

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Shony Alex Braun
June 28, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Shony Alex Braun, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on June 28, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Research Institute's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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SHONY ALEX BRAUN

June 28, 1990

Q: Tell me your full name please?

A: My name is Shony Alex Braun.

Q: Where and when were you born?

A: I was born in Transylvania--at the time was governed by Romania and later [1940] switched to Hungary--in 1930, July 14th.

Q: Shony, tell me a little bit about family and your childhood, will you?

A: I was born into an orthodox family. And we were very family- minded, and, of course, very religious. My parents, and... uh ...he was a jeweler, actually. And...uh...we...we were a very close knit family. And a very interesting thing happened with me, if I may share with you. At age four, I got lost in a forest. The governess took me out; and she said she sat down and fell asleep, and I walked away. And I was found by the Gypsies. There were some Gypsies. They were roaming the forest. And maybe they have come from...God knows which part of the country. However, they found me and they kept me for about three days. And this is where I first time heard the violin. And seems like that was a destiny, because would it not be for the violin--as you will hear later of our conversation--I would not be able to speak to you today.

Q: Will you...(cough)... Tell me about your...your family. Um, did you have brothers and sisters? What did you do during the day?

A: Yes. I was the fourth of six children. And because of the fact that the violin, I was exposed that early... Of course, these Gypsies returned me to my family after they found out whom I belonged to. And...uh...we were...I was actually three. It's very strange--probably unbelievable--but in three...at three years old I was when I started to learn the Hebrew alphabet. When I was five, I could read it very well. And the everyday's life was actually studying and...uh...lot of...lot of praying at the time, as usual. And, of course, one other thing. Uh...The area where we lived in Transylvania, the city called I.G. Duca--I.G. Duca, that was given after a assassinated Romanian president.¹ And...uh...they were not very friendly to Jews. And at the time it was not that severe as it came later on. So, we were restricted. However, we went to school. And ...uh...every one of my brothers and sisters--we were two sisters and four brothers. And...uh...we were allowed to...to go to school and learn like everybody else. However, we would be hearing here and there that we are a Jew, or occasionally that we were "Christ-killers." And that restricted us. Of course, certain places

¹ The original name of the town was Székely-Keresztúr (**Hung**), or Criturul-Secuiesc (**Rom**). The name was changed sometime in the 1930s, in honor of the slain Romanian leader Ion G. Duca. (Information from telephone conversation with Shony Alex Braun, 25 Jul 1991).

we could not join. Like we children would have loved to be a part of this club or that club where other children were, but we were not allowed to. And this... this is how our everyday lifes went.

Q: When did you start to learn the violin?

A: Uh, about a year later. As...as I mentioned, I was four when I got exposed by the Gypsies. And these were very nice people, by the way. Uh, a year later, my parents found a small violin. Due to the fact that there wasn't a day going by that I would not be begging my parents, "I want this! I want this!" I couldn't even say "hegedü"--that's Hungarian name for the violin. So finally, they gave in. And exactly that, to be exact July 14, which was my birthday, they...uh, at age five, they finally presented me with a violin. And I was not allowed to hold, actually, to...uh play with that; only and strictly with a teacher. Because my father, I'm sure that he knew, and so did my mother, that if I had just gotten on and I would have played and maybe got frustrated trying alone to get a tune here and there what I heard from the Gypsies, from bird imitations and God knows what else. So I would have been just dropping it. But no, it was with a teacher from the beginning on. And would you believe that not once I had to be told to practice. In fact, just the opposite happened. My mother, for instance, would tell my father, "Just tell him to go out and play outside, and go on the sun. Look how pale he is! He's...he's practicing too much. And he's not going with some of the other children out." You know. And so this is really strange, because most children has to be told...have to be told, "Practice!" But not me. I loved it from the start.

Q: Tell us where that took you, as...as a young child. What did you end up doing?

A: When...uh... I really honestly have to tell you this. This is only to share with you. I'm not trying to impress anyone. But...uh...I progressed rapidly. Was due to the fact probably that I loved it so much; and also, of course, that I was born with a good musical ear. And...uh...by the time I was 11, I enrolled to a nearby conservatory, nearby our city, maybe...uh ...60 kilometers--which was probably less than 30 miles away.² And I was one of the very few student that was admitted. Now at that time really to be admitted in that school and to that specific teacher, you really had to be...uh...very tops. Because Jews were only admitted a certain percentage; and then you had to be playing or knowing or...or being twice or three times as good as your other friends who were not Jewish, you know? And...uh...it happened that I got a scholarship with this man. And with age...up to age 13, where I graduated the conservatory. And then I got another scholarship at that point... If I may mention--at that point, we were already instead of being Romania... Of course, in 1940 when I was 10 years old, just to back up a little, then a...a major change occurred when unfortunately Hitler invaded or came into Hungary and...uh...actually came to Transylvania, and then forced the Romanian to give a part of Transylvania back to Hungary. The Hungarians claimed they

² This was in Tîrgu-Mureș (**also:** Târgu-Mureș). The same city is also known by the Hungarian name of Maros-Vásárhely. (Information from telephone conversation with Shony Alex Braun, 25 Jul 1991).

were always theirs; and the Romanian, of course, argued that it was not so. And so now we, instead of being Romanian, we became Hungarian citizens. But then the problem was more more severe for the Jews. Slowly, we were thrown out of schools. I was an exceptional...uh...person as far as the Hungarians concerned, with...with their law; because while I was in that--it was not a city, a small town--I would be playing for the...uh... police, giving a concert as a youngster. Or for the fireman's ball; they would feature me before anything, with a solo or so. So because I did so many charitable things in that city... Like the poor people--at Christmas time, they would be asking an Orthodox Jew... But still, it was no difference, you know, as far as... When you can do something good, then you do it. And, uh...so we...I was actually allowed because of that, it really came...uh, to my...to my rescue as far as not being thrown out of the school immediately. So there were very few percentage of the Jews...uh, Jewish children that they were allowed to...be made exception. And I was one of them they made an exception to the rule. So I was allowed to continue, up 'til one dreadful morning in May 1944. That's where the Hungarian gendarme--small town police--was banging on the door in our home...at our home, and said, "We give you one hour to gather some belongings. For instance, pots and pans and the clothes on your back and some blankets. One hour." And they herded us into an apartment complex in the back yard of. And they was incredible. You...you wondering what's going on. And for us children, we couldn't...we couldn't comprehend. Why...why they doing that? In fact, before this came to pass, uh...I like to mention that laws came. For instance, Jews were not allowed to go out without yellow star. And that brought even more antisemitism by the...some adults and the mostly, of course, younger children or teenagers. They would be spitting at us. They would be throwing stones at us. Sometimes I would be cornered by going from one place to the other in...or I would be on the street and beaten up. And sometimes...uh, they would be torn...uh, the...the... What do you call it? The coat off my back; and just left there, you know, practically almost with nothing on me. To which...to shame me, because I was a Jew. And we would be called "Christ-killers." It was...it was impossible to comprehend that the same person who "yesterday" was playing with me--gentiles--today he would be beating me up and calling me "Christ-killer." So that day...

Q: What... Tell me a little more about those years. You were very young. Uh, what...what...what else was your family doing during these years of occupation? What was life like in the ghetto for them?

