

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Thomas Buergenthal  
January 29, 1990  
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## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Thomas Buergenthal, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on January 29, 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 Memorial Museum'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. Interviewee's name may not be substituted with a pseudonym. Interview may not be used for Museum or Council fund raising purposes.

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**THOMAS BUERGENTHAL**  
**January 29, 1990**

[PRE-INTERVIEW TECHNICAL CONVERSATION]

01:00:06

Q: Okay, The camera's on. Would you tell me your name please?

A: Thomas Buergenthal.

Q: And where and when were you born?

A: I was born in Lubochnia, Czechoslovakia, in 1934.

Q: Would you tell me something about your parents, please? Where did they come from?

A: My mother came – well, my – actually, my – both of my parents came to Czechoslovakia from Germany. They got, came there when Hitler came to power; and I was born there shortly after they got to Czechoslovakia.

Q: Tell me about growing up. Did you grow up there? And your very early years, before the Nazis came.

A: What little I remember, really, in that period: I grew up in Czechoslovakia, in that town, very uneventfully; a small resort town. From what I remember, what little I remember, a very pleasant environment.

Q: You moved at one point. Where did you move to, again, before the Nazis?

A: Well, we moved from Lubochnia to a town in Slovakia called Zilina(ph). The—my, my father had bought a hotel in, in this town in Czechoslovakia, in Lubochnia. It was a hotel that was designed to be for German political refugees awaiting the fall of Hitler. My father thought that Hitler would not last more than four years, and he wanted to be nearby and have his friends there. Well, by, by 1938, very few people could come out of Czechoslovakia. So the hotel wasn't going very well. And at that point, we left the hotel and moved to Zilina(ph).

Q: All right. What happened there, when by 1938, '39? Did things change?

01:02:14

A: Well, the – in Slovakia, the Hlinka, Hlinka Guard, which was a fascist group aligned with the Nazis, began harassing Jews and looking for certain people, and my father was one of the people they apparently had on, on some list. It became clear to us that if we didn't leave the

risk – at least, the risk to my parents – that the risk was very great. And that at some point, shortly before the German invasion, we tried to cross the border into Poland. It took about a week to cross the border, in, in no-man's-land between Poland and, and Czechoslovakia. The last time when we – in no-man's-land, when we went – were shipped back to Czechoslovakia, then the Germans were already there, in Czechoslovakia. And it was curious that it was the Germans who actually helped us get into Poland at that point.

Q: How do you mean, helped you?

A: Well, the Germans didn't realize who we were. And my father told them that he was Polish, and that the Poles wouldn't let us in. And so they actually carried our suitcases and told the Poles that they had to let us in. And that's how we entered Poland.

Q: Okay, Okay. But you entered Poland. And where did you go?

A: Well, we had political refugee status, my father, and we went to Katowice, in southern – in Poland, to await our entry, or the right to leave for England. My father had papers that would have allowed him to go to England. We registered in Katowice with the British Consul and waited there until we were supposed to be called up to, to leave for England. And it was really on the day when the Germans moved into, into Poland, on September first that we were supposed to be leaving for England. And we actually left. What happened was that the British Consul – there were quite a number of refugees in our position – were put on a train chartered by the British to take us to the, to the Balkans, and hopefully, from there to England. But the plane – the train – never got very far; because we were bombed by German planes and had to abandon the train in Poland not, not very far from the Russian border. And at that point, the question was: “What do what do we do next?” My, my father actually went and crossed into, into the Soviet Union, across the Bug River; and came back and decided – actually, he had crossed over to see whether we should go to the Soviet Union – crossed over and decided that we weren't going to be much better off there than if we stayed in Poland. So he came back. And we then marched with the refugees on the, on the roads and were actually taken over by German tanks on, on the roads near some village in Poland. After a while, we ended up in a town more or less in central Poland, called Kielce, and eventually ended up in the ghetto of Kielce, and so forth.

01:06:25

Q: Tell us – by then, you are five. Tell us, if you can –

A: No. By then, I'm – yeah, five. Yes, six.

Q: Okay. Tell me what you remember of Kielce.

A: Well, Kielce was, was – at least from what I remember initially, or maybe in retrospect – it's often very hard to keep these things apart. I had never se – Kielce really had a very large

Jewish community, and I've since found out that there were more than twenty thousand Jews in Kielce – a long tradition. There were a lot of very religious Jews. There were Jewish schools and everything – things I had never seen before in – in Czechoslovakia, where, where we were. There were – let me see, what else do I remember from the initial period? There was another language – two languages, in fact: both Yiddish and Polish. Initially – again, until things, until 1941, '42, things were not all that bad. It was when the ghetto was established, all the Jews were herded into one part of the city.<sup>1</sup> Food became very scarce. Housing became very scarce. We lived in, in one room that my father and mother and I shared. And food was very difficult to come by. A lot of, lot of hunger, but still not as serious. There were still a lot of people who lived quite well, who had, had ways of getting food into the, into the ghetto, especially in the beginning. Things gradually became harder and harder. And the, the walls were – protection was built up much heavier than initially. Initially, it was still possible for people to go in and out, I remember. But after a while that became more difficult. Then, of course, in 1942, the ghetto. Most of the people in the ghetto – I would think about some close to 20,000 people – were shipped to Treblinka,<sup>2</sup> and that included my grandparents as well. That was sort of the first really serious killing experience that, that I had. During – I should note, though, that in the ghetto itself there were – if not daily, certainly sporadic – killings going on by Germans of people, German guards of Jews on the street. At the same time, there appeared to be some sort of normalcy that, that reigned, but then in '42, all of that came to an end.

