

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Morris Engelson
January 2, 1990
RG-50.030*0068

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Morris Engelson, conducted on January 2, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

MORRIS ENGELSON

January 2, 1990

01:00:47

Q: Would you tell me your full name please?

A: My real name is Morris Engelson, but that's an anglicized version of...in Polish it would be Mosha Englczyn, but any how, what's in a name. My Hebrew name is Moshay, and I come from a small town in the vicinity of Vilna, which is in the news now in Lithuania, of course. The town is called Popberezha or Podgrada in Yiddish. Now, the name would be Pograder which would be the Lithuanian version of the Polish name for Popberezha.

Q: When were you born?

A: I was born in mid 1935, so I am just about 55 years old now, and that made me 6 years old in 1941 when the Germans came in.

Q: Before the Germans came in, what do you remember of your very early years and I guess when the Russians came in?

A: Okay. I remember a pretty happy sort of carefree childhood. Although it turned out we were not rich. In fact we were quite poor for a certain reason that happened earlier which is germane to this story. But Popberezha is a beautiful scenic area. It's a resort town. People came there for vacations. It's well known as a vacation spot. I remember people talking about...oh, this famous person came and that person came and so on and so forth. So it's a beautiful area on two rivers. With bridges across the town or city as we call it. It's a small town. Roughly half Jewish and half mostly Polish people. Maybe 5,000 people altogether, about 2,000 Jews in the area. And there was a small place. It was a very safe place. The Jewish area was sort of by itself but not any significant amount of anti-Semitism. The Jews and the Poles got along reasonably well together which is unusual. And I remember it as a happy place and an enjoyable place with games and playing and running by the river and all kinds of adventures or misadventures. Stuff like that.

01:03:08

Q: Tell me about your parents. What did your father do?

A: Okay. My father was in business similar to his father in dealing with buying grain from farmers and reselling it, so he was a grain merchant he would call it. A total of seven brothers and sisters that he had, so I am dealing here on his side an extended family. They were all married. He was one of the youngest in the family so we're dealing with an extended family about 50 odd people. And my mother's family, she had a sister there. That's all because they were quasi-recent immigrants having been displaced during World

War I and they came to this area after that but my father's family had lived there for many, many years so my mother's family was more scattered and the rest of her family was in different places. In fact, one sister was in another place called Soly, which helped us out later. But my father's family comes from an old Misnagid [non-chassidik] family. The whole area was Misnagid because of the Wilner Gaon and so forth. And my grandfather, Alav haShalom [may he rest in peace] was a very very staunch you might say stern type individual, but a very honorable person who believed in doing everything by the book if I can say it that way. Well known individual who paid for it in a certain way, but the Nazis when they came in they usually picked on somebody who they considered the leader of the community. I don't know why they picked on my grandfather because he was not the Rav [rabbi] but we have eye witness accounts that he was the one picked on. They beat him. They ripped his beard out, and they blinded him before they shot him. So that was not a good way to end your life at the age of 81. But he also was a grain merchant, but when I knew him he was very, very, very poor because something happened 20 years prior to that that made him poor. And that's an important story I have to tell you because that's what saved our life. It happened that he used to buy and sell grain from the local farmers. Local farmers in that area were very poor. They were sharecroppers because the primary ownership of land in this feudal society in Poland was from the large landowners a form of nobility.

01:06:00

However, there was one farmer who for some strange means had acquired his own land and acquired a little bit of a farm and he was considered rich by those standards. And my grandfather used to do a lot of business with this man. One day it seems 15 years before the war or something like that, Grandfather decided that the way to...to really go was to become not only a merchant but a miller because the real money to be made was in turning the grain into flour. There were three mills in our town, all water-operated mills on the rivers. When one mill became available, he decide to buy it. And so he bought this mill and he spent everything he had...everything he could borrow to buy this mill and he had no money to buy grain. So he went to this particular farmer with whom he had dealt many times before and he made an agreement that he would buy the grain on credit. I don't know what the deal was, how much extra he paid him, but the farmer trusted him and he sold him the grain on credit. And the grain came in and it was put into the mill. It was all filled up and then according to the story apparently it was arson but nobody proved anything because the idea was the other two millers were jealous because they were afraid that he would become too much of a competitor. The mill caught fire and it was on the Sabbath. And it was on the river and people could have put it out. They started to put it out, but my grandfather came out and he said, "There is nobody in there. No lives are involved. You will not put it out. It's Sabbath." And he forbade them to put out this fire and the mill burned to the ground and all the grain with it. So he was bankrupt and he owed this farmer for all the grain. Now the farmer could have probably taken him to court or something, but I don't know what he could have done. In any event, my grandfather then walked about 20 miles or whatever the distance was to the farmer's house, the farm and he told the farmer that he would pay him back everything no matter how long it took. And it took something like 10, 15 years. Everything he had, everything

he could get, and there were some...there was a son in the United States who sent money home. Everything the family went to this farmer to pay back for the grain. That's why the family was poor. Now, the critical issue is that after the Germans came in we escaped. Many Jews escaped. Those who had no money they usually did not survive because they couldn't pay anybody and people were not that altruistic because it was very, very dangerous. Those who had money they did not survive either because eventually they came in contact with somebody who killed them for their money because it was very easy to kill a Jew.

01:09:00

There were no penalties whatsoever. So anybody who wanted to kill a Jew and take their money, they just did it. We had no money. Nobody would kill us for our money. But what we had is the honor of the family that spent 15 years paying off. And this farmer's sons hid my father with the belief that if we survived they would be rewarded, and they knew that he meant it. So through this mill that burned down and my grandfather spending 15 years paying this farmer and his sons knowing that my father was the son of this man, they were willing to take the chance. So in a way he was paid for letting this thing burn down because he said you do not do work on Sabbath. (Long Pause) There's a reason for everything.

Q: Indeed. Alright. Thank you. Let us go back.

