

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Avram Lazar
November 16, 1990
RG-50.030*124**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Avram Lazar, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on November 16, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and 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 interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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.

AVRAM LAZAR

November 16, 1990

I was born in Romania in the town of Iasi on 23rd of January, 1918. I have almost seventy-three years.

I lived in Iasi until I had twenty-six years old. Elementary school and two commercial schools. I made them in Iasi. Iasi was a town with over one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty to forty percent who were Jews. It was a strong anti-Semitism for many years there because in Iasi lived Professor Kusa, who was the founder of the Christian League of National Defense. Also Cornelius, the founder of the Iron Guard movement, the legendary movement lived in Iasi. As a sign of Kusa was the swastika. In this atmosphere, I was raised up and I must emphasize that these people and their followers were making a strong propaganda against the Jews and they had the possibility to do this because Iasi was a strong university center. And youth who were used against the Jews under the banner of down with the kike or send the kikes to Palestine. This is propaganda used against us. We felt it from early years. I have to say you that in school during the last two days of school, I felt a strong anti-Semitic propaganda because Romanians were avoiding us. We stayed in different benches and the professors were tolerating this. Then I realized that these professors surprisingly were Iron Guard members and Fascists.

01:04:

My father was a wood worker, wood manufacturer. We were many children. Unfortunately, my father died when I was three years old. We were raised practically working during our youth. When I was eleven years old I was working in the afternoons and I was accumulating money in order to go to school. Because all of the children were working, we got some more money so I was able to go to high school too. After school I tried to work. I work in different places. I was an accountant. During my childhood I was an apprentice and I was paid for this apprenticeship and this helped me in order to follow my studies. When I finished my school...during those times it was very difficult for us, the Jews. Already Hitler was in power and Romania for Germany was an important source of food and an important source of oil. And the interest of Germany was to have Romania close to it and through different maneuvers, Germany was able to change the government and to bring in power governments which were close to Germany. It was well known Romania was a country which was traditionally allied with France and England. But because Hitler came in power, the German interest in Romania got stronger because through this Hitler was preparing his future, so it was a period of time the atmosphere through which I lived. Anti-Semitism arose and we felt this strongly. This succession of governments ended finally with the coming in power with General Antonescu who proclaimed himself as a leader of the country and from that moment we can say that the country was occupied by the Germans. It was easy to see German army everywhere in Iasi especially, and many civilians which were doing certain maneuvers. The first thing that happened to me was that I was excluded from the army and on my military ID was written excluded as a Jew, and on the whole dimension of this document was written Jew. I was an accountant and I was working for a brother-in-law of mine. This happened in 1940. I was working for a brother-in-law of mine and he was manufacturing hats. I was working there and I knew everyone there and I knew his

whole personnel. Between 1940, 1941 during the winter one of the workers came and said give me the keys of your store. From tomorrow I'll run this store. I was surprised. My brother-in-law tried to oppose and I told him, Nicholai...his name was Nicholai Berkowitz. The worker said tomorrow you are not coming in any more. Give me the keys. We tried to oppose but he said I'll come with my comrades. The members of the Iron Guards were calling themselves comrades. So I'll come with my comrades and I'll shoot you, so we signed and my brother-in-law gave up the store. I told you we are entering in the period of time when for the Jews this Antonescu who proclaimed himself the proclaimed himself Conducator which means something like fuehrer in Germany. He linked himself strongly with Germany. Everything which was lawful in Germany was introduced in Romania, so we reach a period of time when Germany attacked Soviet Union, the Russians, in alliance with the Romanians. Antonescu gave a proclamation saying I order you to cross the Prut. What that meant...the Prut was the border with Soviet Union between Moldavia and Bessarabia which was taken by the Russians in 1940 in an agreement with the Germans and now Antonescu ordered the Romanian army to cross the Prut to liberate Bessarabia, and the atmosphere was very, very nationalistic. So here starts a week of the war from 22nd of June and I would like to stop for more on this week, because what happened it was unbelievable. Anti-Semitism got stronger. The Jews were considered the enemies of the Romanians. They were considered Communists and everything was organized against them. We were attacked in the streets just because we were Jews and I have to tell you also I cannot understand how people were able to believe this. So many were told that the Jews are going on the roofs and making signals to the Soviets in order to help them, let know how and where to bombard, to make, to bomb. Or several Jews were arrested, accused of having flashlights in their pockets with which they were supposed to do signals to the Russians, in order to facilitate the bombardments. Also it was said that the Jews shoot to the Romanian army, but this wasn't a real story. It was a fake story in order to increase anti-Semitism. The war started on a Sunday. Until Thursday anti-Semitism got stronger. Bands...groups of people appeared in the streets. They were beating you up, sometimes shooting at you, not very often but still. Some people were arrested. The Jews were told to come to the main office of the police to get a paper on which it was written free. It was a piece of cardboard, five centimeters on two point five centimeters on which it was written free and the stamp of the police. I saw this permit. I never got this permit. I'll tell you how I went to get this permit, but these things were asked to the Jews and for this reason these groups of anti-Semites were entering the houses, were attacking the Jewish girls, so on Saturday a lot of people were arrested and we were asked to go to the main office of the police to get this ticket on which was written free. We are reaching the so-called Black Sunday. My mother told us go, because other way we'll be shot in the house. I started with a brother and a brother-in-law to the main police office to get this ticket. I have to tell you that from my house to the police office it was a ten to fifteen minutes walk. When I left the yard and I tried to reach the police office, so many people were in the streets that it was very difficult to reach this place, so it took almost one hour to reach that place because there were too many people in the streets, so the authorities got scared and told us go back home and we'll tell you what to do. So we went back home. I went home. I found my mother, my sister and two nephews in a terrible shape. What happened? Four people entered the yard during our absence and asked if there are Jewish men in the house, so they search the house. They look under the bed. My sister tried to explain. They were very violent. My mother said they went to get the ticket from the police, but this didn't happen only in our house. We were living in a yard with many other tenants and they went in every apartment. My mother was very worried