01:09:37

Q: Can you describe the deportation? What did you see?

A: Well, the, the—one morning we were awakened with screaming and shooting outside – orders in German: "Everybody out!" And whoever wasn't to be out would be would be shot, and apparently a lot of older people, others who couldn't move, were shot. My father, who was, was a very cool person – that's sort of the, the memory I have – wasn't going to move until he had shaved and had time to think what to do. And – actually that's what saved us because he took a group, he took us and a group of people out and marched us to – he had been in charge of a shop – and marched us out to the shop, saying that he had orders to protect the shop and keep the, the people in. And that's – and safeguard a number of people, about twenty people, protecting the shop. And actually, that's how I was not initially shipped out. The – we did, however, at the end – when the, when the Nazis finally caught up with us – we were all lined up, as everybody else. And you had most of the people marching in, in one direction, and maybe a few hundred people being saved. And we were in that group to

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<sup>1</sup> The ghetto was established in April 1941.

<sup>2</sup> This event, which constituted the liquidation of the ghetto, took place from August 20 to August 24, 1942.

end up in another camp, sort of a forced labor camp, also in Kielce. I'm compressing all of this a great deal.

Q: It's okay, we have time, we have time. Can you tell us about the forced labor camp?

01:11:49

A: Well, that was basically – when you, when you think of the ghetto as a substantial section of town, the forced labor camp was basically one street that was surrounded with barbed wire and, and other – or maybe two streets. And most of the people worked – were taken out from there to work in various, various jobs. I didn't do anything. I was there with my mother. And matter of fact, my mother had saved two other children from the—whose, whose parents had – were shipped out in, in '42. Two children had been left, and she took them in. So we ended up then in, in one-half room, I think, with, with two other children yet. And – but life still, put it – given what was to follow, was still more or less livable, but very – under very difficult circumstances. Here the killing increased. Every so often, or anybody tried to escape, there would be executions and beatings and other things. The, the worst thing that happened in that camp was towards the end, when the – when – I think it was in, in '43, or the beginning of '44 – and I'm – my dates are wrong – when there was another Selektion<sup>3</sup>. Basically, you know, when people were shipped off to be killed. What happened there was that all the – they lined us up on a sort of like a playground, and separated all the children, and that became the, the famous massacre of the children in Kielce. I was the only one to survive – at least of the group that was, was visible. Two other children saved themselves by hiding in the house where the children were taken. But what happened there was that the, the children who were taken out, ended up – were taken to a cemetery and killed with hand grenades. The Jewish cemetery in, in Kielce; I, I survived that one. That was the worst part in that, that episode.

01:14:28

Q: How did you survive?

A: Very curious. They had us lined up on the field. The German, the commander of the, of the camp, was standing in the middle making the decision who was going to live and who was going to die, and they pulled tried to pull me out, and my mother and father more or less pulled the other direction. And finally, they – my mother, my father and I deci – went up to the German commander; and I said, in German, that I – to let me live, because I could work. And in German. And I, I think what, what I saw happen in camps a number of times was that they were somehow shocked to find that somebody looked very much like their own children, who spoke the same language the way their own children would speak, was there. They had – I think they believed a lot of their own propaganda. And he looked at me and

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<sup>3</sup> Nazi term for the selection of prisoners for transport.

said in German, "Well, let's see," and let me go. The whole thing may have lasted two seconds. And that's how I stayed.

Q: What happened to you after that?

01:15:55

A: Well, after that we ended up in, in a factory, in – still in Kielce. The surviving people in this group – I think about two hundred – were split up, half taken to one factory, another half to another factory. My parents and I ended up in a, in a – and, incidentally, the two children who were younger than I that we had then died in that also. We, we ended up in a factory where they were making carts for – wooden carts – for their Eastern Front. At that point I had a very interesting job and assignment. The feeling was that, that to survive there, it was important to have something to do; and, and I wasn't even 10 years old. So I went to the commander, commander of the German – of that camp; and told him, asked him whether he needed an errand boy. And he looked at me, and he said, "Fine." And so basically, my, my job in that, in that camp consisted of sitting outside his door and doing chores that he needed to have done, like getting his bicycle or taking something to one place or another. The, the job had great advantages because I could hear what was going on and could report back, and I could also alert people to his coming because I would be going ahead of him, running, announcing his coming. And so we had the signal that I would signal. He had – he wore a hat with a feather; and if I went like this to people [gesturing], then he was coming. And – because if people were seen not working, they would be beaten very badly. One interesting episode in that connection is that I could listen to the radio. He would listen to the radio, and I would sit outside, and I could hear. And I heard the, the capture of Mussolini,<sup>4</sup> reported it. Of course, nobody believed me. We had no access to radio or any news. But that was – and the fact that I worked there actually enabled us to have some food, and my father and mother both worked in that factory. But it was one way of, of surviving, and giving me a cer – certain amount of protection, as well.

01:18:49

Q: Did things change at some point?

A: Well, what changed at, at some point was that in 1944 the decision was made, I guess, to ship everybody in that camp to Auschwitz. And we were, we were shipped to Auschwitz.<sup>5</sup>

Q: Can you describe the transport? What was that like?

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<sup>4</sup> In September 1943.

<sup>5</sup> In early August 1944.