A: Right.

Q: Let us go back to when the Russians came '39.

A: Okay.

Q: Tell us what you remember.

A: I remember that extremely well. I was standing by the road and my mother was screaming at me to come inside and it was the most fascinating sight that I had ever seen. This is a little town with dirt roads, not even paved, you understand. When we say roads it was the place where carts went, wagons. And I had never seen more than one automobile per month before and here were these cars, tanks, armored carriers, whatever, going for hours and hours on end. Non-stop! And I just couldn't understand it. I didn't understand where these things came from. It was like magic, and it was just so fascinating to stand by the road and the dust and these things rumbling and making noises and so forth and finally she came and snatched me away because she thought it was dangerous. It wasn't dangerous. These people weren't doing anything. And they seemed to be going on for days. It wasn't. I am sure it was hours, but it seemed as if there were millions and millions of these tanks just non-stop continually going and going and going and going. And the Russians came and took over the place and russified it or whatever the right word is. They changed the administration. A lot of people were rounded up and sent to Siberia, the so-called wealthy and the landowners and the anti-communists and

whoever they feared. Our life didn't change much because we were not rich to start with, as I told you the story and so forth.

01:12:00

And we had a house, but that didn't make us into landowners. And life went on as before, and no significant changes of any kind except there was a lot of tension, the fear. You could sense different behaviors. Of course, there were stories which I didn't understand at the time about the atrocities in Poland, in the German occupied part of Poland. There were refugees that were coming through telling horrifying stories that nobody believed. I mean it couldn't possibly be that bad, you know, and so forth. But on the whole, it continued to be peaceful and most of what I remember of the town...in fact, about what it looked like and...and it's beauty and so forth I think is more from that time than before '39 because I was very young, only 4 years old in '39. It's hard to remember precisely. There is one memory that I am certain is before '39 because I fell into something, almost got killed, but anyhow. It was a childhood accident. But otherwise, the Russians didn't do anything to us, but there were various changes in the atmosphere which was more of World War II than the Russians themselves. And then in 1941 in June very suddenly...it happened very quickly as I assume it happened everywhere. The Russians were there one day, and then they weren't there. There was hardly any fighting. There was no front. There was nothing. All of a sudden there were no Russians and there were Germans. And we knew they were there because right out from this town was a very large military camp, a big military base barracks where military were stationed. They lived there. They had barracks there. Right out side of Popberezha, about couple of kilometers. A very, very large camp and the soldiers used to come into town sometimes. All of a sudden before that there were Poles that were there. The Russians came in and the Russians took over that camp and made it into a Russian military camp. And all of a sudden, the Russians weren't there and the Germans were there. So the Russians interlude was sort of a beginning and an end and sort of no middle to me. Okay.

Q: Tell me about the Germans and what happened. How did life change.

A: Well, the Germans came and the Jews were...two basic orders. One was a location order and since the Jews tended to live in a certain area anyhow there wasn't really that much relocation. Some people had to move and it got a little bit more crowded, but it didn't crowd us all that much. They just adjusted the boundaries of the Jewish quarter because the Jews and the Poles did not intermingle all that much even though it was a combined Jewish-Polish town.

01:15:09

The Jews lived in one area, and the Poles lived in another area. And so the few Jews who lived outside of this area were forced to come in and find places with friends, relatives, whoever it may be, and it got a little bit more crowded. The other thing, of course, was that there were curfews and you could not leave this quarter. There were boundaries but no real fences, no barbed wire, no real guards to speak of. You had to be there, and the

penalty was harsh. If you were found outside it, you were shot. And they did do a lot of shooting of people. Terror killings. They came in and just took little groups here and there. And no rhyme or reason. Presumably they were leaders or whatever, but many people that were killed, they were not leaders. I don't understand what the rationale was. Maybe just to generate enough fear that people would obey orders and not argue about it. And people had to wear the yellow star. You had to wear two stars, one front and one back. And if you were caught without a star, the penalty was death. So you had to wear the star to be identified fully as a Jew. And you were not permitted to go outside the Jewish quarter. Life became more difficult in terms of food and making a living because all the relationships and business things, and whatever the case may be...those could not exist anymore. So people lived off of accumulations and savings or whatever. But that was of no consequence because we're dealing with only 3 months and I am sure the people had enough capital or whatever to live for 3 months. So there was no real transition to Jew(ish) ghetto situation.

Q: How did you feel the change as a kid?

A: The change was a different life style. It's a tension, and it was very clear...the kids understood it very well. There were no arguments about the curfews and not being able to go to certain places that you used to go and so forth. It was very clear that this was serious. This was real. This wasn't just parental whim...no, you can't go here because whatever the case may be. This was very clear that the kids almost...it's almost like a law of nature. At that age you understand that you don't jump off the roof because it is dangerous and it isn't just that your parent is afraid. You really don't jump off the roof because you may get hurt and you're old enough and smart enough to know that you don't want that to happen to you. It was almost that kind of a thing. It was not an issue of somebody telling you. You knew you did not do these things. It was almost as if it was a physical law. You didn't cross this barrier because something horrible would happen. sothere was no issue about dis...disobeying anybody or...or trying some childish tricks about these rules.

01:18:05

You stayed where you were supposed to stay. You wore the yellow star like you were supposed to wear the yellow star. It was a very strange experience in terms of growing up. There was a jump of years. I would think that normally a child would not acquire that kind of mental outlook till later. And in my case I was 6, and it happened very fast and I don't know exactly how the adjustment was made, but I do recall that all of a sudden I had this outlook that this is normal. This is how you were supposed to do and it wasn't a matter of somebody telling me. I believed it. So there was some kind of mental adjustment. I had no idea how it was done.

Q: You were an observant family I understand it...Jewishly observant family. Did that...did the curfew affect that?

