United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Saul Merin
April 19, 2009
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PREFACE

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SAUL MERIN
April 19, 2009

Question: Good morning.

Answer: Good morning to you.

Q: This is a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Professor **Saul Merin**, on April 19th, 2009. We are very, very pleased that you have agreed to come and speak with us today. The interview is about your life story, and we'll start, as we always do, at the beginning. Can you tell us some details about your birth, about your family, about the world that you were born into?

A: And, thank you very much. I-I was born in a township, what they called **shtetl**, the small towns where most Jewish people lived in Eastern **Europe**. This township was called **Bendzin**. It had a – between 50 and 60,000 people – population. And it was similar to so many other places like this. It was in southwest **Poland**, very close to the German border, of more than maybe five miles.

Q: Was it a contested territory with **Germany**?

A: Yes, it was, always they were fighting about it. It was in **Silesia**, **Silesia.** **Schilesia** in – in German. And the Germans thought that this is their country. The Poles thought that this is their country. Before the war, all of Lower **Silesia** was next to **Germany**, and Upper **Silesia**, most of it belonged to **Germany**. A small part rem-remained Polish.

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Q: In **Bendzin**, was it a multi-cultural town? Were there Germans living there, and Poles living there and Jews living there?

A: That's right, but really, the majority were Jewish people, in the town itself.

Q: How large was –

A: About 60 percent. About 60 percent of the people living in **Bendzin** were – were Jewish people. And they – their language mostly was Jewish.

Q: Yiddish.

A: Yiddish.

Q: Yiddish.

A: Was Yiddish. While a – in addition, they learned Polish, and knew Polish, but Yiddish was the major language. And there were people who lived there and spoke German.

Q: What about you?

A: We spoke Yiddish. And – at home, it was Yiddish. I knew, of course, very well, Polish. And I knew a little of German, not much. But I learned German during the war, and after the war, as a child.

Q: And how is it – how was the town's structure in social classes, for example? Were – were Jews in a certain merchant class, or a certain class and Poles in another and Germans in another? How was that split up?

A: The whole town was poor. Poverty was probably the characteristic finding in town. Poverty among all classes. It was among Germans and among – among Poles, and among the Jewish people. The – the poverty was manifested by – by the houses, which were terrible dwellings. Many of them, there were no washrooms in the house, they have to go out to the courtyard. Sometimes this was seen even in – in houses which had four floors, and 20 - 30 families lived there. They had to go down and – life was not easy, not nice. Jewish people lived there probably for longer than many other places, because in **Bendzin** there was a castle, which was built by King **Casimir**. **Casimir**, or **Kazimierz** in Polish. **Kazimierz** the Great. He was the Polish king in the 14th century who united **Poland.** This is why they called him the Great. After he united it, usually by fighting, okay, in combat –

Q: Was that the Treaty of **Lublin?** Was he part –

A: No.

Q: No, okay.

A: No. This was – a-and he – he really thought – he ruled over **Poland**. This was unusual in **Poland**, because **Poland** was – the noblemen rule – ruled the country, not the king. But he was strong; he was the one who ruled at that time, in the 14th century, must have been about 1345. He invited the Jews of **Germany** to come over and live in **Poland**. And he promised that he will take care of it – of them, he will

support them, and th – especially, he will be the one who will defend them, if there will be problems about – in – in **Poland**. The Jews heard it and they just couldn't come at a better time for the Poles, and for the Jews, cause this was the time after the plague, after the plague, disease, the plague epidemic, the Black Plague. While the Germans, which – which maybe – nobody knows how much, but it probably was not less than a quarter of the – of European population who perished at that time from the disease, from the epidemic, and they possibly wa – it came up from 50 percent a – of the jew – of the European population. The plague was brought by an Italian ship from the east, from somewhere in the east. The story goes, in 1943, the – the ship came and they tried to disembark in **Messina,** in south

[indecipherable]

Q: Not 1943, some pa – some other point, yes?

A: In 1343.

Q: '43.

A: 1343. And in **Messina**, the customs officer came on the ship and looked what kind of, how do you call it –

Q: Goods they had?

A: Goods, what kind of goods they brought with them. And then he has seen th-the sick sailors. He has seen this, he left the ship. He told them, you are not allowed to

go to **Messina**, you must leave immediately the port. And they left and they went around into **Venice.** In **Venice** they disembarked.

Q: That was it.

A: Brought down the goods. And unfortunately, one of the problems was, later for the Jews, that one of the businessmen in **Switzerland** had a Jew for his assistant. And – sorry.

Q: It's okay.

A: And he was sent to **Venice** to bring the goods. And he came over there and took the goods and came back to **Switzerland**. The goods were infected, like all of the goods which were **[indecipherable]**

Q: This is – excuse me for interrupting, but it's interesting to hear history – first of all, I'll back up a little bit. I have a theory, it's a not very deep theory, it's a little superficial, but I have a theory that east Europeans carry around their history for 600 years.

A: That's right.

Q: Whereas Americans don't remember what **Vietnam** War was: that's already ancient history.

A: How right you are.

Q: And listening to you now, I hear an east European, because – because –

A: This was just 600 years –

Q: Yeah.

A: – from that time.

Q: And – and I'm wondering whether – whether these were stories and this was history that you grew up with in a – in order to explain how the Jews came to **Bendzin**, or is this –

A: Yes.

Q: – information that you learned later, history that you learned later?

A: No, it was – no, I th – I think I knew about it already as a child. I knew about it, because it's very important for the life of Jewish people in **Bendzin**. You see, when the plague broke out, the Germans accused the Jews, that they brought in the plague, that they caused the plague, they caused the death of at least one-quarter of the European population, and thousands of Jews were massacred as a –

Q: Result.

A: – result of this. And when he invited the Jews to come, tens of thousands left **Germany** into **Poland. Poland**, til then, had one small community in **Kalish**(ph), a town more to the north **[indecipherable]**. And after this there were many communities which were put up.

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Q: So you could sa – so one could say that **Bendzin** was one of the oldest Jewish communities in **Poland.**

A: Yes, that's what I think, yes. This wa – this was what we knew about it. This was one of the oldest – because Jews settled near the king they loved. And –

Q: This is the other point I wanted to bring up, th – and again, excuse me for interrupting, but it sounds from what you're saying, is that there are traces of a Polish patriot in you, in your telling, because of – now, I could be wrong, I'm – this is why I'm testing this out, because it sounds like the story was a favorable story to **Poland,** that it was a refuge, that it was a country where one could live. It was a country that offered survival and reprieve. And the reason I – I – I bring this up is that just recently there was a **Professor Polonsky** who was the chair of Judaic studies at **Brandeis**, gave a presentation where he said, until World War 2, many Jews believed that about **Poland**.

A: Yes.

Q: Many Jews believed that about where they lived. And so that's why I'm asking you, is that –

A: Yes.

Q: – is there something to this?

A: Yes, I agree fully with this. Many Jews believe that they are – they are Jewish, but they – that the Poles can be depended upon, and we should live with the Poles. Th-This happened at the time of **Tadeusz Kościuszko**, when **Berek Yoselevich**(ph)**,** a Jew from **Warsaw**, from the other side of **Warsaw, Fraha – Fraga**(ph). He put up a battalion that fought in the mutiny of **Kościuszko,** as a separate battalion under – under the order of – of yos – of **Berek Yoselevich**(ph)**, Berek Yoselovich**. And Poles that remember this, will find his name anywhere oret – of how he fought. He fell in – in combat. He died in combat. But he dus –anyhow, in – in **Bendzin**, most Jews went to **Kraków. Kraków** was the place where the king lived, and they put up a town near **Kraków** and called it **Kazimierz,** which is this still today, after the king. But in this place, the castle which he built, on the shores of a river, he – this town was built, **Bendzin,** and Jews lived there, I think for centuries. I lived in the place where I was born, and I lived on the street corner called the **Street of the Castle**. And I could throw a stone and hit the castle, it was in the same –

Q: That was that close?

A: It was very close, yes. It was on the same street.

Q: Did you live di – were you born into one of those houses that had four stories high, and a courtyard below?

A: Yes, yes, yes, exactly, exactly like this. For there were three, like buildings around a courtyard, and I lived on the third floor in one of them, on the – the site where there was no building like this, there was a small building of three stores only, or what do – what – shops in the lower floor, and then two floors of apartments, which belonged to my grandfather.

Q: So, it was extended family who lived together?

A: Yes.

Q: Let's turn a little bit to your own family, within this context, within this community and within this history. When were you born? What was the date of your birth?

A: 1933. August, 1930 – end of August, 1933.

Q: August?

A: 1933.

Q: But the date in August was – I – August –

A: 25.

Q: August 25th, 1933. Were you the only child?

A: No, my sister was born two years later.

Q: But there were the two of you then?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. And what was her name?

A: **Dina.**

Q: **Nina**?

A: **Dina.**

Q: **Dina**. And your parents' names?

