

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Henry Bermanis
July 12, 1995
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Henry Bermanis, conducted by Randy Goldman on July 12, 1995 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Research Institute's collection of oral testimonies.

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

HENRY BERMANIS

July 12, 1995

05:01:30

Q: Would you start by telling me your name, date of birth, where you were born?

A: That's important. I'm Henry Bermanis. I was born in Ventspils, Latvia on January 5, 1925. I'm 70 and half years old at this point.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your family and your life before the war?

A: My father was born in 1889. He was drafted into the old Czarist Russian army in World War I. He was wounded at the battle of Tannenberg, the only battle the Russians really fought in World War I and was a prisoner of war in Austria-Hungary for four years. It runs in the family. He came back in 1919, married his childhood sweetheart. They had very promptly two children, a girl and a boy. They lived in Liepaja. Then they moved to Ventspils and now they had in this musical home a future pianist and a future violinist so I had to come along and play the cello. We were at the cross-culture in that western part of Latvia, which was heavily influenced by the Germans. We spoke German at home, and Russian, and Latvian and when they wanted to speak so that we wouldn't understand it, they also spoke English. Like I say, it was a very musical home, and then everything -- well, he had some standing timber and a sawmill, and a dock for exporting lumber, and he bought all of that on credit after World War I and lost the whole kit and caboodle in the depression. So, then he sold everything except our house and furniture and then we moved to Riga during the depression where he sold insurance door to door. My mother went to work as a bookkeeper and we three kids took care of each other. I was five years old at the time. My sister was five years older, and a brother in between. So, we went to school. I did my first two years in a German

language school because our last governess was German and we spoke predominantly German. Before that it was Russian, so I was raised in the classics of both languages. Latvia didn't have classics yet. So, I wore all the hand-me-downs from my sister and brother. It was a fairly routine life. That was 1930 from there until 1934 Latvia went through a benign revolution, so-called, and a fellow by the name of Karlis Ulmanis took over as President. He had his own secret police, which was heavily oriented to the Gestapo. There were no anti-Jewish campaigns and I lived there in that fashion until it came time to graduate from high school. My sister was a secretary to earn some money but she also was predominantly a ballet dancer and did that from age six until the end. She died at 20. My brother was totally geared to music and finally under the Soviets enrolled in the university and studied economics, which is quite alien to his nature. That was a rather peaceful coexistence until 1940, 1941. 1940 the Soviets came and converted Latvia into a Soviet republic. In 1941 the war broke out for us.

05:06:38

Q: Before you go any further, now these German language schools you went to I assume they were public high schools and they were mixed with Gentiles?

A: Yes.

Q: Any incidents or was that pretty comfortable?

A: No, before 1938 it was pretty comfortable. After '38 or just before '38 Hitler called all the ethnic Germans back to Germany, the so-called Volksdeutsche, people whose families had

lived there for centuries suddenly discovered that they were German instead of Latvian. Some kids in school started to wear the Hitler Youth uniforms. So, there were frequent fist fights after school. Never in school, it wasn't done. The pasttime was "Well, let's go out after school and beat the Germans," and they had similar past times.

Q: So you were involved in all of this as a boy?

A: Yes, but not very much.

Q: It didn't make you concerned, or it did?

A: There was no prediction of the future, no. On the contrary because we were raised in the German classics, and people who could produce Beethoven's 9th with Schiller's words couldn't possibly do what was being done. And really until the Kristallnacht of '38 there was no such official program. So, no there was no premonition. There was some premonition when in 1940 a business friend of my father's, a German from East Prussia, came to visit us and said, "You must get out of here." We had, at the end of the Polish war, we had a joint parade with the Soviets, and we marched in formation and you know with the goose-step and all that, to impress the Russians. Then there was nothing for a while, and then we heard this distant thunder. Then there was this incredible cavalcade of T-34 tanks and it scared us. You must get out of here. There will be a war. Well, we didn't believe that. So, no there was not really a premonition.

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Q: Did you come from a religious home?

A: My mother came from a religious home. My father was a self- professed atheist who thought that his children should attend religious institutions, churches, synagogues. Pick one that is comfortable and stick with it. I'm still looking.

Q: How was life under the Russians?

A: For us it was an improvement because my father didn't have to -- he wasn't on his own anymore. He became a bookkeeper for two nationalized industries as a full time job. He was on salary, and our financial situation improved. My mother didn't have to work anymore. My brother's college was paid for, so in that respect at that time, life improved. It didn't stay that way, but it improved. It changed just before the outbreak of hostilities between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. The Soviets were very confused apparently. Stalin did not believe that there was going to be a war, that his friend Adolf was going to attack him, and apparently made no preparations for such a war. There was on the other hand there was a movement in the Soviet Union to move unreliable elements out of the areas where there might be a conflict. That included certainly Latvia. So, on the night of June 13, 1941, the word got out that they are rounding up people, and it was a memorable night. It was my mother's 50th birthday. They simply had a list prepared by the NKVD, by the secret police, and the army trucks came around and knocked on the door and you went with your little satchel via truck to a train station and from there to the Gulags. We anticipated being taken because we were classified as former bourgoise, therefore untrustworthy. They didn't come. And it was few weeks later on I met a young man in the NKVD who told me that he had taken our paper and put it to the bottom of the pile because he was a college friend of my