A: No. Our family, my grandfather was extremely Orthodox. Mine was not that much in those areas. Here in the United States it would be considered. I mean it depends. Everything is relative. But it wasn't any big deal. All the Jews were observant in one form or another. Those who were not observant were what you call it extremely traditional. But Lodz(???) and the other areas we were hardly Yiddishist related. We had many people there in our own family too that were involved with Yiddishkeit not Jewish historical, but the Yiddish language and the Yiddish literature. Vilna, as you know, was the place of the YIVO, the Jewish what do you call it? "Wissenschaft" Jewish knowledge institute, the Jewish Knowledge Institute or whatever the proper translation would be. And it was a modern type movement dealing with current events as opposed to historical Judaism, and dealing with the Yiddish language as a force and the Yiddish literature as a force. And many of these people were totally unobservant in the sense of holding to the Mitzvoth because they believed (not) in the Torah. But that was a way of life and it would be very fine for these people not to follow through. So they were traditional in the sense of this is how a Jew lived whereas those who were observant were this is how a Jew lived and this is how a Jew must live. It's a very fine distinction in that case. Today, of course, the distinctions are much greater. So I don't think there was any impact in terms of the behavior of the town because that's how Jews lived.

01:21:00

And all of the stuff was internal anyway. It isn't as if you went across the street to a Polish friend and had a ham sandwich. So if you are talking about kosher food it was all Jewishly created in any event and the fact that the Germans were around us that didn't change anything. At least I don't recall it. I mean this is a very poor perspective from a 6 year old, but that's how I recall it.

Q: How did things change? When did things change?

A: Well, things changed a couple of months after the Germans came really....significantly in that places started disappearing. I don't know how else to say it. All of a sudden a certain place wasn't there. There were no Jews there. It as if it was pulled off the map and shipped off to Mars or something. Somebody would come in, "I escaped. All the rest are gone." "Where are they gone?" "They're dead." "Why are the dead?" "I don't know." "Did you see it?" "I didn't see anything. I escaped. Nobody knows anything. Can't find them. They're dead." And it was clear that they're dead. The question is why? And there were all kinds of theories. People ascribed some very specific rationale, logical reasons for why the Germans were doing these things as opposed to just pure spite or hatred or some manifestation of a pagan religion that made it necessary to kill all the Jews. So people tried to ascribe logistical war reasons. They wiped out this town because they needed for a military base and they weren't going to bother to relocate the Jews because they don't care about Jews anyhow so they killed them. But they don't need our place for a military base. And later when we, my mother and father, escaped to Belarussia (Belarus), the whole rationale was they're killing all the Jews here but the Belarussia is alright because that's across the border. So places started to disappear and because the they were places of like kind in terms of borders and location and other things, there was

a general feeling we too were on the list. The question is what do you do about it. And we couldn't do anything about it. So there's a great deal of uncertainty, a great deal of fear, a great deal of wondering what would happen and that people were very jittery. It's like living in San Francisco after the earthquake recently and wondering what...when the aftershocks going to hit. Do you run? Do you stay? Do you come home? Are the walls going to crumble down?

01:24:00

Except you couldn't go any place. There was no place to go. People wonder why they didn't escape or anything like that. There was no place to escape. There was absolutely no place to go. Those people who escaped...there were some who managed to escape as the Germans came in. They escaped in front of the Germans and they went into Russia. They escaped with the Russian army. Those people really had some place to go. They had the foresight and they went. But anybody who stayed, the front was so far behind us or rather front of us, which ever way and the Germans were practically in Moscow. There was no place to escape. So the change was more of the same kind in terms of a general feeling of I won't say fear. Uncertainty and dread. I think dread is a better word than fear. Not knowing.

Q: What happened?

A: What happened is that in September of 1941 on the Friday before Sabbath Shuva which was on the 20th of September German groups...soldiers came and organized various local men villages, primarily civilian. There may have been some Poles in those groups but I am not aware of any, and it is my understanding it was one of the Einsatzgruppen came to finish off Popberezha. There were about 2,000 Jews in Popberezha and surrounding vicinity there were little towns or farm communities or whatever and just lived all over the place. It happened that one of the local police functionaries was friendly with a certain Jews because of some prior favors that they had done to each other. And he knew that these people came in and they were organizing various things. He didn't know precisely why but it was quite obvious. And so he came to his Jewish friend and he said, "Something is going to happen. You have hours before the place will be surrounded and nobody will be able to get out." This man sent out the alarm. Most people (a) didn't believe it and (b) had no idea what to do anyhow. They weren't going to leave children. They weren't going to leave parents, and they had no place to go and they said, "If I am going to die, I might as well die right here." Many people such as my father believed it more or less but they wouldn't go because in prior times there had been false alarms and there was a great deal of looting and people were afraid of losing their few possessions because really you were not going to have a chance to work or do anything useful to gain more possessions.

01:27:00

But there was some work I should say. The Germans put the Jews to work in slave labor and it was very hard work. In fact, my father worked at slave labor and he fell down. It

wasn't deliberate. He fell off a...a scaffolding or something and he broke two of his ribs. So at that time he had taped up ribs and...and that was the situation. But anyhow my father decided to send my mother, brother and myself out. We...we agreed where they would go and he said he knew the area very well. He was a strong man. He was a very, very strong physically, my father in spite of his broken rib, and he felt confident that he could get out no matter what they did because he knew the area extremely well and he would be able to hide and sneak through. He said, "I am going to stay home and if there's looting I'll stop them. If something is happening I'll come meet you there next day." So we packed up some food. It was the Sabbath food, some chicken I remember and a few other things in a bundle, dressed up as peasant woman and took off the yellow stars and we walked right out of town. Nobody stopped us. There were no guards. There was nothing. The problem was we had to walk right by the military barracks. And that scared us because we were sure that these people would do something. But they didn't. They had nothing to do with it. Those were ordinary soldiers. The Einsatzgruppen group were the SS, and the soldiers were soldiers, and we were just peasants walking by. We walked right by the barracks a couple of miles out of town where there's a little road to the side where all these Germans...the soldiers were staying, and we saw them coming and going and we just kept walking. And it was nothing. And so we kept walking. And we had a couple of hours walk to get out of town to a certain farm of a woman that our family knew, had done some business with her. Fine lady presumably. She was a widow, had a teenage son. I would guess 15, 16 years old. And we came there and she was at home and mother told her something is happening and we need to hide. The woman was very fearful. She didn't want us there, but she couldn't turn us away. So she said, "Okay. I won't let you in the house. I am afraid. Go stay in the barn." There was a barn, and there was hay in the barn, and we crawled up in the loft and the hay, and the barn walls were not wood. They were kind of straw and we could see through the chinks in the matted straw. And during the night we started hearing shooting. So it was bad. It was clear that something was really going on. It was a lot of shooting. And father was supposed to come during the night if something would happen. He didn't come. And so we were sure that he couldn't get out. That was the end of him.

