speaking this was during the ghetto, all right.⁸

Q: So you wouldn't living in the orphanage any more?

01:23:30

A: Not on fully basis. When I felt like staying over, I stayed over. If not, nobody knew whether I'm coming or going. But if I brought a little bag with flour or a sack of potatoes or some coal, it was accepted. But they didn't ask me where were you yesterday, because, you know, a lot of people, even a lot of the counselors went to Russia, escaped. Only Dr. Korczak was there to the very end. So then naturally one morning I – one night I was out, I used to jump out of the night always where I couldn't be seen. And I came one morning and the house was empty. They were all taken, the children were taken.

Q: At the orphanage?

A: At the orphanage.

Q: I want to get about that, but let me just ask you a few more questions about the good days at the orphanage.

⁸ The Warsaw ghetto was established on October 2, 1940. Encyclopaedia Judaica Research Foundation, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica, corrected ed.), s.v. "Warsaw."

A: Yes.

Q: Now, when you all had these jobs, did the girls have different jobs than the boys?

A: No, no, no, they were, they were, they were jobs just to keep the house in order. Like peeling potatoes, helping with the dishes, putting up the cutlery on the tables, taking off, cut the bread, clean the windows. Sweep the bedrooms or sweep the dining room. So it was no difference. Some girls work in the sewing room, you know, putting on buttons and mending socks.

01:25:70

Q: They were basically treated the same?

A: Same. Yes, same.

Q: And did you – what were the people on the staff, the counselors and all of that like? Was there usually a close relationship with them?

A: Not close, they were like – you know, how shall I say it, like teachers; supervising homework, and if somebody was not good enough, they helped out; they were like summer school. Like if you didn't have very good marks, they didn't force, but they suggested to take classes at the summer school. And they were helping you out, you know, just so you get better.

Q: And was this sort of divided men and women?

A: It was men and women equally. There was a teacher that used to teach us how to sing, there was a piano, whoever wanted to learn piano. I mean... Q. And you went to school outside of it?

A: School was outside, yes. But if there was a parent meeting, one of the counselors from the orphanage went because they wanted to have the full picture of the child, of the behavior, if there was any problem between the teacher and the counselor of the orphanage.

Q: But there wasn't a certain rule, by some of the women to be surrogate mothers to you, or –

A: No, no, no, no, no. We used to – we used to address them as “pani⁹” or “pan¹⁰” – means

⁹ Miss/Misses (Polish).

¹⁰ Mister (Polish).

Mr. or Mrs.

Q: I know that they also brought some cultural activities?

A: Oh, yes, it was cultural activities, a lot of cultural activities.

Q: What do you remember specifically?

01:28:50

A: Playing theater, I took part, as a matter of fact, in one – I don't remember, I think Sleeping Beauty, I think Sleeping Beauty. That was my part just to say a word that when the boy slept and said, “oh, what a wonderful dream I had,” something like that. And my part was, “Oh, let's wake him up very fast, because he is going to sleep he is going to get cross, and he won't be able to go on the outing – you know – on the trip.”

Q: Tell me a little bit about Dr. Korczak?

A: Well, it was Dr. Korczak how should I describe him? Was he superman, he was, a king, he was. Just a good, good old grandpa with a face of an angel, with his hands, they were little, like pillows so soft to touch, and so lovable. When he came, he just, he just felt like get inside of him.

Q: How did he do all this?

A: He had a habit of – if a child had a loose tooth, you know, he used to put his hands and somehow, without any pain, got the tooth out and give 50 cents to the child. And he collected all these teeth, and from the teeth of the children he build a little castle. How he did that all the time, is not to comprehend how he found time, but he had time for every child. Somehow he had time for every child. And he loved every child. No matter how, if a child came in from outside, if a desperate mother brought in a child that he was or was not accepted, the child could have been sick, full of pimples or whatever, Dr. Korczak took him in and kiss him right away. Whether he could accept him or could not, because, as I said, before the war was strict, 51 boys, 56 girls. One went out, another one could come in. But there was an application, a list very long.

Q: Now, he was out trying to get money and supplies all the time, but he was – also you felt he was around a lot too?

A: He was around, he was around a lot. Very, very, very much so. And all the supplies, all the donations were given by rich people before the war. And we produced for them nice place and concert. Like I say, somebody go play the harmonica, and there was another boy Jonas, number nine, he was a terrific violinist player, terrific. You know, we gave concert to this big – how you say digni...dignitary.

Q: Dignitary?

A: Dignitaries, yes. And naturally they saw, they could see where there money is going. To 107 children very well behaved, you know, nice clean dressed. So they knew in that the money is going for a good purpose. And suddenly, during the ghetto, when there was not much available, he just went and begged you know, to the Joint¹¹. There was this man, the head of the Warsaw ghetto, Czerniaków¹², I think. And Dr. Korczak used to manage to get always a couple sacks of potatoes, more than anybody, any other organization. We had our own horse and wagon. He had that capacity, the tongue, you know. And he was offered many time by the Polish underground to escape. He would not leave us. He would not.

01:31:00

Q: You said earlier that once you went to school, after you were part of the orphanage, you had a new respect?

A: Very new respect. Because they teaches us, the new student, the child of Dr. Janusz Korczak. Like there was – children got homework, okay? And the children had homework, so like she says, “For the next day or so you had to memorize page number so and so.” So certain children were reading, and they say, “Next, the student Baum, the child of Dr. Korczak.” I know everybody knew, so I read it, you know, and then was a different story. I don't know why, how. They knew that Korczak was like god. Because first of all, it was only Jewish person who had the program on Polish radio. Polish radio started, “Doctor, oh doctor.” Everything was children. He was – nothing was writing children’s’ books. So, Polish children knew him. Also he took care of Polish, he participated in other orphanages that had only Polish children, non-Jewish. He was everywhere, and we, we gratefully thankful we had plenty of him also.

Q: So, when you were saying you got more respect, this was respect from non-Jewish?

A: From non-Jewish. The beatings stopped, the beatings stopped. And then eventually I went to a school where it was more Jewish than non-Jewish, it was in the – more in the Jewish area. So, it was okay.

Q: But it was mixed?

A: It was mixed, yes, it was mixed. The teacher was Polish, but nice.

01:32:55

¹¹ American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

¹² Adam Czerniaków (1880-1942), head of Warsaw Judenrat (Jewish Council).

- Q: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about the war now. When were you sent to the ghetto?
- A: When everybody else went the ghetto. When the ghetto started, we lived down in the – like I said, the shed of the coals. The owner, apparently he saw what's going on, he left the whole thing and give us his trailer apartment, it was like a trailer apartment. We lived there for a while. And when the ghetto started, we had to find somebody to exchange apartments. Like people that the area was designated for ghetto, and they were not Jewish, they had to find apartment outside the ghetto. So we gave up our apartment, which was quite nice, in exchange for a small room like this, with an attic. And we crammed in, all of us, all six children. And one of my sister walked off to Russia. She went to Russia in 1941, just prior to the ghetto. She got married and went to Russia. To this day, I never heard from her. We had one postcard and that's it. We are still looking for her.
- Q: So you were out of – you were officially old enough to be out of the orphanage at this point?
- A: Ah –
- Q: When the ghetto was formed?
- A: If there would be no war I would still have a year or two. But I was – I was such a hustler, because like even before the war, when daddy was dead already and there was no food, and mama couldn't support, I was able to go to work at the plant; sit a presser all day, and by the end of the day, we receive one – one you received one zloty, and one zloty brought one bread and a smoked fish. And when I brought it home there was seven o'clock, my oldest brother jumped to the ceiling, because it was breakfast. And I was about maybe nine, ten years old. And see my brother Joe was in the orphanage, and the rest of the family was hungry. So instead of spending the day in the orphanage where I could get my good meals, I went to work so I could get some cash to buy a bread and smoked fish and bring home.
- Q: So you left the orphanage early, or you were in and out?
- A: In and out, I didn't leave it, you see, because I was torn apart. My mother and brother and sister were hungry, and I could get five meals there, so certain days I just didn't go.
- Q: So –
- A: Try to feed the family a little bit.
- Q: And you were the youngest?

A: The youngest, yes. The youngest and the hustler, always the hustler.

Q: So in 1940 when the ghetto was formed—?

A: Yes.

Q: You all moved in, and at that point you're back with your family.

A: Yes.

Q: Your mom was – you're not in the —?

A: Yes.

Q: You weren't –

A: Yes, I was in the orphanage, I was in and out of Chlodna and Sienna¹³, but not officially full-term, because then there was no more – I mean there was no more such a control, and no more that they knew everybody is here. If you came, you came, you were welcome. You were never sent away.

Q: So it became a little more chaotic?

A: Right chaotic and sickness.

Q: Do you remember the move, when the orphanage had to move into the ghetto; do you remember that?

A: Yes, yes. We had the, we had the horse and the wagon, and there was Mr. John Zielinski, and we moved little by little, you know, and the kids helped as much as they could. And we moved to a school, but from the school we moved somewhere else, I just don't remember the street. We moved several times.

Q: Did you – was that was that an upsetting –

A: Very upsetting, because, sure, because the first orphanage home was a beautiful building, you know, and every child has his own beautiful bed, and every child has his own place in a big cupboard, and every child had his seat at a table in dining room, and, I mean, it was home. It was home. And over there we were we just cramped together; it was – it wasn't nice. But Dr. Korczak gave us aspiration and hope. You know, we just looked whatever he does, whatever he says.

¹³ Chlodna and Sienna were streets within the confines of the Warsaw ghetto. Chlodna 33 was the location of Korczak's orphanage after it was forced to relocate from the Krochmalna building. Janusz Korczak, *The Warsaw Ghetto Memoirs of Janusz Korczak* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1978), 64.

Q: For – how long was Dr. Korczak able to really maintain sort of the organization of the of the orphanage? Did everybody still have their responsibilities in the ghetto? Was he still able to bring you food?

A: Until the end. He was able to bring some, you know, he was able to until the end. His struggle was like survival, but not for him, but for the children. He virtually got out and begged. He begged for my children he begged, you know.

Q: Did you ever see him do this?

A: Oh, yes; his life deteriorating, you know. He just would not walk away. You know, he stood in front of that door with that Joint representative, he says, “Doctor, I cannot help you, I cannot do it.” But, he says, “But my children.” And he used to wear the Polish uniform. He refused to wear the Star of David.

Q: I see. Why is that?

01:38:30

A: Because he served in the Polish Army.¹⁴ He was an officer. He refused. He was arrested once for not wearing it, but still refused to wear it. “But my children, but my children.” And he had a lot of support from non-Jewish organizations also. So we always had a little bit more than the people outside of the orphanage. But naturally not enough, because when you were hungry, you were hungry no matter how much you get. But this poor man, he was growing thinner and thinner and thinner, and he just ate very little.

Q: Did you – at that time were you too young to think, “I wonder why he is getting so thin?”

A: Who paid attention? You were so hungry and so eager we became like non-human any more. When you're hungry, it's just terrible. Now I think of it, why did I take that slice of bread that he gave me, I cannot forgive myself. I mean the guilt, you know....

Q: Where were you when the orphanage was evacuated?