A: We...we actually...uh...started, as I have mentioned, in 1940 until 1944. Uh, periodically, it was very, very difficult. For instance, my father--who was an Orthodox Jew--naturally wouldn't ever be open, or the store, on Saturday. They forced us to open. That was only to...uh...to make you do something which is against your conviction, against your religious beliefs. And they were--the gendarme, the so-called police who I mentioned--would be there, make sure that he opened every Saturday. So that...and he would be sitting there in the store. And we...we would be...uh...restricted from many things. Jews were not allowed, of course, later on, to be on the street from a certain time on. If you caught on the street from...let's say from 6:00 on, you would be imprison and beaten up by the police. Not only...of course, it was very dangerous to...to walk on the...on the street at that hour; because not only that the

police would be getting at you, but the people that they lived there. I must tell you honestly, not every one of them were anti-Semites. For instance, there was a...must, for the sake of truth, must mention it. Was very strange though. Was...uh, a friend of my father, a German who was bank director. And he would be giving my father helpful hints. Uh, for instance, like he foresee what's going to happen. He foresee it. Because he had informations, because he was a German. But instead of keeping quiet, he would come to my father and would say, for instance, "Listen, you having minor children. Why don't you falsify their birth certificate? Make them older. Just in case if something happens, then...uh...they are old enough to work. Rather than something will happen to them." And my father knew quite a bit in advance, but he would never tell us or not even to my mother. So we would not make them...not scare them, you know, or us. My parents were fantastic, I tell you. My father was just a genius in many, many different... Even in medicine, which is actually what he studied to begin with. But then war, speaking of the other war, came; and he had to do something different. So he became a jeweler. It's a wonderful thing to be. So this was...uh, actually the life during the occupation, as far as the Hungarians came. Now from...at that time, if I may continue, from that time on, when we were herded into that apartment complex and were about 200 or more Jews gathered from all kind of a directions--not only from that...uh, town, but from neighboring towns. We were there. We were outside. We had our absolutely no...nothing to lay on. For instance, we...we were in the back yard and on the grass, and it was still wet. And sometimes it complicated things when...when was raining. We were absolutely out in the open. Kept there, and soaking wet, with very little to eat. What we brought, gathered in that one hour which I mentioned when the police banged on our door. Everything we were stripped of. The only thing, as I mentioned, we were allowed to be taken the clothes which we had on, a blanket and some pots and pans. Now from that place about three or four days later, when enough Jews were gathered, we were put on horse-drawn carts and we were taken into a brick factory nearby. And they were thousands of Jews gathered, their families; and the...the condition was incredible. For instance, now they...they had...the first time in my life I have seen SS guards and officers in that town. In fact, the sad thing about it is that's was the town where I went and studied in conservatory, when it was so wonderful that I would be allowed to be one of those Jews and having a scholarship. Now the very same town, I am imprisoned and encaptured--captured, I mean--in that brick factory. This also when it rained there was nothing, absolutely nothing, to cover us. Not...not very long after--we were there about a week, I would say maybe roughly speaking--and some other terrible thing happened. My two older brothers were drafted by the Hungarian Army as what they called "forced laborer." And it came the news that they were sent in the front. You know, this is what they did. The...the SS did the same thing, as well as the Hungarians. They sent the Jewish forced laborer... they, they wore armband and the star, but they went ahead of the...of the soldiers, of the Hungarian or German soldiers, and so that if they were mined ahead of them. So wherever the territory was mined, they would be stepping on it, would be blown up-- (cough) excuse me--and not the...not the Army. And word came. And you imagine now this. I was a 13 year old, not quite 14, at that time. And somehow I intercepted that letter which came to the ghetto that my two brothers--the older brothers, Adolph and Emil--were both perished. They were both blown to pieces by one of these mines...one of these mines, that were under...you know, undermined. And I kept that terrible secret 'til liberation because I

would never tell my father nor my mother. Nor would I tell my sister, was still there. Uh, my older sister was...uh...with us at the time. Was only the two...when the family was taken from home, my old...two older brothers were already forced laborer...taken as forced laborer. And that terrible knowledge that I couldn't share with anyone. And I begged the person who brought the letter, actually, the notification, not to say a word to anyone. And I don't know how did he...he got...uh...uh, that knowledge. I don't know. It came...uh...through the mail, it came from the Red Cross, or whatever it was the case. Because somebody else from his family was blown up; and so were the Braun brothers, my two brothers. And I would not tell. But to keep that awful things within me, it was terrible. So being in that...in that ghetto, we had very little to eat. Very, very little. And something happened. The SS would be building outside in the open, within that the frame of the brick factory, latrinas. And would...I as, well...you know, when...when you privacy when you...when you have to...uh, when...when nature calls you. And...uh, I would have never ever even dreamed to do anything in presence of...of somebody who's not only is a stranger, not even friends. In fact, even our parents, let's say, we would be not exposing ourselves openly. That's somehow strange, but that's the way it was. It...it took 5, 10...maybe 5 to 10 days being in that. It's very, very unbelievable; but it's true. I couldn't possibly ...uh, do what...what nature calls. And that...that caused a terrible problem, because we were in the open. And I noticed when women and men, they...right in the open. And then the SS would come and take pictures of us; and they would be laughing and...and enjoying that terrible shame that we had, to do our duties in the open and during the day. At least, if it was nights or darkness...you know? But it...it just terrible. Now, one day they gathered us again and took us out to the train station, and they said we have to go. I noticed the train with cattle cars. Now, there were also no facilities where one can go to the bathroom, if that's the way you want to call it, you know. And what...strange thing happened that we...some of us, refused to board the train. And the SS said, "We're going to kill you if you're not going to board the train." So some people threw themselves down to the ground. And the SS went and at random took some children and some women, some older people; and they lined up and just shot them at random. Just shot them dead. That, of course, scared the rest of us. So what we did, in order... For them, life was absolutely nothing. Like you stepping on an ant, even less. But--(coughing) excuse me--they want to...want to show to the rest of us terror. Always that SS terror, you know; with that fear and terror that we would be mindlessly following what they ordered us to do. And we...we boarded the train. And I can tell you, the worst thing yet to come, in that specific cattle car was no sanitation facilities. Was no air, no water; and a very, very rare occasion the train would be stopping and then they would allow some people to get off the train. Some. And mostly... uh, older people, maybe sometimes they allowed them. What happened, if they didn't come back soon enough, they would just shoot them like dogs. And now, at the next stop when it was, then people were afraid to get off. They would say, "Whoever wants to get out, you can get off." Yah, but when you get off, you knew that you gonna be shot if you're not gonna be back. "Los! Los!" You were not fast enough, they just shoot you and left you right there. When we arrived a few days later... Now in the cattle cars, there were a lot of older people and children. They couldn't stand the heat. They couldn't stand the...the terrible scent, or... Or what do you call it? That's the terrible smell. And we have to do our duties right in there. So, many of them died right in the car as we went. We...we didn't know then, but we were going

destination Auschwitz. When we arrived to Auschwitz, we were not allowed out of the car...off the train yet. They were holding us for quite some time. Hours and hours, and during the night and during the day. When finally the...the car door...the car door opened, we were ordered out. As soon as we stepped out, head prisoners--called kapos--SS guards, rushed toward us. Started kicking, hitting, punching and using the whips anyone they could reach. They ordered us to get in line. While we...we were doing that, because we were not fast enough, the kicking and the punching continued, and the whipping. When we lined up, I noticed that an SS officer approached us. It was the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele. And ...uh, that was the man who decide our fate. Instant death in a gas chamber, or lingering life of torture and slavery. And what was interesting, I noticed--specifically for me was noticeable--because actually he was holding a slender stick in his hand and which was a conductor's baton. And we were ordered to file by him; and as we would be passing him or filing by him, he would be motion to the left or to the right. My mother and my younger sister were motioned to the left. My older sister... By the way, my younger sister was 9 years old. She was made...she had a certificate falsified, trumped up to be 12. But Mengele just looked at her and my mother, and just motioned them on one side. Now, my older sister--who was 18--she was motioned to the other side. My father and my older brother--older than I³--they were also motioned to the side where my sister--whose name was Violet, "Ibolya" in Hungarian--they were motioned to that side. When my turn came, to...to my...to my great surprise, Mengele motioned me to stop, gestured me to stop. And says--sweetly, like a father--says, "How old are...how old are you, little boy?" And I said, "I am 16!" And he looked at me suspiciously, and then he motioned me to the same side where my father and older brother and older sister was. Now the reason, and that was where that--remember I mentioned earlier that...that...uh, bank director, the German who coached my father. And, in fact, I said, "I am 16, and I can prove it too." And I had it in my...in my jacket there; but...but he just looked at me like with a very strange smile. Probably what it said, he knew I was...I was no 16, because I didn't look even...even 13, or almost 14, by the way. You know, but he probably said to himself--this is only my guessing--that, "You regret the fact that you lied to me. I let you live, but you regret it." You know? However, I was safe for the time being.