01:30:00

In the morning we didn't know what to do. But before we could do something, a Lithuanian local auxiliary came to the house and he wanted to know if any Jews were in the area and the woman, "I haven't...I don't know anything about Jews. No Jews in my house. If you want, come in and look." And he says, "There are other areas. What about your barn? Jews have sneaked into the barn." She said, "Silly, what would Jews be doing in a barn?" "Listen, you have been working very hard," she says, "it's been a horrible day. They're working all night chasing these terrible Jews. Come in and have something to eat and you can chase some more Jews." He says, "Okay," so they went into the house. And she gave him breakfast. I don't know what. He was eating breakfast and her teenage son came into the barn and we heard this and this was very close so we could hear them talking. We saw him with a gun, a bolt action rifle. I remember it. You had to pull the bolt, an old type rifle. And the son came in and he said, "I'm going to get you across the river. Come quickly." Now Popberezha is on two rivers as I said. One is a major river

called the Lyna [this river is far west from Vilnius!] which you will find in all the big maps I think. It was the Lyna that was going over there or it could have been the other one. I can't swear to it. Anyhow he came with a boat. We got into the boat and he was rowing us across the river and we were about two-thirds across and for whatever reason this person saw us through the window. He got up, he stretched or whatever. He saw us through the window. He dropped his where the?? is gone. He ran out and he pointed his gun at this young man and he started shouting for him to come back or he would kill him but this fellow continued to row for about another half a minute. We were close. If we were not close, I don't know what would have happened. He continued to row. We got to this shore. We jumped out and then this fellow, I think, he shot one shot or something like that. This guy turned around and he came back. He came back. He got him in the boat and rowed him across so the Lithuanian rode across and he was about 5, 7 minutes behind us. He got out of the boat and we were near the woods. There were some woods there. And he starting shooting at us. And we just kept going into the woods and he was right behind us. And I don't know how he missed us, but he missed us. Now we couldn't go very fast because we were in the woods and there were trees and there were branches ripping us up, you know, and I was not running too fast. I'm a little kid. And we were not woodsmen people. We're towns people. So we kept running in the woods and he was behind us shooting at us all the time. And this woman was sure that we were dead. I mean it's impossible that we would escape. And she never saw him again. He just went wherever he went. And she never saw us.

01:33:00

She didn't go into the woods to look obviously. Anyhow, he didn't kill us. So we were in these woods and we're running in the wood and finally, we knew we lost him. But we're lost in the woods. We don't know where to go or anything. Just lost in the woods. And we're wondering around the woods in circles or whatever...just going in the woods. Finally, we're up on a hill or something and in the distance we saw the spire of a church. Very tall. So we needed a direction to go. Now a very strange thing. Many of the priests in that area were illiterate priests. They were peasants themselves, and they were very anti-Semitic. I have to say this. They were illiterate and they believed the Jews killed God. The Jews crucified Jesus and they preached it. And not as badly in other places but they preached it and there were plenty of anti-Semites. The towns people themselves were not bad. Strange deal. This church that we saw, this priest was not only not anti-Semitic, he was, you might call, philo-semitic. He really believed that the Jews were a good people and that it was his christian duty to protect the Jews. He was very friendly with the Jews. And we got to this church and a woman came out...the housekeeper or whatever. She says, "I'm sorry. The priest is not here. They're killing the Jews in town and he went to see if he could help. But he left word if any Jew managed to come to this area I am to do certain things for you. Here is some food." And what she gave us is milk, something to drink. "And I will lead you to where you can escape." And she sent us off to a farm. She told us where to go. And we had not known about this thing at all. It was an old smuggling network. The area is on the border between Poland and Lithuania and it changed hands many times and the people in this area, they didn't feel the border was real. I mean sometimes it's Poland, sometimes Lithuania. Who cares about customs.

There was a whole bunch of people, a gang or whatever you call it who were smugglers. And the commodities they used to smuggle was saccharin (it) was a very big commodity because it's small, and it was very precious. Substitute for sugar because sugar was very hard to get. And cigarettes. That was their big thing. Saccharin and cigarettes. Anyhow, so she got in touch with this gang of smugglers.