because these bandits who entered in this her house said we'll be back in a few hours. If we'll find them, we'll shoot them. When my mother saw us, she said go back because they'll shoot you. When I...I forgot to tell you when I went to the police it was eleven o'clock. I was back at four o'clock. I tried to calm down my mother. My mother was older so she was able to get out in the street and she saw that it will be safer, so she was going out in the street and she was feeling what was going on. At one o'clock we went back. At the police there was not such a big crowd as before. When I reached the police office, I saw Romanian officers, German officers, high rank officers. I saw civilians and they were discussing and around soldiers. I can tell you we even didn't enter the yard of the police because we were pushed inside by this mob. This yard had twenty meters on ten meters. We were in the second half of the yard and people were entering and entering in the yard. We came to get this ticket on which it should be written "free." Hours were passing and nothing was changing, and more and more people were coming in the courtyard of the police. It was getting darker. People were afraid and many people tried to jump over the fence behind the police station, trying to escape because they were afraid to remain there over night. I didn't do this, but I saw many people trying to do this. At this moment, several shootings started. The soldiers jumped on some trees and they started to shoot to this crowd. We laid on the ground and they kept shooting and we were seeing the death with our eyes which was our luck. We found some stairs and we went on these stairs in order to protect ourselves from the bullets and these stairs were leading to a big room belonging to the police. Nobody said enter this room. Nobody said get out from this room, and shortly a fraction of us entered this room, but many of these people were still laying on the ground. My feeling is that the shootings were well organized and were coming from every direction. We stayed in this room until it was dark. This was on Sunday. Were still on the ground but in the room because we were afraid because we saw that some bullets could come in still, and we were staying on the ground. It was really dark and the shootings became rarer. We were thirsty. We were not hungry, but we were thirsty and we were looking for water. I found a bucket and I brought it back and I let...it was a cousin...and we started directly from the bucket without any glass and people saw me and they said give me some water. I have to tell you that I feel sorry even now. I saw someone asking me water in Yiddish. Who was this gentleman? He was owner of the building in which I was living and he had always a store in which he was selling clothes. His name was Solomon Kahane. After I was looking for him, but I never saw him. He was a very gentle man. I gave him water, and I said to myself, I said such a distinguished man to reach the same situation as me, but he was a Jew too so the pogrom was organized for all the Jews. We remained there during the night and we were hearing...how to call...people walking around. The next day I found out what happened. It was a convoy of people who were in the yard of the police office who were transported to the railroad station and put in a train. This was on 29th of June, if I'm remembering well, when very early in the morning we were put in a column and when we reached the yard we saw a lot of bodies and blood, but small rivers of blood coming out from the people who

