

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Martin Spett  
November 7, 1989  
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## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Martin Spett, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on November 7, 1989 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.

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**MARTIN SPETT**  
**November 7, 1989**

Q: Martin, could you give us your full name please?

A: Martin Spett.

A: Where were you born, Martin?

A: I was born in Tarnow, Poland.

Q: In what year?

A: In 1928. December 2nd, 1928.

Q: Had your parents lived there for a long time?

A: My parents lived over there since they were married. My mother, my mother comes from United States originally. She was born in United States, in Newark, New Jersey and she was married in Tarnow, where I was born. So did my sister. She was born in Tarnow also. We had a large family on both sides, on my father's side and my mother's side. And it was a a close, close-knit family.

Q: Could you tell us a little about what life was like in Tarnow while you were growing up?

A: Life, Jewish life in Tarnow was a vibrant life. We had synagogues. We had Jewish organizations, Zionist organizations, Jewish sports clubs, general Zionist organizations where all the people, all the organizations met and they used to organize dances over there. The Jewish newspaper, the publisher had his office there. It was very, a very active Jewish community.

Q: What kind of work did your father do at the time?

A: My father worked for the city in the tax department until 1937 when he was dismissed by the government because at that time anti-Semitism was at its peak and they dismissed all the Jewish workers that worked for the city and at that time he got a job in a Zionist organization where he served sandwiches and you know, tended to the card room to organize the events the Jewish organizations sponsored. He was in charge of those things, with my mother of course. They were working together. They had a kitchen over there and buffet tables, where they you know, tended to buffet tables and so on.

Q: What did you do as a youngster? You must have been nine years old at the time. What was life like for you?

- A: It was a happy life of a youngster. I started out in a Cheder and then I attended the Javne school. It was a Jewish progressive school run under rabbinical supervision until the beginning of the war. And I knew nothing of another world but a Jewish world.
- Q: What about some of your friends at the time? Were they all Jewish or did you have any non-Jewish friends?
- A: I had, well of course I had Jewish friends from school, non-Jewish friends I used to play with where I, where we lived on

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Venskogo Street. This was in a building for the city workers when my father was still active in his office. I made some friends and we used to play. When I was home I used to play with non-Jewish friends. They were very, very nice. There was no talk against Jews. I used to visit their houses. They used to come to my house and there was no problem.

- Q: When did you start seeing a problem, or feeling a problem?
- A: The problems started after Marshal Pilsudski died. He was the President of Poland. Afterwards anti-Semitism became stronger, much stronger and as a matter of fact when he died the Polish anti-Semites used to run into the street and call to the Jews, your grandfather died, because he was very good to the Jews, the Jewish people. And it was at a peak as I said, in 1937 came to a peak where antisemitism was very strong and I don't think that the Germans would have such a good time taking over Poland if not for this anti-Semitism that existed at that time.
- Q: How did you see it? This was 1938? [1939]
- A: Yes, 1938. A week before the Germans came in, it was a chaos in town. It was terrible. The Jewish people were really scared and they hired trucks and wagons and whatever they could get,

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transportation to run towards the Russian border away from the German invasion. They, especially men because it was a talk that the Germans when they come in right away they take the men for slave labor and they massacre the Jewish populations on the way as they come in. We heard stories from the German Jews that were pushed across the borders a couple of years before that, terrible stories but nobody could visualize what really is happening. Nobody believed it, the kind of stories they used to tell, how the Germans treated the Jewish population in Germany. And nobody can really understand what the Jewish people went through unless they themselves went through the war, the holocaust. It's impossible to understand, to to comprehend.

Q: Martin, let's go back to what you were saying a moment ago, that nobody would believe the stories that they were being told by the Jews who were coming back into Poland at the time from Germany. What were some of the stories or what was the feeling that you and your parents were getting from these stories?

A: Well there were stories of Jews being grabbed from the streets and from apartments for slave labor. They were beaten in the streets, their belongings confiscated. Their houses being confiscated, their properties being confiscated. And some of the people never come back from slave labor camps. They were telling stories about concentration camps. Nobody could comprehend what the concentration camp was in those years, and as I said it's very hard to understand unless you yourself go through it, went through it.

Q: You were going through it at the time and at that time, 1938,

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you were ten years of age.

A: I was eleven.

Q: Eleven years of age. (Yes) And from your memory of that time immediately before the war, immediately before the Germans advanced into Tarnow, what do you remember of the experience as you saw it?

A: The day before the Germans came in was very quiet. I remember like today. The city was like a holiday atmosphere. There was no movement except at night the stores were robbed, broken into. the government warehouses were broken into. I even went during the day I went to look how they carried, people carried out cartons with cigarettes and with all kinds of things from that warehouse. There was a fear in the air that you couldn't understand. Spies were being caught. German spies were being caught, and daily air raids, bombing hospitals even. In our city a bomb fell on a hospital and when the air raid sirens were sounding off we yelled to my father, you know, let's go to the basement. He says, oh no, there's nothing going to happen, until the bomb hit the hospital and he fell out of bed. Then he was running to the basement. And we lived near the military barracks where they were registering the new recruits. And that day and night there was a very busy place and while we were in the basement hiding, we heard someone upstairs in the lobby and our neighbor was a fireman. He had a gun on him, and he went to look and he brought down a very scared person, a man, and when he asked him what he was doing, in his state he said he was looking for bullets for his gun, because he had also a gun on him. So they sat him down by candlelight in the basement and the fireman you know, said to my father he says, look through his papers. And my father's hands were shaking and he was looking through his papers and if my father would have said he's a spy, the gun would have, you know, the fireman would have shot this man. But my father said he's alright. His papers are OK. And