A: My father was **Itzhak, Itzhak,** and he belonged to the family **Merin**, that lived in this place, at least documented, I know, 200 years.

Q: That's a long time.

A: Yeah, 200 – 1820, I could see the name of **Merin** written down in the Jewish community, where they had the list of all newborns, you know, and saw his name, the name **Merin** came back – back several times.

Q: And your mother's name?

A: My mo – my mother was **Gruen, g-r-u-e-n**, that's the way –

Q: **Gruen**?

A: **Gruen.**

Q: Uh-huh.

A: That's the way they have written it. It's probably more German, like this, the **u-e**.

Q: Yeah.

A: And they –

Q: Her first name?

A: – she was born in – **Gitl**(ph)**.**

Q: **Gitl**(ph)**.**

A: Okay. She was born in a village nearby, a village about 20 miles from there.

Q: In this – in **Bendzin**, if there was such poverty, what did people do to make their – earn their living? How did they earn their living?

A: I think it was lot different from other places in **Poland.** They lived there as owners of small shops. This was – my father had a small shop given to him by his father, by my grandfather. And he became very religious, and – and my mother was really running it. And I –

Q: What did you sell? What –

A: They were selling all kinds of – they called it **galanteria** in Polish.

Q: How – and –

A: You know, okay –

Q: And –

A: So this was a **galanteria**. Was a big sign **galanteria,** I remember this as a child.

Q: All kinds of haberdashery, I think would be the English phrase. Socks and gloves and umbrellas and things like that.

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: Yeah, hats.

A: That's right. So this was one owners, shop owners. Then there were various professions, like tailors and **[indecipherable]** and –

Q: Do you think that that would have been your future, had there been no war, that you would have taken over the shop?

A: Oh, that's a difficult question. I was too young to – to even – to think about it. I believe my father would like me to go to the yeshiva and become a rabbi, or like this, but it will – there was no chance for it, I would never agree to it. Already as a child five year old, I knew that that will not be my way.

Q: That's interesting that at age five –

A: Yes. At the age of three, I was sent to a **chayder,** so I learned with all these ren – religious way, I learned from the age of three. I hated. This I remember well. I did not like it.

Q: Why? What – what is in your memory?

A: I didn't like the attitude of the rabbi. The rabbi was the teacher over there **[indecipherable]** on many occasion he would hit you with a –

Q: Ruler?

A: – a ruler, you know, which he had there, in his hand. A – and I hated it. And I did not like the way they were learning it, you know, to repeat after the rabbi what he said, and this was the way of learning. I didn't like it. This I know very well. And on any occasion I had, I wou – I run away from them.

Q: Well, three years old is a very young – for a small child to be so –

A: Yes, I probably started to run away at the age of four or so, after one year there. Not at the beginning, but already at the age of four I was definitely running away. My –

Q: Did you get in trouble from this?

A: Well, I tried to – not to let my parents know about it. But my mother would certainly support me if I would – if she would know, she would say, well, let him do what he likes. And my father wouldn't forgive me, no way. And so –

Q: That's kind of tough on a little child.

A: Yes. But, it was – my friend was the – there was a man who lived in the same house, he had a cart and a horse to carry things. And he became – we became very good friends, and he tried to take me always when he was going to work, and I was with him on the cart there, going like this. The other people – so there there were all these professions, there were – was a bakery, and people worked in the bakery. There was a **mikveh**, and a synagogue, a shul, where they – and so many people are

– were all in this. The most – the most common, I would say, and the most Jewish profession – you probably don't know it, but the most Jewish profession at that time, my opinion, was porters.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. These people were taking things on their shoulders and carry them from – they were Jewish, almost exclusively Jewish.

Q: Like loaders, people who would take heavy sacks on their shoulders and –

A: Yes, heavy loads and these were Jewish. Almost exclusively. We knew it –

Q: How do you explain it?

A: Well, th-the problem was that the Poles didn't like Jews, and you know, if we liked King **Kazimierz**, there were not many like him. And he – he – he was exceptional. And the Poles tried to make, for Jews, life difficult. And one of things they did was not to – too much to work with them. Now, if you were a doctor, if you were a – a tailor, and you were good at it, and really they came to you, most Jews and Poles, and – and they worked with you, because it was good for them to do it. But if you didn't have any education, if you didn't have any professional education, you were not a tailor, you were not a **[indecipherable]** you didn't learn anything, then the only thing that was left for you was to work as a porter.

Q: Carrying these loads.

A: And I – I think this was the reason why they work. I knew – I knew children of the porters who were my age. I remember them. They had the very difficult time. Their income was low. They hardly could have shoes to walk around with them. And I – I'm not sure how mu – what they were doing about it, you know, and certainly their parents, uneducated. They couldn't do anything else, except this.

Q: Was there mandatory schooling for children, all children?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: No. Schooling is another interesting fact about the place, because there was one secondary school, one high school, and the one high school was – my father learned in it. Was called **Yavener**(ph) at the time, and the language of teaching was Hebrew. This was the only secondary school, high school in town. So the Poles –

Q: So the Poles didn't have their own?

A: No.

Q: There was no education –

A: I – I'm not sure they have now, but they didn't have at that time. This was the only one. And so when a Pole wanted to learn in high school, would get matriculation, for instance, the only way for him was to learn in **Hebrew.** Go to that school –

Q: And did they?

A: Yes, many did. Many did. It was **[indecipherable]** a – a – a chain of schools, Jewish schools, all over **Poland.**

Q: But private, hm, not state.

A: Private –

Q: Yeah.

A: – private. But then, you know, life became very difficult, worse and worse from year to year.

Q: Well, I would like to see – I would like to kind of weave in the general picture you're painting for me with words, to what happened in your own family. And before we do that, I'd like to get a sense of what your family was like, what memories do you have of your family, of your sister, of your mother. You know, some people report that their pre-war lives were pretty idyllic, and that they grew up in warm, happy families. Some report that it wasn't quite so, and their relations were more, how shall I say? Complicated. How would you describe your own?

A: Whe-en-en – if we speak before the war –

Q: Before the war.

A: – before the world changed –

Q: Before the war.

A: – before the war I was – I was five years old when the war broke out, I wasn't yet six.

Q: I see.

A: **[indecipherable]** so during that time, I could only see what's going around there.

Q: Yeah.

A: And already I knew at that time that what happens in town, and all over in **Poland,** because I heard my parents speaking about it, the anti-Semitism grew quickly. It became monstrous, I think, before breakout of the second World War.

Q: Did your parents talk about what happened to them, or to people they knew, or –

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: Yes, I heard them talking about it. They – the – the major problem was that Poles organized into a – a – in – in the party, which was called **Boycott.**

Q: Ah.

A: And this was, really, this was their purpose, to boycott the Jews. And then they meant – fewer people came to the store to buy there. They could find a Polish store, not Jewish. I – I don't know if you have ever seen, there is a book e – of pictures, published in **New York**, by **Vishniac**.

Q: Oh yes, mm-hm.

A: Have you seen it?

Q: **Roman Vishniac,** yes.

A: **Roman Vishniac.** It's amazing. When you see **[indecipherable]** you can see the porters, who were the ones who suffered most of the Polish boycott, because they, you know, have – a Pole could take a load on his shoulders without learning anything, and take it over. And they suffered, the famine really, that's –

Q: Did you –

A: – **[indecipherable]** starvation, there was.

Q: So you would see the effects of it, you would see the children of the – of the loaders.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you yourself, or your family, or the – the housing complex where you lived, was it almost entirely Jewish? Did you have interaction with Poles wi –

A: Entirely Jewish.

Q: Entirely Jewish.

A: Yes. The school, my father learned in this high school, until just one year before the end, when he said, I don't want to continue here, I want to go to a **yeshiva**. And he left this and started the religious training. And several years later he married my

mother, and she came from the s – village, which I loved. The village I loved

[indecipherable]

Q: What was – what was its name?

A: Mika – was **Sztemaszitsa**(ph) **[indecipherable]**

Q: Oh my God, how do you say it?

A: **Sztemaszitsa**(ph)

Q: **Sztemaszitsa**(ph)? Oh my gosh.

A: Yes. **[indecipherable]** I am saying. There were 2,000 Jews in this village, quite large. There were mats – but they were still only 15 percent of the population of this village. But I loved it, because this was open, and I could run around there. I had the large family, all my mother's family lived there, this was great.

Q: Were you closer to her than to him?

A: Yes, I believe, yes. I – I loved my mother. And I didn't like my father being so –

Q: Strict.