brother's. So, that was his favor to us. About that time, my brother was drafted into the Soviet Army. He was a musician. He didn't know which end of a gun the bullet came from. Youngsters were shipped off to defend Leningrad in the coming battles, but since they didn't trust the non-Soviet peoples, the Latvians, with a weapon, he wasn't given a weapon. So, when the Germans did come, they weren't even able to shoot back. So, my brother was killed near Leningrad. The exact date and place are unknown. That was the beginning -- that was just before the war for us. I'll spend a little bit of time on life before Barbarossa, before that war, to set the stage, if you will. What did we do, how did we live? We had a very nice apartment with four bedrooms, five bedrooms. We had managed to retain from Ventspils a concert grand, a Steinway. My mother used to play in a rather unique orchestra. Eight pianos played four handed so there was a full sound utilizing what Liszt had done to arrange all the Beethoven's symphonies, for example, for that kind of orchestra. One of her distant relatives, Maria Solmonovich, was a concert pianist since age 6 and a student of Glazunov, who did her pre-concert exercises, if you will, on our piano because it was larger than hers. We would sit in the other room, quiet as church mice listening to that. It was uninterrupted pleasure really, except for the concert she gave with Professor Metz, the head of the violin section of the conservatory, and a young cellist named Aronson. They played the Tchaikovsky trio which was dedicated to the death of a dear friend. Maria died in Soviet Gulag, Professor Metz in a concentration camp, and Lev Aronson I found quite by accident in Dallas where he was the principal cellist of the Dallas Symphony and a teacher at the Southwestern University. This musical tendency just permeated a lot of our life. Like I said, my sister was a ballet dancer and she with four other girls toured the provinces giving ballet performances. So the language was culture. The interruption of that culture became doubly painful. That was the background. My personal tendency, I played the cello. My personal tendency was towards engineering and I became the outstanding physics student in my high school and

that love for physics stayed with me afterwards. My best friend was Alexander Bergmans. Sasha, as he was called. Sasha and I used to hang out together every evening when I wasn't busy with my girlfriend Helga, who was totally adorable, and whom I was going to marry. It was generally assumed in the whole school at some later time. That kind of existence, rather almost pastoral until things collapsed. Our first indication of things to come was when my father didn't come home from work one day. We found out that by bribing people that he had been arrested by the Latvian secret police and was held in one of their jails. On the denunciation by the Gestapo in Germany that he was a British spy. This was very interesting later on. It came about because he had a former business competitor in Germany who wanted to get rid of him. In German the in between man between the seller and the buyer is an agent, ein Agent. That has a double meaning, and he was quick to utilize it. So, we got him out. We bribed the police. We got him out, but that stayed in our memory. So, we had to be very careful. We had to check on each other. Except for that one incident, things were "normal." Then came the war. There was very little buildup for Barbarossa, for the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union. At least not noticeable. There were signs that the governments involved just ignored. The German attack started on June 21, 1941. Within days the German army had slashed through the rather meager Soviet defenses, and kept going. On the way they went through Riga, and with them came the first anti-Jewish regulations.

05:20:20

Q: Now, where were you at this time, what was happening? What was it like?

A: Well, I was in Riga. It was exciting to witness what was going on, just as it was exciting before to listen to radio Warsaw during the German attack when they played over and over

again a piece by Chopin: the same piece, until suddenly they went off the air. Then we knew that Warsaw was no more. It was a strange excitement certainly, witnessing history. We had, ourselves, no premonition of what was to come afterwards. I was in the street witnessing it, watching the German army come in. Latvia had a very strong pro-Nazi underground, or movement if you will called Perkonkrusts¹. These people were out in force, of course, waving the swastika and greeting their brothers in blood. It was a chilling experience but interesting.

Q: Frightening?

A: Not frightening, but scary, a slight difference. But again, had we known what was going to happen, we would have been doing other things. Under the Soviets we had to declare a spare bedroom and we received somebody that the Soviet government decided should stay in our apartment. He was the director of the Latvian bank, from Moscow. When his family arrived, he brought two Russian girls from Moscow, the head bookkeeper and the head cashier. They were adorable youngsters, 20, 21 years old. When things fell apart, when the war began, they urged us to come with them, that they would make room for us in their trucks. And we said, no, it's going to pass. So, we didn't go. Again, in retrospect, it was very foolish, but it was not a normal situation. So when the Wehrmacht--the German army--came into Riga, they were promptly followed by civilian administrators from the party and they instituted anti-Jewish regulations. You had to wear a star that identified you. Your passport was stamped. You couldn't get ration cards, so you had to finagle your food using up all resources. You couldn't walk on the sidewalk. You had to walk on the street, like the horses. They were basically things designed to set you off from the rest of the population and to reduce your self image,

¹**Latvian:** Thunder Cross. Latvian pro-fascist party.

and I think that everything the Nazis ever planned to do was centered on reducing your physical resistance and imposing regulations that would detract from you as a person.

05:24:20

Q: Was it effective?

A: Oh, I think so. I think so. I developed a stutter which I ascribed to that, and it took me quite a while to get rid of it. Yes, I think it was effective, at least it was in me. Not enough to remove me from society. A German officer of the German Marine Corps was then billeted in our apartment building, and we quickly became acquainted. He had an orderly who was a cute youngster who had been working on ocean liners all his life, and we became close friends. That gentleman wanted our piano. He got our piano and he got a signed receipt that it was given to him. I don't know how grateful he was, but he did suggest that my father and I both go to work in his organization in the harbor. He was in charge of a German Marine Corps food supply warehouse. A big nine story affair with chilled cooling rooms and stuff. So, we became longshoremen. My dad and I would walk off to the harbor every day and work until they closed up and then walk home again. It was hard work. They quickly liked my father because of course we spoke fluent German and he was so darn intelligent that he could guess what they needed and tell them what they needed. I was the guy who dragged the heavy boxes and bags. I had two teachers, professional longshoremen who said they were going to make a laborer out of me or kill me in the process, and they did a very good job. I developed physically very well. I ate like a horse. My breakfast in that place was nine eggs, raw, with a half of cup of sugar and a cup of rum. That was my breakfast. It went down hill from there. Low cholesterol. It was an existence, abnormal as it was. Then came an order that all Jews

had to move, leave their belongings and leave their apartments and houses and move to this one part of Riga, the Moscow suburb. That was in September. Once we were all there, they put a barbed wire fence around it and then guards, and it now became a Ghetto.