01:36:00

Now they were not altruistic and they were not anti-Jewish. They enjoyed crossing borders and taking risks if they got paid. So whatever money Mother had she paid up, and we went from hand to hand to hand to hand...a 2 week walk at night and they would hand us off to the next station of this smuggling network. And on the road on the way lots of other Jews got involved in this. Pretty soon there was anything...20, 30 people, sometimes coming and going, each one looking to get to a certain place. And we were looking to get to Colsol in Belarus where mother had a sister and she figured that's where she could go where she knew somebody. So he told them where she wanted to go and they said, "Yeah. We'll move you on this way. And this people were going to move you that way." Was a whole network of these people. And along the way, each one you gave a little bit of money. As long as your money held out you were alright. They gave you food. During the day we were hiding and at night we were walking through fields, across barbed wire fences and all kinds of stuff and it was pitch dark and they knew all the holes and all the ditches and they would say, "Stop here. There's going to be a big ditch. Hold hands cause you'll fall down." And we would hold on and walk across. And we walked for 2 weeks. And pretty soon we were on the outskirts of this place and they said, "That's it. Our job stops here. You're on your own. Do whatever you like." And all of a sudden they weren't there. And so we were down to nothing. My mother had two wedding rings. She had her own wedding ring and her father's wedding ring with her. Everything else was given away to these people, and we had to get to this place. And it was far away and also dangerous. And there was a farmer with a wagon driving by so she came to him and she asked him if he would drive us to this ghetto if he knew where it was. He said, "Sure." "Would you drive us?" He said, "Yeah. Pay me." So she decided she would pay him with her own wedding ring and hold father's because this was a memento. She was sure father was dead. So she gave him her wedding ring and he drove us right to the ghetto. Was no problem. In the ghetto we came right in and I have to say this because there's feeling I have. I am unhappy with certain historians and other analysts who claim that the leaders of the ghettos and the Jewish police were all nasty and hoodlums. Clearly, there were some nasty people there as anybody who rises to power and in the major ghettos there were some tyrants. But all my experiences this one and others as I'll tell you, these people did an exemplary, selfless job in extremely different circumstances.

01:39:00

We came to the ghetto. They didn't know us. They didn't owe us. They took us in. They created papers for us as if we were members of the ghetto so we could live there. They shared their food. They shared what they had. We became members of the ghetto. We were fellow Jews. They took us in. There're other incidences when we escaped from this

ghetto where we had to go some place. The same deal. In my experience, this is a baseless

(ALL SOUND STOPS AT THIS POINT. I THINK THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE ON THIS TAPE BECAUSE THERE IS A LOT OF TAPE LEFT AND THIS ENDING DOES NOT MATCH THE START OF THE NEXT TAPE).

INSERT there are nine typewritten pages of insert at this point that must be somewhere. I have accuracy checked the transcript. mschwarz

Q: Okay. We are back on camera, and they are bringing you to where your father is. Can you describe that reunion?

A: That was an emotional reunion. I have to say. I really don't remember that much. There was a lot of hugging and holding and Father hadn't slept for 2 days, of course. He was just walking around, pacing. He was a nervous wreck, but as soon as we saw him, he said, "I knew everything would be alright because I saw the snow." When he saw the snow he knew everything was alright. And then 2 months later, this was in December 1942.

02:01:30

Q: Before you go to 2 months later.

A: Yes.

Q: Where were you brought? Where was your father?

A: My father was in this place, the farm where these people lived. And arrangements were made that we would stay there too but we would hide in a barn. We did not stay there very, very long it turned out.

02:02:00

Somebody saw us or maybe they didn't see us, but there was a suspicion that somebody saw us, and there was a great fear. But I think somebody did see us because there was some searches going on. There was a great fear that we were betrayed and we would be caught. So we had to escape and there was no place else to go, and this was not 2 months later but about 4 months later. It was already toward the spring, toward the middle March, April of 43.

Q: And you had been hiding how in the barn?

A: It was sort of a barn and we kinda lived there. That was not a big thing. There was another barn later which was a major thing to me. This barn was transitory and I really don't have any great recollection because we moved around. Sometimes we're here,

sometimes we're there. Sometimes we were in the house behind the oven. There was a little, kind of cubicle except that it was very hot.

02:03:00

It was a big brick oven that also was used to heating the house and it was very hot, but when we were presumably betrayed by someone we had to escape from the house. And we went into the field. A lot of it was potato country, and when they harvested potatoes they stored them in holes under ground in the field. They would dig a big hole and that's where the potatoes were kept because of cold air and so forth. Well, we hid in a little hole underneath the potatoes in the big hole, which was a very unpleasant place because there were all kinds of worms and things and animals in there. It was just a big hole in the ground and potato bugs and whatever, and it just drove my mother crazy. She couldn't stand those things. She was almost willing to go and be caught. My father just about forcible put her in there because, you know, she's not afraid of the Nazis, but she's afraid of the potato bugs. Obviously she went down eventually, but it was not a pleasant place to be. It's damp and eventually I got sick. I became very sick and some kind of bronchitis and they thought I would die. My father went out in the middle of the night and he went to a farm someplace...don't know where...and he stole. I mean that's the only words for it. In a sense he stole. He milked a cow, and he brought back warm milk. The only warm thing we could have because there was no fire or anything. It was cold. And that's what I drank. And I don't know if the milk helped, but I became better. So he stole some milk. Not a terrible crime. Anyhow, after that we could not stay there anymore, and then we moved to another family. Whereas the first family had some relationship and they had some reasons and they had reason to believe that we would really reward because my father promised and the grandfather and all that stuff, which was all true. This other family, we kinda knew them, but there was no special relationship. And this other family was very poor. They had a lot of kids and they were very poor. They didn't have enough to feed themselves and they took us in. No ulterior motives. They didn't ask for anything. And these are the people that we really gave everything we could, even more than the other ones. There were two families. Okay? And amazing people. Sienkowitz and Bagdanowski. I should say the names. These are important people. Two families. Sienkowitz and Bagdanowsky. And we hid in a barn over there. We were in a loft in a hidden compartment in the loft and that was what I remember the most of the hiding and it was, for a young kid I didn't realize it then.