Q: Stop here. We need to change tapes, please. Very quickly.

³ He is referring here to his brother Zoltan, who was actually 11 months his junior, but who appeared older. During the war, Zoltan's age was also faked on written records so that he became "older" than Shony. (Information from telephone conversation with Shony Braun, 25 Jul 1991).

TAPE #2

- Q: Okay. Let's go on. Mengele... Just repeat it after me. Mengele had motioned you to the right, and then what? Where did you go?
- A: When uh Mengele motioned to me to the right, of course, I went immediately into the group where my father and my older brother were. Because then they would be separating men and women. And we were taken to a building where we were stripped from everything now, even what we had on our back. Every... everything we had to leave. And we were shaven, and everywhere where you can imagine. And then later on, we were issued these prisoners'...uh...uniform, and assigned to a barrack. A few days later, while we were... Every single day we would be counted. Counted, so God forbid if somebody would not escape, you know. And, of course, we had very little to eat. We had some kind of a very questionable jelly kind of a thick substance in a bowl; and each...only one sip we were allowed to take. And that bowl would be passed over the line of five; and each...each group, you know, in each line for five. And then behind the five. So you had to pass it over to the other person. One swallow of it. If not, you were...you were beaten. And they would be head prisoners--called kapos--who would be watching you, as well as the SS guards. Now, you know, you couldn't possibly sip yourself full of anything, because one sip; and if you were lucky, then it might get back to you to have another sip. So we were assigned to a barrack. One night, as I was standing in line to be counted, a kapo came. The head prisoners--and let's refer from now on as...as kapo. Came to our line where I was standing, and picked prisoners at random for what they called it "Sonderkommando"--a special commando. And that meant now separation; because we somehow managed to stay, my father and my brother and myself, stay in one barrack together. At least we were together. And...uh, now that meant separation. And my job--our job, for the Sonderkommando--was to go around the camp and pick up dead or nearly dead bodies, put them on a cart and cart them or push them up to the crematoria where another group of people, Sonderkommandos, would take over and they would shove them in...to the oven. Some of these people were far from being dead. They were just helpless, very ill or dehydrated of... or...or from hunger. They just didn't have any more... uh, power even to stand. So they fell. Now, they were left there; and now we were sent to pick them up, as I mentioned, put them on a cart and push them in a crematorium. On one occasion, I went to the kapo and I said, "This man is not dead!" I get a...such a terrible slap in a face that I made a somersault. I was a little boy, anyway. And he says, "You were not supposed to think or say anything! Your job is to pick them up and put them on a cart and shove them up to the crematorium, just as you were told." Now from that time on, there was nothing I could do. Just pick them up, as he said, with four or six of us, in fact, many cases...occasions. Believe it or not, I have a picture. I couldn't find it, momentarily. I...I would have...if I find it, I give it to you; because I know that the Holocaust Museum would love it. But it was...it's not the one that I worked. However, an eyewitness who went... I just venture away from the subject. You may find it interesting. An eyewitness went after the war, or he was one of the liberator. He found...he took pictures of one of these carts. And he...it was in Auschwitz. And he took it; and when...when I met him not long ago--only four, five years ago, I think it was. Either in Annapolis, or Austin, Texas. One or the other. Where

I performed. He presented it to me, when I told him the story that I was... unfortunately, this what I had to do. So back to the story. I...I would be working about six days in that Sonderkommando. You cannot imagine. I tell you, the most awful things. Some of these people, they were left for days. Not only the smell, there were flies on it. And they...they...the flesh was starting to rotten. It's heat, you know. And...uh...we're talking about end of May, and...uh...beginning of June [1944]. And they...they were put some...some other Sonderkommando went and would spray some kind of a material on it, so as to disinfect them. But that was (laughing) ...you know, made it look even worse. So as I mentioned, about six or seven days I was working. Now in that Sonderkommando was a man who would be about the same years old as my father was--about 41, 42. And he had a son who was maybe about a year or two older than I. And word came to this Kommando--that...that was the father, who also got torn away from his son. And word came that the barrack which my father and brother were, next day going to be transferred to France. And he--the wise and ingenious plan. He says, "In the evening, when we prisoners are rushed, really beaten to group, 'Get into line! Fast! Fast! Antreten, und so weiter! [Ger: "Line up, and so on"]' And so on. When we're running, my son...I going... Somehow, I'm going to let him...my son is going to run in that barrack. And you should run and stay in line with...with your father's barrack." And nobody's the wiser, because we were only numbers. We had no names. We're numbers. He said, "Surely, you wanted to be with your father and brother. And I want my son." And I said, "Oh, yes! Oh, what a wonderful thing." And it worked. It worked. I got to be together again with my family...which was left from my family. And he got his son. Now, at this point, I must say that when...when my mother and...uh, little sister... Back in...in...still in Auschwitz, when they...when the selections were over, and Mengele sent them to the right or to the left; remember they did sent them to the left, my mother and small sister. When the selection was complete...or were complete, they were taken direct to the gas chamber. And they can...I'm sorry that I'm...I'm going back, but I...for the sake of...of the truth... They were given by...by the SS, a towel and a piece of soap. And it was in a...in a building written "Bade"--means "Bath." And they were told that they going to go in to take showers. Camouflaged the fact... See, that the SS didn't want uprising, they didn't want wailings and crying, and what have you. They were said, "No, no. Nothing's going to happen to you. Just go in and take showers." Once they entered into that large room and the door was locked, they would let gas in there. Now, what the terrible thing was in... One of the...one of the lucky thing, in a way, for me...the terrible thing was they would be dead. Of course, they would be stark naked. They would be sending us to go and pick up the dead bodies who they just gassed, and...and cart them up to the crematoria. My...as I said, lucky for me, was that I was not the one at the time who belonged to the Sonderkommando. Because, I assure you, I would have killed myself right then and there. I could not see my mother being...and my sister being in that condition and...and killed, and then I would go on living. I couldn't survive it. Now, back when the Sonderkommando--other words, they were reunited. And my father and my brother, as I mentioned it, and I, were reunited. We were reunited and off to France. While we were going, one of the prisoner... I...I told him, I said, "You know it's a terrible what's happened." I was telling, of course, in my very low key while we were going. I was saying, "It's terrible." I says, "I picked up dead bodies, and they...they...some of them were not dead at all. And if they would be attended, they would be healthy. They could have

been made better, you know, cured them." The illness was only give more food and water. At any rate, he says, "Well, how long did you work in that Sonderkommando?" I said, "There were seven days that I worked." He says, "That was your last day, my dear." Says, "Next day, you and all the other Sonderkommando...uh...people would be burned, and new ones would be selected." They did not keep them but six or seven days. By...by a chance of...of... How else can I say but miracle? That if it would not be the fact from that father wanted his son... He didn't know either. But what was...the point was, as I was told later on, that the SS feared just by chance if someone would escape, by chance, and could tell the world the atrocities that they were doing. 'Cause these people were burned alive. I mean, they were not at all dead. Most of them. Now in France, something happened that I am going to cherish, even it was dangerous and almost got shot to death. But I'll share this with you. I got to...uh...when we arrived, I was put...I was put in a ammunition factory.⁴ And first...first three days, I was cutting parts. Certain parts to certain weapons. And then I was put to...put...I was put next to a machine, or to a machine, where I was filling up capsules with gunpowder. And that was for a secret weapon. Now we did not know that, and I found out only after liberation. But nevertheless, the Germans invented certain type of weapon. I don't know if it was not the V-2 rocket. When they shot an airplane, there was no escape. It was something...it may have a sensor kind of a...

