Helen Fagin interview, 2/13/95

SWB: Why don't you tell me a little about your experience before liberation took place.

HELEN FAGIN: Immediately before liberation, is that what you're asking for?

SWB: Go back a little bit.

HELEN FAGIN: Well j- I'll-I'll just touch the highlights. The Holocaust began for me exactly the day World War w- two started, which is Friday morning, September one, 1939. Our house was bombed Saturday morning, September 2, 1939. And we were on the run since then. We finally returned to our home town of Radumska, Poland, where we stayed with friends, and soon after that the ghetto was formed. We stayed in the Radumska ghetto through 1942. In 1942, September of 1942, my parents were taken away from us and sent to Treblinka, where they perished. My two sisters and I, then, remained in the ghetto, but we stayed there until the liquidation of the ghetto. I was able to escape the march to the railroad station, having sent away my other two sisters before. And I was hiding, I was hiding for a long time and then I couldn't hide any longer. I was able to find my way to a large ghetto in Warsaw. I stayed in the Warsaw ghetto until

the uprising. Then just before the uprising I was able to get out of the ghetto, and I was on so-called Aryan papers, which is false papers. In the mean time, I was caught, and uh worked in a camp, in a w- in a labor camp, but then was released and was taken back to the Warsaw ghetto. I was liberated in Poland, February 17 of 1945. And tried to find my two sisters. We were able to reunite for a very, after a

long long search. And then the decision was made that we could not stay in Poland because we lost everyone, we lost everything, and there was no reason to stay in Poland. Mostly because the atmosphere was not very inviting. Uh, people resented those Jews who have been liberated, and resented the fact that some Jews survived. And uh, we had some personal experiences which persuaded us not to stay in Poland.

SWB: Tell me about those.

HELEN FAGIN: Well, for example prior to us uh leaving for the ghetto, we had some personal possessions that we took

when we fled, and we entrusted these possessions to a so called friend, and uh, after we returned after the end of the world war two to claim these possessions, they wouldn't recognize us, they wouldn't give them back to us, and uh, uh, they just totally dismissed us. So we decided that this was not a very favorable atmosphere to stay at. And then it was much too painful to stay in Poland. It was um, Poland was not very hospitable. And it was very very painful. The memories and the experiences connected with living in Poland will just, were just too devastating. We were contacted by some people who told us that there is a group of Israeli young boys who formed an organization called Brucha, and that they are helping survivors of the Holocaust...to rehabilitate themselves and possibly to find a way of taking them to Palestine. Now Palestine was a place where we knew about because our father was a great Zionist, and he had purchased land in Palestine in 1930's. And he had traveled to Palestine several times. So we knew that eventually we would like to reach Palestine. Parenthetically as a matter of fact, my father had signed me on the list of a uh, higher

education which later become, became the Rehovot, Weissmann Institute in Rehovot, in-in then[?] Palestine. So we decided to put our lives in their hands because there was no real alternative. We were contacted by them and we were told to just, to follow their instructions. And they took us on a long journey over the Carpashian mountains. And we found ourselves on the Czechoslovakian side of the mountains. In Czechoslovakia we were met by another group of young boys who took us through the countryside. And we finally arrived in Bratislava. In Bratislava there was a kind of a camp, which was, in a uh, actually in a square surrounded by buildings, like a large apartment building complex. And we arrived there and there were many many many people, meandering back and fro and uh, everyone was in the same situation as we were. Well we were staying there for a certain time, and I really don't recall how long it was, but I remember that we were walking through the streets of Bratislava, trying to find people who looked familiar, as a matter of fact, we did find some friends who came from our hometown, just by sheer chance, and we were very delighted to have found somebody we have known. And then we were told that we were going to go on a journey. And that journey's going to take us into Austria. The object of our journey was to go out of the Russian occupational zone, leave the Russian occupational zone and go to the American occupation-al zone. Because the conditions were much better and there were some displaced persons camps formed already. In the uh, in Austrian territory of the American occupational zone.

