Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 1

Helen Fagin interview, 2/13/95

SWB: Why don't you tell me a little about your experience

before liberation took place.

HELEN FAGIN: Immediately before liberation, is that what

you're asking for?

SWB: Go back a little bit.

HELEN FAGIN: Well j- I'll-I'll just touch the highlights.

The Holocaust began for me exactly the day World War w- two

started, which is Friday morning, September one, 1939. Our

house was bombed Saturday morning, September 2, 1939. And

we were on the run since then. We finally returned to our

home town of Radumska, Poland, where we stayed with friends,

and soon after that the ghetto was formed. We stayed in the

Radumska ghetto through 1942. In 1942, September of 1942,

my parents were taken away from us and sent to Treblinka,

where they perished. My two sisters and I, then, remained

in the ghetto, but we stayed there until the liquidation of

the ghetto. I was able to escape the march to the railroad

station, having sent away my other two sisters before. And

I was hiding, I was hiding for a long time and then I

couldn't hide any longer. I was able to find my way to a

large ghetto in Warsaw. I stayed in the Warsaw ghetto until

the uprising. Then just before the uprising I was able to

get out of the ghetto, and I was on so-called Aryan papers,

which is false papers. In the mean time, I was caught, and

uh worked in a camp, in a w- in a labor camp, but then was

released and was taken back to the Warsaw ghetto. I was

liberated in Poland, February 17 of 1945. And tried to find

my two sisters. We were able to reunite for a very, after a

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 2

long long search. And then the decision was made that we

could not stay in Poland because we lost everyone, we lost

everything, and there was no reason to stay in Poland.

Mostly because the atmosphere was not very inviting. Uh,

people resented those Jews who have been liberated, and

resented the fact that some Jews survived. And uh, we had

some personal experiences which persuaded us not to stay in

Poland.

SWB: Tell me about those.

HELEN FAGIN: Well, for example prior to us uh leaving for

the ghetto, we had some personal possessions that we took

when we fled, and we entrusted these possessions to a so

called friend, and uh, after we returned after the end of

the world war two to claim these possessions, they wouldn't

recognize us, they wouldn't give them back to us, and uh,

uh, they just totally dismissed us. So we decided that this

was not a very favorable atmosphere to stay at. And then it

was much too painful to stay in Poland. It was um, Poland

was not very hospitable. And it was very very painful. The

memories and the experiences connected with living in Poland

will just, were just too devastating. We were contacted by

some people who told us that there is a group of Israeli

young boys who formed an organization called Brucha, and

that they are helping survivors of the Holocaust...to

rehabilitate themselves and possibly to find a way of taking

them to Palestine. Now Palestine was a place where we knew

about because our father was a great Zionist, and he had

purchased land in Palestine in 1930's. And he had traveled

to Palestine several times. So we knew that eventually we

would like to reach Palestine. Parenthetically as a matter

of fact, my father had signed me on the list of a uh, higher

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 3

education which later become, became the Rehovot, Weissmann

Institute in Rehovot, in-in then[?] Palestine. So we

decided to put our lives in their hands because there was no

real alternative. We were contacted by them and we were

told to just, to follow their instructions. And they took

us on a long journey over the Carpashian mountains. And we

found ourselves on the Czechoslovakian side of the

mountains. In Czechoslovakia we were met by another group

of young boys who took us through the countryside. And we

finally arrived in Bratislava. In Bratislava there was a

kind of a camp, which was, in a uh, actually in a square

surrounded by buildings, like a large apartment building

complex. And we arrived there and there were many many many

people, meandering back and fro and uh, everyone was in the

same situation as we were. Well we were staying there for a

certain time, and I really don't recall how long it was, but

I remember that we were walking through the streets of

Bratislava, trying to find people who looked familiar, as a

matter of fact, we did find some friends who came from our

hometown, just by sheer chance, and we were very delighted

to have found somebody we have known. And then we were told

that we were going to go on a journey. And that journey's

going to take us into Austria. The object of our journey

was to go out of the Russian occupational zone, leave the

Russian occupational zone and go to the American occupation-

al zone. Because the conditions were much better and there

were some displaced persons camps formed already. In the

uh, in Austrian territory of the American occupational zone.