01:40:00

A: When the orphanage was evacuated¹⁵, I remember I was there the day before, and then I went over and help my mother bring over the bread, and at night I spent, either I spent home, or I was out of the ghetto, because I managed, I figured out it's better at night to

¹⁴ Korczak enlisted in the Polish Army in 1919 and served as a military doctor. Falkowska, Maria, *A Chronology of the Life, Activities and Works of Janusz Korczak* (New York: Kosciuszko Foundation, 1980), 25.

¹⁵ On August 6, 1942, Korczak, the orphanage staff, and some 200 children were sent to Treblinka concentration camp in Poland. *A Chronology of the Life, Activities and Works of Janusz Korczak*, 49-50.

come out of the ghetto and be on the Aryan side, and wait until it gets dark again to come back, or earlier dawn. So I was out, and then I managed to get some food. I think there was some grains or whatever. I was begging. And I ran so happily, you know, to the orphanage. And while going there, a woman come and, "Oh God they took the children, my God they took the children, my God they took the children," you know. She was crying, and I said, I – where, so pointed – she pointed to the Umschlagplatz. The Umschlagplatz means the station where the trains came. And I ran there, I wanted to go there to him, you know. The German "Get lost, you are not Jewish, get lost." And I saw that he was, by the end he was kind of disputing with a soldier, I found out later that they had papers for him and a passport for him to go to freedom, and he wouldn't go.¹⁶ You know, he went to the train and went straight to Treblinka, and I was left alone, and now I figure they took away my last hope from me, what am I going to do without him? How am I going to survive without him? You know. So I went back to mother. I didn't know where to go, I just didn't know. So I went back to mother, and from there we struggled, one by one to go out of the ghetto and go to Plonsk, where my mother had a sister.

Q: Okay, let me.... Are you okay?

A: Sure.

Q: Do you want to take a second?

A: I'm all right.

Q: Can you tell me, what were some of the things that you saw and experienced? What was life like, not just for you, but for your family in general?

A: Well, hunger, starvation, sickness. I mean...

Q: You were aware of this as a child?

A: Yes. I saw it on a daily basis. I virtually walked over corpse, there were corpses lying around every day, everywhere.

Q: What did you think when you saw this?

A: Callous. How to, how to find an extra piece of bread, maybe there is a broken down store where you could find something that you could take, trade or sell or whatever, because there was a market, you know, there was like a here you call it a flea market, that you had something you could go sell in exchange, like my sister had a nice red coat with an fur collar made of Alaskan seal, so she didn't see, my oldest brother stole it from her, went to

¹⁶ Reputedly, Korczak had been provided with papers for his release by CENTOS (Federation of Associations for the Care of Orphans in Poland). Betty Jean Lifton, *The King of Children: A Biography of Janusz Korczak* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 344.

the market, sold it, and bought a bag of flour, brings home a bag of flour, very excited. And my mom cooks it, and it wasn't flour, it was plaster. These things were going on.

Q: As a kid, you were walking over a dead body, what – do you remember what you were thinking?

A: Found it natural, I said, oh just another poor soul, another poor soul. Just make sure I'm not going to be in that position.

Q: And what was your mother doing?

A: Nothing, but just sitting there and waiting and completely frustrated, not knowing how to prepare, how to find some frozen potatoes or some potato pills, or something to feed these kids day by day. As a last resort, I remember one day she didn't have anything to sell any more, so she had golden crowns, pulled out the golden crowns. She went to a dentist and had them taken off for a few zlotys just so we could survive a couple days or so; she sold the golden caps.

Q: Was there any school?

A: No school.

Q: Or studies?

A: No. There might have been, but who had patience for that. It was just a daily way how to survive, how to get, how to get something to eat.

Q: Were you aware of any activities, like cultural activities or anything?

A: Not interested. I was not interested at all. I didn't want to go to school, I didn't want to participate in anything, only hustle. My best activities was jumping over the gate, run to the Polish market, buy a few loaves of bread, throw over. That gave me pride that I could do it.

Q: How did you learn how to do that?

A: They say in Jewish, tzuris¹⁷ teaches you how to survive, how to survive.

Q: Weren't you afraid?

A: I was not, no. First of all, once I got through that Polish policeman I was fine, because I spoke good Polish, you know. And the farmers did not recognize me. I didn't deal with

¹⁷ Troubles (Yiddish).

any young – with any gang, so they didn't recognize me. And once legitimately, I bought I paid them, because out of the ghetto you didn't need any rations, so you put down the money and they sold you, one loaf, two loaves. So I took about three or four and run in, if I threw them over several times, so by the end of the day was one bread profit.

Q: So tell me, how did you get to the Polish side? How did you do this? Did you have a system for getting out of the ghetto?

01:48:50

A: As I said, there was a fence. And there was spaces between the boards, so my mother used to put her hands like creating a step ladder and I stepped, stepped and jumped over, jumped over. Once I was on the other side, I was waiting for a car¹⁸, because the cars were going slow from the court or to the court. Once I was on the other side, I was in the middle of the street. And that was not the ghetto, that was the part that people were going to the courthouse.

Q: You said you went through the board or you went over?

A: Over the boards. She made like a stepladder for me, so I went. And the boards wasn't very high, especially on that street it wasn't very high. Luckily there was no wire fence or no cement blocks, just board, and it had a space where my mother could get her hands in there. And I used to step on her hands one by one and jumped over.

Q: Between each of the boards, that's where she put her hand in a to make the ladder?

A: Between the boards.

Q: Between them, right?

A: Between the boards.

Q: And how come the guards didn't see you?

A: Because they were quite – maybe 200 feet, on the corner of the street. And I – when I went out, I went in the middle of the block. And on the corner there was the police guard, just seeing that the cars going there.

Q: Now, were there other kids doing this?

A: Some of them did it, yes, quite a few did it. Some policemen looked away, and some were very nasty and tried to catch us, and we run fast. Sometimes they could catch us,

¹⁸ Streetcar.

sometimes they didn't. Once he got me. It was wintertime all the snow, and I couldn't run so fast. I fell down and he started hitting me with a club and took all the breads away from me.

Q: So you threw the bread over the fence?

A: Yes.

Q: And your mother was waiting for you on the other side?

A: She caught them and she could sell them immediately to the people that could afford. And I was waiting there for ten, fifteen minutes, and she pass me the money and I went on another trip.

Q: What was it like on the other side?

A: A new world. Restaurants, food available, everything. I was afraid to go there, first, first of all, I couldn't afford it. I was afraid to go to a restaurant because they could tell on me, because the way I was dressed, you know, in rags.

01:49:25

Q: What were the Polish kids on that side doing?

A: There were no kids, because it was like commercial street, and mostly cars going into the court. So there were no houses. The only houses that were there in the ghetto on both sides.

Q: What is your memory of the organization of the ghetto? The Jewish police, the Jewish Councils?

A: I had nothing to do with the Councils, and the police, they were just standing at the post where the gates were to come in or out.

Q: But, in general, were the Jewish police nicer to the than the German police or?

A: We had no contact with the German police, because first you had to – if you had the papers to go out of the ghetto, you had to present them to the Jewish police. The Jewish police presented them to the German police, and you could go. It was like a border.

Q: But you were afraid of the Jewish police as well?

A: Yeah, sure. Yes, of course. It was authority.

01:50:35

Q: And it was just authority, or was there something special about these councils and the police?

A: They had no guns and there was nothing special; there was authorities, and some of them played out the role the way they would be big heroes. If they didn't like something about you, they saw that you just coming in from the other side and you were successful to come through the German post, they took care, you know, if they wanted to let you through, if they didn't want to, they could arrest you or beat you up.

Q: And they did that?

A: They did that many times, yes, just to show authority.

Q: You saw that?

A: Oh yeah, just to show authority.

Q: What other functions did the Jewish Council and the Jewish police serve?

A: I didn't see any council, but the Jewish police, I mean, this is the organized transport as I said, and groups of young boys to go to work that required to do some work for whatever the Germans wanted us to do. Like wintertime was most of all cleaning, snow shoveling for the whole day.

Q: Did you or any of your brothers or sisters do this?

A: Me and my brothers we did it, yes, we had to do it. Not in Warsaw, but outside, everybody got a – you know, off the road there is that – what you call it, trench; it was full of snow, so we had to clean it out so the water would go in. So everybody that like five hundred feet, clean it out, and you could go home.

Q: Was this outside the ghetto or inside?

A: Outside the ghetto, on the main highway.

Q: So they would walk you outside?

A: They walk us outside, and we used to do our work.

Q: Okay. So what happened next? You mentioned that you went to Plonsk; how?

A: Yes but before I weren't were went to Plonsk. I told you that the orphanage was isolated.

Q: Yes.

A: So first, as I said my oldest brother went, and the other brother went, and then my mother went, and she was caught, she was brought back to Warsaw to the quarantine, and then again everybody started out. We had several cousins everyone of the children, one cousin took care, you know, and it was fine, I mean there was a bite to eat.

Q: This was in Plonsk

A: Plonsk.

Q: How did you get there?

01:53:17

A: Again, out of the ghetto, took a street car until the end of town and walk hundred kilometers. I mean it was a night and a day walk. Sometimes a horse and wagon go by, you used to jump it on it for a ride, like hitch hike.

Q: How much of you went at this time?

A: By the end we were all over there, all.

Q: Right. But how many went in this little convoy of a hundred miles together?

A: No one together, everybody separate, one by one.

Q: So you didn't go with your mother?

A: No, no, no, no.

Q: And what year do you think this was?

A: '41.

Q: Okay.

A: '41 because we were, we were there – I remember – the part of the summer, before '42. Now, while in –

Q: Let me just ask you a question here, because I'm a little confused. I thought I had read that Korczak and the ghetto was evacuated in '42?

A: In '42, right, August '42. Yeah, you're right.

Q: So does that mean that you were still, that maybe you went a little later?

A: Could be, yes.

Q: So, to Plonsk a little later?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Or did you go to Plonsk and come back?

A: No, no, no, I didn't go back. It was right after they took the children we went to Plonsk. The dates, you know. So we went to Plonsk and then the ghetto was created in Plonsk, and then it became already food not so much available, because a lot of people came, a lot of people came from all over other countries.

Q: And why did they go to Plonsk?

A: Because everybody had a sister or an uncle and it belonged to the – they call it – I don't know. There were a lot of Germans there in the area. And it belonged to – they call it the Third Reich.¹⁹ They call it a part of the Third Reich, and surrounded by farm lands, I mean rich. There was food. But so many people came there the food got less. So I try to find a way to make some money, so I used to buy in the ghetto cigarette paper, and went out of the ghetto and sold it to the farmers to make some money. And then I sold my two brothers. I didn't actually sell them, but I recommended to the farmers, if you need somebody to work for you just for food, is going to go. So I found a place for this one, and found a place for my oldest one; and then I look for myself.

01:56:07

While I was going, then I was also going to beg for food. I mean I went in and I says “If I can get something please?” One day a woman asked me, “A big boy like you shouldn't beg for food, he should become” – summertime you sent out the cows on a field, but somebody has to watch them that they don't go and eat the corn and the wheat, they should eat the grass – “A shepherd.” So I said, “Would you hire a Jewish boy?” She says, “My God, I would never believe your Jewish. But if your not gonna tell anybody, I won't tell anybody.” So, I make a deal with her, and I said, “I do it. By the end of the season you give me five...” it was by the meter then; I don't know, five hundred pounds of potato and 80 deutschemark, and she set says, “You got it.” I went there, her son didn't know I'm Jewish, her daughter-in-law didn't know I'm Jewish, and there were a few boys

¹⁹ In 1939, Plonsk was annexed by the Germans along with the portion of Poland northwest of Warsaw. Wladyslaw Czaplinski and Tadeusz Ladogorski, *The Historical Atlas of Poland* (Warsaw: Panstwowe Przedsiębiorstwo Wyd. Kartograficznych, 1986), 50.