We were met by two or three young boys who told us that from now on we have to shed our identity. That we are no longer Polish Jews, that we are Jews who are trying to return to Greece. Simply because it was felt that no one really in Austria would know the Greek language. But people knew

German or Czech or Polish or Russian and they could always find somebody who could be the translator for us. So we played the role of Greek Jews knowing full well that we cannot communicate in the language. So one of the young boys told us that we, since we cannot be numb altogether, that we have to make an appearance of being able to communicate to one another. That perhaps we ought to use the Hebrew prayers because very few of us really could communicate in Hebrew. So we actually did communicate by gesticulating and using the prayers that everybody knew, in a very conversational tone, so that we would give a uh, some kind of an indication that we are communicating with each other. When we were traveling the international Red Cross would meet us at the different points of the journey and try to help us. And he actually tried to find somebody who knew

the Greek language to be able to speak to us.

SWB: We have to put another roll of film on...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: When you start again, why don't you go back and talk about using the Hebrew prayers as your language.

HELEN FAGIN: So we had to communicate in some kind of a language, and because we didn't know the Greek language uh we used Hebrew prayers by simply using them in a conversational tone, and gesticulating as if we understood each other. Well, we were taken by different modes of transportation, either by train if we were not worried about going through stations and being met there by some

officials, or by trucks. Eventually we reached uh the shores of the Danube riv- river, at night. And there were

little boats waiting for us and we got onto the boats and we crossed the Danube. And then we found ourselves on the other shore which was already in the American sector. From there we were taken by foot and then later by some other conveyance. I remember it must have been trucks, to a camp past Mauthausen concentration camp, which was Wels, in Austria. And there they uh experience of displaced persons camp began. This was our first displaced persons camp. And it was a very depressing experience. First of all, the camp had a fence around it. Secondly, it was guarded by military, American military police, by the MP's. Dressed in the white helmets that say MP, they were wearing the MP uniform, and they were always carrying guns. We had to register and this is the first time that we registered. We got food rations and I remember that the entire experience was very depressing and very devastating. This was to-supposed to have been the liberating aspect of our situation. But it was not. I remember the anguish, and I remember the thought processes that went through my mind. And I remember asking myself what am I doing here. Where am I going? Who is going to be waiting for me? How am I going to begin my so-called new life? What is in store for me? I remember one night, we were awakened about two or there o'clock in the morning, and the MP's stormed in, and told us to get off our bunks, and our bunks were just that, bunks. With burlap sacks filled with straw, this is what we slept on. And they said that were there because somebody stole a can of peaches. And they searched all those straw sacks for

the hidden can of peaches. I remember that the following day, we gathered together and we tried to thing, my God, what is this all about? Fortunately, we didn't stay very

long in Wels. I really don't recall how long. I believe that perhaps six weeks or so, maybe two months.

SWB: Were you locked in?

HELEN FAGIN: We were not locked in, but we were surrounded by fences and we really couldn't get out because, number one, we didn't know where to go, it was a very isolated place. And secondly, we were really guarded, for whatever reason I don't know. [Sound of crows in BG] They took us from Wels to Lenz in Germany. Lenz was another displaced persons camp, but when we arrived there, it was full to capacity. And they couldn't receive us. So we were waiting there on a temporary basis, they couldn't accommodate us there. And finally, they told us that we have to go back on those trucks, and they took th- took us to the south of Austria. Into a beautiful place called Badgastein. Which

was a resort, in the Alps, and the accommodations were absolutely phenomenal. They put us up in hotels. And we had nice beddings, and we didn't have to use outhouses any longer. We had bathrooms. And we had indoor showers. In Wels we had outdoor showers. And that was a tremendous improvement. It was, this camp was under the auspices of UNRHA, United Nations Refugee Rehabilitation Administration. And the conditions were-were-were much improved. There was a certain aspect of that camp which was different from any other. First of all, we were freer to think about our future. There was a free movement of people in and out. And we were aware of what was going on in the world. So we knew that there was such a thing as exodus. We could leave. We could go by way of Switzerland, to Italy, and we could sign up to go on those boats towards Palestine. And we could dream at least of a certain kind of an objective,