We were met by two or three young boys who told us that from

now on we have to shed our identity. That we are no longer

Polish Jews, that we are Jews who are trying to return to

Greece. Simply because it was felt that no one really in

Austria would know the Greek language. But people knew

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 4

German or Czech or Polish or Russian and they could always

find somebody who could be the translator for us. So we

played the role of Greek Jews knowing full well that we

cannot communicate in the language. So one of the young

boys told us that we, since we cannot be numb altogether,

that we have to make an appearance of being able to

communicate to one another. That perhaps we ought to use

the Hebrew prayers because very few of us really could

communicate in Hebrew. So we actually did communicate by

gesticulating and using the prayers that everybody knew, in

a very conversational tone, so that we would give a uh, some

kind of an indication that we are communicating with each

other. When we were traveling the international Red Cross

would meet us at the different points of the journey and try

to help us. And he actually tried to find somebody who knew

the Greek language to be able to speak to us.

SWB: We have to put another roll of film on...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: When you start again, why don't you go back and talk

about using the Hebrew prayers as your language.

HELEN FAGIN: So we had to communicate in some kind of a

language, and because we didn't know the Greek language uh

we used Hebrew prayers by simply using them in a

conversational tone, and gesticulating as if we understood

each other. Well, we were taken by different modes of

transportation, either by train if we were not worried about

going through stations and being met there by some

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 5

officials, or by trucks. Eventually we reached uh the

shores of the Danube riv- river, at night. And there were

little boats waiting for us and we got onto the boats and we

crossed the Danube. And then we found ourselves on the

other shore which was already in the American sector. From

there we were taken by foot and then later by some other

conveyance. I remember it must have been trucks, to a camp

past Mauthausen concentration camp, which was Wels, in

Austria. And there they uh experience of displaced persons

camp began. This was our first displaced persons camp. And

it was a very depressing experience. First of all, the camp

had a fence around it. Secondly, it was guarded by

military, American military police, by the MP's. Dressed in

the white helmets that say MP, they were wearing the MP

uniform, and they were always carrying guns. We had to

register and this is the first time that we registered. We

got food rations and I remember that the entire experience

was very depressing and very devastating. This was to-

supposed to have been the liberating aspect of our

situation. But it was not. I remember the anguish, and I

remember the thought processes that went through my mind.

And I remember asking myself what am I doing here. Where am

I going? Who is going to be waiting for me? How am I going

to begin my so-called new life? What is in store for me? I

remember one night, we were awakened about two or there

o'clock in the morning, and the MP's stormed in, and told us

to get off our bunks, and our bunks were just that, bunks.

With burlap sacks filled with straw, this is what we slept

on. And they said that were there because somebody stole a

can of peaches. And they searched all those straw sacks for

the hidden can of peaches. I remember that the following

day, we gathered together and we tried to thing, my God,

what is this all about? Fortunately, we didn't stay very

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 6

long in Wels. I really don't recall how long. I believe

that perhaps six weeks or so, maybe two months.

SWB: Were you locked in?

HELEN FAGIN: We were not locked in, but we were surrounded

by fences and we really couldn't get out because, number

one, we didn't know where to go, it was a very isolated

place. And secondly, we were really guarded, for whatever

reason I don't know. [Sound of crows in BG] They took us

from Wels to Lenz in Germany. Lenz was another displaced

persons camp, but when we arrived there, it was full to

capacity. And they couldn't receive us. So we were waiting

there on a temporary basis, they couldn't accommodate us

there. And finally, they told us that we have to go back on

those trucks, and they took th- took us to the south of

Austria. Into a beautiful place called Badgastein. Which

was a resort, in the Alps, and the accommodations were

absolutely phenomenal. They put us up in hotels. And we

had nice beddings, and we didn't have to use outhouses any

longer. We had bathrooms. And we had indoor showers. In

Wels we had outdoor showers. And that was a tremendous

improvement. It was, this camp was under the auspices of

UNRHA, United Nations Refugee Rehabilitation Administration.

And the conditions were-were-were much improved. There was

a certain aspect of that camp which was different from any

other. First of all, we were freer to think about our

future. There was a free movement of people in and out.

And we were aware of what was going on in the world. So we

knew that there was such a thing as exodus. We could leave.