Q: Don't worry about it.

A: Yes. So that the...this drove the rocket to the plane, it would tear it to pieces. So one...I was working and putting, as I said, gunpowder. Fill the capsule with gunpowder, and ...and it was done by a machine. Now, I was guiding them. One day a prisoner who spoke Hungarian and Yiddish like myself; but he was a Frenchman. I didn't know then. Perfect Hungarian. And he says, "Uh, tell me. What would you do? Would you give up your life just to get rid of this maniac, Hitler? To defeat him, to get the war over...war over quicker?" I said, "Yes. Anything! Why?" He says, "Now, I want you to do this. See those?" They were electricians. They were French men. Civilians. They were working in that factory, munition factory. He says, "We're going to supply you with plain, ordinary sand. Now what I want you to do: you mix sand with the gunpowder before you put it in. Just put it in and mix it." Oh, it was nothing to it. They brought me some food. And there was...and there was a bottom to that. And I ate farina. I'll never forget it, because it was my favorite. Oh, sure! And I was doing it. One day, it's another group came. And one of the...among the newcomer prisoners, there was a Nazi. A spy, who detected the whole sabotage movement and identified the

⁴ Mr. Braun does not remember the name of this camp. However, he believes it was near Luxembourg. He remembers seeing a sign which said "Villerupt." (Information from telephone conversation with Shony Alex Braun, 25 Jul 1991). Based on this information, it would appear that he was sent to **Longwy-Thil**, a subcamp of Natzweiler located in the northern Meurthe-et-Moselle section of Lorraine, right on the Luxembourg border (and close to the town of Villerupt). According to Arolsen, Longwy-Thil was opened on June 19, 1944 and closed in early September 1944--at which time, all of the prisoners were evacuated either to Kochendorf (in a transport sent September 1, 1944) or to Buchenwald/Dernau (in a transport sent September 4, 1944).

leader. And he happened to be a French captain from the underground, smuggled among us. He was hanged. Everyone of us who worked...now I, now everybody were a saboteur. We were about 60 in that factory, prisoners that working. Everyone did something different. But I was the one who was putting sand, mixed with the thing, so that the second stage would not go off. And we were...were not allowed to avert our eyes from this man. We had to wait 'til he died, and watch him. Then 60 of us were lined up in a horizontal way, straight; and that SS guard came and looked. And went...he says, "You! Step out of the line." And went, "You." Do you know that half of them were selected at random? Now he passed me twice, and he still needed one. God honest truth! He still needed one prisoner. He wanted still one. He passed me again. I...I was passed by three times for the very same day selecting 30. Half of them were right away shot, right at random. The others--meaning me--were sent back to the barrack, beaten severely; and I had a sign in my back this way, like a rainbow, said, "Saboteur." So that any time, as I would be walking by, one of the kapo or one of the SS, they just kicked me. And what does God do? Not long after they...we had to give up. So we gave up our...our uniform. Finally, we...somehow, we got washed or...or--believe it or not. This is incredible, 'cause nothing was washed there. We were eaten up by lice and everything else. But this happened to be. And what does God do? I did not get the "Saboteur" back; so I was just a plain, ordinary prisoner. That was another miracle that I was not picked; because the idea was really, "Let me now suffer for a while." And for...for many of us that they were selected, 30 of them--believe it or not, whoever listens to this--it's...it's incredible. For 29 of them, were given back the "Saboteur" thing. I was not having any. I was just having a plain, ordinary uniform. How it happened, I don't know. This is another miracle. Not speaking of the miracle really, I call. If you call...if somebody calls it "coincident," okay. But I do believe in miracles. So. Now not long after that, we were...the Allies were near. So the Germans--or the SS, I should say really-- liquidated us. They transferred us back...back to Germany. And while during the way we're going, you know, the Allies... the planes could be seen near. And occasionally these SS guards would be stopping and shooting at them, and they shot back. So many times, unfortunately, we prisoners got also the bullets flying from the airplanes. I have to mention something which happened--uh, talking about France and I saboteur...sabotaged. Happened in Cleveland, Ohio, in the early part of 50s. Uh, I came from school. I was going to Western Reserve University. And somebody gave me a check; because I had...I had no money, and I bought a car and I had to pay out certain things. So a friend...uh, gave me a check. And I thought, well, a check would be cashed at any bank. So I just walked in, and it had difficulty. I had language difficulty; and certainly I had no money in any car, in any...no account of a bank, not theirs or any other. So it was about noontime. And the teller was kind enough to escort me into bank...bank president's office, so that he spoke several languages. And maybe one of the languages that he spoke would be matching which...which I speak, you know, which I spoke. So at any rate...uh, now I speak five. At the time, it was four. This English was not the first. At any rate, I went to the bank director, and he was very courteous. And he says, "Well," he says, "are you French?" And I said, "No." Because I ask him...I said, "Can we speak...Do you speak German? Do you speak French?" And he says, "German." He says, "Well, are you French?" And I said, "No, but I was in France." And I was relating the story what I actually did. And when I got to the point that I put sand instead of gun powder, he sprang from his...his chair where he was seated at the

desk and ran to me and grabbed my hand and says, "God bless you! God Bless you!" I said, "Well, thank you." He says, "Now, well, let me explain. My son and his...and mine crew, they were fighter pilots." You know, they were bombing an area around France, around the place where the...where that munition factory was. And they were shot with one of these rockets which got caught...the rocket got caught in the wing or in the tail of the plane. They carried it back with them to the base. And, very carefully, they took this bomb...the rocket apart, see why it did not explode. They found sand in...in that capsule, which did not allow for the second stage impact. You know, the blowing up. Did not allow to blow up. Now, that was in about '51 or '52. Now, not long ago, in Houston, Texas, another fighter pilot was-- actually, I...I found out about this fighter pilot was shot with one of this kind of a shell, and his did not explode. Now, I'm only praying to God, and I hope that there were many of these. Because if I would have been dead or they would have killed me, but knowing this now, I say, "It would have been worth it!" Just to save that many lives of..of Allies, you know. Soldiers that they were trying to liberate the world from such a terrible thing.

Q: Let's go back. You are in France. Tell us what happened next.

A: When...after the selection in France and being shot...executed because of the sabotage. And some miracle...miraculous way I was saved. Then not long after, as I mentioned, we were again transferred to another place--to Germany. And in Germany, I was assigned to work in a salt mine. My brother and my father, they were still alive. So all three of us managed still to be together. And we were working; and one...at Yom Kippur, in the salt mine. All of a sudden, the mine became dark; and we said, "This is a sign from heaven!" Because we were terribly tired. Now at this point we were less and less. We got less and less food, and we were...while our... Our condition was so deteriorated that some peopled started to get shingles. And they...they would be just working in this second, and the next second they would just keel over. And if you did that, they would not bother with you. I mean, there was no hospital. There was no room where you could rest. They would take you and be done with you; either to the gas chamber or they shot you to death. Or throw you into the ditch, and you die there. In the salt mine--as I said, Yom Kippur--immediately as the area became dark, we dropped everything and we sat down. Now, our...our work was, in the salt mine, to... They detonated big salt stones; and then we came with the... Would you believe that? A 14 year-old, at this point. We came and had those heavy hammers, and we were trying to break the salt stones--huge salt stones. Pieces as ...as large probably as...as...as this room, or larger. And they were actually...the Germans were building an underground street. A whole town underground. They were going to uh... uh...save the factories--(clearing throat) excuse me-- munition factories, because the Allies bombed them too much. So they...they wanted to save them; and we were the one who was going...who were going to build. And we did, in fact. There were so many fantastic places under the ground. I...I couldn't possibly tell you. Maybe...maybe 200 feet under. And...but, as...as we were dropping on the ground ourselves ...uh...in 10 minutes later, light came back. Electricity was restored. What happened was actually one of prisoners who ask himself to be allowed to go to the latrina...you know, you call it. He couldn't stand it any longer. He had a...a fork or a spoon fashioned into--you know, you were doing that--into a knife. And he cut the electric wire, and everything in that