05:27:50

Q: Let me just interrupt you a moment before we get to the Ghetto. In this period after the Germans had entered in June and until Ghetto you were still out in the world a bit?

A: Yes.

Q: Your school had stopped?

A: Yes.

Q: What about the people that you knew from before the war. What was the local reaction to what was going on? Were Jews safe?

A: Relatively speaking, yes. There were incidents early on. There was the famous Gogol Street synagogue incident where Jews were rounded up on the streets of Riga and locked up in the synagogue and then put to fire. They all died. The ruins of that synagogue are preserved as a monument to the occasion, but another synagogue in Riga was recently, in June of 1995, was bombed so that the anti-semitic tendencies of the Latvian population are still fairly strong.

Q: How did you avoid all of this? Were there regular roundups. Regular violence directed

against the Jews?

A: It was not a "Monday at nine o'clock" kind of thing. I was lucky. And maybe it wasn't the incidents didn't have such a high profile. They weren't repeated so often. There was time in between. Somehow I didn't get it. On the streets I had a non-Jewish appearance and I when I took the star off I was like everybody else which I did on occasion to go out and buy food and stuff like that. But no, it was an almost-normal existence except the fact that you weren't totally free. And the self image of wearing that yellow star. All that changed with the Ghetto. It was -- I think that the Nazis used a very clever graduated program as if it had been orchestrated. I rather suspect it was happenstance. They really weren't that clever, but it evolved with time, and especially after the 1942 Wannsee Conference. It took on a totally different measure. Until then it was not the program to kill all the Jews. That came later.

Q: So you were required to go into this Ghetto. Did you take all your belongings with you. How did you get there?

A: We walked with a little suitcase and went there. We moved into a preexisting quarter so there was some pots and pans and things like that. It was not a desolate desert.

05:31:30

Q: Did somebody organize your housing or you just went into an empty house?

A: We went into an empty house, an empty room if you will. There were several families in one apartment, and no we didn't have sheets. It wasn't all the amenities of home, and it wasn't

home, and yes, now it began to be scary. When the barbed wire went up it became really scary. When the men who had a job outside came home from the job assignment one day, they couldn't rejoin their families. They had to go into a different part of the Ghetto which is blocked off by barbed wire. That became scarier. But that was still an everyday life, if you will, until the end of November.

Q: Were you still working with your father as a longshoreman?

A: Yes.

Q: So you went out of the Ghetto every day to work?

A: Right. There were a number of Jews who worked there at this point and we had a column of workers who marched off to the harbor and came back in the evening.

Q: Being that were outside of the Ghetto, were there advantages?

A: Oh, one advantage, yes. One was that you were not that vulnerable. In the Nazi hierarchy you occupied a useful function. That was meager life insurance but it was there. We didn't know yet that it was a life insurance. We didn't know what was coming next. And since we got fed every day, that was an advantage, and I became as strong as a bull with that labor exercise and the supporting food.

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Q: Did you get information about what was going on since you weren't as isolated as people in the Ghetto?

A: Yes. Yes. We knew what was going on. We knew. We pilfered the German newspapers. We weren't supposed to know what was going on, but you did and discussions with the Germans and the Latvians surely kept us abreast.

Q: Were you aware of Einsatzgruppen activities?

A: Not yet. That came later. The real killing didn't start in Riga until the end of November.

Q: The Ghetto itself, you described that there were two parts of it?

A: Right. The so called small Ghetto which is where the people came back to after working all day, and then the larger one where everybody else was. I was in the smaller one. We had -- we were told to move in there. Well, our accommodations were not palatial. We found a shack with two rooms and a place for cooking. It was after all the poorer section of town, so it was not terribly nice.

Q: This is your whole family?

A: No, this is just my father and I, plus eight other fellows, men. We all moved together into this shack. That's all that the shack could hold. My mother and sister moved into a room and were joined by a young lady, Shasti, who was in my high school class, but they didn't live there very long. They didn't live very long.

Q: Did the two parts of the Ghetto have contact with each other?

A: They were not meant to have contact. It had a double barbed wire fence and I did sneak through it once, in the first few days of July of '41. But the first Aktion--the first mass killings-- took place on the 30th of November 1941 in Riga. As we lined up to go to work that morning, we were faced on the other side of the street by 110 special Latvian police and we stood there eyeing each other and one of the cops came over and poked his rifle in my stomach and said, "Look at the sun, tomorrow you won't see it again." I didn't know what he had in mind, but that group came into the Ghetto under SS supervision and under supervision of a man named Cukurs, a Latvian war flying ace. They took half of the Ghetto population by street blocks and forced them out of their homes to line up in the street in columns of four or five. And they were marched off to Rumbula, a suburb of Riga slightly further east and south of the Ghetto. During that day and that night, they were shot. There were about close to 15,000 people, so there was a lot of shooting going on, and I don't believe anybody who lived in Riga didn't know what was happening.

05:38:08

Q: Could you hear it?

