Interview with Jules Zaidenweber

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HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is an interview with Jules I. Zaidenweber for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project by Steven S. Foldes at Mr. Zaidenweber’s home, 3308 Idaho Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota on 21 June, 1982. Please tell me your complete name and your Jewish name if it’s different.

A: Well the Jewish name is the middle name -- the initial that I have -- Israel. My name -- the formal name -- Micah, is Jewish for Jules. Jules I. Zaidenweber

Q: And when were you born?

A: I was born January 8, 1920.

Q: In what town and country were you born?

A: In the town of Lublin in the country of Poland. I grew up, however, in the city of Radom. Which is about, roughly, 60, 65 miles southwest of Warsaw. I considered myself a Radomer, because I grew up there from a little kid going to school, graduating high school there, and my parents lived there, and my family -- on one side, my father’s side -- and the friends, actually, I had -- those were all from Radom.

Q: Please tell me about your family. What were your parents’ names and where were they from?

A: My father was from Radom. Born in Radom. His name was Israel Gedaliah.

Q: Can we spell that for the transcriber?

A: My spelling was changed a little bit when I became a citizen. Zajdenweber. I changed the “j” to an “i” The pronunciation is the same, you know, “j” and “i”, but it was mispronounced: ‘Zaj-den-weber” they called it. So that was the reason for changing it.

Q: And your mother?

A: My mother’s name was Ita Justina. She was known usually as Justina. Her maiden name was Frydmacher. And she was born in the city of Lublin.

Q: Were their families from those two places?

A: That’s correct, yes. Of course, my mother’s father, if I remember, was from a small town near Lublin, but it’s basically the same location.

Q: And what did your parents do?

A: My father -- he was a salesman in the textile store or distributing place. The place was both wholesale and retail. My mother had acquired, in her later years, a profession, after we kids grew up. She was a corset maker. She had a shop and that’s what she had done. And that probably saved her life.

Q: Who lived in your household, actually, while you were growing up?

A: Four of us. My father, my mother, my sister and myself. I had a sister, a younger sister.

Q: How old was your sister?

A: My sister was four years younger than I. And she did not survive the war.

Q: What languages were spoken in your home?

A: Well, with us kids, basically Polish. My parents spoke Yiddish and I learned Yiddish. My sister could converse in Yiddish, probably not as well as I could. The language amongst the adults was basically Yiddish -- in the house. I went to a state school -- boys school. That’s not a reform school, as you well know. It’s a “gymnasium” that you are familiar with, and that was strictly a Polish school. Knowing the Polish language -- a good knowledge -- was a prerequisite, so I knew Polish very well. As a matter of fact, I was fairly good in Polish, better than some of the native Poles! That quite often happened, that the Jewish kids were better in the Polish language than the others.

Q: Was your family secular or religious in practice?

A: Well, they were sort of half in half. My father was not an orthodox person. He didn’t have a beard, which was being very Orthodox. I’ll show you some pictures. He looked very secular and behaved secular. He did not work on Shabbat -- unless he had to. He attended synagogue services -- not every Shabbat, but all the holidays. Very strict there. My mother -- she was, as was usual for women, less practicing .She was lighting candles. She would not go to the synagogues as often, or…

Q: But your household maintained kosher?

A: Yes. My household maintained kosher. And being Jewish was a natural thing for us, so there was no question of being assimilated in any way. We had a Zionist background. My father, as a youth, belonged to a Zionist youth group, and I think he transmitted that to us, too. When I became a teenager, I joined a group also. It was not permitted in school, but the school looked through their fingers. All Jewish kids from my school and girls from other schools belonged, because this was the thing to do.

Q: Did your family participate in the Jewish community in Radom?

A: Well, the set-up on Radom was not as it is in the United States. You did not have to belong to a synagogue to be a member and to be active in something. You did not have to belong to a JCC, because there was no JCC. There were Zionist youth groups if you are a youth. There were Zionist organizations if you are an adult. There were non-Zionist organizations. Jewish life in Radom was very active. There was a Yiddish paper. There were many, many groups, as I said, Zionist, non-Zionist, and even anti-Zionists. So anybody who was leaning to one thing or another had a way of expressing himself and joining with a group that he felt comfortable with. These groups were both social, and they were very much political, as you probably know from Jewish life. Some of ‘em were religious and some of ‘em were anti-religious. So the set-up was such that if a meeting had some importance or interest for either my mother or my father, they would go.

They were very much interested, for example, in Yiddish theater. If any troupes will come from the outside and present a play, they will make a point of going, because it’s a cultural occurrence that they were interested in. They would certainly go whenever they could.

As I mentioned before, as far as going to synagogues, there were hundreds of ‘em probably -- small synagogues. My father started to go to one, and I remember as a youth I went with him. This was a private synagogue. The synagogue -- or the “shtibel” as they called it -- was a small synagogue, usually in a private building, not a very fancy thing. It could consist of maybe two or more rooms. Usually it was pretty well attended on a Saturday, but it was very much attended on a holiday, and even more so on the High Holidays. And so, my father would go to a certain one located not very far from our home. Once you started going, you were well known then, and they considered you sort of a member, although there was no formal membership. You will support by giving a “naider” -- meaning a donation. You will give a voluntary donation and that’s how this was supported. On the High Holidays, however, we would go to our own family synagogue. My great grandfather -- who happened to have an apartment building -- donated one of the apartments for a synagogue. It was a regular apartment, with a kitchen, and all of it became the synagogue. And basically, it was only meant for men! Women would never come. Those women who were interested in going to a synagogue, they would go to the city-wide synagogue, and there were some other small synagogues who had a room or so especially dedicated for women. In the family shtibel, there was no room for women at all during the year. However, during the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, my grandmother’s apartment became the portion that women would come to, because it was an adjacent apartment, you see, and they would open the door and hang a white sheet between, so that the women who were close to it could hear, and what was going on farther on I don’t even need to tell you! It was maybe a sentimental thing to go to your own family synagogue, although it was quite a ways farther away, and might have been even an economic reason, too, because you had to buy tickets, which sometimes were expensive. And here we had privilege to come to our own. My great-grandfather, as I said, donated it, and his sons and my grandmother -- his daughter -- they continued it. That was a very nice tradition.

Q: It’s clear that you had a formal Jewish education.

A: Well, the formal Jewish education, again, was different in Poland than it is here, in a way. Going to a Polish school meant going six days a week, Saturday also. I’m not talking about after the war, under the Communist regime, but that was the normal thing, six days. So I would go to school on Saturday, then. It was important even to my family for me to go to a high school like this, even though it meant desecrating the Shabbat. But, I did go to a cheder when I was smaller. And then when I couldn’t go to cheder any more. I would have a rabbi come to my home and teach me. Then when that kind of stopped, I went in the evenings with a group of other kids to a Hebrew school in the evening. Not the rabbis who just learned how to pray, or chumash, but this was more to learn Hebrew and learn history. Besides, our religion was an important element in Polish schools. Poland being a Catholic country, they had “religion” two or three times a week in this school, taught by a priest, but we had release time, an hour or so, maybe two hours, once a week. And the Jewish boys had a teacher come and he taught us what was called “religion,” basically history. Prophets and whatever. So that was the Jewish education. But again, being a Jew in Poland was not only the basic religious education, but it was the environment -- the total environment of being Jewish in a Jewish population that was very much Jewish!

Q: I would like to shift now to talk a little bit more about the specific events leading to the Holocaust. What major events were you most aware of from the mid-1930s until about 1941?

A: The war started for us in ’39. The division was right there, September, ’39, rather than going to ’41. In 1933, I was 13 years old, and that was exactly the time when Hitler came to power. I read the papers, obviously, and it was talked about, and it was heard about, and we knew what Hitler meant to Germany.

Q: What did you think Hitler meant to Germany?

A: Well, at that time, of course, we did not foresee everything -- “we” being the kids or the parents or even politicians and professional analysts -- we made many mistakes in both analyzing and in judging Hitler at that time, but we knew that Hitler brought anti-Semitism to Germany. Now to us it was just like somebody coming close to Poland and reinforcing those anti-Semitic feelings, because it didn’t take very long, you know. Going back a second, I went to a Polish school where the Jews were a very small minority. It was more-or-less a quota system, so everything around me was Polish, and we were very much aware of it -- both as far as teachers were concerned and the administration was concerned, and even more so as far as our fellow pupils were concerned. Coming back to the general environment, the anti-Semitism in the streets, anti-Semitism in the businesses, and everywhere, it was very much alive and visible. A Jew could not get certain jobs that he wanted to -- even if he might have had a better education than the Pole had. A Jew could not become a judge, for example -- ever. A Jew could not become a -- well, a notary public was a more advanced position than it is in this country, because you had to be either a lawyer or at least have a partial education -- but you could not become a notary public. A Jew wanted a license, Let’s say, for liquor or something like that, well, it would have been difficult. Cigarettes was a state monopoly. Jews were in the businesses, but still the police would harass. And there were so many things. So the anti-Semitism was around us, and we felt it. We knew it. We talked about it. We fought it -- if not with physical and external means -- with moral and cultural means. Now Hitler came to power, and this is like somebody coming around and reinforcing our own anti-Semitism. It really didn’t take very long when you could start sensing the increase of anti-Semitic feelings, excesses -- I mention a few in a minute -- even in the Polish Parliament. One example I remember now is the Shechetah. You know Shechetah is the ritual slaughtering. For a while it was a problem. There were Jewish representatives in the Polish Parliament and there were Zionists and Orthodox Jews. People may not remember those things or be aware of it, but before the war Poland wss an autocratic country. You hear about Pilsudski?

Q: No.

A: Pilsudski was the liberator, the Washington of Poland. He was the liberator in 1918, but he was also a general. So he put this military character, you might say, in the Polish government -- not right away, but eventually he took over the government, he and his clique of generals were actually the governing body of Poland. And so that was when Poland became independent. For 150 years before that Poland was not there. He was not an outright anti-Semite, and he never opposed Jews having representatives in the Polish government. And there were Jews! And some of them had positions of importance, if not power. These Jews -- the representatives -- represented a Jewish population which was quite significant. The Jewish population was about 10% in Poland, it was between three and three and a half million Jews in Poland. So there was an array of Jewish representatives, from the far right -- I mean the religious -- up to not quite the left, because Pilsudski would not let them. But there were socialists. Now in the mid-‘30s, this problem of whether or not to forbid the ritual slaughtering came up. It was a fight! The Jews were fighting, as much as was possible, because when Hitler came to power, you could sense that all of those generals, the population, and the representatives -- all of them -- were more and more against the Jews. There were also pogroms on a small scale, not far from our town. It was a town by the name of Przytyk. My wife’s family came from there. The Polish peasants attacked the Jews and the Jews fought back, they were prepared, and they were tried in Radom, because there was a circuit court. They were in other places in Poland as well. So anti-Semitism got a shot in the arm, if you will, by the fact that anti-Semitism came into a country like Germany. So this was, of course the immediate effect of Hitler’s coming to power. This happened in 1933. Well, I needn’t go through history -- ’33, ’34, ’35 -- Nuremberg laws, and all kinds of anti-Semitic laws. And then in ’38 -- I think it was -- might have been in ’37 already -- they came out with an order in Germany to get rid of all the Jews who had lived in Germany -- no matter how long -- that never became German citizens. They considered them still, let’s say, Polish citizens. The Polish Jews went to Germany, and they could not acquire German citizenship, but they were allowed to live in Germany, and they considered themselves German citizens. It turned out that they were never German citizens -- at least not according to the book. In ’37, definitely by ’38, they pushed them over the border -- and I mean almost literally. They brought them to the German-Polish border and they just pushed them, “Here! Go back to your country!” And many came to Radom. It was a shock for them, it was a shock for us. But we still didn’t grasp the enormity of what was coming -- of what was going on then, and also coming -- but the sad part of it all was the whole world wasn’t doing anything! So I was also aware, there’s no question about it.

Q: Did you know some of these Jews who were expelled into…

A: My wife, they took in some people. Many people took in either family or children -- there were young children. When they came and settled in Radom, I got to know some. I was still a youngster.

Q: Were there other major developments of which you were aware before the outbreak of the war?

A: Well this was anti-Semitism that I encountered in my own school. The people who went to the same class with me, same grade -- and personally, I did not suffer because of them -- they joined anti-Semitic groups. I mentioned to you before, it was officially not permitted while you were in the gymnasium, in high school, to belong to external groups. You could belong, of course, to youth groups in school, but they would look through -- pretending that they didn’t see it. The group that these Polish boys joined was almost like an anti-government group, because they were so extreme right and anti-Semitic and anti-everything. I remember, they could not come out officially while we were still in school, but the minute we graduated…it was May, ’38, and we had to come and register for the military draft for officers’ school. Jews were not admitted, but they were required to come and register. Those boys who joined these groups, they had the crossed swords, the symbol of this anti-Semitic organization. Some of them came out openly anti-Semitic in my class. It so happened that the teacher -- the home teacher -- was a very fine person. He ran them down, and he came out on our side, but nevertheless, this was the anti-Semitism that we lived with, within our own class, within our own school, day-in and day-out. I learned German in school and I read German papers, too, any time I could get hold of one.

Q: So you were quite well informed?

A: Yeah, I was very well informed. I was always interested in reading the newspapers and whatever information I could get.

Q: And what were the major sources of your information?

A: Basically, there was a Jewish paper in Polish – a very good paper called Nasz Przegld. So that was a good source. And we had discussions in the youth group I belonged to, whose name was Masada. We talked about these things. We had what we called a “live paper” every second Saturday, people would read either informational stories or compilations or summary writings that they themselves would prepare, so it was always lively, and the information was there.

Q: Radio?

A: It was not as popular as it was later on.

Q: And did you hear some things indirectly by word of mouth from people who had actual experiences?

A: Sure. We knew for example that we would not dare to go into certain areas of the city where Jews did not live -- not by choice, but because they were not permitted to. Walking into those areas was something dangerous, because if a Jew was caught, he could be beaten up. So those were our own personal experiences. You would walk down the street -- even before Hitler -- and you would be insulted, verbally or otherwise. We did not realize what was coming in the future, but we could see what was going on in those days.

Q: Aside from the Polish school that you attended, did you have contact with Gentiles in other places?

A: Only neighbors.

Q: Did your family do business with Gentiles?

A: Sure, they did. As customers. There was very little social contact.

