Testimony of Moses Rechnitz

Interview conducted: July 12, 1992

000Born in Poland, June 3, 1923 in a town called KATOWICE. Originally my family lived in a town called BEDZIN, which was about 15 miles from KATOWICE.

A major population of Jews and a smaller population of Poles. It was by Polish standards, a pretty good sized city. It had street cars, it had stores, it had a main street, it had I believe a couple of movie houses. It had an old castle that belonged somewhere in the Polish history.

Where is Benzin near?

Bendzin is in the Southwestern part of Poland, about 10 miles form Katowice in Silesia, which is predominantly the coal and steelworks region of Poland. It is also I think about 50 or 60 miles from Krakow, which is one of the oldest cities in Poland and is known as the University city of Poland.

Did you live with your mother and father?

I lived with my mother and father on the third or fourth floor of a building. I remember the water system was on top of the building and we were getting the water in our sinks and toilets by gravity. It seemed like it was pumped to the top of the building.

And when did you move from Bendzin?

We moved to Katowice where my father had a wholesale leather store, in about 1930, I believe. It was a relatively short trip between Bendzin and Katowice which one could take a train to and from, which took about 25 minutes of a ride. The town in between Bendzin and Katowice was Sosnowiecz, another town that was also populated by a lot of Jews.

What was your father's name?

033 My father's name was Bernard, and they used to call him BEREK.

Did your father's parents live in Benzin as well?

Yes, they did. I remember visiting them almost every saturday with the rest of my family.

Do you remember their names?

No.

Do you remember your grandmother's on your father's side's maiden name?

No.

On your mother's side, what was your mother's name?

My mother's name was Rachel, and she was called Ruchla. Her maiden name was Lejzerowitz.

And what about her parents?

I only remember her father, which was my grandfather, and his name was Abraham Lejzerowitz. I don't remember my grandmother on that side because I understand that originally my mother's mother died, and he remarried again, and I do not remember his second wife's name.

We there relatives of your mother's also in Bendzin?

Yes, there were relatives in Bendzin and that area on my mother's side. She had a brother who had two children. I do not remember his name, and my grandfather on my mother's side, after he got remarried, had a child whose name was Fisiek. He was about my age. I always joked, because everybody was telling me that Fisiek was my uncle and he was really my own age. I could never accept the fact that he was my uncle.

Did your mother have sisters?

057 Yes, my mother had a sister by the name of Pola. She was married to my uncle, whose name was Max Bolimowski. And I know they had two children, one boy and one girl, and the boy's name was Ziggy and the girl's name was Lusia.

Did your mother have any other sisters?

I don't remember.

So we know that your mother had one brother and a sister named Pola, and you don't remember the brother's name.

Right...

What became of your mother's sister and brother and their children?

As far as I remember during the war, before the war my uncle, who was my mother's brother, divorced or separated from his wife, and he had two sons. One son's name was Vovek and the other's was Ebek. Ebek was the older of the sons, and before the war started he was forced to join the Polish army. Vovek was a few years younger and because of the problem within the family Vovek came to live with us for a couple of years in Katowice, when we moved there, in about 1930.

Vovek's last name was Lejzerowitz?

Right, and he was a couple of years older than I was and we got along very well when he was living with us in Katowice.

What eventually became of Vovek to your knowledge?

Vovek survived the second world war, and I met him a couple of times afterwards. He lived in Constance, Germany. When I became aware that he was alive, I made a point to go and visit him. He eventually emmigrated to Australia and he married a girl in Germany still who also survived the war and whose name, first name was Mirka...

Vovek's brother?

Vovek's brother, never surfaced after the end of WWII, and I believe that he must have... the rumor is that he died somewhere in Russia during the period of WWII. Nobody heard from him again. The same goes for Fisiek. Fisiek ran away when the Germans were advancing, he ran away towards the Russian border. We heard from him a couple of times through the mail, during the early part of WWII, but we never heard anything about him again, and I don't know what happened to him.

Let's talk about... if that is the end of your mother's side, what about your father's side...