certain kind of a goal, certain kind of a future, that was in sight. It was concrete, it was achievable, it was do able. So those of us who had dreams of going to Palestine did so. We signed up. I believe that we arrived in Badgas-

tein towards the end of September, probably beginning of October 1945. The international Red Cross sent us packages, and we were able to find some decent clothes to wear. With the approaching fall and winter however, we didn't have much winter clothes. But we were satisfied that we could at least have some decent attire. Not too much of it, but we were wearing decent clothes. When winter approached, I remember a very fine young lieutenant, from Dayton, Ohio, I remember his name, Lieutenant Kyle, approached me once and asked me if I had a winter coat, and I said, no I didn't. So he brought me a G.I. blanket. And I remember I cut a hole in the middle of the blanket and I wore it as a cape. And that was my winter coat and I was very grateful for that. In the camp I was able to work in the office, cause I spoke fluent German, and it helped us to know the German language to communicate with the rest of the population. The population was not very happy with our presence there. But we did the best we could not to aggravate them and to stay out of their way. The life inside displaced persons' camp... was very interesting. First of all, we tried to gain awareness of what the potential, what our future opportunities may be. And we got together quite often, young men and women, to discuss our situation. The first thing that we did, and that was a very determined act, we were told that if we are of a special, of a certain nationality, we will be given the opportunity to return to the country of our origin. And if we make that choice, we had to sign up, and we would go to our respective countries. The other

choice was, the other alternative was, to declare ourselves

stateless. And then leave it to whatever fate there is going to uh be available to us.

SWB: We need to reload...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: When we start, just back up and restate that you had a choice between repatriation...

HELEN FAGIN: Well in the displaced persons camp of Badgastein, we were given two choices. One, to return to the country of our origin and become repatriated. Or to remain in the camp, in that case we have to pronounce ourselves and declare ourselves stateless. Without any right of belonging to any country any longer. That was a uh choice that many of us decided in favor of, becoming

stateless. At that moment of our decision I think we suffered a very tremendous anguish. Because the decision has to be made on the basis of what is there for us in the future. We knew we cannot go back to Poland, because there was nothing to go back to. We knew we have lost all the ties to Poland and we knew that the situation in Poland was really not favorable to establishing any kind of a life for ourselves. So the decision to become stateless was the better decision. And perhaps the most, the more, the more promising decision for our future. And it was, at that moment, I remember, that my thoughts and my feelings ran the gamut. It was a period of feeling tremendous anguish, even despair. Liberation was a very bittersweet concept for us at that moment. And as much as we longed for being

liberated all these years of the holocaust, the situation of having been liberated did not hold very much promise for a better life for us. Our thoughts went back obviously to the past, to our childhood, to our youth, to our families, to our parents, and there was a tremendous emptiness in our souls and our hearts. There was no jubilation, there was no

happiness, there was almost depression. When we talked, when we met, we were always somber. And we couldn't really understand whether or not we made the right decision. We just felt in our guts that this was the decision that we had to reach. Knowing full well that we are not the masters of our own fate, we just had to leave everything to those who would direct us from then on. So many of us decided to be as positive as we could. We would gather together and we would attend some kind of lectures, I remembered many of us decided to learn English. Uh we decided to find some books or some uh resources that would allow us to get acquainted at least with the language so we could communicate with the people of UNRHA, most of whom were either American or British. And I remember getting some kind of a book with verses, with little ditties, little poems, and we were learning them and trying to understand them, and I still remember a couple of them, but uh. We tried to be as useful to ourselves as possible. Another aspect of our activities, I remember, were political activities. We have found out that the British did not allow the boats to uh land in Haifa, and they did not allow, they did not receive the refugees into Palestine. I don't recall whether we learned about the camp of Cyprus at that time or not, but we heard that some of the boats were returned, and we organized protests. And we were marching [light plane noise in BG] and protesting, and uh we were very vociferous, very vocal against the British actions, and we were trying to influence