A: We were in, in open cars, railroad cars—put in. Interestingly enough, the Germans—we, we, of course, everybody was worried; and I remember people asking, "Where are we going?" and so forth. The Germans told us we were being shipped to Germany. And we once – one believes what one wants to believe, and I suppose for a while we thought that's where we were going. Again, I remember my father saying initially that the direction of the train was going to Germany, and then suddenly it, it changed. And that's when he knew that we were, we were going to someplace else. And he knew then we were going to Auschwitz. Some people jumped out of the train. The way those trains were set up, the, the Germans had machine guns at the end of the, the train, and if anybody jumped out, they would just try to kill the people, and I think a number of people jumped out of the train on the way to – and I don't know, know whether they were, were hit or not. The, the most memorable thing was to arrive in, in Auschwitz. It was, you know, from a child's perspective, it was just like having driven into an insane asylum, with people walking back and forth, doing things. We, we saw a group carrying bricks from one place to another and carrying them back. And we, we expected to be met by machine guns, so we had no idea what the, the arrival in Auschwitz – apart from, from this total view of people in these prison – those prison garb carrying, running different ways, with Kapos<sup>6</sup> with sticks. Was, was a certain calm. We arrived.

01:21:31

We were, we were lined up and told we were going to go to, to a laundry. Had our hair shaved. At that point, we expected that things would happen as in Treblinka, where we would be immediately executed. What happened was that since our camp, since our transfer came from these two factories in Kielce, it was assumed that everybody there was capable of working. And there was no Selektion. That's really the way I came into Auschwitz. I would never have – as a child, would never have gotten in because they would have selected me right out, at my age, at the camp. But there was no Selektion. We actually went through the, the sauna – and I mean that they shaved our hair, disinfected us, and eventually, tattooed us; but I don't think right at the, at the arrival and sent us to camp. And we ended up – this is, of course, Auschwitz-Birkenau – ended up in what used to be the Gypsy camp, and was still known as the Zigeunerlager, the, the "Gypsy camp."<sup>7</sup> That's how I got to Auschwitz.

01:22:51

Q: Okay. Describe where you were taken and what you did, what the barrack was like where you lived.

A: Well, the barracks were very much like the barracks you see in pictures that one sees. These big three story bunks, very broad, with about ten people fitting into them – just wooden, wooden boards, very crowded. The first night on arrival, that was, was probably one of the

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<sup>6</sup> Overseers (German).

<sup>7</sup> Birkenau section B-IIe.



worst in, in my experience because this was the night when one or two of the people who had been collaborators in our camp and had shipped some people to Auschwitz were beaten very badly. So this was by people who had – whom they had shipped to the camp, who in the meantime themselves had become Kapos. The world never changes. But, that was sort of the first, the first night, that experience. That's, you know, the, the sort of initial thing I remember of Auschwitz. We – there were some people that I – my father knew, who had been shipped out before. There again, my father and some friends thought that the way for me to survive was to try to find something to do. And I went – or rather, I don't know who went. But at any rate, I managed to get to be the errand boy for the Kapo in the, in the laundry and sau – I don't know what they called it. A place where people... The wash rooms. And that, again I think, helped because I, I had a certain protection by being there and also knowing when the Selektion process was going to, to happen. Because you could – in Auschwitz, the Selektion of people, the Selektion out to the crematorium, to the gas chambers would usually happen every six weeks. The Germans, with their efficiency, would never repeat things immediately or do things irregularly. So, you could expect things to happen every four to six weeks, and it usually happened with certain people arriving in the camp. And if you knew that was going to happen and if you were where I was, it gave you a certain amount of protection because you could hide and get out of, out of the way. And that certainly helped me, in some instances, to survive.

01:26:03

Q: Can you tell me what working in a laundry consisted of? I mean, you survived this way. What did you do there?

A: One of the things that I had to do was to go and fetch gas. Not very often, but I think two or three times – the same gas that was used for the gassing of people – this Zyklon C gas<sup>8</sup> – to pick it up, for disinfecting purposes, from the crematorium to the, to the laundry. And that was, and that actually enabled me to go to get out of the camp. But basically, just go deliver a piece of paper from one place to another, and hang around. I certainly didn't work very hard. It wasn't, it wasn't a full-time job.

Q: In carrying the gas, did you know that it was the same kind of gas? Did you make a connection?

A: Oh, yes. You, you couldn't, you couldn't live in, in Birkenau without knowing what the gas was for. You have to visualize it. In the, in the Gypsy camp – that is to say, in the—each – there were a number of camps in Auschwitz, in Birkenau. They were basically streets with barracks on each side surrounded by barbed wire, and there was Camp D and C and B, and so forth. The, the gas chambers and crematories were at one side. You could stand, for example, outside your barracks in my camp, and see the smoke billowing out from the, from

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<sup>8</sup> Zyklon B.

the crematory. And not only the smoke, and even almost fire, but also the stench that would come out. So you couldn't be in any place in that environment and not know what was happening. And, of course, it was close enough almost to hear the screaming of, of people 'cause what happened usually, unlike in my case, people would come to Auschwitz at the railroad station, at the – would be unloaded and there separated – one group going into the camp, being allowed to go into the camp, and the others going directly to the gas chambers and the, and the crematory.

01:28:36

Q: Did you watch this often? Were you in a position to see this process?