01:26:21

were killed. And we were put in columns with the survivors from the yard. I think I explained some of them were transported during the night. The rest of them were put in columns in the morning and we were led towards the railway station. It was very early in the morning. Everywhere in the street we saw bodies. We were afraid because it was terrible. They were killed during Sunday, Sunday

afternoon. We were...we reached the railway station. We were ordered to lay down on the ground. We had to stay like this because this way they felt more comfortable and we were ordered not to leave any empty place. We were staying in front of the railroad station and when people were walking there, you know. Romanians, they were ordered to step on us so people were stepping on us like we would be not human beings but animals or something else. After when they decided to embark us on the trains. I think that I was put in the fifth or in the sixth cattle car. These were cattle cars on which it was written that they can put in forty people or eight horses. This was the capacity of such a cattle car. They put after what I learned around one hundred people in every...because I was in the fifth or sixth car and I was hearing what was...they were saying. I heard a civilian who said put more, so I think that over the one hundred they put twenty more. So I'm emphasizing the capacity of the cattle car was forty people. They put one hundred, one hundred and twenty people in this. The car was sealed. We had some small windows, because, you know, even a horse has to breathe. These small windows were sealed. They put some wood there with...and they fixed them tight in order to not let us breathe. I cannot describe to you what happened in this car. It was a summer day. It was very hot and very sunny. We cannot breathe. This was on one side. On the other side were moved from one railroad to another and a lot of smoke was coming from the engine, and steam. And this was adding

01:30:10

to our suffering. Immediately after we entered the cars, people started to shout that they wanted water. They realized that we could exist without water, but we didn't have air because of the sun, because of the smoke and the steam coming from the engine of the railroad on which we were maneuvered from one to another. We stayed for hours. I have to tell you that from Iasi to Poduliloiel (ph) which we reached later, usually with a slow train, it's a thirty minutes distance. We made this distance in over ten hours because we were left there in order to die. I am ashamed to say, but we started to make on us and a smell was coming out which was adding to our sufferences. I can tell you that when I sent my pants back home, my mother was afraid to see only my pants. After ten hours we reached Poduliloiel. Of course we didn't know which was the locality which we reached but we know only one thing...that we have to die and we wanted to die as soon as possible. In Poduliloiel it took so long, probably because they wanted to kill us. I forgot to tell you an important thing and this is probably what saved my life. Me, my brother, brother-in-law, my cousin jumped the first in the car so we stayed to the wall of the car. If someone was dying and falling on me, I was pushing him away, but what happened to the people which were in the middle of the car...at the beginning they tried to resist but in time they were not able to resist and they were falling one on the top on the other, and they were suffocating and they were dying. We were probably lucky we were near the door and probably some small quantity of air was coming in, but my brother was telling me after that I saw you that you are fading away, and I was envying you. A young man who was staying near myself and he bit my finger and he said this way your heart will start to work stronger and you'll come back. My injury from his biting remained on my finger for two weeks. When they opened the doors, I told my brother keep me tight because when I'll go out from the car, they'll hit me and I'll not 01:34:35 resist. When they opened the doors, most of the people died, so nobody pushed us because there was not too many people to push us out. When we felt the air many people fainted. Some people got down from the train and they tried to drink some water from the ground

and they died on the spot. This was the situation when we reached Podu Iloaiel. It wasn't a railway station, but just a stop in...we were expecting to be killed. Everyone jumped out as he could so I lost...I didn't find my brother. Some people from the Jewish community from Podu Iloaiel came. I heard later that during our stay at the police station in Iasi, these people were asked do you want to receive some Jews from Iasi. Would you take care of them? They said yes. The distance I told you was small. Many of these people had relatives in Iasi and they thought that maybe they'll find on the train their relatives. So some representatives of the Jewish community from Podu Iloaiel were allowed to come to the train and they helped us, they explained to us to come to the synagogue, telling us that we'll be taken care of in the synagogue. And to not worry. We were very afraid and we would like to be killed because we were afraid that we'll suffer more. Finally, slowly we started to leave the train and to go towards the synagogue. During this our road...on the road towards the synagogue, it was a curve, and there we saw peasants. It was a market day, and they were looking at us and some Germans came and they started to take photos and they started to shout "Juden". The peasants with the tools with which they were hitting the oxes, they were...they started to hit us. One of them hit me. It was very painful but I started to think and to realize to where I am so maybe somehow ironically he helped me. I...in this group I met two of my friends with which I stayed in the camp. One of them didn't have pants but had a jacket, a sort of pullover, but without pants. Myself, I had only pants, so we were smiling. We wanted to drink some water and we entered in a sort of shop asking for water, but meantime the soldiers came and asked us why we entered this 01:39: building. He hit me under my left eye. I was sure that I lost my eye, and I went with my hand on my eye, and I was taken a picture by some Germans, and I'm asking myself if this photo exists somewhere. And in this shape I reached the synagogue of the Jewish community and there they had water and sugar. Believe me...and I took a bucket of water but I didn't allow anyone to approach this bucket. I wasn't able to drink all this water, of course. I was afraid that someone could come and take this bucket from me and I was protecting this bucket. I told you I met some people that I knew before and they took us in their houses, and we stayed there until we were set free. We stayed there from the 29th of June until the 20th of November.

