Interview with Mr. Allen Mastbaum

By David Zarkin

April 3, 1983

Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League

of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is an interview with Allen Mastbaum for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust history Project by David Zarkin at Mr. Mastbaum’s home in Saint Paul on April 3, 1983. Mr. Mastbaum, I appreciate this opportunity to meet with you. I’d like to start by asking you your name including your Jewish name if it is different.

A: My name is Abish Mastbaum in Jewish name. Abraham Abish. I’m born the 3rd of March 1908, in Dubyenka, Poland.

Q: Was that town known by any other name besides Dubyenka?

A: No. Powiat Hrubilszow.

Q: What’s that?

A: That is the state.

Q: Were your parents and your grandparents also born in the same town?

A: In the same town.

Q: And what were your parents’ names?

A: My father’s name was Chaim Mastbaum. And my grandparents’ name -- Taglezeit Shulem Mastbaum.

Q: And your mother’s?

A: Moshe Alpair.

Q: Do you remember your great-grandparents’ names? Or do you remember where they were born?

A; Dubyenka.

Q: So you go back quite a few years in Dubyenka.

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of work did your parents do?

A: Mine father, he was in business in wood. Firewood.

Q: And what languages did you speak in your home?

A: We speak Yiddish. Polish, too.

Q: Was your family secular or religious?

A: Very religious. My father was a very religious man. He was a cantor in the temple.

Q: I see. Did your mother work?

A: In Poland, you see, the women didn’t work like here in the United States.

Q: And was your family Zionist? Or Hasidic?

A: Hasidic.

Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?

A: I was in the Yeshiva for seven years. Learn Talmud.

Q: When you were living in this town in Poland, were you aware of any local, national or international events from the mid-40s to 1941? Did you hear any news of what was going on in Germany or in the rest of Europe?

A: No radios, no televisions. There was a Jewish paper – the Forward.

Q: You saw that?

A: Used to read. You see, the Polacks, they didn’t give you exactly what’s happened overseas.

Q: Your father was in business -- in the wood business; did you work for your father then? Or help him out?

A: No, I was in school. I was in the Yeshiva.

Q: Did you or any of your family have contact with gentiles during this time?

A: Gentile? Yeah. My father used to got business with the gentile. We bought it from them the wood.

Q: Did you ever have any gentiles in your home?

A: Saturdays, we needed to make some fire. We call a gentile, because we didn’t make alone the fire.

Q: Because it was the Sabbath.

A: Yeah, the Sabbath.

Q: Before the outbreak of the war, did you have any experiences or encounters with anti-Semitism in your community?

A: Very much. When you’re walking the streets they throw stones after you. The Polacks, they was very bad people. Very bad people. In nights I got afraid to go outside.

Q: During this time, most of your relatives lived in the same town? Or did they live in other towns in Poland?

A: Mostly in the same town. Mostly in a big village. Over there, mine grandpa got a business, a milk business.

Q: A dairy.

A: So then in the village there was a Jewish prince. You know what means a prince? A prince means he got a lot of farms. Very much. He got a couple hundred cows. My grandma and my grandpa took the milk in, make butter, cheese, like that. That was a very religious farm. Saturday nobody works there.

Q: How far was that from the town where you lived?

A: Four kilometers.

Q: I see. Did you serve in the military?

A: Yes. Two years. In the Polish army.

Q: Where did they send you? Or did they send you anywhere?

A: This was a town -- Kover.

Q: What year was this?

A: This was in 1930-31. I had two years, 22 and 23.

Q: What kind of work did you do in the military?

A: Military work, nothing, just they have to train you.

Q: So how old were you when the war broke out?

A: I was 31 years old.

Q: Were you still in the military then, or were you out of the military?

A: I came back from the military. I was in for two years. I came back home.

Q: What were you doing at home then, were you working or…?

A: I was working together with my father.

Q: In the wood business. And how did you receive news of the war?

A: The war? See in 1938, we start to know the Germans, in Germany they start already, the attack on the Jewish people. So we heard that.

Q: What, word of mouth, or through the Forward newspaper?

A: The papers had something, but we heard people talking about that. But we couldn’t believe it. Mine father, he remembered the war in 1914, you see -- the First World War. “And then the Germans come,” he said, “The Germans didn’t touch nobody, just took to work, but they didn’t kill.” You know. In 1914. And that’s how my father talked always. And this was different Germans, you know, this was Hitler. Before it was a King, Josef.

Q: Was there discussion in your family?

A: Yeah, we discussed a lot of things with that. Always the old people would say, they would remember in World War I and they said, “ The Germans didn’t touch nobody. They didn’t kill. Just put you to work.” So work is, you know, not so bad. So that’s why everybody didn’t run away from the country, because we didn’t know exactly what’s going on.

Q: So you didn’t talk about fleeing your home.

A: No, no.

Q: What happened then?

A: In 1939, the Germans crossed the border, and it took just one week, they was in our place, by us.

Q: Were you occupied by the Russians at any time?