We could go by way of Switzerland, to Italy, and we could

sign up to go on those boats towards Palestine. And we

could dream at least of a certain kind of an objective,

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 7

certain kind of a goal, certain kind of a future, that was

in sight. It was concrete, it was achievable, it was do

able. So those of us who had dreams of going to Palestine

did so. We signed up. I believe that we arrived in Badgas-

tein towards the end of September, probably beginning of

October 1945. The international Red Cross sent us packages,

and we were able to find some decent clothes to wear. With

the approaching fall and winter however, we didn't have much

winter clothes. But we were satisfied that we could at

least have some decent attire. Not too much of it, but we

were wearing decent clothes. When winter approached, I

remember a very fine young lieutenant, from Dayton, Ohio, I

remember his name, Lieutenant Kyle, approached me once and

asked me if I had a winter coat, and I said, no I didn't.

So he brought me a G.I. blanket. And I remember I cut a

hole in the middle of the blanket and I wore it as a cape.

And that was my winter coat and I was very grateful for

that. In the camp I was able to work in the office, cause I

spoke fluent German, and it helped us to know the German

language to communicate with the rest of the population.

The population was not very happy with our presence there.

But we did the best we could not to aggravate them and to

stay out of their way. The life inside displaced persons'

camp... was very interesting. First of all, we tried to

gain awareness of what the potential, what our future oppor-

tunities may be. And we got together quite often, young men

and women, to discuss our situation. The first thing that

we did, and that was a very determined act, we were told

that if we are of a special, of a certain nationality, we

will be given the opportunity to return to the country of

our origin. And if we make that choice, we had to sign up,

and we would go to our respective countries. The other

choice was, the other alternative was, to declare ourselves

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 8

stateless. And then leave it to whatever fate there is

going to uh be available to us.

SWB: We need to reload...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: When we start, just back up and restate that you had a

choice between repatriation...

HELEN FAGIN: Well in the displaced persons camp of

Badgastein, we were given two choices. One, to return to

the country of our origin and become repatriated. Or to

remain in the camp, in that case we have to pronounce

ourselves and declare ourselves stateless. Without any

right of belonging to any country any longer. That was a uh

choice that many of us decided in favor of, becoming

stateless. At that moment of our decision I think we

suffered a very tremendous anguish. Because the decision

has to be made on the basis of what is there for us in the

future. We knew we cannot go back to Poland, because there

was nothing to go back to. We knew we have lost all the

ties to Poland and we knew that the situation in Poland was

really not favorable to establishing any kind of a life for

ourselves. So the decision to become stateless was the

better decision. And perhaps the most, the more, the more

promising decision for our future. And it was, at that

moment, I remember, that my thoughts and my feelings ran the

gamut. It was a period of feeling tremendous anguish, even

despair. Liberation was a very bittersweet concept for us

at that moment. And as much as we longed for being

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 9

liberated all these years of the holocaust, the situation of

having been liberated did not hold very much promise for a

better life for us. Our thoughts went back obviously to the

past, to our childhood, to our youth, to our families, to

our parents, and there was a tremendous emptiness in our

souls and our hearts. There was no jubilation, there was no

happiness, there was almost depression. When we talked,

when we met, we were always somber. And we couldn't really

understand whether or not we made the right decision. We

just felt in our guts that this was the decision that we had

to reach. Knowing full well that we are not the masters of

our own fate, we just had to leave everything to those who

would direct us from then on. So many of us decided to be

as positive as we could. We would gather together and we

would attend some kind of lectures, I remembered many of us

decided to learn English. Uh we decided to find some books

or some uh resources that would allow us to get acquainted

at least with the language so we could communicate with the

people of UNRHA, most of whom were either American or

British. And I remember getting some kind of a book with

verses, with little ditties, little poems, and we were

learning them and trying to understand them, and I still

remember a couple of them, but uh. We tried to be as useful

to ourselves as possible. Another aspect of our activities,

I remember, were political activities. We have found out

that the British did not allow the boats to uh land in

Haifa, and they did not allow, they did not receive the

refugees into Palestine. I don't recall whether we learned

about the camp of Cyprus at that time or not, but we heard

that some of the boats were returned, and we organized

protests. And we were marching [light plane noise in BG]