099 I don't remember how many brothers or sisters my father had, but I can think about one sister and one brother. One brother was a furrier in Benzin and the sister's name was Sala, and she was probably in her late 30's or early 40's when she... when a matchmaker found a husband for her. And I remember as a child of 10 or 12, that the wedding took place in our apartment in Katowice. I also remember that when the war broke out, she was pregnant, and she did have a baby, and after that because of whatever happened during that period of time, she vanished, and I never heard what happened to her. But I'm pretty sure that she died during the war, as did her husband.

Her name was Sala Rechnitz, and you don't remember her married name?

No, I don't.

113 What about your father's brother?

I don't remember.

Any other cousins, etc...

There was... Ok, my father had a sister, I don't remember what her name was, she was married to an intelligent Jew... she lived in Sosnowiecz. Her married name was Wiederman. He was the director of a high school [her husband, Fevek]. Fevek was the director of a high school in Sosnowiecz that was attended only by Jewish children. They had two children, one whose name was Oleg, and I don't remember the other one. I know that all of them perished during the war, except my uncle Fevek, who wrote a book about the period during the war in Sosnowiecz. He was hidden there for a number of years by a janitor of the high school. And he survived the war and then came to America and wrote the book. It's in the Library of Congress.

What about the grandparents?

I do not remember much... my mother's father died before the war, and my father's father lived with us at the beginning of the war in Krakow, where we moved to before the very beginning of the war, and he died a natural death. The rest of them I have absolutely no idea.

Let's talk about your mother, what was she like?

My mother was a very progressive woman from what I can judge, now and even then... she was very active in Jewish organizations like Hadassa and Wiso... she was very socially active, she belonged to a lot of philanthropic organizations and social organizations and she was really, in my opinion, very advanced in her thinking for that age.

Didn't you say something about your mother going to the world's fair in 1939?

Yes, in 1939, I believe, my mother went to the world's fair in NY. And after the trip to NY, she came back to Poland, we were making plans to emmigrate to Israel at that time. My father was in the wholesale leather business in Katowice. He was doing financially very well and he was very respected in the community and contributed money and here and there he found himself in the position of having to help out some of the members of the family. I became aware a couple of times that when he was walking home from his businees, he got accosted by some Polish youth... and on a couple of occasions he either got beaten up or chased... or something like that. And I believe that that experience prompted him to start making arrangements to leave Poland and emmigrate to Israel.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

I have one sister who has gone to Israel in 1936. She is five years older than I am. Her name is Genia, and she was at the last stages of getting her musical education on piano, and she attended the conservatory in Tel Aviv. And lucky that she did because of the fact that she lived in Israel, she was really not caught up in WWII.

And what was your childhood like, school and things like that?

177 My childhood seemed like a very trouble free childhood. I was a very normal, pretty strong kid, who managed to survive by himself, although there was no big question of survival in the early years. But I mixed very well with everybody else, and after attending Polish grammar school and also a Jewish Cheder in Katowice, I started attending a Polish high school in which there were only like three or five Jewish pupils. I became aware of antisemitism at the early stage when one of my teachers started making fun of me because I had the same last name as another man who was building a huge building in Katowice, and he was always deriding me and trying to poke fun at me because of that relationship. I was really a rebel at heart because I wouldn't take any pressure from anybody, neither from the Polish kids... and I was involved in quite a few fights in school, but eventually they started respecting me and I got along very well with them. Although the teachers didn't like me and didn't like the idea that there was a Jewis boy who fended for himself. I remember at the end of the year they called my mother in and told her that unless she makes sure that I go to another high school, they would not pass me to the next grade and I'd be forced to repeat that same grade in that high school in Katowice.

202 Why do you think that they did that?

Because of the fact that I was Jewish, and they were going to cause trouble.

Tell me a little about the fact that you mentioned that you're basically taller and stronger... and the business about your father letting you be an apprentice...

Before I go to that I just want to mention that as a result of the pressure being put on my mother to take me out of that high school, I ended up commuting to the high school in Sosnowiecz, where my uncle was the director of the high school. I did very well in that high school. My grades were good and the only problem was that I had to commute by train to Sosnowiecz and back, which of course took quite a bit more time.