A: First the Germans occupied. And then the Russians come in. But the Russians was about two weeks and the Russians moved. It was over there a river, the Bug, and the Russians moved back to the river and we had the Germans. The Germans took till the Bug, so we was in this place by the Germans.

Q: And the Germans occupied.

A: The Germans occupied. After two weeks, the Germans took it right back. So then they right away start monkeying around with the Jewish people.

Q: What did they do?

A: They took you to work and they shot you, and they killed you right away.

Q: You saw things happen.

A: Yeah, oh yeah. And they took the old people and start to make a Judenrat. You know which means a Judenrat?

Q: Why don’t you tell us.

A: They chose some people. So the people, the Jewish people, the name was Judenrat. That’s Jewish Rat. It means they’re going to go along. The Germans gonna give you what to do and you have to do it with all the Jewish people. They gonna tell the Judenrat. For instance, they want a million dollars, they say to the Judenrat, “One week, you have to give a million dollars, otherwise 10,000 Jews gonna be shot.” They didn’t come to the Jewish people separate, but the Judenrat later come and collect the money from the Jewish people. So they chose a Judenrat, some from the best people from the downtown. It was about ten people.

Q: They had to go around to the Jewish people to collect money and valuables?

A: Money, valuables -- money and to take to work. And the old people, they want 200 today to shot ‘em. They take ‘em behind, in the trucks, they take ‘em out of sight and shot ‘em. The old people. So everything, the Judenrat did. You didn’t hear about that?

Q: I did, but I think we ought to explain it for the purposes of this tape, as to how they operated.

A: You see the Judenrat, it was ten people, and people, they know what to do. And the Germans, the Gestapo, come to the Judenrat, say everything, tell the Judenrat and the Judenrat come to the Jewish people, they talk to the Jewish people what the Germans wanted. And then it was through 1939. In 1940 they start take from all over the country. And they took from our place about 300 people -- young people -- to Belzec, in a concentration camp.

Q: As I understand it, there were three camps. The camps were located in the town of Belzec.

A: Belzec, yeah. And then it was Parawashnya, it was one camp. That was the place that the trains when they come, they repair the trains. You see the machines from the trains come in, they repair. The other camp, it was Molin, that is a mill where you ground some wheat for flour. And then there was Atartuk. Atartuk was the factory where you bring some wood and they cut the boards. So it was three camps in Belzec. I was in the Parawashnya camp. There was 20,000 people in the camp.

Q: And how did that happen. Did you go right from the town where you were living/

A: Yeah, they took us. To Dubyeshov, our town, there was not a train. There’s all horses with wagons. No machines, no trucks. Is come 300 wagons with horses and they took all of us in the wagons and this was to go 20 kilometers to Dubyeshov. And then they took us to Dubyeshov and then from Dubyeshov, they took us to the station, to the train, and we went to Belzec, to Tomaszow. This was the town near Belzec. This is the state, Tomaszow.

Q: What time of the year was that? What year?

A: Let’s see -- it was warm outside. When started the war, what year? In May? June? I don’t remember. This was 1940.

Q: How many were there?

A: We was there until 1941. In Belzec one year. Before the war break out with Russians. That was exactly the border with Russians. And we dig over there, we cut woods, and we dig walls for the Russian tanks not to go in to the Germans. You see, we cut woods over there, and we dig, very deep, and put the woods, and when the Russians come from over there with their tanks, to stop at the walls -- wood walls.

Q: To stop the Russians from advancing across the border there.

A: Yeah. Then, you see, before the war broke out with the Russians, they took us from over there, away, after one year. They put us on a train. It was there about 100,000 people, from all camps, and there was about 8,000 in the train. And they took us to Sobibor, a death camp.

Q: It was a death camp?

A: Yeah. Sobibor. Everybody knows of this camp. In Poland. They took us over there, but before we went, before Sobibor, the train stopped because they didn’t have the place. So many Jews were there, thousands and thousands, and they didn’t have the place for the train to go in. So this train stopped before Sobibor, maybe about 5 kilometers before Sobibor. And we were standing there in the train, we was all day and all night. People dying on the floors. You have to -- everything, on the floor. And the people dying. And when that was happening, we started to do something, so we knock out a wall.

Q: You were on the train.

A: The train -- we knock it off the wall, from the train.

Q: You were like in a cattle car?

A: Yeah, like cattle cars. I don’t know, maybe fifty, maybe 100 cattle cars at that time. Wooden. So we knocked out the wall, a door from the wall. We started jumping. But in the roof it was Gestapo with machine guns. In the train roof. Gestapo with machine guns. And the people started jumping -- hundreds and hundreds of people. And they start shooting. They kill everyone. But I jumped too -- I can’t remember -- maybe on the top of me was other people. They shot the people that was behind. And I didn’t know why I’m alive. So after midnight, the train start moving. And there was shot maybe about a thousand people -- dead -- where the Gestapo shot ‘em from the roofs.