specific area became dark. Within seconds--I mean, not seconds. We were minutes. Uh, it took 10 minutes total to restore order, to restore the light. But the kapo noticed, and knew who was the one who went by that. He was caught. Then he was beaten severely. Again, we had to witness his hanging. And then again the same thing. People that they were there were picked at random. Again, I was bypassed. But we got a severe beating. And what happened actually, when we...when we dropped--I forgot to tell you--we were starting to chant the Kol Nidre. Somebody started; and there was about 40, 50 of us over there in that area. And the others got... Even...even if you didn't know the words, you know, you started started chanting it; because it was...it was Kol Nidre, it was Yom Kippur. And when the light came back, the the SS came in and were severely beating us. "There's... there's no chanting! There's no...uh...holiday! There's arbeit! There's work!" And as I said, we then had to watch him hang. When...when we were...while we were still in salt mines, which was in Kochendorf.⁵ This is a small town. February...February 1945, my father turned 42. And at home we used to exchange gifts. We would be buying something for our parents, you know, even each other. No matter how small; but the idea we buying presents. And...but we had absolutely nothing to give. The SS stripped us of everything. Then I came up with the idea; and I went to my brother--whose name was Zoltan. And I said, "Why don't we give him our ration of bread for the day?" Now, our ration of bread was just a piece of bread. So Zoltan liked that, and he says, "Yes!" So in the evening, we approached our father and held out our hands with a piece of bread in it. And he would not hear about it. He says, "No! That is nourishment for you. That means life. I wouldn't think about it!" But we kept on insisting. So, and finally our...our insistence--with tears in his eyes, he said, "Thank God, that allowed me to live long enough to witness that graciousness, that love from my sons." Next morning when would... **[TAPE SPEED PROBLEM: END OF TAPE]**

⁵ Subcamp of Natzweiler. Located near Württemberg. Opened September 3, 1944.

TAPE #3

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: The next morning...

A: Next morning at 5:00 AM, as we always we did before going to the salt mine, we were counted. One prisoner was missing. After several recounts, prisoner...one prisoner was still missing. So the kapos went to the barrack to see...or to look for him. And they found the missing man sleeping in the corner. My father! They dragged him from...from his collar, from...from his collar to the SS guard. That's February: cold, snowing, ice on the ground. And the SS guard turned to the assembly, to us. And he said, "As I understand, the Jewish dog has here two sons. I want them to step out and come near him. Witness his punishment." So we had to step out. So we step out, and we were standing near him. Then he turned to the rest of them. He says, "This dirty Jewish dog kept Germany from victory 10 minutes, because that's how long it took to find him!" Then he gave a swift kick to my father, which signaled the kapos to start the punishment. They rushed toward him, and was kicking and beating him from all direction. Whipping him. We fell on our knees. And we turned to the SS and said, "Please, stop! Beat **us**! Please don't do it!" The...the beating was even more severe. Then slowly, I started chanting the...the 22nd Psalm. I think it's the 22nd. "Eli, Eli, lama azavtanu?"--"Oh, God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken us?" They were beating him until he collapsed, my father. And was silent; except for his lips were moving, try to say something. And I noticed...came closer, and I noticed that he was reciting the declaration of faith of the Jewish people. Sh'ma. The Sh'ma: "Sh'ma Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad"--"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." And he was very silent. I must tell you that, first time in my life, the faith in God was destroyed. Completely broken. Like so many times, I heard after, people say: "How could God allow something like that happen to innocent people?" This is the same question I put then. How could God allow? I had no answer. Then, at night, in my dream, my father appear. And this is what he said. "Yitzhak." He called me my Hebrew name. He says, "Don't ever lose your faith in God. God is real. You'll see. You'll survive." Now, he spoke Hungarian in my dream; but what was so strange, he didn't say plural. He said, "you,"-- meaning "you and your brother"--but he said "you" the singular. And when we...when I woke up... Now, previous day when we seen that, Zoltan-- who was my brother--who was a very strong individual... He was one of those kind of a workout constantly, with muscles some...uh...incredible...uh...size. And he said...and he said to me, he says, "I am going to kill that SS! 'Cause I don't want to live any longer. I cannot stand it any longer. I am going to commit suicide; but I am going to take that SS guard who gave the order for our father to be killed by being beaten to death!" And I said, "Zoltan, you wouldn't even come one step close, not even five inches close, to him before you would be shot. Don't do it!" No, he...he was determined to do it. And when the dream I told him, I said, "Father said, 'Don't lose all your faith in God.'" Which, of course, that restored my faith immediately. "But he said also we going to survive." Then he completely abandoned the idea of killing; because he would have done that. I mean, you couldn't be...you wouldn't be able to kill that man, but he would be killed right away. And so one day the SS again gathered us

together. Now, we're still in Kochendorf. They gathered us. Now, they're going to evacuate us for...another time. This time, destination Dachau. When in Dachau... Again they pulled the very same thing, like going from France to Kochendorf, back to Germany.⁶ Except this time, was much more severe. They stopped the train. And got out and started again, seeing the pilots coming so close... We could see actually the pilot. They started shooting. They took refuge or cover under the...under the uh train, you know. And these ...these pilots shot back. So, again, quite a few of the prisoners were shot. Now, in my... When we were in cattle cars, the bullets were flying left and right. And somebody... See, we were so sandwiched together that if you sit...if you sat down, you couldn't get up. If you were standing, you could not sit down. Because if you wanted to sit, the prisoners would be like dogs; fighting among each other, too. Completely we were brought down to the level of animals. And I happened to be seated at that point. The bullets were flying; and one of the prisoners who was very near me was shot and he fell. And he fell right on my head. And he died on my foot. And I couldn't...I tried to push him off. I couldn't push him off. There were no room to ...to make. And it was the most awful thing. It was another two or three days. Can you imagine? This man is on my foot. People, believe it! That's incredible! That's almost as impossible. Impossible! It's somehow possible. It was on my foot then; and I couldn't... couldn't... My...my foot, both of them were numb--went to sleep, as you say. You know. Numb. And I tried desperately to move. Can you manage how like sandwich...over a sandwich, like sardines. You couldn't move...you couldn't move your...your leg one way or the other. Incredible! Incredible! So, finally, we arrived to Dachau. After a day or so, I knew if something not going to happen soon, I'm not going to survive. At this point, I was so weak that I could hardly stand. And you have to stand, no matter what happen. When an SS guard came, in his presence you have to...you have to stand. One day, as we were standing in line, Zoltan--my brother--just fell. I said, "Oh, my God! Zoltan, get up!" I said, "What's wrong with you?" He said, "I don't feel good. I don't feel good." And so he was taken away. I was told that he's gonna be taken into a place in the Revier [Ger: Hospital]. They put him in to--I found out...what I'm gonna tell you right now, I found out only after liberation and only a month or two later, when...when I got to myself, even. Because I was a long time in coma. But we found out why. But he...he was taken away; and never seen him. And I was told that when an SS guard walked into that place, they would allow him maybe a few hours. And then, since he was strong enough--I mean, looked strong enough--to work, they would give him a few hours to recuperate. See what happens? When an SS walked in, everybody had to stand up. No matter how...how sick or what. Now, when he couldn't stand up, this SS stepped on his neck and choked him to death with his boots. Pressing his boots with his neck, and choked him to death. I only found after...after liberation, now as I mentioned. But as I...as I said, in Dachau now, about a few days later I knew if something desperate...if something drastic not going to happen, I would not...I'm gonna wind up giving up. Because I...I couldn't...I couldn't stand on my feet. What happens? One day an SS walks in, late night, wakes up the whole thing. You know? We were on just a piece of...of wood we were ...uh...uh...sleeping on. And he says, "Who can play the violin..." He's holding a violin and bow in his hand. "Who can play the violin, come in the front room." This is where the Kapos