A: You – I could see it. To say that I watched it... You, you couldn't help but know what was going, going on. And as a matter of fact, towards the end, when I was – at the very end, when the crematory no longer functioned, we were struck at one point that that suddenly there were birds and other things. There, there was nothing before. It was really sort of a, a cloud hanging over the over the place. I was at one point, I was – later on – sort of taking the story forward – I was in a camp that was even closer to the gas chambers and the crematory, where you could really hear the screaming almost on a...on a regular basis.

01:29:40

Q: Tell me about your parents at this point. You're in Auschwitz. You were with your father? What happened to your parents?

A: When we came into Auschwitz, my father and I were separated from my mother. My mother was sent to the women's camp in, in Auschwitz, and my father and I were sent together to the, to the Gypsy camp. I saw my mother once during that, that period. I was able – I was sent on some – or had to go for something to the women's camp; and went just so I could, could see my mother, and we had – there were systems in which you could get some messages through from one group to the other. But otherwise there were just my, my father and I. We were, we were separated, I think, in October of 1944 or, or later – when there was another, when there was a Selektion. And that was the only time when I wasn't able to escape. I – there were many instances where I avoided the crematorium throughout that period of stay in, in Auschwitz; but that was the only time when, when I lost. I'd always taken this as sort of a battle between them and us. And I'd always won; because I was never caught up in any Selektion. I was always able to escape. But in the last one, my, my father and I, we – there was a Selektion of people to be sent out to another place, another camp, in Germany for work purposes. And Mengele<sup>9</sup> and a group of, of doctors were lined up. And they saw me as a child, and they motioned me to go one way, and my father go the other way. And that's the last I saw of my, my father. I was retained in the, in the barracks, where we were supposed to then be taken from there to the, to the gas chamber. I knew that you

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<sup>9</sup> Josef Mengele (1911-1979?), extermination camp doctor at Auschwitz.

couldn't – you develop all kinds of expertise as a, as a child growing up. I tried to escape a number of times – couldn't, was caught, was beaten and gave up. At that point, I figured there was, there was no way. And I'd tried my best, but it was the end.

01:32:23

What saved me was the fact that there weren't enough people to take to the gas chambers. They made a decision to take us to the sick ward, instead, until they had a larger transport. And that's what they did. They took us to, to barracks in another camp, which is the camp closer to the crematorium,<sup>10</sup> where all of the people had this serious skin disease. It was – in, in German it was called "Krätze"<sup>11</sup>. I don't know what it is in English, and I didn't develop it. There was a young Polish doctor, who kept giving me alcohol and other things, and told me what to do. One morning, I, I woke up. I – it was very difficult in that place to sort of separate nightmares from reality, because you heard the noises all the time. One morning, I woke up and the people I had come with were all gone. And what had happened was that the Polish doctor had torn up card with my name on it, which had a "X" in back, which meant that I was supposed to go. All the other people were taken out to the gas chamber, and I – he had written a new card for me, and I was saved. And so... From there, then, I went – was able to get out of that camp – with the help, curiously enough, of a German—to, to a work camp back in, in Auschwitz.

01:34:15

Q: How did a German help you?

A: I saw a German, and I approached him in German. Told him that I wasn't sick, I shouldn't be here, and I was afraid if I stayed here I would catch something – couldn't he help me get out? And he did. And I went to a camp – the D Lager<sup>12</sup> – which was, which was sort of the major camp. And there was actually there were barracks that sort of children's barracks kids. I think all of them were older than, than I was. I, I was about ten at the time. There was a, a Kapo. Not really a Kapo, but it was what is known as a Blockältester<sup>13</sup> – the head of the, of the barracks, who had actually sort of indi – protected the children, saying that they could work. And he had a whole group of, of young kids.

#### TECHNICAL PROBLEMS - LONG PAUSE - TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: We were in Lager D.

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<sup>10</sup> Birkenau section B-IIIf.

<sup>11</sup> Scabies (German).

<sup>12</sup> Birkenau section B-IIId.

<sup>13</sup> “Block elder”: The head of a barracks row in the slave-labor and concentration camps, who was almost always a non-Jewish criminal.

A: We were in Lager D, with a, with a group of, of children, and I really don't remember what we did there very much. But it – that the treatment on the whole, given how bad it had been in various other places, was not, not all that bad. We – there were two of us – three of us – who became friends. And we had to do all kinds of chores. I remember once we, we broke into the SS kitchen and I drank my first glass of milk in a, in a long time. If they had caught us, I suppose they would have beaten us to death. We did those things. We had to, I think what I remember we had to pick up garbage, and engage in those activities. But then that really didn't last very long because, in Janu – by January, the liquidation of, of Auschwitz happened. They lined us all up. They came in to announce that the ca – camp was being liquidated. Lined us up, gave us some food, and began to march us out of, out of the camp. And that started the famous death march out of Auschwitz.

01:36:53

We were marched first for about three days, to a town in Upper Silesia called Gliwice. The, the, the three of us kids were together. The kids were put—the, the children's camp group was put in front when we first marched out. But it was – Polish January is cold, and we didn't – we carried blankets. But after about a 10, 12-hour walk that we began to, to be very tired. The children began to, to fall back. People from the back were pushing, that we weren't going fast enough. And whoever sat down was, was shot, within, within our view, by the guards who were on each side of the road. The three of us developed a system of resting which was to run up to the front, and then sort of stop almost, until we reached the back. And by that time, we had, we had rested, and then we could run up again and we would stay warm. And I don't know how long we did this, but at – suddenly in the evening there was – they stopped the column and asked for all the children to, to come forward, that they were going to be put in a farm, on a farm, and they didn't have to march anymore. Well, we had had experience. And we didn't go. And all the children from that group then were, were taken away and apparently shot. So we were the only three that, that stayed. We – and it wasn't easy. There were all kinds of—we, we carried bread, and people kept pushing to get the bread. And everybody had a slice of bread, food, clothes, blankets; and we, we couldn't carry them. After a while, we didn't have anything any more. After three days, we, we came to Gliwice, where they did another Selektion out. But the three of us managed to, to run. The, the test was whether you could run across some square, or something. And we together held each other up, and, and made it.