– never knew I'm Jewish, and I stood there the whole season, the whole summer. By the end of the term, they had to give me their potatoes. And the I took the horse and the wagon. And at that time the Germans brought in together potatoes and all that, and put them in basements, you know, down, to bury them; I don't know for what. So every for farmer had to donate so much. So I drove in with the horse and wagon myself. And they told me here, here, you have to put it here. And I says yeah, yeah, yeah, and I went straight to the house where my mother and my cousin was. We unloaded it, but we never had time to consume it. You know. And then –

Q: Was this ghetto very organized?

A: It was quite organized. But then, you had to be a residence, a resident, of that town. My oldest brother, who didn't survive, he used to go out with the daughter of the president of the ghetto. And they gave him an ID card that he is from here. One night they say everybody out in the field, all Jewish people out, out in the field; and they started to verify. Whoever had a resident card, the ID card could go home; whoever didn't have, about hundred brown uniform Germans²⁰ this way, one hundred this way, and everybody had their whip in the hand.

Q: I have to stop you. We're going to pick up. They need to change tapes.

A: Okay.

²⁰ Nazi stormtroopers (Sturmabteilung or "SA"). Amy Hackett, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Third Reich* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), s.v. "Sturmabteilung."

Tape # 2

02:01:70

Q: We're in Plonsk...

A: As I said, whoever had the ID card as a resident from the city were allowed to go home. I resumed normal activity. Whoever didn't have, there were about a hundred of the Germans in the brown uniforms on each side, making like a gate. Everybody had a whip, if they had to cut down a branch just to have something in their hands. And whoever didn't have it had to pass them. And everyone had to hit while running through. My two brothers and one sister were extremely lucky, they were the first one of the victims. So one German took them and walked them through that terrible gate. So the ones that get beaten should know to where to run. My oldest sister, unfortunately, wasn't so lucky she was beaten very badly, and then came my turn. They told me I had to go there, so I go there. So I was running like a snake, you know, nobody could hit me. I escaped everyone. By the very end one was waiting for me and hit me right across the face here and split my lip right open. When it was all over, they put us in trucks and put us in a field surrounded with barbed wire, and kept there I think for a day or so. No water to wash up or no food, no nothing, and then –

Q: What about your mother?

A: My mother was in Warsaw. My mother, she was then remained in Warsaw?

Q: But she went to Plonsk for a while?

A: She did not make it because she was arrested on the Aryan side. She went to prison and she went to Warsaw. And she waited the for a chance to come to get some money or some goods for that person that smuggled the people out of the ghetto. So, we were there, and then we were put on trucks, and we were driven to a place called Pomiechówek, which was a just a building, a big building, you know, with cement floor, and that's where we slept on the ground. No food, no water; waiting for a rain to come down with started to wash a little bit with the soap. Then the rain stopped. And eventually, after the third or fourth day, they brought in water in barrels of sour pickles. That water we drank, and then a little soup. And we were just kept there with, without saying anything to us or anything; we were just kept there. Guarded by Ukrainian soldiers which served the German Army. And I saw outside behind the gate, people from that town had relatives in that place, they used to come and brought a package. They called out the name and threw in a package, and the guards did not object. So I said to my sisters, you know what, why don't you go talk to them a little bit, flirt with them, distract them. They didn't know what I was about to do. When they went, I got down on my knees and dug a hole under the gate with my hands I dug a hole and crawled out, cleaned myself up, and stood up as if I were a visitor, you know. And –

02:05:00

Q: Were you scared?

A: No. And walked away, walked away; walked out on the highway with another boy. And I saw trucks of workers, I ask, "Where you going?" "Oh, we going to Plonsk." I jumped on the truck and went to Plonsk. By then I was not afraid, I went straight to the gate to the Jewish policemen. "I am so and so, I am David." David was my oldest brother, and the Jewish policeman was Moshe Niman (ph) who was friendly with my brother, you know. So I said, "I just escaped from Pomiechówek." I went in, and in a minute I was surrounded, "Who is the hero who is the hero? How could you escape from there? What's going on there?" So I told them the story, and I go to my cousin. And by that time, I see my mother was there. She came from Warsaw. While we were all there. She came, oh, when she saw me, you know. And the rest of them apparently remained in this Pomiechówek a few week until they evacuate them back to Warsaw.

Q: About how long was that?

A: I don't know, but it was quite a couple months I guess. They chased them on march back to Warsaw.

Q: Let me stop you a moment. When you got out of this Pomiechówek?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you feel any, anything about leaving the rest of your brothers and sisters in there?

A: If I feel any remorse, any guilt? Not really, no. It was – I felt that I'll be able to go there and get some food and bring to them. You see. I felt as a rescuer. You see like going to go to work. I figure I'll go, I'll get something and come back. Because being outside it didn't bother me, because I would appear as a resident of that town, it's legal there. And bringing a package was okay because they did not object.

Q: But, did you talk to people when they just thought you were Polish, and you told people you were just a Polish boy?

A: When I was begging?

02:07:30

Q: Yes.

A: Yeah, yeah, I did, "holy spirit, bless holy spirit," [gestures sign of the cross] whatever

you say, and “Can I ask for something?” They say “Why, why you begging you begging for something?” I say my, “Mother and father was killed in the war, you know, I am an orphan and I have nothing.” “What are you collecting?” I say, “Whatever you can, a little flour, a little barley, you know, some potatoes, a piece of bread.” So they gave me.

Q: You are how old now, about? Eighteen, 17?

A: No...

Q: You're still very young?

02:08:00

A: Then it was— we are talking now from '26 to '40?

Q: '42.

A: No, no. From '26, '26 to '30 was 14.

Q: Well, Korczak was '42, so that makes you 16?

A: Sixteen, I was in camp already.

Q: Okay, well Korczak —

A: Well, I was about 14, 15 then, before I went to Auschwitz. 15, but I was not developed because I'm hungry. So then my two brothers and two sisters, they were chased to Warsaw, and they told me they made a big fire so they couldn't go back. They were in Warsaw. Now, a postcard from, come from my two sisters to mother, “We are here. Icek is sick with typhus in a hospital, this one here. They have nothing to eat, they have no place to sleep. We are desperate, we are helpless, what are we going to do?” So, what is mother going to do? She takes off and walks to Warsaw to rescue the two girls and the two boys. By friends and so on, she found a little place where they can stay, they take him in. By that time, the girls came to Plonsk with that smuggler. The other brother, old, came, and he came. Then we were all in Plonsk already. And by that time, we were all in Plonsk, and during that time I sold my two brothers, you know, we spend like summer. And then the main evacuation started. Everybody, residents, non residents. Everybody transport, go to Auschwitz. So I think ours were the second transport that went to Auschwitz. My oldest brother remained because he was friendly with the president's daughter, unfortunately. If he would have come with us he might have been survived. So we went to Auschwitz, it was in the fall already. It was in the fall because I remember when we got dressed naked, the frost was sticking to my feet.

Q: You think this is '42ish?

A: I think it's '42ish, yeah.²¹

Q: Okay, tell me a little bit about the trip to Auschwitz.

A: The trip to Auschwitz on the train, on a train me, my mother, my two sisters and my two brothers. Took about two on or three days, I think. No food, no water. I mean, the food – I mean we took a little bit of food with us, whatever we could, you know, and I was dressed in four suits, because there was a tailor down there, we didn't know where we are going he says take, take maybe we can sell, and – wherever we going, because it was resettling. We knew we were going to be resettled somewhere else.

Q: What other things did you take with you?

A: Take whatever we could carry, you know, suitcases, clothing, and what food we had. And I think they gave us some bread for the road, but water was – everybody was dying for water. So what my mother had, she had – she still had a very thin wedding ring. She gave it to a soldier so he could scoop up a little cup with snow for me, you know, she didn't – she couldn't take care of the others, but I was the youngest so he scooped up a little snow for the wedding ring. That was the last thing. And then early dawn one day we arrived on the ramp in Birkenau²² and he said, “Everybody out,” and we see the boys in the striped suits.

Q: So you were on this train, you had really no idea where you were going or what was in store?

A: No, no idea no, resettling, that's all.

Q: Was it at all frightening, or you didn't know?

A: Didn't know, it wasn't even frightening.

Q: Okay.

02:12:20

A: Because we were promised we were going to a better place. We didn't know. So we arrived there, and naturally everybody out, you know. And the boys with the striped uniform say “Everybody out, go walk this way, walk this way.” Helping people and trying to carry the luggages, I mean we had to leave our luggage, we had to leave. And I

²¹ The German Army occupied Plonsk on September 5, 1939. A closed ghetto was established in May 1941. The Jewish community was liquidated throughout the month of November 1942, when 12,000 Jews from the Plonsk and the vicinity were sent to Auschwitz on four transports. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Plonsk.”

²² Birkenau (Auschwitz II), subcamp of Auschwitz concentration camp.

know plenty, pots of pans, especially pots of pans. People used to make double decks and they hid some money in the pots or double suitcases. And then here comes big Mr. Eichmann²³.

Q: How did you know that's who it was?

A: Later it I found out. I never knew, I never knew anybody, no.

Q: Had you heard any stories yet?

A: No, no way.

Q: You knew nothing?

A: No way. In Warsaw there was a rumor that they sending people to, they call it a fry pan, you mean they put people in the room and the floor turns over, and they get murder, so they call it a frying pan because a frying pan you flip over. 36 Never knew; nobody ever escape, never knew nothing.

Q: So when you arrive and see these people in uniforms and Germans, what's going through your mind?

02:13:37

A: We just didn't know who these people are, and then they speak Jewish²⁴, I said my God, people speak Jewish here, what is this? It's a paradise. People from Eretz Israel²⁵ maybe, you know, or something, because they spoke Jewish, "come out, come out," and all. Didn't give any indication whatsoever. Then it's ordered "women left, men right" or vice versa, separate men and women. Then the women and children were taken away, don't know where. Then comes men, you know, and I stay with my two brothers, try to make myself nice and tall and he says you know, pointing to two brothers on one side and two on the other side. I go, what do I know. And I stand for a while and I look and – first thinking, I see on the other side my two brothers are, about 45 boys, nice strong, and I'm between all people and children. And my brothers indicating to me like that, from far away. And I couldn't find a moment because the soldiers are were marching forth and back and watching, you know. And once the soldier passed me by and I snucked over to my brother, and he put me between him and the other one, they kept me there. And in a few minutes they told us to jog. And then we see Auschwitz "Arbeit Macht Frei"²⁶ into

²³ Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962), Nazi official who played central role in the organizing and execution of the "Final Solution." *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. "Eichmann."

²⁴ Yiddish.

²⁵ Land of Israel (Hebrew).

²⁶ Work Makes Free (German); infamous sign posted above the main entrance to Auschwitz concentration camp in

the camp, and I was the youngest of the camp. And the part where I was, at that time they did not need any woman at the working camp. So all the woman were destroyed immediately, gas chambers, my mother, my sisters, and then the people where I was put, the older men and the children.

