

Unauthenticated

Interview with Philip Goldstein
June 2, 1992
Chevy Chase, Maryland

NOTE: At Mr. Goldstein's direction, the original transcript has been completely revised and some of the statements cannot be found on the interview tape.

- Q: The date is June 2, 1992. We're speaking with Mr. Philip Goldstein. Mr. Goldstein, could you please tell me your name and what you were called during the war, your date of birth, your place of birth and then anything you possibly can about your childhood, growing up in Poland.
- A: I am Philip Goldstein, formerly Fishel Goldstein, born in Radom, Poland on January 12, 1922. I was the youngest of five children, four brothers and one sister, born to a family of artisans. My father was a custom tailor, his brother was a furrier, his father, uncles and cousins were furriers. I started parochial school when I was about three years old. While accompanying my mother, who took lunch to my brothers in cheder, I didn't want to go home, and that's how my parochial education started.
- Q: Would that be a yeshiva?
- A: No, no .A cheder. At the age of about six or seven, I entered a Jewish secular school which had a double curriculum, a complete Polish curriculum plus a Judaic curriculum of Hebrew, Yiddish, the Pentateuch, Rashi, Jewish history and so on. I was there up to the age of ten when I entered a Polish public school for Jewish children. I graduated at fourteen, which was the end of compulsory education under the Polish school system. At that age I started to work as an apprentice in my father's tailor shop. My heart was not in it, for I would rather spend my time reading books, and I did spend a lot of time reading in the beautiful park we had in the city of Radom. My sister had her own dressmaking shop and my oldest brother worked for my father. My father also employed a journeyman in addition to myself as an apprentice. The next brother was a printer; he was an active member and leader in the Zionist movement, Hashomer Hatzair, in Radom. At the age of 20, he left Radom and went to Kibbutz Hachshara, which was the preparation for kibbutz life in Palestine.
- Q: Was your father religious though?
- A: The parents were religious. My mother was very religious. My father was religious in the sense that he prayed every day and went to Sabbath services at his congregation and so on, but that was the extent of his religious practices. He was observant; the children were not. We were all secularly inclined. However, we followed our father to services on high holidays, and I did carry his tallith to the

congregation every Saturday until I was about 12 years or 13. That was about the end of it. After my Bar Mitzvah, my religious education came to an end.

Q: Well, you had a kosher home?

A: Oh, yes. You hardly found any Jewish homes that weren't kosher. That was part of a way of life. We never ate out. Even though our city was fairly sizeable for Poland, having about 100,000 people, and a varied industrial base, nevertheless, the idea of eating out was not a way of life as we knew it in the West. I left my hometown at the age of 20 when I was taken to Auschwitz, and up to that time I had never eaten out in a restaurant. We had eaten out at parties, at other people's homes, but never at a restaurant. My next brother was employed in a commercial establishment. He was the only one who, at the end of 1939, escaped to the eastern part of Poland, which was occupied by the Soviets.

My mother was the oldest in a family of eight children and my father was the second in line in a family of six children. All together, our family consisted of, in addition to our own household, of eleven households, with eleven uncles and aunts, their respective spouses and with 25 first cousins. One of my mother's brothers lived in the U.S.A. since the 1920's. Of the entire family in Europe, only three first cousins survived, and all three came from the same household. Of the remaining ten households, not a trace was left. From our own household, in addition to myself, my brother, who spent most of the war years in the gulag, in the Arctic, returned after the war. He lives in Europe now.

Q: What did you do -- did you have any other interests? You were involved in the Zionist movement? Did you have any hobbies?

A: Yes, yes. My brother was one of the leaders in the Zionist youth movement. I joined this group when I was about ten years old. My chief hobby, from very early on, was reading. We had a very extensive library, the second largest in town, which was a part of our organization. It was called the I.L. Peretz Library and I exchanged books there every time that the library was open, which was three or four times a week. I stayed up reading to the early hours and used a kerosene lamp or candle instead of the ceiling light so as not to disturb my two brothers who slept in the same room.

Q: Were these mostly Yiddish books?

A: No, mostly Polish, some were Yiddish. I preferred reading in Polish, but I was articulate in Yiddish as well; however, there weren't as many Yiddish books to choose from. We read mostly Polish, but our spoken language was mostly Yiddish. Yiddish was a living medium then, and not the linguistic curiosity to which it has been reduced in our day.

Q: Would it be Polish literature or other literature in translation or Jewish books in translation or what?

A: Well, you could get everything you wanted. I read mostly Polish translations of French, German, Russian and American literature, as well as some Polish and Yiddish works in the original.

In 1939, at the outbreak of the war, my older brother, Moshe, was mobilized. Since he had served in the Polish army and was released in March of 1939, he was subject to the general mobilization. He reported to his regiment and was lucky that he didn't become a POW. He was able to escape capture as a POW and return home six weeks after he left. Of course, we didn't know what had happened to him throughout this period. Subsequently, he had become a very active member in the underground Hashomer Hatzair movement in Radom, and our home became the contact place for couriers from Moscow. Polish ladies, as well as members of the Hashomer Hatzair leadership in Warsaw, came. Mordecai Anielewicz, the leader of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, who perished in 1943, was our guest during the first and second Passover seder in 1941. He stayed in a furnished room establishment in our courtyard during a mission to Radom, having traveled on Polish papers from Warsaw via Lodz and Czestochowa. He didn't look Jewish and had no trouble traveling on Polish papers. While in Auschwitz, I didn't know who was in the leadership of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Even those rounded up from the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto, who came to Auschwitz-Birkenau via Majdanek in the early summer of 1943, had no idea of who was in the leadership. It was only after the war when I came across a monograph about the uprising, and recognized Anielewicz from the picture on the front page, that I found out about his role. There were other people from Warsaw who came to our house who were involved in the first armed action in the Warsaw Ghetto in January 1943, Josef Kaplan among them.

My brother, Moshe was taken in the early morning hours of the 28th of April 1942 and executed. I was in hiding. My entire family was put under house arrest and I had to surrender. By the delayed action of this process, I escaped a bullet in the neck. I was taken to headquarters of the security service and put into a large shed that was full of Jews from our ghetto who had been there since the early morning hours. We were shipped out the next morning, April 29, 1942, and arrived in Auschwitz past midnight.

Q: What went on between '39 and '42? What were you doing? Were you still working or ---?

A: Yes. I was the youngest. Every able-bodied Jewish male from the age of 16 to 60, had to work at least one day on assigned places of work that the Jewish community, and later on the ghetto community government, administered. They had to send out forced laborers so to speak, to various posts that the Germans had designated; military posts, and a variety of other assignments,, doing all sorts of

work -- unloading, loading, digging ditches, you name it. There was hardly any kind of work that we weren't assigned to do. Being the youngest, I took the place of my father as well as of my older brother, so I would end up working almost two or three days a week. I didn't mind, I'd rather do it than have my father, who was in his mid-to-late fifties and ill, do hard labor. My oldest brother had to help my father so I took his place as well. In 1940, that is August of 1940, almost all able-bodied young Jewish males received orders to report for shipment to forced labor camps on the German-Soviet border in the district of Lublin to dig anti-tank fortifications. I was the only one in the family who was caught in the net. It turned out that if you didn't report, you simply didn't go; they didn't come after you. But if you did report, you were trapped. Several hundred of us left Radom, perhaps four or five hundred men. Altogether there were thousands of young Jewish men from various parts of the country congregated in several forced labor camps stretched along a section of frontier land that ran between two rivers, the Bug and the San. Our camp was in Cieszanow, where we dug anti-tank fortifications along a given section of frontier. That was my introduction to forced labor under SS rule. We left dead inmates at the work site every day. They were simply shot at random and buried in the woods and covered up with moss, so that one couldn't even find their graves, for there were no markers left. This went on until about the end of October when suddenly we were marched out of Cieszanow and taken to Belzec, from where, by rail, we were transported to Krasnik, in the District of Lublin. We spent the whole night in a courtyard where the Jewish community's council was located. I will never forget the kindness of the town's Jewish people who practically showered us with food and drink. In the afternoon we were marched out, under guard, to the town of Annapol and handed over to a German private firm to build highways. We were not under any military supervision, but just worked as civilians. We discovered soon that if you go away and don't come back, you're not missed. Several of us decided to start on our way home the next morning. We sold whatever clothes we could spare in order to get a few zlotys for food and passage money for the trip. We marched 16 kilometers that morning and crossed a guarded bridge that spanned the Vistula River, and within two hours were in the next town. We spent the rest of that day going from small town to town, riding in horse-drawn carts belonging to Jews engaged in either transporting people or goods. After darkness, we found ourselves as "passengers" on such a cart, sharing the space with a load of grain that the owner smuggled into the city of Radom, traveling through forests all night. Not only were we in violation of the after-darkness curfew, but also sitting on "contraband". Had we been stopped, it would have meant the end of us all. We arrived in Radom the next morning after an absence of two and a half months. That was my introduction to camp life, and in a way it helped me later on. When I arrived at Auschwitz, unlike many others, I was not totally surprised by what awaited us, even although the level of raw brutality in Auschwitz-Birkenau was uniquely evil. In retrospect, from what I have learned in the past century, I can state without hesitation, that in the entire universe of evil that was Nazi-occupied Europe, there was no place that could match the hell of Birkenau in its first year of existence. We walked the three kilometers from Auschwitz to Birkenau on

May 1, 1942, and there were one thousand young and middle- aged men in our transport. Within one month most of them were dead. By the end of about two months, most of those still alive were the ones who survived the camp -- there were fifteen of us. Allow me to track back a bit in time -- I have a reason for doing so. In early 1942 I came down with typhus. There were many typhus cases in the ghetto. Normally typhus is survivable by young, healthy people, even without any medical help as long as there is water to drink, because one can't eat anyway in a state of very high fever. I had developed some complications and hemorrhaged all night. We lived in the ghetto under strict curfew conditions and had no access to doctors or drugstores. My brother risked his life to go outside the ghetto to an apothecary in order to get some medication, which turned out to be the wrong one, and it nearly poisoned me. The doctor who attended me was sick and he didn't know the seriousness of the problem. My brother, together with one of our neighbors, searched for a doctor half the night until they found one. He realized that I was in a bad way for it was the third or fourth case in town that winter of typhus with such complications, and no one survived the hemorrhaging. He plainly said, "There's nothing I can do, if you have some cognac, give it to him." He thought I was out of it, but I was still conscious and I remember the stupidity of his suggestion. This was a ghetto in Poland in 1942 and he expected us to have, or be able to get, cognac in the middle of the night. In the morning my doctor came and ordered a transfusion but there was no way to find a donor who had my blood type. I was supposed to be taken to the hospital for the procedure, but luckily someone decided that I couldn't possibly survive the trip, since it was a very cold winter day, and my blood pressure was extremely low. Instead, the ghetto hospital sent a surgeon, accompanied by a laboratory technician who used some hand held dish for typing the blood of several volunteers, including my brother Moshe. I remember the technician telling the surgeon that none of the blood tested matched mine. Nevertheless the surgeon decided to use my brother's blood for there was no time to lose and he told my parents that the risk must be accepted. Transfusions were given directly from donor to recipient via some tube contraption connecting their veins. My parents were standing over my bed knowing very well that any moment now, should my body reject the donor's blood, their youngest son will be dead within minutes. The doctor kept asking me, how I felt and I said, I feel warm. That's a good sign, he responded. He finished the transfusion and I was saved. He came back eight days later to take out the stitches and he couldn't believe his own eyes that I was alive. I still have the marks of those stitches on the inside of my right arm. He suggested that I come to the hospital after I get well to be examined thoroughly to find out how I managed to survive that ordeal. It was the same brother whose blood saved me, who was shot dead two months later, when I was taken to Auschwitz. As it turned out, had I not had typhus at home and developed immunity, there would have been no chance in the world for me to have survived Birkenau in 1942.

Q: Can we ask a question, Susan did ----.

(S.B.) Did you ever consider escaping rather than returning to the ghetto, after you had been in the labor camp?

A: When we were in the labor camp, i.e., in the fall of 1940, there were no ghettos yet in most of the General Government of Poland. The ghettos there were formed in the spring of 1941. Except, of course, for the city of Lodz, where the ghetto was formed in early 1940, because Lodz was incorporated into the Reich, (i.e. the city of Lodz and the entire province) and the city of Warsaw, where the ghetto was formed in October or November of 1940. Yes, it was a good question. Some people escaped, it was not too difficult to escape across the border which consisted of a simple barbed wire which wasn't electrified. Of course, if an inmate was caught before he reached the no-man's land he would be shot. On the way to work, at some points, we almost brushed against the barbed wire fences. We saw the Soviet guards patrolling. Some officers came close to the fence and talked to us. I remember there was one officer who spoke Yiddish to us. He was a Soviet Jewish captain. I wanted to escape, some of my friends did. They were all caught by the Soviet guards, every single one of them. Once you escaped across the fence, you had to cross a stretch of no-man's land of perhaps 50 feet of terrain to reach the Soviet fence. In most instances, the German guards couldn't see, when one forced the fence, either by crawling under it, or by spreading the strands of wire and going through it. The guards were too thinly spread out. However, the escapees were spotted while walking or running through the neutral no-man's land. Since the guards couldn't shoot at them, they fired rounds in the air, thereby alerting the Soviet border guards who apprehended them. Even though, the Soviets knew that the escapees were Jewish inmates of forced labor camps, running for their lives from the Nazis, they were treated as if they were spies. Every single one of them was interrogated in the nearest town of Rava Ruska, imprisoned and eventually sent to the northern gulags. Ironically, through this act of callous and unconscionable mistreatment at the hands of the Soviet police apparatus, most of the escapees were saved; for had they been left in the Soviet-occupied Polish territories, they would have been killed a year later when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union and occupied those territories. I wanted to escape from the labor camp to join my brother Jechiel, who at the time lived in Lvov, no more than about 100 km south from our camp. I had no notion under what ghastly conditions he lived in Lvov as a refugee. However, I received a postcard from home in which my brother Moshe informed me that Jechiel sent a postcard home from some rail station on the old Polish-Soviet border. In the card he told us that he is in transport, forcibly evacuated from Lvov, and going either to the Far East or to the Caucasus. Well, he wound up in the far North, hundreds of kilometers north of Archangelsk. That postcard was dated July 1940. In the summer of 1940, the Soviet authorities rounded up all Polish-Jewish refugees under their jurisdiction who did not apply for Soviet citizenship, and shipped them to the northern gulags. That covered the vast majority of refugees. Once I found out that my brother was no longer in Lvov, I had no great desire to risk an escape attempt to face an unknown fate alone. I was too young then. Whether I would have been better off or not is hard to say. The chances are that I had as

good a chance to survive as to perish there. About half the people perished in the Soviet camps. However, I didn't escape and returned home to face the real test of fending for myself only one and a half years later, when I wound up in Birkenau. The last time I saw my parents and my family was on April 28, 1942. The liquidation of the ghettos in Poland and the annihilation of the Jewish population there began in the summer of 1942. In some areas, it started earlier. So about three or four months after I was shipped to Auschwitz and my brother executed, my family, that is my father, my mother, my sister and the entire extended family were shipped to and annihilated at Treblinka. Treblinka became the killing field of the Jews from the ghettos of the towns and cities in the districts of Warsaw and Radom. In addition, of course, to devouring transports of Jews from all over Europe. My personal saga began with my arrival at Birkenau. My experience at the main camp in Auschwitz lasted only about thirty-six hours, enough time for the conversion of civilians into prisoners. But Birkenau was hell. Time was not conceived in terms of months or years but in terms of days. If one survived the day, one achieved the unlikely. If one survived a month, one achieved the impossible. When new prisoners arrived in the fall of 1942, and I told them that I had been there six months, they found it unbelievable, because most new arrivals, by the time they got oriented and realized where they were, which usually took a day or two, became aware of the fact that they won't survive too long. Later on, it became a little easier but in 1942 was an indescribable hell. We didn't even know upon arrival that Birkenau had just started to become the crown jewel of the Nazi killing machine of European Jewry. It took us several months to find out exactly what was going on right there.

Q: Did you know that they were killing people in those places?

A: No, no. We didn't know. A couple of weeks after we arrived, some strong people from our transport were selected to work in the Sonderkommando, but we had no idea what was going on. We thought that they were put to work burning the bodies of prisoners who were killed or died in the camp, since every day there were heaps of dead bodies in front of each barrack. A barrack that counted twelve hundred prisoners on Sunday would be half empty by the next Sunday. They would usually combine the contingents of the two half empty barracks into one, and use the empty barrack for a new transport. We didn't know that there are transports arriving from the outside world, i.e., from ghettos, and internment camps in Western Europe, bringing families of men, women and children. It took us months before we realized that. It was well concealed and there's no wonder that the surrounding world didn't know, because we, who were that much closer, didn't know at first. But once we found out, we understood where the trucks filled with people, were going to. For about a year, in fact almost exactly a year, from March '42 until March '43, there were no crematoria in Birkenau. The gassing took place in an abandoned farmer's cottage, the inside of which I had a chance to see in 1944, while the burial and later on, the burning of the bodies took place in pits adjacent to the cottage and surrounded by woods.

The trucks were loaded at the Auschwitz railroad camp and traveled the two miles to the gas chamber, passing the road that surrounded the Birkenau camp complex. We sometimes saw the trucks from inside the camp, and occasionally passed them by on the road on our way to work. Most of my work, and the work of people around me, was involved in enlarging the camp. It was an enormous universe of camps which could, by the middle of 1944, accommodate close to a quarter of a million prisoners. My job throughout the spring and early summer of 1942 was digging the foundations for crematorium one. By mid-summer of 1942, they had some crazy idea of separating a group of about 800 young Jewish prisoners, from 16 to 25 years of age, and forming a masonry school to teach us how to become bricklayers. I don't know what they had in mind for the plan turned into a fiasco. Not one of us eventually worked as a bricklayer. Many of the 800 died of typhus during the summer anyway, i.e., they were selected to go to the gas chamber after contracting typhus, but the few who survived were helped by the fact that they didn't have to work outside in the heat of summer. With the rations that we received, compounded by the lack of water, hard labor, sleepless nights and beatings, one did not last long. We were lucky that during a crucial period in the summer, we were indoors in barracks receiving instruction on how to lay bricks. But it didn't prevent the SS from performing selections among us. They took place every week. Those who looked weak or showed signs of illness or had abscesses or scars were selected to go to the gas chamber. By the fall, the masonry school (Maurerschule) ceased to exist. Some of the remaining youngsters were sent to Auschwitz to work, and I was among those assigned to a work commando in Birkenau. The same kapo for whom I worked earlier returned from the Auschwitz sick bay, where he was confined with typhus, and was given a new work crew to dig foundations and help in the construction of crematoria three and four. He recognized me and several others, and we became part of a group of 100 workers who worked for him until the spring of 1943. Only a handful among the original one hundred survived the winter. Our last job under his command was to dig the foundations for the sauna. One day in late April, I had a near fatal accident. I was hit by an empty truck. At the time, German tractor cabs are usually pulled two or three trailers. After the bricks were unloaded, I closed the side lid of the first trailer but the German truck driver did not see me and he started the engine. I was caught between the first and second trailers and thrown into the ditch. Had I fallen under the wheels, I would have been dead or completely maimed. I was so stunned that I couldn't get up after regaining consciousness. They improvised a kind of stretcher from some boards and carried me back to camp. Now carrying back dead or near-dead bodies from work sites to the camp was a common sight. Each work detail that returned from work to camp invariably carried one or more dead bodies but they were stretched out. Here I wasn't dead or near dead. I simply couldn't walk. I was sitting up on this makeshift stretcher and looked like a Roman proconsul being carried by four people on their shoulders. There was only one witness who remembered that very unusual sight; he died in Canada a few years ago. I was lowered down in front of my barrack where the whole contingent was assembled for roll call, and permitted by the barrack elder to sit on the ground while the counting took place.

Afterwards, I was picked up by a strong Belgian fellow who carried me to my third tier bunk. The next morning, with the support of two men, I made it to the doctor to be examined. If one didn't go out to work, or report sick, one's life was in mortal danger. There was no third choice -- it was either work or death. The kapo came with me, because it happened on his watch so he was sympathetic. By that time he had known me for about a year and in some way acted as my protector. He helped me to the sick bay and we met the chief camp doctor who was a Polish prisoner and former colonel of the Polish army. He should have been tried and convicted after the war as a war criminal. I thought that he was dead but discovered only a couple of years ago that he was tried in Poland sometime after the war and was let go for lack of evidence. He would simply assault patients who came to him to be examined and he also conducted selections on his own, sending Jewish prisoners to the gas chambers. His name was Zenkteler. He treated me more or less, correctly. He examined me and said there's nothing he can do and that there is nothing wrong with me. But since I came and he knew that I didn't try to shirk work because the kapo was with me, he gave me a couple of days of what was referred to in German as *schonung*, meaning rest, at the sick bay, which was barrack no. 7. That barrack was an assembly point for Jewish prisoners who reported sick throughout the entire week. On Tuesdays, the trucks would come and take most of them to the gas chambers. From the very beginning, barrack no. 7 served that function, i.e., as a way station from camp to the gas chambers. The moment I crossed the camp road (I remembered it as a road, but when I visited there this past September, I realized that it was more like a wide path than a road) and passed one of the little earth and brick bridges that connected the main camp road to the respective sides of the camp which were separated from the road by ditches; something happened to me: I suddenly became able to stand on my own feet and asked my two companion, who helped me, to let me walk to no. 7 by myself. In retrospect, it is obvious to me that my inability to walk was a psychosomatic phenomenon. It was a result of the shock received during the accident. My sudden ability to stand on my own feet must have resulted from the realization that I had better not walk in sick to barrack no. 7. I met people there whom I had known since the beginning, a couple of them came with me in 1942, and they worked there as orderlies. The next morning, I was discharged, and a few days later was transferred to barrack no. 16 and thereby gained the assignment to work in the "Canada" work detail. Luckily my work was inside the barracks sorting goods and I didn't have to go to the rail siding to meet arriving transports. That work ended after four weeks when I developed an infection on my face and was admitted to the sick bay in barrack no. 8. The fact that I was admitted to sickbay no. 8 and not to no. 7 was in itself a break for which my cousin was responsible.

Q: Can I stop you? I need to flick the tape over.
(End of Side A, Tape 1 in original transcript.)

A: In early 1943, there were two sick bays in the old camp of Birkenau, in addition to the main infirmary to which Jewish prisoners had no access. Of the former two,

one was barrack no. 7, which I described above, and the other was barrack no. 8 which admitted some Jewish prisoners. To get me there required a little influence in the right place. Although my cousin was surgeon there, he couldn't simply admit me. I had to be assigned there by the camp's administrative office, and that's where his connections helped. Patients there weren't subject to regular selections to the gas chambers and usually stayed there until pronounced fit to return to the regular barracks. He succeeded in treating me for my infection, and after three weeks, I got my first shave, but my face was still full of scarred tissue. It took more than two years before the scar tissue completely disappeared. A few days after transferring out of the sick bay, the old camp for men in Birkenau was evacuated and it became part of the enlarged female camp. The men moved to one of the newly finished wooden barracks camps, called "D Lager" or Camp D. That happened in June of 1943. For the next nine months or so, I went from work detail to work detail, including work inside the barrack, until in April 1944, I was recruited to work in the "Sauna" -- the more correct designation being disinfection facility, where civilians were transformed into prisoners. I worked there from April of 1944 until November when the size of the crew operating the facility was drastically reduced and the surplus sent back to Camp D. Birkenau was no longer the destination of incoming transports nor of prisoners transferred from other camps. The last victims of its killing machine were transports from Slovakia and Theresienstadt Ghetto, in addition to Birkenau inmates whose fate was sealed by the last mass selections that took place in the fall of 1944. The "sauna" facility abutted the road leading from the railroad ramp to the crematorium complex no. 3 and 4, and we had the unfortunate and heart rending experience of being witness to daily processions of thousands upon thousands of men, women and children marching past us to the gas chambers. The marching columns were no more than about 200 yards from their destination, but what is still etched in my memory is that the faces of the about-to-be murdered people betrayed only fatigue, perhaps confusion, but no comprehension of their imminent doom. Between April and the end of summer, several hundred thousand Hungarian Jews plus countless others from various parts of Europe, walked this stretch of road without realizing that it is their last walk.

Q: Are there any things specific, incidents or episodes that you remember from this period?

A: I remember far too many episodes but I cannot think of any specific one which would, or should, take precedence over all others, hence, the choice is difficult, especially in an extemporaneous setting. We could sit here for days and tape without a stop, and not exhaust the reservoir of my recollections of this period, let alone the well of accumulated experiences of my three year sojourn in Birkenau.

By way of concession to your inquiry, allow me to add the following: what has burdened my memory foremost, and is forever etched in my consciousness, despite the lapse of nearly half a century, is the daily procession of thousands of

people, marching past the “sauna” on their way to the gas chambers, and the sight of smoke coming out of the crematoria chimneys shortly afterwards.

However, one occurrence which has since become grist for the mills of Holocaust researchers, namely the uprising of the Birkenau Sonderkommando (crematoria crews) in October of 1944, took place within a stone’s throw of the “sauna” facility and I would like to register my recollection of the event within the framework of this interview.

Q: Was that Greek, was that run by the Greeks?

A: No! To my knowledge there were no Greek Jews among them, or at most, very few. The old guard, i.e., the cadres consisted mainly of Polish Jews, plus some French Jews and others. During the late spring of 1944, newly arrived Hungarian Jews were conscripted to work in the Sonderkommando because the size of the crematoria work details almost tripled at that time. From its very inception in the spring of 1942, the Birkenau Sonderkommando crews were subject to periodic liquidations. The first total liquidation took place in December 1942, when the approximately 500 strong crew was murdered. The first job of the new crew, selected the evening before when the Birkenau camp was subject to a strict curfew, was to dispose of the bodies of their predecessors.

The next sizeable liquidation took place in November 1943 when a part of the Sonderkommando was transported to Majdanek, allegedly for work in the crematorium there, but once in Majdanek, they were put to death. The events leading to their death in the Majdanek gas chamber were confirmed by members of the Majdanek crematorium crew when they arrived in Birkenau in July 1944, after Majdanek was evacuated.

By early fall of 1944, when Birkenau no longer functioned as a mass killing machine, the SS began the process of thinning out the ranks of the Sonderkommando. The first victims were several hundred men from the crew of crematorium no. 3. They were brought to the sauna for disinfection and that was the first time that I came face to face with, and talked to, members of the Sonderkommando. They were told that they were being transferred to another camp. The disinfection process was used as a subterfuge to lull them into believing the deception. They weren’t deceived, and were aware of their situation. From the sauna they were taken to Auschwitz where they were put to death in the old gas chamber. When, on October 6, the order to assemble came for the rest of the crematorium no. 3 crew, they refused and barricaded themselves inside the crematorium living quarters. They put their straw mattresses to the torch and exchanged fire with the SS guards outside, using the few small weapons in their possession. The guards pretty soon received reinforcements from the SS barracks that were located not far away. When it was over, crematorium no. 3 remained a gutted shell and the several hundred prisoners inside, all dead.

The burning of the facility and the sound of the firefight was construed by the crew of crematorium no. 1 as a signal that the expected uprising has begun. After throwing their German kapo into the burning furnace, they cut the barbed wire that enclosed the crematorium and dispersed in the direction of the Vistula River. The SS gave chase and every single one of the several hundred prisoners was hunted down and killed. Several days later the crew of crematorium no. 2 was gassed and all that remained of the approximately 1,500 strong Birkenau Sonderkommando was the crematorium no. 4 crew of less than 100 men, who at the time were barracked within the main camp.

Following the events described above, crematoria nos. 1,2 and 3 were blown up and dismembered. Crematorium no. 4 was left intact until January 18, 1945, the day of the final evacuation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex. An attempt was made to separate the remaining members of the Sonderkommando, but in the haste of the overall and sudden evacuation, they managed to get intermingled with the general camp population and share their fate and survival chances in the ensuing months ahead. I was told after the war that about 30 or 40 of them survived the ordeal of evacuation and death marches.

Crematorium no. 4 was blown up on January 18, and I subsequently learned that the demolition was only partly successful.

I myself was assigned to a work detail in late November – early December, 1944, to break up the concrete floor of the crematorium 3 gas chamber. We used hammers and pickaxes for the job. During our work, we found many pliers that were used by the crematoria crews to pull out gold teeth from the mouths of the gassed victims. The unbelievable circumstances of this assignment did not escape me at the time for I was the only one among the prisoners in that work detail who worked at digging the foundation and at the construction of the very same crematorium two years before, and lived long enough to be present at, and participate in, its demolition.

I recall one incident during the uprising which in retrospect fills me with terror. While the road outside the sauna building was teeming with SS guards and officers running on foot and on any conveyance they could find including bicycles, in the direction of crematorium 1 where the breakout took place, we in the sauna received the dreaded order, “Alle Juden eintreten”, i.e., all Jews fall-in. We assembled in the courtyard, separated from the non-Jewish members of the work crew, and watched with horror, and envy, the satisfaction on the faces of the latter that they are lucky enough not to be Jews and not to have to share our foreboding of doom, and doom was exactly what we expected at the time. We never found out the reason for our being ordered to assemble, but were greatly relieved when we were dismissed later on. It was the last time in my incarceration that I was subject to that blood-chilling fear produced by an order for Jews to assemble separately.

I went back to Birkenau this past September, my first visit since I left the camp in January 1945, and I was overwhelmed by the desolateness of the place. Where crematorium no. 1 stood, there are only a few slabs of concrete sticking out of the ground and a commemorative plaque affixed to a stone telling what took place there. Only the brick barracks of the original camp remain while the hundreds of wood barracks were allowed to disintegrate or taken apart for firewood. The brick chimneys of the latrine stood out ghostlike and are the only remainder of a past to which they bear witness.

I was accompanied on my trip by a friend from Warsaw. It was during the late morning, on a Saturday, and the two of us were the only ones there. In that huge complex of former camp there wasn't another human being in sight. There was an eeriness in the absolute silence that pervaded this greatest of killing fields of all time. The eeriness became more intense for me when I juxtaposed this silence of the grave against my recollections of the teeming scores of thousands of prisoners, who at any time between 1942 and 1945, occupied these grounds, not to mention the millions who never set foot inside the barbed wire confines but walked, or were trucked, on the nearby road from the railroad ramp to the gas chambers.

On the way back to Cracow we stopped at the Auschwitz camp which is about two miles from Birkenau. The parking lot was full; there were bus loads with visitors, and the cafeteria was busy. The place projected an aura of a busy shrine, while Birkenau has been allowed to go to seed and its physical plant is so disintegrated that it is beyond repair, and certainly beyond recognition.

There is no comparison between the two camps in the way they are kept and maintained as Polish national museums. In that connection, it is apropos to reflect on the difference between the two places when they functioned as Nazi concentration camps. Auschwitz was not unlike many Nazi camps within Germany. The difference was only in degree, i.e., more cruelty, more harshness, more of everything evil, but in its basic essentials it resembled concentration camps like Dachau, Buchenwald, etc. However, Birkenau belonged to a different universe of evil. In its operating mode, and in its basic objectives that unique hell could be justly described as having been a slaughterhouse rather than a concentration camp.

Q: Okay and I missed all that. You were telling me about the cement bags and all that _____.

A: In April, the so-called winter issue of clothing had to be surrendered. A prisoner risked his life if he wore any such article past the due time. April was not spring, yet, in this part of the world. In fact, I was never so cold in my life as I was in May of 1942. I slept on the upper bunk and the wind came in from the open rafters under the roof, and we had no bedding or blankets and slept in our day clothing, which consisted of a shirt and a cotton blouse of sorts. If one was lucky enough

and worked at a construction site where cement was used, the empty bags were converted into undershirts by cutting out holes at the sides and top and worn under the garment as an added layer against the wind and cold. Again, you wore it at your peril for, if caught, the retribution was merciless. The combination of exposure; sleeplessness; total fatigue from hard work, long marches, and endless hours of standing at the morning and evening roll-calls; very little food and water; lack of medical care; non-existing sanitation; and the ever present beatings, which frequently concluded with the victim being strangled, contributed to a very short life span for the vast majority of Jewish prisoners.

Our daily food rations were minimal but were made much smaller by the barrack elder and his helpers who appropriated one-fifth of the bread by dividing a loaf into five portions instead of the required four portions. Of the margarine and occasional liverwurst or smelly cheese, we received the tiniest of fractions allotted to us, while the rest was brazenly stolen by the barrack elder and either sold for other products, or distributed to his cronies and protégés. The soup was distributed at the worksite at noon and was one of our supplies of drinking water. The fact that we did not have spoons did not, in most instances, make any difference.

The soup consisted of water, some thickener, a few bits of floating potatoes or beets and, very rarely, a morsel of meat. The presence of meat in the soup meant little to us, for we never saw it in our bowls. The kapo usually allowed the meat to sink to the bottom of the soup container and did not stir the contents before serving. The booty belonged to him and his helpers.

At every worksite throughout the camp, when it came time to line up for the soup, there was jockeying for position and ensuing pandemonium, for no one wanted to be the first in line to be served from the top of the container. Occasionally, the strategy of those who managed to line up at the end of the line was rewarded with failure when the kapo decided to stir the soup at the beginning of the line, or when he decided to serve from the top of the second container, instead of emptying the first.

The bread ration was distributed in the evening, after roll call and it was usually eaten at once. That meant waiting 24 hours for the next piece of solid food, for in the morning we only received some cold, vile-tasting ersatz tea, made from some kind of leaves. It required discipline to forego eating the entire ration of bread at night and have some for the morning. If one managed that, he could last a little longer.

We envied those lucky enough to be chosen for work assignments in Auschwitz. Very few had the luck to be considered for such assignments or had the requisite skills asked for. That tells a lot about our perception of the relative merits of the two camps. We knew that Birkenau was the place that we were sent to die, but in our desperation we thought that Auschwitz offers a chance, however slim.

Most people now do not know the difference between Auschwitz and Birkenau. Some have never heard of Birkenau. When Auschwitz is referred to as the largest Nazi extermination camp, it is Birkenau that fits this description, for it is there where it took place. The Auschwitz gas chamber and crematorium was the place where the extermination started in early spring of 1942, but it was eclipsed by the far more extensive scale and scope of the Birkenau death factories. Birkenau was designed and built for the sole purpose of serving as a giant killing machine to dispose of that part of European Jewry that had not been devoured by the extermination centers in Eastern Poland.

References in the general American press and electronic media usually equate Buchenwald, Dachau, Majdanek, Treblinka, etc. as was one of those camps where European Jews were martyred. This is a gross inaccuracy and reflects a failure to understand the difference between concentration camps and extermination camps, as well as a failure to grasp the history of the period as it relates to the destruction of European Jews.

In the fall of 1942, an attempt was made to make German concentration camps, within the borders of the Old Reich, "Judenfrei", i.e., free of Jews. A transport of several hundred Jewish prisoners from various camps in Germany arrived in Birkenau at that time. Among these were German, Austrian, and some Czech Jews who were imprisoned since 1933, 1938 and 1939, respectively. Within a short period, only a small remnant of that transport remained alive.

Birkenau was not designed as a place to concentrate people to prevent them from doing damage to the state, but as a place where people were sent to die in a somewhat slower process than execution. That was my experience of Birkenau, at least for the first six months to a year. Those who survived that period had increased chances of making it to the end.

Q: Do you want to discuss some of the further things that happened to you during your time there? You were liberated at Birkenau, you have Birkenau ---?

A: No! Birkenau was liberated in January of 1945. I wasn't so lucky. The Soviet offensive started on January 12, in central Poland. By the 18th, the Nazis had to evacuate the remaining prisoners of the entire Birkenau and Auschwitz camp complex. We were assembled and marched to Auschwitz. We received our ration for the transport, some bread and something, and we marched all night and then another night, and we left many dead on the way. The column was guarded by SS whose rearguard members killed any prisoner who couldn't keep up with the column. We walked and kept hearing shots all night. They would leave the dead on the road and the local authorities were required to remove the corpses. It was snowing and I was barely awake, walking in a trance and becoming fully conscious only when I bumped into the person ahead of me in the column. We must have walked 25 or 30 kilometers a night. During the day, we were

accommodated in some barn for a couple of hours rest. Of course, we couldn't sleep for it was too cold. The barn belonged to a Polish farmer and I remember a woman came out and brought some hot drinks for us but she couldn't do much more. Some people tried to figure out a way to escape at that time. It was extremely risky. The first night two of my acquaintances tried to escape, but they were caught and executed on the spot. The second night was worse because more people were killed for not being able to keep up with the column. Hundreds of people were killed in those two nights of marching until we were brought to a place which looked like an abandoned railroad station or some kind of facility. We had no idea what it was or where we were. We spent the rest of the night there and were loaded into open railroad freight cars for a whole day's travel to Gross-Rosen, a notorious concentration camp in lower Silesia.

To describe the existing conditions at Gross-Rosen as pandemonium would be understating the case. It was a medium size camp, capable of holding perhaps several thousand prisoners, but at the time of my arrival there were between thirty and forty thousand prisoners there, most of them evacuees from camps further east. My barrack housed about 1,200 men and there was hardly room for them to stand during roll call. It is not hard to imagine what happened when they all tried to find a place to stretch out for the night. Those positioned close to the wall were lucky, but those in the middle couldn't even find a place to sit on the floor. If one left his place for a visit to the latrine, that place would be pounced upon and fought over by those with no place of their own.

The food supply and distribution system was in shambles. The camp kitchens had little left and couldn't keep up with the demand placed on it. We never knew when the soup would be delivered, it could be in the afternoon or at 2 a.m. The same was true with respect to the bread ration. Neither of the two contained salt. The soup was nothing but water and some beets, a vile concoction, and hard to swallow because of the lack of salt.

I wore a halfway decent looking three quarter coat which I acquired while working in the sauna. One day a German kapo came over to me and requested that I give him my coat. He was an evacuee just as I was, and didn't function as a kapo there. I told him to go and fly a kite. Under the conditions, he was no better than anyone else and he did not scare me. He thought that I, being a Jewish prisoner, would defer to his demand by virtue of his superior status. Someone was observing our exchange and when it was finished, he came over and said, I could not believe that you had the guts to tell him off. This fellow was from Radom, a friend of my brother and our paths crossed in Birkenau in 1943, and I had no idea that he was still alive. He survived the war and lives in Haifa now. I spoke to him during my visit to Israel this past October.

After three weeks of this life with little food, hardly any sleep and no chance to wash, we got our marching orders, a can of meat as our provision, and off we were, two thousand of us, on another death march.

Q: Was that your worst, or one of your worst experiences?

A: If I discount my experiences in Birkenau throughout 1942, I would have to say yes; my sojourn in Gross-Rosen was one of the harshest episodes of my incarceration, except for what was yet to come.

Armed with our can of meat, which in most instances was eaten in one sitting (there is not much else one can do with an open can of meat except eat it since it is not too portable) we started out on what was to become the deadliest segment of our three and one half months long agony that took us from Birkenau to freedom. We marched for two days and lost many people until we reached some rail embarkation point. That was on a Thursday and we didn't reach Flossenburg (another of those stone quarries camps) until the following Tuesday. The distance was not far at all, for Bohemia. It was snowing most of the time and we were in open freight cars without any protection from the element and without blankets. That can of meat was the last food issued to us until we reached Flossenburg, and then some. That meant eight days on a pound-sized can of meat. Some of us were able to lower the empty cans and scoop up some snow from the ground and drink the melted snow.

Upon arrival in Flossenburg, there were close to 500 corpses among us. They died of hunger and exposure. That was in addition to the many that we lost on our two daylong march. The way up to the camp's entrance led through a very steep road which to us, at that time was like scaling Mt. Everest. Our arrival at the showers coincided with a blackout due to an air raid alarm which lasted for most of the night. I remember a wave of naked bodies pushing towards the door and attendants, using high pressure hoses with cold water, forced us back to the wall, while those at the wall pushed us back again, and throughout all this there were dead bodies on the floor and their numbers increasing. It was a night never to be forgotten. When released in the morning and assigned to the quarantine barrack, it took almost another day before we received the first morsel of food.

Our sleeping arrangements, due to the crowding, was an ordeal that is hard to convey unless experienced; it cannot be comprehended. Imagine a bunk narrower than a twin bed, meant for one but sleeping four, packed like sardines, two heads on one end of the bed and two heads on the other end. If two bunks were placed alongside each other, the barrack elders felt that such an arrangement adds available space, hence, it could accommodate ten bodies. There were no mattresses or blankets, just bare slats. After spending a restful night like that, we were driven out of the barrack in the early morning to spend the whole day outside in the bitter cold, and not allowed back in until the evening.

The camp had several terraced levels carved out of stone and on each level were barracks. I discovered that on one of the levels below ours there is a barrack led by the former chief kapo of Birkenau, Aloisy. He was a German political

prisoner, but murderous and paranoid to boot. He allowed the inmates of his barrack, those who didn't go out to work, to sit on the floor of the barrack all day. They couldn't move about -- they just had to sit. It was still better than freezing outside. I took a calculated risk and went down to his barrack one morning, and sat down on the floor among the others, without asking his permission. He remembered me from many encounters in Birkenau and I knew that if he were asked for permission, he would never grant it. I just made myself as unobtrusive as possible, and he ignored me as if I weren't there. Yet, he never asked me to leave. The only problem was that by sitting there, I had to forfeit the soup in my barrack. When he dished out the soup to his people, I grabbed a bowl and lined up, although I didn't belong there. Some days he ladled out a double ration for me, or called me back to receive a supplementary helping, and on other days, he would hit me and give me no soup, without ever telling me why or speaking to me. On balance, I thought that the trade-off was in my favor, i.e., it was more important to be warm than to have a guaranteed soup every day.

After about a month we left Flossenburg and after traveling by train a couple of days we arrived in Leonberg, near Stuttgart, by the third week of March. It was a small camp located almost in the middle of the small town. The camp served as a labor reservoir for a Messerschmitt plant nearby. The plant was situated in an autobahn tunnel which was closed off at both ends and converted to a two-level manufacturing facility producing wings for Messerschmitt military aircraft. It was the first time since leaving Birkenau that I was put to work. My friend, Isaac, who left Birkenau in October 1944, was in Leonberg the whole winter and worked as a riveter at the plant. He trained me to use a riveting gun. The trouble was that I couldn't hoist myself up on the assembly platform for I was very weak. The food was very meager, consisting of spinach soup every day and a small ration of bread.

Usually, completed wings would be rolled out to the autobahn through the tunnel entrance and picked up by trucks. In the entire two-week period that I was there, not a single wing left the assembly hall, for everything that moved on the highway was fair game for U.S. warplanes. I remember how amazed I was watching a unit of Wehrmacht sappers that was engaged in chiseling away at the tunnel walls at both ends and packing the cavities with explosives to be detonated at the proper time. What amazed me was not the fact that they were going to blow up a production facility (I often wondered whether we'll be on the outside or immolated within the tunnel when it occurs), or deny the Allied forces an autobahn shortcut through that tunnel, but the ease and composure displayed during their work. They worked regular shifts, took time out for a smoke and coffee breaks, went to lunch and behaved as if they were building a tunnel rather than preparing its destruction.

Well, I never fully mastered the skill of riveting for the camp was evacuated on April 1, and I never found out whether the sappers' job paid dividends or whether their orders were so construed as to prevent the success of their mission. We

marched the better part of the day until we reached a rail station of some small town near Stuttgart, or a suburb of Stuttgart. Another two day travel without food, and we arrived at Kaufering, Upper Bavaria, which was a satellite camp of Dachau.

The tiny barracks there, huts really, were half underground and half above ground. The reason for this odd design was a mystery to us. The place was not too crowded, there was no work for us, and the food was at near starvation level. When we arrived at this camp late at night, we camped out in the field waiting for the processing to start in the morning. I fell asleep, and woke up in the morning amidst a pool of rainwater. I didn't even know it was raining.

We vegetated there for about two weeks, followed by yet another march and three- day train trip, without food, of course. One thing stands out in my memory about this trip, for it restored a bit of my faith in man's humanity. The guard in our car was a Wehrmacht soldier in his fifties who came from Dresden or somewhere nearby. He took out his wallet and showed us pictures of his family, among them a son on the eastern front.. He showed us an excerpt from a German newspaper from which we learned of the death of President Roosevelt. When our train stopped at some station, he left the car in order to steal some potatoes for us. He expressed his regrets that he can't help in any other way. We arrived at Muhlendorf, another Dachau satellite camp and not that far away from Kaufering, yet it took us three days by train to get there. It was to be our last camp, however, not our last transport.

In Muhlendorf, I met many former inmates from Birkenau, those who left during the mass evacuation in October 1944, as well as those from a transport of non-Polish Jewish inmates who were shipped from Birkenau to Warsaw in the summer of 1943 to clear the ruins of the destroyed ghetto in that city. They were evacuated from Warsaw at the beginning of the Polish uprising there in August of 1944. This was the first place in my three months of wandering where I encountered some friendship and encouragement, and it helped a lot.

After several days of work at different work details, I was assigned one day to a group whose job it was to clear out a machine shop, which was located in a converted or abandoned monastery. We loaded a truck full of machine tools and grinding stones. Some of it loose and some of it in heavy metal crates. The conveyance consisted of a trailer cab that pulled two open trailers. The first trailer carried the uncrated stuff plus several prisoners sent along to do the unloading. I was one of them. The second trailer held the crated material, two German civilians, and two armed guards. We had no idea of the destination of this shipment. The driver turned off the main road and took us down a very steep road leading towards a river, at which point, I suppose he was going to make a turn and proceed on the road alongside the river. Well, luckily for us as it turned out, he never made it to the river, for he soon realized that he did not have enough braking power to prevent the cab and the trailers from jackknifing into the river as

soon as they hit the bottom of that road. He turned the cab into the ditch, jumped out, and hollered in German, "Jump". There were three of us in the first trailer, my friend, Isaac, who was standing, another fellow and myself were sitting on the floor of the trailer. Isaac jumped in time, but the two of us didn't make it and we were caught in an overturned trailer with heavy debris flying all over, including the stuff from the second trailer which toppled. I lost consciousness for a moment and when I came to, I saw myself covered with debris, and people clearing it away and carrying me away from the road towards the woods. I was bleeding from a cut above the eye and from a cut in the back of my head. It was as great a miracle as any that happened to me during the war. There were heavy objects flying all around me, some weighing hundreds of kilograms and all I suffered, were two cuts. Of course, no one knew whether I sustained some internal injuries or some brain injuries.

The German driver was very upset, for he felt guilty about the accident; he tried to get some assistance but all that he managed to do was to bring a band-aid for me and a promise that someone will come to take me to the camp's sick bay. In the meantime, hell broke loose with the sound of exploding bombs and flak that came from a nearby town under air attack by U.S. warplanes. I remember someone saying that it is the Allies gift to Hitler on his birthday, and that is how I know it happened on April 20. Because of this air attack, we had to wait for hours until we were transported back to camp, and when I presented myself at the sick bay, the floor was littered with people injured during the bombing of some facilities nearby. Among them was a fellow from Radom who took a shrapnel in his thigh. His survival is a saga, for he was operated on in a German military hospital only after liberation, which was about two weeks after he was wounded. He lives in Miami Beach now.

I received no help or sympathy from the people in the sick bay; they had more serious injuries to deal with. I was merely assigned to a rest barrack, where after several days we received orders to assemble for transport. The Muhlendorf camp was being evacuated. That was to be our last transport but we didn't know it, of course. As we assembled, I overheard one of the SS guards tell someone not to worry, "You are being taken to Switzerland". That really gave me cause to be worried for if they felt compelled to lie about our destination, that meant we were in real trouble. Our destination was not Switzerland but straight south towards the Bavarian Alps and Austria. The rails of that part of Bavaria were clogged with trains full of prisoners being dragged towards the Reich's last redoubt. What they had in store for us there, or how they were going to resolve the dilemma of either killing the remaining scores of thousands of Jewish concentration camp prisoners, or letting them be liberated by the Allied armies can only be conjectured.

We traveled for several days and covered little distance, spending more time on sidings, allowing other trains to pass through. Our transport was not immune to air attacks by U.S. warplanes, as any moving objects would be in those days. The pilots had no way of knowing who was inside those rail cars. When an alarm was

sounded the guards locked the car doors from the outside and took cover in the woods nearby, leaving us as sitting ducks. Luckily, there were no bombs thrown, however, we were machine-gunned and there were casualties.

On the second or third day of our journey, we found ourselves sidetracked at a small railroad station in Upper Bavaria called Poeing. There were rumors that the transport commander, a German army officer, ordered that the locomotive, plus one empty car, be detached from the train and return to Dachau in order to obtain provisions for the prisoners in his charge. There were several thousand of us and hardly any food left. If that story had any truth to it, it would only reflect the naivete of the officer who was not attuned to the ways the SS camp administration operated. Once a transport left the camp, no one assumed the responsibility for provisioning the prisoners of that transport, except perhaps for providing the initial rations. I'm sure that he couldn't obtain a single loaf of bread in Dachau for the camp was already at the point of disintegration at that time, or about to be overrun by the U.S. Army.

I don't remember how long we had not eaten at that point, but I do recall that I was very hungry and decided to eat a raw potato that I had somehow acquired. I was aware of the risk, and it would have been the first time for me to ignore the possible consequences. No sooner had I cut, or peeled the potato when we became aware of a very loud conversation outside. Someone opened the door of the car (these were closed cattle cars, not open ones) and we were treated to a most grotesque spectacle on the platform, where many prisoners were jumping and shouting, "the war is over", and in their excitement embraced some guards. The guard unit of our transport consisted of a motley crew of SS, Wehrmacht soldiers, and black uniformed Ukrainians. The platform was littered with abandoned knapsacks belonging to the Ukrainians for they were the first to abandon the ship, either out of fear of retribution or using the opportunity to desert.

The source of the story about the war's end was no other than the commanding officer of the transport. He went into the stationmaster's office to use the telephone and heard a radio announcement to that effect. He came out and said, "The war is over, you are free to go". Of course, it was a false alarm. What happened was on that day, or the night before, there was an uprising in Munich, involving some Wehrmacht units and civilian sympathizers. It really took place. They declared Munich an open city and wanted it surrendered to the Americans, rather than have it destroyed. However, the coup was suppressed by an SS division, and so came to a quick end, the only open insubordination of the German military in the Second World War. I only recently read the details of that story in a book called The Hundred Days by John Tolen. He was an American war correspondent following the Allied troops into Germany in 1945.

In the meantime, the car doors were opened and masses of prisoners were milling around on the platform. Hundreds decided to take off and ran in all directions

towards the nearest village or town. I never did eat that raw potato and, instead, said to my friend, Isaac, if the war is really over, it's over right here as well as in the nearest village, and there is no need to run into the unknown. First things first, I said, let's go and find the car that holds the provisions. We located it, but it was difficult for me to climb up onto a railcar from the ground. I managed to hoist myself onto it and emerged with a loaf of bread and some margarine. So did he, and we both ate ourselves full after three months of near starvation.

Soon enough, we heard the sound of shooting and saw emerging groups of prisoners running for their lives back to the train. We learned from them that as soon as they approached the village nearby, they were rounded up by Volksturm troops (Home Army) who shot at them and drove them back to the train. There were casualties. It turned out that some paid with their lives when they were almost at the threshold of freedom. The news from Munich about the end of the war turned out to be premature. The transport reassembled and got on its way again.

A while later our train stopped alongside another train with French speaking civilian workers inside. I understood a little French. I didn't speak it but I used the few words that I knew and asked them whether the war was over. They said they weren't aware of it.

The next day we stopped at many places and German women came out and brought food and drink but only a few managed to get it. We noticed that the guards didn't interfere and we felt that the end was near at hand. The same night we stopped at a rail siding near the Alpine village of Tutzing. We were asleep on the floor of the car when in the middle of the night we were awakened by sounds on the outside. There were some people out there, whether military or civilian, I didn't know for I was too tired to notice. They said that they were from the International Red Cross and that for all purposes, we are free men, and that U.S. troops should be in the vicinity pretty soon. I fell asleep again, and what was said outside didn't really punctuate my consciousness. I just didn't believe it anymore. I got up in the morning and looked outside, and what I saw was a dream come true. The SS guards were gone, disappeared through the night, the few Wehrmacht soldiers, without weapons, were mingling with our people and down the road, at the foot of the embankment, we spotted motorized columns of troops that didn't look German. They were units of the U.S. Third Army, 100th Division, I believe. It was April 30, 1945, exactly three years to the day of my arrival at Auschwitz.

The U.S. troops were merely passing by that road, going somewhere, and encountered masses of emaciated people coming down the embankment to greet them and cheer them on. From their moving vehicles, they threw at us cigarettes, chocolate, and various rations.

The group of Wehrmacht soldiers was waiting in our midst for most of the day until a U.S. army vehicle came to take them away as prisoners. There was one SS man who either did not manage to escape or came back for some reason. He was of short stature and I remembered him as a mean S.O.B. The moment he was spotted by the Greek fellows, they began to pummel him. He would have been lynched had not the Americans interceded and taken him away. I was in a mood to explore and began walking on the track for several hundred feet or so. I remember turning my head to make sure I am not followed. I simply could not believe that I was free. After three years of living under a death sentence, the very first moments of freedom seemed unreal and dreamlike. It is hard to recapture those moments of delight and joy mixed with sadness and sorrow, for there I was, 23 years of age, having just emerged alive after a cataclysmic long war and imprisonment, and alone in the world. I knew nothing about my brother in the Soviet gulag and I feared for the life of my oldest brother who was evacuated from Birkenau the preceding October. The rest of my immediate and extended family was destroyed, as were most of my friends and neighbors.

In the meantime, the immediate problems of survival had to be given some attention. A lieutenant of the U.S. Army's 100th Division, named Smith, appeared on the scene. He apparently was placed in charge to organize the setting up of a Displaced Persons' Center in Feldafing, a few kilometers from the village of Tutzling, where our train was still used as our home. We spent two days and two nights on that train, having the satisfaction of seeing German POW army officers and army doctors of a nearby military hospital bringing containers of soup and ladling it out to us. At the same time, Lt. Smith and his staff got the townspeople busy in the conversion of a former Hitler Youth School complex of buildings into an UNRRA DP Center. They cleaned the place, set up beds with mattresses and linens, and got the kitchen and mess hall running. The train brought us to Feldafing once it was ready to receive us. Before we entered the new quarters, we had to leave all of our clothes to be burned at a bonfire outside the building. By way of new clothing, we received a pair of heavy striped hospital pajamas. The Greek fellows of our transport broke into the clothing stores of the Hitler Youth School and emerged with brown Hitler Youth uniforms. It was a grotesque sight to see former inmates wearing those uniforms, but no one seemed to care. We were on our own and had to obtain clothes one way or another. I found a pair of shorts, which were several sizes too small, even though I weighed no more than 85 or 90 lbs. at most. Next, I located one moccasin and as luck would have it, a few days later, I found the matching one on another floor of the building. That was the sum total of my clothes for the next six weeks or so.

There wasn't too much food at the mess hall and we were still hungry. However, it turned out to be our advantage. We slowly gained weight and strength. At other centers, where the food was more abundant, i.e., more fat and high protein, which wasn't too well digested by people who starved for too long, there were cases of serious diarrhea and death.

In time I discovered that in Garmisch, south of us and at the very foothills of the Bavarian Alps, there was a larger concentration of survivors from Radom who lived in the UNRRA camp there. I traveled in my pajamas, hitching a ride on a milk train. It was there that I acquired my first suit of clothes. After about a month, we were all transferred to the DP camp in Landsberg. It was there that I learned that my oldest brother had been sighted in Flossenburg, the last week of April. One day, while playing ping-pong in the recreation hall, I was greeted by a young man whom I didn't know. In response to my question, where we had met, he said, in the Flossenburg camp. I left Flossenburg in the middle of March, but he said no, I saw you there about the 23rd or 24th of March, before the evacuation. He meant my brother, for we resembled each other, even though he was ten years older. This was in the middle of summer, if he had been alive I would have heard about it, for people traveled between DP camps and news spread. It was a heartbreaking disappointment to me that having gone through so much, he perished within days of liberation. I don't know where it happened; whether he was killed during the last death march, or died of starvation.

In the early fall of 1945, I left for Stuttgart whose DP Center became Radom in exile, attracting Radom survivors from all over Germany, as well as some who came out of Poland. It was there that I received news that my brother in the Soviet Union survived and that he is in Central Asia. The news came via a letter from my brother to Radom, which was read by my cousin at the office of the Jewish shelter there, and transmitted by a former neighbor of mine who had left Radom and had just arrived in Stuttgart. It was the first heartening news for me after the war, yet I doubted whether the Soviets would ever permit the refugees to get repatriated to Poland. I remembered the story of my father's younger brother who was caught in a similar bind after the First World War and could never return home to Poland. He and his family perished in the Ukraine during the Holocaust.

I spent six months in Stuttgart, and on April 28, 1946 (the fourth anniversary of my leaving home) I was on a freight train with hundreds of others going to Bremerhaven, where on May 10th, we boarded a U.S. troopship for New York. We were the first displaced persons to arrive in the United States after World War II. We got a festive send-off by the U.S. Army in Bremerhaven and when we arrived in New York on May 20th, the pier was full of newspaper people and photographers. It must have been the first and last time that arriving DP immigrants met with such a reception.

I was sponsored by my uncle, my mother's younger brother and only living uncle. He was never married and my brother and I were the only survivors of his very large family. He treated me with great kindness.

Not long after my arrival in the United States, I received mail from Stuttgart in which my neighbor informed me that someone arrived from Stettin (the former German Baltic port, now a part of Poland) to Stuttgart and told her that my brother and his wife have come to Stettin with one of the transports of the

repatriated Polish citizens from the soviet Union. They came back to Poland shortly after my emigration to the United States, and as it turned out, luckily my fears that he won't be repatriated were unfounded. I had his address and sent him a food parcel immediately. By the time the parcel reached Stettin, he and his pregnant wife were already in a West Berlin DP Center. The reason for their leaving and for the exodus of most of the thousands of repatriates from the Soviet Union and others, was the bloody pogrom in the Polish town of Kielce, not far from Radom, on July 4, 1946, in which over forty Jewish survivors from the concentration camps were hacked to death as a result of some blood libel. The police and the military did not intervene, while some policemen participated in the bloodbath.

Q: What compelled him to settle in Germany?

A: Nothing compelled him, except some circumstances. His son was born soon after he and his wife came to Berlin. They occupied a bunk in a common room in the DP camp without privacy and conveniences. He managed to find an apartment in the city; he began to work and soon opened a clothing retail business. His children were born and raised there. While he didn't become rich there, he made a decent living. I have been there many times in the course of these past forty years. His son graduated from the University of Jerusalem and did graduate work in Amsterdam and Brussels. He has a responsible position with the Common Market Commission in Brussels, and leads a good life in Belgium. My niece studied law at the University of Berlin and became an attorney. She works in Luxembourg where her husband, also an attorney, works for the European Parliament in Luxembourg. Berlin has a viable Jewish community and it is an interesting city to live in. My sister-in-law died three years ago and my brother has been deeply affected by her death; they were married for forty-three years.

Let me return, if I may, to my experiences as a new immigrant in New York City. My uncle was working in the apparel industry and his boss gave him a chance to train me as a sewing machine operator of ladies' dresses. It was a skilled trade, for we made the entire dress, however, I never accepted dressmaking as my career objective.

I didn't speak a word of English when I arrived from Europe. I was schooled in Polish and Yiddish and acquired a reasonable knowledge of German during the war. I started by going to evening school several times a week to learn English. At the end of the school year, the teacher asked me to go to the principal's office and take a test, the passing of which entitled me to an elementary school diploma. In the fall of that year, I registered as a student in one of Manhattan's two evening high schools. New York City operated evening high schools enabling adults to acquire a high school education. The school I went to in lower Manhattan had excellent teachers. I started by going two nights a week and taking English and history classes. After a year or so, I realized that if I contemplate entering college, I had better buckle down and take my high school work more seriously. I

began to attend five nights a week, four hours each night. It was hard, going directly from work to school every evening from 6:15 to 10:15, followed by a long trip home by bus and subway. Homework consumed the rest of the evening and most of the weekend, and I still had to get up early to go to work. Just before graduation, I took the New York City College Entrance Examination and was accepted as a matriculated full-time student at the uptown campus of CCNY. My uncle's assistance permitted me the luxury of being a full-time student without having to work. If I had to do both, I don't believe that I would have mustered the courage and the energy to go on.

I graduated from CCNY after three and one-half years with a B.A. in Economics and applied to graduate schools at Columbia University and the London School of Economics. That was in 1954. I was accepted at both schools and settled on Columbia University. After one and a half years at Columbia, I took the U.S. Civil Service entrance examination. Several weeks later, I was called by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for an interview and was offered a position as a labor economist.

That was my start with the U.S. Department of Labor. The job was interesting and there was a lot of travel in the first years. After two years on the job, I got married. I met my wife at my friend's house. She was an excellent student, graduating from Hunter College at the age of twenty and completing her Ph.D. in economics at twenty-three. She died of kidney failure at twenty-five after three and a half years of marriage. At the time, there was not much that could be done about nephritis. Kidney dialysis was still a thing of the future.

Q: So you married her though, after you started working for the government?

A: Yes! I began working for the government in 1956, and we married in 1958. She died at the end of 1961.

In early 1962, I took a leave of absence from my job for six months and went to Berlin. The Department was very decent to me. They realized that I needed time off and didn't mind giving me half a year's leave without pay. From Berlin I traveled to Israel and later on to Scandinavia. Several months after my return, I was assigned to Cleveland, Ohio, to assist at the setting up of a new regional office of the Bureau of Labor Statistics in that city. A former colleague of mine from New York who had transferred to the Chicago office at the beginning of the year, was the one delegated to Cleveland to set up the program which I assisted. For the next holiday weekend, he invited me to come home with him to Chicago and visit with his family.

During my stay in Chicago, I got in touch with Jeanne, my present wife, who at the time was completing her PhD dissertation in psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, but resided and worked as a psychologist at a hospital in Chicago. We attended City College at the same time, and had known each other

for many years. We met and continued to meet on subsequent trips. We married one and a half years later, after she completed her Ph.D. and returned to New York. That was in 1964. Our son, Marc, was born in 1965. In 1967 I decided to transfer to Washington, for I had enough of travel assignments which are a consequence of work in regional offices. Our son, David was born here in 1969. We have lived here for 25 years now.

After nearly 35 years of service with the Department of Labor, I retired two years ago.

In a nutshell, you have my life's story on tape, i.e., up to now.

Q: It's a very involved story. Would you like to talk a little bit about your parents now or would you like to stop? That would be up to you.

A: I would like to stop at this point. Thank you.