LONG PAUSE

I'll tell you what happened in Podu Iloaiel. During the first days, it was difficult. We had to bury all the dead, our people, and we had to help with this. I found my...I'm sorry...I found my brother-in-law and my cousin, but I didn't find my brother. I found him after two days. With my brother-in-law helping to bury the dead people, I found his father dead. My two friends who I mentioned, one of them found one of his brothers dead and the other found his father dead. What can be more awful, more terrible? I don't find my words. What could be more terrible to bury your brother with your hands or your father. This what's happening. Brothers were burying brothers, sons...fathers. A few women were with us and some children, a few children. People who resisted better, who survived easier, were the bakers because they were used to big heat due to their profession, and also strangely enough, small children who maybe are living easier without air survived also. We did this during the first days, but meantime we were very very scared. We were afraid of our shadows. This was a very small 01:44:40 town and through this small town it was a road, a big road, and all the night we were hearing the troops marching and we all the time thought that these troops are coming to kill us. We didn't get out from the houses for many time but we were

meeting other survivors who were staying in the houses around. And we were talking to them and one evening and I met a Dr. Kaufman (ph), a colonel with the Romanian army, and a lawyer from Bucharest. What happened to them? They came by train and to Iasi and when they came, they were identified as Jews and they were put in the cattle cars but they were lucky because they were put into one of the last cars and I have to tell you that Colonel Kaufman was in his uniform and he was still put in one of the cars. I mean they were not even respecting their own uniform. He was Jewish, so he was put in this car. He was active in the Romanian army. It is true that after two weeks he was set free. After a while, less than two weeks, we were taken to different works. We were taken to the railroad station to load and unload different goods. We started to wear the yellow star and I have to tell you some people had pleasure of seeing us loading and unloading very heavy things and we were not used to do this and they were staying around and laughing and showing us, showing...pointing to our yellow stars and also people who were passing by, by train, they were laughing at us and were making jokes about the fact that we are Jews. After a while, we were taken to some fields where we were, we had to walk there four kilometers every day. Sometimes we were sleeping there in very, very difficult, under very, very difficult conditions. We were eating boiled meat and _____ and _____ and onions. It was very rainy. If it was raining, they were not feeding us and they were sending us back because we were not able to work. On our way back, we were passing through a village of gypsies and since gypsies were laughing and saying look, the Jews are exactly like the gypsies, like us. This was our life in that camp. So work was pretty difficult, but the food and the place where we were supposed to sleep 01:48:50 were terrible. This went on until 20th of November, 1941, when we were sent back into the town of Iasi. When I went home, the first thing that I had to do was at our relatives suggestion was to give to the Central, the Romanian Judenrat some clothes. There was a law saying that every Jew is supposed to give to the state through this Judenrat a certain quantity of clothes. In exchange of these clothes, they were giving you a sort of a pass which you was supposed to keep it in your ID and if they were stopping you in the street, you had to show this paper. I forgot to tell you that the hours during which the Jews were allowed to be in the streets were limited. We had special hours when we were allowed to buy food, exact hours. And we were allowed to go usually when there was nothing on the market, so to survive from the point of view of the food it was very difficult for us. In Iasi being young I was forced to do forced labor. For example, cleaning up the snow in the streets. Again, you had to have proof that you did this in order to be able to walk the streets and then I did...I worked in a detachment called Sokola (ph.) Detachment for a while and then in a job related to the roads. We were pushing some carts loaded with sand or with stones. It wasn't an easy work. But it was more difficult when they were angry on us and we had some norms. We had to work late night and to wake up very early in the morning in order to be able to fulfill these norms. The only big advantage was that this wasn't too far from the town, but only during the Sundays were allowed to come home if we were not punished. The fact that the food was very bad...this wasn't a big problem because we were able to bring some food from home. We had some money...we could buy something. So this wasn't the biggest problem, but to sleep it was terrible. We were sleeping on the floor and then we were brought some beds with almost nothing on them. So this was our fate of being Jewish and we were working 01:53:23 with the hopes that Sunday we'll be able to go home and to wash ourselves, to get clean clothes and to find out about what was going on on the front, to find out what will be our fate in the future. This was our life when the Russians, when the Soviets liberated us in 1944. Iasi was a sort of front town during the spring of 1944 because the Russians stopped a few kilometers, a few miles

USHMM Archives RG-50.030*124

7

from Iasi and they didn't...they stopped until August in front of Iasi. All the time around Iasi there were clashes with the Soviet...there were clashes with the Soviet army. Some bombings, more of them belonging to the English and the Americans, but not many. We didn't have authorities in Iasi. They flew. They were very scared that the Russians are coming. They flew, and for months we lived without authorities in this town. We had no food, until we were freed in August 1944 by the Soviet army. I could tell you what happened after.