I start to come to myself. “I’m alive!’ But I couldn’t crawl out from the dead people. I was strong, I start making me a place, and I touch mine self. I’m not hit -- nothing. So I left in the woods, and over there was people still alive, but hit. Who cares, you know. You don’t care for nothing. You don’t care for nothing! You care just for yourself. You want to live. To live is very strong! You want to live. So I run to the woods, and in the woods, this was not far from Chelm, and there was still Jews over there. There was still a ghetto. I went to the ghetto over there and started to talk to the Judenrat. To give me a card. They give out the red cards. You don’t have a card, you can’t be in ghetto. So they give me a card and I was in ghetto from 1941 to 1942.

Q: Before we talk about the ghetto, could you tell us about life in these concentration camps you were in before Chelm?

A: Yeah. I was in Belzec. Over there, they give you ten gram –- a little piece of bread. And black coffee in the morning. And I was working two shifts. So much people, you know, two shifts. I was working from seven to twelve and at twelve we were brought back home, and from lunch the other shift went to work. So twelve you got a little bit soup, with a bone from the horse, I don’t know. But still, the peasants, the people that lived in the town, the Judenrat, brought every week some packages, food. The Germans allowed them to bring some packages of food. Bread and butter, something like that. The Germans allowed us to do that. The leader in this Belzec, it was a Major Dolff and assistant Votechko. Votechko was a Czechoslovakian German. He was of German origin but he lived in Czechoslovakia. And Dolff, he was a German.

Q: And they were the ones that ran Belzec.

A: Yes, they run Belzec. So every day they took us to work -- this was the border with the Russians. We saw the Russians across. We saw the Russians when we working. We even could speak. When you speak to the Russians, they shot you right away.

Q: Who, the Germans?

A: The Germans, yeah. They find out, the Germans, he take your cap and throw it away to the Russians. The people was so dumb, you see, they run to pick up the cap. And he shot him right away. Because he said, “ You are on the run to the Russians -- across the border.” That’s what the Germans said. So they shot every day about twenty, thirty people. But later the Jewish people got a little smarter. In Chelm, in ghetto, I was working in a kitchen. Peel potatoes. I was over there one year, but later on we heard, some Gestapos have got Jewish people. They talk to them, and they make business with the Jewish people. So if they said, for instance, “Tomorrow they’re gonna take all Jews and they’re gonna be shot,” well this Jew come back and he said this, “Tomorrow” --and over there there was about a thousand Jews -- “everybody’s gonna get shot.’ So when I heard this, I took off at midnight. We took it off midnight. My brother, he was in a little town Wojslawiec. This was 20 kilometers from Chelm. I know he lives there.

Q: What was he doing there, do you know?

A: Over there there were 200 Jews and the Germans held them to work in this little town.

Q: How did you hear -- get letters from him?

A: Every second day, it was some people coming to Chelm from this town.

Q: And they told you about your brother?

A: Yeah, I know that my brother’s there. We can write a little, and my sister was there, and his daughter.

A: He’s older than you?

A: Older, yeah. Why I have to go over there, I thought. I got not so bad, so I gonna stay, but when I heard they gonna shoot everybody in Chelm, I took off at midnight, to my brother.

Q: On foot.

A: Yeah. And I came to my brother and I told him.

Q: How long did it take you to get there?

A: Some people, you see, drive some horses, wagons, so they took me. And I come to Wojslawiec, and I said to my brother, “ They gonna kill everybody.” This was in September, 1942. The Judenrat over there, know it already, tomorrow’s gonna be -- Gestapos are gonna shot everybody in this little town. So I talk to my brother, let’s go out to the woods. My brother accepted. And we got over there a gentile, a very nice man. He used to fight with Pilsudski. You heard of Pilsudski?

Q: No.

A: The guy that’s in Poland? In 1921? 1920?

Q: Tell me about that.

A: That was the President. In the Polish army, he was a General, Pilsudski. Then he was President. He was fighting with him, side by side -- the gentile -- with Pilsudski in 1921. So we went to this gentile. We explained to him what’s happened. He knows already. We said, “ We gonna pay you how much you want.” My brother has money. The gentile man had a farm, big farm, in the woods. His woods. And my brother go and took to make a bunker in this woods, to dig up a bunker. And he said he’ll allow us. And we dig from there a bunker -- all night and all day -- we cut the woods and we put her in. And on the top, on the bunker, we put some leaves, and then we put some grass. You got a little box, you open this and go in. Here you have it. (Uses a book to demonstrate.)

Q: What’s the name of this book now?

A: This is the name. The people, they lived in this little town Wojslawiec. This whole book is from the people. All the people, they come back from Russia, they was survivors, and they wrote this book. After the war.

Q: It’s all in Hebrew.

A: No, that’s in Jewish. It’s in Jewish language. On the 28th of November, 1942, we went in the bunker. And we was in the bunker, two years. Two years we was in the bunker. It’s very hard to describe this. We went, every week, to bring some water, two kilometers. Over there it was water come from a stone. I don’t know how you call this. Very good water, clear water.