Q: Now, did you know this, or did it take some time for you to find out about your mother and sisters?

A: Later, later I found out, because we were speaking with people that work – that work Sonderkommando²⁷. Sonderkommando means they were putting people in the oven. So some people had indirect contact and they said the transport from Plonsk came so, you know, women came to labor camp. So then we came to find out. So here we come into Auschwitz, and people, you know, they put us up in barracks, and the beds are made so nice and straight, and everybody is afraid that they would not be able to make the bed. That came existed from before, you know, and German criminals were then political and the beds was straw sacks, and everybody got two boards to make the edges so straight and the pillow and the blankets had a stripe, and it was like a one hundred beds and one stripe. So many of them were afraid because we are given orders and people start asking questions, and then I shot off my big mouth in Polish, “What's the matter with you, don't you understand what they talking to you.” And one guy heard me and he said, “Come over here little boy, where are you from?” I says, “I'm from Warsaw.” “Oh, I'm from Warsaw too.” It was a Polish guy who was the bookkeeper here.

02:17:02

And then right away, “Here's a piece of bread, here's a bowl of soup,” and right away I'm a whole macher²⁸ there, you know. And I share it with my bothers, you know, and then they tell us to take off our clothes, it was frosty, completely naked, and the frost was – our feet were glued. And sent into the shower, shave the heads – the shower, and come out the other way, and we got striped clothes and we got our bowl. “This is your property.” Then we went for the numbers. They put the numbers, I talked to my brothers and I say, “We going to show you one day in the United States, I didn't even know United States exist.” So my brother got “630,” I got “631,” and my older brother, he curious, walked away, and we never saw him again. They counted out 50 people and took him away to coal mines to another camp, never saw him again.

Q: What were you thinking in all this process?

02:18:00

Poland.

²⁷ Special commando (German); A commando of Jewish prisoners in the six extermination camp selected to work in the gas chambers and crematoria. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. “Sonderkommando.”

²⁸ Influential person, “big-wig” (Yiddish).

A: I was thinking what's going on, we came to a camp, we are going to be kept, we are going to work, and until America will happen, something will be over.

Q: You thought this was just a labor camp, it wasn't going to be so bad?

A: Yes, I thought it was just a labor camp, and right away they took care of me, I didn't have to suffer any hunger, nobody was beating me up, you know, and we didn't have to work even, it was only – Auschwitz was only a passing. We were there about three days. Then we were walked off to Buna²⁹, to another camp. We walk, and half the way, again we have to go into a place where they took our clothes and put it in the oven to disinfect it, to disinfect it, you know, and this was the dirty room and over there was the clean room. So, a part of the people walked from the – they went in the shower, and everything, they were waiting. And the people on this side wanted to know what's going on. So it was one of my cousins there, he says [draws forefinger across neck]. I said “no, nice,” and I show him a sign that they are not killing us, you know, just shower and disinfect so we are nice and clean. And we went to Buna. We went to Buna and we went to a quarantine again. That was a camp quarantine. And again, I was the youngest, so they made me clean the block. It was a blockältester³⁰, the head of the block, of the barrack. And he had a little room for himself with a bookkeeper, so he told me, “You going to be like my maid.” You know, every day I had to dust and clean and clean, and clean and dust, and help, like keep the spoon in the pot, you know. Cut the bread, make rations, and hand out the soup, hand out the potatoes, and try to put a little bit aside, and every night I give to my brothers a little bit more. So in quarantine you had to be like a certain time, and then you walked out to labor camp.

Q: How long was the quarantine?

A: I think a few weeks, about four weeks or so, you know.

Q: Do you know what happened to your cousin or?

02:20:35

A: I didn't see him any more. When the quarantine was finished, this brother Joe worked labor camp, and they asked me if I want to remain where I am or if I want to go to labor camp. I says sure I want to remain where I am, you know. So I found a piece of bread, some potatoes my brother used to come every night I used to give him something and others. And during that time a transport came, and my oldest brother, that remained in Plonsk, came also. When he came, so, I was begging him, “David, whatever you do, try not to drink the water here, because it's very contaminated.” But he was thirsty, from the way he was drinking, he wouldn't listen to me, and also an excellent tailor so he made the

²⁹ Buna-Monowitz (Auschwitz III), subcamp of Auschwitz.

³⁰ Block elder (German).

hat for the blockältester, but one of these people brought typhus with him, they took the whole transport and send them back, and my brother had to go back to Birkenau with them. And while he was marching he met his brother and he said they are taking him back to Birkenau, we are not going to see each other any more. They took him to Birkenau. A few days later they brought another transport, again typhus, and then they took everybody already even the people that were the supervisors and me too, to Birkenau, and right away I run look for my brother there and he was already taken to crematorium. He was gassed because he was sick. I didn't see him. And then Birkenau I remained.

Q: Your other brother, Icek?

A: Yes. He remained in Buna.

Q: He wasn't in the quarantine?

A: He was for the part that was required. Then he went to labor camp, but I had – they kept asking me, and asked me if I want to remain in the quarantine to do these little chores. I said “Of course, why not, I don't want to go to the hard labor. In here, what I do – I keep the place clean.”

Q: Let me ask you a question about Buna?

A: Yes.

02:22:40

Q: In some of the reading that I've done, it said that one of the factories in Buna was making rubber. Do you know anything about that? Your brother said they were more involved with fuel and kerosene, or something of that. I had read that there was a big synthetics rubber plant over there.

A: There was the I. G. Farben³¹, Farben, but rubber plant I don't know.

Q: You don't know about that?

A: I don't know.

Q: That was one of the I.G. Farben businesses?

A: Could be, could be, could be.

³¹ German limited company that was a conglomerate of eight leading German chemical manufacturers. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. “I. G. Farben.”

Q: Okay, please continue.

A: So then I remained in Birkenau, and doing all kinds of jobs. And again I met a landsman³², you know, and little by little, if you remain in one camp for long period of time, you get into a group, and you get an outlet a little bit to organize and to find a better place of work only where food was available. Like once there was a Dachdeck-Kommando (ph), which means a roof Kommando³³, and you had a chance to put a roof on the kitchen, work near the kitchen, so a piece of bread, little potatoes, or gone to the women's camp where you work in the women's camp, you know, and then there were girls, the hired girls, that had the little position like, "Here boy, here is piece of bread," like playing little, little flirtation. There was nothing you could do, because God forbid you get caught talking to a woman, was bad for both them they were not allowed to talk us. And then finally I got a job to work with what they called Kanada. That was the cleanup Kommando. In other words, whatever the people brought on the transport we had to assort. Shoes separate, shirt separate, pants separate, and big, big wooden box where you had to put valuables in. So naturally if you found a hundred dollar bill or a gold coin, took it put in it in the condom, stuck it up, brought it into the camp, and traded for a bread for, you know, some people had connection with Polish civilian people that they brought the kielbasa, salami, bread, a bottle of vodka, and that's how we survived all those months.

Q: How many months were you with the Kanada group?

A: A few months, not many months, not many months.

Q: Was it weird to be sorting out all these personal belongings?

02:25:35

A: You get, you get accustom to it. You get accustom. It's just the part of it. You know, no emotional feelings. Now, now any little thing I cry like a baby. But then, I could see my cousin or whatever, come to camp, and knew what's going to happen to him. I was looking, "he's got a piece of bread somewhere or something if I could have something to eat," because I knew he was going to perish anyways, I knew. You see. What we did, what we did as a group of boys, what we do makes me feel good. We also used to go to the ramp when the transport came. But we knew already what's going on, so when we saw a young woman with a child, with her mother, we took the child and gave it to her mother and say, "You hold it, it's better." We didn't tell her why, because we knew if Eichmann sees a woman with a child, she is she goes to crematorium immediately, and the mother is an older woman, has no chance anyways. So, we gave her the child and we

³² Fellow countryman (Yiddish).

³³ commando (German)

able to send – to save the woman, and she go to labor camp and she could survive. Now one thing is going to be with me as long as I live. Here comes a Hungarian transport. By the end a lot of Hungarian. I don't remember now again the year, whether it was '43 or something, it was the last evacuation of Hungarians; two at daytime, two at nighttime. One transport came, apparently they knew what's going on. When they came out of the train, it was during the night you could see the flames of the crematorium ten feet above the chimney. People just put on their praying shawls, you know, and say the last prayer. Apparently they knew. It was such a chaos – chaos?

Q: Chaotic.

02:28:03

A: You have, you know, we got all so emotional, and people are screaming and crying, and even the German soldiers got afraid they shouldn't be all right. "Go," I say, "don't worry, don't worry, be fine." And this other woman, "Oh Mutele³⁴, soon you going to get, going to get a shower, going to put you in nice clean bed, don't worry, just move ahead, just go, just go." Here I walk over, and this young girl stays close to her mother, and I take her by the hand and I say, "You come and stay on the other hand." And she takes me by my chin in Jewish and says, "I'm 18 years old, I didn't love in my life yet. Why do you take me to death already? Why you take me to death?" You know, like I would be the one. I says "No, no, what you talking about? You come with me you see, you'll be fine. I put you among all these young people." I was able to save her, and she went through labor camp. But apparently she got crazy and she got destroyed, because I was able to, to, to come into the women's, come into the women's camp once in a while by exchanging with somebody else that was carrying the kettles with food. So when somebody came into the camp with the food, I say you stay here today, I give them something and I took the food, and I wanted to see if she survived. She survived a few days, but she got crazy. This scene will remain with me for as long as I live. I was not emotional then, but she put such a guilt trip on me, and she said, "Why do you hate me? Why do you want me to die?" she says, "I'm only 18." This was terrible. And the Germans are running so much that when I thought they had no room in the gas chambers, it was so active, that before every crematorium the dug a big hole very, very big, and it was burning fire and they used to put the people on blocks break up alive, into the fires burn them alive, the Hungarian transports.³⁵ That was already way before the allied started to approach. And now, as I told you, my first miracle is when I escaped to go to Treblinka. The second miracle was when I came to Auschwitz. Here I am a worker now, and this SS woman is walking around always and looking and looking, and with her whip against her boots like that walking around like you know, proud and looking, looking taking numbers down, and she points at me to put my number down. Because I was in Birkenau, I was not a Muslim

³⁴ Mother – diminutive (Yiddish).

³⁵ May 9, 1944, SS Camp Senior Rudolf Höss orders five open crematoria pits dug near Auschwitz-Birkenau Crematoria V, in order to accommodate the overflow generated by the mass transport of Hungarian Jews. Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945* (New York: H. Holt, 1990), 622.

man. A Muslim man means bones and skin, I had nice brown skin always. She takes my number down, now the blockältester knew why she takes my number down, they wouldn't tell me, but there was a request of sending out of Birkenau a few hundred people to another camp, to Stutthof, and he puts me there. And then he told me, "She took your number, she wants your skin to make a bag or gloves or something," and he sent me away. And I escaped that, because they were making bags and gloves and lamp shades from our skins.

Q: How did you know this, or did you know this at the time?

A: I didn't know at the time, but later when they evacuated the complete Birkenau, that blockältester came also, because blockältester, you see, they were all my inmates, you see we were all run by inmates. We got a barrack, you got a blockältester, and then you got a stubendienst³⁶, somebody to see that it's clean, you know, that the beds are made and all that. When Birkenau was evacuated, then they took so many.³⁷ But when the Allies – Russian were pushing, then they send us. So, my first was Stutthof, from Birkenau of Stutthof.