the international Red Cross to express our protest. I know that we had a number of visitors who brought us all this news, of what was going on, and we tried to inform ourselves the best we could. And we tried to help people who are in need, that there was a hospital nearby in Hoffgastein, my sister who had some nurses' training was working in that hospital. We tried to obtain as much medication as we could, to save the health of a number of people who were placed in that hospital. We tried to be as helpful to each other as we could. We tried to be as uh social with one another as we could. There were very many kids who didn't have any parents left and who didn't have any siblings, so we tried to sort of form extended families for those who didn't have any families left. We tried to boost each others' hopes and we tried to help each other. The international Red Cross came there to try to find some of our families. We had families, we thought we had families in England and we gave them the names and they tried to research it for us. They did research, uh-uh, some of the names for us. Uh, we tried to communicate with people we knew who lived in Israel, I had family in Israel, and we contacted them. And we established communications with

Israel. What we were very surprise is that we were not very much helped by any Jewish organizations in the United States. I don't recall that any of these organizations came forward with any help for us. As a matter of fact, I do recall that, that high-S[?] helped with my... with my ticket from Bremenhaven to New York City, but I also recall that I got a bill for them from them, and eventually I had to repay them the fare of the transport from Bremenhaven to New York. I was very surprised and in retrospect I really cannot understand the fact that when I arrived in New York, nobody gave a hoot what has happened, what would happened with me.

Uh, I uh, was not given the opportunity for education, nobody cared about my psychological well-being. Uh, nobody ever asked how in the world is it possible for a young person who has gone through five and a half years of persecution, and kind of a personal tragedies that we had to go through, and not worry about their psychological well being. Uh this is something that has always dumbfounded me. That when the Holocaust survivor came to the United States, he or she embarked immediately onto the process of

acculturation, of trying to adapt oneself to the way of life of America, to try not to stand out like a sore thumb, to try to melt into the culture and the life, to try not to show that we were different, to try not to act the victim, and to try to develop a certain mode of- live in the certain kind of a life which would establish us as a normal part of the society. Learning the language, for example. I came here and I didn't know English. And I remember my first act was to buy a dictionary. I couldn't find a Polish-English dictionary, I bought a Polish, a German-English dictionary and I would buy the New York Times and I would read it with the dictionary.

SWB: We have to reload.

HELEN FAGIN: Now would you prefer if I stopped already?

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

SWB: So for example the language, if you could just back up to there, coming to this country.

HELEN FAGIN: Well, oh, I didn't really know English at all. And uh what I did was I would buy the New York Times and with the help of a German-English dictionary, I would read it. And I would try to understand it. And then, everyone that I would meet, I would ask them to please correct my pronunciation, to correct my language, as much as they could, because I was very very intent on learning how to speak English. I never learned a word unless I knew its spelling, so that I knew how to spell it, and then I would learn how to pronounce it. And the pronunciation of course was very difficult once you are more or less an adult, it's very very difficult to forget the uh, idioms of a language that you were trained in, and translate them into a different language. Uh, but you really don't want me to talk about my time in-in-in America, so.

SWB: Tell me, going back to Wels, I want to learn about the day-to-day life there. Was there a lot of standing in line, was it organized, was it disorganized?

HELEN FAGIN: I thought it was pretty well organized, uh, but of course there was always standing in line for the food, as was always standing in line for the showers. There was um, always, well standing in line of course for registration. But this was, this was a very very well

organized uh-uh system. Uh because they wanted to have everything under a very very strict control. Uh, this was actually the first time that we registered. The first time that we declared ourselves as-as any kind of a, of a living person, to be dealt with. Uh, but um, it was very depersonalized. Very cold, and very very uh, officious, I would say. We didn't get the impression that anybody really cared for us as people, as a person, as a human being. But

they had a job to do and they did the job, and uh, it was all on a very contem- uh-uh temporary basis. We knew that uh, uh, that was the place, that is was sort of a transit place, and uh we were hoping we were not going to remain there for a long time.

SWB: The time that you were there, were there um many nationalities and also were there non-Jews?

HELEN FAGIN: I don't remember whether there were any non Jews, but I do remember many nationalities. Many Czechoslovakian, many Hungarian, many Rumanian Jews. Uh, I

don't remember that there were very many north European Jews, but I do remember central and east European Jews.