later on he, my father told me, you know, I didn't even look at the papers. I was so scared I couldn't see anything. (Laughter) So but they were catching spies, musicians that were going from courtyard to courtyard and they had maps and papers on on their bodies under their shirts. Some when the planes were coming over, German planes, bombers were coming over, they caught a few that had radios on them talking to the pilots. I remember, you know, a lot a lot of people were being caught as spies, it was a chaos. A week before the Germans came in a bomb, a time bomb went off at the railroad station, and one person got killed, a woman that was in transit, a Jewish woman in transit, and I have her name written down. As a matter of fact, I am working now with a with a lady that this was her aunt. Just happens that we were talking about the situation in Poland at that time. She says you know, my aunt was killed by a bomb in Tarnow at the beginning, before the Germans came in, in transit. I said I remember. Things, things come back into memories that when the Germans came in, on September 8th, I was on a corner, standing on a corner on Main Street watching them coming in the trucks. Truck by truck, and the German military police was standing directing the traffic. And they all were asking directions to the main crossing point on the way to Warsaw. One road led to Lwow in the direction of the Russian border and one towards Warsaw. And I was standing over there watching the guards that were on each corner of

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the street, and they had belts, belt buckles and it said, Got mit uns, so at that time as a kid I was wondering what kind of God did they believe in. Which god. Cruel people, they didn't seem cruel. I, as a kid you know, I always admired military uniforms. They had beautiful uniforms. And had those two grenades under their belts, and standing guard over there with a gun. I, as a kid you know, you admire military people and I was fascinated by the military splendor that they came in with, organized, motorized. It wasn't like this under the Polish government. Polish government, I've seen soldiers come running back, retreating where they had their shoes on their shoulders and barefooted running back. And this fascinated me. It was a well motorized, organized army that came into Tarnow.

Q: How long did it take after they first came into Tarnow before you and your family felt their presence?

A: As soon as they came in, it didn't take long. It took a day or two where the horror begun, where they started searching and confiscating the Jewish properties. They took old people. Especially they picked on Jews with beards, religious people, to take them out into the street and to clean the manure, horse manure from the street with their hands. They didn't give them brooms, nothing. They were degraded to a point where even an animal doesn't do it and at that time we were seeing what those people that came from Germany were talking about. There were people that were rounded up, young people in the streets for slave labor. They send them to Plaszow - that's near Krakow. This was just a beginning. There were some of them came back. They were telling stories about working conditions in those in those camps. People were really horrified because you never knew when you would be grabbed in the street. (By) the SS, the Wehrmacht didn't bother. The Wehrmacht went along with the SS,

what the SS was telling them to do. They were of course helping; they had to help, but the Gestapo and the SS were the main characters that came in to play that horrified the Jewish population and there was a day they picked Jews at random in the street and they tortured them. They were cutting off their beards with knives and they were kicking them. My rabbi that used to teach me for my bar mitzvah, they caught him with a tallis on a Saturday at his home and they were kicking him around and I happened to come because this was the time for my lesson. I just happened to be there when they were kicking him around and he saw me and he yelled out, he yelled out in Jewish he yelled out, run. As a matter of fact not in Jewish but in Hebrew. Run, Moishele. As I turned around you know, they pushed

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him down to the ground and then I heard a shot. And this was the end of Rabbi Brubel(?).

Q: The thing you were talking about occurred shortly after the Germans . . .

A: After they came in.

Q: Where was your family at the time? Were you still living in your same apartment?

A: The same apartment. Same year one day, this was in 1940, came a Volksdeutscher, it means he was of a German descent, and we were ordered to get out of our apartment. And we had to leave everything behind and moved in with his family and my father and I had to sleep in my mother's uncle's lumber yard because there was

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no place where to go. My mother and my sister, Uncle Farber took in and they lived in his apartment. We, my father and I slept over there in the lumber yard for some time and then we found a little apartment in a farm house overlooking the Jewish cemetery. This was Ulitsa Spitalna, number 43. I still remember. And we lived over there until the first massacre, the first deportation took place. After the deportation we had to move from there. But something happened during the time before the deportation. My father heard that it will be more than the deportation and he built an attic in a woodshed. This was a little farmhouse where had woodsheds. You know, each apartment had the woodsheds. And we had, he built a woodshed to, just in case of emergency we have to hide, because he didn't work and I worked at that time for a tailor, a very nice Jewish man that catered to German clientele, when they came to visit the military husbands or brothers or whatever. And he was very nice to me. I didn't know the trade but I used to help out and my father worked at the ?? \_\_\_\_\_ what they called it. There was a German firm; they were putting up structures for high tension wires from the German border to the Russian border all along. It was very hard work but after the work in the area was finished, they dismissed all the workers and that meant my father didn't have work. But everybody had to work at that time. Otherwise they were in trouble. And one day it happened. Suddenly there was the day of deportation where

the Germans came in and from house to house searching, they, with a list. They were very well organized. They always came with

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a list with names. And they took mostly the old people that couldn't work, people that were wearing glasses, that were undesirables. People that had anything, like a limp or had something wrong with the eyes. Right away they were the candidates for the transport and as soon as we heard that the Germans, what the Germans are doing, before they came our way, my father and I went into the attic and my mother had her birth certificate, and that's how she could protect my sister, because she was a little kid, she was ten years old, eleven years old. So she thought she would be safe with, as an American citizen. And she also had her Ausweis, the ID card issued by the Germans as an American and we heard the columns of Jews under the German escort at night. It was going constantly. They were passing our house because this was already on the outskirts of the city, the cemetery, and they were marching them to the woods behind the city. And as we found out later they were all shot over there. During the day I looked out through the shingles. My father said I shouldn't look but anyway I was a kid. I was curious and the roof was overlooking the cemetery and wagons with bodies dead bodies, were coming in. Groups, they were bringing in groups of Jewish people that had to dig ditches and the bodies dumped in and after those Jews that dug the ditches, they were shot also and pushed by another group that came in after them into those ditches and lime was poured over over the bodies and the next group covered up those ditches and dug

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other ditches. They brought in, they brought in pregnant women, and they didn't use any bullets. They used bayonets. The screams of the mothers that their children, they they hold the children under their arms and the screams of the children I still hear. Little infants. The Germans took pleasure, the SS took pleasure in taking little infants and smashing their heads against the tombstones or the cemetery wall. Little babies - they made a game out of it. One grabbed one leg and one the other leg and they tore the babies apart. I'm sorry.

Q: That's fine my friend. Have a little drink of water and just take your time.

A: No matter how many times I speak about it, I have the same reaction.

Q: I can understand that.

A: My father swore to me I shouldn't speak about it. Nobody will believe me. They will say that, that I made it up . . . He was partially right; even our Jewish people said it really happened (?)

1:32:50



... I don't understand. How can anyone make up a story like that? At that time when I hid with my father in that attic, we heard, it was during the day, we heard my sister scream, calling my mother. It happened that a German soldier came in and was looking you know, for Jews, and my mother showed the birth certificate and had an ID card and he left. It took a few days till the whole thing subsided but as I understand from people that survived, the gathering places was the main market place, \_\_\_\_\_, in the center of Tarnow, was jammed with people that were either killed on the spot or taken to the railroad station and transported to Belzec concentration camp. And actually it was, and that camp nobody came from Belsec, out of Belsec. When it was over my mother sent my sister because she was little and she figured nobody was going to bother her in the street, to see if anybody from the relatives is still alive, and she had an old aunt living in that market place with two daughters and this aunt was already 90 years old. So when my sister came up there, they told her that they didn't bother to kill her on the spot, this old woman. They took her by the legs and arms and threw her from the second floor down on to the wagon with the dead bodies, alive. And it was Mala Lubash (ph) and her sister Golda Reich, with her husband, the old Tante Lubash they killed. That was the first deportation and massacre in Tarnow of the Jewish people. At that time 12,000 people died because before they massacred, they ordered all the Jews from surrounding areas, from smaller areas, to move in to Tarnow. No Jews were allowed to live in the villages and the farm areas. They had to live in Tarnow. So the population swelled you know and they had a better a better easier way of killing the Jews that way.

Q: While the activities were taking place, were the Jewish residents living in what could be described as a ghetto at that time, or did that come later?

A: The ghetto was formed after the first action was taken, after the first deportation. I'll tell you about my father why I skipped it. I wanted to tell a story about my father on the first day of the deportation, across the yard, across the courtyard lived a Jewish policeman and when my father heard, you know, he went to ask him advice, his advice what to do. And while he was in his house, the Gestapo people came into the courtyard and when they saw him coming out from Mr. Gelb's house, my father didn't have any papers on him. It was all destiny. It didn't take much just for the Gestapo man to ask my father, Ausweis, papers. This this would have been the end of him. But they didn't ask. My father was so weak, so scared, that he braced himself against the wall and his knees started to buckle and the Gestapo man says, said to my father, are you sick? My father said nein. Are you besoffen? Are you are you drunk? He said nein. Where do you live? So my father pointed to the house next door and he says, Zurueck nach Hause. Go back home. So one of them couldn't take it because this was a

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higher ranking officer told my father to go back home. He run after my father and give him a kick in the behind you know and my father fell into the house. But as I said, the whole war that we lived through was destiny. Each one who has any family saved the others' lives which I will - so the first was my mother, because she saved us because she was an

American citizen.

Q: Let's hear a little about that. Just prior to the war, your mother made efforts to obtain visas for you.

A: Yes, in 19... in 1938 my mother wrote to the American Consulate in Warsaw and they said that they're going to issue her a visa if she will come to Warsaw Consulate and sign papers testifying that she never voted in the Polish elections. And she procrastinated. She was busy with this and that. She never thought of going to Warsaw until 1939 when there was talk about the war. And the American Consulate at the Embassy said that she should come immediately because they are evacuating all the American citizens and she should come to register. And she still procrastinated. So they said you can go back to United States but your family has to stay behind because we can't issue visas anymore for your family. And she didn't want to go by herself. She said if they have to stay, I will stay with my family. That's how she got stuck as an American citizen. And the American Consulate, the American Embassy ignored her. They just left her to fend for herself as a Jewess.

Q: Difficult.

A: They were difficult years. Difficult years.

Q: Just after the deportation, as you were describing it before, where were you and what happened to you?

A: The Germans made the Jewish quarters smaller. They tightened the area for the Jews, made it smaller. The part where we lived on the little farm house was out of the Jewish area, so we had to move in into a smaller.... , well, this was a ghetto without walls. And at that time we had to, my father and I had to go back to the lumber yard to sleep. My mother went with my sister to the Farber's to live, to her uncle, and a short time later they found room for my father and myself also and we slept ten people in one room because the Farbers had their son and their relatives come from other cities to live with them. At that time they thought that Tarnow is, will be safer and they wanted to stay with the family. So there were ten people in one room sleeping on the

01:44:

floor. And it didn't take long till the second deportation started. And we heard about the date because the Germans said the Jews should be ready for a transport on this and this date, and Uncle Farber in his lumber yard dug two ditches underneath the floorboards of the lumber yard. One for his family and one for his immediate relatives. I thought that we are included so my father said as soon as he heard about the deportation, he says let's go. This was the day before the actual date, and went to hiding in the lumber yard. When the action began it was too late already for the Farber family to get there because the Germans were rounding up the Jews already and they couldn't go through the streets, so you know Uncle Farber and his two

daughters climbed up on the roof of the building and there was a big chimney like the European buildings have, those wide chimneys, hid behind the chimney and it didn't take long. The Germans were rounding up the Jews in this building and one of the neighbors, downstairs neighbors, pointed out to the chimneys to the Germans Uncle Farber with his two daughters, and that's how he was killed and my family hid under the floorboards. And we heard shooting for about four days because this lumber yard was situated also on the market place. Tarnow had about four market places and this was a gathering place for farmers and you know, when they came to, before the war, to the to the market place to sell their goods. We were flat, prostrate on our backs under the floorboards. It was dark. We didn't know when is day, when was night, and all we heard was yelling and screaming and the German shepherd dogs barking outside. This was another thing, a miracle that the German shepherds didn't sniff us out. During the the massacre, during the action, there were Polish young people who helped the Germans kill Jews. There was the Legion, the Polish Legion they called themselves. And two of them came into the lumber yard and they were standing right above us urinating and one said to the other, oh, if I catch a Jew, I won't give him over to the to the Germans. I will cut off his head with my axe. And this was the attitude of the anti-Semites in in Poland at that time. They were even helping the Germans kill the Jews. And when it was over we came out smelling like roses. We were covered with feces and dirt. We looked at each other and started laughing. But during the deportations my mother was so scared underneath the floorboards that she was hallucinating and we had to slap her face. She saw a Gestapo man. It was dark. It was pitch dark. She was hallucinating. She saw a Gestapo man with that with a briefcase standing. Where? Slapped her face to keep her quiet. Really - if someone had a bad heart this was the end of the person. Could never live through if someone was weak. You had to be a really super strong to - all the people that survived the war were people that were strong, strong people. Otherwise you couldn't survive.

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Q: For four days you stayed under the boards?

A: Yes.

Q: Why did you emerge? What . . .

A: When it was quiet. It was quiet. And . . .

Q: What did you see when you came out?

A: When we came out we went back to the house, to the Farber's house, and nobody talked. Everybody kept to himself. It was like someone died in the family. Actually they did. But nobody talked about it and each one of us went back to their own chores. After each deportation the Germans, they (re)organized the factories, re-registered the people. The factory that I worked with my mother was called Madritsch (ph). This was a German firm, actually Austrian, an Austrian firm that used to make military coats. and I used to work in

the pressers room where I used to wring out the rags for the pressers. I used to come home with blisters on my hands. I couldn't move them. All day, you know, have my hands in water and and wringing out rags and then after the pressers got through with pressing the coats, they loaded coats on my shoulder and I used to carry the coats to the to the other side of the building where they were sewing on the buttons on the coats. That's where my mother worked, and as I said, after each deportation they re-registered and the ghetto was getting smaller. Each time they were making the ghetto smaller. The ghetto after the second deportation, they split the ghetto in two. There was Ghetto A and Ghetto B. Ghetto A was for the slaveworkers and Ghetto B was for people who didn't work - for the old people and for children. And then after the deportation when they were re-registering - let me, let me go back a little bit - I want to make a point of something. When I was carrying the coats there was a group of women, the wives of the managers, German managers and the owners of the firm came for an inspection of the factory, to Tarnow. And when one woman saw me carrying the coats, she says, oh what a pity - that little boy with a load like this on his shoulders. Soon after I was called to the office. I said to myself, oh, this is the end. So when I came to the office, there was the owner of the factory, the Austrian, standing there with a smile, and he says to me, how do you like to work over here? I said, it's alright. He says, how is your health? I said fine. It seems like his wife said something about me. He says, then he says to me, if you need anything, come to me and tell me. And this manager, the Jewish manager Mr. Weinstock, who managed the factory, was getting fidgety and he excused me by saying that I have to back to work and shoved me out of the door. This Mr. Madritsch I'll never forget because this Mr. Madritsch after the war, wrote a book, how he saved 500 Jews in Tarnow by creating a factory. He did it with a purpose, and he wrote a book and they put up a tree in his name in Yad vaShem. (Very interesting.) He had a partner, Mr. Titsch (ph), who also was honored by Yad vaShem, and I want to make a point that after the deportation when they were re-registering the Jewish people, I went over to the table, to the Gestapo table that was standing in the middle of the market place, and you know, there was a line of people. I came to the table and they put my name down. And then Mr. Weinstock was standing over there and he didn't want to register my mother. I was very desperate. I looked around and I said, why not. He said we don't need so many people. I looked around and I saw Mr. Titsch standing talking to an SS officer. I went over. I was a little kid. I had no fear because I knew that they liked me, you know, this Mr. Madritsch liked me and he was there with the with a group inspecting the factory at that time. I went over and I said, they registered me, but they don't want to register my mother, in my in my broken German. He looked at me with a smile. He took me by the shoulder and led me to the table and he said to the SS man, he said put his mother's name down.

Q: An incredible story. And Martin perhaps a good place for us to end this part of our discussion so that we can get ourselves ready for the next. Thanks.

End of Tape #1

**Tape #2**

Q: Martin, we were talking about the transportations, and you mentioned you had something very important to add.

A: One morning I got up early before all the others. I looked around the room. There were ten people on the floor sleeping and as I was dressing I looked out of the window that was leading outside the ghetto and I see trucks, German trucks with soldiers, a whole column going towards the ghetto gate and as they were riding down towards the gate they were dropping off Polish policemen across the street to stand guard watching the ghetto. I knew right away what's going to happen. This was the third deportation taking place and right away I screamed out an alarm - the Germans are coming. And everybody got up and they started running in every direction. People didn't know what what to do. They were not prepared for it. And my parents and my sister started running towards that hiding place again in the lumber yard. We couldn't get there because the we realized when we were in the street already that the gate that the German trucks were coming in to where it was in our way, between the hiding place, the lumber yard and us. And we couldn't get through. So we turned around and my father told us to get in to the first building that was on our way, as we were retreating, and it was a big courtyard, an old house where you come into the house and there is a big door, a wooden door and then a big courtyard and there was a complete chaos in that courtyard. People were running, screaming names Chaim, Moishe. And they had a big ladder against a wall of a building and there was an opening in the wall, high up, and they were climbing the ladder to that hiding place. How many people can go into that - there were about a few dozen people running around like chickens. My sister, she was a little girl, turned around on her on her heel, comes back running into the street with her pigtails flying - she says, I am not going in there. And she started running towards our house. And without a word we followed her. As we were on our way back to our house, we heard the Germans marching in the streets behind us because they had those hobnails on the boots and we were running back as fast as possible and on the way my mother said, you know, I heard about a hiding place that a man was building in his apartment. Let's go over there. So it was on the first floor where we used to live in our in our house where the Farbers lived, and at the end of the balcony because the the courtyard had a balcony all around, a wooden balcony, so at the end of the balcony there was an apartment and we came over there and there was a padlock on the door. My father turns around to me. He says go back to the apartment and get the axe. I run first to the apartment and brought the axe and my father ripped off the padlock and we heard already Germans entering the building downstairs. We came to the apartment. Was quiet. Nobody was there. So my mother called out - we are Spetts. Please let us in. I know that there is a hiding place over here. And nobody answered. So my mother threatened. She said, if I don't hear from you we're going to move the furniture around. We're going to look for the hiding place. Finally from under the bed, a voice came from under the bed. They said bend down, crawl under the bed. There is an opening. And we all did. There was a a panel. The the door from another room - the frame was taken out and blocked off. You wouldn't even know that there was another room behind that wall. We crawled into another room where there were about eight people there. And the owner of the apartment

told us that his two daughters went to work early that morning and locked the apartment with a padlock and they didn't have any food. We stayed over there for almost a week. That's how long the deportation took. But they had a pail over there for doing the business and they shared food with us. Very nice people. The daughters never made it back. It seems later on that they were grabbed in the street and put on a train and while they jumped out through that cattle car opening - from a window - they were shot, both of them. They never made it. . . .

Q: And you and your family stayed in this shelter for a week?

A: In this shelter for a week and while - a few minutes after we were there in that hiding place, we heard German voices. And one German said to the other, Wir waren schon hier, we were here already. We were here already. Because they saw the lock broken, so we saved, we saved the place from being searched.

Q: You were speaking before about destiny.

A: Yes. I still say life, each person's life has its destiny. I believe strongly in that. And no matter what you do, how you think, how you plan, it doesn't help. It's your destiny that rules the life.

Q: And when you came out after that week in that . . .

02:09:

A: After that week this was third deportation and we struggled in the ghetto. Were terrible sanitary conditions, hunger. After the deportation there was talk about doing away with the second ghetto where people who didn't work and the old people. One night I hoisted my mother over the wooden fence. We found a corner of the fence that wasn't patrolled. It was a dark place, and I hoisted my mother over and then I climbed over because my father was there with my sister in that ghetto. And I gave my father my number with the Madritsch name on it and my sister and myself were packed into wicker luggage trunk, locked in and my mother called two strong fellows in the morning and she said, be careful with my china. It's very precious. And they were complaining how heavy it is. When they put it on a dolly and and they came to the gate to take it to the other ghetto, to the working ghetto, and the Jewish policemen were giving them trouble - started asking questions: why do you need china? What are you going to do with china? My mother said this is my my only possession and finally they let us through, and the trunk was thrown into a basement where my sister and I came out later on. And my sister went into hiding you know, out of sight. That's how we had to live. My father didn't work also and food was very scarce. There was no medication. the Gestapo used to come and they used to grab people, shoot people in the street and it was a horror. Finally, excuse me, finally in May of 1943, the Gestapo was asking the Jewish leaders if they know about any foreigners like American, British citizens that are still in the ghetto and the Gestapo men you know, sent fliers - whatever you call it - and my mother was very apprehensive because in the beginning when the Germans came in,

they took eighty British citizens and they shot them behind the city. And at that time my father buried the my mother's birth certificate in a wall because they were afraid, you know, for my mother to be recognized as an American citizen. And but when the war, we started moving from ghetto to ghetto, he took the birth certificate out you know when they started moving us around. My mother kept the birth certificate with her and that's what saved her. On the 10th of May, 1943, a Gestapo man was sitting in the office of the Jewish police station and registering a family that came before us. A man by the name of Sam,... Sam Bloomenstock who received a postal card from his father in New York, and in that postal card the father mentioned that he applied for him and for his mother for a visa. With that postal card, he presented this postal card to the Gestapo man. And the Gestapo man accepted it. Not only that he saved his mother and himself, but he took along his girlfriend and he presented her as his wife and he registered her too. And he lived through the concentration camp and with us together and was liberated and he is now in Brooklyn, a businessman in Brooklyn.

Q: Amazing. Let's go back to . . .

A: Yeah, to the registration. When my mother came in she faced the Gestapo man. He, the Gestapo man asked her if she has a husband and children. And my mother was afraid to say - she didn't know what to say. My father and my sister and I were standing outside waiting. We didn't know what to expect. And the head of the Jewish community was standing by the table and he said - he knew us - and he said of course you have a husband and children. The Gestapo man said where are they. So she points outside the window and he told us to come in and he registered us and he told us to be ready tomorrow morning. One suitcase for each person and we would be exchanged for German prisoners. That's our destination. The next morning, on May 11th, 1943, on my father's birthday, we were, we boarded a wagon with a horse and they took us to the railroad station. Passenger train took us to Krakow railroad station there, and we had to wait for a while over there and we told we will send out postal cards to people that we know. One we sent to ghetto where we knew that it's not going to arrive but we tried - that we arrived in Krakow. One we sent, we addressed to Basel, Switzerland where my mother had an aunt by the name of Miller, Tante Miller, and she always, my mother always drummed the address into our heads just in case we will be separated during the war that after the war we should meet over there. Eight Rue des Bains (ph) in Basel and, but they never received mail. Shortly under German escort they marched us through the streets of Krakau into the prison, political prison, Monteluppe (ph) where we spent nine weeks, men separated from women. We didn't know of each other's fate. We came to the cell and there were straw sacks burlap burlap bags with straw as mattresses, for mattresses. There was a table, a wooden table and two benches and a niche in the cell for a bucket for sanitary conditions. The windows were facing the courtyard and they had a metal cover wider at the top so the sun can come in and on the bottom was narrower with holes on the bottom for drainage, water drainage. And a few days later they brought in more prisoners to our cell, also Jews from Lwow and surrounding areas. As we found out they had false papers, foreign papers. They paid for those papers and the Germans registered them as as foreigners. We were about ten people in the cell and on the way to the showers one day in

the basement we met Jews that were prisoners of that prison there, political prison - Jews were considered - as Jews they were not political. They were considered lower than animals. They were

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not even human because they were not human beings. But they told us on passing - they were coming out from the showers and we were going in and we looked at each other and they had pieces of noses missing, pieces of ears that were all scratched and bitten, so one of them said that when they are being punished, they are being thrown into cells with mad dogs, German shepherds, and that's what happens you know, when the German shepherds attack. During the day we saw exercises in the courtyard where they were exercising the prisoners, Jewish prisoners, and they were beating them and torturing them with sticks. They were being hit in the Adam's apple while they were running around in circles or they told them to climb up a pile of coal on their elbows and and and their knees, up the pile and as they were sliding down they were hit over the backs with a boards, two by twos. It was terrible. One day we were very hungry. We ate ate anything that was given to us. One day we heard somebody by the door and we had to line up for food and the door opens up. We are standing already ready to get food and there was a SS man, SS officer with his shining boots and gloves in his hand, and he seemed like a little drunk. And he says, "Also Juden Spruch". He says Spruch (saying). We didn't know what he means. So everybody kept quiet. So he keeps yelling again, Spruch. And with that he hits the first man in the row, which was Bloomenstock, right in the face. He says I'm going to teach you what Spruch means. And he goes like this. "wir Juden sind schuldig an allElend wenn das kosbare Deutsches Blut fliesst, wir Juden sind Gauner, wir Juden sind Verbrecher."

Q: Which means?

A: Which means, we Jews are guilty when dear blood that is spilt - German blood that is spilt - Jews are Gauner, I don't know how to translate it - it's it's like a thief you know [actually means criminal]- a Verbrecher means a murderer [also means criminal]- we were the murderers. And I will be back in one hour and we'll have to know the "Spruch" and with that he closed the door. And we were sure he's going to come back and everybody - I didn't, I never heard, I never saw people learning so fast the language - in one hour (laughter). And I still remember. (laughter). So he never showed up. And I still know the "Spruch".

Q: And you stayed there for nine weeks?

A: For nine weeks. After nine weeks they took us out from the cell into the courtyard and were reunited with the women, with my mother, my sister and the others and the Germans told us to face the wall. And while we were standing with our faces to the wall, they were loading and reloading the guns. It seemed like they were trying to scare us because a few minutes later, a few minutes - it was like a half an hour later two trucks came and a German officer came over. It was Wehrmacht, the regular Army and he told us that we are being taken to be



exchanged, to the exchange station where they will exchange the German prisoners and we were being loaded on the trucks and taken to the railroad station. Pullman cars and while the train was in motion - we were going towards Germany and this officer came with official papers and he was taking down the information - how much property each one of us left in Poland - the same amount in monetary, in money will be given to us when we will be exchanged either to England or to United States in their monetary value. And he told us to sign the papers. The train arrived on the Berlin station and the Red Cross was waiting for us with milk for the children and all kinds of goodies - chocolate and so on - bread and the Red Cross knew about us. We were the Auslaender, the foreigners. Everybody was nice to us on the Berlin station. At Berlin station they attached another train to our train that came from Lwow in Poland with other group of Jews. And we were on our way. Two hours out of the Berlin station the train stopped in an open field. And we saw the SS surrounding the train with dogs and they came on the train and they started yelling for us to get out and hitting us with their guns. We turned to the commandant, to the German officer that said that we're going to be exchanged - wanted to know what is the story. He says I don't know myself. He said this end of line for me. They told me to go back. And we're being thrown out, out of the train and lined up and as they were passing by, the the SS men passing by, one says in German to the other soldier, he says oh, "ein Maschinengewehr ist genug." One machine gun is enough for them. So we knew, we thought we knew what what was waiting for us, and after a while trucks came backing up and they loaded us on the trucks and they put down the flaps you know in the back so we wouldn't see where we're going but through the opening we saw we are going through a forest and my father took us around and he started praying. After a while we arrived at a camp. We saw barbed wires, pine trees all around. Smelled beautifully because the barracks in that camp was freshly built. The wood the wood of the barracks still smelled fresh. It was in the summer of 1943 and they unloaded us on the main road in the camp where we saw across the road British and Russian prisoners still finishing the barracks. It seems like they took the prisoners of war for the work for building the barracks. We found out we were in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. It seems like we are the first ones to open up the camp and while we were standing over there waiting something to happen, something happened to me. All of a sudden I lost my strength in my legs . . My legs started giving and I feel I didn't have the strength to stand on my legs. So my mother started crying. There was a nice young strong man in our group. He picked me up and he was holding me in his arms until the Germans came and they were leading us away into a barrack. They assigned us a barrack and they put me on a bunk and they called a German doctor, a German military doctor. He came and he diagnosed it as Rose (ph) Fever, from malnutrition. I got Rose Fever in my legs and they would swell up, swelled up and and had reddish spots - it was terrible. I couldn't move them. So they gave me, I guess, vitamins, the round big pills. They gave me vitamins. After a while it subsided and I was walking around again. From the beginning we were considered Ausleander, foreigners with British and American papers. Some of the people had South American papers. I remember one had Mexican, Mexican papers as a citizen of Mexico. And from the beginning they treated us very well. The children were getting milk. The food was good and then something happened. I don't know exactly how it happened when the food was rationed and we didn't get the same treatment just as we came in. We were about, and I can't - already at that time they brought

in people from Warsaw who had false papers from all over. And one day an inspection came. Gestapo came to inspect the camp and our commandant, Jewish commandant, our representative you know - speaker - his name was Sonderling (ph) and he was he was from Lwow. As the Gestapo was passing by and the, Mr. Sonderling was presenting his statement, one of the Gestapo men said to him, what are you doing here? And he called him by his rightful name. This Mr. Sonderling, it seems that he was studying law with the Gestapo man in Germany. Together they were classmates. And he recognized him. About a week later there was, they posted a list of names on the barrack. Those people will be sent to Switzerland for exchange of Germans from the United States or Britain whatever. And people were fighting to get on that list. They were paying off the people on that, that were on that list money to take their place. Some people did it. And there was a transport a few hundred people. Because the camp already consisted of over a thousand people. And Mr. Sonderling was on that list with other people. Two brothers, that were doctors. One stayed and one went with the transport. As we found out later, that everybody envied those people - they are going to Switzerland. They were sending messages with them. We found out later on from the grapevine, through the grapevine, people working the railroads - you know from the prisoners, other prisoners, that the train came back with the luggage of those, of those from those people on that transport. It seems like that thing went straight to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. And afterwards they were checking papers but the Gestapo was very thorough the first time. And whoever was left, they made the compound smaller. They moved us from one place to another, from one barrack to the other. One day - it was so bad that we were so hungry. There was a piece of bread they gave us that day that we made- they gave us a loaf of

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black bread and we had to cut it, cut portions, appropriate portions for each person in the camp, and we made a scale out of strings and pieces of wood and each crumb, God forbid it fell off off that that scale - was terrible. There were special people assigned to weigh that bread. Sanitary conditions was terrible. There was, in the beginning we had the latrine was a building with a big ditch and two benches on each side. You had a panoramic view of everybody. Later on we had a barrack with a toilet that didn't work. We had water that was rationed you know, hours that you could use. People were eating up were eating up eaten up by lice. We were sitting in the morning and and killing the lice - the shirts were infested with it. Hungry - that the kettle that they brought in from the kitchen - we had to send people to bring those military kettles with with soup that you didn't know what the soup was made from, and yet when it was dished out to everybody, a portion to everybody, we had a line-up of people, a list of people that could lick that kettle out after it was finished. Such hunger. You can imagine sanitary conditions in that in that camp. No toilet paper. People left to their own devices to tend to the sanitary conditions. . . .

Q: Martin, what did you do during the day?

A: Nothing. Nothing. The kids were were asking, actually the parents you know were asking

those older the the young people that went to colleges, that studied, to teach the others. So we used to take out the board from the bunk, from underneath the mattress and scrape out our lessons on the board with a piece of wire or something because there was no pencil. If there was a pencil it was a treasure. I learned about architecture this way. There was an architect, my mother you know saved a piece of bread to give for my lessons. There was a person that taught English. There was a person that taught French. We tried to occupy ourselves but actually we did nothing. This Bloomenstock that I was talking about that is now in New York, became a shoemaker. We used to have these Sabots. Those are the wooden Dutch shoes. They hurt our feet terrible. But the shoes that we came with were falling apart. So he used to take the boards from the from the bunks. He used to make little pegs and that's how he used to fix the shoes. He used to take old shoes, cut a piece of leather out of the shoe and used to patch up the shoes, other people's shoes with that way, you know, with the pegs, wooden pegs. Over here he has warehouses with shoes - it became it became his trade. (laughter)

Q: Back in those days in Bergen-Belsen, how long did you and your family stay there?