A: Oh, yes, inevitably. Then during the days following that, I managed to sneak through the barbed wire one night, and I saw my mother and sister and the girl. Then everybody knew what was going on. My girlfriend was shot and 15,000 other people. There was still about that many remaining and the Aktion was repeated the following weekend, and the rest were

shot. That took care of the large Ghetto, and it left about 2500 men and two women. It was a very thorough expedition. There were two ladies in the Zentralka prison. They did not get killed. And there was a young woman by the name of Frieda Michelson who crawled out of there, out of the graves and lived. About a month later, on January 3, as we were lining up to go to work, a group of Gestapo agents came over in their black coats and took my father out of line. As I found out later, it was a Gestapo arrest, still going back to the old agent of the British business, that former competitor of his didn't let go. They took him to Zentralka prison and he was killed there, or he was tortured to death. I don't know how. I don't know the exact date. That was on January 3, 1941.² Now they're all gone. Nothing. Life continues. I continued as a longshoreman and in due course I felt that I had to do something. I was angry. I went to work. I got myself assigned from the longshoreman work, to a well first as an electrician for Siemens. Siemens was one of the German companies, still alive, that was making money out of this free labor for which they paid the SS. I worked as an installer of electric circuits in private homes under the supervision of a Latvian fellow who was as inexperienced as I was and just an absolute sweetheart, Janis. Janis came to pick me up one day at the Ghetto and marched me to the next apartment. He had obviously been crying. He had been drafted into the SS. So, we did our work and then we went to his apartment, me on the street and he on the sidewalk as my guard, much to the shock and dismay of his mother. We sat down in the kitchen and we consumed at least one bottle of vodka. Then when it became to get back to the Ghetto, he marched me back the same way. We're both staggering and singing at the top of our voices. With him gone, I got myself reassigned again. This time to the Powder Tower--the Pulverturm--in the remaining standing part of the fortification of the old city of Riga. In the meantime I had also joined the underground in the Ghetto. We had a triple cell structure where three fellows would belong to this thing and only one would

²**Correction of Mr. Bermanis:** 1942.

report to the next one higher to make it basically betrayal-proof. It wasn't. We smuggled weapons into the Ghetto. I had some weapons training there, and at the Powder Tower I had further training. I became an ordnance expert.

05:43:40

Q: How did you get the weapons that you smuggled?

A: These were weapons that the Germans had collected in the battlefields that the Russian army had left behind in retreat. They brought these things together in the Powder Tower and tried to reconstruct them into useful weapons. There were also some Russian PWs, worked in that Powder Tower. That brings me to the Russian escapade. One of the Russians from Georgia took me aside one day and said that one of their members was a high ranking officer and there were several others like that and I should get in touch with the underground and get them out of there before the Germans found out who they were. So, I got through the underground. We organized this. Somebody stole a German army truck and uniforms and we became Feldpolizei--military police-- and then just before the action was to take place, one of the ten people in our little group, nine now, took me aside for a walk one day, and said, "You aren't going tomorrow." When I asked how he knew about it, he said that he was one of the Committee of Ten who governed the underground. I had no idea. Jerry Bahn, so he said you have to stay behind and organize the next one. Well there was no next one. This one was betrayed, and they all got killed. In any case, that thing became a little bit hot for me, and I got myself reassigned out of there. But we had a good organization.

Q: How large of an organization do you think it was?

A: I haven't the slightest idea. I can tell you how many people I knew. That was three. Unbeknownst to me, there was another underground going on, and that one included all the Ghetto police in the Latvian sector. These were select fellows, about 50 of them, and I had never looked at them as my buddies because we could not disclose to them our underground or they would have had to stop it because it would have threatened other people. That was the trouble with forming resistance in the Ghetto or a concentration camp. It was not in isolation. The retributions, like the town of Lidice in Czechoslovakia, was total. So we had to be very cautious about who knew about it. And it affected my social conduct totally because I didn't trust anybody, and I didn't want to expose anybody to knowing me. Well, the Latvian police was betrayed and they were killed by the Nazis. For some reason, the sense of humor of the gods, I was not picked out and I started to do very innocuous work, which was probably a life saver, because some of the work at the Powder Tower was fairly risky. We did bomb disposal, for example. I remember one time in northern Lithuania there was an encampment of Soviet 105 artillery that they had left behind and this stuff was damaged and they were scared that people would bump into it and blow themselves up. So, they told us to bring those things out. Well, some of them could be brought out. You could unscrew the fuse and have an innocuous metal object. Some of the fuses were obviously damaged and should not be monkeyed with and some were plain too dangerous to move. So, what we did, was to unscrew the good ones and put them in crates and load them in the truck. The others we placed in a circle, 16 rounds of 105 plus two pounds of TNT in the middle. Then we threw a percussion³ handgrenades into the woods to scare away the locals. The Lithuanian police kept them away from us. Then we had 15 minutes to trade, to get some food. My speciality was raw eggs, and then we'd get the dickens out of there after lighting a short fuse. The

³**Correction:** concussion.

explosion was impressive. And then I would sit on the tailgate of this truck full of questionable artillery rounds and carefully balancing a bag of raw eggs, worried about the raw eggs. The German police at the Ghetto never bothered us when our truck came back. They stayed away from us and that was one way to bring weapons into the Ghetto.

05:50:00

Q: What about the internal police? Were there Jewish police within?

A: Well, for obvious reasons we couldn't trust them. For the protection of the rest of the Ghetto population they couldn't tolerate what we were doing. So, yes, they were the enemy as well. On one of my electrical engineering assignments I worked in a textile factory installing cable and on the way to and from work in the truck, I met a young Jewish girl from Czechoslovakia who had just recently been brought to Riga and there was a very strong attraction. You might call it puppy love, I don't know, but we decided we were going to get married after the war. That sort of continued until 1943 when the Ghetto was eliminated. The people in Ghetto were either assigned to work camps--Arbeitslager--which were subservient to Kaiserwald. Kaiserwald was established and I was shipped out to Kaiserwald one fine day.