214 During the summer my father always made arrangements for us to go on a vacation somewhere in the Southern part of Poland in the mountains, and until I was about 14 or 13 I did that and I had a lot of fun... you know being on vacation and doing things in the countryside or in the mountains that you couldn't do in the city... this obviously appealed to me. But when I got to be about 14 or 15, it didn't appeal to me any more, and I talked my father into letting me work at a garage in Katowice, because I was always interested in mechanics. And he made an arrangement for me to work as an apprentice. And my father had to pay the German owner money for me to be an apprentice. I enjoyed it very much and didn't miss my vacations at all. I felt that I was doing something that I really liked. I learned how to drive a car at a very early age, and I was very proud of myself when I was 15 and could drive a car.

So you grew up essentially in Katowice. What was it like there?

233 We lived in the city in a nice apartment house that had three bedrooms. It was a stone building in an area of the town that was considered upper class, so to speak.

Wasn't that Jordana street?

Yes, the street's name was Jordana, I believe the number was 17.

Under what circumstances did you leave that location?

Before the war started, while my father was making arrangements to go to Israel, he sold his wholesale store and we moved to Krakow. My mother and I already lived in Krakow while my father was still active in Katowice trying to wind up his business deals. We packed all our belongings to be shipped to Israel. When the war broke out on Sept. 1, 1939, most of our belonging were already at the railroad station at Katowice, on their way to being shipped to Israel.

Why did you move from Katowice to Krakow?

I really do not know, except that it was supposed to be a very short-term move. When the war started we were obviously caught in Krakow.

What was it like in Krakow? So you lived there but didn't really know anybody?

I didn't know Krakow at all, because I lived there very shortly. Although, as a kid a roamed around and thought it was a very interesting city, from a lot of perspectives, and for a boy of 16, with all the castles and the history and the stone walls and everything else, I thought it was very interesting. I didn't have any friends in Krakow because of the very short time I spent there. I never started school or anything else in Krakow, because we were ready to move, and the war broke out in September before the school year started. When the Germans moved in... we lived in a fairly well to do section of Krakow. About 2 or 3 months later, they took over the whole neighborhood for the military, or military families' personnel and forced us out of our apartment. As a result of that, my father found a place for us in Wieliczka, which was known all across Poland as the salt mine town of Poland. And we found an apartment in Wieliczka, which was just about 300 feet from the entrance to the salt mines. That's where I spent the first year and a half of the war.

282 At that stage we were forced to do forced-labor for the Germans in many ways, and in order to keep out of the German control, so to speak, I joined a group of people that commuted to work near Krakow. It was a project whereby the Germans were building railroads to bypass Krakow itself, and the spur bypassed Krakow heading towards the Eastern front, towards the Russian border. I was taking the train to a place called Krakowianka (sp?) right on the outskirts of Krakow. It was forced-labor, but I did it voluntarily, because somehow the arrangement was, as long as you worked for a German company or for a German project, the Germans left you alone. My father and mother lived in Wieliczka, they had nothing to do, no work or anything else. And the way we survived, or tried to survive was by selling off gradually everything we had to get cheese and butter or bread and anything else like that. Of course, whatever we owned was very little and things were really getting pretty tight. At one point, the Germans decided that they don't need any more Jews in Wieliczka, or they don't want any more Jews in Wieliczka, and surrounded the town, and they were going to evacuate all the Jewish population in Wieliczka. Because of my work that I commuted to, and because I got along very well with one of the German foremen, I asked a Polish woman to go to him and to tell him that the town was surrounded, and would he please try to get me out of that town. As a result of that he sent a truck to Wieliczka and I managed to get my mother, my father, and myself and about 30 other people on that truck, and we drove out from Wieliczka, and we ended up on the working project itself. Somehow we made our home in a brick factory, or a kiln... I remember we spent the first few weeks practically in that kiln, all on our own. There was no question about running away or doing anything else, because it was almost impossible, because of the attitude of the Polish population, that we would get any support at all even if we tried to run away.