01:39:40

That's in Gliwice. They put us on a train which took I think twelve days or so to get to the destination – my destination. The train stopped at another place, but that was Oranienburg – which is near Berlin – where the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen was. I suppose what is noteworthy about the train ride: again open cars, January 1945, Polish winters. The train was packed with people. You couldn't breathe. And if you were small, as, as we were, it was very difficult. By the time we arrived, you could walk in the car. People died in tremendous

numbers of exposure, of hunger, everything else. And whenever somebody died, they were thrown overboard as the as the train moved. I think, in my, in my car alone there were no more than about ten people or so, when we when we arrived for the first time at the railroad station in Berlin. There you might have an interesting footnote to that experience: in Berlin, when we arrived, I heard a German woman say, "Es stinkt so wieder nach Juden" – which means, "It smells again of Jews." At the same time, a, a German – our German guard, who was sitting on our train – gave me a cup of coffee, which was the first warm thing I, I had had on this entire trip. We – well, the, the train eventually ended up in Oranienburg, in Heinkel – where there's a factory, airplane factory, where we were kept for about two weeks, I, I think.<sup>14</sup> By that time, I – the cold was so bad I, I lost some – my, my legs were totally frostbitten, my hands. Eventually, the toes, some toes had to be amputated. But, you know, Oranienburg, in Heinkel, I remember taking off my shoes and never found my shoes again. They were, they were good shoes. We were there and nothing much happened. Then after two weeks, we were taken to the concentration camp of, of Sachsenhausen – which was a German Musterlager,<sup>15</sup> which had been there already in the in the '30's.

01:42:30

And was a – you came in, there was a big sign saying "Arbeit Macht das Leben Süß" – all of which, which is, "Work Makes Life Sweet." We were put in, in barracks there, after actually marching. And it was very difficult at that point for me to, to walk from Heinkel to Sachsenhausen. German kids were throwing stones at the group that was, that was marching. It was almost a relief to end up in the camp. I don't know how long I was there before I couldn't anymore, with my feet. My toes had turned totally black. And the, the – it wasn't pain; but the nerves were – I just, I couldn't sleep. I, I could feel everything. I then went to – they had a hospital there. And because it was a model camp, it was actually a well set-up hospital. I went there, went into a room. They looked at my foot. And before I knew it, four people grabbed, stretched me out on the table and operated right there on the table, with the I think chloroform or some other thing. They had to operate again because they hadn't – but the person who operated was a French military doctor, who was very good and very kind, and actually saved my leg, because gangrene would have set in. It was black. He saved my other foot – I didn't loose any, any toes on, on my other foot. My, my hands were, were fine. And then I ended up in the hospital, which, again, was a hospital where usually, after a few weeks, you would be – you would be cured only to be to be killed. But it was coming to the end of the war. And actually the camp, the Russians came to the camp in, in April of 1945. So I was, I think, in the, in the hospital ward for about four to six weeks; and was, was helped a lot by, by Norwegians, and others, who so saved my life.

01:45:09

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<sup>14</sup> The Heinkel facility was a subcamp of Sachsenhausen.

<sup>15</sup> "Model Camp." Camp after which other camps were modeled.

Q: Tell me, if you would, about your stay in that hospital ward and your meetings with the Norwegians. What – first, what was the ward like?

A: Oh, just a big barracks with, with beds where people – some were dying, some had...had minor injuries. A lot of people -different thing. Every so often, people would be taken out, people would be released. The Selektion was made of people who were actually taken out and, and killed, without most of us knowing what was going on. They were called out. The Norwegians received packages from the Norwegian Red Cross, or the Swedish Red Cross. And befriended me and helped me immensely, with – especially a man by the name of Fridtjof Nan – Odd Nansen – the son of Fridtjof Nansen<sup>16</sup> who was in the camp – helped me with – both with food, and also I think with giving food to the people in the ward to, to protect me. It was curious. The, the one thing that I remember from that ward is something which we – which people who haven't been in camps don't realize. That when all of this terrible tragedy and terrible conditions that were going on, people still had a great sense of humor. It, it didn't leave us. Let me give you one example: in this hospital ward, we had as a ventilator just a hole in the roof, which was plugged up with a piece of wood. Sachsenhausen, as I said, was about twenty kilometers outside of Berlin. And when the Allies bombed Berlin, the planes would fly over Sachsenhausen. There's another story to this, which I can tell you later. But at any rate, the bombing, of course, the bombs would fall pretty close. And one day, there, there was a very severe bombing attack, and people were getting out of their beds because of the fear that the barracks would be bombed. And, and there it was all wood and would have been burned. And suddenly there was a tremendous crash of a bomb falling, and a man screaming he's been killed by the bomb. But what had happened was that the piece of wood that had plugged up the ventilator had fallen down, and just fallen on him. And, you know – despite this environment we were in – that whole block of people, maybe a hundred dying people, burst into a roar of laughter which I still remember to this day – about the fact that this poor man thought he had died already. There were many instances of that going on. The other thing which, in which we took great pride and joy was that when the bombing raids came, the, the German officers' families and influential Germans would hide in the camp from the bombing attack. Because the bo – the the camp was known to the Allies; and they avoided bombing it. As a matter of fact, at night they would drop flares around the camp, in order not to bomb it. And so it was really the safest place nearby. And that, to us, we were beginning to feel that the war, that we were maybe winning.