Q: I want to ask you a few more questions about the Ghetto. Now, what I've heard is that only the small Ghetto remained. Did they ever fill up the larger Ghetto again?

05:51:55

A: I'm sorry, I left that out. Within a week of the second action, they brought in Jews from Europe, from Czechoslovakia, from Germany mostly and assigned them to take over the homes. One lady told me that it was a horror because the food in some cases was still warm on the table. They couldn't understand what happened here. How come these people so suddenly left. They didn't believe the obvious. After all they were told by the Nazis that they were going to be working in the east. They believed it. They wanted to believe it I guess, just like we wanted to believe all the other lies. So, there was a new population into this larger Ghetto. Some of these folks came straight from their homes in Germany. Some of them were really Jewish Germans instead of German Jews; there was one gentleman with the Iron Cross from World War I, proudly displayed, which was torn off. Any sign of self awareness had to be destroyed. Yes, it was a new population. I did not mix with them. This charming lady, Nelli Stahler, was on the same truck. I did not have to pick her out. I was not good company. I was not safe company, so I didn't make myself available as safe company. I don't know if there was any other mixing. I never did.

05:54:08

Q: What about the daily life the basics in the Ghetto, the part that you were in. Was there any life, was there enough food? What was going on there other than working?

A: Depends on your definition of life. You call that living? Yes, there was life. It was a community. People went out to work. Some people did not, some people did. There was medical care. Some people got together in the evening for a musical soiree. I was not in that. I cannot talk about it. To me, it was a totally abnormal society in every respect. I'm not aware of any children being born or conceived for that matter. I just don't know.

Q: Your part was mostly men?

A: It was all men, yes.

Q: Were there any activities, anything other than work, come home, make food?

A: That's it.

Q: Now, both of these Ghettos were under some sort of administration?

A: Yes.

Q: Who were these people who ran the Ghetto?

A: There was a Nazi administrator, an SS officer who had a lousy reputation; well earned, I might say. He ran it with an iron fist. Whether he could do otherwise, I don't know. It didn't take very much to keep this kind of society alive. It also didn't take very much to destroy it. It was not that cohesive. There were people from all over Europe. Germany itself didn't have a strong national entity. After all it was only Bismarck who unified the German principalities. So, the united Germany was a myth and the love between the Bavaraians and the Prussians for example, was not there. I was escorted one time through Riga by a Bavarian officer, and when somebody blew up an ammunition train in Riga not far from us, he jumped from one foot to the other shouting, "Serves the damn Prussians right." There was that kind of local chauvinism in Germany. It was repeated in the Ghetto. I have seen it repeated in the Ghetto.

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I don't know how prevalent it was.

TAPE #2

06:01:05

A: I had as little to do with the administration as I possibly could. I didn't go on sick call because it wasn't healthy. We did have a small hospital. It wasn't very healthy either. Whatever supplies I had to have I had with me. We did, in our little group of nine, in our shack, we had two people who stole food and brought it in. I was one of them so when I quit the harbor I had to rely on others. But it was not a problem. At that point, food was not a problem. That became a problem later. So, the administration mostly was German Jews. Not Latvian Jews especially after the killing of the police, and I just kept my distance from them.

Q: This one administration ran both Ghettos?

A: Yes, so we had a sub-administration if you will but yes it was one group that ran the whole thing.

Q: Now because this is interesting, dynamic, because they were German Jews in Latvia did that cause any tension, or did everybody get along?

A: I am told that it did cause tension. I never experienced it, maybe because of the German orientation in my home, but some of the German Jews told me since then that they felt severe antagonism on the part of people who said "They killed my family so you could move in here." Like I said, I did not experience it but I'm told it happened.

Q: Was it your sense that the Jewish administration and the Jewish police tried to help and support the community or were they corrupt in basically saving their own hides?

A: I don't think they were corrupt, but their view point was different than mine. They wanted to do nothing to antagonize the German administration. The less antagonism, the quieter the better they were off. People like myself who challenged that obviously were outvoted. All we could do is cause trouble à la Lidice. So, it was their job to make sure that we didn't exist, that we didn't do these things and it was my job I felt to do precisely that and to be in a position of taking some of them with me when the time came. I wasn't very nice. I didn't feel any reason to be. But that's Ghettoesque society. What an awful term. That Ghettoesque society existed reasonably successfully until Kaiserwald. Until the Nazis decided to eliminate the Ghettos as one step in the control of the Jews.

06:04:50

Q: After the actions in the beginning or in the early months, was it fairly quiet then until the liquidation or were there other roundups and actions?

A: No, it was fairly quiet. I'm not an eyewitness to what happened in Salaspils, but I'm told that Salaspils, which was a small concentration camp outside of Riga, that there were medical experiments going on and things of that nature. I have no direct knowledge. The liquidations were performed by Einsatzgruppen. In the Nazi hierarchy, the SS was in charge of that particular activity and they relied heavily on local talent to do some of the dirty work for them. They found that the German troops were not suitable. Their mentality was not suitable for this kind of a mass murder of men, women and children. I read some place that some of

them approached Himmler and complained about needing a break for his troops. That they couldn't take that kind of work any longer. One reason it is speculated why Riga became an important killing ground was because the Latvian population was anticipated to support the liquidation of the Jews. So, that probably will be strongly opposed by some Latvians, but two years ago when the Gogol Street synagogue monument was dedicated, the president or prime minister of the country in his statement said that the Jews only have themselves to blame, because after all, they were working for the Germans. And that kind of insensitivity to what really happened, in a high government official, does not speak well. In any case, in the Nazi approach to the Final Solution it couldn't be done with an undisciplined mob within the Ghetto. The movie Schindler's List was, I thought, an excellent depiction of an Aktion in action. People fell through the cracks. The kids were hiding in the latrines and stuff like that. It was not a well-organized activity with precision, and that was what was needed. The task of killing that many people successfully is formidable. The eventual disposition of the bodies also was. So the Einsatzgruppen became specialists supported by local talent and that's what happened in Riga. I cannot speak for all the others.