Q: Was it like from a creek?

A: A creek, yeah. And we went every week, every Saturday night, and we got a pail. Mine sister went.

Q: You sister was with you.

A: Yeah, she’s here. It was mine brother and my brother’s wife and a little girl from four years old in this bunker. And every week we went for the water. That gentile, he brought us to eat, every week he came and brought three, four loaves of bread, a little piece of butter like that, and we pay him. Every week we’d pay him -- in gold -- ten pieces of gold. But we had the money. My brother had a lot of money, that he got out of the factory, the leather factory, in the time from 1940 to 1942. Business was very good, you know, the black markets, like that, for the Germans. And the people, what they had, they bought it, so my brother saved a lot of money. So he paid the gentile with money. In winter time it was worse, a lot of snow, and we couldn’t open this little box to go out. The gentile have to come and open this, and then we can go out. Otherwise, if he don’t come, we die inside. Every week, Saturday night, he came over there with a sled and the horses. He brought to eat, and he wait till we going to bring some water. In the morning he come back and he closes everything. One week inside, we were sitting inside.

Q: What did you do all that time?

A: Nothing. You just sit inside and in your mind, you get every day, you’re gonna die. Every day you got in your mind you gonna die. That’s all we got in the mind, for two years like that.

Q; For two years you were in the bunker.

A: Like that, yeah. Because you don’t know what’s happened. If the gentile will not come to you, you gonna die. You can’t go out. If somebody gonna go over there in the woods and find you -- the bunker--you gonna die. You can imagine what this is for two years to just talk about death. And everybody wanna live. Your life is to live. So we was for two years there. In summertime, 1944, the Russians come.

Q: How did you know that the Russians came?

A: We heard it. They was about a quarter of a kilometer from this place where we were lying in the bunker. And I heard everything what they said, just standing by the bunker. I got afraid the tank comes, and the tank gonna fall down and gonna kill us, so I stayed by, behind a bush and watch ‘em. What they gonna do. They didn’t know I’m there. If they know I’m there, I’ll be shot. They don’t know who this is.

Q: Did you speak Russian or not?

A: Yeah, I speak Russian. And I heard everything and they was all night there, and then the Germans run away, and so the Russians left, and everything was clear, and we still was three days in the bunker. Because I got afraid. And mine sister said she’d like to leave and I said, “No, we have to wait till everything is gonna clean up.” After three days she went out. She went to this town, Wojslawiec, where my brother used to live. And then my brother went to Wojslawiec. My brother’s name was Joseph. I begged him, “Don’t go. That’s burning, on fire. We can’t go in fire.” He didn’t listen to me. You could see the flames from the city.

Yeah. And I said, “Don’t go.” And he didn’t listen to me. He want to go over there to one gentile, because he got over there a lot of things hiding. He gave the gentile to hide them, some different things, shirts, dresses, like that. He wanted take back something.

Q: Back to the bunker. You were afraid that the Germans were still there.

A: They were there! So he went over there, and he went to the gentile, and the gentile said, “Wait here. I gonna bring something for you.” Then the gentile went outside and he brought a German -- brought the Gestapo, and he said he had a “Jude,’ a Jew in his house. So the German come and took my brother.

Q: Why did he do that, do you know?

A: I don’t know. You don’t ask questions, the Polacks do everything, and they shot him. They shot him, that’s what it was.

Q: Right there at the farm?

A; They shot him in downtown, over there. And I went back to the farm and I told them this. I was with my brother. I was outside, watching. The door, it was glass. And I can see everything, except the gentile didn’t know I am outside. And I saw the German come in. He took my brother, he took everything away from him. So when I saw this, I run back to the farm, I ran to the bunker. And I come back and I told mine sister-in-law that’s it. He didn’t listen, you know, he didn’t want to listen. He got it. So in 1944, after the Russians came over here, and we went, after three days, my sister went to downtown. She met over there a Russian officer. No more Germans were there. It was the Russians already. And she met over there a Russian officer, a high officer. Higher than a lieutenant. And she talked to him, and he said he’s a Jew. So then she told him the story. He said, “So, you can come in this town, but till we are here, nobody gonna touch you. But we have to go farther.”

Q: The Russian said, while the Russian troops were there, nobody would bother you, but they had to leave. They’ve gotta go get the Germans someplace else.

A: They wanna go on, you know. So we went to this town. We was over there for a couple days. From the bunker to the town. You can’t see nobody. The children, they run after us, like they was just howling, “Jews still alive! Jews still alive! Jews still alive!” Polacks. Behind the back.

Q: Laughing. Making fun of you.

A: Like they keep us, like crazy. They just hollering, “Jews still alive! Jews still alive!” And after three days we was in the town, we see nobody, we see Jews are there, but nobody laughed.

Q: Why was that? Why do you think that the Polish people were no longer shouting at the Jewish people?