SWB: Did you think there was a lack of understanding on the part of the administrators, or the MP's, because many of you were from countries that they didn't understand why you couldn't go back?

HELEN FAGIN: Well, I really cannot remember the exact, uh conduct of the people, but I have the impression that is so lasting, as a matter of fact I spoke with my younger sister about it the other day. And I ask her what kind of impressions she took out of there. And she confirmed with me that she felt the same way. So it's not a personal aversion, it is something that was a general atmosphere, a general feeling, that we weren't cared for as human beings, we were just cared for as uh, as-as-as an entity to-to-to-to-to, to-to process more or less, it was a processing feeling rather than caring feeling.

SWB: And now going back to liberation itself, can you tell

me...

HELEN FAGIN: Yes the process of uh-libera-liberation was uh very interesting one in my case because I was sort of liberated twice. Uh I was at that time living on uh false papers, on Aryan papers [plane noise BG] and that was after we uh-uh were wandering from place to place, trying to hide and trying to establish ourselves uh-uh

SWB: Let's cut for a second because this jet...

[CUT]

[SYNC TAKE 5]

HELEN FAGIN: My liberation was really a very curious one, because I was twice liberated. I was then under uh false papers, and uh trying to hide and trying to emerge, and uh at one point we uh heard rumors that the Russians are very near, that was very close to the Russian-German front. In western Poland. And when we heard that the Russians were very close we decided that maybe we can emerge and finally uh, act as ourselves and [plane noise BG] say well here we are and we can be liberated. Well the Russians did come and we emerged and we were elated and they, at first could not believe that we were Jewish because they had encountered, prior to that, Jews coming out of hiding or coming out of camps, and sure enough, we were euphoric. Absolutely

euphoric. Uh the Russians are uh very friendly although they were a little bit rough, but they were very friendly, and uh they uh offered to share some food with us, which was uh, very much welcomed. And then they went ahead. And uh we were just left there in a very sort of atmosphere of no

one's, nobody's land, and we didn't know how to act and how to uh, relate to the people we have uh met, whether to blow our cover or not, because we really didn't trust the Polish people. So we decided not to show our-our elation, and to take it with low profile, and that was a very lucky choice for us, because sure enough, somehow or other, the Russian had to re- Russians had to retreat, and the Germans came back. When the Germans came back we really were very frightened. We thought that we are going to be renounced by the population, who may have sensed our elation with the Germans. And uh we decided to go east to move east as far east as we could, but we really couldn't get very far because the front moved, kept moving from one kilometer one way to the one kilometer the other way. So we went underground, and then we-we-we heard fighting, and we just

didn't know what to do, so we hid in-in basements as much as we could, until about few days later when we heard total silence, when we didn't hear any shooting, when we uh sent somebody out to uh find out whether it was safe to come out and when we came out indeed the Russians were there. And they assured us that they were there for good, and that the Germans retreated for good, and then we really blew our cover, and we felt that we were free to be ourselves. And then of course, the bittersweet feeling came upon us. We uh made the decision to return to our hometown, to see whether we can find anyone alive, and then we confronted the rubbles, the physical rubbles and the psychological rubbles of uh, of the aftermath of the war.

SWB: And so order emerged out of the chaos very slowly.

HELEN FAGIN: I wouldn't call it order. Chaos was continuing. People were wandering about, people were trying

to establish stations where we could uh notify others about the fact that we are alive and try to find people's names.

Uh there were on-on-on any well-well we had kiosks in Europe where all kinds of proclamations were pasted. Uh, on any such kiosk in every town you could see rows and rows of names that people inquired about, and those who were alive would put their names and the whereabouts so they could be contacted. Uh, it was no order, it was chaos. In Poland especially, there was chaos, because the government was in exile, and uh, they-th-they had to form a new government which was of course now being dominated by the Russians. And uh people could not understand where to go and what to do and how to establish their uh new existence. And um there were people just a-wandering about, looking for others, trying to uh make sense out of the chaos. Order was-was far far away.

SWB: Thank you. I think I have everything that I need, thank you.

HELEN FAGIN: Okay, you're welcome.

[END]

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.