06:08:20

Q: One other question about Ghetto, and you got involved in an underground organization, how did that come about? How did you get involved? How did you know who to trust?

A: Well, we didn't trust anybody, that's why we had these groups of three so that any betrayal would have limited consequences. Subsequently they discovered -- and I don't know who discovered it and betrayed it, but they discovered one of our training rooms, which was rather nicely hidden underneath a movable kitchen. Underneath there was a cavern, and it

was very well done. We did learn how to use weapons. We didn't fire them there, but we learned how to use them. By my activities in the Powder Tower I did know how to use a weapon and learned even better. No, you couldn't trust anybody.

Q: You were just talking to some of your colleagues and said "Let's fight back"? I mean, how does this get started?

A: Well, I let it be known that that was my mind set and eventually I was contacted. Interestingly there were two undergrounds in Latvia. One was the Nationalistic one, the one that wanted a free Latvia but had no arms in to succeed in it, so all they could do is pray that someday the Swedish navy would liberate them, which they didn't. Another one was the one that was pro-Soviet and worked very closely through the communist party in town, in Riga with the Soviet partisans who were mostly the ones near Tukums and Daugavpils, two cities in Latvia. They were very effective. The civilian Latvian police, if there is such a thing, left those people alone because if they went into the woods with their arms in their hands they got shot at. If they had them on a sling on their shoulder, they were left alone. So, it was sort of a mutual admiration society. My subsequent contacts with the underground were with an agent who worked with the Soviet radio station, clandestine radio station near Tukums.

Q: Was there an overriding ideology or did you have goals? I know you were trying to bring in weapons, but what were you going to do next?

A: Kill Germans.

06:11:25

Q: Anywhere?

A: Well, clearly we were all motivated to exact revenge. We had all lost our families, every one of us. So, our mind set was to avenge something. The professional undergrounder, the Soviet organizers, they couldn't stand that because that took control away from them and they didn't want any of that. So they were at cross purposes. There were different motivations. Mine was to damage the German war machine, to damage the German effort. To do something.

Q: Was there a where and when, do you know what I mean?

A: No, it wasn't that well organized and the elimination of the Ghetto and the move to Kaiserwald brought a halt all of that for a while. The underground in the city continued lively. When I got to Kaiserwald in the early summer of 1943, I was again in very strange surroundings. Do recall, if you will, the life in the Ghetto, no matter how crazy, it was still a civilian existence. When you moved to the concentration camp, you became a number. You lost your identity as a human being, and so that changed your perception of yourself. It changed the Nazi perception of us. We were so many pieces. I didn't stay long in Kaiserwald, just long enough to get my nose busted, but that was an even more abnormal society. The importation of the German Kapos, the German professional criminals who became the ears and eyes and hands of the Nazi administration, they did the dirty work. They were not Jews, and whatever feelings they had about Jews was not pertinent. I didn't stay in Kaiserwald more than a few weeks. It was enough not to like the place.

06:14:10

Q: Why?

A: Because you ceased to be a human being and because it was dehumanizing. For example, one of the betrayers in the camp was found drowned in the latrine upside-down. That is not the normal proceeding. We had one gentleman by the name of Einstein who was a head Kapo in a smaller camp somewhere in Latvia; when they destroyed that camp he was brought to Kaiserwald and we knew that he had actively collaborated with the Nazis. So we held kangaroo court in the barracks at night and persuaded him to hang himself. Well, we tried to persuade him, he wouldn't. He was -- why would he kill himself, but after two weeks he snapped and he went after the fence with a set of manicure scissors and he got shot by the guards. It was that kind of abnormal society. There was some other work going on and we were fed reasonably well, comparatively well, comparison with later food. But it wasn't that bad. It was a --in all respects a totally abnormal society. At this point, I was about 18 and, heck, I resented it. I resented everything that had gone before that and that was still going on. I was very soon assigned to a branch camp at the cement factory. As a matter of fact Riga had a large and reasonably modern cement factory. They were short of people, so they got the SS to give them some Jews, and I became a maintenance electrician in that place.

Q: Do you remember the name of the place?

06:16:35

A: Zement Fabrik. Cement factory. It was on the left bank of the Daugava River that goes through the country. It was hard work, but it was not without some humor. It was not without

some human contacts. I met two people there who were important to me. One was a fellow prisoner, also an electrician, who just had a couple teeth left. He had come from the Zentralka prison. When I asked him of my father he knew him. The other one was a young man by the name of Dute. Arvids was about my age, came from a farm near Tukums. He was a totally dedicated communist. Had gotten his whole family to jail because of it and he was still pursuing it. He had a furnished room near the cement factory and he gave me some food. He was a delightful man, a truly delightful dedicated fighter whether you share his philosophy or not, his politics. That assignment lasted for about -- by the way that other prisoner confirmed that my father had been tortured to death but he couldn't tell me when or how. When that assignment closed, they closed that little branch camp, at the factory, I was assigned together with the others to Spilwe. Spilwe used to be the airport for Riga. The Germans modernized it, enlarged it, and it became the main tactical Luftwaffe--German air force-- support field for the northeastern operations. So, as long as they could fly, they flew out of Spilwe.

Q: Was Spilwe part of Kaiserwald?

A: It was administered by Kaiserwald, yes.

Q: Did you live at Spilwe or did you live at Kaiserwald, in barracks?