A: Because they got afraid already of the Russians. So anyhow, we saw this was not the place for us. I got afraid to go outside. We was with a gentile, his name was Goshkovski, and we was with him for three days. And he told us everything that’s happening. And we met over there a Russian truck driver. He was a Jew too, from Warsaw. And he told him to take us to Chelm. In Chelm there was more Jews already, a committee. We came to Chelm, there was already about 20 Jews that were there.

Q: Twenty Jews?

A; Yeah. And we was four. And I went over there, asked what they gonna do. They said, “The government, the Polish government, gonna give us a room to live.” And they make like a “center,” a little center. They’d come in, they got already to eat, they got to give you bread, they got something they collect from the government and the Polacks. The Polacks was very good then, they got afraid of the Russians.

Q: How long were you there in Chelm then?

A: 1944-1945. And then, that’s not a place for us, too. They start shooting the Jews.

Q: Who started shooting the Jews?

A: Polacks. Midnight. The Russians went very far away and the Polacks took it over, their own police. So they start to look for Jews, and a couple Jews got shot from the Polacks. So I saw that’s not the place. So we went to Germany, occupied from the Russians.

Q: The Russian zone of Germany.

A; Yeah. I went to Klewitz over there. It was better. You see, over there it was Russians.

Q; Where’d you stay?

A: Well, the Russians took away houses from the Germans. They give us. We stayed over there, and I was over there till 1946. I met my wife over there, and I got married over there. My brother was in the same town.

Q: Were you doing any work while you were there in this German town in the Russian zone?

A: Make some business -- little business. And then…you know what means a pogrom? I wanted to go back to Chelm, take a look what’s happened, you know.

Q: Were there any people there that you needed to see?

A: Yes. I was there one year. And go back to Czestochowa. That was a Polish town. I can’t explain it, a second town. I was in the train to Chelm. In Czestochowa, this was a big town, was a Polish organization, the name was Hakar. They was against the Jews too. They started shooting Jews over there. And they killed about 30 Jews, took off the Jews from the trains. I was sitting outside the train, because I didn’t have a place to go in. The train was packed. You couldn’t go in the train. So you got steps. I was sitting on a step. So, you see, the Polacks go in -- the Polish police -- he asked me in Polish if maybe I saw here Jews, to tell him who’s a Jew. He didn’t recognize I’m a Jew. And I said, “I don’t know.” And I hear, over there, a Jewish woman -- she got a little girl, maybe about seven years old -- and she talk in Polish, loud, she knows I’m a Jew, and she said, “who’s going to be alive?” -- to take care of her little girl. and he took care of her. He shot her. The woman. But the girl start crying, “Mother! Mother!” And he shot the girl too. So, we come to Lublin. Lublin was a big town in Poland. Over there was a concentration camp. Then -- who was the Rabbi from Cincinnati? Silver, from Cincinnati. And he came to Poland, to Warsaw. He heard everything. He heard how they killed the Jews and everything.

Q: What year was this that Rabbi Silver came?

A: 1946. And he was in the government in Warsaw. And the government knows whatever was going on here, shooting the Jews on the way from Czestochowa. Then they sent Polish officers to take care for that, not to let them shoot the Jews. I was in the train at Lublin. Then five officers -- Polish -- come in and said, like that, “Who’s a Jew, to come to see us.” You know? “We gonna take care, nobody gonna touch you.” I got afraid to go, because I thought maybe this is something make it up! But I didn’t have a choice. And I said to them, “I’m a Jew.’ He said, “Sit down here.” And the other two Jews left over in the train, they took us to Lublin, and there was a Jewish organization.

Q: Which organization was this?

A: A Jewish committee. There was a lot of Jews already, was a couple of hundred Jews. And they had a kitchen. They cook over there, and they took care of the Jews left over. And I was over there a couple days. And from over there I come back to the Jewish committee.

Q: Did they have an office or something like that?

A; Yeah, they had an office. They had a whole building.

Q; And what happened there?

A: There they give us a place to sleep. And they give us to eat. Then my brother-in-law, he come and look for me. And I met him. And he said, “ You go with me,’ and we went back home to Woldenburg. This was 1946. Woldenburg was German -- occupied by Russians, Polish-Russians.

Q: And what year was that that you went there?

A: 1946.

Q: And you went there with your wife?

A: We were married in 1945.

Q; I still don’t understand why it was that you wanted to go to Chelm.

A: Make business. In Chelm, was everything cheap. In Woldenburg, everything was expensive. I went over there and bought 5 kilo butter. Everything you brought back.

Helen: We sell it.

Q: You met your wife in Woldenburg?

A: No, in Claivitz.

Q: And then you moved to Woldenburg, so Woldenburg was really your hometown.

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you stay in Woldenburg until you came to this country?

A; No. when I came back, I said to my wife, “No more in Poland! They start shooting the Jews.” And after two days , we went to the Czechoslovakian border.

H.M: We went first to Haganah. First you went and talked to Haganah, and you wanted to leave Poland.

Q: Did you want to go to Palestine?

A: We don’t got our passports.

Q: What did the Haganah tell you?