01:49:04

Q: This is a good moment to change tapes, I think.

A: Uh-huh.

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<sup>16</sup> Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930); Norwegian explorer, Nobel peace prize winner.

TAPE #2

02:00:03

Q: Okay, in the hospital, you tell me that you were befriended by Norwegians – particularly Odd Nansen. Can you tell me something about him, and about your relationship with him?

A: Well, he, he would come and visit various Norwegians in the, in the hospital; and that's how we, we met. He, he was writing a diary in the camp. I, of course, didn't know about it at the time. I found out after the war. So he, he came by, talked to a lot of people; and then, when he found out that I was there and that I'd come from Auschwitz, he befriended me. And came and visited me almost every week, or maybe even more often and would bring me cookies and try and make sure that I was all right. And brought me ex – as a matter of fact, brought me paper and a pencil to draw. And what, of course, I didn't know was that he wrote down a lot of things about my experiences at the time. He was a wonderful man, who had – really a great humanitarian; very much in the tradition of his father, who was Fridtjof Nansen – the High Commissioner for Refugees during the League of Nations time, after whom the, the Nansen Passport is named. But he, he helped me immensely. I, I think he, he saved my life. He was then shipped out of the camp shortly before the, the end of the war, when Count Bernadotte<sup>17</sup> was able to get the Norwegians and Danes out of the camp and get them to Sweden. At that point we, we didn't see each other again. And after the war, when having survived I, I tried to, to find him, couldn't remember his name – only knew that he, that he had a very famous Norwegian name. But wanted to find him and wanted to thank him. I didn't find him until about 1947 or '48, when my mother read in the newspaper that a book had been published. It was a diary of the concentration camp that, among other things dealt with Sachsenhausen. And that it was a Norwegian who had published it. At that point, we, we wrote to him, asking whether he knew that, who that Norwegian might be who helped me in the camp. And, of course, it was he. There's a great story to this because I – mail, of course, was very slow in those days, after the war. Food was very scarce. We didn't hear from him for – we didn't receive an answer to the letter for about four or six weeks. And one day, there's a knock at the door in the house where we lived in Germany – in Göttingen – and up pulled a Norwegian military truck. And the soldier came out, and asked whether this was our home. And we said, "Yes." And he said he had a little package for us. And so we said, "Well, give it to us." And he said, "No, no. It's, – we need to carry it." And they – then a group of Norwegian soldiers jumped out of the car, and brought this tremendous crate – wooden crate – of food that had been collected by Norwegian children, with a letter from him. And shortly thereafter, he came and actually took me to Norway for a few weeks. And – because he had thought that I had died in the camp. And the book, in fact, that he published about the camp – the diary – was dedicated to me, among other people, on the assumption that I hadn't survived the – the camp. So it was a wonderful reunion when we when we finally got together.

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<sup>17</sup> Folke Bernadotte (1895-1948); Swedish statesman, Count of Wisbourg and nephew of King Gustav V.

02:04:21

Q: Okay, let's go back to you in the hospital. When were you released from the hospital?

A: I really wasn't. The camp – the Germans lost the war before I was released from the hospital, or rather, they had to leave the, the camp. Again, this camp was to be liquidated, and people were lined up to march out of the camp. We, we really couldn't walk, and the people in the hospital ward were left behind. And we assumed that they would come in and shoot everybody in our beds, and it was extremely – I remember the day when people lined up, and then it became extremely quiet. And you couldn't hear anything. You only – and we waited, basically, on the assumption that any minute now they would, they would come in. Nothing happened. And of all the people in that, in the barracks, I probably could move better. By then, I had a crutch; and I could move on, on one leg. And finally, I went out to look. With all this silence. And the machine gun on the gate of the—overlooking the, the sort of plaza in the camp was empty, for the first time. And the Germans had left. You – by then, you could hear already the rumbling of artillery in – in the background. And there wasn't a soul to be seen. Nothing happened for a while, except, you know, we, we realized that maybe we were, we were going to live. The shooting came closer. Eventually the gates swung open and Russian troops came in. And they began ringing the, the camp bell to say that we were free. There was – that, that was freedom. And the first thing, of course, that happened then was that anybody who could move stormed into the German, where the Germans kept provisions, and tried to grab as much food as, as possible. I had eaten so little in that time that I couldn't eat. I remember the only thing I took was a pickle. I found a pickle, and, and I ate it. And maybe that's what saved me, actually, because people died by simply eating too much, and not having eaten for a long time and not being used to, to the food. As a matter of fact, I'll come back to that later. I couldn't eat for anything very much, for weeks after my, my liberation. Just couldn't. Could barely eat anything more than a piece of, of dry bread, but a lot of people ate and got extremely sick.