A: – strict and religious and ja – I didn't like. You know, when – when you think about life over there before the war, that's certainly on the one side, it's the poverty, which became worse in 1930s, after my birth, when I was a small child. With every year it became worse for the Jews because of this, I mean, because of the boycott, because of what Poles did. And – but on the other hand, you – you must – it was a

life you could enjoy, with all this. You know, you had something to expect, you know, you didn't have enough. I think nobody, really, except some rich people, they didn't have enough bread. They would eat more bread if they would be given. But they knew that in another 10 days, **Pesach** comes, Passover. And then they will eat as much as they want. Or another holiday, or the Sabbath. Was no way, even the poorest people, that on the Sabbath they would not – the whole family would not sit down and eat, really as one should. You know, no way. They would be ashamed of it. They wouldn't be ashamed during the week that they cannot give their children enough to eat, but on the Sabbath they would certainly be ashamed of, and they would do anything, you know, on Sabbath and the holidays, that they did – the behavior of the family is different, and they can – and this was really every Friday, I was going already as a four year old child. I was taking the **cholent**, the **cholent**, you know, which they prepared for the sat – for Saturday me – for the Saturday meal, I was taking it to the bakery, and then on Saturday I brought it back, see. So it was, you know, there was some enjoyment in this life. The school, the high school, which was kept by the community, broke down and the –

Q: The Hebrew high school?

A: The Hebrew high school, it broke down, they didn't have enough money to continue to run it, once the boycott started. Was during the time I was already living

there as a small child. My father stopped to go there earlier. And in the town there was one Jew called **Furstenberg**.

Q: Oh, that's a very ar-aristocratic name.

A: Yes, without the **von.**

Q: Okay.

A: **Furstenberg**. And **Furstenberg** was a very rich Jew, but very. Very means that in the 1930s he had an airplane, a private airplane, which you know, unheard of.

Q: That's **Hollywood**.

A: He was one of the richest people in all of **Europe**. He became rich from a – from a mine which he founded, of zinc. And he – this was really the – the center of zinc export to all of **Europe.** So he – he took on himself the whole school. They changed the name of the school to **Furstenberg** and he was paying for **[indecipherable]** all the teachers, and thing, was paid by him.

Q: He was the benefactor.

A: He was the benefactor of the school and everything **[indecipherable]** after it.

Q: So the war started after your sixth birthday, right after your sixth bir –

A: No after, before my sixth birthday.

Q: Oh –

A: Oh, no after, immediately after –

Q: Right after.

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: I mean five days, six days after September first –

A: Just – just – yes, right.

Q: – '39.

A: Right, right.

Q: How does a six year old boy experience a war? What was the – how did – how did it introduce itself into your life?

A: Frightening. It's – I-I was never afraid of anything. I believed that I was never afraid in my life, there's nothing that I could not overcome. But it was frightening because of the – of the people around me, you know. They were obviously afraid. And I could feel it, I could see it.

Q: You were six years old, and these were the grown-ups, and the grown-ups were the ones –

A: Yes.

Q: – who provide security to the children.

A: That's right.

Q: And if they're frightened, of course the children are frightened.

A: That's right, that's right, that's right. I never expressed it, and the – nobody would know it, but definitely it was clear. When the Germans came in, which was immediately after the war broke out, they didn't have much to go.

Q: That's right across the border, yeah.

A: Just across the border. The first Saturday after this, they came and burned down the shul, the synagogue. And they burned it down with all the people were praying inside. And whoever tried to escape was shot.

Q: It must ha – I mean, was there any crime in **Bendzin** before the war?

A: No.

Q: So this was – this is a shock to the system.

A: That's – yes, yes. They were – we lived on this **Castle** Street, which was on the same street, a little further, there was the synagogue, the central synagogue of the town.

Q: Did you see anything of this?

A: And the – I don't know, I was – at the time, on Saturday when they burned it down, they came and then they announced to all people around in the other houses to stay down in the basements. So we went down. When we came back we have seen some shots in the ceiling of – when they – they shoot around just to frighten people, you know. But –

Q: Did you see any German soldiers? Do you remember seeing any?

A: Yes. No-Not at that time. On that day I couldn't see any, but yes, I have seen them.

Q: After –

A: They came in, and after this, and –

Q: But then it was just sort of like this – if I can try and – and extrapolate, a – a child is hearing – is – is sensing the fear of the adults, does not yet see what it is that they are frightened of, is told that, along with his family to go to a basement, and at that time, it's when the synagogue is being burnt down with people inside. Did you hear anything from what was going on down the street?

A: It was a noise there. We heard that it's burning. I heard them talking about it, that they burned down the synagogue. We didn't think that this happens with the people inside. And there were s-some survivors from it, succeeded to run away, and they went to a nearby church. And the priest of the church really hid them, he was hiding them. He later be – received a – a – what they call it at the Holocaust museum of **Jerusalem** –

Q: **Yad Vashem.**

A: **Yad Vashem,** the – no, he received the **khassidey umot ha-ola.**

Q: I think it's called Righteous Among –

A: Righteous of the world.

Q: Yeah.

A: Righteous, he – this – he definitely saved. Many of them were killed later, but at least he did what, really the only one who did anything for it.

Q: Really?

A: And – at that time. So –

Q: So –

A: Y-You know, and after this, when the Germans, after burning down the synagogue it became a little quieter. You know, there was nothing going on. Well, here and there some, I would say, things not on the level of the whole town. Like, for instance, I learned at home. I never went to school. And in 1940, my parents brought a Jewish young woman, was teaching me Polish. How to write, how to read, and –

Q: Is she the one who taught you history? Because if –

A: No, no, no. She was – and she was really not a long time. I liked her very much, I still remember this.

Q: Do you remember her name?

A: I was six – no, no. Six or maybe seven years old, she was older. She looked to me the perfect lady, you know, th-the perfect girl, which could be I looked at her, I

was waiting for her coming every time. Then one day – and she learned. I mean, sa – I learned how to write in maybe a couple of months when she was teaching me. Then she didn't come. And I asked my parents what happened, they didn't want to tell me. And then I heard that, one day a talk between them, and one of them saying that her parents are accusing my parents about what happened. And then I understood what happened. When she left our house after teaching me, she went back to her home. She had to cross a lawn which was on the way, quite a large lawn, and when she went through it a German soldier went by and just shot her, killed her on the way. I-I – I remember, when I heard this, I was shocked by it. First time in my life that I really started to understand what's going on with the Germans in that time. All schools were of course closed, and there was no way, even religious schools, like I learned in the **chayder,** so I could like, continue, up to a certain time when the – the rabbi was taken to **Auschwitz**. And I start in another place and the rabbi also was taken away a short time later, and there was no way to learn. I started my school only a-after the war.

Q: What happened with your mother's **galanteria**? Obviously, even before the war, it must have suffered. Did you have Polish customers before the war?

A: One – and, yes, undoubtedly, most customers were Polish. Nearby was a shop, a butcher, and the butcher was Polish, it was not kosher. But my grandfather rented it

for – to – to him, and he – he m – he was bankrupt. And this was the way they lived until the war broke out in – at the end of 1939, beginning of 1940, we were informed that the house of my grandfather is **[indecipherable]** too much into the street. And so they had to leave it in 24 hours, and they demolished it, the German – not the Germans, but the people who worked for them, and – including the Jewish.

Q: So that meant that in this – was this house owned by your grandfa-father? In other words, it was his asset, it was his property?

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Completely destroyed?

A: Oh, the whole house was destroyed, yes. This was his major property, he lived on this because he rented this – the shops downstairs and – and he rented the other – th-the other apartments. He lived in one of them, and he rented the other, four or five other.

Q: Tell me a little bit about this grandfather. Did you ha – did – did he play a role in your life, in your childhood? Do you remember, or was he a more distant person?

A: H-He was – no, he was like a grandfather. When I was born, probably in that time, my parents didn't have an apartment of their own, they lived with the grandfather. I was born there, this I was told. Then they moved over to this apartment. H-H-He was – he was like a **zayde** should be, you know, like a

grandfather, a **zayde** should be. He was the one always prepared for me something which I liked. And so I loved him, I loved him in that time. Like, you know –

Q: Of course.

A: – most grandsons would – would love. He was the one, o-or maybe it was 1941, it was already becoming very bad. The pressure was rising all the time. Was standing on the balcony of the – of the house and he said to me, you see, when this war will end, we are going to **Palestine**. It was – for the first time I heard the word **Palestine.**

Q: Really?

A: Yeah. I had an uncle there. His son. He was the oldest son, went to **Tel Aviv**, and then there were four sisters, and then my father was the youngest.

Q: This was a large family.

A: Yes –

Q: Quite a large family.

A: – there was.

Q: So you had lots of aunts.

A: Yes.

Q: And did they all live –

A: I liked the – all of them, I liked them. Yes, they were all of them married. I liked them all.

Q: And they were all in this apartment building? This – this house –

A: No.

Q: No.

A: No, no, no, no.

Q: No.

A: They all left, they married and after –

Q: So it was only your father –

A: **[indecipherable]**

Q: – who kind of stayed wi – closer –

A: Yes, to the grandfather.

Q: – to the grandfather.

A: Yes, but when they demolished his house, we couldn't take him in because our apartment was small. So we moved over to the place of my aunt, the oldest aunt who lived in the **[indecipherable]** in **Bendzin**. She had the large apartment.

