

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Steven Springfield
March 30, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Steven Springfield, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on March 30, 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.

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STEVEN SPRINGFIELD

March 30, 1990

Q: Would you tell me your name please?

A: I'm Steven Springfield.

Q: Where were you born and when?

A: I was born January 30th, 1923 in Riga, Latvia.

Q: Will you tell me about, something about your parents?

A: Yes

Q: What did your father do?

A: Uh my father owned a junior department store in Latvia, in Riga. Originally he worked as a salesman and slowly improved himself and was opened, able to open his own business. He was, he was selling ladies sports clothes and uh my mother worked in the business with him. She used to style the clothing. At that time uh there was no wholesale buying and all the inventory used to be produced by seamstresses who used to come to the store after it was closed in the evening and my mother used to give them out the work and discuss the various fashions and they did, did the work at their houses and used to bring it back and this is the way we we acquired inventory. And my mother used to go once in a while to Paris to get some styles, to copy styles and and she was working hand-in-hand with my father.

Q: What was what was your family life like as a child, growing up?

A: Well, the general situation in Latvia before the 2nd World War - Latvia was an independent country from 1918 to 1940. And even though there was some anti-Semitism prevalent, the Jewish people had had many cultural activities. We we had many Jewish schools. We had Jewish museums, Jewish theaters and a very active cultural and social life. my father and mother worked very very hard in order to provide a decent standard of living to the family and give their children the best possible education. We went to private schools. , as a matter of fact private German schools until 1933 when Hitler came to power. Then all the Jewish people demonstratively took their children out of the German schools and I started attending the Hebrew

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school, Gymnasion Ivrit, and I visited the school. I was attending the school until 1940. My brother went to a different school which was called Ezra School which was also, was

not Hebrew but it was also diversified in various languages. And we we had a very interesting social life. We belonged to a Zionist organization. we were very much interested in Palestine and most of our young people used to volunteer to go in the kibbutz whenever possible. And we were strong supporters of the Zionist movement at that time. Our social life was very active and we had really had a nice a nice growing up period. And all this of course changed when in 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied our country. overnight things were not the same anymore. first of all my father lost his business. There was no private enterprise allowed under any circumstances. One day somebody came into our business and asked my father for the key and that was it. And my father had to go and work in the lumber factory, after all those years trying to build the business and provide a future for his family - all of a sudden everything was gone. All our Zionist organizations were closed immediately. It was forbidden to have any kind of nationalist groups under threat of incarceration. Even the Hebrew schools were closed because the Soviet Union does not recognize Hebrew as as a Jewish language. That that is nationalist and anything which is nationalist is forbidden. So life changed dramatically. In addition they they arrested five thousand prominent Jewish families from Latvia and sent them to Siberia, their only crime being that they were capitalists. They had large business and all that. And that took all of 1940 until 1941. we had heard, we had heard already about things transpiring in Germany and in Austria. We had heard rumor about persecution against Jews, even Jews being sent to concentration camps and all that, but nobody really believed that these things would lead eventually to mass murder or mass persecutions against Jews, so when when the war finally broke out on the end of June, June 22nd, Germany declared

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war on the Soviet Union. the German army swept through the Baltic states, within eight days occupied the Baltic states and there was very little time to make up one's mind whether to stay behind or to leave with the retreating Russian army. We had a discussion about it in our living room and my father felt very very strongly that it is a temporary situation. Yes, there might be some privileges which will be taken away from the Jews and there might be a certain amount of persecutions, but nobody in their right mind could ever imagine what was to come, so my father said we're going to stick it out. We're going to stay. So we did - that's the reason why we stayed behind. Some of our friends left with the Russian army. the men were taken immediately into the Army and most of them died fighting the Germans. Some of them were sent to Siberia. Some of them were sent to inner Russia and some of them survived and came back after the war. The minute the Germans occupied Latvia and particularly Riga on July 1st, 1941, the Latvian population, the Latvian civilian population, turned against their neighbors, the Jews. Anti-Semitism, as I said, was always prevalent, but the year occupation by the Soviet Union increased anti-Semitism by so much because as usual the Jews were used as a scapegoat and the Latvian civilian population accused the Jews of being the culprit of bringing communism to their country. And that is why immediately, when the Russians pulled out, the German civilian population started persecution, persecuting Jews. They, before even the Germans

had a chance to institute any kind of change, the the Latvians used to sweep through the houses, used to drag people out, used to murder, plunder, rape, everything, in the last, even the last the first few days. In this, in the first few weeks, our family was lucky because we had a maid who was living with us and she used to go out and do all the shopping for us, so we didn't have to venture into the streets, which was very dangerous. And she used to go buy food for us and and help us as much as she could. But then came out orders that every Jew was supposed to wear the star, the yellow star of David, left front and center back. And we were not allowed to walk on the sidewalk. Like cattle we were driven into the gutter. Not allowed to go to parks. Not allowed anything. It was a very very sad and nervous time because Jews were continuously, continuously arrested, taken to prison. Most of them never came back. Few later, a few weeks later, an order came out that all Jews have to get ready to be moved from their apartments into specially designated area called the ghetto. It was supposed to be in a dilapidated section of town where about four thousand poor Russian and Polish families lived. They vacated the premises and in their place thirty thousand Jews were brought. All we all we were allowed to take is what we could carry in small little hand-driven carriages. By October we all were supposed to be in the ghetto, and the gates were closed.

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Q: How did your family prepare to go into the ghetto?

A: Well, we knew that there was really no possibility for us to do anything but to follow orders because the majority, the overwhelming majority of the Latvian civilian population, didn't have any kind of feelings for their neighbors, the Jews who who who who were struck with this particular disaster. And there was no chance of getting help from anybody. So when the day came, we just, sad as it was, packed up a few little things which we could carry and we - I remember the day very well. It was about a mile and a half from our house to the ghetto, and we carried a few pieces each and had a little wagon which we pushed and took a few bare necessities, what we could carry, and we made the transition from our apartment to the ghetto. In the ghetto of course, the situation was disastrous because we had to share - in the ghetto we were assigned a room to share with another family. One room. Every apartment, a two or three room apartment usually was occupied by six or seven families. And the ghetto was guarded on the outside by the Latvian military guards. We had in the ghetto a civilian administration which was in charge of the sanitation, in charge of police, employment agency and whatever, and every morning people used to line up and the German or Latvian guards came and took people to work. At night they used to bring them back. my mother, my brother and I were working at that time for a German police unit called BDO, which is translated into German: "Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei". We were, my brother and I were doing menial labor. My mother was working for the for the chief in in the kitchen. She cooking for his family, which enabled her once in a while to get some extra food to help to support the family. My father of course stayed home and he did the the the menial chores in the house in so far and so at night we used to come back, but all this took a very very

short time. That is from October till November. On November 27th, the orders came out that people who live in a certain section of the ghetto supposed to line up on the streets the next morning and they will be sent to a different camp. And of course all kinds of rumors started sweeping the ghetto. Nobody was sure what's to come and everybody was concerned and worried and but then, after lining up on the 27th, they sent every...everybody home again. But a day later, on the 29th, thousands of Latvian and German police came into the ghetto, drunk, most of them drunk - shooting, chasing everybody out. Raus. Everybody raus. Schnell, schnell. They chased everybody out. Whoever couldn't walk was shot on the spot. Children, women, elderly men, on the street. And German officers were walking around and telling the elderly and the weak and the ones who couldn't walk very well that they will provide transportation for them. They, it would be much easier for them and they provided special blue buses. At that time we did not know what was happening to them, but they were chased through certain

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sections of town into the forest, a place called Rumbola and there Russian prisoners of war had prepared large graves, mass graves, and when the people got there they were told to undress, put their shoe in one pile their shoes in one pile, clothing in another pile, driven to the edges of this mass grave, and machine-gunned. It was going on all night and the next day. Fifteen thousand of our people were massacred in that particular day. My brother and I were taken with a group of other men and told to go to a certain place where they established a small ghetto of four thousand able-bodied men, and we were immediately separated from the rest of the ghetto. My father chose to stay at that time with my mother, but somehow - they lived in a different part of town, so they were spared the first murder. It didn't last long however, and on December 8th, they started the same thing all over again. And my father came over to visit my my brother and myself, wanted to go back and all of a sudden they closed, they closed the ghetto and he was stuck. He couldn't go back to my mother because he really wanted to be with my mother, so that's how my father stayed with us, and that particular day my mother with most of the rest of the ghetto were taken out. Another eleven thousand, five hundred were massacred. There was another small Aktion the next day of five hundred. There were within a very short time, two weeks, twenty-seven thousand people massacred.

Q: How did you hear about your mother's death and what did you do?

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A: Well, as a matter of fact we, even after it happened, we were not sure. There were all kinds of rumors circulating what had happened to them, because the civilian population we didn't have any contact with. We didn't know for sure what was happened. All we knew that my mother was taken away in the second aktion with another eleven thousand five hundred people. We were still hoping against hope that maybe it was some kind of a different labor camp where she was taken to. Nobody was sure but but after a while, the

the real picture started emerging - that it was just a disaster, that they were just murdered and there was no hope of anybody coming back. And of course my father and us were totally devastated. A lot of tears, a lot of crying, saying kaddish after my mother, but really there was not, nothing nothing much one could do at those those at this time. I remember while they were taking out those people from the ghetto, I was standing behind the barbed wire and I saw those wild animals, those drunk Latvian and German soldiers beating, killing in the most brutal and barbaric way. I saw a woman walking with a child, with a baby in her arms, and somehow she slipped and the baby fell out of her arms. The Latvian policeman grabbed the baby, held it by its legs and put a bullet through the head, and when the mother started pleading with him and crying, he shot the mother on the spot. I saw that just in front of me. So when I saw that I had no doubt in my mind what was happening to our people. And it was the futility of the situation which made me raise my eyes to the sky, say my God, it just cannot be. Human beings cannot do that to other people. It's just impossible. Day had turned to night. People became worse than animals, blood-thirsty without any pity, any feelings for their fellow human beings, and the Latvian civilian population and I must get the record straight, the overwhelming majority of them just couldn't care less. They were hanging out the windows and they knew what was going on, and the majority of them couldn't care less. Yes, there was some exceptions. A few people even risked their lives to help their fellow Jews. But a percentage and it was so minute and so small that it really doesn't amount to anything. After these big exterminations of November and December, life went on in the small ghetto where just four thousand of us able-bodied men were left, and a few hundred women were kept in a special house away from us. Then the Jews from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Lithuania started arriving. The majority of them were sent immediately to their death. Some of them were brought to our camp, to our ghetto in the place of of our people who were executed. And every day new shipments kept arriving. And as time went on, we got to know them, and in the beginning there was a certain understandable

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resentment from the Latvian Jews because somehow we felt that we had to make room for them, and when when you are emotionally overwhelmed by happenings, you don't think rational and you blame the the new arrivals to to a certain extent about what had transpired. But soon we became friends with them and even though we were separated by barbed wire, we had contacts with them being that they had also women and girls, and in our camp there was only men. The contact came, used to be boyfriend-girlfriend relationships and all that, and a certain amount of social life under those primitive circumstances took place. My brother and I, who used to in in in in pre-war times belong to a band, used to come to, on Sundays we used to go the German ghetto used to call it, and have social meetings and and sing and and even dance a little bit, just, you know, just to pass the time away, and , you know, life was going on and everybody was trying to do the best he could under the circumstances. (pause) A lot of my friends from from pre-war friends volunteered to join the Jewish police force in the ghetto. The Jewish police force

was there for the purpose of keeping order within the ghetto. They had no weapons of course, nothing. They just keep order, make sure that the sanitation is properly done, that they that they maintain order. There there's no criminal activities whatsoever, and my first reaction, my brother's and I when they asked for volunteers, we wanted very much to volunteer for that too, because it meant have a uniform, have a little bit larger rations of food, not to have to go to work in the city, be inside the ghetto and all that, but my father, God bless him, was very much against it. He says I don't want you to volunteer. Just do whatever you have to do, do your work, and don't be in the forefront and try to keep a low profile. Little did we know that indirectly that saved our lives later on because as life was

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going on in the ghetto, and as our situation started to become hopeless, some people started thinking of resistance. I was not directly involved but I knew about it because I had a cousin in the ghetto who was directly involved. They were smuggling guns and other military equipment into the ghetto, with the sole purpose of whenever it comes to it, that we will not go to the slaughter voluntarily. We'll fight back as much as we can. As it happens many times, somehow the Germans got wind of it. And till today we still don't know exactly how, but the fact is they came in, in the ghetto one day, and they discovered the arms. And immediately everybody who was there in that particular apartment was arrested. So were many other ones, and nobody ever saw them anymore. And a week later, they took, they lined up the whole police force of forty-five young, of our youngest and bravest men, most of them were close friends of mine, and the German officer who was in charge of the of the ghetto said to them that they're holding them directly responsible for not maintaining order in the ghetto. And they took them out to a to a big place in front of the ghetto and they machine-gunned them all, machine-gunned them all to death, forty-five of them. One of them escaped somehow, but later on they caught him too, so not one of them is alive today. One night when I came back from work with my brother, we heard the news. And it was devastating, but we first realized that by not letting us join this police force my father had saved our lives at that particular time. So life was progressing in the ghetto. On and off they would come again and take away so many hundreds of people - whoever couldn't work, whoever was elderly, whoever was sick - never to be seen again. And finally in 1943, the order came out that the ghetto will be liquidated. And the ghetto

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population will be transferred to a concentration camp on the outskirts of Riga called Kaiserwald. They didn't liquidate the ghetto all at once. Used to come an order, tomorrow we'll need five hundred men. Then three days later another two hundred men. So every time an order came out for so many people, every building and every family had to supply a certain amount of people, and everybody of course wanted to stay in the ghetto as long as possible because as bad as things were in the ghetto, we knew that Kaiserwald concentration camp is going to be much worse and we had heard already rumors to that

effect, so when the order came that that in our house so many people have to be volunteered to go my brother and father and I consulted. One of us had to go and I felt that I was the younger one. I was the stronger one. My father was out of the question. It was between my brother and I.

Q: What?

A: I felt that I would have a better chance to survive in a concentration camp and I really felt that somehow my brother who is who was not in excellent good health at that time already, would have a more difficult time. And we discussed it and in the beginning of course my brother didn't want to hear about it. He wanted to pull straws or things like that, but I said no, it's OK. I will go. So next day, about three hundred of us were sent to Kaiserwald, and Kaiserwald was a very very difficult place. Was a hell hole. Inside the camp we were ruled by criminals, by German criminals who were also prisoners in the camp, but they were above us. And they used to beat the hell out of us and food was very little. See every day they used to line up in the morning, at five o'clock in the morning in the cold winter, without any clothing, and used to, they got so many people to go to work. And many of those German war criminals were murderers. They were in prison for murder, and they were in charge of us, so there was one particular guy, we used to call him Mr. X. He used to take a group of hundred, two hundred people out to work every day, and for sport every day used to drown one or two of them, just for the sport. Used to bring back less than he took out. Fortunately it didn't last too long for me. I was able to volunteer to a group which was supposed to go to a different work camp, and in about three or four weeks I was able to get out of Kaiserwald and go to this camp which was about a couple of miles away from Kaiserwald, and there I was working for a unit called TWL, which is in German Truppen Wirtschafts Lager. It was a unit which supplied the clothing and the food for the German army. We were working there in assorting clothing and many other duties as far as the warehouse is concerned. A few weeks later I found out that my brother and father also were sent to Kaiserwald, that the ghetto had been liquidated, so they were in Kaiserwald. I was working in this TWL and I was doing everything I could to try to get them to join me, because the

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conditions in Kaiserwald were horrible and I knew that particularly my father couldn't survive too long there.

Q: What kind of things did you try to get them to join you?

A: Well, there always used to be some contact with Kaiserwald, and I used to try to get some messages to them to try to volunteer. The minute they asked for volunteers to come to us, to volunteer to come to our camp. Also every couple of weeks they used to take from our work camp people who had to go to the dentist, problems with their teeth - the dentist was in Kaiserwald, and what he would do is when you used to come with a

toothache he just would pull your tooth, and when I heard about this I volunteered. I said I had a toothache and I volunteered because I wanted to see my brother and my father and see them personally. So that morning when I was working in the clothing depot I took some socks from the depot. I hid them underneath my pants and at night we were lined up, a kommando of about fifteen, twenty people ready to go to Kaiserwald. Low and behold we were stopped at the gate. Germans control. When I heard that I knew that I'm going to have a lot of difficulties to say the least, and I had to get rid of those (pause) socks. I was able to establish contact with a German, not with a German - it was a Latvian guard outside the barbed wire and I told him in Latvian, I have some socks. Take them. Keep them. He did. I was able to sneak the socks to him and get rid of them. However when I looked at my group, all of a sudden there were some socks which somebody else had thrown down on the ground, and I had told the people who were with us, fellow Jews, that I was carrying some socks for my brother and my father, so the people felt that they were my socks, and when I told them that I got rid of my socks they didn't believe me. And when the Germans saw the socks laying on the ground, they said who, who do they belong to. In the beginning I wasn't going to volunteer because I, there was no reason for me. They wasn't mine. But I was pressured in into admit, to confess by my fellow Jews because they really felt that it was mine and they said if I'm not going to volunteer, everybody was going to be punished. I had no choice, and I stepped forward and I said they were mine. And next, immediately I was given a merciless beating. I was arrested. I was dragged to a bunker where they used to keep the people before execution. I was almost unconscious. I was thrown into the bunker and I blacked out. A couple of hours later I must have woken up. It was still completely dark. It was night and first I did not realize what had transpired. Slowly it started coming back to me and I started to realize that I was doomed. People were executed for much less than that. I just couldn't believe it. I was bleeding. I was holding my head. I was aching all over, but I just couldn't believe it. I was twenty years old, and I just couldn't believe that this was going to the end. All kinds of

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thoughts started flashing through my mind - the kind of life I was hoping to build one day for myself and it all goes down the drain. It's not going to happen. An hour later I heard footsteps nearing the bunker where I was incarcerated. I was a hundred percent sure they were Germans coming to execute me. The door swung open and there were two Germans, officers in uniform and the camp elder, the Jew who was the camp elder. His name was David Kagan, and as they entered the bunker, before the Germans had a chance to draw their guns, the camp Aeltester started beating me, saying you lousy son of a gun, he says. How dare you to steal from the Germans, and kicked me and beat me and kicked me and beat me. I started bleeding profusely from all over my body and he beat me into unconsciousness. But somehow, ironically, that saved my life. He beat me so much that the Germans assumed that I was dead or close to dead. They just turned around and walked out, which I was told later because I was unconscious. I was laying in this bunker for another two or three days and then finally the camp elder came and got me

and took me back to camp and it is something which I have never forgotten. Mr.Kagan who did not have a very good reputation from everybody because a lot of people felt that he was too strict and sometimes too merciless, but I must, if I want to be honest I really have to admit that if not for him I wouldn't be alive today. Another few months passed. It was 1944 now. And even though we did not have any radios or any newspapers, the news kept trickling in to us that the tide of the war had turned. The Russians had won the battle of Stalingrad and the Germans were starting to retreat. And of course for us it meant some kind of a glimmer of hope. Perhaps, perhaps the Russians will be liberating us before the Germans have a chance to kill us. In the meantime, periodically the Germans would come into our camp, line everybody up in front of a table where one of the Germans would sit. Everybody had to undress naked and walk in front of him, and if there was something he would like on your body, any scar or anything like that, you went to the left, and left meant certain death. And my father who was an invalid and who was with us at that time yet still on many occasions he would have been doomed if he wouldn't have somehow we're able to save him by not letting him go into the line, by sneaking him out. When once I remember my father was taken out and and sent to the left, and he was still standing there and waiting the truck to take him away, and the German guard was walking back and forth, and as he turned his back I snuck in. I grabbed my father and pulled him out of there which at that time saved his life. So my brother and I and my father were still in this particular camp when 19...when the fall of 1944 came, and that was when we started

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already hearing rumors that the Russians were getting closer and closer. And one day we woke up and we heard already the Russian guns and Russian planes and we could, you know, we were starting to to have hope against hope that maybe, maybe salvation is near. If I were what is what is it was not meant to be. It was not meant to be. We were all driven out of our barracks, lined up with the Germans and taken to the port where ferries was standing by, and we chased on to those ferries and taken by boat from Riga to Danzig, Germany into concentration camp Stuthoff, and we heard, after we arrived in Danzig, when we heard that we were going to Stuthoff, we were devastated because Stuthoff was a camp which was very well known as one of the worst. There was no food. Was a lot of brutality, a lot of killings and hardly anybody esc...got out got out of Stuthoff, so the three of us, my brother, my father and I, went to Stuthoff and spent several weeks there. The conditions in Stuthoff were beyond any description. People were dying left and right from hunger. People - you woke up in the morning - next to you people were dead, emaciated. And the condition was deteriorating by the day because the tide of the war had turned and as bad as it was before, now the Germans were letting the anger out on the few remaining Jews because they were, it was clear to them by this time they were loosing the war. A few weeks after we arrived in Stuthoff, we were all lined up one day and a German officer said they are looking for volunteers to work in a German ship building firm in Danzig called Schiff ?? Werke. My brother and I and my father volunteered, but as my father was going across to join us, the German officer noticed that

he was invalid. He was dragging a leg as a result of scarlet fever which he had in his youth. The minute he noticed that he says you cannot go. Back. My brother and I started pleading, it's our father. We have to go together. Just to spite, he says you're going and he's staying here, and no matter how much we begged and no matter how much we pleaded and cried, it did not help. We were kicked and beaten and forced to leave my father. It was clear to my brother and myself that the minute my father would be left in Stuthoff he would be doomed. And we were we were absolutely heart-broken to leave him there, because we knew it was going to be the end. But we were forced to do it and that's how we left Stuthoff. From Stuthoff we were taken to a camp called Burgram ? (ph) and from there every morning at 4:30 we were put on a train and taken to the shipbuilding company to work there. And that was going on for a couple of months...

Q: Tell us about the work you did. What did you do?

A: Well, they were they were building submarines there and we had to carry the heavy steel parts and hand it to the mechanics and to the engineers, whoever wanted them, and we were guarded by German soldiers all day long. The working conditions left a lot to be desired, but we used to get an extra piece of bread so it was still better than staying in camp and not working. Besides while going to work we could always have some communication with the outside world, learn what was happening, find out that the war has definitely turned, that the Germans were retreating on all fronts. We also learned that Latvia had been liberated and we missed it by not more than a few days. My brother got sick in that particular camp and he could not go to work. He had a had a problem with his stomach and with his legs and he was staying in a makeshift hospital there in this camp and I kept trying to look in on him and see that he's OK. One day in the hospital he saw a glass with white liquid and assuming it was milk he drank it. And it was rat poison. And that completely

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destroyed his stomach. Completely destroyed his stomach. He was very very sick from from then on. He was in very very bad shape. And to make things worse a few weeks later the order came we are moving out because the Russians were obviously coming closer. That was the winter of 1944-45. It was a very very - the climate was very cold. We were driven on foot through the German countryside. It was cold. It was snow. My brother could hardly walk. I supported him as much as I could. It got so bad that he pleaded with me to let him go. Don't he says. Let me die. I I cannot, I I really cannot handle it anymore. I I want to die. Leave me here. But it was it was clear that the minute I let him go, he would be shot on the spot because anybody who couldn't keep up with the march was shot on the spot, and you would walk on the road - you could see corpses all over because it was an actual death march. I just couldn't give in. I just couldn't drop my brother. I carried him. I schlepped him. I kept talking to him. I'd say we're not too far away from salvation. You can't give up now. You can't give up now. Anyway, somehow I was able to schlep him to the next camp which was a place called Gottendorf in eastern

Pomerania. There the conditions of course got from bad to worse because the Germans didn't have enough to eat themselves anymore because the armies were retreating and the Jews didn't get anything to eat. If we got a piece of potato peel we were lucky. We used to press it against the little oven which you had in the barracks and and roast a potato peel. Every morning you used to wake up in the barracks - the fellow on the left, upstairs on the right used to be dead. It was just a disaster. It was, you know, it it - another few weeks and there wouldn't be any camp. And in all that I still was able once in a while when they asked for volunteers to go out of the camp, come in contact with civilian population in my work, once in a while got a little piece of bread which I could, I would I would be able to bring to my brother who who really didn't get anything to eat in camp, because he was not in a position to be able to get out. In the meantime it was 1945, (pause) March. March 1945. My brother was near death. He was very very sick. They had a little tent on the side of the camp where they sent the very sick people there, and they were just laying there and dying. Once in a while I used to come in and bring him something, but what they needed we couldn't give them - medication, any medical help or anything. Beginning of March I started feeling bad myself and I got sick. Typhoid fever. I started, I tried to carry on as long as I could, but I just couldn't do it anymore. And one morning the order came out again we are leaving the camp. We are marching out again. I couldn't march anymore. I couldn't walk anymore. I took all my strength to drag myself to the little hut where my brother was laying, and I walked into the hut. I laid next to my brother. If we're going to die, we're going to die together. In the meantime everybody who could walk was lined up and marched out of the camp. We could hear them shooting and we could hear them yelling, but all of a sudden it was quiet. They were gone, except for two German guards who were left behind with the instructions to shoot the sick fifteen minutes after everybody else leaves. We were so sick at that time, hallucinating - we didn't even know what was going on. (Pause) All of a sudden, we could hear shooting, gunfire. The two German guards ran into our hut and said to us, we have instructions to shoot you, but we won't if you won't give us away to the Russians, because the Russians are coming in. They took off their German uniforms, put on our striped prisoner clothes, and laid down right next to us. A few minutes later we could hear

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some more shooting and before you know it, the were Russian tanks, Russian tanks moved into camp. All of a sudden a young Russian officer wearing a short leather coat and I remember it so well like it happened yesterday, with a machine-gun strung around his waist, walked in, looked at us and a seasoned Army veteran broke out in tears and started crying. What have they done to you? He says: "Ikh bin a Yid." And he says we will take revenge for you. For every one of you, we will get thousands of them. And somebody pointed out the two German guards who were laying next to us and they took them away immediately, and that was our liberation. That's how we were liberated. Yes, we had freedom, but many didn't survive the freedom. There was no medical help. Yes, there was some more food but our stomachs could not handle it. Many people died because of over-eating. The Russians couldn't be bothered with us. They had a war to

fight. So all they told us is you stop the German refugees who are on the road, and you make them take you back to town into a hospital. Needless to say, the minute the Russians were gone the Germans couldn't care less. They left us laying there. Finally a Russian stopped the German horse and buggy and he said to them, you take them back to town, and if you don't we'll shoot you. So finally this German family or whoever they were took my brother and myself and another two guys, put them on their wagon, took us back to the town. The name of the town was Lauenburg, which was also in eastern Pomerania. The town was in the center of fighting. There was a lot of shooting, a lot of bombing from airplanes and everything. The the Germans dropped us off in the center of town - just dropped us and took off. We were staying in the middle of town. We could not walk.

01:57:

We didn't know what to do, how, what, so we was crawling on our legs and hands, hands and legs until we came to a building. In the meantime it had gotten dark. All we could do was feel. We didn't know where we were going. We opened the door to a building, crawled in, found some kind of a couch or a bed and laid down there.

Q: We've got to change tapes, and this is a good place to do it. We're just going to change the tape.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: OK. We're back. You've collapsed on the sofa.

A: Several hours later we smelled smoke. The Russians were burning the whole town down and as sick as we were and as tired as we were, we had to crawl out of the building again and look for other shelter. Finally we found a little place and we collapsed there and then the long tedious process of recovery started to take place. Took us months. As a matter of fact I recouped a little faster and...

Q: Tell me - just a minute though. What was it like? Tell me something about where you were and what the moment was like as the Russians came in.

A: Well, we were, as I said we were in a little town in eastern Pomerania. The Russians were occupied with their march. They were going straight to Berlin they were telling us. So we had very little possibility to have any kind of a real contact with the Russians because they were only coming through. They were only coming through. All day long troops, tanks were coming through the town. But they left a certain amount of people behind for the running of the town and administration and all that and once I was able to get around again, the Russians did help us to get some food. My brother was very sick. We lived with two, we stayed in an apartment with two other friends of ours who were also liberated and one of my friends and myself, we were able to get around better so we used to go around. It was a very unusual situation. We, at that time we really were not concerned about our new life, about thinking about the future. All we were concerned was getting enough food to eat and getting well again. We did not think about plans, where we going to go, whether we're going to go back to Latvia or

02:03:

whether not going to go back to Latvia. We really didn't give it much thought because all those years of of this incarceration and living under certain circumstances, you know, you don't think the way a normal human being would think - that I have to start making plans about my future. All we're thinking in terms of just survival, day to day survival, and it took a considerable amount of time simply emotionally we were ready to start thinking about other things than just the day of survival.

Q: How did you feel at that point?

A: Well, of course we were very anxious to find out what happened to the rest of our families, whether there was still anybody alive, try to establish some kind of a contact. But our primary purpose was to really get back on our feet so we could function again. In addition, the Russians were taking any, every able-bodied person was taken into the army, and they couldn't care less whether you were in a concentration camp or not. Then they used to put you in a hospital, give you some care. The minute you could well enough

they used to give you a uniform and a gun and away you went. Many people who were liberated at that time had to go to the Russian army and still in the last few months were killed on the Russian front, after surviving concentration camp for over four years. I slowly was starting to get a little better and we made contact with some Russian officers who were coming through town and they asked us whether we would like to work for them as interpreters, being that my brother and I speak fluently Russian and German, they asked us to to come with them to help them to deal with the with the civilian

02:05:

German population. And we accepted. We accepted. We felt that if if even if it was temporary, it was...we did not feel like going back to Riga right away for whatever reason. Was it you know, because we had emotional apprehensions about going back, what we were to find, but we just felt that in the meantime if we worked there, we'll be provided for and they'll take care of us. So we started working for them, and four or five months passed by and we were doing quite well...

Q: What were you doing?

A: Mostly interpreting between - you see, the Russians were running big German farms to get the food to the troops and the Germans were working for them. And the communication, we used to help to communicate between the Germans and the Russians. And we also - I was in charge of a warehouse. I was managing a warehouse for the Russians. My brother did something else. So we we had a pretty good job with the Russians. For for for a while they didn't bother us, you know, they pretty good to us, but four or five months later, maybe even less than four or five months, in the middle of the night, they arrested us, my brother and I. And we were not told why we are being arrested because under the communist system you are assumed guilty unless you're proven otherwise. In other words it's an opposite like it is in our system. So they don't give you any explanation when they

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arrest you. Just took us away, put us in prison, and later we found out that the reason we were arrested there was one Russian officer, a lieutenant, who was anti-Semite. He went back to the general and says the only reason the two Jews survived is because they were Nazi collaborators. Now as I said, they don't investigate whether it's true or not. They don't give you a chance to explain. Didn't give us a chance to prove that it's not true. They just arrested us. Put us in jail, with the most undesirable element, Russian element who fought in the well-known Vlasov army. It was army of Russian volunteers who fought against their own brothers, and we were sitting with those criminals. It just, it was it was hard to believe for us that after surviving over four years of German concentration camp, we would have to deal with that and truthfully speaking it wasn't much better than German concentration camp. We were kept under most inhuman conditions. My brother

and I were separated. I was thrown in a room, in a Stall [stable] without windows. I got boils all over my body. I really felt that it was our end after all this time. It the situation looked hopeless. But somehow we were fortunate again in the respect that it was a Jewish major in the Russian army and his name was Auslaender and one day they called us to interrogate us and we told him that we went through concentration camp and what they are accusing us, we have we have hundreds and hundreds of witnesses who were with us to dispel any doubts and all we're interested is to go to Israel, on to Palestine. Somehow he felt pity and he let us go. Yes, it took some other doings to persuade him but our our wives - we were married at that time already - yes, my wife was from Hamburg. She was brought to Riga from Hamburg and was in Riga in the ghetto and we had lost track of each other. After the war, while I was working for the Russians, I was able to find her somewheres wandering around in Germany, and I brought her to me. Her and her mother. And my brother had met a girl, Jewish girl, in Poland. At that time Pomerania, today it's Poland and he also got married. So they knew, the the the girls knew where we were incarcerated and were able to follow us, and somehow they were able to establish contact and also it took a little bribery to get us out of there. In addition, you know, to this major who felt pity on us, took a little certain amount of bribery. They

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let us go. They didn't give us any papers but they let us go. At that time my brother and I made up our mind that we're not going back to Latvia. We aren't going back to Riga after this experience. We didn't want any part of it. We didn't want any part of it. Said we're going to try to make it to to the West. So that was very very complicated. And first we went to a place called Stettin in Poland and there we were able to establish contacts with some Russian soldiers who smuggled us over the border also for bribes, smuggled us over the border into Berlin. I was I went with a special kind of a truck which delivered mail from Stettin to Berlin and the Russian soldiers made a business out of it. They hid people underneath the sacks of mail, and that's where I was laying and all the sacks of mail on top of me and that's the way I went over the border. My brother and the three ladies were smuggled in a different open truck with a Russian captain who was able to get them through and in Berlin we all met. We my sister-in-law was a native of Berlin from before the war and she was able to get an apartment in Berlin. It was 1946 and we stayed in Berlin for a little

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while, a few months, and then I applied for a visa through the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society [HIAS] and 1947, March 10th, 1947, I came to the United States. My brother stayed another six months in Berlin. He came six months later. Of course when we came to this country it wasn't easy, but I never took the attitude that anybody owes me something like some other people had, you know. And I was content to be here and have an opportunity to try to rebuild my life. We worked hard, two jobs, three jobs - whatever was necessary. My wife worked hard and slowly we kept rebuilding our lives. Family -

my first son was born in 1950, and my second son, 1952. My oldest son Stewart is 39 years old today. My youngest son Charles is 37. I have since been divorced, after 29 years of marriage. I have remarried eight years ago to a wonderful woman. My brother has had much much of tragedy even after the war. His first wife who was also a survivor, died in 1952 or '53 from a heart ailment and left him with a four year old son. He remarried a year later and was married to another woman for twenty-five years and she died from cancer. Now my brother has remarried again. He's married now for almost eight years to a very nice, charming woman. A few years back, quite a few years back, my dear friend Mr. Max Kaufmann who was the mainstay of Latvian Jews in this country, Mr. Max Kaufmann wrote a book about the destruction of Latvian Jewry about five years after the liberation and this book has been served, served as reference to many historians and many people who wrote books after that. He was a very close friend of my father and I felt almost like I would be his son. He used to always try to keep the remnants of the Latvian Jewry in this country together by arranging yearly memorials during December for the twenty-seven thousand Jews who were murdered. And he

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asked me to get involved, to help him. So maybe twenty years ago I got involved in that and I assisted him all through those years to go on with his work. Max Kaufmann died about five years ago, and I felt that it was most imperative for me to try to carry on with the work which he so bravely carried on for many years by himself. I called a few of my friends together from Latvia and we formed an organization called Jewish Survivors of Latvia. We try to pass on the legacy of the once beautiful Latvian Jewish community in Riga to our children and children's children. We also incorporate in our organization the new immigrants from Latvia who arrived who arrived in the last fifteen years and are still arriving today. I am involved. A lot of work which has to do with keeping the flame alive, perpetuating the heritage, trying to tell the world what was done to us and never let it forget it. I personally feel very very strongly when people ask me how come that so many died and and you didn't. Usually I feel, I answer is first of all it was a certain amount of luck. You had to have luck because no matter what you did, nobody can resist a bullet, but I also felt that a lot had to do with the fact that I was young and strong and also most important I felt that it was meant to be and I maybe I had a mission. Because I was fortunate enough to survive, I have a responsibility and mission to do my very best to try to tell the world what was done to us and what man's inhumanity can do, where hate and bigotry can lead to. When we start looking around us today, we are witnessing the awakening of anti-Semitism, of national anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union to a point where the million six hundred thousand Jews in the Soviet Union, they do not feel safe anymore. It's not anymore a question of looking for a better life. It's a question of being frightened. I have

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so people who I have met in the few months from Soviet Union and some as recently as

last week from Latvia, there's hardly anybody today who does not consider getting out. We are unfortunately anti-Semitism as a result of the liberalization of the country, nationalism and with it anti-Semitism is rearing its ugly head again. And therefore I feel it's twice as important now not to leave one stone unturned to make the world aware of what is happening and to try and do everything possible not to let the same mistake to happen again, where the whole world stood by indifferently and watched our people being slaughtered. I feel as long as I possibly can I would love to go on with this important work whether it's in Israel, whether it's in this country, whether it's in Latvia or in the Soviet Union. Wherever I have a chance and opportunity to get involved I'm sure going to try.

Q: Thank you. Thank you very much.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: Tell us how you met your first wife?

A: I met my I met my wife in 1942 when she with another group was transported by rail from Hamburg, Germany to Riga. We became quite friendly and used to see each other quite often, had a relationship and spent some time together. However once they liquidated the ghetto, everybody was sent to a different directions. And I lost track of her for quite a long time until after the liberation and I was working for the Russians, I met

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somebody one day and was told they had seen my wife my girlfriend somewhere near Danzig. I went to the general, asked him for permission, and I went looking for her. And sure enough, it took me a little while - I found her. She was working in Danzig for a Russian general with her mother as interpreters. I was able to convince the German general, the Russian general excuse me, that I was married to her already, which I wasn't because I knew darned well that if I just say she's my girlfriend he'll never let her go but luckily they bought my statement. They understood and when he called them and says, he called my mother-in-law and asked her, does your daughter have a husband and she says yes, because she was smart enough to understand that it must be me who were looking for, so he let them go. He let them go and I took them with me to where we were staying and after we had the problem with the Russians and we decided not to go back to Latvia anymore, we went to, we decided to go to the West, on our way we stopped off in Danzig and we got married. My brother and I got married on the same day under the same Chupah under the most primitive circumstances. Friends of ours came, one friend came with half a lamb. One friend came with a milk can of vodka and everybody brought something and we had like a real nice little wedding under those circumstances. And that's after we got married then we decided it's time to move on and that's when we came to Stettin, and from there to Berlin and so forth.

Q: When did you know for sure that your father was dead? You had been taken away and he was still in Stuthoff.

A: Well, after the war we started of course looking for my father, trying to get some kind of information and one day we ran into somebody who was in the same barracks with him and he told us that right after my brother and I left Stuthoff, my father lost all will to live. He was emotionally devastated and under the circumstances not being able to work, the rations of food which he which he was getting was not enough to survive, so it was just a matter of time and he got sick in Stuthoff, typhoid, and he died in Stuthoff. We all actually had an eye-witness who told us the news that my father died in Stuthoff. I would like to mention that in September 1989, my brother and I decided to go back to Riga and one of the compelling reasons for us to go back

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to Riga was an emotional need to say kaddish, my mother's grave even though she did not have her private grave - it was a mass grave - but we still wanted to go back and we did go back and spent six days in Riga and for us it was an emotional holocaust. Yes, there were many pleasant experiences in Riga like visiting the new Jewish community which is twenty-six thousand strong today, satisfying an inner emotional need of paying tribute to our mother and saying kaddish at her grave. Also meeting our distant family which we still have in Latvia, in Riga and spending a few pleasant days with them. But also to witness the sad reminders of an era - walking on the street we were reminded of how we were driven as cattle in the gutter under the Nazis. When we passed by the street, certain buildings we were reminded where Jews were beaten, raped and murdered in those particular buildings. We went back to our apartment which was totally dilapidated. Three families living in our three room apartment. Going back to my father's business. What a sad sight. Selling some books and postcards. Everything in totally devastated condition. The whole life in Riga today, it is not the Riga which we once used to know. Latvia was a beautiful country. Riga was known as the little Paris of the East. Today, what the system has done to a beautiful country - it's absolutely unbelievable. The shelves in the stores are completely empty. Nothing to buy. And any merchandise arrives, there are instantly blocks and blocks of people waiting to buy it. But we never are sorry that we went back. We had to fulfill an emotional need and we did exactly that. And it was very well worth the trip.

02:30:21

Q: Thank you very much.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

End of tape #2

Conclusion of Interview