02:06:10

As an adult I really don't understand how I survived it and be half-way normal because it was tremendous sense of deprivation. It was dark. Everything was closed. There was some light from the chinks in the slates in the roofs but it was dark during the day and during the night. And there were always people, strangers whoever, so you could not speak out loud. So for over a year I was in the dark and I didn't speak. And that's a crazy environment. And I don't know. I can't say I'm completely normal, but I don't think I'm very peculiar. And so maybe that's a good sign that people can overcome all kinds of stuff. And we stayed there for just about a year. Now I need to back track one thing what

kept us going and what kept these people going which is what happened about 2 months or so after we reunited with Father. You will recall from history that when (General von) Paulus was surrounded and captured in Stalingrad in January of 1943, I believe it was. I would have to look it up. And the Russians made a big propaganda deal out of it. They dropped leaflets all over...not Germany maybe, but all over the prior Russian territories. Not only telling about it, but with complete pictures so it could not argued that it's a fake. Or from Paulus and his bedraggled remnants of army or whatever thousand they captured...I don't know...300,000 that were there showing that they really were captured. This was a tremendous celebration for us. Father was convinced everybody that we talked to...all the...all the Gentiles were convinced that there's no question who would win the war. It was no longer a issue of which side am I going to be on because I don't want to be in trouble with the victors. The victors were going to be the Allies. The Germans were going to lose the war. There was just no doubt. No matter what the Germans said, no matter what they did. Once when Paulus was destroyed in Stalingrad, as far as we're concerned, it is a matter of how long will it take. Made life a lot easier. All the uncertainty was gone. All we had to do is stay alive. And these people were certain if we were alive, eventually we would be liberated and if we could do something for them because they were poor people...these last ones and the previously ones were not so poor, but even so we would keep our word.

02:09:00

So it changed everything. That victory in Stalingrad had special meaning for me because it really was the turning point as most historians say of the war in Russia, but also the turning point of belief in what was coming among those people who had to survive...the remaining Jews.

Q: Tell me a little more about life in the attic and how the farmer helped you particularly.

A: Yes. Yeah. I don't know how the deal came about, but my parents...my father used to go out and work sometime on the farm. If somebody saw him, they could get away with it. His hair had turned completely grey. I mean completely grey, prematurely grey. And so rather than use his regular name which himself was not necessarily a Jewish name his name was Wolf and in Polish it's Ulfa so it could be maybe not a Jew, but it's sort of Jewish. So they started calling him Stary. Stary in Polish means the old one because of his grey hair. And so he acquired the nickname Stary and on that basis nobody would know who he is. "Who's that?" "Oh, that's Stary. He came to help us." Or something. And so he could go out during the day. My mother could go out sometimes. Her Polish was quite decent. My brother's Polish was not wonderful, but not too bad because he had gone to school prior. I didn't know any Polish. I could only speak Yiddish, and I never went to local school. My Polish was just words that I picked up, you know. You live in a town you pick up Polish, but it's not as if you live in the United States, where you live here you speak English from birth no matter what your ethnic heritage. Over there if you were Jewish you spoke Yiddish. Who spoke Polish unless you went to school or when you got older. So my Polish was just awful. I don't know any Polish to this day. I know Russian because this...this one and a half years was really Russian...Russian school so

I...I have some decent knowledge of Russian. My Polish is just useless. My brother's Polish was not that terrible. He could go out. I could not go out. It was dangerous. If somebody saw me and said something to me, as soon as I opened my mouth there was no question I was not a Pole. I was a Jew. And I couldn't pretend to be Lithuanian either because the accent was just wrong. So they made a deal or agreed or whatever, one night the farmer came and he said, "We're going for a walk." So wonderful. "Come on, We're going for a walk." And so we went for a walk. And it was wonderful. Just him and me. Nobody else. Still who knows who would see us? It was very dangerous. There were rewards for Jews.

02:12:00

The reward was salt. I hadn't seen that written any place. The reward was salt. I don't remember how many kilograms of salt. Salt was a great commodity. Very hard to get. Very precious. People wanted salt more than sugar. And if you handed in some Jews you got salt. People looked for the reward and there were nasty people who would do it for the reward. They would do it out of spite. While we were hiding there, there was a family hiding in the woods and one day, some so-called great patriotic partisans who were fighting for the country...Poles in this case...found them. They took them out. They shot them...saw it through the roof a little bit. And they came into the house. They asked for some to drink, and they told the farmer, "Go bury those people." And they were sitting there talking in the house talking next door to the barn where we were and then they left. And they were Poles, Army Krajowa from London. There were other partisans, mostly Russians. One day my father was caught by them and he was sure they were going to kill him. And then they looked him over and they decided he was a Jew. They didn't know who he was because he stumbled on them. He stumbled on their camp going through the woods. And then they looked him over and they decided that he's a Jew. They didn't know who he was because he stumbled on their camp going through the woods. And they said to him, "Don't worry. We're not going to hurt you. We're just like you." In Russian "Vi tozje takoje" which means we are also like that. Those are the exact words they said because Father repeated it, so I'm repeating you what he said. And in fact they said, "Do you have any food?" He says "No." "Come here." They had shot an animal. Don't know where. Maybe...probably a farmer's animal, and they gave him a quarter of beef to take with him. They sent him on his way. Didn't hurt him. They were prisoners of war. The Russian prisoners of war were treated abominantly by the Germans. There was a prisoner of war camp not far from Soly and obviously the Jews were all eventually, they say eliminated and Soly was sent off to Ponari near Vilna and the prisoner of war camps were not eliminated, but none of them survived. The living conditions in the ghetto were a hundred times better than the prisoners of war. The Jews used to give them food if they could. They were starved to death and worked to death, those Russian prisoners of war. And when they escaped their hatred for the Germans was something unimaginable. They would very glad die as long as they could take some with them. And many of them became very sympathetic to the Jews, especially if they came from a camp like the one I described where the Jews in the ghetto tried to help. So even though the Russians were not that well known for their love of Jews, the Russian escaped prisoners of war were not that bad as far as the Jews were concerned.