and protesting, and uh we were very vociferous, very vocal

against the British actions, and we were trying to influence

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 10

the international Red Cross to express our protest. I know

that we had a number of visitors who brought us all this

news, of what was going on, and we tried to inform ourselves

the best we could. And we tried to help people who are in

need, that there was a hospital nearby in Hoffgastein, my

sister who had some nurses' training was working in that

hospital. We tried to obtain as much medication as we

could, to save the health of a number of people who were

placed in that hospital. We tried to be as helpful to each

other as we could. We tried to be as uh social with one

another as we could. There were very many kids who didn't

have any parents left and who didn't have any siblings, so

we tried to sort of form extended families for those who

didn't have any families left. We tried to boost each

others' hopes and we tried to help each other. The

international Red Cross came there to try to find some of

our families. We had families, we thought we had families

in England and we gave them the names and they tried to

research it for us. They did research, uh-uh, some of the

names for us. Uh, we tried to communicate with people we

knew who lived in Israel, I had family in Israel, and we

contacted them. And we established communications with

Israel. What we were very surprise is that we were not very

much helped by any Jewish organizations in the United

States. I don't recall that any of these organizations came

forward with any help for us. As a matter of fact, I do

recall that, that high-S[?] helped with my... with my ticket

from Bremenhaven to New York City, but I also recall that I

got a bill for them from them, and eventually I had to repay

them the fare of the transport from Bremenhaven to New York.

I was very surprised and in retrospect I really cannot

understand the fact that when I arrived in New York, nobody

gave a hoot what has happened, what would happened with me.

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 11

Uh, I uh, was not given the opportunity for education,

nobody cared about my psychological well-being. Uh, nobody

ever asked how in the world is it possible for a young

person who has gone through five and a half years of

persecution, and kind of a personal tragedies that we had to

go through, and not worry about their psychological well

being. Uh this is something that has always dumbfounded me.

That when the Holocaust survivor came to the United States,

he or she embarked immediately onto the process of

acculturation, of trying to adapt oneself to the way of life

of America, to try not to stand out like a sore thumb, to

try to melt into the culture and the life, to try not to

show that we were different, to try not to act the victim,

and to try to develop a certain mode of- live in the certain

kind of a life which would establish us as a normal part of

the society. Learning the language, for example. I came

here and I didn't know English. And I remember my first act

was to buy a dictionary. I couldn't find a Polish-English

dictionary, I bought a Polish, a German-English dictionary

and I would buy the New York Times and I would read it with

the dictionary.

SWB: We have to reload.

HELEN FAGIN: Now would you prefer if I stopped already?

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

SWB: So for example the language, if you could just back up

to there, coming to this country.

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 12

HELEN FAGIN: Well, oh, I didn't really know English at all.

And uh what I did was I would buy the New York Times and

with the help of a German-English dictionary, I would read

it. And I would try to understand it. And then, everyone

that I would meet, I would ask them to please correct my

pronunciation, to correct my language, as much as they

could, because I was very very intent on learning how to

speak English. I never learned a word unless I knew its

spelling, so that I knew how to spell it, and then I would

learn how to pronounce it. And the pronunciation of course

was very difficult once you are more or less an adult, it's

very very difficult to forget the uh, idioms of a language

that you were trained in, and translate them into a

different language. Uh, but you really don't want me to

talk about my time in-in-in America, so.

SWB: Tell me, going back to Wels, I want to learn about the

day-to-day life there. Was there a lot of standing in line,

was it organized, was it disorganized?

HELEN FAGIN: I thought it was pretty well organized, uh,

but of course there was always standing in line for the

food, as was always standing in line for the showers. There

was um, always, well standing in line of course for

registration. But this was, this was a very very well

organized uh-uh system. Uh because they wanted to have

everything under a very very strict control. Uh, this was

actually the first time that we registered. The first time

that we declared ourselves as-as any kind of a, of a living

person, to be dealt with. Uh, but um, it was very

depersonalized. Very cold, and very very uh, officious, I

would say. We didn't get the impression that anybody really

cared for us as people, as a person, as a human being. But

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 13

they had a job to do and they did the job, and uh, it was

all on a very contem- uh-uh temporary basis. We knew that

uh, uh, that was the place, that is was sort of a transit

place, and uh we were hoping we were not going to remain

there for a long time.

SWB: The time that you were there, were there um many

nationalities and also were there non-Jews?

HELEN FAGIN: I don't remember whether there were any non

Jews, but I do remember many nationalities. Many

Czechoslovakian, many Hungarian, many Rumanian Jews. Uh, I

don't remember that there were very many north European

Jews, but I do remember central and east European Jews.

SWB: Did you think there was a lack of understanding on the

part of the administrators, or the MP's, because many of you

were from countries that they didn't understand why you

couldn't go back?