Q: You never had Gentiles in your home, for example?

A: I could have had some from my school. Some friends. The friendship was very shallow. I couldn’t say that we were friends, but I got along with the Polish colleagues very well, and as a matter of fact, I have some good memories about two of them, who even helped me on occasions during the war. Those who were anti-Semites, I had nothing to do with, because I didn’t want to or because they didn’t want to, but those who were more-or-less friendly, we all -- the Jewish boys were only a small number -- would get along with quite well. But as far as my parents or my sister, she had probably more Gentile friends from school than we had. But certainly we had Polish neighbors in the same apartment building, and we got along fairly well. Again, “getting along” was not “close,” because the religious and ethnic differences didn’t allow us to become very, very close. We were friendly, in that sense, but not really close.

Q: Did you have relatives who lived outside of Radom?

A: Well, I mentioned before, Lublin, my mother’s side.

Q: In other places?

A: They lived in Lublin. I would go to Lublin quite often -- at least twice a year -- during my winter vacation, summer vacation.

Q: Is that the only place where you had relatives that you were fairly close to?

A: That’s right, yes.

Q: To your knowledge, what happened to them, and when?

A: Well that’s a long story. Lublin was probably one of the first cities that was affected by the German extermination plan. During the war, you could not travel. The last time I was in Lublin -- I don’t know if we can get to this point about traveling when the war started, but the last time I was in Lublin was in 1939. I had four uncles there, my mother’s brothers. I had my grandparents -- my grandfather actually died in ’38, so my grandmother was still alive -- and then cousins, my uncles’ and aunts’ children.

Q: How many children were there?

A: Six cousins. And my mother’s sister, the only sister, she emigrated from Poland in 1937, I believe, and went to Argentina. So she survived the war in Argentina. But those four uncles and my grandmother were still in Lublin. And I saw them in ’39. As the German army was coming close to Radom, I escaped with many, many young Jews who were going east, hoping that the Germans would be stopped and we would be coming back. But back to your question about the relatives. Those were the closest relatives on my mother’s side. I did not see them after that, except one uncle who came to Radom. And he came sort of disguised, because we were already in the ghetto. He had a very Aryan look, like a German. He was married to a woman from Radom, so he came, saw us, and saw also his in-laws, but by himself -- he left his wife and his child in Lublin. He didn’t bring them in; that would have been too dangerous. I don’t remember how he managed to come the relatively long distance from Lublin to Radom. It must have been in the summer of ’41. And then I saw one cousin who escaped from Lublin -- later -- and who was caught in Radom, recognized as a Jew at the railroad station. He was shot. It was in ’43, or at the end of ’42.

Now in Lublin, at that time, was also a ghetto, and they were liquidating, and they built a camp in Lublin. It was called Majdanek. As I found out later, three of my uncles were killed there with their families, except this one cousin who came to Radom, but unfortunately he was caught at the railroad station. He, too, had a very Aryan look, but the Poles had some kind of sixth sense. They could tell. No matter how you looked, no matter what your appearance -- the Germans wouldn’t recognize us. The Germans could see a Jew and they couldn’t see the difference, whether he’s a Jew or he was a native Christian Pole or whatever. But a little Pole -- a little ten-year-old Pole -- could point out, “Hey, German, this is a Jew.” That’s how they were. And he was pointed out, apparently. Or else it was such a tight inspection at the railroad station that somehow he was caught. I never found out how. But I know because his body was brought in. At this time it was what we called the “snow” ghetto. We were already liquidated. We were just a tiny band left over. This was the end of ’42, because I remember quite well when he came -- so it’s 40 years ago, in 1942. I didn’t realize how many years.

Q: Did you have any relatives who served in the army?

A: When? During when the war broke out? No. Not this time, no.

Q: Now I’d like to talk much more directly about you and your personal experience. How did you receive news of the outbreak of the war?

A: You didn’t ask anything about the relatives in Radom, but this is later, because this was on my father’s side.

Q: We’ll get to those relatives.

A: Okay, I’m sorry. The question, “How did I receive the…?

Q: How did you receive news of the actual outbreak of the war?

A: Well, actually, prior to the war breakout itself, we saw what was coming. It so happened we were in the resort area about thirty or so miles from home called Garbatka. Jews would go for a summer and rent a house and stay there. So we were there at Garbatka, and they started calling up reservists -- that was the last two weeks of August in 1939, and we were just almost ready to go back, because my sister had to go back to school. And besides, this was the end of the season. So we were getting ready to go back to Radom, and we could see the trains filled with young people. We knew that young people were being called up and the trains were going. So, obviously, we could see that tension, and we could understand this, and the government was getting prepared. Now this was the end of August. We went home fast. It was very, very tense. I can remember on a Friday morning, we heard some sirens. We didn’t know what was going on. And all of a sudden we heard rumors that the Germans crossed the borders at eight or ten o’clock in the morning that day. We thought that these were just false rumors, because with all this tension going on -- people were ripe for rumors. Anything somebody would come up with, you know, was taken seriously – or else people would disqualify it as another rumor. Well, it so happened that it was the truth. And I know, because we listened to the radio. We tried to confirm it, and sure enough, we found out that this was the truth. The Germans started to march -- and they never stopped. So that was Friday the first of September in ’39. And then, the next day -- Saturday -- everybody was very tense and we were very apprehensive, because are coming the Germans, and what was going to happen to us Jews, especially -- what was going to happen from the Poles, and what was going to happen from the Germans -- we didn’t know. And we were not prepared, you know. The young generation didn’t know what the war meant. The older generation -- the parents -- remembered World War I, and they knew that that was terrible. It was terrible, but yet they think, “They lived.” They lived through it. The areas where they lived changed hands, you know. First there were the Prussians, then there were the Russians, then they were back to the Prussians -- back and forth -- and if they lived in southern Poland, the Austrians --like in Austria-Hungary, you know -- but even though they were exposed to very difficult conditions, most of the people survived them. There was none of the official hatred as this was in Germany. Now here the Germans were coming, and knowing what we knew by then, what they were able to do, we were very scared, but still we hoped that here are the English and the French, and they are so strong, and they are certainly going to be stopping the Germans. That was the first of September. September 2nd, nothing happened. It was Saturday and we were obviously very apprehensive and the mood was very, very depressed. I can remember -- both in our family and in all Jewish families.

Q: You were still away from home.

A: Oh, no. We came back from Garbatka. Since we saw what was going on, we cut short a few days of our stay and came back. Anyhow, when the war started, we were home. And to repeat again, Saturday was a very sad day, too. And then Sunday morning -- all of a sudden, without any warning, we didn’t know what was going on, again rumors were flying all over the place -- we heard those bombs falling, not far from us, and being curious and being probably unaware of what could happen, I heard that a bomb fell on the viaduct not far from my home, and I ran to see what happened. And, sure enough, I came upon injured people -- you know, a viaduct goes up like this over the railroad tracks, and there were steps there, and glass was broken, and I can still see it before my eyes - people’s limbs were all torn, and when I saw this, I turned around and ran back home to tell my family to just go down wherever -- there was some basements, dark basements, dirt floors, you probably remember that, that was the cellar, actually -- to go down and everybody, of course went down there, because the bombs fell very, very close from us. There was just a few of them, and that was the end of the day.

This was the first real sign to us -- and to me personally. I saw what it could mean. Because here is the bomb, here is an injured person, here’s the broken glass and damaged building. Well that scared me very much. I had probably very, very strong feelings at that time, but there was nothing we could do. We expected -- I was nineteen -- that the Polish military would call up the young people. But nothing had happened so far. Even though I was eligible for that officers’ school and had graduated from high school, they never called me up. It turned out I was ineligible -- they found ways to make me ineligible, first of all, because we were Jews. They never called any of the Jews into officers’ school. Very, very few did in past years, but not in the late ‘30s. But there’s nothing we could do. People started buying food as much as they could afford, as much as they could find. And we were trying to find out from newspapers, from radio, what was going on on the front. We knew the Germans were marching. Very soon people started talking again rumors that the Germans would arrest all the young Jews -- not the older, mind you --but the young people who were my age, of military age, because that’s of course the element that could fight them. They would arrest them and take them away. So what do you do? So we start talking -- to your friends, to parents of your friends, my parents, to other friends, and so on and so forth -- and pretty soon you find out what the others intend to do. We decided to go east -- go ahead of the Germans. And by the time we prepared ourselves, it was Wednesday. Wednesday night, believe it or not, by the late afternoon or evening, we left home, kissing our families and saying “Good-bye” and “Oh, we’ll come back, probably next week. We’ll come back in two weeks, because the war will stop by that time.” By the way, the third of September, the very same day when the Germans bombed the place near my home, France and England had declared war on Germany, and they gave the ultimatum for Germans to stop and leave Poland. Well, I needn’t tell you what Germany thought of this ultimatum. But we thought that it meant something, and besides, the English and France has got to be stronger than Germany. And everybody else -- the whole world -- is against Germany, so obviously Germany is going to lose the war and our strong Polish army is so strong that they would, they said, “We won’t give up a button to the Germans.” It’s funny now, but believe me, in those days, it was very…

Q: That’s how it seemed.

A: Certainly. And we trusted them. The cavalry -- the horses -- were going to fight the tanks, mind you. And that’s what happened. Interestingly enough, they fought in Warsaw for 26 or 27 days -- longer than any French and any Western Europeans. If you know the history, that’s how it happened. Warsaw survived, even though they bombed it to pieces, four weeks, longer than any of the other countries that the Germans invaded. But we were not taking chances, mind you, and I left home that Wednesday night and we started marching east.

Q: Who were the group of young men like you…

A: Young men like me -- and anybody. Basically we were a group of Jews, because we really didn’t care what the Poles were doing, although a lot of them were going, too -- it was interesting -- those who were not called up -- and few were, ‘cause the Poles were so disorganized, they didn’t know what was going on, and they were so completely confused and probably shocked that I don’t think they called up very many people to begin with. They had hardly any equipment, and so much sabotage. You know what a Volksdeutcher is?

Q: No.

A: Volksdeutcher is the ethnic German. And every country in Europe had ethnic Germans. And they were the fifth column, a very easy fifth column for Hitler. They were Poles, and with Polish, Slavic names, but all of a sudden they discovered that they had some German blood, the father was German or the mother was German or somebody, and they declared themselves as being German. And some of them were really German -- and they were probably spies before. And they would probably help with signals or any other way. Later we found out some of them were very beastly pro-Nazis -- but that’s another story.

Q: So how did this group of people get organized to keep close together?

A: There was no organizing. All they’d say is “I’m going tonight. Are you going, too?” “Yes, I am going, too.” That was the organizing. There was no leader. There was no plan. There was no theme -- there was nothing! You can’t say it was organized. Was actually, a disorganized band of people. And I say “band” because you try to get together with people that you knew, at least walk with them. You could just shlep along and go. We didn’t have any hiking boots, any particular equipment or anything. All they had to do was just say, “Let’s go,” and whoever wanted to join, joined. There was no leader. I couldn’t tell you what to do or not to do. You couldn’t tell me. We just happened to be comrades in that disaster.

So where did we go? We went to country roads -- Poland didn’t have those great highways, you know, in those days -- and it didn’t take us very long to find out the Germans would come down with their airplanes and shoot at us, so we had to lie down in the fields. By that time -- Friday, I remember, or even Thursday -- we could see planes coming down. We didn’t have enough Polish planes. We walked for three and a half days, almost. It was such a huge mass. People who had horses and buggies went. People who had cars, and there weren’t very many, they got stalled, they’d run out of gas. The cars couldn’t move, because everybody was going on these roads that were supposed to be for the cars and the horses. It was just unbelievable, and indescribable! They were honking, they were screaming, “Get out of the way!” But eventually, as a group, we got to Lublin.

By that time, I hoped we would get there, because at least I knew where I could stay overnight -- and not one night. So we did get to Lublin, I remember, on Saturday night. Saturday night was the ninth of September. It was almost the middle of the night, and part of Lublin was in flames! I can still see it! It was burning! The Germans must have dropped some incendiary bombs. And by that time, they were very close. They were eight days, already, away from their border, and nobody stopped them -- until then, anyway. It so happened that that was the Friday they took Radom, so I escaped two days ahead. Friday the eighth, they marched into Radom.

Q: Your family was still there.

A: My family was still there. Right.

Q: You were the only one from your family…

A: Oh, yeah. Because this was the idea, that young men should escape, because those are the ones who are most liable to be taken prisoners and put in camps, and prisons, and God knows. So the parents, with tears in their eyes, and with pain, they said, “Go! Save yourself!” So we got to Lublin, and I knew the city, so I had no problem finding my family. I got a good bed to sleep in and food and everything, and they were, too, anticipating. I went to my youngest uncle, with whom my grandmother lived -- or he lived with her. He was married and had a little girl. This is the one who looked so much Aryan -- he’s the one who came to Radom -- and it so happens that his wife was from Radom, too. So I stayed there.

The Germans came to Lublin a few days later, and I was out in the main street. By

that time, they put out the fires, and things sort of calmed down. The Germans came to Lublin and I said, “There is no point of running any further, but at least I will stay here and see what happens.”

At first nothing happened. It’s sort of quiet. As a matter of fact, I was standing with many people and watching their soldiers marching with their band going down the main street -- the victors, the herenvolk. You know German? “Herenvolk is the “Master Race” -- loosely translated. So nothing happened yet. Now this was the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, maybe of September. It so happened that the High holidays were coming upon us, so I stayed over the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and I even went to a synagogue. At that time the Germans started looking for Jews, and we almost had to hide

Q: Did you have any contact with your family at this time?

A: No. There was no contact, no telephone. We never had a telephone, and besides the telephones -- I don’t think they were in operation to begin with. The Germans took care of that, so that people would be isolated, so you wouldn’t know what was going on in back of you or in front of you. As I said, I stayed over the High Holidays, and then I remember being in the city, where I saw a group of Russian officers come to the city.

Now let me back up a little. I stayed there maybe two weeks -- I don’t know exactly -- but you know, from history, that the Russians and the Germans made a pact just shortly before the war broke out, and they agreed that the Russians would march into eastern Poland and stop on the river Bug, and the Germans would march to that place and this would be their new border. And indeed, that’s what they actually did. I think the sixteenth or so of September and they came over -- it was very easy for them, it was close from the old Russian border -- and they stopped. But somehow I don’t know why, a Russian officer group came to Lublin, and I saw them there. And the ironic part was, that people were kissing them, and grabbing them, and lifting them up, and they were happy with them -- the Jewish people were. They thought, “Boy, the Russians are coming. Maybe the Russians will save us. Maybe they will chase the Germans out, maybe they’ll make a pact with the Germans and do something.” People were catching onto anything possible/impossible, hoping that things will be better, although it wasn’t bad yet, because it was just the beginning.