Q: Okay. I want to –

A: And he came also, and he told me.

Q: He told you how they were using the skins?

A: He told me, "You know why I send you here? You remember she wrote your name down." So I says, "Why, what is it?" He says, "She wants to make a nice purse or gloves or a bag from you."

Q: Did anybody that you know actually see this happening?

A: No, you know, they just took the boys, did whatever they had to do. Who could see?

Q: But the prisoners –

A: No. Like they were castrating Jewish boys.³⁸

Q: How did you know this?

³⁶ Barracks duty (German).

³⁷ In mid-January 1945, the SS began evacuating the Auschwitz camps system – some 60,000 prisoners were sent on death march to concentration camps further west. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Historical Atlas of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 205.

³⁸ Numerous prisoners of Auschwitz were castrated as part of the sterilization experiments carried out by Dr. Horst Shumann and Prof. Carl Clauberg, among others. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. "medical experiments."

02:33:00

A: Because what's his name, Morris, Morris he was a cook. He was a cook. His testicles were taken out, because he was with me in a few camps. So, I knew that he was taken, that he was taken, and then he said, "They put me to sleep, and whatever they did."

Q: And he was aware that there were other boys –

A: Yes.

Q: – that were in the same –

A: Yes, yes, he was aware of that, because as a matter of fact I was friendly with him. He was always a cook, and he always cook. So after when we would send food from one camp to another camp, I was maybe in 15 of them, but I don't know the locations because they used to send boys to build air strips. It means take big stones, break them up, make gravel, and then cover with cement. And every camp had a little kitchen. So, Morris was a chef – kitchen. So, I remember one day as we were walking, walking through German village, I saw an apple on the ground. I ran out and grabbed the apple and put it in my pocket. I think I'm going to give it to Morris that night and bribed him, you know, he had all the soup and all the potatoes he needs – but an apple. So, night at he came in to the barracks; I said, "Here Morris I have an apple for you." So, for several days he brought me baked potatoes. Took raw potatoes and threw them in the fire. And one day they needed boys to peel potatoes, and he took me. One day the German took a truck and went with two boys to the village so the baker gave bread for the barrack, so he took me also. So the German gave me whole loaf of bread. I ate it up at once, because I had a bad experience with my men that slept with me, because I was a terrific worker, I always told to my – you – always a group, that we slept on the same platform – try to avoid to get beaten up – "Do as much as you can." So, we work to please the contractor. The contractor had to make so many trips with his truck with stones, could so he could make more money. So I don't know at the time whether it was Christmas or something, he gave me like almost three quarter loaf of bread. So I figure, "I'm going to add a little bit to my every day rations." Because once I went to Birkenau I was in trouble: No connections, no nothing no food, nothing to organize. So I depend on my strength and pleasing the civilian contractors, and they give me a nice piece of bread. And then at night I who to go use the big –

Q: Latrine?

A: Yeah, to urinate. Two minutes I came back, the bread was gone. He swallowed it so fast, he stole it from me. So I said to myself, "Next time anything I get, I don't save, in here it is the safest." And that poor man died in my eyes also, he didn't survive, Meir Bornstein (ph), he was French, from – French Jew.

Q: After you left –

A: Birkenau?

Q: No. I want to stay a little bit longer. You left – you stayed in the quarantine area longer?

A: Yes.

Q: And then, when you left, you went directly to Birkenau?

A: Birkenau, yes.

Q: You were there fairly early. Did you get involved in building anything, in – since a lot of the camp wasn't yet finished?

02:36:53

A: The only thing that was built was the Gypsy camp. An...another complete camp was added. That was – Birkenau was D camp. A, B, C, D, and then they were building Gypsy camp. It was building it was just – yes, it was putting together barracks. Putting together barracks that were prefabricated. We didn't know for what. It was prefabricated. We put them together every day, you know, Kommando means Baukommando – building Kommando. We used to go there and help put the barracks together. There were natural German civilian foremen, you know, and some professionals. It was very simple, a wooden barrack, no windows. And some German inmates became blockältesters – blockältesters means elders of the block – and they were by themselves to build an office for them, like – I mean not an office, a separate room, a stube³⁹, and they built an oven, an oven made out of bricks throughout the length of the barrack, just so high to be heated with wood, and then it was finished.

Q: This was in a separate area?

A: In Birkenau, but another camp like, it was like camp A, B, C, D, D was where I was, the D Lager. And then it was the Gypsy camp.⁴⁰

Q: So the Gypsy – did you know it was for Gypsies?

A: I don't know, but then a lot of Gypsies came, men and woman came together and they were kept there. They kept there for a while, and overnight one night they were destroyed.

³⁹ Room (German).

⁴⁰ A separate block for Gypsy families was established on February 26, 1943, when the first large transport of Gypsies arrived in Birkenau. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. "Gypsies."

Q: Did you have any contact with the Gypsies?

A: No, just my first girlfriend was a Gypsy.

Q: Well?

A: German, German Gypsies from Germany.

Q: You mean?

A: Yes.

Q: In that camp?

A: Yes.

Q: Because you were there fairly early, did you have a sense of the overall structure of Auschwitz Birkenau?

A: Structure?

Q: Well, I mean there were these different camps, and there were things going on in different places?

A: No, they were all the same. Birkenau was practically the same, the same barracks, you know. They all look the same.

Q: But in Birkenau was where the crematoria were?

A: Crematoria, yes. We didn't get to see them.

Q: You never saw the crematoria?

A: No, we didn't. We saw the flames from a distance. I could smell like Sunday – we didn't work, you know – or at night you go out, you saw the flames. And the people they put in the oven, we couldn't get in touch with them also, because they were kept in a separate barrack, they called that Sonderkommando. And every few months they used to put them in an oven and get new, until they make an uprising, this Sonderkommando. They were to go up and got hold of some guns, but it was very fast made “hush, hush.”⁴¹

⁴¹ October 7, 1944, Sonderkommando unit in Auschwitz-Birkenau Crematoria IV stage uprising which destroys crematoria facility – all participants are captured and executed. Jean-Claude Pessac with Robert-Jan Van Pelt, “The Machinery of Mass Murder at Auschwitz,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington, Indian

Q: Did you see people going by you, going to the crematoria? Or groups? Anything like that, when they passed by you or...?

A: Well, when they were taken there were selections held, you know, selections held once in a while see who still has some meat on them, like everyone had to get naked outside you know, and Mengele⁴², Dr. Mengele came out, and you had to present yourself, either you were sent to the barrack or sent on the side. The ones that sent on the side, they went to block number seven, seven, and they put a "L" on them here. "L" means generally means "leiche" – in English would mean "corpse." They put in that block, and from then they put them in a truck and into the crematorium.

Q: You went through these selections often?

A: Oh, yes, quiet often.

Q: How often?

02:41:15

A: Oh, many times, every few months; but I managed to – once I got – another miracle I escaped. Once I got pneumonia in Birkenau, and I went to hospital. And there were two Jewish doctors from Kraków, and I remember they listen to me, and they made a picture of my lungs with little points, you know, they had no x-rays or anything, and they told me, "one thing will save you, you have to get some calcium." Calcium you could only get injections from somebody who worked in Kanada, and in Kanada they had a little room where all the trucks came in they kept them there separately. So one of the men that I was friendly with got hold of calcium injections and put it in his rectum and brought it to me, and the doctors injected me, and I came out of it. But during that time was a selection, it was selection, but they manage to hide me. They confuse the number, somehow they confuse the number of the sick people minus less, minus one, and I got away. And then I got better again.

Q: What about the selections, you said you were in them every few months, but were they happening more often than that?

A: When there were enough sick people when they couldn't go to work, there were quite often, I don't exactly know, we didn't know what the purpose was, he says everybody up, you know.

Q: And was Mengele involved in all of them?

A: Indiana University Press, 1994), 239.

⁴² Josef Mengele (1911-1978?), German doctor and SS officer.

A: I have no idea, but I knew that he was the main doctor, because when I went – when I went and I was so sick with fever, I knew that one boy, one boy went or man, he had done something with his finger, you know, I don't know what he, just took a scissor and cut and cut and cut to the bone. No injection or nothing.

Q: Were you aware of any of the medical experimentation that you read about now?

02:43:40

A: I saw – I don't know the experimentation, I saw one boy, there was a young boy running around in Auschwitz, it was a Polish boy, because once in a while they kept children – I didn't know the reason then, like they kept in Birkenau they kept two Rabbis two Greek Rabbis with beards, and used to allow them to pray in the shawls and made movies. Now I know it was for propaganda, so this boy was running around. All of a sudden I heard that the boy dropped dead. So there was a barrack where they did the experiments and I looked through a little pea hole, it was like the door there was spaces, and I saw they were cutting him. And I saw the they cut the scalp and pulled the skin over, I saw it, and there were – they took off the part of the scalp and I saw there was a big tumor on the brain, I saw it that with my own eyes, and I knew the reason they wanted to find out why he died. But to come back to the – to the –

Q: Experimenting?

A: Experimenting, I knew they going on, but I did not witness them because they were in all closed places.

Q: How did you know they were going on?

A: How I know they was going on, to tell you the truth, I didn't. I just found out later. During my being there I didn't know, I didn't know.

Q: When you were with this Kanada group, how come you had to leave there? Did people have sort of a set time you were there? Did you get privileges?

A: No, no, no, no, how come I leave it was because eventually transport ceased, you know? They stop coming, so they didn't need us any more, and then as the Allies start to approach, we were evacuated and took to Stutthof. Really it was a privilege to work there, to get to go there, an that Kommando was a big privilege because there was there was maybe 130 people, everybody was wanting to work there because you could wear any clothes you wanted, good shoes, good clean shirts, and there was – ladies were working there also, so everybody got somebody friendly, and every Friday this girl gave you a clean shirt.

Q: Did you tell me how you were chosen to work there? On that – in that...?

A: How I was chosen to work on that? I think recommendation by the blockältester. Recommendation that ask the Kapo⁴³ – Zep, Zep (ph) was his name, “Why don't you take him.”

Q: You started to mention Sunday, you said it was not a workday. What happened on a typical Sunday?

A: On a typical Sunday.

Q: Was it a day of rest?

02:46:50

A: It was a day of rest, it was a day of taking the lice off the clothes, sitting down and try to...

Q: That's mostly what you did on Sundays?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you – what do you remember any humor, any enjoyment, any activities in the camp?

A: No, there were no humor because everybody was that hungry, you know, everybody was – I have death. The own entertainment was the gates when you walked out or walked in, the music, the orchestra was playing.

Q: What was it playing?

A: A march, march songs.

Q: The Germans would play the songs?

A: No, it was inmates, everything was inmates it was a whole band.

Q: Did it sound nice?

A: It sound pleasant, but who paid attention, because only as you walked by they were playing.

Q: Were there any concerts? Was there nothing like that?

⁴³ Forman (colloquial German); term used for inmates appointed by the SS to head a labor Kommando of prisoners.

A: Concert, no.

Q: But your brother said that there were – I thought he said there were sometimes music, there was sometimes soccer games?

A: There was a boxing game, I remember there was a Polish guy I remember the name Czortek (ph), just for the, for the group of people for their entertainment – for the blockältesters. But soccer games, I don't know of any soccer games. Maybe in his camp, not in Birkenau.