02:15:00

And this particular band helped my father. We learned later that this band was wiped out. They got into a fire fight with somebody, and they were all killed apparently. Don't know. But anyhow, so we lived in this little place and about once a week or so, from then on, we was determined we go for a walk for a hour or so at night always, look at the stars, talk a little bit. Was not a very imaginative conversation because my Polish was not that great. They were wonderful people because one day there was a big scare that somebody had seen us there too. And we didn't know what to do. So we decided...they decided...this was a tremendous chance. I can't understand how these people decided to do this. It was totally insane. We would just integrate with the family because if they found us in this place clearly we were strangers. And I remember he put me in bed with his daughter. And it was at night because somebody was supposed to come searching and we crawled into bed together as if we were, you know, living together because I was young enough. She was a little kid, but I think younger than me, so it was considered alright under those conditions because the family was very crowded. And the only thing I remember is the giant bed bugs. They were about this big. (Laughter) Huge red things, which we did not have in the barn. In that respect the barn was better. We had rats or mice and they were not good things to have. They were scary at night. But these bed bugs bit and they were big. They made hugh holes in your flesh, and, of course, there were lice and other things. We suffered from dysentery and lice and all kinds of intestinal parasites. And there was no...very, very bad sanitary conditions and the local people suffered from the same thing. It wasn't just us. It was local conditions were that way. So that made a big difference, the...the walks at night. And then eventually the Russian Army came in and we moved right with them. We didn't stay. Nobody stayed. Anybody who survived didn't stay. We ended up as refugees just moving from place to place.

Q: Can you back up one second because we had been left with you.

A: Bed bugs.

Q: Bed bugs and you were in bed with this child. Tell me about the German search.

A: Nothing happened. Nothing happened. It was either a false alarm or whatever. Apparently, there was a search in surrounding farms. They didn't come to us, but there was a search in the surrounding areas and some Jews were actually taken. But in this case we had no place else to go. We couldn't go in the woods.

02:18:00

We had no place to go, and they decided if there's going to be a search, we would all commingle and the German's wouldn't know who is who. And so we just totally became one big family...was a big family lots of people. They had...I don't know...seems like a thousand kids. I think was something like 8 or 9 children. Was a very poor family. Staunch Catholics. And they saved us.

Q: What did you do in the attic all these days?

A: Father educated me. He taught me reading, writing, mathematics...whatever he could oral. That's how I got my primary education. It wasn't a bad education because I did manage to survive high school and university here and so forth and apparently it worked, but it was a very difficult time because we couldn't speak very loudly and not all that much. Most of the time I either slept or looked out through the little holes in the roof. That's it you could not do anything else. You couldn't move, no exercise. You just sitting waiting. I really don't know. The mind turned off. I don't have that many memories of what I did cause I didn't do anything.

Q: Think now. The Russians have come. Can you describe that? What do you mean when...that the Russians came. What happened?

A: All of a sudden somebody...I don't know who, said, "It's all over." That's it. It's all over. There was no fighting. There was no shooting again. Just like the first time, the Germans left and the Russians came. Before the Russians left, the Germans came. They just...the Germans ran off, and the Russians rolled right through. A lot of turmoil. Nobody knew what was going on. Nobody cared. We liberated a house. Gave it to one family, with all the possessions we could gave it to the other family. Everything we could find. And we left. It's a graveyard. And we just followed the Russians. We kept moving and they were moving more fast than we were and pretty soon we were in Germany. And then we just ended up in the American zone and then we were in a displaced persons camp and then it's no big deal. Just four years of waiting for a visa from my father's brother to the United States because we were displaced persons. 02:21:00 And once we got to the United States we really could do something. Then we continued correspondence with these families and we shipped them money and packages as much as we could because we were also poor just starting with nothing. But to them it was a great deal. And then suddenly these people disappeared. We don't know what happened. I think some bad things probably happened because these people were very individualistic and did not take too well to authority so I don't know what happened, especially the...the so-called rich farmer. I don't know if they did something to them. This is still during the late...late days of Stalin, and some crazy things happened during that time.

Q: Both families just disappeared?

A: All of a sudden they...within one year they both disappeared. They didn't answer any of the letters or anything. Couldn't track them down in any way. So I don't know what happened. But anyway that's the situation.

Q: Tell me if you would again. You were a child.

A: Right.

Q: Can you describe the DP camps. You were very young and

A: Yeah.

Q: What it was like for you.

A: The DP camp was a carefree time for me.

Q: By the way, which DP camp? Do you know?

A: First we were in Berlin, and then we moved out of Berlin on the airlift in 1948 so that was my first airplane ride in a military transport. And then we ended up in, I think it was Bavaria. Yes...in a camp called Gaubensee ? in a location. There were several camps. There were schools. There were decent schools. I think the schools were good so it was the same as any other child. You had an apartment, and you lived there. My parents did some minor work. The thing was boredom for the parents because you really were not permitted to have real work. Some amount to just survive. Filling out millions of papers. Great introduction to bureaucracy. But for the kids it was quite good because there was a great deal of freedom from pressures from outside. There were schooling. A great deal of education. The teachers were enormously dedicated because this was the first chance to maybe raise a survived generation so there was a lot of dedication and input more so than a normal situation might call for. Children were precious so you could get away with all kinds of stuff. And it was not a bad time from a child's point of view. Of course, it was not the greatest from other aspects in terms of a settled life and knowing what's going to happen to you and having a place that's your own.

02:24:05

It really wasn't our own. We were not citizens. We weren't going to live there. We weren't going to settle in Germany. It was just a transient camp and you couldn't call it home, but in terms of living conditions and friends and so forth I feel it was nice. The adults were very nice to the kids.

Q: How did you come to the United States? What were the circumstances? How did you manage to actually come here?