328 In order to keep the Jews working on that spur project, the Germans started errecting barracks. And as a result, my mother my father and myself eventually moved to one of the

barracks, and were working for the Germans in different capacities. I, because of my mechanical backround, got a job driving a narrow gage locomotive with wagons that was bringing up dirt to build up the railroad spur. I don't remember what my mother or father were doing, but I know they were also doing physical work. At one point in that I understand I got very sick, and I believe it was Dyptheria. My arm was very very swollen, and I had drains in my arm, although there was no medical care of any kind to speak of. Somehow, I had drains in my arm, and I was delirious for quite a few weeks before I started recuperating. I was very lucky in the sense that I grew up with both Polish and German, and... I seemed to be liked by some of the German foremen, which made life a hell of a lot easier, and I attribute that to the fact that despite the fact that I was sick, somehow I survived that ordeal. For a period of time myself, there was a small quarters on the location of the job, and I had the priviledge of sleeping over at those quarters with my father and mother. Unfortunately, and there were like another 40 people doing the same thing, which means we did not have to go back to camp every night and go back in the morning to the job... However, there was an accident, and the barn where the locomotives were stored caught fire... everybody started running and doing whatever they could. And I jumped into one of the diesel locomotives and got it out of the barn before it burned down, but as a result of that in the morning, a contingent of SS men came, and they decided that it wasn't an accident, that it was sabotage. They lined up everybody and they started pulling people out to be killed. I remember that when the SS man got to me, that the German foreman intervened and said, leave him alone, that's one of my best men... and that's really why I think... one of the few things during the war, that resulted in me surviving that war. Because there were a lot of incidents during the war, that for all practical reasons, I should have been dead.

Where exactly was this?

That was in Krakowianka, on the job. They locked about 10 or 12 of us survivors in a shed overnight, and of course before they locked us up, we watched the SS shoot all the people that they pulled up of the line up. And we were convinced that come morning, we'd be shot just as well. In the morning, they made us load the bodies into the Lories that were used on the narrow railroad spur and bring them out to a location where they were going to bring in fill. And we dumped those bodies in that location, and I can still remember that there must have been at least one person who was still alive, because his hand, was being raised out of the sand... but of course there was nothing that anybody could have done, and we had to go back to the original workplace. I am sure that those bodies are still there, and nobody will ever know who those people were, or what those people were. The only incident I vividly remember, is that there happened to be a couple of young children in that work camp that stayed overningt with me, with their parents. And because the kids were relatively young, 8 or 10 years old, they didn't have anything to do... so the rode with me in the locomotive that I was driving... and during the line up, the SS pulled those two children and the father and the mother went absolutely crazy, and they were told by the SS man that if they don't keep quiet he'll shoot them too... and of course

they didn't, and as a result the mother the father and the two children were shot right in front of me.

What happened next?

Next, after the fire, of course there was nobody who could stay on the job or on the premisis exept by coming in the morining and going back at night, to the barracks, the barracks base.

425 Life went on from day to day, hoping that the Germans would start losing eventually and maybe that would be the end of our misery there, but unfortunatelly, it lasted and went on and on and on... Across the road going from Krakow to Wieliczka, there was another camp called Jerozolimska, and in that camp there was another large group of Jews. Jerozolimska used to be a Jewish cemetary, and the function of those Jews living on the other side of the highway in the camp called Jerozolimska, was to dig up the corpses and retrieve the gold, whether it was teeth or rings or any kind of jewelery from the corpses that were buried there already for a long time. That was the only thing I remember abtout Jerozolimska. I have never been there, but you could see it from our camp because it was on a hill going up and you could observe it sometimes, as far as the activity that was going on there.

448 After building the spur around Krakow, we, as a group of people forced to work were moved to Skarzysko-Kamienne. It was a place where the Germans took over a munitions factory and they were adding to the capacity of the munitions factory. When they unloaded us at Skarzysko-Kamienne, there were three camps already in existence: camp A, camp B and camp C. Camp C was considered, after a short time after they unloaded us from the train... we understood that camp C was the worst camp of all the three of them. It was the worst because that was the facility where the artilery shells were being filled with the powder, and it was a yellow powder and somehow the people must have absorbed the powder through their skin... and at the beginning it was really weird because their color was yellow. Of course, it was a chemical reaction that made those people look yellow, and I understood that their life span was shortened very much... so when they lined us up, after they unloaded us from the train they started sorting us out. And they started asking for people who are electricians, people who are mechanics, different professions. The minute I heard somebody askinf for an electrician or a mechanic, I raised my hand and I was selected to be moved to the other camp. I didn't know which one, A or B, but it ended up being, I believe, A. My father and mother, unfortunately got stuck in camp C, and while we were being led out by a German guard from camp C on the way to camp A, which was only a couple of miles away, the comment by the German guard was "Well, you got yourself another extention of your life be leaving Camp C."