02:07:33

The Russians did nothing, really. There was no – unlike from what I hear about the camps that were liberated by the British or American troops, or French troops, there was no doctors sent in. No first aid. No supplies. Nothing. We were just simply told we were free, and we could go. And the direction we should go was away from Berlin, because Berlin was still not, not captured. This was about April 20th or so, 1945.<sup>18</sup> And so whoever could move, went. And there was with me in, in the hospital a, a Pole who he and I got up, and we decided to try to...to move, to...to go, leave the camp. And we got out into Sachsen – into Oranienburg, the town where Sachsenhausen was, and there the houses were empty. The Germans had, left their homes, left food almost on the table, and, and had left, and we sort of

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<sup>18</sup>

Sachsenhausen was liberated April 27, 1945.



moved from one place to another, from one of these homes to another, until we came upon a group of the – a Polish division under Russian command – the First Division Kosciusko<sup>19</sup>. And by then we had accumulated a group of people, about five or six people, all from Poland. The – the Polish soldiers saw me, assumed I was Polish. I, I spoke Polish. And didn't – they had to speak German at the time, of course. And asked me whether I was from Poland; and I said, "Yes." And then they said, well, they'll take me to Poland. And so what they did was take me along in with their group. And their – this particular group was the scout company of the First Polish Division. And I became the mascot of the, of the Division. I was given a horse and a, a little cart. As a matter of fact, they had, they had captured a German circus, and this was a small pony. I had my pony, and moved with the troops.

02:09:56

And actually, I always say I helped capture Berlin with my troops because we actually moved on Berlin. And I was in Berlin before Berlin fell, because the, the troops came in. The Russians had already advanced, Russian troops had already moved in. But I was in Berlin before Berlin fell, on the outskirts of Berlin – actually, in Berlin with Polish, troops. It's never mentioned that Polish troops were in Berlin among the conquerors, and it, it's true. We, we were there. We, actually, until Germany surrendered I was – we were still following German troops beyond Berlin. After the fall of Germany, the Polish troops were being moved back to, to Poland. And I was moving back with them. And we initially moved to a, to a military garrison in Poland called Siedlce. It's a town in, in Poland, where I've spent some time until a, a Jewish-Polish soldier in my company took me out one day and took me to a Jewish orphanage in Otwock and left me there, and there were a lot of Jewish children in that in the orphanage, that we – for the first time, I sort of began to live something of a, of a normal life. The period in the orphanage is interesting – again, as a sort of historical footnote – because our orphanage was an orphanage run by the Jewish Bund, which was a socialist communist Jewish organization that didn't want people to go to Palestine then. At the same time, the Zionist group – the Ha-Shomer Ha-Za'ir<sup>20</sup> – had more or less infiltrated the orphanage. And there was one counselor who got all of us who wan – those who wanted to go to, to Israel – it was then Palestine – put the names on a list. And would then run away, one by one, to the Zionist kibbutz in Poland, or camp. And from – and would be shipped from there to Palestine, and I signed up for this group.

02:12:41

Problem was that, that I was the only one who had been in Auschwitz and in other camps. And so the decision was made that I should run away last because I would be interviewed on newsreel and on radio about my camp, and they thought that if I ran away it would blow the

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<sup>19</sup> The Tadeusz Kosciusko Division appeared in July 1943 and was comprised of Polish patriots under Russian command. Alexander Werth. *Russia at War*. (New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1964), 653.

<sup>20</sup> Zionist youth movement directed at educating Jewish youth for kibbutz life in Israel.

whole operation. So I was put on to, on the list. The list was sent to the Jewish Agency for Palestine, to Jerusalem, but I was told that I would be told when to run away, but I would be the last person. In the meantime, something unbelievable happened. My mother had survived the camp. And my brother, my mother's brother was here in the United States. And they began looking for me all over, of course, after the war. And they couldn't find me. My mother never gave up hope that I was alive. Everybody told her, "It's impossible that he survived." But she believed that I survived. And among other places where they looked, of course, was the Jewish Agency for Palestine. Somebody in the Search Bureau of the Jewish Agency for Palestine noticed that there was a child in an orphanage in Poland who was going to be coming to Palestine, who met the description of the child that the woman was looking for in Germany and notified my uncle in the United States. And that's how they, how I was eventually reunited with my mother. What happened was that, the, the – it wasn't all that easy to leave Poland, you know, I had no papers or anything else. And my mother was in Germany at the time, in the, in the British zone, so the American Joint Distribution Committee basically smuggled me out in December of 1946 from Poland to Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovakia to the American zone, and then the American zone to the British zone in Germany, until I was reunited with my mother. And there was the Joint operated with the *Brichah*<sup>21</sup>, which had bribed a lot of people on the border. And that's how I got to Germany in '46. That was really three years after I'd been separated from my mother. But the – I think the most telling thing is, is the faith that my mother had that I was alive. And there was no way for anybody to shake her in the belief that, that I was alive. And I, I really never looked. I assumed that if my mother or father were alive, they were going to find me. And –

02:15:43

Q: Can you describe that meeting?

A: It's emotionally a little hard, except to say that, that we met on the railroad station outside of Göttingen, which is in northern Germany. She had gone to a, a station earlier, and I recognized her, yeah.

Q: Where did you go once you and your mother were reunited?

A: You'll be surprised to hear it when I say to school, as a good academic. No, what I – what we did was Göttingen was my mother's home town. My father and mother had a, had different meeting places that they had agreed upon if they survived the war. One was in Kielce. My mother had actually gone back to Kielce – walked from Germany. She was liberated out not far from Ravensbrück. Walked, got back, mainly walking, into Kielce looking for us; escaped out of Kielce, left Kielce just a few days becau – before the pogrom after the war<sup>22</sup>,

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<sup>21</sup> Literally “flight” (Hebrew). The attempted movement of around 250,000 Jews from Eastern and Central Europe to Palestine. Yehuda Bauer. *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (New York: Random House, 1970), vii.