A: Two years. From 1943, summer of 1943 until April, beginning of April 1945. The conditions were terrible. People were dying and they moved us at the end already to the end of camp in a little barrack and people were dying of typhus at that time already. In April of 1945. But I want to come back to the camp before that, to the compound before that. One day I was standing outside before the barrack and a transport of Jewish prisoners - the Germans brought in to the next compound next to us. And while I was standing outside I heard my name called. I turned around and through the wires I see a skeleton standing there. I couldn't recognize him. He says Martin, he says. At that time they called me Monick (ph). Monick, don't you recognize me. I said no. And he told me his name. He was my classmate. And he says they told me that you are coming over here for Erholung, for recuperation from another camp. Can you spare a piece of bread? I didn't eat. I didn't eat for two days. So I I went to my mother. I said, can you spare a piece of bread? So she went to ask other people when we got a little package together of pieces of bread and I went to the wire and made it so you know so the guard from the tower wouldn't see, and I threw it you know, through the wires towards him. And that night we heard, I heard a commotion in that barrack next door, next compound. In the morning that barrack was empty. we heard that Kapos and the German guards went in there during the night with sticks and beat the whole the whole group to death. Just beat them to death. And I didn't see my friend again. In 1983, when I was at the gathering of the Holocaust survivors in Washington, a woman passed me by. And she saw my badge which says

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Tarnow. I, so she says are you from Tarnow? I said yes. She said I have a husband that is from Tarnow. I said what is his name. So she said Franco. I said Franco. What's his first name? So she told me the first name. I said it's impossible. Franco was killed in a barrack in Bergen-Belsen. No she said. He played dead. He fell on other bodies and he they took him

out of camp and he joined other prisoners, a work a work group, as the bodies were being transported. He lives now in Mexico City. And this was his wife. (Amazing) And he was in Washington and we missed each other. She gave me his telephone number and I was rushing to the hotel and I got stuck in traffic and I never made it. He went back to Mexico.

Q: Martin, if we could come back now to the time when you were still in the camp (Yes) approaching a time when there would be other actions in the camp. How did you experience through it?

A: As I said, the sanitary conditions and the hunger was very bad and this was 1943, winter. Was very hard winter and the Germans allowed the people from the barrack, they should volunteer to go into the woods - it was a forest actually behind the behind the camp and gather twigs for the stove in the - we had one stove, belly - how you call it - stove oven - and my mother volunteered. The poor woman was stepping to her knees in this snow to go to the forest. And pieces of bread that we saved, maybe later maybe later we'll eat. The crust from the bread we used to stick to the pot-bellied stove. It should get hot where she would be able to chew on it and in April of 1945 it was Passover. The Germans took us out about, four hundred people and transported four hundred people. An epidemic already started in that compound, typhus epidemic. And they marched us out of the camp. I had double pneumonia. And I had to walk seven kilometers to the train in Celle, the town of Celle. I was lagging behind. My mother was afraid that as I stayed behind the Germans would shoot me. Who needs, you know, who needs me. But I made it. As soon as we came to the train I lied myself down on top of the luggage rack over there, just laid there. I had a terrible pain in my back. I was sick with fever. And the train started with seventy guards sitting on top of the roof while the train was in motion. The German commandant who was in charge and we found out that we are going to be transported to Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt was the show case for the world, so-called better camp of for foreigners. By the time we reached Magdeburg, this is in northern part of Germany, the train started to rerouting, back and forth. We are going in circles for ten days. We couldn't get through because the Allies were on all sides. And German kids were standing on mounts you know near the railroad tracks and they were yelling while we are going towards Magdeburg, they were yelling, where are you going? You are going into fire. Magdeburg was bombed by American planes. And the train had to stop in the middle of the forest. And while the bombings were going on, the wave after wave of planes, we went underneath the train to hide. A lot would help if the bombs would drop. And the commandant, not knowing what to do, he went to the next village to call up Berlin. He told us where he is going. And he came back and he told, he told us that he has order to liquidate the whole transport, to shoot us. He says I am sorry. I have orders from Berlin. And the heavy machine guns were all set up. During the night we saw artillery from far away shooting in our direction. It was like someone was lighting a match. One by one. And the German army was retreating in the forest past our train. We were scared terribly because we didn't know. Maybe they they will get into their heads to finish us off as they are retreating. In the morning it was quiet. It was a beautiful day in the morning. And the train was in a place where there was a stream passing by you know, running by. And the little kids went to the stream. People were dying. Hunger, hungry, terrible. We had rations given us as we started out. People ate it right away. When the train stopped in an open field we used to jump

out and dig out the the turnips that they give to cows to eat. We used to eat it raw. It used to burn our throats terribly, but we ate it. And that morning the German commandant left the train and we see him on a bicycle. He went to the village and we see him on a bicycle passing by, and waving to us as he rides rides away. And out of this seventy guards that were guarding that train, only seven were left. And they were not even Germans. They were Ukrainians, a mixture of from other countries in German uniforms. About ten o'clock in the morning, about that time, we heard a squeaking sound of metal rumbling and a tank showed up over the horizon on the hill pointing a gun towards the train with a white star on it. We couldn't make it out, what it was. And a soldier jumped off that tank and he comes towards us and we realized it's an American soldier. And he didn't, he didn't come fifty yards from the train when a surge of people started running towards him (pause - crying) kissing his feet. The soldier started crying and he told us that President Roosevelt died. It was the 13th of April, 1945.

Q: And for you, Martin, it was the end of one long experience?

A: And we realized that we are liberated. And one of the German guards pointed a gun at the American soldier. And two of our people jumped him. Took away the gun from him. So we said to the American soldier, shoot him. He wanted to kill you. He says no, he has orders to take prisoners. We found out the soldier's name was Schwartz (ph) from Brooklyn. A young boy.

Q: Martin, we do thank you very much. It was fine. Thank you.

End of Tape #2

Conclusion of Interview