497 I arrived at camp A and we were put into barracks. Our job was to help building a new facility where munitions are going to be produced. I lost track of my father and mother, with the exception that once a month, there was a delousing facility at our camp, and different groups of people were coming in to be deloused. So once a month or so my father or my mother came to our camp to be deloused, and because I knew when they were coming, I always made sure that I had the opportunity to see them. This experience kind of splits into two, because of the fact that there wasn't enough food to satisfy the people's hunger, and because of the fact that we had a number of Polish employees working at the factory also... that was already producing artilery shells, just the casings... I felt that it was a good opportunity to put in maybe a few extra hours for the Pole, and as a result, he'd give me bread or anything else to eat. All of that worked fine until I realized that with all the additional food and working all those additional hours, physically, I wasn't gaining anything... as a matter of fact, I was getting weaker. And I came to the conclusion that that idea wasn't such a bright idea. So I gave up the idea of trying to work an evening shift, besides working myself during the day. My job during the day was hooking up different cement machines to the electric wires. I don't know how or why, but I became very proficient at it, and as a result in the later stages I was getting extra food so there was no reason for me to work for a Pole or anything else to get extra food. The second part of it was that my mother and father were obviously stuck in camp C and suddenly I realized that the people that I was friendly with kind of... you know didn't communicate with me as they used to before. And before long I realized that something happened, and I found out that my mother got hurt because one of the people working in Camp C dropped a loaded artilery shell, and the shell exploded and quite a number of people got injured, among them, my mother. Because there was absolutely no medical care at all, although he injuries today would have not been considered very serious, or she would have had a very good chance of survival... Because of no medical care or attention she was having a very hard time, and my father, in order to be as helpful or to do whatever he could for my mother, went to the extreme of having his gold teeth extracted so he could sell the gold and buy my mother the proper nurishment. All of that did no good, and eventually, my mother died.

Where?

Skarzysko-Kamienne. I know my mother died at Skarzysko-Kamienne. I know she was buried in a mass grave. I really have no idea where or what or how, but I guess she's one of the 6 million Jews that vanished and that died during the war and nobody will ever now where she is. I'm glad that I know as much as I know about it, because my father survived, and it's from him that I learned all the details about what my mother went through before she died.

588 I don't remember precisely how long I stayed in that camp, but eventually the Russians started advancing and the Germans got really worried about it. So they shipped all of us out, which was quite a number of people, to the Eastern part of Poland--I know it was early fall or

late summer--to dig ditches in the form of a "V"... they were quite big, to prevent the Russian tanks from coming across. We were living very primitively, and we had relatively very poor shelter for the climate, and it was lucky that it was late summer or ealy fall, otherwise it would have been horrible. They were happy having the kind of tank traps that we built. They moved us from there to Czestochowa. They also had a munitions factory in Czestochowa, and they also had two camps. And I ended up in one facility and my father ended up in the second facility. By comparison to Skarzysko, Czestochowa wasn't that bad at all. I was active, I joined a group that was rebuilding the engines for the German Tiger tanks...

[END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1]