A: Be ready and we’re gonna take you. So we went to Czechoslovakian border, and it took us about one hour and we crossed to Czechoslovakia.

Q: Were you planning still to go to Palestine at this time?

A: Yeah. I didn’t know I have some relatives here in the United States. I know it, but I didn’t know where they was, you see. So we were maybe going to Palestine. And we was in Czechoslovakia about two days, and they took us to Vienna, Austria.

Q: Who took you to Vienna?

A: The Haganah.

Q: So you were with the Haganah all the time that you were going through Czechoslovakia.

A: Yeah.

Q: How many of there were you going to Czechoslovakia?

A: Maybe about 20.

H.M: Maybe more than that.

Q: So you went to Austria.

A: We was in Austria one day.

H.M: Maybe longer than that.

A: Maybe two days. And from Austria they took us to Germany. The Germany occupied by the United States.

Q: What town was that?

A: Ulm. And there wasn’t no room.

Q: Where’d you stay in Ulm?

A: In the D.P. camp.

Q: What was it like there, staying in a displaced persons camp?

A: We got a room and so then we got to eat. They give us everything for us. It was not too bad. It was okay. The Americans got the D.P. camp, you know. And there was over there everything.

H.M: This was just everything temporarily until they placed people different places.

A: Was a lot of people in there. It was thousands and thousands of people.

H.M: People would go to Israel, people went to America, people went to Australia, went to Brazil. Canada.

A: I started writing letters to New York.

Q: You had relatives in New York?

A: No. To the organization -- New York organization.

Q: What organization was that?

A: The Jewish organization, New York. I didn’t know whether they ever see the letter. And I ask ‘em, I have two uncles. I have mine father’s two brothers in America and I don’t know their address. The names I know it. And I don’t know nothing. After four weeks, I receive a letter.

Q: Who was the letter from? Do you remember?

A: The letter was from an uncle here. I receive a letter saying they was communicating with mine uncles -- the Jewish organization in New York -- and they told him.

Q: I would think like a Jewish Family Service.

A: A Jewish Family Service! Yeah. They communicate with mine uncles here. And I put the address where I am to the Jewish Family Service in New York. And they send it -- the address -- to mine uncles. And after four weeks, I received a letter.

H.M: A package too. Clothes.

A: They send me a package, and they say they’re going to send us the papers to come to the United States. And still it took many years. It took us about three, four years.

Q: And where were you all this time?

A: I was in Germany.

H.M: D.P. camp.

Q: It took three years to get your papers processed?

A: Yeah.

Q: So what did you do all the time you were in the D.P. camp?

A: I was working a little bit over there.

H.M: We have a little bit business with American soldiers.

A: With American soldiers at the PX we sold some coffee there. I bought it and sold it to the Germans -- the German people. A trade. So we got over there very good, very good in Germany. We was over there ’46 to ’51. That’s five years. And it was not too bad, but later on they sent us the papers.

Q: Was there some Jewish organization or agency that helped arrange?

A: I think so.

H.M: They called it the Joint.

Q: The Joint Committee.

A: The Joint helped a lot of them. A lot of jobs.

Q: Yes. They helped you come to this country -- the Joint Committee.

H.M: The UNRRA.

A: The UNRRA, and the Joint.

Q: The United Nations Relief Organization also helped you come to this country?

A: Yeah, helped us. To eat, food, to wear some clothes and everything. They give us, yeah. Mine uncles paid off everything here to bring us over from there to come here.

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: It cost money.

Q: It did?

A: Yeah, they paid.

Q: Who did they have to pay?

A: I don’t know.

H.M: First of all, we came by ship.

A: I think they had to pay.

Q: They had to pay the passage.

H.M: And then when we came to New York, then the Joint took us over -- from New York, and then they sent us fees.

Q: What did the Joint Committee do for you when you got to New York?

H.M: For me they didn’t do anything.

A: Because we came private. Because we came from the uncles. When you came from the Joint, they give you everything, but the uncles took us, so the uncles have to pay -- they give $10?

H.M: Just one moment. When we came to New York, was a Saturday. In the meantime, I met some cousins. I wrote to them. My mother’s sister knew I’m coming, and we came, they wanted us to stay with them a few days, and the Joint say, “Mine job is to take ‘em to the depot and fix ‘em up to Saint Paul, because they need some help.” And the cousin say, “ No, we will take them. Let them stay a couple days and we’ll bring ‘em back.”

A: They were responsible.

H.M: They say, “I’m responsible for the people. Let ‘em stay a few days and I will bring them, I will take ‘em to the depot and buy them the tickets and sent them to Saint Paul.”

Q: You had relatives in Saint Paul then.

H.M: Yes.

A: When I came here to Saint Paul, after one week, I filled out an application to Whirlpool Corporation. And I was working there for nineteen years.

H.M: We saved money.

A: We saved the money, and my wife was working, and I bought a five-plex at Goodrich and Victoria, and we was living over there and I was the caretaker, and she was sweeping the steps.

H.M: I was cleaning everything. It was very hard.