Q: These things sound terrifying, when I – I mean they sound terrifying at any age, but I am just trying to imagine still, a child of six and seven years old. How did your parents explain, or try to explain to you what was going on? Did they – did they

comfort you, or were they so worried with their own fears that you kept quiet about your own?

A: We spoke very little about it, if at all, if at all. They never, ever, ever, ever spoke with me about it, really. And the truth is that I think they – they were clever to do it, not to tell me anything, because it certainly frightened me, there's no doubt about this. But they knew what's going on in my head, you know. They knew that I live a – in an imaginary world. And all this just kind of doesn't belong to me, and they knew it. And I remember my father saying to me, we're going down to try to open the **sukkah**. The **sukkah** for – a **sukkah.** And they said to me, you know, and I was trying to explain to him, because there – there were several things he couldn't do. He was not allowed to go at **[indecipherable]** outside, he had to put it in this – which is not according to the religious laws and the – there's several things, also with the **sukkah**, he couldn't put this way, he had to put it in another way, and he said that's not the way it should be done, it should be – and then he looked at me and he said, you know, I envy you. It's good to be a child at this time. You know, when – he knew I am living in an imaginary world, which is not the world of **[indecipherable]** during the war. And I think this was the way, really, you could keep yourself normally.

Q: How about your little sister? She was truly a baby, wasn't she, at that point, still?

A: Yes, she was a baby, and I felt like this was always, for me she was the baby. And I always think I told her, look, I will take care of you, you don't be afraid, I will always take care of you. And that's really what happened later.

Q: So let's –

A: I took care of her.

Q: I want to get to that point.

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me, after you – after your grandfather's house was demolished, how did things proceed, how did life continue to change?

A: So my grandparents moved over to her, my grandfather died later in the – and I'm not sure, but possib – certainly from natural causes, but it's also probable that he didn't get the treatment which he could get if there wouldn't be a war.

Q: Yeah.

A: He died, and we continued to live. Th-The main problem was how to get away from the Germans, that they don't catch you when they go in the streets and catch some Jews to send away. And there were several cases when it was organized. One day it was organized this way, that they came to surround our place, all the four buildings. And they took everybody to the police station, or whatever it was, and – and they said – they decided, whatever one of you is going back to his house, or is

sent over for deportation, as they called it. Deportation was **Auschwitz**. **Auschwitz** was not more than about an hour by train from our place. And so, at that time, we learned something. And we learned this, that they – they are taking away larger families, because it's easier for them. If they have to take, they come over in there to bring a thousand Jews, they take larger families, then they do it quicker and it's for them much easier. We survived this because what happened is that a Jewish policeman was there, they were helping the – the Germans. And they were policemen of the **Judenrat**. And the Jewish policeman was a distant relative of ours. So he said, you don't take – stay here. Went out and locked the outer lock on the door. So it was clear to everybody who came over there, there is nobody inside, they left already and locked the door.

Q: Did people know that they were being – go – going to **Auschwitz**, or did they just know they're being deported?

A: Not at that time. They were – they knew they were deported, and not at that time. Later on, yes.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Later –

Q: Was there a ghetto formed –

A: Yes.

Q: – in your town, in **Bendzin**?

A: Much later.

Q: I see.

A: Much later. Was just at the end of ’42 that they oh – in ’42, one day, this was the second time after this, that they called all Jews to the stadium. And in the stadium, after a whole day **[indecipherable]** waiting, and th – everybody had to go through a station where Gestapo was sitting, and they decided every one, if he is going to be deported, or he is going back.

Q: Did you remember that, did you go?

A: A-And – yes, I do remember it, very well. Because what I did was – and I did it myself, I had my – when – when my parents with my sister came over to the table, I kind of hid ara – behind them. So here seems three people, and he stamped the – the I.D.s and he gave it to them, then he has seen a fourth I.D. He looked around and see me and what’s that **[indecipherable]** cause then it would be already you couldn't change it any more. But they told me later, the parents that I saved them, because families of four, they were deported, and only smaller families not. So my hiding behind it, and so they – they manifested only three members.

Q: And then the fourth seems to show up, but the stamp is already there –

A: Yes.

Q: – and so he's allow – you know, one more reprieve.

A: Yeah, yeah. So they – they gave it to me, they let me out. Then the – a man came, a – a distant relative of mine. You know, I had maybe – I counted for si – Kaddish somewhere, maybe tomorrow, I counted – I had first relatives, first degree relatives, up to first cousins, there must have been some 25. And we speak about distant relatives, more distant, second cousins, so once – first cousins once removed, we're coming to maybe 200.

Q: What a lot –

A: Was a very large family. The name **Merin** is very – i-it was very popular there. Must tell you, it's not really for this, but you know, once in 10 years I have to renew my visa to the **United States.** Last time when it was, I had to – well, usually I give it to the agent, to the travel agent, and he does it for me. Now, they changed the law, and the rules, and now you have to come yourself and be there. Takes half a day. I didn't have time for it. So I was angry about it, well, you cannot do anything. I came over there, it was four months ago. And I come in there and they – I was waiting with the others, and I come to a large hall where I've seen people waiting, they said, this takes the most time. You must wait here until they call you.

Q: Was this the **U.S.** embassy in – in **Israel**?

A: The **U.S.** consulate in **Jerusalem.**

Q: Oh, okay.

A: I didn't go to the embassy in **Tel Aviv –**

Q: Okay.

A: – I went to the consulate in **Jerusalem**. And they said, this may take two or three hours to hear. The minute when I come in, I sat down. **Merin.** I said to my wife, something wrong here, it cannot be. All these people were before us. But I come in there, a woman is sitting there, at one of the windows, smiling. And she says to me, you are **Merin**? I say yes. You are from **Bendzin**? I says, what do you mean? That's not written there. So, she said, my father is from **Bendzin**, and he told me if at any time somebody named **Merin** will come, take him immediately, he is from **Bendzin**. And this was her.

Q: How wonderful.

A: Yeah, was funny.

Q: Yeah.

A: You know, like –

Q: Did you know who her father was?

A: I didn't know him before, I don – she thought that I know, but I was a – you know, I'm a –

Q: A lot of **Merins,** yes.

A: – I was so small.

Q: Yes.

A: I knew many **Merins**, but not – in 1942, a man came back, a distant relative of ours, and he had the broken hand, I remember. And he told us that he was on the way to **Auschwitz**, and he jumped out of the train. And he broke his hand, and – and th-this, but came back. And I remember him sitting down with my parents and I was listening from the side and I heard him telling about **Auschwitz**, what it means **Auschwitz** and what – that they are killing Jews there.

Q: And you were nine years old?

A: I was nine years, yes. When – when he left, I heard my father and mother speaking, they were angry. They said, he is lying. It cannot be that this is happening. It's really – it's a pity that he is saying things like this, which are not true, he's frightening everybody. This was the attitude. There were a few people like him, but they didn't believe it. I think that this is probably the basis for not doing more to defend themselves, of the Jews, because it seemed so unreal, so impossible, that anybody, any country, they may not like Jews, but th – they – nobody would think about it, that there may be an **[indecipherable]** arrangement of – of massacre of Jews. So –

Q: And then – but it – in some ways it sounds like he gave you the idea that saved you, if we go further in your story.

A: Maybe. Maybe.

Q: I don't want to suggest, but you know –

A: Maybe this was, I – I ran away because of my mother.

Q: Well, let's get to that part. Let's go – after this person visited, that's very close then to the time that things changed.

A: That we moved into – into the ghetto.

Q: Okay.

A: We moved into the ghetto and th-the starvation became much more serious.

Q: All right, so now – now we speak – excuse me Professor **Merin**, I'm going to pause once more. Press –

A: Press the pause, and –

Q: Okay, so now I'm recording again.

A: And now stopped, you pause **[indecipherable]** again, you see.

Q: Record?

A: No.

Q: No. It doesn't. See, here's the thing.

A: Yes. Now you have to –

Q: Thank you.

A: Okay.

Q: Thank you.

A: That's all right.

Q: You did it, all right. So, we're in the ghetto. Then –

A: We moved into the ghetto end of '42, and the main problem there was starvation, the – we didn't have enough to eat.

Q: How did your parents get food for you?

A: They didn't. They –

Q: They had no way, huh?

A: Yeah. They cannot – I don't have, we never forget, you know, just the two or three evenings before a – the end of the ghetto, that – from dinner, we had one egg. And we were sitting, all four of us, and my father or my mother said look, we discussed it **[indecipherable]** between us, and we could divide this egg into four. Or another way, one will receive the whole egg, and then when we get another one, the second one, third one and so on. So we decided we go for one, so that he can be stronger, and – and they said, we decided you'll be the one. And they gave me the egg. You know, I was eating it **[indecipherable]** and you know, it looked to me like the **delicatess**(ph) of the world. And in the middle of eating this, I raised my head, I

have seen the three people, both my parents, and **Dina,** my sister looking at me with hungry eyes. You know, I remember their eyes, you know, like it will be yesterday. Maybe this explains more than anything else, the starvation which we went through at that time. There was certainly not enough bread, not enough anything, ca – on the bread, you know. Not even all these ersatz, the – what – what – that came instead of coffee, like ersatz coffee and ersatz tea and things like this.

Q: Replacement, replacement, replacement.

A: Yes. But even that – this we couldn't get.

Q: In all this time, do you remember having any contact with either the Germans, or any of the Poles, or the soldiers? I mean, did these – did any of these outsiders come into your world? No.

A: No, not at all.

Q: Not at –

A: It couldn't be. It couldn't – it couldn't happen, it couldn't be. The-They wou – th – our way of knowing things was through my mother. We used to go to the **Judenrat**, which was in the second town, just nearby, and to sit with them. The head of the **Judenrat** was also a me – a **Merin.** Probably a – I don't know even, he was certainly not a relative of – a near relative, but maybe he was a distant relative, this could well be. And she was meeting him, and he was telling her about what's

going on. Towards the end of July ’43, she came back home and she said, they am going to cancel this ghetto. And, you know, my father said, how do you know? What happened? She say, I have seen today that the Gestapo took all the members of the **Judenrat** somewhere away, and they – they didn’t come back. This must me – mean that they send them to **Auschwitz**. We already knew at that time about **Auschwitz**. Ha –

Q: And so they started to believe the man who had come to your home?

A: Yes, yes, at that time they already believed what’s going on there.

Q: And so, it’s about a year’s difference, isn’t it?

A: Yes, this was about –

Q: Didn’t you say he came at 1942?

A: Yes. And this was July ’43, when they – July ’43 already, it wa – it became clear what’s going on. Still tried to make normal life. I know – I remember my father, when we moved into the ghetto, my father tried to build a fence around the small piece of land which belonged to this – to the room which we had, because no Jew was allowed more than one room. So he built this, and I remember somebody coming over and said, are you crazy? They are going to kill off all of us. Why do you do it? Well, it was quite clear. When my mother said it, she said, we cannot

stay here. They will cancel this ghetto. And they – they decided to leave the ghetto, and try to escape into the woods.

Q: Did she know what was happening with her family from the village?

A: No.

Q: She had –

A: At that time, no.

Q: No.

A: There was no connection with the village, there was no way to know. But, we decided to leave, and we decided to leave on a Sunday where they – there's less guards, fewer guards around the ghetto. So we decided to – to leave on the first of August, Sunday, in the morning.

Q: 1943.

A: 1943.

Q: Just before your 10th birthday.

A: Before, yes. In the evening of the 31st of July, you know, I remember how I went to sleep and I put on my clothes and I put them neatly on the chair, I thought, to have tomorrow when we leave **[indecipherable]** what I decided to take, and they were put down here. In the middle of the night, the Germans came. This wen – shouting of the streets, the Germans are coming, the Germans are coming. And

Judenrein. Judenrein, they are taking everybody. It's not that they select people, some to come and some not, they are taking everybody. The same – so we be – we had no choice. Now, there were – it was impossible, because they put heavy guards around the ghetto. It was impossible to leave. We went down into what we called the bunker. The bunker, many families arranged some way out, to escape, because, if it was not the **Judenrein** and they were coming and taking, then they took anybody whom they found. They – they didn't look too much for it, but yes. So we went down into the bunker, and the bunker was a very good one. You had to go through a – through a cupboard like this, to move a drawer, and then to open another door like this, and went to go down over a ladder, and into the bunker. Very difficult, nobody could really – when you open the cupboard, you wouldn't see anything. So we went down. This was prepared for exactly such a case. It was prepared for four people. In a short time we found ourselves with 16 other people, and you couldn't say anything, I mean, all our family came, cause they knew that our bunker is the best. We stayed there for three days, probably the worst three days of my life. It was terrible. It was August, very hot, small place. It was –

Q: No toilet.

A: Of course no toilet, but there was no water in th-there. We didn't think about it. There was no water. There was no place to sit for everybody, you know? My father,

remember, was sitting on the ladder, which was taking down. The thirst was terrible. On the third day they understood how it's done. They came over there and they couldn't find the entrance into this, so they went down into the basement and started to break the wall. Soldiers came and start to break the wall. When they did it, and they opened the hole, there were my cousin, older than me by three or four years shouted we – we give in, we don't – we give up and we are – we are going out. So the soldier shouted, all right, how do we get in here? So he told him where to open it. Started to go out, and they took all of us to the place where we were waiting for the train to **Auschwitz**. It was terrible three days, really, it's not only – I tried once to go out, and it was quiet, to find water. And they couldn't, there was no water anywhere, they closed the water, the Germans. So there was no water anywhere. I looked **[indecipherable]**

Q: So you had gone out of the bunker into your old apart – into your old room?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: And did you remember seeing anything, or hearing anything –

A: It was a ground floor, I – I – I heard a cart on the street, so I looked out, and I looked behind it. It was a cart full of dead bodies. I remember the picture of it, was terrible.

Q: Was this the first time that you saw dead bodies?

A: Dead, yes, yes. There were so many of them, this I remember. Many, one on the other, on the other. But it were terrible three days. And then they were taken to the station, to the train station. It was – it was not the regular train station, it was a station which was made up for Jews, to take up the Jews. And we were waiting there surrounded by the German soldiers. And there my mother told me, you must run away, must run away. So I said, okay. I took my sister with me, and I broke out. There was a fence with – a wooden fence, so I could break up one place, and being a slim boy, could easily get through, and my sister was slim as I was. And we went through it. After a few minutes, when we were there hiding on the other side of the fence, I found out that we are in a German military camp.

Q: Oh, God.

A: And of course it took another 10 minutes or so, and the soldiers found us. But luckily, you know, both of us looked sympathetic, I would say.

Q: You're kids, you're kids.

A: Kids, and the soldiers didn't beat us or – as they would do otherwise, but they took us back, and they send us in. When I came over there I wanted to speak with my mother, but she said. when I was, not yet at her, she said, don't come to me, don't come to me, because us there will be, when they see that we are your parents, after you tried to run away. A second time, when we were – it was close and the –

the train was already coming in, I thought, that's the last chance that we have, and I tried it another time. And th-this time we succeeded. We went by, not far from the German watchman who was there. He – he was looking over the street on the other side. He didn't look anybody would walk nearby him, cause he wouldn't think that any Jew would do it. And this was just off the edge, where all the Poles were coming through. So, the only thing I felt was – my thought was only, how does it feel when the bullet would struck you – strike you. And so we – we could get out from there.

Q: And **Dina** was not crying, she was not –

A: No, no, no. No, no.

Q: She – she trusted big brother.

A: Yes. She n – she never. But once when I was talking about it with the scouts, and then they asked a lot of questions; one of them was, how did you go out your sister, how much did you quarrel, how much did you fight with her and so on? And I said, never. We never quarreled. We never was fighting. Not in that time, and not after this. And that's true.

Q: Can I ask – can I ask you too, how did your relation to your father change? Because it sounds wi – the last time we left it is before the war, and he wants one

thing for you and you want another. But certainly with the way things took, that was out of – that – that issue went off the table.

A: How right you are. How right you are, you know. That's exactly so. You know, for the first time in – in my life, my young life, I felt sorrow about my father, cause I felt how much he suffers. And for the first time in my life I came to him, I said, look, if you want to teach me religious stuff, I want you. Just say when, I am coming and learn it. First time. Cause he knew that I don't like.

Q: And how did he react to that?

A: He was – I think he was happy that he – he gave me lessons.

Q: Did you feel closer to him, besides having sympathy and seeing his sorrow, did – did you feel like he was closer to you, too?

A: Yes, I think so. I think so. For the first time that he really – I felt that he understands me better. But I certainly did understand him. I knew that he is suffering this. So we went – we left this place, and the two of us went to town. And I knew about the Polish woman who was the maid in my aunt's place before the war.

Q: Had you met her?

A: Y – I knew her well.

Q: You knew her well, okay.

A: Very well, even. She came from a village in **Poland**, and she was the only Polish woman whom I really knew. I didn't know anybody else. I went to her. And we stayed there for one and a half years.

Q: Wow.

A: We were hiding in a place what – what – there was a – it was one room when she lived where she lived, but there was a connection to a small room after this. We put a cupboard between the two, so anybody who came in has seen only one room, and we were in the second room. Second room was about this size, maybe a little smaller.

Q: So, was this the last time you saw your parents?

A: Yes, it was the last time. **[phone ringing]**

Q: Yeah. So this was the last time you saw your parents.

A: Yes, this was the last time I've seen my parents. I said the – this Polish woman, when – she was not at – at home, she was working in a German factory for ammunition. She was preparing the sandwiches for the workers, the bread wa – sandwiches were bread and jam, you know, and they – much di – that was her job. She was working there and when she came back home, she found us waiting for her out in the street. She was – I – I am not sure that she was very happy about it. I am certain that she was not. But she was shocked by th – us. And –

Q: How did she behave?

A: **[indecipherable]** you know, she behaved all right. She behaved as – as she should. Sh-She said to us, after a few days, look, she said, if you had come with your parents, I would never take you in. This would be impossible. But you came alone, you two, you will stay with me here. And she was frightened all the time, you know.

Q: Well, did she have a family, or was she living by herself?

A: She was single, but her family was in the village. The family certainly did not support her. One day when I asked her what would your family do if they would know that you keep Jews? So she said they would go to the Gestapo. They would go, she would – she lived after the war in a – **Italy**, and I came to visit her several times. One day when I came, she was sad. I said, what happened **Aniela**(ph)? A – said, my brothers came to **Rome** to see the Polish pope, and – you know, there was a Polish pope – pope, and they didn't call me. They didn't come to see me. I am here, not far from **Rome,** you know? Just imagine, all the time she was in **Italy**, she was sending parcels to her family, of fruits, of – usually of some –

Q: Of course.

A: **[indecipherable]** like this

Q: There wasn't – there was nothing good in – you know, there were no fruits, there was no citrus fruits, no nothing.

A: Yes, yes. She was sending it, every year she was sending it several times. And she say – sh-she was the one who taught me they would go and – and they'll report me to police, to the Gestapo.

Q: Did she tell you while you were living with her, or many years later?

A: At least twice. She was at that time telling me – no, I asked her, during the time was there, she said it. I thought maybe she's not right. We were lucky because we didn't have, you know, she couldn't – she had to pay on the black market to get some food for us. And luckily I knew where my parents – they told me before I left, they said, look, we put some money in this place. The money – and I knew where it is, and I told her. And said, I will never find it. You know, the way I explained to her. So we decided my sister would go. She doesn't look Jewish at all, and she – they will take – she – so she went with her. On the way – they passed a park or so on the way, when suddenly Polish kids started to shout, a Jewish girl, a Jewish girl. You know, there was –

Q: How do you say that in Polish?

A: **Żydówka**. And when – when they – she succeeded to hide, my sister, run away **[indecipherable]** somehow found – found a place to – to hide, until it became dark, and then they came back.

Q: Did they find the money?

A: No, they – they didn't go there, didn't go **[indecipherable]**

Q: They didn't – they didn't – didn't get there, yeah.

A: – was on the way to – to the ghetto. But then I sat down with her, I explained to her how to find it and she went and found it. It was 20 **Napoleons,** about – you know what a **Napoleon** is?

Q: Golden – was it a golden coin?

A: Golden coins with the head of the **Napoleon.** They were called **Napoleons** all over **Europe**. And she found them. She brought back 18. And I knew about it, it was 20. Now, years later, I asked her, at the end of the war I asked her, why did you take those two coins? So she said, I wanted to make **[indecipherable]** you know. And I said, well, that's – it was a side of – of somebody **[indecipherable]**. So, sh- she was –

Q: She could not resist.

A: She couldn't resist.

Q: What was her name?

A: **Aniela**(ph) **Sabatska**(ph). **Aniela**(ph) **Sabatska**(ph). She received righteous of the world.

Q: But during that year and a half, how did you feel in her one and a half rooms? How did you interact? How much of the outside did you see?

A: Not at all. We – we couldn't.

Q: You were just in that little tiny area.

A: Yes. There was no way – we couldn't talk loud in any ways, except – you know, and – and we couldn't make any noise. And we played. It was a game, an imaginary world in which the two of us lived. We're playing, all imagination. I remember she – one day she wanted to make a present to us, and she brought over paper figures for us to play, just to show that she wants to give us. And she was so angry because she found that we are not playing with this. And I couldn't explain to her, we are not playing –

Q: Paper dolls.

A: – paper dolls, or we are not playing anything which exists, we are playing something which does not exist, just an imaginary world. That's the only way that you can live in a place like this for so long as a child.

Q: Did you – did **Dina** cry, or did you cry at night –

A: No –

Q: – thinking about your parents?

A: – no, I don't think so. I never heard her crying and I was never crying. There was no way that –

Q: Did yo – were you thinking about your parents during this time?

A: Certainly thinking about it, especially when the war e-ended. On the 27th of January 1945, in this place there was a cousin of mine who – who stayed with her, much older than I am. He was maybe 15 years older than I was.

Q: He also stayed with **Aniela**(ph)?

A: Yes.

Q: Oh, so were you together, or was he in a separate –

A: We were all – yeah, he lived in the first room mainly, he didn't stay with us there.

Q: Oh, so were you together, or was he in a separate –

A: We were all – yeah, he lived in the first room mainly, he didn't stay with us there. On the 27th of January 1945, he woke me up at six o'clock in the morning, and he says, rise quickly. The Germans found us. And I looked through the window and I have seen a lot of soldiers there. And it was clear that they found us, and that's the end of it. And suddenly we see a **Jeep** passing by with a red flag, with the red army. So this was not the – these were not Germans, but Russians, and for the first

time. So we left a few days later, this place. Oh, and they found another apartment for us. We stayed with **Aniela**(ph).

Q: Can I ask this? In her one room, was she – did she have like a separate little house, or did she have one room –

A: No, no.

Q: – within an apartment building?

A: No, it was an apartment building with maybe six, seven apartments there. At least six, seven, maybe 10, even.

Q: Was it a courtyard as well, like you had?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: No. it was a entrance from the street. What my cousin did, he closed the entrance to the building. Was all the time kept locked. Nobody was there. And he – he destroyed all the other apartments so that nobody would move in. So there was anything which could be broken, he broke.

Q: So, in other words, **Aniela**(ph) lived in this apartment building by herself, with you.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: With the three of you.

A: Yes, until one family moved in, in spite of the ruined house, you know. And so we had to take care much more about it. For instance, in the winter of 1944, it was a bitter winter, but one day when they – she came back from work, the neighbors say to her, look, what's going on there? There was the chimney, there was steam from your chimney. And so she said, I left it, my mistake. Nobody would keep it, because there was not enough –

Q: Fuel for everything.

A: – fuel to run it. So nobody would leave it when you are not at home. But from that time we couldn't heat the room in the bitter winter, you know, because it couldn't – it would happen again, they would know that something fishy is going on there **[indecipherable]**

Q: Did you interact with your cousin much, when she was not there? I mean, were you then more together?

A: Yes, yes, I was, you know, sometimes when – he told me about the world. I didn't know anything about it.

Q: About the war?

A: About the world.

Q: Oh, the world.

A: About what's going on in –

Q: What's his name?

A: **Wolfe.**

Q: **Wolfe Merin**?

A: **Wolfe Schweitzer.**

Q: Uh-huh.

A: **Schweitzer**. Was –

Q: Can I ask an indiscreet question? Were they – was she a young lady who – were they together?

A: Yes, yes, she was – they were together, yeah.

Q: Did he come to her after she found – after you had –

A: He came probably a short time before we came, because he was caught by the Gestapo and accused of trading the points, you know, which were given for – for – for food.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And he was put, as they did it for a – before a court, which looked like any other court, except that they had only one sentence, this was the death sentence, and that's what he received, the death sentence for this. But a day later he ran away, he succeeded to flee from the prison, and he came to **Aniela**(ph), stayed there with her. And that's – after the war, this was the thi – like the third period, you know, once

the – once the war was over. I was still – I didn't learn in school at any time. And I was really lucky, because two or three months later, in – in April, actually two months later, in April 1945, my aunt came from **Russia.** She survived in **Russia,** she was one of the sisters of my father.

Q: Had she left for **Russia** –

A: In 1939 in August, just before the war. She said, I will not stay here.

Q: Interesting, interesting.

A: I'll not stay here waiting for the Germans. So that she decided to leave and run away.

Q: Did sh – how – I had a couple of questions here. Did she have stories of how she had been treated, and what had happened to her when she was in **Russia**?

A: Yes, she was – she succeeded to get through to **Lvov**. You know **Lvov** is today th – one of the three cities of **Ukraine**. And she was there, settled there and – but she lived in **Lvov** with thousands, thousands of refugees who came over there, and life was not good. She was a rich woman. She was otherwise not like the other brothers and sisters. And in **Lvov**, the rumors came in 1940 that it's not bad with the Germans. They didn't know anything about killing Jews. And they said, well, they are not very good, the Germans, but it's not that it's impossible to live with them. In – in April 1940, the Russians announced that whoever wants to go back to

the German side can do it, and they will help, they will make a train which will take them to the German side. She decided to go back, like another one or 2,000 people who came to the train. On a certain day they came to the train, and when they're sitting in the tain – train, the Russians closed the doors, and they said, you are enemy of the people, you want to go back to the Germans. You are all going to **Siberia.**

Q: And this is during the **Molovov-Ribbentrop Pact,** when they're friends?

A: This was after this.

Q: Oh, this was after this?

A: Yeah, the **Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact** was til the war, til the – til bast -- **Barbarossa**, til the attack of the Germans.

Q: Til 1941.

A: Til 1941. Til the 22nd of June 1941.

Q: Oh, and I thought you said it was in 1940 that she wanted to go back.

A: Yes, 1940.

Q: So it's – so it's while they're still friends?

A: Yes. **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact** was in 1939.

Q: Correct.

A: This was in 1940.

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Q: So that's why I'm saying, isn't it unusual –

A: There were still friends.

Q: – that while they're still friends, they're called enemies of the people, and taken to **Siberia**?

A: Don't worry, that's what they said, that's what they did. They took all of them to **Siberia,** all these who decided, according to their saying, and it really seemed unlikely that they will do anything, because they were friends. They took them all to **Siberia.** And many, many of them survived, because of this. But what she did, she decided we're not going to **Siberia**. On the way **[indecipherable]** and succeeded to flee from that train. They were stopping the train from time to time, once in a couple of days, and so – to supply, to buy some products, and that's what they did. And they went down and got back. And they li – stayed there, until in '41 the Germans came in. When the Germans came in, her husband was killed on the same thing. They went from house to house looking for communists and Jews and took them, and all the men were shot in the same thing. She told me how after a couple of days, she went to the Gestapo and told them look, my husband is in prison. Would you – I brought him a sweater because it's cold. And the German looked at it, gave it back to her. He doesn't need it. So she understood. She stayed with her son, they changed th – on false papers. Got an **I.D.** of a Polish woman and that's

what – what – what they did to survive. When she came back in April '45 – no, it was the first time, she said, I will take care of, we will not staying here with **Aniela**(ph) or with **Wolfe.** You will come with me. She had the son, the son survived with her and she really took very good care of – of me and in fact, she never let me feel that I am not her son, or **Dina** is not her daughter.

Q: I was going to ask, did she take **Dina**, too? Yes.

A: She – yes. We're all – we were three of us there like brothers and sister.

Q: And you stayed in **Bendzin**, you moved to **Israel**?

A: No, she moved to another town there, **Hoczew,** and this was the place where she lived before the war, not far from there, a more German town than ours, **Bendzin**. And we stayed there. In 1940 – in 1946, the chief rabbi of **Israel, Yitzhak Herzog**, came to **Poland,** and he had an agreement with the Polish government that he can take children up to the age of 14, if they are orphans, they will go with him to **Israel, Palestine** at that time. And so we joined this train. Went with him, but it was stuck in **Prague**, and then we went to **Austria**, where we had that distant relative of the new husband of my aunt. And they stayed – w-we stayed there for some time, decided to go back to **Poland** because you couldn't move on. And it was a camp of the **DPs** in **Linz.** The **DP** camps were run by the Americans, and by the **Joint.** So there were Jewish people of the **Joint** there wh-who were really helping us a lot.

And the Americans, they were running the places. And it was **Bindermichl**, and the other place in **Linz** was **Wegsheid.** Just these days I see in the newspaper a picture of **Wegsheid,** which was not far from there. So, we – we stayed there and came back to **[indecipherable].** When – already in 1945, we understood that our parents will not come back. You know, at the beginning, the first few months, e-every – everybody who knocking on the door, maybe they are coming back, or one of them is coming back. But towards April or May, it was clear that nobody would come back. In fact, I tried to find out what happened with them. I went to **Auschwitz**, cause that time I was 11, I went to **Auschwitz** with my cousin, tried to look there over this, the only thing I could find is in – in the gas chambers that was written the **kemar**(ph) – revenge, which they have written with their blood.

Q: Were there people, were there officials in **Auschwitz**? Was there anybody manning – I mean, I don't mean Germans, I mean, had anyone else come in, was the place empty, was it deserted?

A: It was deserted in that time. The-They opened it as a museum much later –

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: But at that time it was just deserted. You could come in, you could go in, look where – whatever you want, at wherever you want, and that's – that's what we did.

Q: And no one was – yeah, and no one was there keeping – you know, looking at the – whatever records they might have kept to say, okay, let's see, maybe you're – there was nobody there?

A: I – I wouldn't know it.

Q: Okay.

A: I wouldn't know it.

Q: You were 11 years old, also.

A: Yes, I wouldn't know it. The Russians came in on the same day, on the 27th of January '45,they came into **Auschwitz** –

Q: **Auschwitz**.

A: – the same day they came into our town.

Q: How did they behave? Did you have any interaction with the Russian soldiers?

A: Not too much.

Q: Not too much.

A: Not too much. My cousin left immediately, he had a – a red –

Q: Armband?

A: – **banderola**(ph) **–** armband, like this. And he went down. And I've seen the soldiers from the window, I've seen soldiers stopping him and talking with him, and shouting at him. And then somebody ordering him to take it off, so he took it off.

No, there was not much communication with the Russians. The Russians left **Auschwitz** also, very quickly.

Q: So they were on to **Berlin**?

A: Yes, they went on. This was the south, I believe, to **Berlin,** where **Zhukov** and his army was more to the north.

Q: That's right, that's right.

A: This was a southern army that moved out. The Poles didn't behave too well after the war, you know. I remember first time that I really went out, to the square of the city center, pole – position where a man stood at one of the windows and gave a speech about new **Poland**, and the communist **Poland**. They called it the socialist party, and the socialist **Poland.** And they said that the Russian promised that if they will behave really like true communists, they will change the name of the party from the socialist part of **Poland** to the communist party of **Poland**. Very like today that they say that. And I was standing there listening to him, together with thousands of Poles, when the woman said to me, you are Jewish? I said yes. She said, how do you survive? So I told her, a Polish woman helped us. She said oh God, she said, oh God. And a boy much older than I was, you know, heard it from **[indecipherable]** what Jew, you are a Jew? Ga – gave me a fist in my head, in my face. And you know, to me, then I understood that they don't like us too much. I

couldn't find a – a barber to – to make my head, which looked terrible, of course, after all these years. Nobody wanted to take me, when he understood that I am Jewish, yes.

Q: That's an awful lot for an 11 year old to have to look at, to deal with – 12 year old.

A: Yes, yeah. It was not nice. You know, at that time it was really – later on – I went to **Poland** again. I left in 1949 for **Israel,** when – when it was allowed, when the Polish government allowed the people to go out to **Israel**, only to **Israel.** But many years later I've been in **Poland**, just like eight or 10 years ago. So now they accepted me, now in a different way, because I came, they knew at the time a professor of ophthalmology and I immediately also invited a Polish ophthalmologist to come to **Israel** and I will help him for a couple of weeks to see the country, but maybe to learn about ophthalmology in **Israel.** And they were very happy about it. Made a dinner for me and so this was very nice. And I tried to think all the time, is there still anti-Semitism in **Poland**? And you know what? It changed completely. It became ridiculous. It's not that there is no anti-Semitism, but it's an anti-Semitism of – of a ridiculous sort. You could only laugh at it, you know? I remember my – a – a cousin of mine in **Israel** went to the town, to **Bendzin**, and he took pictures, video pictures, he had a – a team which **[indecipherable]** for him. And then he

asked people, he went to the school. The school exists, but it's not called **Furstenberg**.

Q: What happened to **Furstenberg**?

A: **Fursten**(ph) was killed by the Germans, like anybody else. It was – you know, they didn't kill people because they were poor or rich, they killed people because they were Jewish. He was Jewish, that was enough. He spoke at the school. They asked him to speak, which – so he spoke with them, and si – before I start my talk, who knows what was the name of the school before the war? Not one of them knew. Said, did you hear the name of **Furstenberg**? Not one of them knew. So he told them the history of the school and about. Then he went into a place that looked very similar to our house. So it's three buildings around a large courtyard. It was in another part of the city. I knew that there were two places like this. Ours was destroyed later, cause they put the – a road there. They built a road there. And the other place, he went there. And in both places there were Jewish – there only Jewish people living. And he went around, first in the main street of the city and asked people, remember the Jews who lived here? Nobody know. He went into this house, where only Jews lived, in all of the three buildings. And when they came out and they were standing around him, and he says to them, remember the Jews who lived here? Not one. You look at the people, he took pictures. Old people that certainly

lived there, you know, in the second World War. Nobody remembers. Then a dog passed by, and he looks at the dog, and the woman sticks out her head from one of the windows and calls, **Aaron, Aaron**. So he says to her, that's the name of the dog? She says yes. Why **Aaron**? So she says, **Aaron,** that's so that we remember the Jews who lived here. This was the first time that he found somebody who remembered the Jews, you know, through the dog. This is ridiculous. That's not the same anti-Semitism that frightened my parents and the Jews before the war, or even after the war, in the first years after the war. It – it was just same like before the war, in **Kielce**, the pogrom in **Kielce** where more than 40 Jews were killed in 1946.

Q: How do you explain that? How do you explain it?

A: You know, I'm not sure that I tried to think even about it. It certainly changed, there's no – today, it stopped at – it's something on a personal level, it's not – certainly not that **[indecipherable]** of a country.

Q: Did you feel when you were – when you were meeting with people, and they had this dinner, that there was a lack of sincerity? That there was a lack of understanding, of genuineness, that somehow or other you couldn't trust what it was that you were seeing?

A: That they could not trust?

Q: No, that you could not.

A: Well, may – may well be like this, yes. That – that I couldn't trust everything that was said to me. You know, after I invited the ophthalmologist, I got maybe three or four calls from the mayors of the townships of – which belonged to this area, and they were all at the dinner, five mayors, cause these were the places where Jews – Jewish people lived around, including **Sztemaszitsa**(ph), the – the village of my mother. And after I left, and I left the invitation for one of the **[indecipherable]** from **Dombrowa,** one of the fi – five townships. I got later maybe three or four calls from the mayors. Look, maybe you take them for three weeks instead of two weeks. And another one calls me, maybe you know, I have somebody else who may be better, maybe we'll take two ones, you know. **[indecipherable]** the Poles, one must understand it. I don't know if you read the book, it was **Michener**, was **[indecipherable] Poland.**

Q: No, but I heard of it, I know of it.

A: You know, when you read it, you – you read the history of a tragedy. The Poles suffered always, from the beginning. The Jews suffered more, but it was a tragedy for the Poles, what was going on there. The Swedes attacked them, I think it was the 17th century, 17th or 18th, I believe 17th century, and massacred the Poles. You know, they killed thousands, thousands of Poles. And if it wasn't the Swedes, then it was the Russians or the Germans, the Prussians, you know, all of the time. They

suffered a lot. And on the – on the personal level, they suffered from the system, it was a feudal system. Why are there so many Polish jokes, the Polack jokes in – in – in the **United States**, you know, because they came when the **[indecipherable]** was – was annihilated at the beginning of the 20th century, after the second World War, the end of the second World War, suddenly they could trave – they could g – and many of them traveled to the **United States**, they had relatives here or so – they came over here, most of them settled in **Chicago**, and it's not only they didn't know English, cause Ukraines also didn't know English when they came over, and –

Q: You're talking probably the first World War, yes?

A: Yes, first war.

Q: First World War, mm-hm.

A: Did I say second? No, first World War. And the Ukraines when they came over, they also didn't know English. They didn't know English, but they didn't know anything, they were uneducated. They didn't know to read and to write, most of them. It – and – because in the feudal system they couldn't go to school without permission to go to school was not given by the noblemen. **[indecipherable]** want the educated people here, I need workers here. And so, they **[indecipherable]** people like this, I think, always start trying to find the scapegoat. The scapegoat for that – you know, it was a good feeling that there is somebody who is inferior to

them. And for this they have to show that the Jews are inferior. And if they can kill the Jews, or you know, curse them or show their inferiority, then it gives them the superiority complex. I think that's the main reason for **[indecipherable]** anti-Semitism. That's it. I –

Q: Thank you.

A: – I have five minutes more? No.

Q: You have five minutes more, you have five minutes more. You've more minutes, if you want.

A: You know, if I divide my history, my story into four periods, the fourth period was different. That's th – that's the time when I came to **Israel**, and for the first time in my life I felt like equal with equals. There was no problem any more. I knew that when I go to school, I will not be chased up like in the Polish school where I remember very well. In mathematics, I'm very good in mathematics. I knew it, there was no doubt about it. But always I was given a very low –

Q: Grade.

A: – grade. And I couldn't understand it in that – in the last class when I was, I knew that I can get a grade which will not be enough to pass into the next class.

Q: So you're talking postwar, when you went to – postwar –

A: Postwar, 1949, before I left.

Q: Yes.

A: And I knew also that the teacher is anti-Semitic. A young woman, anti-Semitic. One day she came, and she said, whoever will – I'm giving here some exercises to do. Whoever will finish it the first will get a very good grade. A grade of very good. And she was – I knew, that's mine. I filled it out for it, I came much before the second one, to give it to her. And she didn't take it, she was sitting there, she didn't take it, she waited. Then another boy came after me, and she took his. I said, I was the first. No, no, he was the first. What can I do?

Q: Of course not.

A: And this happen – on the same day she gave another exercise and another exercise, and in all of them I was the first one of the whole class, by far, you know. And then she had no choice, so she gave me good, but not very good. She couldn't – you know, all this changed, of course. In **Israel** I was even. And maybe that's the best. I went to school of medicine, became a doctor, became an ophthalmologist, professor of ophthalmology, so I could devote a lot to teaching. I became a professor also here at the University of **Illinois**, where from time to time I have been there and I work there. And in **[indecipherable]** I did many things for humanity, I would say, you know. Like I went to **Africa** to work two years, with my family. My wife and the two kids, when they – **Zak**, my son, who works here in

[indecipherable] he was, at that time, five years old. And the – I went to work for two years.

Q: In what country?

A: In **Malawi.**

Q: In **Malawi**.

A: **Malawi** is southeast. And then I came back maybe 10 times to **Africa**, each time for periods of between three months to one month. And I liked it. It's only mi – maybe five years ago when I went back to **Rwanda** to operate, to operate people. And so there are, at least, 2,000 Africans who are walking around, who are walking around there seeing, just because I operated them, you know? So it gives you a good feeling. Maybe that's the – the revenge on the Nazis – Nazis. They not only didn't succeed to kill you, but also they couldn't prevent me, you know, doing things for –

Q: Others.

A: – humanity.

Q: Yes. They didn't take away your humanity.

A: Yes. Didn't stop me from doing it. I'm in the last nine years. I am in – a doctor, a specialist in **Saint John** Eye Hospital, which is an eye hospital in eastern **Jerusalem** that serves the Arab population of the **West Bank** and **Gaza.** Mainly it

serves the Arab population of **Jerusalem**, but also of all the complicated cases are sent over to me. So I see there a lot of complicated cases from the **West Bank** and from **Gaza** as well. And I continue with this, I like it, and –

Q: Do you – do you have more interaction beyond – beyond being a doctor to them? Is there any way of – of – I don't even know how to put the question. Do your Palestinian patients get to know you, do you get to know them in some ways?

A: Well, they know me and they like me, I've no doubt about it. You cannot get through a certain level. A couple – also because of different attitude and different way of thinking, you know? It was maybe three or four months ago, where I gave an injection into the eye of an Arab patient. It's a thing which I do a lot, I give at least 10 injections every week. That's the modern, new way to treat some eye diseases. And I gave him this injection. And he stands up and says, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. After four or five times I say to my nurse, look, he knows two words in English, thank and you. So tell him to speak Arabic, and you'll translate for me. So she said all right. And he say something in Arabic, and she translates it to me. He wants to bless you. And he wants to tell you – to wish that you will have four wives. So, you know, this was – so it is a different way of thinking.

Q: But he means well.

A: He means well, I have no doubt. I said they liked me there.

Q: Professor **Merin,** the last question I have before we end, unless there is something else that you would like to add to what we have talked about, is that my impression is that you didn't – you didn't have a chance to really be a child, except in very stolen moments, when you were growing up. That you had to grow up and be pretty strong, very early on. That's my impression. Is that true?

A: That's certainly very true. I – in fact, the only thing that – the only thing that I behaved like a child is the place in – in – in the hiding place, there, wa – how I played with my sister. And this was all about imaginary things with the – we put up. So this was one and a half years that we played around with this, lucky, because I think that allowed me to live normally, almost, at least from th-the – the point of view of my soul, you know, about – which was a chil – child's soul at that time, you know, at the – this was only one and a half years, just at the time when it was the worst time for me. You know, li-living without my parents, living in a place like this, in a closed place like this, and living on very poor food. Just in that time, I think I felt a child at that time. Just playing around with all this, and –

Q: In – in these circumstances –

A: – I think this was lucky, yes, this was lucky. I think it happened also with the other children, who survived at that time, that they – they survived because they played the imaginary plays, you know? And this kept them alive.

Q: When you had your own children, did you play with them more because – because of that? Did you – did – was there anything from this entire history that showed up when your children were the same ages that you –

A: I never – I never made such decisions, but yes, the truth is that it was like this. You know, you are all the time – I was already a doctor. I – I married when I was a student, and I was a doctor when I had children already. And in **Africa** when they came to – with me to **Africa**, and there was not a night, unless I was busy in the hospital in the evening, was not a now – a night that I didn't sit down with them for half an hour at least, and tell them a story. All imaginary stories, you know. But they still remember it day – today. My son here, well, I think he told to his children already, some of the stories I was telling them at the time. All right.

Q: Thank you, thank you.

A: You're welcome.

Q: This concludes our United States **Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with Professor **Merin** on April 19th, 2009.

Conclusion of Interview