... back from the Eastern front that broke down or needed rebuilding. And I was assigned to a group of Germans that was assigned to testing the engines after they were being rebuilt. The system was that the whole engine was taken apart, and every part was measured, and only the good parts were going to go to the new engine... or replaced by new parts. The rest was thrown out. Because I was working with some German soldiers, they were kind of taking care of me. I got along with them very well, and they were bringing me sandwiches, and I even enjoyed what I was doing, so as a result of that, I had absolutely no complaints about that period of time... and contrary to a lot of other people I looked like a very well nourished member of the camp. My father happened to be in an ajoining camp also in Czestochowa, working also in some kind of a munitions factory. Occasionaly, he had a chance to come over to the camp where I was living, and we had a chance to see each other. He seemed to be dealing pretty well with the overall situation at that time. Sometime at the end of '44 and beginning of '45, the Russians were advancing from the East. And in January of '45, they were getting pretty close to our area, and the Germans decided to evacuate us. One day they just made everybody walk out to the railroad spur and loaded us on the freight wagons, and we started moving West. They emptied completely the camp in Czestochowa. While we were travelling through the night, towards the West from Czestochowa it was almost ironic that at one point we were passing the town of Katowice, where I was born... of course that brought up an awful lot of emotions that I went through in that period. We ended up in Buchenwald after a few days, and Buchenwald was a huge concentration camp that was in existence already, from what I understand, from before the beginning of the second WW. There were rows and rows of barracks, and we were marched into the camp and were allocated into a wooden structure of a barrack. We lived on straw matresses and two meals in the day -- in the morning and in the evening. And we realized that the war isn't going to last too long, so everybody's hope was that the Germans will get conquered and that we will be liberated.

037 What did you eat?

Well, we had mostly... soup and a quarter of a European type bread, a German type of military bread. However, fortunatelly, during that period, either the Americans or the British had bombed

Weimar, which was a city not too far from Buchenwald, and had done an awful lot of damage in the residential areas, so the Germans took us out to the town of Weimar in order to help clean up the damage that was caused by the bombardment. We were also... we were going to Weimar by train and coming back to the camp by train, but being outside of the camp gave us an opportunity to get some extra food that traditionally the Germans were storing in the cellars, like potatoes and jams, and maybe a piece of bacon, which obviously helped everybody to get more nourishment than they were getting in the camp. My father also ended up in Buchenwald in an adjoining barracks, which was separated from ours by a fence, and because I was getting enough food during the day while I was working in cleaning up the destruction, I was able to give him some of the food that was allocated to me in the evening when I came back from work. Because not everybody was able to go to work in the city to try to clean it up. There were a lot of inmates in Buchenwald that did not have a chance to get extra food and I was aware that a lot of times the stronger inmates were trying to take away the food from the weaker ones... and it was like a death sentence because the weaker ones could not defend themselves or could not have enough food in order to survive. I definitely was a witness to the fact that every day there were a number or corpses that were taken out of the area of people that did not have enough strength or who could not survive under those circumstances.

065 The Russians still kept advancing and at one point, the Germans decided to evacuate all the Jews from Buchenwald. At that point I decided that being a Jew would probably more dangerous than not being a Jew. As a result, I managed to take and armband that belonged to a Frenchman who happened to be in Buchenwald who was dead, and I took his armband and put it on my arm and I got rid of my armband which designated me as a Jew. And I tried to blend in with the rest of the different nationalities that were left in Buchenwald after the Jews were evacuated. Two or three days after the Jews were evacuated from Buchenwald, the Germans decided to evacuate the whole camp again. They loaded us on freight cars and they happened to be open freight cars. And on every freight car, on top, was sitting on each end a German soldier, and I'm stressing this particular point because three or four days out of Buchenwald, going towards the Czech border, we were attacked by British airplanes on a huge railroad spur, and... the train contained like four or five thousand people from the Buchenwald camp, and I understood later that apparently the British pilots, seeing those soldiers sitting on top of those freight cars, thought that that was a convoy of German soldiers, and they strafed us with machine guns and small bombs that also disrupted the railroad system at that point.

089 A lot of the people that were in those trains got killed as a result of that incident. And after everything quieted down, we were forced to put the bodies of all the people that got killed into the last three or four railroad cars, and there was really a.. just bodies, piled one on top of the other, and the rest of us got into the rest of the railroad cars and we continued on our trip towards another camp in Czechoslovakia, I'm sure... I don't remember the name of that camp, but it was on the German-Bavarian border, and we were there for a few weeks, and then again just before the end of the war, which was the end of April, the Germans decided to march us out towards

Dachau. We marched during the night and we rested during the day, hidden in the woods so we would not be spotted by any airplanes. It was Spring and the rain was pouring. It was very cold, and a lot of people could not keep up with it, and every so often, I heard shots in the back [of the line?] and the Germans were killing the people that could not keep up or fell down and could not walk any more. I was determined to do the best to survive, and I always as a result of that tried to stay up front of the column. The column was a long column of the prisoners from the camp on the Czech border.