A: Call that living. In Spilwe the living quarters, sleeping quarters, were in an abandoned old brewery. It was not designed for the purpose so some of the rooms and facilities were not very suitable but they had a fence around it and it was administered by somebody we called the "Eiserne Gustav"--the "Iron Gustav"--a perverted gentleman in the SS. No pretty girl

who was safe for the man. Or boy. But it worked. I was an electrician again, on the airfield. They clearly didn't have enough guards for all of us so they had guards around the field. It was a leaky fence. And there were times when I had a civilian suit from Arvids in one of the substations that nobody would go in because of high voltage. I would put that on and go and look up my friend Arvids during the day. I gave him information about the Luftwaffe--the German air force--the disposition of planes and so on. And he instructed me how to sabotage the planes. So, I was able to get into a hanger and unsecured the oil drain plug cotterpin and then watch to see if that plane would make it back or not. Sometimes it didn't so I shot down a German plane. We also handled bombs and we found out that there was a way to secure the bombs so they wouldn't go off. So we all did that. But my main function was as an electrician and that was pretty good. I was also able to steal some personnel documents, ration cards, and passports and so on and I.D. cards and get them via Arvids to the paratroopers in the woods. All in all I felt very successful and so did the underground. So, in 1944 with the return westward of the Soviet Army there came a point when they said you've got to get out of there. We have to save you. It was around May or June of 1944 I had a friend in Spilwe and I told him -- I told the underground first that I couldn't leave without him because obviously he would become a hostage under the Nazi system. The nearest relative or the nearest friend becomes a hostage and, within three days, if he doesn't come back, he's dead. So, I explained to him that he had to come and be prepared the next day not to come back. So, that night he went over the fence and left me. So, I became the hostage. Boris Monastirsky, a fairly unforgettable name. He survived. I was designated as the hostage and within three days I was assigned to Stützpunkt. Stützpunkt was the work assignment where you went and naturalized, denatured the mass graves. You had to open them up, destroy them with lime, and then close them up again to eliminate them. And of course, since you were a witness you had to be destroyed. It was an assignment of no return.

06:23:25

Q: You just covered them or you had to cremate them?

A: Well, you had to open them up, chemically destroy them with lime, and then cover it up again. The decomposition gasses were unavoidable and they raised the earth, they raised the soil. So, to stop that, you had to either remove the bodies which by then were not easily handled--that is a euphemism, too--and so destroying them chemically in place was the way to do it. So, I was assigned by the Eiserne Gustav to that detail, and the truck broke down. The Germans used at that point trucks that were lacking gasoline and they used stoves that partially decomposed wood and the resulting gasses were combustible. So, that was in lieu of gas and it raised Cain with the engines so they frequently broke down. This one wouldn't even start. So, I was permitted to stay in the camp, but not go out to work. So, I became the delouser. I would take mattresses and clothing that were full of lice and fleas and stuff like that and bedbugs and put them in a chamber and use a bowl of sulfur powder with sawdust and set it on fire and then seal the thing up. The next day I would open it up and take the stuff out, shake out the dead beasties and do the next one. This wasn't very healthy. You did a lot of inhaling and finally I went to the Eiserne Gustav and said I was on strike and I wasn't doing that any more. And he was so impressed with this audacity that he said if you find a guard who will give you his gas mask, you may don it. There was such a guard. So, that helped. The guard in question was half-Polish, half-Scottish, in the German SS. He gave me his gas mask. He also did the incredible act of sitting in the guard shack and listening to Radio London and Radio Moscow and then come out and tell me what's going on. Because the front by then was very dynamic. He also did an even less credible. He and a German

lieutenant marched the perimeter of the fence of the camp and then the two of them took me around and showed me where there was a weak spot where I could go over the side. Totally unheard of that two of those people in uniform would trust each other as much. But in any case, one day I was allowed to go out to work under a one-on-one guard to dig an air raid trench, and I discovered where I was digging was obviously a field cemetery from the Swedish-Polish war of 200 years ago. And I found a lot of wonderful skeletons well persevered in this sandy dry soil and I put "Charlie" together, a full skeleton leaning against the tree. There was a loud laughter after that. The captain of the German meteorological station which was there, dismissed the guard and he and I ended up using the captain's Luger to plunk at tin cans on "Charlie's" head. It didn't last long, but it was fun. He also showed me the German tactical map and how sparsely they had occupied the countryside between Riga and Leningrad. So, the time had come pretty close to do something. Well, the Nazis did it. They liquidated Spilwe as part of Kaiserwald, marched us to the harbor and we were loaded on this one incredible ship and taken on the Baltic to Gdansk and to Stutthof.

Q: When you say you marched to the harbor, were you close to the harbor?

06:28:20

A: Yes. Riga is a harbor city. The Daugava river bifurcates Riga just like Covington bifurcates Ohio at Cincinnati, so, yes, it was a port city. Stutthof was, as Bella said, was a horror. It was our first acquaintance with an extermination camp as opposed to the labor camps or concentration camps before in Latvia and, thank goodness, I was there for only a few weeks before being shipped off to a branch camp of Buchenwald. Listen to the semantics of that: "Thank goodness I was shipped to Buchenwald"!

Q: What was so horrible of Stutthof?

A: Stutthof was an extermination camp, not a labor camp. It was a place to kill a lot of people, starve them into being vulnerable to diseases so that they would die. It was not designed as a mass killing installation, but it was designed as a mass death installation. So, the conditions, if you will forgive the expression, the living conditions, were submarginal. The food was submarginal. And it was not designed to be survived. That was very unique in that respect.

Q: Did people work there?

06:30:15

A: No, there was no work. There was just dying. Everything else was just immaterial.

Q: So, how did you spend your time?