⁶ According to Arolsen, this evacuation took place on April 9, 1945.

were, and this is where the barrack doctor was. A Frenchman, by the way. And he says, "If you played..."--the guard--"that I'm going to like it, we gonna give you plenty of food and water." Because that was terrible. We didn't have water. I and two others were volunteering. So we walked at the front...front room of the barrack, smaller room. And the violin was handed to the older man, who was in his 40s. He tuned the violin. The first few notes were shaky, but then he started to play Bach "Chacon,"--one of the sonata from Bach. It's so gorgeous, I never heard anything like that. Never heard it! But the SS was pulling his nose, like [it] stinks. Now one of the kapos...there were two kapos plus the barrack doctor were allowed to have that comfortable room--if you want to call it, you know, that front room. And one of the Kapo took the violin away from his hand. The other Kapo picked up a thick iron pipe, went behind this violinist; and he hit him so severely from behind that he cracked his skull open. And the...the blood and brain were splashing all over...all over the floor. And "God, my God!" I said to myself, "They don't want...they don't want no playing! This is another kind of a entertainment for the sake of the SS!" Which so many times the Kapos did that, and they did themselves. And I was petrified. Now I wanted to sneak back in the barrack. And one of the kapo picked me up from the collar and dragged me back. And while that was going on, they gave the violin to the second one. Now, he was about...I would say, about a 25 year-old young man, who was so shaken that he...he put the violin on--and you could see he was trembling--and not...not a note. He..he...he didn't play a note. It was nothing he could play. And the SS says to him, "How do you dare come out when you cannot play the violin?!" And they started kicking him. They kicked...kicked his ribs in, because I...I noticed that he couldn't breath. He was like... So he died right there. They...they pulled him off. Now while that was going on, now the Kapo picked up the violin and puts it in my hand and says, "Spiel!"--"Play!" "You came out," he says in German, "to play the violin. Play!" I was standing--here, something happened that not up today I could explain. Not up today. Now, if all the things that happened up to me...that I escaped two or three executions, you know. And switching with the son of the Sonderkommando places. And then I was not burned, but I was able to go to France, and...and so on. That ...if you want to call that...if somebody want to call this coincidence; [but] what happened to me here, this I like to...somebody to explain to me. Any other way but a miracle. So the violin, as I was mentioning, was given to my hand. I'm standing there... Now, when I got out of the barrack, I figured when my turn comes to play, I'm gonna play which I feel comfortable. I'm gonna play either a Sonatina by Dvořák, which I performed; in fact, later I performed in Radio Munich. But which... Or I'm gonna play...uh...a Kreisler composition. But when...when I saw what I saw, and the violin in my hand, my mind went completely blank. Nothing came to me. And I said to myself, "God, how is this Sonatina starts? How is... the Kreisler piece starts? My God, how...how does anything starts?!" I couldn't think of anything! And now I noticed, from the corner of my eyes, that the murderer kapo picked up the iron pipe again and was walking toward me. And I knew I'm gonna be killed. I knew it. So my right hand and my left hand all of a sudden started moving in perfect harmony. And the Strauss "Blue Danube" was heard coming out of my violin. Now, how I never thought of the "Blue Danube." Never. I heard it. In fact, I...I'm even hate to admit to you, I never even played it really. I heard it many times from the Gypsies, and [from] my brother--who was a fantastic accordionist in his high school group. But playing, I was not even allowed to play anything

else but classical. And the kapo looked at...eagerly to...to the SS: "When shall I whack him? When shall I hit him?" Instead, the SS guard was humming the melody, and was beating the rhythm with his fingers--like 1, 2, 3...1, 2, 3. And he...he just smiled and, "Let him live." Now that specific night there was that French doctor, the barrack doctor. He also went around another barracks, attending. I don't know why they needed a doctor when we couldn't get nothing. However, he was there. And I reminded him of his son, who was about the same age as I and who was not passed by Mengele; because Mengele thought that he was too young to live--meaning, his son. And from that time on, he made sure that I would have more to eat. He did not... he got permission from the SS to keep me in the barrack and do the chores; like washing the floors, or even helping, you know, sometimes going and picking up those little cans which were cucumber peels. This was our ration, you know? And some kind of a black looking...uh...dirty water, which they called it "coffee." But nevertheless, that allowed me to stay inside rather than go out in this...in that watery weather. Which was very... How can I tell you? Muddy. You know, in that time of the month, specifically. Which, as I mentioned, was in Dachau; and ...and...uh...it was April, early part, and this is where the raining kind of a thing comes. And that allowed me to come to myself. I got an extra cucumber maybe, you know. And the SS would...would be giving to these people the...even the bread. For instance, the Kapos would help themselves before they would divide it. Now, this SS... We have time? This SS would then take me to the SS barracks, and I would be playing. From that time on, I could play anything. It was fine. But you know what they did? When I finished... By the way, that Kapo who was the murderer, he--at this point, when he saw that the SS loved what I was doing, the Strauss waltz... There was a guitar hanging on the wall, which was his; and he took the guitar off the wall and started accompanying me. Now the SS had...had an idea. He took him and I--this murderer Kapo and myself--go over to the SS barracks and play for his comrades. So we did that. When... when they said, "Hast du genug gespielt?"--Said, "Enough? Did you play enough?" "Well, if you don't want me to play more, then yes." Then he says, "Go stand to the wall." There was a brick wall. And what they were doing, they were shooting... They were drinking beer, and they were shooting at...at me; a head above me, side of me. You can imagine! I was like... How can I tell you? If they... Wishing: "Please end it. Please, end it." And no matter how low, how animalistic, but you have that...still want to live. I mean, if you do death, this then end it once. They would never accept that some of the chips which came off the wall would graze me, would cut me here and there. But never hit me. Not one time. The Kapo! That murderer Kapo, he was asked...he says, "Now your turn." By the way, the shooting happened many times after that. Day in, day out. Always ended up with giving me a nice slice of salami and...and also a bread, and a bucket full of water. But believe it or not, I...I was so uh overtaken by that that I couldn't eat anything. And besides that, when I went back to the barrack, the rest of the...uh...prisoners... They allowed me to go take it into the barrack. The rest of the prisoners were like...like hungry dogs. Attack me. And they would tear the bread out of my hand. So one day, he was told by one, he says, one SS was--in fact, the one who found the violin--he was celebrating his birthday, and again got both of us out late. He wants to...he wants to celebrate. So we should go and play. We went to play. This SS--who, as I said, witnessed the beating and he was giving the okay--but his birthday it was. So when I was told to stand in...on the wall, because they going to play now with shooting, he said,

"No." Now the kapo--the head prisoner--he want him to stand there. So he...he says he is going to do the shooting alone because that's his birthday. So he had his beer, he sipped it, he drank, and he aimed. That's what they did before with me, too. He aimed to my head; and the last second they would shoot and...go up. So they saw me seeing that they're... right...going to be shooting me right in here (points to forehead). But in the last second--I don't how they did it--but the last second, as he did the bullet went over. He again... Now this time, as I mentioned, this Kapo--the murderer with the iron pipe, who is now the guitarist--he aimed it at his head, and he pulled the trigger without moving it and he hit him right in his...in his eyes. Between his eyes. The Kapo fell like a sack. Was dead instantly. All he says to...the SS says, "Oh, I missed!" Then he...he clicked ...clicked his...his heels, and he says, "Prosit!"-- means, "To your health!"--toward the Kapo. Now then the other SS, they started to...to... uh...argue among them who is going to do the shooting for me. Other words, now it's my turn to stand there. And while they could not agree and they started to be violent, another SS told me to get the H-E-L-L out of here. Because he was afraid they're gonna shoot up each other. But there again, I am sure if I...if I would have been standing there back over there, he would have done the same thing to me. He would have done the same. But what happens: now, here I just escaped death again. But... To go on?