Q: There was no special –

A: No, no soccer games. The only activity Sunday activity was to witness how people got hanged or shot, because if somebody escaped they brought them back and they hung them and we had to witness that. Everybody had to see it.

Q: So you witnessed a lot of hangings?

A: Oh, yes. And then I remember very vividly they caught 22 Polish people, nice huge guys, six footers, very, very well. Apparently they were listening or operating some radio system. They got caught and they put first 11, and then another 11, at very close range they shot them dead, and the whole camp had to watch it.

Q: At close range?

A: Close range, yes, to make sure that they don't miss. And I understand that according to the law of – whether Geneva or general law – if somebody is being hanged and the cord breaks, the man can live. And I saw they hang a man, twice it ripped, third time they shot him. I don't know if it's true or not, the Geneva law, if you hang somebody and the cord breaks your life is granted.

Q: Now you say they have you seem to have pretty good relationships with the blockältesters, and you seem to be able to charm them or finesse them?

A: Not really, not really. First of all in Auschwitz because I open up my mouth and I was the landsman – somebody from Warsaw and I was the youngest. And then so when I came to Birkenau, when I came to Birkenau there was one stubendienst – I mean one that took care of it – happened to be from the neighborhood Plonsk that was in the camp with my oldest brother, knew my oldest brother. So I got used to him, you know, so I became friendly with him a little bit, and then he knew somebody else, and that's how you get into the little group where you get a little more, but the blockältester, they were already set up with their own group of people.

Q: How did somebody get chosen to be one of them?

A: Stubendienst?

Q: Or a block-elder?

A: Well blockältester were German inmates. The Germans got better positions, and his helper – and the Lagerältester⁴⁴, you know.

Q: Were they mostly pretty horrible?

A: No, not really. Not really, not really. Not really.

Q: Some of them were decent to you?

A: They were decent, but they wanted respect and discipline because they had to answer to the higher authorities also.

Q: But didn't they get points for treating you badly?

A: No, no, no.

02:52:00

Q: Did you have strong relationships with a lot of the other inmates?

A: Not strong, but friendly, friendly we became like family, you know. Like I go to my brothers, I was friendly with two brothers, the Brown brothers, you know, we would be looking out for one another.

Q: You were?

A: Yeah, you know.

Q: Were there situations where you had to really just steal from each other and take care of yourselves?

A: Not from the immediate group, because there was no necessity, because everybody had a little bit, you know, and to steal from one another, there was nothing to steal from, unless the person was already in any minute he is dead, and the rations were given out, so another inmate is it near him and he got first to him and he took it.

⁴⁴ Camp elder (German); prisoner functionary appointed by SS to serve as camp representative, but answering to the SS. *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, 827.

Q: Now, do you remember your reactions toward some of the prisoners who were treated better? For example, prisoners of war who were in there, or German criminals who were put in the camps and were given better positions?

A: If I had any...?

Q: Any sort of reaction to them?

02:53:30

A: Not really, because there were – they had their own gang again. They had – they were stuck with them.

Q: They had power over you, didn't they?

A: Oh, yes, they had power. They could ask us shine my shoes, you know, “Here is this, here's a couple cigarettes or here's a piece of bread,” because they always had a little more.

Q: Wasn't that strange? I mean, here they were in prison as well?

A: It wasn't strange because he was, he was like the boss because he was before me. He had the priorities, you know, and you were just newcomer, hey, so had you to wait until you [gestures rising up].

Q: Were you –

A: Priority. Was a priority.

Q: Were you ever aware of efforts to either resist or sabotage the hierarchy, or the Germans in the efforts – any resistance in the camp?

A: I know one thing, while I was in Buna, while I was in Buna a whole outfit of German soldiers in German uniforms were marched into the camp, the clothes taken away and put in striped clothes just like us. And then we wondered why, and we found out that they refused to fulfill an obligation that was against their will, never knew what, what it was, but something they asked to do and they refused, about 40 of them came into camp. So apparently that was a group that resisted their own people. But the inmates, nobody resisted anything. We were just afraid that nobody hits, us so we would get beaten.

Q: Do you remember any specific advice you were given by people who had been there longer, or any advice that you would then give to new prisoners?

02:55:55

A: My only advice is – was not to be hitten, and try the best not to get sick, because people used to grab anything they can, me too. Found a bone, you know, from an animal, God knows where, that was in the in the later time, when I was hungry. I used to burn it in the garbage and chew on it the whole day. I had advice maybe you better go hungry and don't try to get sick. And advice, who could give somebody advice, because it was a survival from day to day. Somebody would say hey go over there, you could find something to eat or whatever. It was just survival, there was – I mean, what could anybody tell anybody.

Q: Well, they might know where there might be some food?

A: They kept it for themselves.

Q: Let's change tapes.

Tape #3

03:01:15

Q: Do you remember, when you were in Birkenau, situations of real abuse by the people in authority?

A: Yes, I got, once I got badly abused.

Q: By whom?

A: By the blockältester, by the blockältester. I mean he had a complaint from outside. Apparently I stood in line twice, they were giving out, when an extra piece of bread and cigarettes, something. Sometimes they used to give out cigarettes for workers. And my couple, my foreman, gave me a name of somebody that deceased the day before, because everybody – so first I went to my name, and then I went for the other guy, say I'm him, so I could get three four more cigarettes to exchange for bread. So that there was a little boy that was working for the blockältester or whatever, he said, "He, he was here already." So, I start running, so I start running, and they caught me and they got my number. So the in evening after the appell⁴⁵, the blockältester called out my number, and they hang me for 20 minutes by my hands like this. And I developed a bad disk there, you know. And while I was hanging they hit me on my whole body; it was pretty painful.

Q: Were you screaming?

A: Sure, I was crying. But then again, I did it again where I got away, you know.

Q: Now you're – you also were working in other camps, yes?

A: Yes.

Q: Where?

A: The other camps after Birkenau was very, very hard work. First of all, it was breaking up stones with a big sledge hammer into small pieces. Once they were broken up, you had to load up trucks with them very fast. And the trucks were driven to the air strips. And after the trucks we walked toward the air strips and distributed the broken up little stones, gravel stones, nice evenly over the whole area, as much as was necessary, as a lot. And then we waited, waited for the cement truck to come. And we had to go in with the feet to the cement and were given big brooms to push the cement, even out. That was very, very hard work.

⁴⁵ roll call (German).

Q: And if you couldn't do it?

A: You got beaten, you had to do it.

Q: Did you see beatings a lot?

A: Yes, very much. Very much because they didn't believe. I got beaten once again, we were building railroads and we had to carry on our shoulders the railroads. If we got even people then the load even up. Once, two – one from front of me one in back of me – were shorter than me, so the load fell on me, and I caved in, you know, and they wouldn't believe me. And I was hit, hit over the head. They thought that I'm playing games. And I told them, the guys are shorter. "Never mind, you verfluchte Jude⁴⁶," It was a Belgian civilian worker that was not an inmate, he was just working for the German Kommando in that particular area, being paid, whatever, he bit me like anything, but things got – I got up, and next couple days they got little friendly with me because he saw I wore a coat. I had a coat made of good material. And inside the coat it was build in so much, and he wanted a hat – to made the hat, you know. So, there were two French tailors. He says you give them the material from inside, we going to cut it out, make a hat and get bread from him. So we made a deal, three partners, two tailors and me. I give them materials they sewed it and he got two loaves of bread and we split it up.

Q: You were building railroad tracks?

A: Railroad tracks also.

Q: Was this kind of activity going on throughout your whole time there?

A: No, it was air strips and railroad tracks, air strip, railroad tracks, what else was there, that was practically it.

Q: Now, was this earlier on?

A: No, that was that was already – I think it was the last, the last that was the beginning of '45, because I remember the air raids were coming, and that was our only relief, because it was near the woods where we built this air strips, and when the Allies were coming, we were ordered to run into the woods to hide. When we run into the woods we used to grab the leaves, dried leaves from the trees, and we had the paper from the cement paper, and roll them up and we smoked just to relieve the hunger. And the planes were coming so low, you held on to, and they were British, they were the Royal Air Force we could see. We could almost see the pilot, they came down so low, because some German airplanes were sitting. They just got them on the ground and destroyed them.

⁴⁶ Damn Jew (German).

03:07:20

Q: I don't want to get too far off yet, but since you are talking about it, when you saw or heard these air raids, did you think that there was some hope that you would be rescued?

A: If there was some hope, I knew a war was going on, but whether they are going to succeed, whether we are going to be liberated, that doesn't come to our mind, that didn't come to our mind.

Q: Why not?

A: The dream, we were so conditioned to it, that that's it, that's it, you know, that's it. We had one wish, enough bread before we die, because we are prepared, we; I don't say me, I was never prepared for that. Because whenever the boy ask me, "What do you think we going to survive all this?" I says me yes, you, I don't know, swear to God. I always had to positive attitude. And then I couldn't picture any liberation, any, how do you start, I don't know where my mother is, I don't know where my brothers are, I'm all alone here. I just didn't picture to resume a new life, what's it going to be, because I was kind of taken care of. Okay, I had to go to work. I had to sleep in my clothes because I was afraid to take them off, wet or dry, you know. And my feet were wet and cold all the time. It was winter time, snow, but yet, I was programmed. I got up in the morning got my little black coffee or a little piece of bread and I know lunch time came they brought the little thing, if I was lucky I got a little thick soup, if not I drink whatever I can. And then I stood in front of the German, three, four feet away made a pity face, you know, while he was peeling his potatoes and throwing the peels, I used to run, grab the peels. So, he throw me a potato sometimes, and sometimes then, just he did that [indicates grinding into ground] to the peels, nobody should get them. But always try to find some sympathy someplace, you know – throw me a potato. They were not allowed to do this, they were not allowed to. But some of them had a heart.

Q: Were there only things in the average day that come back to you that really stand out in your mind, the way you spent your days?

A: Not really, all the same, all the same, just nothing to look forward to, you know, nothing to look forward to, just.

Q: Why were these appells so difficult for people?

A: Standing those many hours with the cold, just standing and waiting. You got up in the morning, you wanted your little tea or whatever they gave you, you wanted it. Sometimes you couldn't sleep through the night because you are so hungry. In the morning they gave you the piece of bread with margarine and a little tea or coffee, whatever you wanted. And they kept you hours and hours and hours, bad weather, rain, mud, you know. There

was one German in Birkenau called Schillinger⁴⁷. He was so bad, he was so bad. Out of nowhere, he used to take people and he made us jump like a rabbit or roll over in the mud. So much punishment, unbelievable. One day a transport came from Poland, they told the Polish Jews, “Whoever had papers to go to United States and missed the ship, now it's time, take all your valuables and you're going.” So people believed them. And they brought them straight to Auschwitz. And here goes this woman and this man, and he happened to be – the guy, Schillinger goes to this woman and man and have an argument with them. “Why did you fool us? You told us so and so, and you brought us.” So this Schillinger slaps the man. The woman grabs the gun and kills him, his own gun, and kills them.⁴⁸

Q: He killed Schillinger?

A: Yes, Schillinger. That was Yom Kipper when we heard that Schillinger got killed. I mean we prayed merciful to for God for taking him away from us.

Q: You didn't see this?

A: I didn't see it.

Q: Were there reprisals?