A: Well, eventually a visa came because, as I say, my father had a brother here and he vouched for us. He signed us up so we came under the displaced persons act. I think it was the second one President Truman signed. I am not sure which one, but we did not come as pure refugees in that sense. We came as sponsored refugees because there was a relative who sponsored us, who vouched we would not become wards of the state and so and so forth so there was a quota...the displaced persons quota permitted us to come sooner maybe than 50 years later. I don't know how long the quota would have lasted, but we came as part of a normal quota of sponsored people. Alright. And so we went on a ship. First big ship. First airplane, then first ship. Terribly seasick. I still get seasick. Airplanes are fine. Ships are not good for me. We came United States, (Chuckle) and that in itself is an interesting story because I did not speak any English. And I was old enough

to go to high school. Well, there're no tricks. No "Kunsten" as we say in Yiddish. You supposed to go to school, you go to school. So we signed up and I went to high school. Don't speak English. Well, that's no matter. And you know what I did. Maybe with an accent, but I think I speak a reasonable English. So I came here and I went to high school and that's it. And as far as I'm concerned, I'm an American because that's where my real primary education came from...my real education...the only real schooling that I have had. Other schooling was all in bits and pieces and in very peculiar circumstances.

Q: Can you tell me about that first year for you. It must have been..

A: In high school?

Q: Not easy. Yes?

A: Well, it was not easy, but I'll tell you I was very naive. Of course, I was not used to any big cities or towns or anything of that nature.

Q: What city? Where are we?

A: This is in Brooklyn. We're in Brooklyn, New York. Nice place. We're in Brooklyn, New York, in New Utrecht high school if you wish to know the exact place.

02:27:00

And the people were nice. The teachers were understanding. At least I thought so. If I wanted to be cynical I would say they were uncaring because they didn't care what happened to me and they let me do whatever I did and they passed me maybe when they shouldn't have. They just passed me along. All I can say, they were very nice. They understood my circumstances or they didn't make it hard for me. I don't know which. I had a better background in certain areas than the kids that came there. Mathematics, history, other areas, the home education, and the education in the camps was very, very good. Was a very high level education. I had only one problem. I couldn't speak English. So I had terrible trouble in English, English language and other areas that require good facilitive language. History, English history, social studies where you have to understand what the teacher says. The other disciplines were no big deal. Mathematics is mathematics. Two plus two is four. The symbols are symbols, and I knew all that. I was ahead of my class. In the other areas I did not do well to start with, but I think the teachers really were understanding rather than careless. They gave me barely passing grades at first, and that was because my content was good, but the execution was terrible. And it's amazing how well you can learn a language if you live among the people and you speak it and you interact. I am not a great linguist. My brother is the linguist. He speaks a half a dozen languages quite well. I know other languages, but only because I lived and...and used them, but in terms of learning languages directly from books, it's very hard for me. But it's not that difficult. By the time I was a junior I was a pretty decent student. And so I made friends, peculiar friends who were willing to be friends with this strange kid like me. But as you interact and you learn the language, fine. The

big problem was I had to learn some new tricks. My lunch money was taken away from me and a few other little things. Nothing personal. It was normal. That's how it works. Then I learned how to protect myself. But initially, I think a lot of the special ed classes and so forth, today may be doing it all wrong, from my own experience...and there's too much recognition of the differences.

02:30:00

I think what's needed is to mainstream the kid to have normal intelligence and to be patient with their difficulties. Give them a chance. But let them learn in whatever magical way people absorb knowledge just like little children do unless they're old...too old to do that, but I found at 14 it still worked. Probably wouldn't work if I was 24 something. So I was just mainstreamed, left to my own devices, and just by interaction I learned that l-i-o-n is lion and Lyon (is a city) and after a few corrections you remember and that's all there is to it.

Q: Is there anything else you want to add?

A: Yes. Something that has nothing to do with my own experiences but there is very little talk of German re-unification right now. And I don't think I have a unique perspective but I will tell you something that bothered me greatly. And it is not that unification is coming, because it has to come. I would prefer that it be 20 years from now. The generation that did these things is not around any more, and I have nothing against the new generation. I don't believe in collective guilt or anything like that. It bothers me greatly that the loss of memory. That's why I am so happy to be here. I was watching a news cast two months ago, 6 weeks ago. There was this huge rally. Chancellor Kohl was giving a rally. Okay. Lots of signs. "Ein Deutschland, ein Volk", various things like that. Legitimate. And people were saying how horrible it was. That they couldn't be unified and so forth. It happened the same day our local newspaper had pictures of the same rally. And the same day I was reading Newsweek. It had pictures of the same exact rally. Very strange coincidence. And everything was fine. I was a little upset about this big rally because I am worried about reunification. That's immaterial. Then I saw the name of where this rally is held, and I was sick. And the thing that I still think about is that I have not heard a single commentary or mention of it any place. The rally was held in Erfurt. Now people should know that Toppensohn who built the crematorium of Auschwitz was from Erfurt and if you don't know the history actually, that Toppensohn had the same problem that all contractors have with Government, that it didn't work right in the first place. And they protect themselves. You know it's only a science. You don't understand it. You know the mechanics of huge piles of human flesh and the convection currents. You don't understand. But you know you run some experiments and we promise you, we will fix it, and production will be pretty close to 10,000 a day,

02:33:00

and you know great German engineering, they fixed it. And when the Hungarians were brought in, and they had this big emergency. They were able to run production at 20,000

a day. Why is it that nobody would say, you know we are having this great rally in Erfurt, and we will reunify because things are different now. And we know that we will not permit another Toppensohn to come into this world. That would be a great rally.. Not a single commentary that I have seen in all the news media mentioned the existence of Toppenson but the revisionist historians say those were chimneys they were baking bread. That bothers me greatly. It really upsets me. So even though I was not in Auschwitz and I cannot have any recollection of it, when I saw those pictures all of a sudden all the banners and everything changed and it wasn't people, it was just chimneys and stuff. Because it was Erfurt. And I have no idea if Toppensohn or his son or his son's son are around any more. I really don't care. That has nothing to do with it. But there is a saying about knowing some relationships and somehow, those have disappeared. I don't understand why. Surely people want a little bit more history than that. I am not a great historians. I know that Erfurt is Toppensohn, that is my comment.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you for having me.

Conclusion of Interview.