Q: Actually, let's hold it a minute. This is a good time to break.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

TAPE #4

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: OK. We're back on camera. You have now gone back to the barrack. Tell us what happened.

A: So as I mentioned, that these...they were afraid and they're going to be a riot, and they're going to shoot each other. Because they were arguing, these SS, who should do the shooting when I be put against the wall. I was...my turn was to... Before it was only me who was standing there, but this time also, as I mentioned, that Kapo. Yah? And he was shot to death. So I was escorted by another SS back to the barrack. Not long after that happened, one day the SS came and he said, "Jews, Germans,"--because there were German prisoners--"Poles. Get out of the barrack." And we were told that the...the Allies were very near. We could really daily see some of them flying over. It was in Dachau, now. Over Dachau. And...uh...we could really see the pilots. And we were so overwhelmed, I cannot tell you. And he said they're going to evacuate the camp, Dachau; and they're going to take it probably to Tyrol. But they wanted us to get out; and we would be marched, and some people would be put on top of the truck into the forest. And in a cleared forest, cleared place, you know; where we could stay...be there examined by the barrack doctor. That mean the doctor himself--that French doctor, you know--he would be coming. And so we were up...I was put in a truck and driven into that spot. Now, some people started already as we went, says, "They not...they're not going to evacuate us. They're taking us out of the camp, and they're going to kill us!" They started to panic. And many of us said, "No, no, no. They wouldn't do that. They could have done it there." Some people said, "No, they couldn't done it there." Because there was...I don't know, there was a thousand, 80,000, God knows how many thousand of...of prisoners were in Dachau. And (clearing throat) so there would be a riot. If I know that they're going to kill me, I'm going to spring against them. What else can I lose? I'm dead, but at least person that we hated... We certainly didn't like the SS, and...uh... what they were doing to us. So they said, "Doctor came, and he's going to determine." However, there were machine guns hidden from our view, ready to fire. And here again, they ordered prisoners to stay in line. And this time was not like five, and then five behind. But again like the horizontal way, you know. So that next and then next...side by side, rather than the way I explained to you. And this doctor, he knew. He knew. And he says, "Shh. Alex!" He called me Alex. "Alex, [Alles hundert, march! (ph)]. Please, run!" And I understood immediately what he's trying to tell me. And I ran right into the forest. I was chanting also the Sh'ma while I was running. "Sh'ma Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad."--"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One." And I felt terrible, hot something enter my chest. I didn't even...I didn't hear any...any shots. I...I felt something entering my chest, that I had difficulty breathing. And I just fell. Now, the doctor, who was nearby--because he was also helping to form the line. He was told to help form these. Put these prisoners in barracks and barracks and barracks, you know. One barrack at a time, and then another barrack would be... At any rate, he saw me fall; and he ran toward me and picked up...he...he... I was trying to get up; but he gently pushed me. And so was an SS guard with drawn out revolver. And he was very angry. How did I dare run? That means I'm tried to escape. That's already

punishable by death to begin with. Now, it's his job to kill everybody there. So he came; but the doctor was first. As I tried to get up, he gently pushed me and took my pulse. And he turned...he was already knee...half, you know, kneeled on the...on the ground. And looked up to the SS who was aiming to my head. He says, "No shoot. Drei minute, kaput!"--meaning, "In three minutes, he'll be dead." The SS saying to him... Now he was putting his revolver away; and he says, "Let's this dog suffer the three minutes! He's not worth the cost of another bullet." Because the officer, they had to pay...they have to pay for the bullets, the ammunition. They have to buy, apparently--so this is what my understanding was there. So I wasn't worth it. Now he went back, and...and signaled for the rest of it, for the rest of the people to be killed. When this killing was over, and they were... The French prisoners, presently, they were excepted. Now, later on they would be killed anyway; but presently, they were excepted. They came along, and they were the one who picked up the bodies and throw them on the truck. Now the same truck who brought me from the camp, now it would be taking me back either to be thrown in the ditch or burned...cremated. So the French doctor told them that when they take me back to the camp, take me into the French barrack. There was a French barrack where only French people were. He changed the insignia of a Jew to the Frenchman. Now, I was going to show; but I'm not going to now. But, however, in my violin case I always carry--I will tell you why I carry--a tweezer and a knife, a pocket knife. But he fished out the bullet. The doctor came into the French barrack. He fished out the bullet with a tweezers and pocket knife, without giving me any anesthetic. And next day, the day after, wonderful Americans liberated Dachau.⁷ This is how I am here to tell you about my story. Because if it would not be for that... You see, even a day longer... By the way--which is very little known to people--but no matter what would have happened, Dachau would have been blown up. Because it was mined.

Q: Let's...let's stay with **your** story. OK?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell us what happened when you became conscious. When did you become conscious?

A: Okay. First... After, of course, I got conscious, I found out that the doctors... I was taken by the Americans into a nearby hospital in Gauting, near Munich. And the doctors said no way that I can survive. No way! I...I would be dying, and I'll be dead. Because first that bullet which was removed without...without anything, you know, was already infection set...set in. Which already I had blood poisoning from that. Maybe there is another term to that, but this is what... I also had already--which was not known to me--I had tuberculosis. And I also had...uh... What you call it? Stomach...uh... Well, I...I...it escapes me. Not diphtheria. But there are other words... Plus, was all...all the...I had run down. I was run down. So there's no way that I...I would survive. In fact, where occasionally I would come to myself... And that's where I'm going to mention Sári; because it happened...it happened that I was put in the very same hospital that she also was brought in. But she was brought in with tuberculosis,

⁷ Dachau was liberated on April 29, 1945.

and...and, of course, run down from uh malnutrition and hard labor. And she also had been beaten...beaten. Everything beatings, you know. Was beaten several times. But she was telling the story she heard it even before, that there was a young boy--namely me--who is dying, and my only wish was for the doctors to bring me a violin. Occasionally, I would come to myself. First, I was absolutely in a coma for a long time. And when I would come ...occasionally, I'd say, "Where is my violin?" So one day...so one day, strange as it sounds, when I came to my...myself, there I seen a violin. And the doctor says, "Here. There's a violin!" And I was overwhelmed. Now, supposedly that was a great help. But I am sure God was the one who really helped me. At any rate, I would be sometimes sitting up, you know, with pillows and so on, so forth. And I would be playing; and the windows would be open. And it could be heard outdoors in the hospital. And the patients--they were all Holocaust survivors--that they could walk, they would come and listen. And I would be playing. And that's what happened, that Sári asked somebody, "Who's playing?" She...she thought it was beautiful, but I can't imagine. "Who's playing?" "That...that's the boy who's dying, and that was his wish." Sári would one day--that I did not know, because I was not in myself, you know, with the relapsing back to coma. Or comatose, or whichever it is more correct to say. She would come in, and she was only 12 years old. And she would come and sit next to my bed, and would be crying. But she knew that I was dying, so at least I had nobody. You know? And she had a sister and a brother. Thank God, they still have it. They would occasionally come to visit her; but the boy who is dying and playing the violin--to her liking, at least--uh, has nobody. And she would be there and asking God to help me. That's...that's really something! But God wanted differently. But as soon as I recup...I was better, I still lived in a hospital. But I would enroll in school. First in Munich; and from there would be uh having a scholarship by the Ford company--or the Rockefeller Foundation, forgive me. Would uh...I...I won that scholarship among...I don't know how many, three hundred auditioners. Uh, so then I would be going to Salzburg; and this is where I'm graduated, and have a masters degree from that school in music.

Q: How long did you stay in Europe uh before you came to the United States?

A: (Clearing throat) Well, we...we stood [NB: stayed] there 1950.

Q: Let's back up a little bit. You won the competition in Salzburg. Sári, I gather, grew up. Did you stay together? What happened?