A: Excuse me?

Q: Was there sort of revenge by the Germans?

A: Oh, they took them right away, everybody – the whole transport was gassed. But this woman, you know, unbelievable.

Q: You said when you first arrived you saw Eichmann?

A: I found out later that is Eichmann, you know, that...[pointing].

Q: Did –

A: On the ramp and made the decision who lives who dies.

⁴⁷ SS Staff Sergeant Josef Schillinger, successive appell leader and commander of outside squad for Auschwitz. *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, 821.

⁴⁸ October 23, 1943, a transport of 1,800 Polish Jews bearing passports for Latin America, arrived via Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Poland. Apparently, these so-called “exchange Jews” did not realize their destination and fate until arriving on the selection platform at Birkenau. During the processing of the female prisoners, a woman grabbed Schillinger’s revolver, killed him and injured another SS officer. A riot ensued and re-enforcement’s were called who eventually subdued the women and herded them into the gas chamber. *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, 513.

Q: What was he like?

A: Serious, you know. Tall, dark and handsome. He was a nice man and he looked like a respectful man. He didn't speak, he didn't talk, just motion [pointing] with his hands, he didn't talk.

Q: So you walked out to these other places to work?

A: Yes.

Q: Any particular experiences that stand out as you worked at all these other sites?

A: Well, we used to – there was a camp near Stuttgart we used to go to work every day, and we had to go to a village. And very, very often, very often, German woman used to come out and holding something in there, and waited to get okay from the SS that was accompanying us, and they used to throw out bread, piece of bread in fronts of us, or in the middle, whoever could grab it, if the soldiers give the permission, otherwise they would turn return their goods. Many of them they did allow.

Q: I wonder why?

A: Some had a heart, because the ones that watched us, they were not young soldiers, they were mens in the 60s, fathers, you know, so maybe they are – and just what – was not SS, there was the Wehrmacht⁴⁹, I don't even know the difference. I mean the SS was the closest – the most supportive to Hitler, and the other one was just like reserve. Were older men that could hardly carry their rifle.

Q: Do you think the people that you passed as you went through the villages had a clue what was going on inside?

A: If they had a clue what's going on? I don't know that they knew about the destruction, the gassing, the burning. They knew that we are inmates to do labor work for them. And when the they sad the way some of us look, and maybe some of the soldiers were talking to the wives, and the wives, you know, passed the word so they had idea that we are punished. Whether we were Jews or not, we had no idea, because everybody wear the striped uniforms, because we were never in contact with them, no close contact with the civilian population.

Q: Were you ever in any other camps for any length of time?

A: No, all of us were only short, short because Allies – but the last, by the end, again I don't

⁴⁹ General title of German armed forces from 1935 to 1945. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v. "Wehrmacht."

remember the date, we were brought into Dachau one night.

Q: Let's hold on one second and let me see if there's anything else we need to cover about Birkenau. I don't think so – pretty thorough. Anything that stands out in your mind?

A: Not really, not too bad.

Q: Other than the fact that you were there a long time, in Birkenau?

A: Yes.

Q: Three, four years?

A: [Nods "yes."]

Q: It must have been have seemed endless?

A: Not Birkenau, all the camps together. Yes it was endless, it was endless. And at the end of all these little camps, we were finally brought in, at night, to Dachau.

Q: Why? A. I don't know why, it was – I guess it was the end of the trip for them, they had no place to get us any more, in Dachau we were we also were short time, few days, and then were sent on a march, you know, just walking, walking, day in and day out, and walking, walking, walking, walking and walking to nowhere. And people were falling like flies, left and right, left and right, you know, didn't know what's going on, getting a piece of bread a day, for warm weather, whatever it is, walking and walking and walking.

Q: You were walking by people in villages?

A: No, no.

Q: Did anyone see you as you were walking?

A: Yeah, people were seeing, we were passing little towns, just a mass of people walking, walking and these old soldiers going, you know, creeping. And after, I don't know eight days or nine days walking, look back, the group gets smaller and smaller and smaller, and I don't even know how those people were taken away the ones that fell, you know. All of a sudden one time they tell us, "sit down for a rest period," and the German people eat whatever they get, and then we sit, and they tell us "Okay, up, up, up aufstehen⁵⁰ up." And like it was a password, we refuse to go. What's the use, you know, we refuse to go. Then the Germans get mad, they thought that we are rebelling. And they, they said, "Up,

⁵⁰ get up, rise (German).

up, rouf, rouf!”⁵¹ I mean, up the hill, so big deal, we up the hill, then held his hands up, you know, face the trees and hands up, so we put our hands up. And then, then one officer says like “genickschuss”⁵², means aim at the neck, you know. We hear the rifles, didn't bother anybody, and we stay and we stay, and we wait and we wait, then we hear one of the officers says, “My God, four kilometers are the Americans!” And we hold our hands, and, you know, it hurts. We look, look, look, no more German soldiers. We run down the hill, and we hear the noise of tanks, tanks, tanks coming. And we put our hands up, “Hey, hey, hey,” – didn't know, my God, liberated. The other Jews start singing the “Hatikvah”⁵³ and they tell, “Us let us go, let us go.” – they spoke some German, the Americans – “Wir müssen gehen”⁵⁴. So what do we know, we let them go, they pass us by. And we all alone again, the German come back to take us. To take us and march again and again and again and again, and –

03:19:58

Q: What was going on then?

A: The Germans just passed, they wouldn't take us, they wouldn't liberate us, they just passed by. The Germans hid, they were hiding somewhere, the Americans passed by, the Germans came back. But apparently the Germans were in the occupied territory. We don't know. Then they made us turn around, like back towards Dachau, but there was a camp they name Allach. They put us in there, and I think we were there maybe a week or two. And that's where I told you where the Germans took off the uniforms and became civilian, and they started to be awful nice to us, awful nice. “Oh, we going to try to get you some barley, we are going to get some potatoes, we are going to get the soup a little thicker,” you know. And you are men at the appell, you know, we were so all of a sudden we became so confused. “Oh, you are men. Please behave, you know, like don't make us punish you or hit you,” you know, because some became very disorganized, “what the heck is going on.” A few weeks, and then all of a sudden, as I told you, the guards disappeared, you know, and again we don't know what's going on, and people go and break the gates. I wasn't even – didn't even have the strength to pick up a piece of stick, I weighed about 90 pounds. And all of a sudden some jeeps roll in with a, with a big truck with the red cross on there, you know, and some soldiers come out and shoot a gun and look and make pictures, you know. And I remember very good that there was one inmate, a German Jew, he spoke English and he says, “you bring food.” Now I know, then I didn't understand, he says “yah, yah, yah,” and went off. At that time I didn't bother looking at them, they wanted to make pictures, I say, “the hell with your pictures.” and looked and looked, and go in the truck to look for some food and I find a package and I say, “My God I got chocolate.” I like chocolate so much, and I ate the whole package of Exlax, you know, and later I get my business and get my cramps, and I woke up in the

⁵¹ Up (German).

⁵² Neck shot (German).

⁵³ Hope (Hebrew); Jewish national anthem.

⁵⁴ “We must go.” (German).

camp, nobody was there telling me, “yes go, no don't go,” and I went and there was this kitchen outside. I see the soldiers lined up and they're serving beautiful white bread, and make pancakes, you know, and I start to talk to somebody. There was one soldier he was speaking Russian it was American soldiers, and he says, “What's wrong with you?” I say, “bu⁵⁵, bu, boli⁵⁶, schmerzen⁵⁷.” And he took me in the Jeep, and it wasn't far away and drove me in to a town called Mühldorf and put me in hospital – new, and I got good – you know, cleaned out and the surgeon gave me farina, milk and sugar every day. And in two weeks I got [gestures to face] and I just walked out from the hospital.

03:23:40

Q: I just want to go back a little. So when the Americans came?

A: Yes.

Q: Finally.

A: Yes; and I –.

Q: Do you remember how they treated you? Do you remember anything more about the scene? Where you...?

A: Well, I just told you. Didn't hate us at all. They just came in as visitors, appeared to me like visitors, you know, they just came in looked around, spoke to some civilian, you know, and that's all. And I – there, there was no treatment, didn't pay any attention to us, you know,

Q: What did you –

A: Just made pictures, I don't know, I said, “What the hell is going on, who are these people?” So they says we are free, or liberated – we are liberated. People started to sing the “Hatikvah,” and I wanted to eat, didn't get anything for three days since the Germans left. The night before we had the artilerske⁵⁸ some people got killed in the barracks.

Q: The night before?

A: The night before, the father and son got hit with shrapnels. So when we they came in, they were looking around making pictures. There was nothing.

Q: Could you believe that you were free?

⁵⁵ “Boo-hoo” (Polish).

⁵⁶ Hurts (Polish).

⁵⁷ Pain (German).

⁵⁸ Artillery (Yiddish).

A: I could believe because the, the how you call, it the guards were gone. The guards were gone. And some people broke the gates, the doors were open, the gates were open. Some people got strong, they went in and out, and all of a sudden I see the inmates that were in my barracks sleeping next to me, came with – bring motorcycles in they were nice and strong motorcycles. Apparently they robbed some people, you know, but I was too sick.

Q: What – do you know what happened to the German guards, did they just disappear?

A: They disappeared, yes, the Germans disappeared. Some of the civilian remained to take care of us, just to play a role of repairing, and hoping that one of us would say a good word to the authorities, that they wouldn't imprison them or some prisoners, not to kill them, because prisoners take advantage later on Kapos and the blockältesters. I know there was one blockältester in Birkenau that the Ukrainian put them, and they cut him with a saw, because he was a bastard, he was bad. So prisoners, I mean inmates took revenge.

03:25:50

Q: Did you see this?

A: I didn't see this. It was just talking, you know.

Q: Do you remember approximately the date of all this; the date when you were liberated?

A: The date of liberation, it was spring, April sometimes, I know springtime, it started to get warm.

Q: What – where did you go from the hospital? You were in there a few months...

A: From the hospital, I walked out to a little town called Ampfing, and I met two boys, two Jewish boys, and I started talking to them, I just came out and “What are you doing? What’s, what – where are you from?” “They say, well, we are from here.” And I said, “Where are you staying?” “We are going to two sisters, farmers, you know, they took us in. If you want you can come stay with us.” So I went with them, and there were two old sisters. They were so afraid that they thought that every survivor that comes in, they have to give up their life, you know. So they took care of us, all three of us. We stood there for several months. And then in that particular town, there was a camp in the forest, a camp. And they were making parts for airplanes. So we used to go there and get little motors, electric motors. We took the motors and went to a farmer in exchange for a cow or a calf, slaughtered and sold the meat to camps. Camps were established already, UNRRA⁵⁹ camps, but they didn't get enough to eat, so we started to be in business.

⁵⁹ United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

Q: You're a hustler!

A: Yes, started a business. Got a horse and wagon, and started the business. Then when we got sick of the little town, we says we going to go to Munich, so we go with the horse and wagon to Munich, and we go, and had already a little idea. And one of my partners had a landsman was an administrator in HIAS⁶⁰, you know HIAS? So I do it here and there, what can we do, and he says "Well, you go and find out an apartment where a Nazi used to live and you can have that apartment." So we found out that Nazi get a clearing order to clear in 24 hours, he had to not even take any bedding, nothing, leave everything as it is. And we got a beautiful apartment. So we took the horse and wagon back there, came up, moved into apartment, and start doing business.