Tape #2

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

I had a big wish to follow my studies, to continue with my studies and Iasi was destroyed because of the war. It was impossible to find a place to work, so I decided to leave for Bucharest on one way to learn more and to work, to continue to work, to follow the courses of the commercial academy. It was easier there to find a place to work and I knew some people so I...at the beginning I was working for two enterprises. It was difficult to continue my studies. I needed money too, so I started to work in a ___ place. So I stopped studying completely but I was working and I was somehow pleased. Meantime, the Russians occupied Romania and they imposed a Communist regime. I'll be very short here, but completely they forbade...I mean the Communist Party ousted the rest of the parties. They controlled everything. They started to nationalize, at the beginning less, then more and from 1950 they started to have annual plans and then plans on, five plans. It was a centralized economy and I don't have to make any appreciation on this, but we can see what happened in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union concerning this. This nationalization destroyed the small enterprises and in the place where I was working, they were forced to close practically, so I started to work as an accountant, as an economist in an enterprise factory which was manufacturing clothes. I worked several years there and then I worked in an Institution of planning (?) where I worked thirteen years. From this institution as a thanks, I was sent again to an enterprise or factory which was manufacturing clothes and I was dismissed because I was Jewish and because I was not a Party member. And from this last factory I was...I retired. What I would like to emphasize is that this Communist regime which was pretending to be against the nationalism, racism, but after a few years it started a hunt...not really a hunt. It's too hard. I wouldn't like to exaggerate. Many Jews were dismissed from their chores, jobs. If they had leading positions, they were automatically dismissed but the fact that they started to immigrate, started a new wave of persecution. They were forced to do unskilled jobs, some of them. What I should tell you about this period of time is that retiring I tried to do my life calmer but I had other problems. My daughter was always asking me why you never left this country. I many times regretted that I didn't leave the country, but my daughter said she will not do the same mistake and the truth is when she was twenty-eight, married and with a kid of four years old, she left for Canada and now she's in Toronto. Before retiring, this Communist regime brought in the country unbelievable problems of lack of goods and so on. We didn't have food, starting with bread and meat and sugar and so on. But what was more painful that after the years '80 to '83, it started to...we started to have a lack of electricity and heat. During the winters of 1984 and '85 we had weeks during which we had to sleep with hats on our heads, completely dressed and on the walls we had water and moisture and we were...we didn't have cooking gas for...they didn't care about the needs of the house, households. They tried to divert all the energy towards industries in order to fulfill these so-called annual plans, in order to be able to pay the people. When I retired, I tried to arrange for myself a normal life. But I had the following problem. I was regretting that I didn't leave myself and it was a big mistake of my life, and I'm pretty confident that with my capabilities, professional capabilities, I would be able to realize a normal life in the western world, and not what I fulfilled in eastern Europe. I worked over forty-five years. All these things and the fact that the retired people started to be treated in Romania as unproductive people, the fact that we were living in darkness was a kind of personality which was

USHMM Archives RG-50.030*124

9

difficult to imagine even. I decided to leave. It was pretty difficult to get approval to leave, but not for retired people because they asked me to renounce to our retirement money, so this way we were able to leave pretty quickly, and also all our...we had two suitcases for each of us, and this was all that was left to us. This was the result of forty-five years of work. In Canada I wanted to work and even now I am able to work, but I was able...but I realized that being handicapped by the language, I will not be able to work at level of my knowledge and I was willing to work in any place. I worked in many places for a few months, but I were almost seventy years old, but it was very difficult and I had to stop. Now I live in Toronto in a municipal building. The rent is low. The local government in Toronto gave us some social help which we can live on in a quite good way and we are pleased to live in Canada. From March 1989 we are Canadian citizens and we are really happy of being Canadian citizens. I hope that God will give me health to live many years in Canada.

Photographs

This picture presents myself. I'm on the left side. On the right side is a friend of mine. A friend of mine and behind another former friend. I think that is David but I'm not sure. I met these friends walking toward the synagogue, toward Jewish community in Podu Iloaiel. My friend from behind found his brother dead in one of the cars and ____ found his father dead in one of the cars. This photo shows us in pretty bad shape. If I'm remembering well, it's during one of the days when we came back from the work which we were doing.