I don’t remember the details, as I said; so many years, it’s what 43 years later? I must have told my friends that I went with where I was going to be, and we got together again, and we found out that the Russians are already on the Bug and it’s safer to go to the Russian side and escape from the German sector. Somehow we got out of Lublin. We again marched, and somehow got on -- I don’t remember how it was -- on a train, or somehow we got to the border and we bumped into the Russians. It was so fluid. There was no border yet, because things were going back and forth, so there was no big problem getting to their side at that time.

: Yom Kippur I was still in Lublin, but on Sukkot I was already in the city of Chelm. That’s where we wound up, and we even wound up in a home of a Jewish family there! They fed us. They gave us fish. It was just amazing. We were refugees and they took us in, two or three of us, and the others went to other families. Again we sort of tried to keep together. We had to stand in line to get some bread, because at that time the bread lines started building up at the bakeries, and you ate bread just freshly baked -- actually half- baked. You started feeling the crunch of the war days. But we were on the Russian side.

Q: What town was this?

A: Chelm. This was Poland, but the Russians were there, right? I remember, too, that on the railroad trestle, we encountered a Jew -- an officer in uniform -- and he spoke Yiddish. And we spoke to him. And he told us that the Russians are moving back -- this is just a temporary location for them – and he really praised Russia, and he praised the Moscow subway, and all kinds of things. He told how good, really, the Jews have it, and all the good things that the Russians have done, because they remembered under the Czar! This was in ’39 and the Russian revolution took place in ’17, only twenty-two years before, and he was a young man, and he remembered just like you remember twenty-two years ago in Hungary, and I remember war, years ago in Poland, so naturally the comparison was positive for him! So he encouraged us to go towards the Russian side. “Besides,” he said, “The Russians are going to move back and the Germans will come here.” And he was right, because the river Bug was east of where we were, so we didn’t think twice, and we -- I mean we intended anyway -- and we went further down to a city named Kowel. And this was already under the Russians, and they were there maybe a week or two weeks already when we got there. It was a town where there were at least half Jewish and half non-Jewish. It’s a small town in the eastern part of Poland. Now it’s part of Russia, like the whole eastern part of Poland is Russia. The further I got away, the less chances I had to know about my family, and the less chances they had to hear from me. And besides, it didn’t really matter how close I was, there was no communication, there was no letter writing, there was no post office, there was no telephone, there was no any way to just communicate with them. This was the end of my going east – Kowel.

Now there I started appearing that I was a real refugee, because being a small town, and then the town filled up with people -- and where do you put up those people? They started putting up food kitchens, and there was no place to stay overnight! It was really bad. Eventually I left the place. I found a friend of mine who lives in Israel now -- he had some relatives there -- and we decided to go to the big city! Lemberg. Today it’s Lvov. It’s in southeastern Poland. Today it’s not Poland anymore. It’s the Ukraine, and Lvov is the main city in the Ukraine -- a big, beautiful city. Well, the conditions in Lvov were not very good either, but at least it was a big city. But if you didn’t have any money, you were just really out of luck. You had to find how to get along, you know. I found my uncle -- my father’s brother – there.

Q: You just bumped into them?

A: Somehow I found them. Frankly I don’t remember. The only way you could find out -- by the grapevine. Somebody from Radom saw you, and you start asking questions, “Who did you see? Who came? Who’s gone?” And little by little, you find out from one to the next, and somehow I must have found out about my relatives -- my father’s brother and two or three of his cousins. I moved in with them, in a cold room, I remember. My aim was to register -- to try to get into the Institute of Technology in Lvov. I wanted to go either there, or to some university -- there was a famous university in Lvov, too. Poland has two I.T.’s only, one in Lvov and one in Warsaw. And it was always my desire to go to an I.T. if I could get in. I tried and I did manage to get into a dormitory. It was a part of the I.T. in Lvov. Now this is ironic, because the dormitory was the hotbed of anti-Semitism in Lvov before the war. As I mentioned to you before, for a Jew to walk in a certain area of Radom was like taking his life in his hands, and this was worse! Much worse! Because students who were part of the anti-Semitic group -- they were the worst. This very dorm was one of the worst known in Poland. Under the Russians, of course, all of a sudden, things turned around, and a lot, not me only -- but a lot of people who had credentials moved in to prepare themselves to take a test to be admitted to the Institute of Technology.

Q: So things in Lvov, they were still fairly calm.

A: They were calm, and we were calm, because by that time the Russians were there. You didn’t have to be afraid of the Germans. The only problem was that you didn’t have anything to eat. You didn’t have any money. You didn’t have any clothing, really, because when I ran away from home, you know how much you could carry, and besides, you thought you went for three days, and you will come back, so there’s no point in carrying anything. So in that respect, you were just a real refugee with nothing on you. And so we did all kinds of things -- little jobs, or, I remember, one of the things I did -- and not only I, but many people did -- there was a liqueur factory in Lvov, and you would stand in line, early in the morning, and they will sell you a bottle or two -- or maybe just one per person. And what would you do? You would go out and sell the bottle and make a few zlotys. That was how you kept going. So it was tough. This was the end of October and the beginning of November, and all of a sudden I heard that there is a train going from Bug to the German side. That was a free day. They were going to allow people to go back. There were a lot of refugees that went back -- women and children -- not Jews only, because a lot of Poles run away, too, especially military personnel, government personnel. The government of Poland told them, “Go east. We will come back in a few days or in a week.” It didn’t work out that way, so all these people wanted to go back home .To them the Germans were also an unknown, but they were not afraid that they will do something with them! So, anyhow, a few friends came over and say, “What are we going to do? Here we can go back officially, legally, back home.” And just like I -- the others were all separated from the families -- we didn’t know what happened. Here I was, sort of debating to go to school, but you never knew what was going to happen. We didn’t trust that the situation between the Germans and the Russians was going to be stabilized. Somehow, we had some kind of feeling this was not the end, you know, even though the Germans and the Russians took over Poland. And then later on we found out the Russians didn’t want these refugees. They started sending people away into Russia, and that is what scared us -- I won’t say even more, but scared us just as much. We didn’t know where we were going to be sent.

So, when this opportunity came, a few of us decided to go back and say, “if we can, maybe we can come back, somehow, smuggle ourselves back.” Well, it was maybe the right thing, or the wrong -- I don’t know -- but we did get on that train. That train took us all the way from Lvov to Lublin. I saw my relatives -- that was the last time I saw them -- and then from Lublin, I had to go back to Radom. In order to get from Lublin to Radom, you had to go to a place on the Vistula and cross and then take another train, but the Vistula bridges were all bombed out, so there was no connection. You had to go on the pontoon. And sitting in this railroad station called Denbrey -- am I telling you too many details?

Q: Go ahead.

A: I was sitting in a corner, and a little Polish boy came with a German. He was looking at all the faces, so we split up -- the three or four of us -- so we would not be obviously visible, you know, all together. So I was sitting by myself and that little kid came over and pointed to the German that I was a Jew. And through more guts and gall, I pulled out an I.D. from my high school. First I pretended I didn’t know what he was talking. I knew German, but I pretended complete ignorance. I showed him the I.D. I said, “Here!” And he saw on my I.D. “Israel.” He didn’t even look -- just walked away. He would have beaten me up and God knows what he could have done with me directly.

Q: So he saw that your name was Israel?

A: He didn’t look at it. Just the fact that -- through sort of chutzpah, you know, he just let me be. I came home, finally. My parents were glad to see me. They said, “You came at the wrong time, because they are arresting people.” I came the ninth of November, and the eleventh of November was a Polish holiday. It’s an Independence Day -- just like in this county Armistice Day. World War I ended on November 11th, so that’s the Polish Independence Day, believe it or not! He said, “They are arresting people. They are looking again. God knows what things happen! You should have stayed where you were!” I said, “How did I know? So okay, maybe I’ll go back.” Well, I stayed a short time. We had to hide! By that time they started…

Q: Where did you hide?

A: Well we would not go out of the house, okay? We were locking the doors. The Germans would go to houses -- not every house -- and knock on the door and scream and call people out, say, “Come out! Get out!” Or sometimes they’ll break down the doors. Well this was the beginning. They would grab people on the street, “Who are you? Are you a Jew? Come to some work. We need --“ They’d clean out latrines -- or any kind of things like that. But it was not a general thing -- just a little bit yet. Well, I stayed over the eleventh at home. And one day my father came home and said such-and-such -- whatever his name was -- “He wants to get out of here. He’s ready to hire a taxi and he made some arrangement with somebody that he wants to go over the river Bug -- to a city, Berdyachev, and he thought maybe you want to go with him, because you are there already. Maybe you can be helpful.” “I can be helpful? I don’t know.” “You want me to go?” So I said, “Okay, you don’t want me to be here because it’s dangerous, so I’ll leave.” And I did. And it was kind of a risky enterprise, really, but we made it. We made it across and it didn’t take very long and I was again on the Russian side.

Q: Who was this person?

A: He was a man who was a store owner of some kind.

Q: Jewish?

A: Oh, yeah, he was Jewish. He was willing to pay for a few people to just go with him. It was not a matter that he paid, but he already had made the arrangements, and he took me. My parents were glad to see me go again, because they were afraid.

Q: Was there food in this…

A: There was still food, yeah. Pretty soon after, they came out with the ration cards, and the Jewish ration cards were shown with a Mogen David, and the rations were smaller than the general rations. But when I got back in November the food was still available. People were hoarding, it was hard to get certain items, but it was still possible. And it was only September, October, November -- only the third month, and not quite -- maybe two months only, and so people had some supplies of their own from before, and they were buying all during this time, so it was not terrible yet, you know, it became later, but at this time, it wasn’t so bad.

Q: So you were back on the other side of the river.

A: I didn’t stay home very long. Maybe a week, and then I was gone again. And again I had no contact with my family. I eventually wound up much north of Lvov, in Brest Litovsk. It means “Lithuanian Breast.” But actually in Poland it was a little different name: Brest Litevski -- Brest Libuggen. Again it’s in Russia now, the Russian side. It so happened that I had been in this place before the war, but that’s beside the point. So I went south to Lvov. I couldn’t get back into this dorm anymore. The term was over with the tests and all that, so it was too late. So I enlisted in something else. Well, then, I couldn’t find an apartment until I found my uncle. See, when I came home they said that Uncle Henry and the two cousins -- they left, too. And then I started looking for them -- I think that’s probably what happened -- and I found them! That time we found an apartment up high in some building. Then December came -- it was a terribly cold winter -- and January. You would leave a cup of water on the table, and you would wake up in the morning and it was solid ice! That’s how bad it was! Things were getting worse and worse and then we heard a lot of people being sent deep into Russia!

Q: By the Russians?

A: By the Russians! They’d send them to coal mines! Into the Donets Basin. There were a lot of coal mines there, and other hard work. And gee, what’s going to happen? Again, our parents will never hear from us! So again, a group of us started talking, “What are we going to do! Maybe we should go back! When we were there it wasn’t so bad.” Now this was the bad part -- “bad” in a sense -- very uncomfortable and very uncertain. But nobody realized that things were going to get worse and worse and worse. So, seeing what we did, it didn’t look so terrible! So we said, “Here we don’t have a place to stay, we don’t have any food, we don’t have any money, we may end up in a coal mine, we may end up in Siberia, who knows?” It would have been a salvation in a way, you know, but then again, you are without your family. So we decided to go back. But this time, we did not have an open border where we could just go get on a train, and the Germans let you go. We started looking for a way to go back, and we found somebody -- and again I don’t remember the details because it’s so long ago. You had to go to a border place on the river, and some local person who knows the area will tell you how to get across and not be caught by the Germans. Now this was January, 1940. It was one of the most horrible winters, a lot of snow and very, very cold, just like the Minnesota winters. When there’s a war, maybe you know -- everything is bad! And that includes the weather! No kidding! It seems like every winter during the six years of war was bad. So anyhow, we had to pay this so-called “guide.” We met him in a bar on the Russian side. It turned out he was not a Jew, he was a Ukrainian! He could have lead us right to the Germans! He probably knew that we were Jews. So here he tells us to cross, three or four of us. He described how to get across, how to go this way, to the right, and to the left, and we had to be on the opposite side before eight o’clock, because this was the curfew hour. If they catch you a minute after, they shoot. They don’t ask you who you are -- regardless of whether you are running across the border or not! This was one of the really bad experiences during my life. We had to cross with snow this high!

Q: To your chest!

A: To my chest! And I had two little packages. I tried to carry my things back with me wrapped in some green paper, I remember. And I tried to carry that warm coat, too. I was sweating -- I was hot -- I had to pull out my leg from snow, just step by step! Finally all of us came across the river, and as we got there, “Halt! Halt! Halt!” A German soldier! Would you believe that? He didn’t notice us crossing, but somehow he came along from some little town. We pretended we didn’t understand what he was saying, so he showed us the watch, and we said, “Yes, yes.” And we ran. A woman was looking out the windows, and she saw us coming -- it was a fairly bright night -- and she opened the door. Would you believe, I knocked on the door, she let us in -- let us sleep in the barn -- even gave us milk? She didn’t know we were Jewish. The next day we rented a horse and buggy and we got away from the border, so it would not be suspicious, because we were strangers in this place. And little by little we finally made it back to Radom.

Q: How did you manage? You had enough money to hire a carriage or…

A: A carriage, rather than the trains, because that was more obvious. On the train we’d have been more recognized, but we were going in a small group, in - you say “carriage”, but it’s a horse and buggy, really -- from place to place. And we finally made it back.

Q: What did you see as you crossed?

A: Well, the bridges were still in ruins -- broken up, you know. The Poles did that when they were retreating. Life in the rural areas -- it probably wasn’t any different. Everything was at a standstill, so you couldn’t see much. We didn’t go to any stores. Basically we kept to ourselves, and we did not want to get involved with anybody. And once we got back home, well, again, there was the question of what are we going to do? Now we’re not “we” anymore, we’re “I”, you see, because everybody went to his own family…

Q: Your family was still living in their house?