<sup>22</sup> The pogrom to which he refers took place on July 4, 1946.

got back to Göttingen because that's where, where she had grown up, where my great grandparents lived, and waited for my father. I came, and I had really no schooling whatsoever, and we lived in Göttingen.

02:17:23

So I was put – I was taught a year of private tutoring, and then enrolled in the high school in Göttingen. And was the – the only Jewish kid in – in school in that town, and the only Jewish kid that anybody in that town – at least, the children – had seen. Which was, in itself, an experience because they always expected to find somebody with a long nose, and, you know, all the caricatures out of the *Stürmer* and other German newspapers. Initially it was difficult. One, one is – sort of comes with a certain hatred to the town of the people who did all of this. And initially, I had this desire of sitting on my balcony to take a machine gun and shoot everybody who – then, gradually, you meet the children and their parents; and the abstract of the Germans becomes the reality of human beings. And you sort of gradually shed the hatred, and you integrate in the town and in the school. It helped to – we spoke about Nansen before. One of the things that I didn't mention was that when Nansen's book was published in German he gave the proceeds for that book to German refugees. And his whole approach to the Holocaust and to the problem was one of reconciliation. And that made a great impression on me, living in that environment and seeing people who hadn't participated in these killings. But I, I never really felt at home in any sense, in, in Germany; although I was treated well. Made a lot of friends. Then, in 1951, I, I came to the United States. I came initially alone, just to stay for one year. Came to live with my uncle, who lived in New Jersey. And never went back.

Q: What did your mother do?

02:20:00

A: My mother remarried; stayed initially in Germany, but really remarried. And she and her husband, who had been also in, in camp, in some of our camps, went to Italy. He had some relatives in Italy who were in business, and he went to live in Italy. She never came to the United – I mean, she came to visit often, but she never came to live in this country. She had this strange notion that if she came to the United States she'd have to work in a factory. And having worked during the war, she wasn't going to – despite the fact that we tried to disabuse her of this, it never worked. She still comes to visit only.

Q: And when you came here, you did work in a factory.

A: Yes, but – I, well, I came. I had a wonderful – my uncle and aunt were wonderful to me. They took me in. Was just living as a – I mean, obviously it was my family; but they, they weren't wealthy. They were, they were people who themselves worked in the factory and stores. They took me in. They had one daughter, and they treated me like a son. And I came in December. In January, I was in high school in Paterson, New Jersey, and became a high

school student like everybody else in the United States and enjoyed it very much. I, I liked it. I was treated very well. They – I was tremendously impressed with the very different atmosphere in the high school from the German environment. Germany was academically higher. The American high schools are a wonderful laboratory of democracy in so many ways. I liked it very much. And the teachers, I felt, were very good. And they helped me immensely. And they helped me get into college, and so forth.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add? Any part of the story you want to fill in?

02:22:31

A: Well, you know, I, I think I, I should go on with the, with the college story, in a sense because it, it's sort of relevant I think for Americans too, in many ways. It's almost part of Americana in its, in its true sense. I – when I went to high school, of course, I knew nothing about what one does from there on on. All I knew was that I wanted to go and become a lawyer, and, and, and write. And, of course, to many people that seemed totally outrageous. For somebody who had just come, that you'd be able to go to university, being an immigrant, and so forth. But I had a wonderful advisor – college advisor—in, in high school, who gave me a list of, of ten colleges. And she said all small colleges, that I should write to. And she told me what to write, asking for a scholarship and admission, and that's what I did. The problem was that most of the colleges, on seeing my record looked at it and saw that here was this kid who had had no school—except basically two and a half years of school in, in Germany and about a year of high school in New Jersey, and he wanted to go to college and he wanted a scholarship. So the reaction from most of them was: "Well, we'd admit you, but we can't give you a scholarship until we see how you perform in the first year." Well, I couldn't, couldn't afford it. One college I'd written to for a catalog – which was the sort of the first step – was Bethany College in, in West Virginia. And Bethany College, I received the catalog. I opened the catalog, and it said, "This is a Christian college." Coming from Europe, with my experience, I thought that meant that, that they didn't want me. So I didn't apply. And time went by – a number of weeks, or months. One day I get called to the, my counselor's office. And she says that "There is somebody here from Bethany College who would like to meet you." And I'm introduced. And the first thing the person says to me is, "Why—you, you, you wrote to Bethany, we sent you the catalog. Why didn't you send in your application?" I hemmed and hawed, and didn't quite know how to explain this. Finally, I told him the truth. And he said, "Oh, this isn't the case at all! I can tell you that if you apply to Bethany College, we'll give you a scholarship and a job. And you can – you won't need a penny in order to graduate from school if you, you know, do well." And that's where I went. And they were—this, this is a school that's founded by the Disciples of Christ. I found it to be an extremely liberal school. Nobody cared what religion I had. They treated me wonderfully. I got a good education. I went on from there to New York University and to Harvard Law School. And – but they were the ones who gave me this, this wonderful break. The schools, the, the supposedly "better" schools, in quotation marks, weren't going to take a chance. And I've always been extremely grateful to, to Bethany College.

Q: That's quite a story. That's – thank you. Very much. That's it.

02:26:57

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION