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George Salton interview 2/14/95

Shall I start.

Sandy: Yeah.

GEORGE SALTON: I was liberated in spring of 1945. I was by that time a prisoner in various concentration camps for over three years, and it was the 10th camp. The name of the camp was Woeblin. It was a camp that apparently the Germans didn't finish when we arrived there. The buildings were not finished, there were no floors in the few barracks, no windows. We slept on the sand and the place was very disorganized. It was, it was base-, but it was springtime, it was a time of double pain because inside, discipline and organization and supply of food have were deteriorating, the madness and the evil was increasing, while nature placed leaves on the trees outside the wires and birds were singing and flowers were appearing more in greater number as if to mark the many starving and dying prisoners inside the camp.

GEORGE SALTON: There was no work there, there was really very little organization, the German SS men still, however, maintained certain processes, calling us out every morning for for a assembly to count us. It was not meaningful

anymore because so many people died every night that the count didn't mean anything. Nevertheless, we who were still alive and able got up every morning and appeared for the assembly and for count. We did it because we were afraid. I suppose in those days, only the dead were not afraid. And so it happened one day--and I believe it was the beginning of May--I know now that it was the first of may, but I

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believed then it was the beginning of May--at one of those assemblies it was announced that the prisoners in this camp, camp Woebelin in which they must have been about 4 or 5 thousand prisoners that were still alive were to be placed on a train to be evacuated again. Mind you, that during that those late days of the war as the fronts were moving and advancing we were being evacuated from camp to camp. May I ...

GEORGE SALTON:And so it happened that about noon or 10 o'clock that day we were placed on in boxcars some hundred or 80 or 130 people to a boxcar. It was obviously very crowded. The train was--well, let me tell you, the camp, as

all camps, was surrounded by double fence and the railroadline with the waiting boxcars were in an area between two fences--it's significant as the story evolves. We on that train the whole night. Hungry and miserable, there was some random shootings from from the guards who surrounded us. And then by next morning, again, as I remember it very well, about 10 the doors were opened and the prisoners were saying to other prisoners that the locomotive didn't show up and therefore therefore there was some doubt about us being transported to some new destination. Later that morning, we were asked to, we were ordered to leave the boxcars, line up in the areas in front of the boxcars right in front of the fence and the gate that led to the inner camps, where the camp was, with instructions that, with orders, I need to remember that, with orders barked, orders that all the Jews should step forward. I would estimate at that time that among the 4 to 6 thousand prisoners there must have been a few hundred Jews, maybe 4 hundred Jews. Most of us being sufficiently experienced and knowing what to expect, most of us Jews, I

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should say, tried to ignore that order. Some people who really didn't care stepped forward, others were being singled out in this commotion by prisoners who were not Jewish, and in the midst of that confusion and shouting and and and fear accompanied by by shouts and beatings, eh, there was a, we heard the cannon fire, eh, eh, artillery cannon fire in in some place close by and all of us looked in the direction of the sound from which the sound came down the corridor the railroad track cut through the forest, and in the the distance we should, we could see a tank. A green tank, I quite frankly didn't know and didn't care at that time whether it was a German or a Russian or American tank. We didn't know exactly where we were in which part of Germany and we didn't know at all how the war was coming, even though we knew that there were changes because of the movement of the prisoners from camp to camp. And there was this tank and was surrounded by smoke, which I suppose was the smoke emitted by the canon and it kind of stood there on the horizon, almost--I remember seeing it as some kind of prehistoric animal ready to snarl or attack. I was, most of us who see it were kind of stunned by that sight and the Germans, of course, reacted to it very quickly. They opened the inner gate, or the gate to the inner camp and made all of us move, walk into the camp. Gave up the idea of singling out Jews. They did hold back the the German trustees, so-called kapos, who were basically the admini, administrators of the day to day working of the camp and we just went in and there was nothing more. There was no--the

tank didn't appear and there was no additional canon fire. It would have been about 10 or 11 when this happened in the morning. The German guards continued to occupy the towers that surrounded the electric wire around the fence. For reasons that were, they continued random shooting into the

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camp. Prisoners were being shot and those of us who were inside searched out--and I in particular, searched out a position between the barracks where I was not in the line of fire. And some food was available for stealing because the kapos who in the past protected the supply of potatoes or cabbage was there, were no longer inside the camp, so there we were not knowing what to what is going to happen, and clearly I did not anticipate liberation. The whole, I must confess that the whole notion of being free, of living a life that was my own was outside of my expectation. I had been in camps, I was a prisoner since I was 14, I had been under German eh control since I was 11. I just didn't know what it meant to be able to decide when to get up or what to do or or or the whole notion of liberation and freedom was not was not something I was counting on. And I had no idea

and no expectation that this was the day when the thing that I had forgotten about may happen, that I may be liberated and free. So there I was, sitting behind a barrack with other prisoners. Mind you in that camp there were, there were hundreds and hundreds of unburied bodies because the whole process of managing the camp was was stopped and so there we were sitting behind the barrack. I think I had two or three potatoes and some prisoners started fires, little fires, and I had my bowl that all prisoners carried and that was essential to have in order to receive rations of soup whenever it was available and I tried to cook this potato and --- time passed, I really didn't think about anything very much. When I noticed out of the corner of my eye in the distance amongst other barracks, people running. Just individual prisoners I could see running all in a certain direction and I still had the survival instinct even though I was by that time very tired and my life was ebbing and I was on the verge of becoming a Muselman, if you know what it

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is, someone who no longer really cares about surviving. Still the instinct was there, and I saw these people running

in this one direction. And I wanted to know why. Maybe there was food or maybe something good was happening and I wanted to take advantage of it. Maybe there was something bad and I needed to know about it to try to avoid it. Mind you,. as a youngster I survived many years of concentration camps and many selections by making myself invisible--15 year old boys were not supposed to stay alive in camps because they were not old enough to be to be productive workers.

Roll 2.

Sandy: I think a good place to start where you saw...

GEORGE SALTON: So there I was sitting, hidden kind of against one the barracks protecting myself from the line of fire, where I noticed people running in the distance. In the distance I could see individuals in the white and blue striped prison uniforms running. And I initially wanted to ignore it because it was safe and kind of warm sitting in the sun over there, but my survival instincts made me want to find out why the people were running and what was happening. There was maybe there were maybe good things to that was to happen and I needed to know about it to take advantage of it, there were maybe bad things that I needed to know about to avoid That was the instinct of a prisoner who who no matter what the circumstance still wanted to survive. So after noticing the movement of people and the running, I followed, followed between the barracks, moved

on, and came to an area of the camp where the latrines, toilets, were located. It was a special area not only

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because the toilets were there but because this is the place where prisoners who are about to die for some strange reasons went to die. And there were mountains of bodies and many dead people and so I ran in that direction and as I came unto that place I noticed many prisoners yelling and screaming and jumping and dancing and there standing amongst them were seven giants, young people, they must have been 18 or 19, American soldiers, there were 7 or 8 of them standing inside the camp. Apparently they cut the wire and came into the camp. They were bewildered by us, wild and unkempt and dirty and ? smelly people jumping and dancing and trying to embrace them and kiss them. And did too, I also joined the crowd and yelled and screamed and somehow knew that the day of liberation has come. I was a strange feeling for me , however, because, as I remember it, on the one hand, I was I was overwhelmed by this unexpected and un hoped for encounter of freedom, but at the same time, what was happening was outside of me. I really didn't know what to make of it. I

knew I was free, but I didn't count on it. I somehow didn't know what it meant, and I knew it was great, but I was overjoyed because all people around me were overjoyed and were singing and dancing and and but I was 17 I was free, but what it meant I wasn't sure. The soldiers were there for for a few minutes, they were on patrols whose job, I'm sure, whose assignment was not to liberate a camp but to march along a certain road to some destination and after ten minutes or fifteen minutes they left. They just moved on through the wire. We looked around incidentally during all that celebration and wonderful feeling, eh, the Germans were gone. The towers were empty, there were no soldiers, there were no guards, and the Americans have left and some of us who remembered the stories that our parents told us from the first war when the Austrians and the Russians kept moving

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back and forth across little town and advancing and retreating, some of us said: the Germans may come back. So we left some groups of people, the Frenchmen, I saw them arrange themselves into a kind of a marching order and walked out of the gate. And 5 of us Jewish young men who

knew each other from home, left through the hole in the fence and through the forest. Not to search for freedom, or or, but to hide because we thought the Germans might come back. So while we were free and while the Germans were gone, we were not really free because freedom didn't come like a sunrise where eh eh, one day we were in the dark and the next day there was light and warmth and nurturing and rejoicing and celebration. Freedom came as something that happened but did not effect us immediately. So we went into the forrest not knowing what to do. I remember there was some guns and and some pistol laying around in the forests. Obviously, the Germans were retreating already at that time. We tried to carry some of these weapons with us, expecting that we may have to hide in the forrest and defend ourselves, but quite frankly, the weapons were too heavy for us to carry. And we came to a little town. The towns name is Ludwigslust. Only to discover as we walked into the town, I think looking for some shelter, maybe for something to eat, that the town was still in German hands. I remember us walking coming around the corner and on the opposite side of the street there were two German officers with a woman walking, and they were still in uniform and armed. They looked at us and we looked at them and they moved on and we jumped over a hedge and hid in a little shack that was apparently used by a painter to store his paint and we were just hiding over there waiting for darkness to leave the town and hide in the forest again. So here we are liberated but really did not recognize that. And toward the evening,

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as the sun started setting, American GIs came walking into town.

GEORGE SALTON:

And we were liberated, we were liberated. We then knew that the times of oppression and pain and beatings were behind and rather than saying me let me talk about myself. I really didn't know what the future held, I recognized that most likely I was alone, I recognized that most likely my parents were not--did not survive. I recognized I was still unprepared, I was obviously unprepared for freedom and selfsufficiently, and I was driven only to contact my relatives in the United States in the hopes that my brother might have survived and and when the family was separated back in early 42 my father uh instructed us all of us to contact to contact our relatives in Europe because this is how we will find each other. So that is how it happened. The day of of pain and misery and then kind of a low key development that snuck up on us, Wonderful day--I shall never forget it. A day I remember with great joy and great pleasure, but it wasn't a day that help the kind of

excitement that one would expect to see in the movies. It was a day when freedom came, liberation came and of unannounced and unexpected.

Sandy: OK. Two minutes left.

GEORGE SALTON: Well, let me talk a little bit about what happened next. Urhm. Once we, once we, once Americans came to town in Ludwigslust, the five of us decided to, we didn't know what to do, we really stayed in this little shack and which paint was stored. Slept and went around to the American to the kitchens that cooked for the American

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soldiers which by then occupied the town and begged for some food. There were really no arrangements--and I'm not complaining I recognizing that there were no arrangements to take care of us or the hundreds of other prisoners that were liberated in the camp in Woeblin. American soldiers were quite generous and helpful and sympathetic--they gave us food, they gave us whatever they had including Hershey bars. After a few days of that existence Americans then started

making arrangements to ship the various liberated prisoners to their homes. This--where we were liberated was to become the Russian zone and the Americans were of course uh, uh expecting to retreat from that area on the other side of the Oder river. So the French were sent home to the West and the Italians went down south and the Poles and the Ukrainians the Czechs were shipped east. we were, while we were Jewish, we were still Polish. One day the Americans gathered up, gathered us from this little shack and put on a truck with other people of Polish origin and sent east towards the Russians whose lines were right outside the town. The Russians didn't want to accept us, did not want to--whatever the reasons were, the guards standing at on the roadside did not allow the truck to pass, so we were brought back. The British came and put on their trucks and took us to a town called Lubeck. And I must tell you that on that road something happened that was a part of the liberation. I think was the day that I really realized...

Roll 3

Sandy: OK

GEORGE SALTON: After the Russians refused to pass the truck with people from Poland and sent us back uh, by some

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arrangements British soldiers showed up with truck and we were placed on a number of trucks driven by british soldiers and taken west towards the town of Lubeck --obviously into that part of Germany which was to be British zone and not Russians zone or Eastern zone. Something happened on this trip that I remember with great emotion. Because even though it happened a week or 8 days after liberation it was that punctuation make that really made me realize that I'm whole again or that I can at least hope be be whole again. We were sitting on the back of the truck as the trucks were moving and behind us was obviously another truck with two British soldiers in the uniforms driving that truck and the truck because of various obstacles, the trucks would stop every once in a while ad move and a few of us that were sitting in that truck spoke yiddish to each other, Jewish, Yiddish. And at one point, eh, the drivers of the trucks behind us started blowing the horn. The trucks stopped and they came out running. Speaking Yiddish to us. Telling us that they were Jews, and being surprised and happy that they had found some Jewish survivors because somehow they didn't expect to find any and I remember the feeling of seeing people in uniform with authority with guns with hands on the wheel that could make a truck turn left or right that were Jewish, and it was the moment when I realized that eh I was

equal. That was the moment when I realized that ah the days of humiliation and and and and and days when I was treated as somehow subhuman were behind me because it was possible for me. It was attainable for me to feel that there were no limits and possible for me to rally understand that I was free. Uh, maybe that was how long it took for me to really understand what liberation was, That is how long it took for me to to really comprehend that liberation was more just being able to just go out out of the camp and cross barb

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wire. Liberation was something that had to happen in me. I had to realize and understand that liberation was also a feeling of sufficiency and equality. And that happened that day with the British soldiers.

Anyway, life went on. We were settled in DP camp in ..

Sandy: Let me ask you a couple of things. One--did you at some point, did an American share his rations with you.

GEORGE SALTON:Yes, I'm obviously going to back in time. Uh,

on May 2, the evening of May 2, which was the day of our liberation, we that evening as we were hiding in this little shack hoping to be undetected to be able to somehow escape when the darkness back into the forest, the Americans soldiers marched in and we were liberated and we just stayed there and and did not leave the shack and the following day or two, we I who was very weak and very skinny, and I'm sure looked terrible, spent my days kind of sitting in the sun resting and trying to warm up and trying to recover. Young American soldiers who didn't look young to me--they looked like kind of giants or angels--would come by and give me food, give me a bar of chocolate or share some food that they had. Uh, yes that's what happened. I'm sure they felt sympathy for this little teenager who was half alive and half dead and I'm sure that they recognized that we deserved pity, I'm sure they also recognized that we are may be one of the reason why they risked their lives for the Germans.

Sandy: And also, you saw children for the first time.

GEORGE SALTON: You have perhaps seen some of my stories, yes. When the American soldiers left Woeblin and some of us were

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concerned that maybe repetition of the stories we had heard from our parents of what happened during the first war and were concerned that the Germans might come back, we left. And we walked through the forest where there were many uh, there were weapons and abandoned trucks and as we walked through the forest, came out into clearance, or little side road and there was, there were refugees there. I don't know whether they were German, I expect they were German, they could have been Lithuanian or whatever, wagons and horses and lots of refugees with women and children. And I remember walking and seeing two young children, They must have like my grandchildren now, three or four or two, and I was surprised how a child--to see a child to see how a child looked because I haven't seen a child for three or four years. I just, I knew that children exist, of course, but I Haven't seen a child. It was a kind of a special experience to see a child to remember how a child look and to see how really beautiful and innocent they were. I was kind of like seeing a flower one has only read about. And I remember going down on my knees and in front of these two little children and looking at them and they were not afraid of me--I didn't touch them--they were just there, and when I stood up I I did feel a little bit more human, or I did feel that I that the anger and the and the desire for revenge have had left me, I did feel a little bit more human. I also felt sad, I must add, because I'm sure I realized that there

were no Jewish children around. There were no Jewish children at the year of age three or four or five or seven or eight any place in in central Europe. But, yes, I saw two children, there were more children, but I saw these two and I looked at them and I to this day remember how surprised I was to see how a child looked because I forgot. And that experience was one of those many experiences that

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I'm sure that was--led me from to a path of healing and and becoming free.

GEORGE SALTON: You have, of course, seen some of my other stories and that's not fair.

Sandy: When you, when the Americans came into the camp, can you describe your physical condition?

GEORGE SALTON: In that, in that camp in Woeblin which was As I said the tenth camp in my history and I had been in camp ten years, I had basically deteriorated very badly physically. I couldn't, I couldn't walk very well, my hip

hurt me, and I was really very weak and reaching the state in which a prisoner no longer cared whether he or she survived. Now, I didn't reach that point, I still, when I saw people running out of the corner of my eye I still got up and went looking what was happening. But I was in very bad shape and I think if I wasn't liberated in a matter of days, I would have been one of those bodies that was laying in mountains of dead in front of the toilets. I would guess that I had maybe a week or ten days to left, and if I wasn't liberated and was not given additional food and was allowed to rest and sit in the sun I wouldn't have recovered.

Sandy: Reload. On to DP camps.

New Roll.

GEORGE SALTON:After we ere brought the British military to Lubeck which is in northern Germany, I found my way within a few days to a displaced persons camp run by the British in a town called Neustadt. It was located in the former German

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submarine school. There were many people there. Jews were in the small minority, there were people there from, there were Frenchmen, there were Italian, soldiers who were interned by the Germans somehow after Italy changed sides and declared war on Germany in 1943. There were some Yugoslav former prisoners of war. There were Poles, Ukrainians as well as Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians. Within a matter of days--no--within a matter of weeks, various people left, went home. They were there was mmm made possible for the Frenchmen to go back to France, and the Italian soldiers were somehow able to move back to Italy, and the Yugoslavs left. The Poles and the Czechs, the majority of the Poles and almost all the Czechs went back east home, and after a matter of 6 weeks or so, the people that were left in camp were Jews, a few hundred Jews, a few Poles who and Ukrainians for whatever personal reasons did not want to go back. And uh Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian families of people who uh escaped uh from the advancing Russians, people who in large part were, I believe, were cooperating with the Germans and, of course, as I knew as I got to know some of them, some of them did serve in the German military in the Estonian divisions or Latvian divisions. Life in the camp, DP camp, was really a waste of time. There was nothing much done there. We were, of course, provided for by various charitable organizations under the sponsorship of United Nations. UNRAA was the organization that was really responsible for the British managed it, but it was not a meaningful, useful, purposeful

time--it was just kind of time of waiting. for those who were willing and able to go home, it was a time of transition of weeks or days until they could give them a train to go back to Czechoslovakia. So after a relatively short time it was a--not only a waste of time of waiting but

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for the Jewish people in that particular camp, and generally in camps in the English zone, was a time of waiting in a relatively hostile environment. The Poles, I don't want to single them out, but the Poles were there still had certain anti-semitic attitude and I remember an occasion where a a a group of Polish performers came to perform to entertain the DP people, and their comedy included various anti-Jewish jokes. Eh, the Latvians and Lithuanians, who were most, who were mostly in kind of in charge to administer the camps were obviously people who cooperated with the Germans. So it was a, it was, it was not a time of healing, it was not a meaningful time, was a time of waiting. Some of the young Jewish people were, managed to get into a situation where they could smuggle themselves into Palestine--it was illegal at that time, because Israel was not yet free--others eh

were just waiting. I had made contact with relatives in America and I knew they were sponsoring my coming to United States. I accepted that as my future and I was just waiting. It was the end of 1945. Both because I felt that living in the American zone would make it easier for me to immigrate to United States, and because of the of the really unpleasant frictions that existed in that camp where the majority of the people were not sympathetic to us, I moved on to the American zone to a camp, DP camp in the American zone. The situation was different there, for for whatever by whatever circumstance the Jews were in separate camp, which were Jewish displaced persons camps. It was still a time of waste, it was still a time of waiting, but at least there was an opportunity for us to nurture each other to somehow help each other in healing to give us a sense of importance and value, but that was displaced person camp. There was nothing dramatic about it, there was nothing really helpful, it was just a time of waiting and and maybe

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eh getting well, and maybe some of us managed to go to school. I was too young to really go to try to go to

university, and I was too old in terms of my own experiences to start going to high school even if there was an opportunity to this. So it was a time of waste, time of waiting and in in October 1947, some two years and four months after liberation, my papers came through and I came to the United States where I started a new life.

Sandy: can you tell me a little about the conditions in the DP camps in the American zone--especially ??when you first were there? Was it comfortable, was it overcrowded, was

Most of, I mean,

Sandy: Let's ????

New Roll?

GEORGE SALTON: Clearly, there was difference in the how the DP camps looked and operated in the first few months after the war when so many people were sick and dying and needed medical attention and so on. But once, within three or so months after the war things settled to some routine. They were all pretty much the same. Virtually all the camps were established in former military facilities of the German army, navy army or military. We were housed in former military barracks and our barracks in Germany and that barracks made out of wood. but they were stone building where soldiers lived before. So the living conditions were quite austere, usually a number of people to a room, but

given our background as prisoners and concentration camp, this was still much better. Eh, food was distributed in

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kitchen, and some places later, for families it was possible to rather than that get in line to get you food in the kitchen, to get some supplies to people who had the need to and the ability cook could cook their own food. It was really a a somewhat of a a regimented life eh which to those of us that came out of the camp looked wonderful time of vacation and recovery, I think to us today, would look eh eh with our background, would look as a very restrictive and kind of a shabby existence. But this what it was. It it, we were free to walk around and we're free to communicate, and we free involve ourselves in whatever in whatever civil and civic things were organized in the camp, but again, I need to repeat, it was time for of waiting, waiting to Israel, waiting to go to America, waiting to to find the means to live outside. It was also time of growing up, you know, I was 18 and my hair grew and my I realized that I was a man and I think I must have fallen in love once or twice as teenagers are apt to do, but eh, when people ask me to

talk about DP camps, and I try to think of them, I see a picture in black and white, not a picture in color.

Sandy: What about--did Ben Gurion come to where you were?

GEORGE SALTON:No, Ben Gurion did come to, I know now, but where I was in Degendorf which is in Bavaria, I just don't remember anything important happening except that that time of waiting. I needed, for example, then to work I remember in those days, hrrm, there were no dental facilities, I had to wait till I came to America to to to do whatever whatever dental work I needed to do, and and and I did not see anything exciting, I did not see anything great. Yes, there were people under Israeli sponsorship who tried to organize young people and and and arrange for them to smuggle

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themselves through the borders to go to Palestine, but for those of us who decided for one reason or another to wait until our American paper came through, it was a time of waiting.

Room tone.

Sandy: You have spoken of your loneliness and your envy of normal life. Can you talk to me about that?---Or even just after liberation.

GEORGE SALTON:Yes, yes, of course. I do remember, in in still in Neustadt the fall of 1945, walking through--we are are free to of course go to town, there was a curfew, we had to be in the DP camp at a certain hour because the British was locked the gates, but I remember walking through town. And I was 17, not quite 18. My hair, my hair was growing, I, my teeth were broken, and I saw young German teenagers--eh, the fact that they were German was unimportant--going to school, young men, young boys, and young girls with school books and backpacks and laughing and giggling as teenagers ought to do, and I remember the very great pain and very great sadness because I was convinced that would never be part of my experience, and I remember that envy. Eh, that I could no longer be one of those young people that could laugh and giggle and not be not be rally somehow suppressed by memory and experience, and I, I, it was a very painful experience for a young man to know that the normal things that was that were available to others were denied to me. So yes, there were such times, and there was that sadness, and that those feelings of insufficiency, those feelings of somehow being second rate that were that was somehow planted in me in the war years did not disappear

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the minute somebody said to me: You are free. And they were with me for a long time. I would not be at all surprised that some of those things that happened and some of those experiences influence me to to this day, but in those days I was especially sensitive, I was especially envious and was especially sad that I was alone and eh and eh lonely and without any value, in my eyes, and seeing those young laughing and smiling and giggling and going to school, people my age, can underline that.

Sandy: What about religious ceremonies. Do you remember?

GEORGE SALTON:Yes, I I remember there were religious, of course. In the English DP camps there was very little of it, that that the DP camp in Neustadt was dominated by the majority who was Christian. In the DP camp in Germany, I'm sorry in southern Germany, where there were primarily Jewish camp, Jewish ceremonies, Jewish religious practices were organized for holidays for Sabatday. I was too devastated by what I saw by seeing the thousands of dead and knowing of millions of dead to be sufficiently forgiving to really

participate in religious ceremonies. I was not making judgement about God, but I was also not making not I was also unable really to to to feel honest about myself and the same time participate to any great extent in religious ceremonies. I'm Jewish, I'm glad to be Jewish, I am eh that my children are Jewish, but in those days, and to some extent even today, I have not made peace with the fact that it was possible for me to survive and there were others who were more worthy, did not. And It was so--I did not , I did not embrace, I embrace Judaism, I embrace the idea free Israel, I did not embrace the religious practices that were available to me.

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