A: This was the beginning of 1940, and we were living in the same apartment. There was no problem of moving out yet -- that came a little later. So the question was getting another job. But things were getting tougher -- as far as food was concerned, as far as safety and security were concerned. And the worse part again, as far as I was concerned, is that people of my age were required to report to work. And what happened then, too, is that the Germans ordered the Jewish community to organize. Well, the community was organized, in a way. But they told the leaders to organize for a certain purpose! Like delivering a number of workers every morning for the Germans, for their purposes – let’s say 200, and then 300, 500. I don’t know the numbers exactly, but obviously, somebody had to be in charge. And pretty soon, they organized what they called the Eldestenrat. The English word for it is the Council of Elders. Not that they had to be older people, but the seniors. And so those people had to organize, and they organized into different departments. Now the Jewish community was organized already. They had a Rabbinate, and they had a welfare department, and they had a lot of different departments, but those were not what the Germans were after, but the Jews were wanting those departments, so those departments and a few that the Germans ordered were put together – probably in a different framework -- and that’s how it started to function. Now, as I said before, my age group -- let’s say from sixteen to maybe fifty, and even sixty later -- was always an endangered species (especially the younger ones, because they wanted the young ones to come and work. And the Jewish community was required to make them available.

Q: Were you recruited as part of the labor group?

A: I was recruited, but fortunately, I also found some jobs. I don’t remember now. Eventually I was working in the community. I was more -- well, let’s say intelligent, bright. I could be a good clerk, so I did find a job. They had to organize for different purposes, so the need for people like this also increased. I worked in different places. I remember, eventually, I did get a clerical job there. I worked in what they called the “labor department”. I worked in the “housing department” because Jews, even though we were still living in our former apartments, houses, there were certain areas where the Germans would come in and tell the Jews to get out! They liked their apartments, or they wanted to live in that particular area, and for a Jew who owned this apartment or lived in that apartment, there was no recourse. The Germans would take it and that was it. But if he was “nice enough” not to take it right away -- they’d say. “I want this apartment tomorrow,” or “I want this apartment in three days,’ and “a week” was very nice -- that family had to go and live someplace else, so somebody had to assign an apartment. Now you would not go and rent another apartment, because there was a lot of Polish refugees who came from the western parts of Poland to Radom, and they had priority. The Polish administration gave them apartments, and they would take even the Jewish apartments, too. So there were more and more Jews who needed apartments. And you couldn’t just say, “I want a three room apartment,” or a “five room apartment,” or “two room apartment.” You were assigned. You were assigned a room, you were assigned two rooms, depending on the number of people, so things were getting really tough! Crowded! You were lucky if you were not kicked out of the apartment. And if you were, you were lucky if you could find something that was half suitable! We were still in ours; we didn’t have the biggest apartment, but it was ours and we stayed there.

Now, as long as we are speaking about apartments, this was February, March of 1940. The end of ’40, the beginning of ’14, there came a decree that Jews have to move out of all areas of Radom and move into a particular area which would become the ghetto. Now it so happened that Radom was a peculiar city in the respect that Radom had gotten not one ghetto, but two. For the simple reason that the area that they wanted to assign to the ghetto was not large enough to accommodate everybody -- perhaps because Jews lived all over the city -- what the Germans decided to do is to make what was known later as the Large Ghetto and the Small Ghetto. The Large Ghetto was around the Jewish institutions -- the two large synagogues, huge synagogues, where the majority of Jews lived. Unfortunately, some of these areas were very dilapidated, and naturally they added all dilapidated areas and said, “You have to live there.” Now the Small Ghetto was in a completely different area. It was closer to the area where I lived, where the bombing took place. It was probably more of a Polish area. So we wound up in April of 1941, living in two ghettos. My family had to move out of their apartment, and we moved to a place, we called it an apartment -- in the Large Ghetto. At that time I was working for the community and that was where I wanted to be, because my place of work was there. Later I wound up working in the other ghetto. I had to take the bike back and forth.

Q: This was in February or March?

A: No, this was in April ’41. 15 of February, everybody had to be in a ghetto. Anybody caught outside the ghetto will be shot and that was as explicit as you could get. “Will be shot” was their way of…

Q: How did the actual movement of the ghetto take place?

A: Well, it obviously took months. They gave us a fairly good amount of time, and said, “Here” -- let’s say January 1st -- by April 15th.” You have three and a half months. So this department of housing -- the Jewish department -- had to assign certain places, and it was a tremendous job, you understand. People were moving out from all over the city and they had to move into this area. The Poles moved out from there and they were getting a good deal, because they were getting good apartments -- either it was an exchange with a Jewish apartment or they moved wherever they wanted. So we had to move now. Needless to say, the ghetto was so small, and they tried to get in a large number of people. Just an intelligent guess, the Large ghetto had probably about -- with people who came in from other places, too -- maybe 25,000 people, the Small Ghetto perhaps about 10,000, 11,000 people. The available room was, by far, for less people than that, so they assigned a room for a family. So you had three families living in one apartment, because this family had a room, and this family had a room, this one had a room -- or single people, whatever. It was just indescribable.

Q: Before you arrived in the ghetto, what were your and your families’ expectations about the meaning of this deportation?

A: There was no deportation yet.

Q: I meant the movement into the ghetto.

A: In addition to the ghetto there were arrests. It was not just a simple thing that “Here we all are in God’s Paradise now that we’re inside the ghetto.” The Germans came in September first, and then I saw them in November, and I said, “It wasn’t so bad.” From November till January when I came back in ’41 things got gradually worse. People were arrested, people were beaten, people were kicked, people were put away someplace -- nobody knew where -- and they showed up beaten up, without hair. All kinds of things happened. Stores were taken away and given to Poles. Jewish stores -- my father’s store or others -- they were unsafe! If a German would come in and say, “I want this material! You couldn’t say, “Pay me for it.” He would take it and go out.

Now, this was relatively easy and not dangerous, but more and more things were happening. There was never a standstill, say, “Okay. Now we reached a plateau and nothing is going to be any worse.” There was no such thing. Every day, every week, things were worse, worse and worse. We thought, “Oh! It can’t be any worse!” It got worse, nevertheless. In between were stages where there was no food, there were other difficulties. People lost jobs. You had no jobs, you had no money. So when we got to the ghetto we said, “This is going to be the worst, probably. Nothing worse will happen.” Okay. So what is the ghetto? The ghetto is that we move, first of all, from a fairly comfortable place to a very uncomfortable place! Even if you have a family of wife and children and lived at your parents, things don’t always get along -- so you can imagine with strangers how things go! You use the same kitchen. They cook something, or else you -- I mean, I don’t need to tell you! Those are the difficulties. And everybody is high strung, obviously because there is no food, maybe there is no heat. All these things are obviously going on your nerves and on your entire behavior! You considered yourself lucky if you found yourself a good room together with nice people that you could get along, so that was the good thing! The bad thing? We lived in a ghetto! You know what a ghetto is? You could not leave the place! Alright? The only time you could leave, the only reason you could leave, is to go to work. You went through a gate or a certain place, lined up at six o’clock in the morning, or five-thirty with a column of workers, Jewish policemen around you and sometimes SS policemen, sometimes Polish policemen, and you marched to your place of work. You couldn’t get out of line. And at six o’clock in the evening you marched back! Alright? During the day they’ll bring you some watery soup and something -- a piece of bread or else, at that time maybe, you’ll take your own piece of bread along -- and that was the day. Then you come back to the ghetto. And in the ghetto, the curfew was nine o’clock or eight o’clock and you had to stay inside. Okay. All of a sudden you hear shots in the ghetto. You are scared to death because you know where the shots are coming from. You get sick. You need to go to a doctor, the doctors can’t help you very much. It so happened in the Large Ghetto there was a Jewish hospital. My mother had appendicitis. She was taken to the hospital. I remember she was operated on the very same day the Germans invaded Russia. When I say “Russia,” they crossed the Bug borders; that border was never really stable, and the Germans marched right through there, and they started the war with Russia. 22nd, I think, of June! That’s tomorrow! Can you imagine that? It was ’41. So tomorrow is the anniversary, right?

Q: So your mother was operated on?

A: She was operated on at the Jewish hospital. They had the Jewish doctors. It was the only place they could do it, because they wouldn’t let them out of the ghetto, either. You could get out of the ghetto if you had a special pass. You could go from one ghetto to the other if you had a pass. I did! I had a pass. I had a bike! I could bike back and forth. If somebody stopped you, you had a pass, then you were safe. That doesn’t mean that somebody couldn’t stop you, a German, and ask for a pass and knock your teeth out!

Q: What happened to your mother?

A: Well, she was operated on, she came through all right. She was the only person from my family who survived the war, by the way. But that’s a later story. So you see, when you said before about deportations, there was no deportation yet. The only deportations were from the ghetto later on, and they started arresting, not individuals, but groups of people. Once we were concentrated in the ghetto. The Germans had the idea too -- they had all of us together. Anything they wanted to do, they could do -- all wholesale! Anything they wanted to take away from us, they could take wholesale! All they had to do was say, “if you are caught outside the ghetto you are shot!” Well, people don’t want to get shot, so, obviously you stick in the ghetto. One day they came out and said, “Anybody who has fur coats or any kind of furs has to deliver them to such-and-such a place. Anybody who after this date is caught hoarding the fur coats” --that was your own, you paid for it --“will be shot!” On location. Anything they did, anything they wanted, the threat was, “will be shot.” And then they did! It was not an empty threat.

Another time they said, “Anybody who has bikes has to deliver the bikes to such-and-such a place.’ Well what do you think I had to do with the bike? I had to go, give it away. No more bike. Anybody had horses -- and there were some horses -- had to give the horses. No more horses in the ghetto. Those were the things going on, day-in, day-out. In addition, the sanitary conditions in the ghetto were so bad -- so horrible -- that typhoid reigned in certain areas at some times, and people were sick, like a plague. You couldn’t do much about it. Even the doctors, they couldn’t really cope. The Germans are basically a clean people, and they would not come close to us. They would come to the ghetto, but they put signs outside the ghetto --“krankheitgefar” -- that means “the threat of a plague” or a disease. There were signs all around so that nobody, supposedly would come in. On the other hand, the Jews always found some contacts -- I shouldn’t say “always” -- that Poles will come through ghetto. Now let me just describe the ghetto. The ghetto was boarded up and a fence was put, but on the other side of the fence were living people -- non-Jews - so there was some connection. Others took a risk and came because they wanted the Jewish money. So they would bring a bread, and the bread that they paid, let’s say a dollar, they’ll take two dollars. The Jews didn’t have zlotys to pay for things, they would pay in jewelry, other things, to buy food. Or some of the were trying to buy passes, for example -- not passes to get out, but I.D.’s that a Jew needed to escape out of the ghetto. Some managed, and some did not. Some smuggling was into the ghettos -- even coffee, and certain luxury items could come in -- but this was the rarity.

Q: Well, what happened to you after this period?

A: That period led eventually to what they called deportation. Now, we lived in the ghetto -- two ghettos -- from April 15, 1941 till August, 1942. There are two dates in August where events are meaningful. The first one was, I think, August 4th and 5th, in the middle of the night, where the first big deportation took place. What they did, they surrounded the two ghettos with SS troopers, Polish police, with Ukrainians -- I don’t know if you know this, but Ukrainians were very good helpers to the Germans. They were very good executioners. They were volunteers. They were getting probably good food, and maybe Jewish money, and they always loved Jewish blood. Nothing new to them, so they very gladly were helping the Germans to do their dirty work.

They surrounded the two ghettos. Now, what they did first is, they went to the Small Ghetto, and they emptied it completely. Right? Now I was called in as a work detail. And working in administration, I went out with a group of about eighty, a hundred, maybe, young people. We were taken at the early morning hours, like four o’clock. I was dragged out of bed and taken with a whole group of people, with Jewish policemen, marching toward the Small Ghetto to clean out, to drag out the stuff. To carry bodies, you know. They did a lot of shooting. Ninety percent or ninety-five percent of the people were taken by trains, put on the cattle cars. And five percent, maybe, were shot right there. They had to put the bodies on buggies.

Q: This was part of your job.

A: That was the job. We carried out things -- I was trying to stay away from bodies if I could -- and put the bodies on those carriages and then pushed the carriages. And they were buried in a mass grave. I was taken to that mass grave, and we were standing there. And other people - I was not in the group -- who were burying were people from the very same ghetto. The younger people were left there to help bury. There were lots of people. Two huge trenches were dug out, as I saw with my own eyes. And they put layer and layer of dead bodies, they had to be undressed -- man and woman, it didn’t make any difference -- they undressed them. They filled up the bottom of the trench. They poured calcium on top of it. So when they decomposed, you know, to prevent disease and the smell and God knows what. And they put another layer on it, and they covered up with dirt. That time, I managed somehow to get away. I walked back with the bad news. Well people knew what happened, and my parents didn’t know what happened to me. I was worried about them, and they were worried about me, because they took a group of young people to do something -- they never told us what -- you never knew whether these people may come back or not. That was the situation. So, naturally, parents worried. They could take us to another city even. You never knew.

I’m jumping ahead. There were cases where people were taken away. You heard about “Zonderkommando?’ Zonderkommando means a commando of a zone or something special -- special tasks to perform. They didn’t want you to tell anybody else, so they finished that group, too. That’s how it worked, okay? Well, anyhow I managed to get away from it -- from that grave - and I saw some Germans shooting right there. So I came back to my ghetto -- from the Small Ghetto to the Big Ghetto -- in the night. While our column was marching up to this other ghetto, the people who were selected to remain -- not to be shipped away, to be deported -- came to the Large Ghetto. Those were young people who were capable of performing work, and those people remained. You heard about the selections? They selected. In this case they elected. “You are strong, you are young, you go to the left. You, go to the right.’ And so on.

They brought down maybe a thousand people out of the ten thousand or so, and the rest of the ghetto was deported, and some of them were killed, as I just mentioned. So that was my experience with that. The next day, we thought, “That was it. Not for today.” But it wasn’t because when they had put the people on the train, the train was not filled up, really. So they came back to the Big Ghetto, and they grabbed more people without practically any selection, and they took them away and filled up the trains. Can you imagine that? Because they didn’t have the quota! That was August 4th or 5th deportation. So the Small Ghetto was no more. There was only the Big Ghetto, and part of the people from there were taken away, too. Two weeks later, the 16th, the 17th, the 18th -- I say the three dates because they always did it at night -- it was a Sunday night to Monday, Monday night to Tuesday, and they did the same thing with the Large Ghetto. That was the time when my family went, because you see, by that time, my uncle, whom I saw in Lvov, he came back and he went. His wife, my aunts and my own father and my own sister. And again I was spared at that time, and my mother who worked -- they had shops for the Germans, and she was one of the people who worked in these shops -- they didn’t select them. They left them in the shops and they were spared, because the Germans still needed them.

Q: So who did they take from your family?

A: My father was taken and my sister. And my sister, there was a sad story, because she was with a group of people who worked for the German administration. They administered Jewish real estate. You see, the Germans had taken away all the real estate. If you had an apartment building, they came and said, “This is not yours anymore. You have nothing to do with it. We’ll administer it, and we’ll take care of it.” But somebody lived in it. And it was most likely not in the ghetto, because if it was ghetto, they couldn’t care less. But if it was outside the ghetto and people were paying rent into your purse, it wasn’t yours. So there was an administration, and they hired Jews to do that, but the money went to them, you see. So, my sister worked in that office. The leader of this office tried to save his Jews. He put them in the office and he put a German seal outside the door -- “This office is sealed by the German authority.’ People knew that the workers were there, and we thought that they were safe.

Q: What was his motivation in saving them? Because they were all good workers, or?

A: They worked for him. He got to like them. Had some relationships, you know. This probably is what happened. But either somebody pointed a finger, or he got cold feet. He brought in the Germans -- the ones who were in charge of the deportations --- or he brought all the Jews out himself, and that’s when all the people there were deported. And my sister was one of them. And one of my aunts worked there. She had a high position, and her sister, so the whole family went.

Q: Where were they taken?

A: They were taken! So, that’s the whole thing.

Q: You really had no idea.

A: You heard about Treblinka, okay? We didn’t know at that time where they were taken. We were at night. There were thousands of people in this big area. It was inside the ghetto. The Germans put in huge lamps, so was like daylight in the middle of night. And there were hundreds and hundreds of SS troopers, and they were shooting and killing. Just right there and there. With babies. And with…just something horrible. I can’t tell you the details of that…the people were sitting in columns. They were playing God, you see. “You go to the right and you go to the left.” Those who were going to the right were going to stay and those who went to the left, they were going to be deported. And after the night was over, about three thousand people were probably left out of, by that time, about twenty thousand. We were now decimated. Literally. About ninety percent or more of the people were going, so there was only a small remnant left. The Small Ghetto, as I mentioned, was gone. The Large Ghetto was decimated now in population, and they took out about three, four little streets -- the worst area, you know -- and said, “This is where you are going to be.” So we came into a small little area, and that’s where we stayed until that was liquidated again, the end of ’43. So then only a small remnant was left. The Jewish hospital was outside the ghetto. They took over an old building and they said, “This is your hospital now.” And this was not the end, mind you. You’d think that that would be the worst, and that’s it.

Q: Is that what you always thought?

A: We always thought was going to be the worst and that’s it, you know. It wasn’t. When I describe it to you, maybe it’s hard to imagine and understand, and then -- you know -- an outside person says, “Gee, that’s terrible. Nothing worse can happen.” But it did. Because again they had another deportation, in January of ’43. And in the meantime they also had killings. They would check the houses and see whether the people were out to work on a particular day, and if they caught somebody at home -- not out to work -- they’d line up sixteen people at one time, another time ten people -- and just with machine guns. And again, Ukrainians did a lot of this, too. My wife and I got out of this place to a gun factory which was located in Radom before the war. Radom was an industrial place and it also had a government factory that was making rifles --guns and so forth. And naturally the Germans had taken over this place. There was called a “Defense Triangle” in Poland with two other towns that had also ammunition plant and some other things. The Germans had in all these factories, Jews working, slave labor. They didn’t have to pay us. All you do is to get a little watery soup and a piece of dark bread and that was it. So it was very cheap and very convenient. If we die, so what. So they have some other slaves.

So we felt that if we could get out of this place and go to this factory earlier, maybe we could get some little better jobs and we would not be under the pressure. As long as we could work in the factory, we could preserve ourselves. I had a friend, I mentioned to you, who went to school with me. We graduated from high school together. So I made contact with him. I went over to see him. He was a medical student, but he couldn’t study during the war, either. The universities were shut down. But he worked as a medic for the plant doctor there, and his father had worked there for years before, so he had connections, and he arranged for me to get a job that was much more appealing to me. I worked in the electrical department there. It was a day job, and my wife, he arranged that, too. But you had to, to grease.

Q: You mentioned your wife. Were you married at this point?

A: Well, that’s a good question. I didn’t mention that before, but when we wound up in what’s called the “Remnant Ghetto”-- when the Germans liquidated the Large Ghetto and the Small Ghetto and we remained in this little area of the Large Ghetto, they stopped calling it “ghetto” and officially they renamed it “Yiddish Zwangsarbeitlager’ -- Jewish forced labor camp”. And in July of ’45 we got married, in the camp. And that’s an interesting document, our marriage certificate in the camp.

Q: May I ask you a little bit about your wedding?

A: Sure. There were some people who were getting married, and there was some reason for it, too, even though the times and the circumstances were very peculiar. It’s a long story, but maybe I should mention, because it’s for the records.

Q: How did you meet?

A: Oh, we lived in ghetto, not far from one another.

Q: Did you know each other before that time?

A: No. She was younger than I, and you know how it is, you don’t look at younger girls unless you get up to a certain age. But then we met, and then we started going with each other, and eventually circumstances were such that we felt were appropriate for us to get married, because we wanted to be together. The chances of staying together were much better if we were married, and there were other reasons, too. There were chances -- and again rumors, and some indications -- that the remnant that remained, some people at least might have a chance to be exchanged for Germans in Palestine. Very few people heard about it, but it really happened in one or two instances. And that was the basis for the belief and hope that maybe more people could get out. I don’t know if I should go into a long story, because it’s kind of a fantastic story, in a way. You might have heard about the Israeli Ambassador to Egypt, the first one? He was from our hometown. He was a little child at that time, he got out, the family, and wound up in Palestine. So that was one possibility. And then some other people got out, but they never made it to Palestine. They were interned at Bergen-Belsen, in the civilian camp, not prisoners. My wife happened to see them. They were from Radom, too. So there were some possibilities. That was the reason that some people married sooner than they would have otherwise, perhaps.

Q: I see. So you were married. Were you married by a rabbi?

A: No. There was no rabbi. No more rabbis at all. But you didn’t have to be married by a rabbi in Jewish law.

Q: That’s right. Who did marry you?

A: Well, we’ll call him the president or chairman of the community, of this little remnant that was there.

Q: Did you move in together into a place? Was this possible?

A: Well, in a way, as much as was possible. It wasn’t that much possible. And then, see, we moved away from this little labor camp. A few months later, we moved to this gun plant, factory. There, men were in one barrack and women were in another barrack, so there was no -- what’s the word -- to live together.

Q: Cohabitation.

A: Cohabitation! Right. But at least you hoped, you know, that you’re saving the lives of the two of us.

Q: Was your wife’s family already taken?

A: Her father was taken, at that time, but her mother and her brother were still around, and they, too survived the war. It’s a long story, a different story.

Q: So tell me, then, what happened eventually?

A: Well, eventually, we did wind up in this factory. The rest of the people that remained after us in this little, little ghetto, they eventually all came. They were transferred to the camp adjacent to us -- not right away to our camp. We were in the camp that was under the auspices of the Germans, but eventually the rest of the people came to a camp that was right adjacent to ours. It’s called “Szkolna” camp. Then the Germans changed the name again, that we became a branch of the concentration camp Lublin. They converted the names for administrative reasons, and for their diabolic reasons, who knows. They changed the names, they changed probably the administration, they changed whatever --philosophy. Now we were part of a concentration camp. The headquarters was Lublin, but we were the branch in Radom. Okay? And they opened up the two camps together, the one that we were in as workers of the gun factory, and the other people who were a part, basically, of the shops -- the trade shops. So now we are all in one camp. Then they took people to a camp near Cracow. I don’t think they took to Lublin. It’s in a famous camp there. So there’s never a dull moment. We were there till July of 1944, the end of July. And the Russians had started their big offensive after Stalingrad. They started pushing the Germans, and they were pushing them, pushing them west. And they came as close to us as maybe twenty-five miles on the river Vistula, which runs not far from Radom -- and they stopped. The Germans were retreating west, and we were so important to them, that they didn’t want to leave us! So they shlepped us along, and we went on a march, called a “death march.’ All these workers, men and women, we started out the 26th of July on a march towards a place called “Tomaszowmazvoretski,” We marched over one hundred kilometers in three days and a lot of people were falling down, and a lot of them were shot! They couldn’t walk any more, so the Germans put them on a horse and buggy, and they…

Q: What season was this?

A: That was July.

Q: So it was in the summer.

A: It was very hot. And so they killed off quite a few, but again we made it to a place in Tomaszow, where they separated the women from the men, and again we were in some kind of a chemical factory.

Q: You were still with your wife at…

A: No. At that time, they separated us.

Q: But you made the march together.

A: The march we made together.

Q: And then you were separated.

A: My mother was with us and her mother was with us -- Rivka’s – too.

Q: And they survived the march.

A: Yeah. And her brother, yeah. They all survived. Her uncle was shot on the march and a lot of other people. People just couldn’t make it! It was very hot and hardly any water. It was real bad. And then once we got to Tomaszow, they separated the women. There were about 500 women. And they took them to the jail for a few days, and the men, about 1,500, maybe 2,000 00 were in this huge chemical factory, and we stayed there for a week. Dysentery was just horrible! Just indescribable! And finally, maybe the 5th of August, Saturday night, they put us on a train and they took us to Auschwitz. And we got to Auschwitz Sunday morning.

Q: “We” meaning…?

A: By “we” meaning everybody. Everybody. Because they picked the men up from here and the women from wherever they were.

Q: How were you transported?

A: By train.

Q: In cattle cars?

A: Oh, sure! All night, and we finally made it to Auschwitz in the morning. So they took us off the train, and again the women were separate, and then they took off some older men and the sickly off that train and…

Q: Before you go on, will you tell me something about the traveling conditions? What were the conditions on the train like?

A: They were very, very bad! Obviously. Again, they didn’t feed us! They didn’t give us any water, but when we arrived in Auschwitz, I think we did get some water and some piece of bread, maybe the next morning. But this was a relatively short ride, only during the night. We traveled in separate cars, the men in some cars, and then the women in separate cars, and we could only wave at each other. And we got off the train in Auschwitz, that was the end. They were taken off and put in a camp there and some of them were taken to the gas chambers, including those older men and some children. We remained on the trestle and they didn’t take us into the camp proper. We were still on the railroad duct, and at the end of the day, they put us on the train again, back into the cattle cars again -- because the train waited for us all day, and they started shlepping us to southwestern Germany to another camp. And that’s where I arrived the 9th, I think of August, 1944.

Q: What about your wife?

A: She remained at Auschwitz. My mother remained at Auschwitz. Her mother remained at Auschwitz.

Q: So you went to this other camp?

A: I went on to the other camp.

Q: Which was?

A: Vaihingen. And I have to add the word Enz, which means Vaihingen on the river Enz. That’s in German, okay? And that was, as I said, in southwestern Germany, roughly about thirty, thirty-five kilometers southwest or south of Stuttgart.

Q: Who were the people who accompanied you?

A: SS. You mean guards?

Q: No. I mean other people.

A: People who were in camp with me all along in Radom. Now in Radom, they were not all my friends! They were all different kind of people. As a matter of fact, some people were not even from Radom proper, because Radom had these two ghettos, and they swelled up, these ghettos, with people brought in from small towns. The Germans didn’t want to monkey around with small ghettos in every little shtetl! They made the ghettos in the big cities. And Lublin was a big city, and Radom was a big city, and Warsaw of course, and Cracow. So they emptied out the Jews from all the small towns and villages, wherever they were, and brought them into the ghettos, and they had them all under good surveillance and supervision. And that was true of Radom, too. So some people who were in my transport might have been young people from small towns, from other places. As a matter of fact, they even brought in a group of supervisors from the Warsaw ghetto, who participated in the uprising. For some unexplained reason, they brought to Radom -- in that small, small ghetto, mind you -- they brought these people in. And some of them survived in Radom -- and then they became part of our Radomer transport.

Q: What happened when you arrived at the camp/? How were you processed or registered?

A: We were new. There was nobody else in that camp. And right away, administration was set up and there were several blocks and what they called the German “Blakeldester” -- means leader of the block, or the senior, or the elder of the clock. They became the bosses of the blocks. Then they also had people who were supervising the portion that they had to send people out to work. And they had the medical staff. There were a few Jewish doctors, still. Not that they had much to help with -- medicines, medications -- but they were doctors, nevertheless. They were under the supervision of some German orderly who became their boss. Some of them survived -- one just died, a friend of ours, was in upstate New York. And then we started going out to work! The Germans assigned us certain numbers to go to certain types of work. I went out to work in a metallurgical factory -- a big factory -- at first. By the way, I don’t know if I mentioned to you or not, once we came to this camp, we got the striped suits. I have a picture, I’ll show you. This happens to be my brother-in-law. And that’s what we had, see?

Q: Can we talk about this in a moment? After we’ve finished here.

A: So we would go out to work every morning -- we were of course guarded by the SS troopers -- and come back to the camp in the evening. Other prisoners would go out and bring us food. And that was day-in, day-out. Towards the end, in the spring of ’45, they were building an underground factory. They never finished it, but it was kind of a long-range project the Germans hoped to build by the slave labor, but the Americans kind of superceded that. We were shot up by Americans in April -- all the month of April. American planes would come down and shoot with machine guns. And we also were killed, us in stripes. And then from there, the end of April, the 7th, I believe, we were taken to Dachau.

Q: Before we get into that, how long were you in Vaihingen?

A; Nine months. I got from August, ’44 till April, ’45.

Q: Can you say something about the living conditions, if that’s all right? What were they like? What was the routine of the day?

A: The routine of the day I mentioned already. You had to get up in the morning.

Q: About how early?

A: 5:30, because we had to leave for work about 6, 6:30. And the we had to be lined up, what they called an “Apell,” the counting. The mustering, right? I say counting, because we had to count! And they would check how many people are in the barrack, okay? Each barrack separate.

Q: How many people were there in your barrack?

A: God knows. There were several hundred, and then if somebody was missing, they would start counting from one again. And if somebody made a mistake, would get hit in his face. And if the number did not match, nobody would move, and they would go out and check the barrack. And all of a sudden somebody remembered that somebody’s in the sickroom. Somebody was responsible, from the administration, would get hit on his head if he forgot to tell the SS men that somebody was out. So that went on every day.

We were mustered in the morning, we were mustered in the evening when we came back. And then after that, we were allowed to eat breakfast. What was the breakfast? It was a little hot water mixed with some rutabaga -- maybe. And then a piece of bread ration. And so-called coffee -- it was sort of black water. We went out to work and then they would bring lunch, rutabaga water or some other water or some so-called soup -- which was hot, fortunately -- and that would help. And in the evening we would come back and eat in the camp again, and then again get our ration of bread. And sometimes the ration would be given in the evening for the 24-hour period, and you had to manage your own bread. If you ate it all in the evening, you were out of luck the next day, right? So you had to be sure to divide it up. And sometimes they only give you half the portion, and then give you the next half tomorrow. And Sunday we will get special food. We will get a piece of marmalade, we’d get a piece of so-called sausage. So that was great! A regular blood sausage they would give us, you know, just a piece of junk. And if things were good, they’d give us a piece of horsemeat. Real nice. In your soup! It was the horse died of some sickness. They would cut up the horse and put the meat in the soup. Usually they didn’t have any salt, except if they found some smelly herring -- there was salt, you know! They would use that herring juice and put it in the soup to make it salty, so that was terrific, too. In other words, we had just a perfect diet! You never got fat though! It kept our weight down. Was perfect! (Laughs)

Q: What were the sleeping conditions?

A: The sleeping conditions? They were horrible! Straw, you know. And there were bunks, three bunks, one-two-three high.

Q: On top of each other.

A: On top of each other, right. And dirty! We tried to keep it as clean as it was possible. It was not very possible. It was cold water, and the soap they would give us was -- I don’t know if you have ever seen that raw soap -- that was the soap that we would get, and we tried to save that and wash ourselves, to keep ourselves as clean as possible. Take off the shirt. Wash it. Dry it. And put it on again. We would get a change of underwear, maybe, once in several weeks. There were outhouses, latrines. The bad part was that we were supposed to keep them clean. We had to wash it and keep it clean, but again, with hundreds and hundreds of people, you know, it was almost impossible! And they were all kinds of people. Some people couldn’t make it, because dysentery was just prevalent! It’s all over the place. People were running -- the “runs,” you know -- they just could hardly make it. And there were in a place like this, where you have people of all kinds of levels, culture levels, intellectual level, all kinds of -- you know – hygienic levels, you were against all kinds of situations.

The fact is that a lot of people died. And this was an interesting camp, because it was not a ruthless camp. I myself got beat up because the SS officer finds a bulge in my suit -- I made a pocket inside, and the pocket was bulging -- and he said, “What do you have here?” So I pulled out photographs -- that I mentioned to you -- and he said, “Show ‘em.” They were wrapped up in something, and he unfolded it and he slapped me on my face, and threw them away. I was fortunate that he didn’t tear them up, out of spite. Just the fact that I dared to make a pocket, and I dared to have the photographs in it, that was enough reason for him to just give me big punches. They could catch you for whatever reasons. You didn’t take off your hat, you were slapped. If you did take off your hat, they say, “Are you my friend, that you are greeting me?” This kind of a deal. It was a no win situation. And yet, there was no mass murdering us. No killing. No nothing, you know, of the sort that they would take the whole group and gas them. There was no gas chamber. There was no crematorium there. People were just dying! Somebody would die because he just couldn’t make it! Whether it was dysentery, whether it was typhoid, whether it was any other sickness -- just a weakness, or mentally, a breakdown, that was the end.

Q: Were you sick, also?

A: I was sick. I did not catch the typhoid which was prevalent, maybe ninety percent of the people. I got friendly with the lice, and they just treated me well, see? (Laughs) So I was nice to them, they were nice to me, and they did not infect me with the typhoid. Maybe I got immunities from them! However, in December, I remember quite well, of ’44, I was sick. I don’t know what I had, some kind of virus. Headaches, terrible headaches, and I felt terrible. I went to the doctor and said, “Can you help me?’ And he gave me maybe two aspirin. That’s all they could give me, and they said, “Don’t come here.” They didn’t want people to stay in the sickroom because you never knew what may happen. You know, they could take you for an experiment, they could feel that maybe you are not strong enough to work, so they give you maybe a needle. Who knows the Germans? So it was better not to be in the sickroom -- even though you were sick -- unless you just couldn’t help it. So I was sick, and yet I did not admit to it, so I got by with my sickness, and I got through it. My wife almost got killed by the typhoid. She was in Bergen-Belsen. When she got through, she weighed, towards the end of the war, maybe forty pounds. Just something horrible, you know! So in that respect, I was fortunate.

Q: Did you encounter any non-Jews in this camp?

A: Yes. I mentioned to you before, that we came from Radom and there were all Jews. Then they started taking out groups of these people to other camps, and they emptied some of these barracks, and they started bringing in non-Jews. Interesting enough, they brought in many different nationalities. They brought in French, Poles, Ukrainians, even Dutch, Danish and Norwegians. Some of them were very high officials. In Norway, for example. Now the way we were taught, is that they tried to make this camp, from a strictly Jewish camp and a kind of strictly labor-oriented camp, they made it into some kind of recovery camp, because those were probably sick people. There was not work for them. Only those who were fairly healthy went out in columns to work -- and those Norwegians and French hardly went out. So the Jews kept on working, and very few, very few of the non-Jews.

Q: Were there gypsies?

A: No, I don’t remember.

Q: Homosexuals?

A: No. Not in our camp. It was interesting, because some of…

Q: Were there Jehovah’s Witnesses?

A: No. There were only, I told you, Norwegian and Danish intellectuals, a judge and lawyers and some people who were apparently caught up in the underground there, or the resistance, and they arrested them, and eventually they wound up in our camp. But we were still the majority and the administration, of course, the original one, basically.

Q: Was there a means of communicating throughout the camp?

A: What do you mean throughout the camp?

Q: With other prisoners, or…?

A: Oh, yeah. I said, this was not a camp, as I’ll tell you in a minute about Dachau. You were free to move about from one barrack to another. I was in Barrack Two and if my friend or somebody that I wanted to see was in Barrack Six, I could go over and see him, and he could come over and see me. People were even meeting in some area of the barrack to pray -- mind you -- on Yom Kippur. They would put some people outside -- guards -- to watch if the SS were coming. And the religious would pray. I fasted on Yom Kippur. I worked, and I don’t think I prayed much, but I didn’t eat. Was very easy to do. You can survive - you are filled up and eating for a whole year, but then you have one day - but if you don’t eat ten days before, the eleventh day might be kind of rough -- but anyway, that was it. On Passover, there were people in our camp who would not eat bread, even though bread was all you could get, bread and this watery soup. They didn’t want to break the Passover, so they would trade. They would give their piece of bread to whoever wanted it, and they would take a piece of rutabaga. They would take some raw potato. Something they sustained themselves with, practically nothing. So as far as communicating and moving about, this camp was not a strict regime camp, in that respect.

Q: Were you aware at all of the ongoing war effort during this time?

A: Good question! You asked me a terrific question. We were going out to work, and where we worked in this metallurgical factory, there were Germans, and you could talk -- if they wanted to talk to you, that is. If they wanted to give you something, they could have done this. If they wanted to push a piece of paper very innocently, you could get it, okay? In addition, there was a shop -- the shoemakers and tailors and barbers -- who worked for the Germans. They took them out and they put them in a certain place and when the Germans needed to repair something, they would come into the shop and say, “Here. Repair it for me.” Those were the guards, you know. Now if the guard wanted to bring you, say, a piece of bread, he will wrap it in yesterday’s paper, see, and leave it with you. Or he would supposedly come in, read the paper and just forget, supposedly, and leave the paper. That paper would come into camp. And we read the paper -- the local paper. Now the Germans were giving information. When they were retreating, it was a “victorious retreat.” Obviously we know if they are retreating, it’s not very victorious, and you would read between lines -- where they were yesterday, and they were today. We pretty much knew that the war was going against them, and we could sense that the war was going to be ended, hopefully, soon. Whether we would survive the war -- whether they would let us survive the war -- that was a different story, but we could see what was going on. As a matter of fact, let me tell you two stories. I don’t remember which came first, but the one that I’ll start with is this:

On Christmas Eve the lights went out in the camp. It was a total darkness and blackout. Okay, what happened? American planes were flying overhead, over us. And they were flying to their bombing mission. We found out later, and again we probably read it in the paper. Some of the Germans were not true SS guards -- it was towards the end, and in this particular place they converted old army officers or men, put them into SS uniforms, and they were the guards. They were not as indoctrinated and brainwashed as the real SS men were. They were a little more humane and more human, and sometimes they might have even been against the regime, okay? so they could tell you something -- or they were even sympathetic, sometimes. So, sometimes you might get in the shops, where they had personal contact -- maybe they took a liking to some tailor or somebody -- they’d bring them paper. But that particular night, we could hear wave after wave after wave of planes (oo-oo-o-o-o engine sound) going over our head, and we are very glad to hear that. And then we saw flares coming down. Blue and red and yellow flares they were dropping. Now we found out, next day, that they were bombing not very far from our place, a city where apparently the Germans established some war industries, and apparently the Americans and the British got word of it and they bombed it, right on Christmas Eve, the American planes were flying overhead almost always, at that time.

One time the workers were sent home from their place of work because--and again these were rumors -- because they were chasing English spies. Spies were dropped down by parachutes or somehow, and they were in the area, and they were afraid maybe they’ll get into the camp or whatever. They were chasing them and they wanted as few people around as possible, so they would not repeat it. When we got to Dachau, after this camp. The beginning of April -- I read - I saw it myself -- Somebody, I don’t know how, brought in the Nazi party paper, into our barrack, after Roosevelt died, and it said, with big letters, Roosevelt was dead. And I saw it in Dachau!

Q: Do you recall any of the names of the major German personnel? Like the commander or the officers?

A: Well some of them accompanied us all the way from Radom. I remember one guy whose name is Schippers. I could probably look up in the book of Radom, because I gave a deposition about some of these guys, too, officials in Radom, not only camp, but in the German military government in Radom. Radom was a district city. Why is it important to have names? You think that’s…

Q: Just to get a sense of the concrete reality.

A: Well, another guy, his name was Hacker, or Hecker. I don’t remember, it’s so many years.

Q: Were there any specific units of the German army, or the SS?

A: Well, in Vaihingen, as I said before, not anticipating the question, some of these guards were not actual SS men. They were sort of converted army people, or even old retired army people.

Q: Now tell me about the circumstances leading to your transfer from Vaihingen to Dachau. Why were you transferred?

A: That’s the good question. Because the Germans never left us alone. We were so precious to them that where they ran, we ran with them. They took us along. They didn’t leave us in Radom. All their options were closing, and they could have saved their own skins, but they brought us to Auschwitz, and then, of course to Vaihingen. At Vaihingen, the French army was pursuing them, so the German guards had to escape, to leave the area, right? They did leave maybe two-thirds of the camp intact, but they took out about a third, about ninety percent Jews and ten percent non-Jews, roughly five hundred people or so, and they left about maybe fifteen hundred people. The numbers are not certain; they never told us the numbers. Just a plain guess. Anyhow, beginning the 7th or so of April, 1945, we marched out of this camp. They left the rest of them because they were typhoid stricken, and were not healthy enough to walk thirteen, fourteen kilometers to the station. They put us on trains, again cattle trains. And they shlepped us to Dachau via Munich. And I remember the train going in Munich, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, all night, almost. We finally made it into Dachau.

Q: How long was that? How long was the trip?

A: Oh, I don’t know. We left probably late afternoon or evening, and we got in the middle of the night, maybe, in Dachau. So we went through this procedure, registering names and so forth. Then we had to take off all the clothing we had, throw it away into the pile. The only thing we could carry with us were our shoes. Many people didn’t have good shoes. It so happens, my shoes were pretty good, and I wanted to keep them. I also had in them those pictures that I saved all these years, and I was watching, because in front of me were people, and they were making them spread their legs, and then lift up their feet to see that they didn’t have anything between their legs, and then lift up their feet to see that they didn’t have anything stuck. They made them go into a little water pool with their feet, so if there’s anything stuck to their feet, between their toes or what-have-you, that will come off. Well, while they were doing this, I was watching, and they were taking away everything. They put hands in the shoes, and put the shoes in the water, so the pictures would have been all damaged. I sneaked by, and never got through the actual hand check. Now these checkers were prisoners themselves, you know. That was their function. They were not very sympathetic, and they did what they were supposed to do very -- sometimes very roughly. But I did get by and carried my pictures through, and I had my shoes, and then they gave me a big suit. And the guy with a big size probably got a small suit! And so we were through and now we were in Dachau. They assign us to a barrack .It was barrack 22, I believe. I don’t remember that, either.

Q: Did they do anything else to you before you…

A: Well, we probably had to take a shower.

Q: Did hey shave your head?

A: They might have.

Q: Did they tattoo you?

A: No. They didn’t tattoo. The only place where they tattooed was in Auschwitz. My wife has a tattoo. And those who were tattooed were the lucky ones, because those who were not, were temporary. That means that they could go to gas chamber any time. Those who were put on tattoo, they had a better chance of surviving, at least for the time being. Since we did not stay in Auschwitz, it did not apply to us.

Q: What were the conditions like when you got there? How many other prisoners were there?

A: I don’t know how many, but we know the barracks was full. The whole camp in Dachau was full. You didn’t see the next barrack, you were just in one barrack, and that was it. That was your, what we called, “lebensraum”, your area of living. Or existing.

Q: Were the conditions much, much worse than at Vaihingen?

A: I can’t say that they can be compared. See, in Vaihingen you went out to work! In Dachau there was no work. There was nothing. You didn’t do anything except some might have volunteered to push the cart with the dead bodies that was piled up every morning. People would die of diarrhea, die of exertion, they gave up -- whatever. And every morning we would see a pile of skeletons, you know, dead people, fifteen, twelve, whatever. And the people who were pulling the cart, pile up those skeletons on the cart, and then pull out the cart to the crematorium and get rid of it. Maybe they got an extra piece of bread and maybe not. I don’t know. I didn’t volunteer for it, and that didn’t concern me.

Q: Did the condition of the people at Dachau seem worse to you than the people in Vaihingen?

A: No, I don’t think so…

Q: There wasn’t much difference, except that there was no work?

A: There was no work. Nothing to do. And obviously the war was coming to an end, and that’s what happened a few weeks later.

Q: Were you glad there was no work?

A: Well, I suppose, because, after all, you didn’t have to expend any energy. Whatever food you got, you know, that sustained you. And you didn’t go any place! They said, “If anything would happen to you, it was right here.” You didn’t have any foreman to contend with, you didn’t have any German guards to contend with, you were right inside the camp. The only people we had to contend with were the prisoners who were in charge of the barrack. And if you stayed out of the way, you hoped they wouldn’t touch you, and that was it. The kapos, I think they called them kapos, in the camp.

Q: How did you know that the war was almost coming to an end? Because of the newspapers?

A: The newspapers in Vaihingen. I mean it was not getting any better for the Germans, obviously. The Americans were marching on. The stories of the spies in the planes, and the paper. The German paper, even though they tried to avoid telling anything to the Germans, we could read between lines, and we knew very well what was going on. We somehow got this paper in Dachau even, which was very peculiar, and very interesting to see it. I told you I read German, so there was no problem with it. And other people did, too. And in this barrack, again to repeat, there was a mixed multitude, all kinds of people, not only from my own camp. They probably put them in different barracks and we wound up with being, maybe, a minority. I slept with my shoes on, because, remember, I told you maybe the story that my shoes were very good, and I was afraid, being in a place like this where there were all kinds of people, you were exposed to theft and assault. And in the shoes I had my pictures. I walked on them. From the day when, I mentioned before, the SS man stopped me and beat me up for having something in my pocket and I wrapped the pictures in heavy drafting paper, cloth, and I walked on it. Needless to say, they got damaged a little bit, but I saved them, and in Dachau I slept with the shoes on, to protect it. People thought I was crazy, so this one night I said, alright, I’ll put my shoes under my head, like a pillow, and I’ll go to sleep like this. Lo and behold, somebody was watching me. They turned off the lights, and everybody was asleep, and all of a sudden I felt somebody trying to pull them out from under my head, and I screamed out, and they turned on the light, and we caught what was a Ukrainian who came from Vaihingen with me. Oh, he didn’t get the shoes, but I didn’t get the pictures either. The pictures fell out of the shoe apparently, and somebody grabbed them. And I was just beside myself! I would have given the shoes and ten years of my life to get the pictures, because those were the only pictures I had of my family, my parents, and of my wife. I didn’t know whether she was alive, you know. And I was just completely sick because of it. So walking back and forth in this courtyard, first that day and the next day, and maybe the day after, and I -- well I had given up. What could I do? But I just couldn’t get over it. All of a sudden --now this sounds like a made-up story -- all of a sudden, somebody in the barrack parallel to ours looking through the iron bars -- he couldn’t get out, and I don’t know who it was, because he never showed his face -- he just yelled out, “Hey, did you lose something?’ At first I didn’t know whether he was yelling at me, or whatever. I said, “Yes, I lost something.’ And all of a sudden, this packet -- the package and the paper with the pictures flies out of there. God is my witness, I don’t know who it was. I never found out. The guy was afraid, apparently. I don’t know how he recognized me, because this is important, too. If you see a picture, somebody looking like this -- (shows photo from camp) -- now this was not the picture he found. The pictures he found, I look like a man -- like somebody. This was a picture from 1938! So he must have known me. I never found out who it was, but I got my pictures back! Would you believe that? I considered it a miracle! It was “beshert” for me to get the pictures back. And by that time, the days were going, you know, the 15th, the 16th, 17th, April, until the 27th of April, I think, they said, “You Jews are getting out of here.” Just Jews. You see, they didn’t want to leave us. The Americans were coming close, and they told us to get out. They took out about 2,000 Jews, I don’t know exactly how many, from the entire camp. They marched us to a railroad trestle again, and before we went there, they gave us coats, which apparently turned out to be Russian uniform coats, or somebody’ else’s army, olive green coats, plus a little package -- kind of a paper package wrapped up with a string, but very nice, neat package, a box, a Red Cross box (like a shoe box) and they took us to a train which was not a cattle train, but it was a passenger train.

And we didn’t know what was happening. We just couldn’t figure it out. Naturally, rumors start flying. “Well, why would they give us the coats?” They didn’t give us other suits. They left us with the striped suits, but they gave us the coat to keep us warm. Before we came to Dachau we had coats like these made of the striped material -- in Vaihingen, for example -- all winter. We were freezing to death. There was no lining or anything. But here they gave us those warm coats -- fairly warm. They gave us a Red Cross package they never gave us throughout the war. And they gave us something, we didn’t know what it was, but it turned out it was a paper sleeping bag, a Finnish bag with many layers of paper, that if we had to sleep someplace, we can just crawl in and keep warm in it. And we’d never been on a train like this. So, what’s the rumor? They are going to Switzerland, and they are going to exchange us. The war is at an end and they are trying to be nice and let us go to a neutral country. Well it was not true, needless to say. But they took us out of Dachau, and they “shlepped” us -- Dachau, if you know the German geography is not far from Munich, in the southern part of Germany -- they took us south of Munich to the Alps, right into the mountains to a place called Scharnitz, if I remember it right. We came there, was a Saturday, the 28th. This was in Austria, incidentally -- Austria was of course, a part of Germany -- so it was a different Gauleiter, a not-so-official governor, of this part of Austria that we were going into. And he apparently didn’t want us to come in. He said, keep these guys yourself. But we stayed in Scharnitz, and the 28th, on a Saturday, here we stand in the rain, cats and dogs, and again a rumor. The radio announced that the war was over and we are going to be free and the Germans are giving up. Well, the people went crazy! They started jumping –of-joy! And they were jumping -- even the Germans -- and kissing them! It was unbelievable! I just stood there and looked, and my group, we were not that enthusiastic. We said,” That can’t be true.” Didn’t make sense, you know. And the Germans were confused. They didn’t know what was happening either. There was a radio message that indeed said the war was over and the Germans had given up, but as it turned out, it was a false message. It was the underground, apparently. And these SS troopers, bastards, they found out it wasn’t true, and they started beating on us with their rifle buts and anything else, and the joy was short lived. So then they started walking us into the mountain area, to some barns, and they left us there for the night. And some people escaped. Some of them were lucky, they really got away, because in some areas, the troopers were shooting. But we stayed. The next day, Sunday…

Q: Why did you stay?

A: Well, they told us to stay. They said they would come and pick us up the next morning. Here they treated us so nicely, put us on nice train, dress us up, give us a Red Cross package. We didn’t know that they would do some harm to us, as here they were treating us fairly. So, they said, “You stay here, and tomorrow we get together and us on the train again.” Well as it happened, they really did, believe it or not. They put us on a mountain car and they were carting us in smaller groups, because there was only one car, back and forth, to another place in the mountains. You see mountains all around in the Alps, mind you. Beautiful Alps. In front of us are the mountains, in back of us is the road, on the side of us is some kind of a mountain stream, and the guards are on the side, so we were wedged in, right in that area. And they say,” We’re all going to sleep here overnight. Stay right here.” So here we have this nice paper bag -- sleeping bag --now, that we didn’t know what it was for, but now we said, “Maybe it will come in handy.” And it started to snow. This was the 29th of April, you know, it’s in the mountains, and it could get pretty cold, and as I said, it was snowing. And the time, who knows? We didn’t have watches -- naturally they took those away long ago -- so we figured out it must be maybe ten or eleven o’clock or so, it’s dark, so we laid down. I pushed my feet into the sleeping bag and laid down on the ground and all of a sudden, I hear a commotion. We wake up and say, “What’s the matter, what’s going on?” Somebody said, “The guards disappeared. No guards.” “No guards!” I woke up right away, no? What happened to the guards? Nobody knows. They just left us and went. Well, in that case, if they went, then we have to go in the opposite direction -- in other words, in the direction where we came from.

Now, at that time, we organized a group of Radomer -- about thirty of us. And we decided that we are going to be an organized group, fairly organized, meaning, in a nice column we will set up ourselves, and start marching north. We came from the north, we’ll go back north, back on top of the highway. We’re right off the highway, which is very close, and then we will march north and see what happens. If they ran away, that means the Americans are close, right? That was logical answer. So we would go toward the Americans. Well we did. We really put ourselves into a nice column and went up the highway, and it didn’t take us very long and we were stopped by an SS officer and an army officer, who said, “Where are you going? This is the front line. And who are you?” Now they see us with these big green coats, you know, and they could see, obviously the pants and the jackets -- we had the stripes – so they should have known who we were. But apparently they had nothing to do with it, so they were not sure who we were. So we told them a story that they accepted. “Oh,” we said, “We were guarded by these people, they left us, they told us to go back north.” It wasn’t true. But it was a good story to tell them, you see. So, “You can’t go. This is the front line. We are right here on the front. You are disturbing us. So, stand here, we’ll tell you in a few minutes what to do.” Now the SS officer and the army officer went on the side. They went away maybe twenty minute, and they came back. Now from what I remember and what all of us figured, the army officer must have been of higher rank. Or prevailed somehow. And apparently he was the spokesman. He said, “Get out of the way, this is the front line. Get all of you guys up into the mountains and get out of the road. We don’t want you here.” They didn’t do any harm to us! And he said, “We’ll see later what we will do. Just get out of here.” Which was one way of saving all our lives, so far.

So we did. We started walking a path into the mountain. We didn’t know where we were going, we just tried to get away -- perpendicular from the road. We finally found a place -- if you’ve ever been in the Alps, or seen any pictures --those shepherds’ huts. They have walls from the ground up about half-ways, and from here to the top it’s open. It’s a good protection for animals, even, too, for humans, for shepherds. So this whole group got into one of those huts, and we had still the food boxes that we received -- the Red Cross boxes -- and we ate just a little bit of it, a little sugar, and a little bit of marmalade, what we hadn’t seen through the entire war. And we stayed there.

Now this was Monday, the 30th of April. Now during that day, somebody was shooting cannons – just terrible. All day long the cannon balls were flying over our heads and we were shaking, we were scared. We were afraid that just any minute, something was going to hit us, but where were we going to go? We had no way to go. The Germans were there, and they will catch us, they’d probably shoot us with machine guns, so we stayed there. Now that was not bad enough, every so often a German straggler would walk along and look in the hut. They were loaded with ammunition, and with grenades. A lot of grenades around, and we were afraid that any minute one of these bastards was going to drop a grenade right in the middle of us. They didn’t, obviously, otherwise I wouldn’t be sitting here. And that’s how the day went. That was the end of the day. When it got dark, they started to stop shooting. You know we were sitting and leaning against the wall, lying on the ground, and some of us fell asleep, and during the night we could hear heavy vehicles going on the highway. We’re not very far from the highway, so we were wondering what vehicles were there. Obviously, they must have been German, because we saw the Germans the night before, so we didn’t know what was going to happen. We stayed there, scared. Finally it started to dawn. Tuesday morning, first of May, we still heard the cars, the trucks and heavy vehicles, and said, “We have to find out. Maybe it’s not the Germans any more.’ Well, we sent down a scouting group -- two, three people. They crawled on all fours down to the road, so they wouldn’t be heard, they wouldn’t be seen. They came to the road. Guess what? American vehicles! They came back – running! Even though we were all weak, they found the strength, and they came back and started screaming, “Americans! Americans!” And we, too, picked ourselves up and ran down to the road, and when the Americans saw us, they started throwing candy, and chocolate and all kinds of things. They knew who we were, obviously. And we were screaming, “American, American! Long Live America!” And we thought we were liberated. Now you think this is the end. By that time we were between a place called Mittenwald and Garmisch Partenkirchen. Garmisch is very famous. The Olympic Games took place there, the winter Olympics in ’36, with Hitler sitting there. It’s really a very pretty mountain town. So in spite of our weaknesses -- and we are weak, and we didn’t have enough to eat -- but the strength came to us because we felt we were free. So we finally made it, We…

Q: You had to walk?

A: Yes, there was no other way. We walked, I don’t know, maybe eight kilometers or so, because Mittenwald and Garmisch must be about fourteen or twelve miles, so we were more than half way. So we got to Garmisch. It was raining, and the Americans were standing, and believe it or not, they had a Hungarian military group surrounded. They were on the German side. And the Hungarians with those big moustaches, they had to put all their belongings on the ground, and the Americans say, “Take anything you want!” -- to us. That’s right. In one of those backpacks, I find a chocolate I hadn’t seen for five, six years, and a shirt and other things I could use. We couldn’t carry all this. And besides, who was interested? The Americans said, “Take it! Take it! Have anything you want!” Then they told us to go to a camp -- to a collection point -- so that they would put us up someplace, in some barracks, again. And we said “Oh, no! No more barracks for us!” We’re not going to any camp and barrack. They would lock us up there and keep us.” So we found a place. We found a place first in the back of some laundry, and then we split up into smaller groups, because we couldn’t be all together, and at that time, we didn’t care, you know. We just keep close to our closest friends. My brother-in-law and I and some other people -- about four or six of us -- we found a place behind a laundry. We slept on the floor, but this was probably the sweetest floor that I have ever slept on. It was the first day of liberation.

Q: What I’d like to know is finally, in the end, who among your family survived and who did not?

A: Well, I mentioned before, my father did not survive, my sister did not survive. My mother survived, and she wound up in camps in eastern Germany, and she was in Auschwitz, and then she was taken out and transferred from Auschwitz and she was taken to eastern Germany, and she eventually wound up in Thereienstadt. And that’s where she survived. She was very sick. And she was taken to Poland -- back to Radom -- and then, somehow she found out that I was alive and she came to Stuutgart. I’m not telling you the details that I heard about her, but when I was on the way to Poland, to bring her, I met somebody who said that she’s on her way which was not necessarily true, but at least saved me from going to Poland, and maybe saved my life, too, who knows, because I had to smuggle through Czechoslovakia and Poland, and that would have been quite difficult. So I turned back and she did not come for another six or eight weeks. It turned out she was not on her way, but that’s how it turned out. So she survived, and she’s not alive any more. My wife is one of the few lucky ones. Her parents survived, even though her father spent in Auschwitz, one of the longest times of anybody I know. He’s not alive any more, either. So, my wife’s brother and I were in camp together and we are both here. He lives in Minneapolis, too.

Q: After the liberation, what did you and the other people in your family who survived, do?

A: We didn’t know that we were alive -- that we survived, you see. I didn’t know anything about my wife. I didn’t know anything about my mother. The only one I knew was my wife’s brother -- because we were together.

Q: Did you try to go back to Radom?

A: That one time, I told you, that I tried to go -- this was when I heard that my mother was alive. There was no communication in Germany. The post office didn’t function. The telephones were not there. Who were you going to call, and who were you going to write to, and so on. And you didn’t know what happened to these people, right? Now the one nice thing happened, and really it’s something that these people deserve a tremendous amount of credit and thanks, are the chaplains -- Jewish chaplains in the American army and maybe British army, too, I don’t know. One rabbi Klausner in the American army, Chaplain Klausner, he organized, plus all the other chaplains, an enterprise whereby all the survivors were registered. And the registry lists were sent out to all the places in the American zone and British zone, and French zone and when the list came, I was naturally looking for my family, and sure enough we found my wife’s mother’s name and my wife’s name on one of the lists. And the list also told us where they were, okay? Now when I was liberated from the Alps, remember I told you before, about two-thirds or so of the people who were in camp at Vaihingen did not leave Vaihingen, and they were liberated a few days later by the French. Now they were free, but I was still in camp for almost three weeks. And these people were taken out of this camp, and then the Americans and the French started to organize these camps, and putting them in…

Q: Displaced persons.

A: D.P. camps. And then they put the Jews in with Jews, and they put Poles and the Ukrainians and Lithuanians and others in. So that group of Jews who were in Vaihingen were transported to another place, and eventually they wound up in a place called “Schloss Lagenzlef.” It’s a castle not far from Heidelberg in Germany. But nobody knew about it. This was already the middle of May. But once people started to recover, and everybody had, obviously, lost relatives, or friends, they started, if they could, to travel - by any means. There was no order. There was a terrible situation, you know. The bridges in Germany were all in pieces; the Germans did it, you know, because they tried to prevent the Americans and British on one side, and Russians on the other side from moving. There was terrible confusion. The trains, obviously were not running on time and they were not running on schedule. There was no schedules, really! And there was no food to be had, except they had their food rations. But yet people traveled! They looked! They went and maybe went to Poland! And they went throughout Germany! They went back to camps! And little by little, the people who remained in this Vaihingen and eventually wound up in Schloss Lagenzlef, they traveled, too. Some of them came to Garmisch, and brought news from Schloss Legenzlef, and said who was there.

Now some people from the British zone maybe found out through word of mouth. It was amazing how I found out! We found out that the people who were on the list, including my wife and her mother, were in one camp. And then somebody said that they might not be in one camp. And then somebody said that they might not be in this camp any more, because the camp was liquidated, and they were combined, and they were taken here, and then some people were taken to Sweden -- you know. It was amazing how these rumors, and facts were really flying all over the place. So they said, “If you really want to find out where to go, how to go, then you go to Schloss Lagenzlef first. You’ll get the latest information,” because this became sort of the hub for Radomer. So that’s what I did. I was working by that time for an American military outfit in the officers’ mess -- in the kitchen. And I got fatigues. I got a letter of recommendation saying, “To Whom It May Concern.” To give me transportation and food, so by hook and by crook and somehow, I finally made it! I came here and I found out, that indeed, the two women were not in the camp that the list said they were, because, after all, the list was old, you see, and things were just so fluid, so they told me they were in a place called Diepholz, and it’s not far from Hanover or Hamburg, in that area. I took off again, on coal trains, stopped army trucks, and I couldn’t even speak English. I showed the letter, and I found it -- this was finally, by the way, in the British zone, not in the American zone -- so I had to somehow make it there, and I did. Took me maybe six days to make the six hundred miles, but I got there. And I walk into this place, a dusty place. I had to walk maybe a mile from the road to the camp, and here I see from afar, two young women marching toward the road, and as I walk close, my heart starts to pound. I said, “My God, that can’t be! That can’t be! Maybe it is! Maybe it isn’t!” And sure enough, it was my wife, walking just by pure coincidence, you know, that she was walking on that road. However, because of the people traveling back and forth, she already heard a few days before, from somebody who visited Garmisch, that we were alive, you see? So she hoped and expected maybe we will get together, but she didn’t know that I was coming -- or maybe somebody did tell her that hey, I was on the way. And, can you imagine our meeting? They were scheduled to leave a few days before for Sweden -- you see, Sweden had invited some of the survivors, especially women, to come and recover there. They had facilities and doctors -- everything possible. They were neutral, and before they couldn’t help, but now they wanted to repair their good name, and they let maybe several thousand survivors come, recover, and say good-bye.

Anyway, my wife and her mother were scheduled, and I said “scheduled.’ Because they almost forced them to go, and they said, “No, we are not going, we hope somebody will come here and look for us, so we don’t want to go.” And they didn’t, and indeed, that’s how I found them. So that was the end of the story in so far as looking for them.

I also heard about my mother being alive, and she heard about me being alive, and I didn’t know that she knew, and she didn’t know that I knew, yet I went on the road in September, ’45 -- that was around Rosh Hashanah -- and I came to a small town on the Czech border, and just pure coincidence, I see somebody from Radom, and he says to me, “Where are you going?” And I said, “What do you mean, ‘Where am I going?’ I’m going to my mother. I heard my mother’s alive and I’m going to take her to Germany.” “You’d be crazy if you went, because she’s on the way. She heard about you.” I don’t know how he knew, and I don’t even remember who it was, but he meant well. He said, “If you go to Radom, you’ll miss her, because she’ll be on the way, so why go?” Well, again, I was with two other guys, and so we all talked each other out of going, you know, because the situation was very uncertain. Maybe you heard about the pogrom in Chelmno, which is not very far from Radom. In spite of the fact that there were very, very few Jews, very, very few survivors, the Poles, the murderous anti-Semites, were still the same anti-Semites as before, so it was not very safe to go. So I turned around and went back to Stuttgart, and it took several weeks before my mother made it. In that respect, it worked out all right.

Q: I have only a couple of questions that I want to ask you very quickly. After you did manage, eventually, to find each other, was there any question about where you would go? Did you think, for example, about going to Palestine, at that time?

A: Yes, there was a time when we were thinking of going to Palestine, and there was still Aliyah Bet. Well, in order to answer a question, I have to give you again, some background. The Radomer group was eventually transferred to a D.P. camp in Stuttgart, all right? It so happened, just by pure coincidence, that it was closer to the Vaihingen camp, the “bad” camp. They cleared a block of apartment buildings in a certain area, moved the Germans out and moved the D.P.’s in, and that became the camp. It was not a closed camp. It was an open camp, in nice apartment buildings, and very modern and everything, and eventually we moved there, too, okay? When I left, my brother-in-law stayed in Garmisch. We couldn’t both go, in case somebody would come and they would start looking for each other. So we settled in Stuttgart, and of course the people were talking about going to Palestine. First of all, we waited for my mother to come. And the situation was difficult, because only the single, unattached people they wanted to get. They needed to probably build up the Haganah, and get the people to the kibbutzim and different places, so the pressure wasn’t there yet. And then, while we were there, I wanted to go back to school. Even though Germany was not my favorite place to go, I figured, I have an opportunity, and I didn’t want to waste any more time. I waited six years. Was plenty. So I applied in Stuttgart in the I.T. and they said it will be quite a while to open. So I went to Munich, and they said, yeah, they are opening at a certain time. So I said, “Fine. I’ll sign up in Munich!” And I did. My wife was in Stuttgart, we already had an apartment in Stuttgart -- and I found out that Stuttgart was going to open up just maybe two months later, so I registered in Stuttgart, and, indeed in February of ’46 they started classes. Now here I started classes, mind you, in a foreign language because German was not my native tongue. High school I had graduated in ’38, so that was six years later -- more than that. My brain power and everything was, naturally, affected during that time, and, you know, a lot of things happened with my family, with myself, so it was kind of a peculiar time. I had to start, basically, from scratch, which I did. I signed up for electrical engineering and started working. Little by little I got into it and I could handle it. (Laughs) I could hack it. So then one semester was done, and two semesters, I had a year already done, and then I already had half of the course done. Then Israel came into being in ’48. My mother remarried in Stuttgart. She found a friend, also from Radom, who lost his wife, and in ’48 they left for -- not Palestine --– it was Israel, okay? Israel came into being in May, and they left the end of August, I think. So that was, again, separation from my mother, but my wife’s father remained in Germany, yet. Okay? In the meantime, her mother died. And my wife started school, so we wanted to finish school. We didn’t have to pay for the school, see, that was one thing that we got the benefit, because we were the survivors. That was part, sort of, of the German reparation. So we didn’t want to leave and go -- especially as I already have half. Now that time, the pressure became a little stronger. And they (Israel) tried to really make everybody go, because they needed people. I was a Zionist most of my life, and I felt like going, but yet, after wasting a good part of your life in the camps, here you have an opportunity, so they understood. I talked to the man in charge, and he said, oh, he understood, and they needed qualified people, too. But my wife’s father went to the United States and her brother came to Minneapolis, and my mother was in Israel at that time, and the situation in Israel was just horrible as far as housing and food and jobs -- everything was just very, very bad! So I just kept going to school, and by the time I finished it was 1950. We sort of signed up to come to the United States, too, and here we are.

Q: You followed your wife’s brother.

A: Well, her father. Her father came here, too. They both came in ’49.

Q: To Minnesota.

A: Yeah, in Minnesota. We came here a little over a year later. We arrived in the United States in September, 1950, and we stayed in New York a few weeks and then came here in the beginning of November.

Q: Do you maintain contact with other survivors or survivor organizations -- here?

A: Oh yeah, we have friends who are also survivors. We have friends in the east –

Q: Do you have contact with a survivor organization?

A: Yes. You might want to see, we even have a periodical. This is not the latest issue.

Q: This is The Voice of Radom?

A: Right. You read Yiddish?

Q: From Bayside, New York. No, I’ve never seen these.

A: As a matter of fact, it so happens the editor is a friend. We just visited him, right in his home at Bayside, a few weeks ago.

Q: Just a final question. Can you describe what it has meant to you to be a survivor?

A: In what way? Personally?

Q: Yes, personally. To you!

A: Well, obviously, it meant a lot. I’m one of the very few who survived. You hear about survivors, you speak about survivors. It sounds as if there are thousands and thousands of them, but actually, there are not. So I consider myself, on one hand, a lucky person that I survived. On the other hand, I feel also a certain mission that we survivors have in telling the story. My wife tells it, a very big job. I don’t know if you know or not, but she’s one of the main speakers on the Holocaust in this area, and she travels to different universities and colleges and speaks in churches and schools. She’s a very articulate person. She really brings out the truth about the Holocaust. I think all of us probably have some kind of a guilt feeling, too, because, here I am, I am alive. I’m enjoying certain things of life and the benefits of a living person. I eventually got my education, and live a fairly decent life. I’m enjoying life, and my children. But I think about what happened to my closest relatives, my parents, my father, my sister -- all my cousins, and my uncles and aunts -- and just plain strangers -- Jews. So why was I destined to be alive and live, and why were they not? And so in that respect it’s a very difficult problem to answer, and nobody really knows why. It’s not because somebody was smart or clever. Basically I think it was a matter of pure luck or just circumstances, coincidences, God knows. Maybe the fact that I just met an acquaintance on the border of Czechoslovakia, and he told me my mother was on the way, and she wasn’t but I turned around anyway. Maybe that saved my life. Who knows? Maybe in camp, certain things happened. Nobody really knows. There’s no explanation why the people who didn’t survive, or some at least, didn’t. There were people who were stronger, physically, who probably you would have said that they would probably survive anything, and that those who were weaker and not as healthy would not, and yet just the opposite was true.

And so those are nagging questions and probably have no answers. What else does it mean? It means that maybe we do have an obligation to tell people about it. Many people have either no idea whatsoever or very, very limited idea of what happened. If you tell people what happened is not only to find some pity or some sympathy or some kind of understanding, but more for the fact that they would be aware. For many years, for many years after the war, people didn’t even want to talk about it. They didn’t want to listen to you if you wanted to talk, and obviously, if you have an audience that doesn’t want to listen, you don’t tell them anything. But in the last few years, as you are probably well aware, people started listening, they started asking questions, even school children and students in colleges, and they established chairs and Holocaust lectures, and whole circuits, to the point where some of our Jewish intellectuals come out and are against it, which is, of course, just the other extreme.

Anytime that anybody will ask me to talk about it, I would certainly not turn them down. It’s painful, but after so many years you can talk about it in a certain detached manner. You can put your pain on the side and tell the story as it was. And I feel it’s my obligation, for no other reason than it’s for information and for some kind of enlightenment, and maybe more and more people understand it, the better chance we’ll have that it will never happen again.

Q: How do you feel about the German people?

A: Well, I’m still ambivalent about it, because I lived there. I can’t have any special love for them. I cannot condemn, let’s say, the younger generation unless they are anti-Semitic, and unfortunately that’s what’s happening. But there’s one thing that I cannot forgive them -- if they lie and say they -- especially the generation of yesteryear -- they tell you that they didn’t know anything about it. And we encountered lots of them when we lived in Germany. They were telling us, “Oh ! We didn’t know anything about it!” “Just terrible!” and “Oh! What you went through.” “We had no idea!” It’s probably true to a certain extent, because they didn’t want to know! And yet you can’t help but be very worried about people like this. They unfortunately have the tendencies to look for a Fuhrer. And if somebody would come probably today and tell them, “We can make you great!” as Hitler did. I’m not so sure that they wouldn’t go along with it. So, maybe it’s a national character or maybe it’s just -- who knows. I cannot say that I carry a hate in my heart, because I don’t -- it’s just that I would probably distrust the war generation. You still don’t know if they talk to you nicely whether they didn’t have their hands bloodied in some camp or some place where the Jews didn’t mean anything to them. So. It’s kind of hard to erase it completely from your system.

Q: This completes the interview with Mr. Jules Zaidenweber by Steven Foldes on 21 June, 1982.

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