Q: Who arranged for this Nazi to leave, or you just marched in?

A: German – we didn't march in, no. We asked around, "where do the Nazis live?" and Germans used to say, "Nazi used to live here, Nazi used to live here." "You know his name?" "Yes." So we talked the guy in the HIAS and he made an application and HIAS – the guy get an order, an eviction and had to give up the apartment. And we moved in, and then whoever came from Poland moved in with us to stay, and it was like a transit.

Q: What did you – at what point did you try to find out about your family, your brothers?

A: I was looking all the time, but I was under the impression that they perished. However, this Joe⁶¹, Joe got liberated in Czechoslovakia, he remain in Czechoslovakia. My older brother somehow wound up now to be in Belgium, you know, from German they took him to Belgium, and me I was in Munich. I got organized, I got even a car, the first boy to get a car. Nobody could even get a car, I got a car. I registered the Palestinian embassy, and I used to drive around the doctor to the children in Palestine, I had the car, and the Rabbi used to drive around and do the weddings. And then I started to get – I got acquainted with somebody who had a connection with a Belgia consulate, not knowing that had I had a brother in Belgium. The Belgium consulate give a list of people that perished. So the men told me for 200 dollars, if anybody wants to emigrate to Belgium, we are going to make him a paper and as that man who perished, going home. So I got involved with that, you know, I made hundred dollars, he made hundred dollars. "You want to go to Belgium. Today your name is so and so, and you are going home legally with the picture." He went to Belgium and in Belgium the HIAS took over, and made them stay until whatever, didn't know that I have a brother in Belgium. Then my brother comes from Belgium to Munich looking for me, he was on the street where I was, couldn't find me, goes back to Belgium, and somehow he got in contact with him – Czechoslovakian and Belgian and were writing to each other, and they crying over my

⁶⁰ Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (American).

⁶¹ Icek (Josef) Baum

death, you know. While I doing business in Munich, I see one man who got approximately the same number. I say by the number we know the transport, you know, "Oh you from here, you must have been in Buna." I say "yes." "Do you know Icek Baum?" He say, "Sure I know him. He is in Friedland⁶² to Czechoslovakia, I just came from there and here is the address." He gives me address, I write a letter, came back "unknown." The Czechs wouldn't let him out, they wanted him to remain there, they wanted him to become a citizen because he was working in electrical place. To make the story short, my brother Joe didn't want to be Czechoslovakian, he wants to join his brother in Belgium. To go to Belgium he has to go through Czechoslovakia and has to come to Germany, to the border. In Germany they meet two girls. They say, "Why don't you accompany us to," – wherever they were—"to, in UNRRA camp." My brother says, "Okay I go." He goes then to Munich. In Munich he meets the guy who told me about this. "You know, you have a brother here in Munich." He says, "no way." So the whole night I couldn't stand it, and the morning he brings me to him, you know, after years. Then I start crying to him that the other one is dead. He says, "No he is not dead, he is in Belgium. Here's a picture." So right away I go with this – with him and make papers. Now we go to Belgium, who wants to be in Munich. So we make papers and I got suitcases. And the brother from Belgium comes to Munich. And then we all went to Belgium. We stayed in Belgium for a while, and the war broke out in Israel. We went to fight in 1948, me and the oldest.

Q: How did you get over there; was that easy?

A: To?

Q: To Palestine.

A: To Palestine, my brother got smuggled in somehow. And I went to Marseilles. From Marseilles, the United States donated a ship, a frigate, a war ship. And they kept me from Israel again mobilized us in Marseilles. We walk on the ship prepared. We went out on sea under a Panama flag from Marseilles. And on the waters, a little Jewish fish boat came and passed the Jewish flag to us and we went into Haifa. In Haifa put in the cannons right away and out to war.

Q: So you went to Israel to fight for independence?

A: Yes.

Q: Had you tried to get there legally before? Had you try to immigrate there earlier?

03:33:50

⁶² Frýdlant, Czech Republic

A: No, no, no, I just went as a volunteer to fight.

Q: And the same with your brother?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: And did you meet with up I with him there?

A: Yes, I meet up with him there. And then when the war ended, they had to liberate us because we were not aliyah⁶³, you know, at our request, because nobody wanted to be there; it was bad, there was no food, and I got married there and I couldn't find any occupation in the situation. Since they had to let me out, I went back to Belgium, and I applied to come to the United States or Canada. And in Belgium every day the police was chasing me, couldn't stay there, for a whole year. And I wrote a letter to Queen Victoria telling her my situation, and nobody came to Belgium to let me stay in Belgium, give me permission to work for as long as I want. At the same time, I got the permission – a permit that I was permitted to move to Canada. So 1951, I emigrated to Canada, and lived in Canada for 15 years and still wanted to come to this beautiful country and finally succeed.

Q: You wrote a letter to Queen Victoria?

A: Yes.

Q: And somehow–

A: Explaining my situation.

Q: – it got through?

A: Yes. I explained I have no place to go. I cannot back to Poland because of the persecution the survivors of such a Holocaust. And here I came to this wonderful country and I'm waiting to receive immigration papers. And then this Mr. – what's his name in the jus..., the palais of justice⁶⁴ – send the police after me every day, every day where I'm going to go, because I was not legal in Belgium, because I was an alien.

Q: How long were you in Israel?

A: About 14 months.

Q: Was it exciting fighting for the...?

⁶³ Immigrant to Israel (Hebrew).

⁶⁴ palais de justice; law-courts (French).

A: Sure it was it was exciting, sure. Ben-Gurion⁶⁵ came on our ship. I was a chef on the ship. I had always a spoon in the pot! There was no food, it was very bad in Israel then, everything rations. But for the soldiers, we got – and I cooked for them meals. They loved it.

Q: When you got into Haifa you were fighting on land?

A: Not in on land, the Israeli navy. My brother was on land; I was in the navy, the Israeli navy.

Q: And you met were up with him in Israel?

A: Yes; I met him – I just visit him, just visiting. When I came there, he had furlough 24 hours, so he spend time with me, and then he had to go back on his camp and I was on the ship. He wanted to come on the ship too, but they never allowed two brothers in the same outfit because, God forbid, if something happens, at least one us should survive.

Q: Did your brother stay in Israel?

A: No, he came back to Belgium. He is older than Joe, he is in Canada.

Q: Now, one thing I didn't ask you about is, was religion ever important to you throughout all of this?

A: No. Believed in God, prayed to God, but you know, I had a hard time – you I used to go to – mama used to send me to cheder⁶⁶, you know cheder? Jewish school, religious Jewish school where they had all the Rabbis? But they used to beat up on the children. If you didn't know something, "pow," or let defense down, and he hit. So I didn't want to go, I just refused to go to that. So Mama order – hired a tutor to come three times a week to the house and teach me Jewish, you know, how to pray and all that. But, he wanted one zloty, like one dollar every week, and we didn't have it, so he didn't come. So I never really learned. I know a little bit. Now I go to synagogue Friday, Saturday, just.

Q: How did you feel about being a Jew throughout all of this?

A: How I felt, I mean I wish – I used to wish I wasn't. You know, like, “Why did God want me Jew? Why did he want to punish me? Why? Look at all this. Why I was unprivileged?”

03:38:20

⁶⁵ David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973), Zionist leader and Israeli statesman, served as first prime minister of Israel. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Ben-Gurion, David.”

⁶⁶ Orthodox primary school (Yiddish).

Q: You didn't necessarily look down on Jews, you just didn't like the position?

A: Yes, I wish I wasn't. I was trying to deny it, but – I could deny it but I couldn't hide it.

Q: When you look back at this long period, that you were really suffering, what do you think of that now?

A: Well, guilty, I mean why, why couldn't my mother have lived, why couldn't my beautiful three sisters have lived, my older brother, why? And then again, I put it in the hands of God, he wanted me. He wanted me to tell the story, although I'm still paying a high price for it. It's haunting me constantly. Especially that woman that took my number down. I see her so often, "take his number."

Q: It seems throughout all of this there was some God?

A: And some sceneries that I have seen, like, for instance, in Plonsk, when they told the people to come out, out, out, so the woman tried to hide, and was hiding too, her child. So this young, young soldier about 17 years old grabbed the child out of her hands, and she was screaming and he shot her right in the mouth and threw the child down. You know, seeing all these sceneries just come back, come back to me, haunting me. The evacuation, the train rides, especially the train ride to Dachau. It wasn't an actual train, it was those little narrow on the narrow tracks, how you call this?

Q: You were in cattle cars, weren't you?

A: Not cattle cars, there were narrow tracks and they were up and hanging in aisle like containers, with a little locomotive,⁶⁷ and they were running during the night, and the whistle sounds in my ears so sad, you know, like a crying whistle. And you going to nowhere, to nowhere. And coming to the Dachau and the Germans with the dogs, you know, not where knowing the next what's going to be. So I'm free, I'm not free. Then I told you I liberated myself. In 1988 the Polish authorities tried to find whoever was in Dr. Korczak home and made anniversary celebration of 75 years of existence of the house, the building is still there, you know, that they built. So they got hold of me and my friend David, and there was another one, he moved to California, he would be a testimony. So we went to Poland; we went to Poland, and we come to Poland and people, introduce one another, comes a gentleman and he says my name is Aleksander Lewin, but in orphanage they used to call me Szura, and if there would be a hole I would fall right in. He was my Mr. Szura. He was the one that was like my father next to Dr. Korczak, you know, used to help me with my homework, come to my school, and we I mean we hugged and kissed. He didn't recognize but I show him my picture. It was – then we go into to the home and I look, and the feeling over came, came over me like the best to describe it like

⁶⁷ Schmalspurbahn (narrow-gauge railway).

you have your famous toy, your famous doll, they take it away from you, they give it back but it's broken, you know. Like everybody – that commode, everybody had, with the little drawers where your toys were it's gone. Everything is different. But one thing, they assign a seat to me, you know, to sit down, and they assign me the same seat at the same table where I was when I was a child, you know, not knowingly. Unbelievable. And it was very emotional, everybody used to tell the story. But most of the people were prior to the war, prior to me, that immigrated to Israel and to Australia and to Brazil, they also came. So I was the youngest, and I remembered the most of Dr. Korczak, you know, so my stories were.... And they took us on tours to different camps. And then me and David hired a private chauffeur with a car and says I want to go a Auschwitz; I want to go to Birkenau. We had to have the courage, you know. So drive to Auschwitz, and naturally I walk in, now my memory comes. When I came to Auschwitz I was forced in. And this thing, you know, the railroad crossing that long thing was closed shut, electric wire, no way out. Here I walk in because I want to walk in. And I know on the other side is a guy waiting with a Mercedes for me, and I walk out. I'm liberated. That's why I say I didn't feel liberated when the Allies came. I walked in my free will and I walked out. And since then I feel liberated.

Q: You never felt got liberated since –

A: No, because –

Q: Sort of just trapped with the memories?

A: I was just then, as I say, I came in and took over like a landlord buys a building and the tenants were there. They came and they were there; the territory was occupied and we were there. But there was no provision for us, you know, like I would understand they came in with doctors or, or Red Cross, you know, medication or some food, nothing. Pictures.

Q: Anything else you want to add?

A: Well, that's about it.

03:45:25

Q: Thank you.

A: My pleasure.