A: And we was living over there. It didn’t cost me rent. And so we paid off this, and I have it still now. I still have it, and that’s a very good income.

H.M: The reason that we moved from Victoria here, because my daughter wants to go to Highland High School, because it’s a very excellent school and she wants to go to a very good school.

A: So I’m now okay. I got everything, and I’m very happy, and I like very much the country. Very much!

Q: I just want to summarize here. During all the time that the war was going on, were you getting any news from anybody about what progress was on the war? Did you receive any news?

A: Yeah. The gentile come in the woods in the bunker. And he told me everything. He told me, “This, today, the Germans are here and here. And they fight here and do not take more.” He told me, “Six months, the war’s going to be over.’ But took more than six months. And every day he come he had some papers, he told me the news. And he told me, “Don’t worry, we’re gonna live. Don’t worry, we’re gonna live.”

H.M: He told you, “If my son-in-law wouldn’t kill you, then you will survive.

A: Yeah. He said he got a son-in-law. And the son-in-law was very ACA, and they don’t like Jews. And he said, “ If mine son-in-law will not kill you, you gonna be alive.” But one night he came over.

H.M: Well, he was drunk.

A: He was drunk, and he said, “ I’m gonna kill out all of ‘em.” I said to him -- his name was Tadjik -- I said, “ What you want, Tadjik?” So he got softer, and he said to me, “You have to buy me a machine gun.” I ask him, ‘ What you need the machine gun? To kill me?” He said, ‘ No, I wanna go out kill Germans.’ He was drunk. I gave him some money to buy a machine gun. And the second day he come with a big machine gun. He put it right on the ground there by the bunker . He knocked and I come out. He said take a look at this machine gun, you give me the money. Now we’re gonna go kill Germans. But he went, I don’t know if they rob Germans, they kill ‘em over there because the Germans, they stopped, you see, they run away.

Q: The Germans were running away.

A: Away, yeah. So they kill ‘em. They run away, they took away everything from the Germans. The whole damn town was there and he said, “That’s all. The Germans run away, the Russians come, we gonna be alive.” But when we went out from the bunker, I didn’t have nothing. I got bare foot. No pants. Everything was pulled down in the bunker. It was rags. So the old man come to me, “Come.’ Like that, see. “take a look how you walk to me.” I said, “ I know, I’m looking. I don’t have nothing.” So you know what he’s told me? “You don’t have nothing and I don’t have nothing and this money you give to me, I was drinking. I drink all the money when you give to me because mine brains was working every second -- They gonna catch me over there, the Germans. They gonna kill the whole family.” The gentile family too. But they didn’t know the gentile’s family kept us, and who hold a Jew, you know, they kill ‘em right away, too.

H.M: Not many gentile people hide out some Jewish people. You could count them on your fingers.

Q: Can you tell me what it means to be a survivor of the Holocaust?

A: You see when I was in the bunker, is everything was in my mind; to be alive, to build back my family, to sit by table and eat by table. You understand? To sit by a table and to build back my family. This was the survivor. In the bunker I was nothing. Nothing. You sit and you lie down in the bunker -- you just -- your mind was just on killing and dying. Maybe tomorrow, maybe the day after tomorrow. What are you doing here? Why you should be here? Go out, get shot. Why you have to be here one year, and maybe half a year later get shot – much better right away? Not suffer in this bunker? You know what suffering is in a bunker for two years? And somebody sit in jail for two years? He got everything. He got a room and he got light, everything. He didn’t wanna sit in jail. In the bunker -- dark. No air, you know, and sit in a bunker, you can’t go out. You like to get in company with the animal, but with a human being you can’t get in company, because you know if he see you, he’s going to go to the German and tell him, “Over there is a Jew.”

Q: Just one more question. After your experience during the Holocaust, could you please describe your general feeling about human nature, non-Jews and Germans?

A: I hate very much the Germans. Very much. Because they kill sixty-four people from mine family.

Q: Sixty-four people.

A: Yeah. In my family. Brothers and sisters and children and everything -- and not counting second cousins -- sixty-four people. I don’t have nobody besides the sister -- she was with me in the woods. She’s here. And that’s all. And mine wife now, and my children. Yeah, and I have a niece in Israel from my brother. She survived. She’s in Israel. Here, the people, is a lot of anti-Semitic here too, in the United States. A lot of it. I can’t believe it --the best men -- the best gentile -- your friend -- I don’t believe it. When something happened, is your friend gonna be the first one he wanna kill you. The first one! The best friend! You thought, you mean he’s your friend! Like here, people got friends, yeah? He gonna kill you the first one! He come to you and he take away everything, he’s gonna kill you. That’s mine. I don’t believe it, I can’t take it. The government, maybe, it’s not too bad, the government don’t let it be anti-Semitic like that, but we have a lot of ‘em here, too. Is an article today in the paper. It’s article from a professor. He’s an Arab, but he’s a professor in the United States. What he wrote -- about Israel, to Reagan -- he told him not to give to Israel, to help, nothing. He’s anti-Semitic, too, a big one. A very big one.