How old were you?

At that time I was 22 years old, and I could feel that the end of the war was near. My father who was in Buchenwald, and they had no choice or didn't think of a better solution, was evacuated with the Jewish group a few days before myself and the rest of the camp of Buchenwald was emptied out. On one of those nights on the march toward Buchenwald [sic?] we were supposed to rest during the day, but the Germans apparently knew that they were being advanced on, so they got us out of the woods and put us on the road to march towards Dachau during the day, which was totally out of style for the last few days. We were marching for about an hour and a half or two hours, and suddenly I realized that there was some kind of a commotion on the back of the column and I saw that the column was kind of splitting, and a tank appeared on the right, and it had a white star on it. In the beginning I thought it must be the Russians, but then I realized it was an American tank. And then the second, third, and so on... the guards that were walking along side on both sides of us started taking off for the woods and the tanks were shooting at them, and you could see the tracer bullets trying to get them before they managed to disappear into the woods.

135 At that point of course everybody realized that this was the moment that we'd waited for for years. And although there was not a spontaneous rejoicing because everybody was really very weak... we were not fed during that march, except a cup full of grain... otherwise there was no bread and no drink except water. When that finally happened, the only thing I can recall now is that a lot of the Russians and people that were really in good physical form, took off after the Germans and immediately the revenge for all that suffering and all those years of misery came to the surface. The first and second tank were shooting at the Germans, and the third tank was taking pictures of what was happening. The rest of the tanks were throwing out army rations, or camp rations, or sea? rations, which were packages of food which were very well preserved and could last a very long time. Obviously everybody pounced on the rations that were being thrown out by the American crew of the tanks, because everybody was really starving at that point. And... people were just sitting on the sides on the ditches and most of them were totally exhausted, a lot of them were crying, and of course... if you had the appetite to eat at that stage of the game, you started opening up the package and eating some of the food that was contained in those packages. It was like little cans of scrambled eggs, little cans of SPAM, some crackers,

and I remember there was a package of four cigarettes as part of that whole package. I tried to light up one cigarette and I almost fainted because I hadn't smoked for a few years, and those cigarettes were very strong and they almost knocked me out.

165 It was midday by the time everybody realized that we were free and we started looking around as to what to do with ourselves the first day of being free. We were not too far from a small village so a number of guys and myself and a couple of other people who were kind of hanging on to me for survival during the last couple of weeks, we decided to occupy a German farmhouse. And we, the Germans disappeared, there was nobody in the house. It was a farmhouse with animals, pigs, chickens and stuff like that. So we organized ourselves and we decided that's where we were going to stay over night and decide what we were going to do after that. A few of the Polish people that joined us used to be cooks at the camp. They said, don't worry, tomorrow we are going to eat sausages. And they caught a pig and all I know is the next day we were having sausages from the pig that they managed to kill overnight, and it seemed like we were going to have a feast. And one of the main things that I remember is that they took a frying pan through and a piece of lard or fat from the pig into the frying pan, and when it got hot, they started putting eggs into it, and the eggs of course were boiling in that fat, and everybody thought it was wonderful, including myself, and I... of course those eggs were really fat... because they were practically fried(?). I don't know how many I had but I had a few of those eggs for breakfast and as a result of that I had the worst diarreah in my life that lasted for five or six days because my stomach was not used to that kind of food at the time.

194 We stayed at the farmhouse for about five or six days and tried to recoup some of our strength. It was very nice to have finally a roof over your head and be free to do whatever we wanted to do. And then the decision came as to where we would go from here, because obviously, we were not going to stay at the farmhouse forever. We started on a trek to a small town in Bavaria called Schwandorf. And in Schwandorf, because a lot of the Germans were either absent or ran away or whatever it was, we found also an empty house on the outskirts of that town and we kind of organized ourselves and tried to shed our concentration camp clothing by trying to find whatever we could find that would not identify us as concentration camp inmates. We basically tried to join the civilian life, and tried to normalize our life...