HELEN FAGIN: Well, I really cannot remember the exact, uh

conduct of the people, but I have the impression that is so

lasting, as a matter of fact I spoke with my younger sister

about it the other day. And I ask her what kind of

impressions she took out of there. And she confirmed with

me that she felt the same way. So it's not a personal

aversion, it is something that was a general atmosphere, a

general feeling, that we weren't cared for as human beings,

we were just cared for as uh, as-as-as an entity

to-to-to-to-to, to-to process more or less, it was a

processing feeling rather than caring feeling.

SWB: And now going back to liberation itself, can you tell

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 14

me...

HELEN FAGIN: Yes the process of uh-libera-liberation was uh

very interesting one in my case because I was sort of

liberated twice. Uh I was at that time living on uh false

papers, on Aryan papers [plane noise BG] and that was after

we uh-uh were wandering from place to place, trying to hide

and trying to establish ourselves uh-uh

SWB: Let's cut for a second because this jet...

[CUT]

[SYNC TAKE 5]

HELEN FAGIN: My liberation was really a very curious one,

because I was twice liberated. I was then under uh false

papers, and uh trying to hide and trying to emerge, and uh

at one point we uh heard rumors that the Russians are very

near, that was very close to the Russian-German front. In

western Poland. And when we heard that the Russians were

very close we decided that maybe we can emerge and finally

uh, act as ourselves and [plane noise BG] say well here we

are and we can be liberated. Well the Russians did come and

we emerged and we were elated and they, at first could not

believe that we were Jewish because they had encountered,

prior to that, Jews coming out of hiding or coming out of

camps, and sure enough, we were euphoric. Absolutely

euphoric. Uh the Russians are uh very friendly although

they were a little bit rough, but they were very friendly,

and uh they uh offered to share some food with us, which was

uh, very much welcomed. And then they went ahead. And uh

we were just left there in a very sort of atmosphere of no

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 15

one's, nobody's land, and we didn't know how to act and how

to uh, relate to the people we have uh met, whether to blow

our cover or not, because we really didn't trust the Polish

people. So we decided not to show our-our elation, and to

take it with low profile, and that was a very lucky choice

for us, because sure enough, somehow or other, the Russian

had to re- Russians had to retreat, and the Germans came

back. When the Germans came back we really were very

frightened. We thought that we are going to be renounced by

the population, who may have sensed our elation with the

Germans. And uh we decided to go east to move east as far

east as we could, but we really couldn't get very far

because the front moved, kept moving from one kilometer one

way to the one kilometer the other way. So we went

underground, and then we-we-we heard fighting, and we just

didn't know what to do, so we hid in-in basements as much as

we could, until about few days later when we heard total

silence, when we didn't hear any shooting, when we uh sent

somebody out to uh find out whether it was safe to come out

and when we came out indeed the Russians were there. And

they assured us that they were there for good, and that the

Germans retreated for good, and then we really blew our

cover, and we felt that we were free to be ourselves. And

then of course, the bittersweet feeling came upon us. We uh

made the decision to return to our hometown, to see whether

we can find anyone alive, and then we confronted the

rubbles, the physical rubbles and the psychological rubbles

of uh, of the aftermath of the war.

SWB: And so order emerged out of the chaos very slowly.

HELEN FAGIN: I wouldn't call it order. Chaos was

continuing. People were wandering about, people were trying

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.

Wentworth Films LIBERATION/DP PROJ. 2/13/95 Int. HELEN FAGIN Page 16

to establish stations where we could uh notify others about

the fact that we are alive and try to find people's names.

Uh there were on-on-on any well-well we had kiosks in Europe

where all kinds of proclamations were pasted. Uh, on any

such kiosk in every town you could see rows and rows of

names that people inquired about, and those who were alive

would put their names and the whereabouts so they could be

contacted. Uh, it was no order, it was chaos. In Poland

especially, there was chaos, because the government was in

exile, and uh, they-th-they had to form a new government

which was of course now being dominated by the Russians.

And uh people could not understand where to go and what to

do and how to establish their uh new existence. And um

there were people just a-wandering about, looking for

others, trying to uh make sense out of the chaos. Order

was-was far far away.

SWB: Thank you. I think I have everything that I need,

thank you.

HELEN FAGIN: Okay, you're welcome.

[END]

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.