Q: Have you read any books or seen any movies about the Holocaust?

A: Yeah, I was always at movies. I watch ‘em, but some people can’t take it, but I watch ‘em.

Q: Do you think they tell the story right?

A: What you see in the television is not 10%! You still have 90% you have to see it. I can’t tell you. I saw in the ghetto was a building. In the building was maybe a hundred families -- Jewish families living -- big buildings. And the Germans come, in the building. They took all the children, there was a big truck, by the windows, and they throw the children in the truck! Through the windows. They throw 500 children, but the mothers couldn’t take it -- they jump themselves, too. That’s what I saw with mine eyes! And how you know that, if I don’t tell you. There was a girl from seven years old. And she was alive, in the truck alive. So they took all the children -- some in the hospital. They sucked out the blood from the children for the soldiers -- for the German soldiers -- they had to give them some blood for the soldiers -- they got wounded in the front, you know. And the father from this girl was a doctor. And he went to the Gestapo. And he pay a lot of money to bring the girl back. The Gestapo brought the girl back. And the girl told everything what’s happened to them and the children. How you can talk about things like that --you can’t talk about things. You see a lot of things.

Q: Do you have any photos, mementoes, or other things from that period that you’d be willing to share?

A: We got some, but the Czechoslovakian border they took everything away. Even the passports. When we come we didn’t have nothing. The Polacks took away everything.

Q: Do you think that your belief or practice in Judaism or a Supreme Being has been changed by the Holocaust experience?

A: I belong to the Lubavitcher here. I go to Lubavitcher. Why I’m going over there, my father was a very religious man, you see, and I can’t forget this. My wife’s at home. She fights with me, why I go over there. I go over there because when I go over there -- I don’t do very much, but Pesach, I go over there, and on the holidays -- when I go over there, you see, I’m back at home. You understand? I’m back at home. This here is exactly like home. But I’ve changed a lot, very changed. We believe in God, but when it’s happened like that for six million Jews, rabbis and Hasidim, and BIG rabbis -- they shot ‘em, they burned and everything, and nobody answers for nothing, I question, Where’s God? I believe, but I am changed. I never ate meat -- we buy in a store meat, I never ate it. Because why? You see, the Jewish religion, I know very good. You buy the kosher meat, but is not kosher, either. Because in the old country it was a lot of difference. You see here, meat, when you have three days in a shop, when you don’t put some water on the old meat, it’s not kosher.

H.M: That’s a tradition I don’t know.

A: A tradition doesn’t stop. That’s not tradition, that’s kosher. If they don’t do that, it’s not kosher. And then he drive the car on Saturday. When he drive a car on Saturday, his meat is not kosher. You understand? That’s the religion!

Q: So what you’re saying is that some of the traditional things are no longer done.

A: That’s right. You have to know.

Q: I’m running out of tape here unless you had anything else to add.

A: Tell me. What you gonna do with that?

Q: This tape is going to be made available. It’s going to be part of a library on the Holocaust, and it will be used for educational purposes. There’ll be a transcript made, and from there there’ll be summaries made of each of the interviews. And they’ll be put together in a little book.

H.M: Well, for instance, a lot of people have passed, are dying already. And who will tell what happened?

Q: That’s why we’re getting on this right away and why we’re doing the interviews now, and I’ve been brought in to work on this, to set these up as quickly as I can, and get them done.

H.M: It’s the same like you have to tell what happened in Egypt, with thousands of years, you know? And maybe this is what the tape recorder is for -- something!

A: You have the Pesach -- the holiday -- yeah? You got the first day and second day and make a seder, yeah? And you want to make a seder now, from the Germans, for what’s happened. It’s a lot more to do. Exodus. Is a lot more. 100% more.

H.M: ‘Cause they needed for slaves, you know, but he murdered them, in the concentration camps.

A: But they took out the Jews. And the Jewish people in Egypt, they didn’t kill ‘em. They didn’t kill ‘em, they was working, they got everything. Slaves. We wanted to be slaves, but they didn’t want it. We once wrote a letter to Hitler, if we converted, for Catholics, and he said, “No.”

H.M: I’m converted. Because of the Spanish Inquisition, we have to change your religion.

A: So they didn’t touch you.

H.M: If you change your religion, they let you live.

A: Live! But here, by Hitler, he didn’t want it. If the fourth generation, he find out. Your father, your grandfather…

H.M: Take for instance, Weinberg, yes? He’s the Defense Secretary.

A: He’s a Jew.

H.M: He’s not a Jew. He is converted. His father converted from Judaism to Catholic, I think, or I don’t know what, but if he would be by Hitler’s time, they would kill him, too. He would be the same Jew like I am, you know. But he is not a Jew here.

Q: I gotta cut the tape here. This completes the interview with Allen Mastbaum by David Zarkin on April 3, 1983 at Mr. Mastbaum’s home in Saint Paul.

PAGE

PAGE 2

PAGE

PAGE 2