A: Okay. When...uh...first, of course, there...uh...the award which I got from the Rockefeller Foundation, the scholarship; and I went to Munich. And first I enrolled, or at least I continued, to finish uh my high school; which...which I did. And then I enrolled in pre-med. And that's very interesting. That same time, also, in the conservatory--in the same building. I was in Munich. The same building you could have...it was a conservatory, and you could go to pre-med. And one day I got...and I was living in the hospital. A doctor, who would be about the age of my father if he would have lived, was my roommate. They brought in a...a roommate. And so, he's a doctor. To myself I said, "How wonderful! He's going to help me with my studies." Yes, but I was meanwhile practicing. And he said, "Why on earth would

you want to be a doctor when you accomplish...you look...you sound like an accomplished violinist?" And turned out that he was actually an amateur conductor. He was a very fine conductor, by the way, but amateur if you don't make money. In...in Transylvania. He was a Transylvanian. That was what's so wonderful about it. He spoke the language which I spoke. And this is why I was so overwhelmed that he's going to help me--my studies, medical studies. But no, he took me off of it. And he says, "No, "; he says, "It's gonna take you a long time until you finish. Then you go in a different country, they're going to make you take it all over again." He says, "When you going to go into a different country, even if you don't finish school, all they're going to tell you, 'Pick up your violin and play.' They're not going to ask you, 'Now which school did you finish? Which school you have your diploma?' They're gonna...they gonna want to hear you." Which was right, in a way. And sure enough, but I had a chance to finish. Anyway, and meanwhile I went..one time I went into...when I was better--I'm talking what happened in that four or five years which we stood [NB: stayed] in Germany, which I was studying. So immediately as I got strong enough, still in the hospital, I went to where the women were. And I was looking to see maybe my sister, my older sister, would be among them. Because I knew then that my mother and my little sister, what happened. But I didn't know what happened to the other. And I met Shári, but I was just only seeing her for a second. But when...when we sort of grew up, we just talking. And one day that talk became a little more friendlier. And in all honesty --and I'm gonna say that for the world, you know, to the world--that it was not the way as people accustomed today. I have no judgement, whichever...whoever does what. This is their business. But however, that--call it "old fashion"--way was not that you "went together" maybe--I don't know how strongly I can say--before you get married. You know what I mean. And so, at any rate, she was...before she became...just before she became 17, we got married. And soon after, we came to the United States. But at that time, I was studying and so was she. And...uh...I had a chance to finish uh the Academy of Music in Salzburg; which I am very, very lucky to tell you. And then coming to the United States started some other problems. And it was very, very difficult. At first, you could not get a... I could not land a job. In fact, I was offered a job in a school; because I have the credentials to teach. However, by the time I got here to the United States, it took so long... I was not well yet. And uh was difficulty because even though that I recovered from tuberculosis, but America at that time they were very reluctant to let, even though that I was "cured." Which I am, thank God. But still I had to go through tests, and another test, and wait, and ___; and this kind of a thing. So that job was gone. And I did certain things that...when I was going to school. I became a filing clerk in an office. Then, still in part-time, I became the uh manager of the...uh... Oh, it's sort of a... How do you call that? Uh, a factory, which they manufactured dresses. I had absolutely no idea about that; but I was working in the very same...same uh office for the same people. And I was doing so well that when... Well, from one day to the other the owner of that factory, [his] brother-in-law left him. They thought that I would be doing well. And, my God, would you believe I did? Just on part-time! (Laughing) So finally after I got a job in the Cleveland symphony--or a position, I should say. Uh, then I had difficulty leaving that man; because...uh... I will tell you honestly. It was [Lempol (ph)] Fashions. It was a wonderful uh dress manufacture. They're not in existence, so I can mention that. I don't mean to...I don't mean to give any plug, you know. But it isn't that. They were nice people; and...uh...so

he...he was offering me any kind of a thing...so even in part- time. Because my only day... Of course, we married; and a boy came to us, first child, and the second one. We have two children, by the way. And...uh, may I mention, Robert. Now he's a physician. We're very proud of him. And so are we very proud of our daughter, Dinah, who also... She finished school. She has a degree in psychology. However, she's a business lady now.

Q: You have been playing the violin. Just tell us a little bit about it.

A: In Europe um I was... After, of course, liberation and I was still in school. But I was having offers; and I played with various symphony orchestras. And also Radio Munich. And in various cities, almost in every one of them. Then I gave command performances, and I'm gonna mention a few.

Q: Not...not...not the whole thing, no.

A: No.

Q: No. Because it's not that kind of a professional listing. Just tell us, when you came to the United States...

A: Yes.

Q: ...did you...? Uh, you got a position with the Cleveland Symphony. How long were with you them, and where did you go from there?

A: I was only with three years with the Symphony. And uh a very strange thing--not even that long, probably. Three...after three seasons, a very strange thing uh made me quit. One is that...you remember I mentioned earlier that I was lost in a forest, and I was exposed to the violin by the Gypsies. And I really loved Gypsy music from that time on. Always! And secretly, I would be going back to the forest and listening to the Gypsies. I would sometimes disappear from home; but at the time I was already older, you know, than four years old, of course. But 11 or 12. And I would be asking these Gypsies to teach me some of the songs that they played that was so fantastic. And they did. So I learned a lot of different kind of music. Even if I was not allowed to play. But as I said, secretly I would be doing that. And...uh...so...in Cleveland, as I said, certain strange circumstance got me... uh, made me to leave the symphony orchestra. First, it was really very badly paid at those time. And secondly, the conductor, uh Maestro [George] Szell, was very rough, so to speak. I shouldn't say that uh openly, because there are millions of people may know him. However, he was probably one of the greatest in the world. And...uh...I also had a job--an offer, that is--uh, to play this kind of music and teach. Teach, actually. So I left, and I got lots of pupils. But that was very straining on me. So finally, I got a job in a restaurant; which was, of course, much more profitable. And I met a lot of people and I learned lot about the way of people living in the United States. Which I really loved to be here. And uh this also made me grew up in a different way. Because I was very, very sensitive when I came. And probably I would be still

sitting in an orchestra. However, I'm not sorry at all. Because mentioning once, since you are from Washington, uh if I would be in that orchestra--like Cleveland Symphony--being just a violinist in the orchestra... Even the first violin section, but still I would never be invited to the White House--as I was a few years ago, during the Reagan era, you know. And that was a big thing. Or...or go to Italy and give a concert; or to go to Jerusalem and give a concert. It...it's...these kind of a thing would have not occurred, because I would be still maybe a screw in a big machine, a little teeny screw. Uh, so I'm not sorry at all that I left that part.

Q: And you have made a new life here.

A: Oh, Yah. Well, as I said, now I am... For instance, which I'm very proud to mention, I wrote several--I'm a composer also--several pieces. And one of them which is my...probably the greatest thing that I ever written in my life entitled the "Symphony of the Holocaust." Which I was fortunate to perform it with two major symphony orchestras, large symphony orchestras. And uh so I just keep on writing and playing as long as God wants me to.

Q: Good. And on that note, I think now we will end this section. Thank you.

A: Thank you.

TAPE #5: PERFORMANCE

The violin he plays is a Galliano (circa 1740), from the workshop of Amati (teacher of Stradivarius).

- (1) "Blue Danube" (Johann Strauss)--He plays this piece as he played it in Dachau, up to the point where the SS officer stopped him.
- (2) "Symphony of the Holocaust" (Shony Alex Braun)--Excerpts
 - (a) "Song of the Holocaust"
 - (b) "The Prayer"
 - (c) "The Liberation"
 - (d) "Song of Commemoration" (there are several takes of this piece)
 - (e) "Song of Joy of Life and Freedom"
- (3) "The Lark" (unclear on tape who wrote the version he plays here--whether this is his, or the work of a famous Romanian composer whom he mentions has inspired him)