213 In that town in Schwandorf, the military police established a headquarters and because I started English in high school in Poland, I kind of struck up a conversation with some of the MP's and also a unit of the counter-intelligence corps, had a headquarters in that city of Schwandorf. I eventually joined the CIC, because I spoke German, Polish and English, and they incorporated me into their group, gave me an army uniform, a PX card, and all kinds of identification that I was part of that group. The function of this unit was to try to find the Germans that were active in Poland during the war and were in charge of the concentration camps, were in charge of the forced labor camps, and particularly the ones that were really

abusing their power via the prisoners, the people in the camps... because a lot of the construction companies that were working in Poland originated in Bavaria, we ended up going to the offices of the different companies and found the names and addresses of the particular people that were really taking advantage of the power that they had during the war in terms of persecuting and killing some of the prisoners. As a result of that activity a number of them were found and were returned to Poland for trial and I understood that quite a number of them were found guilty and were given the death sentence and were executed in Poland during 1946 and 1947.

244 During my activity in Schwandorf, my father managed to realize that I was alive and in Schwandorf, and at the same time I also realized that he survived the war. A lot of lists were published all over Germany of the names of the survivors, and this is how I found him and he found me on one of the lists. WE were reunited about two or three months after the end of the war and needless to say it was a very very joyous occasion. The only sad part of that whole period was that my mother did not survive the war. My sister, which spent her time in Israel during that period, obviously did not suffer as a result of the war, except she was mentally very distressed because she did not hear of her parents or her brother, being me, and she suffered terribly because of what she knew the people in Europe were suffering while she was living in Palestine during those years.

After working with the CIC for close to a year, I was employed by the UN Rehabilitation Organization, which was very active in Germany. I moved to Regensburg and the unit that I was active in the UN Rehab. Org. was part of the United Joint Appeal. And I was very active in Jewish causes, going from displaced persons camp to DP camp. I worked originally with a fellow from the states by the name of Joe Levine, who lives now in Fort Wayne, Indiana and is also very active getting all the facts during the war together. He's active in the Jewish historical society in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Eventually, towards the end of 1947, my father emmigrated to Israel through an underground organization, and I followed, myself, at the end of 1948 to Israel. I lived in Israel for five years before I came to the states. As far as I know, before the war, there were about 40 members of our immediate family -- uncles, aunts, cousins -- and the only ones that I am aware that survived was Max Bolimowsky, my uncle on my mother's side, and Fevek Wiwerman, whom I mentioned before who was my father's brother in law.

296 To fill in some of the details, I belonged to the Ha'Noar organizaton in Poland when I was a young kid, and that organization was active in all kinds of Zionist activities, including collections of money to buy land from the Arabs in Palestine at that time. There was also another organization called Beitar, to which I did not belong. During my growing up in Katowice and the time that I attended the Cheder, I spoke Polish, German, I took English in High School, and I also spoke Yiddish, and of course I learned to read and write Hebrew.

You didn't mention much about your hobbies growing up...

My hobbies growing up were a lot of different types of sports, including ice skating, skiing, bicyling, and one of the other activities was boxing, which I ended up with a broken nose.

You wanted to mention something about the UJA... shipping packages...

After the war I joined the United Jewish Appeal organization and I was working with a representative from the United States, Joe Levine and Abe Cohen from Detroit who took Joe Levine's place eventually, we used to receive an enormous amount of packages from the Jews in America. The packages included all kinds of clothing which was definitely needed because the people who were liberated from camps had absolutely nothing that belonged to them in terms of clothing or any other posessions.

The other thing... the connection of the musical talent of your family...

The musical talent in my family originated with my mother who was also a pianist, and because of her my sister was attending the conservatory, learning the Piano in Poland and that's why she ended up in Israel to finish her studies in the conservatory of Tel Aviv. As a result of her background, her son now, whose name is Rami Barniv, is a famous pianist who travels around the world giving concerts in classical music.

This is all that I have to say for now about my early life, and the years during the war. Even though it sounds very cut and dry, during narration, I must admit it is a very unnerving emotional experience to recount those days in detail. I hope this tape will be of good use to the Holocaust Museum. Thank you.