A: Partly doing calthesthenics. That sounds ridiculous, but it was a way to burn off our energy, what was left. We had to do push ups and knee bends and so on. Try doing a knee bend to the count of eight and then stop at three and stay that way for a while. That takes energy away from you. Anything to destroy you. There was one young Russian PW in Stutthof who broke down and took a hammer and smashed his German guard over the head with it. He killed him. He was executed that night and we had to stand at Appell and watch him hang. It was not a nice place. The exception perhaps was a group of Norwegien PWs who were fed by the International Red Cross. They got food packages every week and they sat there along

the fence and taunted the SS guards by biting into a large salami and then throwing the rest into the dirt. The Germans didn't have much to eat at that point. So, the atmosphere was rather deadly.

Q: Was there any commraderie among the inmates like yourself?

A: No. Not that I remember. There was no what they call bonding. Not in Stutthof. It was awaiting death. And, if you will, at that time we were badly weakened. We had not been properly fed for a long time and worked. The transport from Riga to Stutthof was not pleasant. There was a lot of sea sickness. There was very little food, almost no food, and no water. We were badly emaciated by the time we got to Stutthof and that environment just did the rest.

Q: Do you remember what you were thinking at the time in terms of chances for survival.

A: I remember the tactical overlay that I saw that this captain showed me. I knew that the Nazi system was coming to an end and I resented the fact that I wasn't going to be there to see it. I badly wanted to see that, but your thoughts are heavily preoccupied with food and your discussions are about juicy steaks that did not exist. It's like "fatah morgana" in a desert where you visualize a bucket of water or a lake. We were not normal, I think, at that point, and our thoughts were not what a normal person would conjecture to be. This is not uniformly so. My friend the cellist ended up in Stutthof and so did his sister. His sister died there. But in his words, he had to unload a truck with several others at one point, and he was told that if it takes longer than 30 minutes you'll be shot. Well, we didn't have watches, but being a concert cellist he played in his mind the Saint-Sans Cello Concerto, which he knew

takes 23 minutes. So, they unloaded the truck in time. There were these moments, but in retrospect 50 years later to tell you about my thinking process I can't. I don't know.

06:35:05

Q: Mostly you talked about food?

A: It was a dominant subject. And safeguarding what little food you had. I mean you got a small food ration every day.

Q: Is there any way to get extra food there?

A: No.

Q: How long were you in Stutthof?

A: Oh, about four or five weeks I think.

Q: Then what happened?

A: Then the order came out that they were looking for professionals, and I was an electrician of course. I could prove it so I volunteered. Anything was better than Stutthof and I was put on the transport to Magdeburg. There were others, my friend Bella and her husband and several others so it was not as if it were among strangers.

Q: You and Bella went together on this transport?

A: Yes. That was the positive aspect. The fact that we were eagerly volunteering for Buchenwald didn't come through. It was the sign of times. By comparison to Stutthof, Buchenwald was okay. Magdeburg was a branch camp, a labor camp, Außenlager 101 of Buchenwald. And I again became an electrician.

Q: Is Magdeburg a large place? How many people were there?

A: Oh I'm guessing, I'd say about a half a million. It was a fair-sized city.

Q: How about the camp?

A: Oh, the camp was small. Only a few hundred people in it. It was set up to support the Polte factory; they made ammunition. Yes, we supported the German war effort, for the love of Pete, reluctantly and only for a while. Two things interfered. As an electrician I had maintenance access to that part of the plant. The stampings, the manufacturing process, consisted of large stamps that rammed a disk into an elongated shape, further elongated at other stamps and then it was taken to the machine floor in the mezzanine for final drilling and lathing, turning. That elevator therefore became a key in the transport and I was able to destroy it. It had two wheels which were driven by a large motor and I overrode the security system and drove it beyond its limits and broke the two rails that handled the elevator. The chief engineer of Polte formed a committee to find out why it had happened. They decided it was sabotage. That evening in the camp I told our head Kapo, Dave Kagan, what had happened, and he gave me a new number. The chief engineer, you know, You see one

prisoner, you've seen them all, and he went by the number and I had a new number and he couldn't find me. So, my Kapo saved my life.

Q: Now, why was this Kapo so benevolent?

A: He was a nice guy. He did his work, partly to make sure that the Nazis did not administer us directly because they could beat us more than he could.

06:39:10

Q: Was he German?

A: He was a Jew from Latvia. I don't know what part of Latvia. He eventually came to the States.

Q: So some of the Kapos were Jewish?

A: Oh, yes. I have no statistics. But in any case, that slowed down the transportation from one floor to the other. The other thing is that the allies conducted air raids of Berlin every night at ten minutes till nine the armada flew over Magdeburg, and then we stood there and waved goodbye. Then one night they stopped and, on the third of January 1945, they blitzed the city. They destroyed a good part of it and moved on. That pretty well wiped out the productivity of Polte. After that they did one more massive bombing raid and that totally wiped it out and after that we just cleaned up debris in the city. There was no sense working in the plant. Also, somebody had very good intelligence on the ground because when the

utilities to the plant were brought back to life, the compressed air station, the water works or the transformer, one plane would peel off that night from the armada and wipe out that facility and move on. There was very good intelligence apparently, by somebody. It was delightful to watch, but that was the end of productivity.

06:41:06

Q: Now when you were in the city cleaning up debris, did you come in contact with the local population?

A: No. I had no contact. They pretty well stayed away from us and vice-versa and there were guards. The German administrators had a difficult time with some of the cleaning up because there were bodies around. There was one bomb hit right in front of the door of an air raid shelter housing a large number of Hitler Youth kids, and the air shock dismembered everybody in there. So, we had to go in and pick pieces of bodies and try to match them up by shoe size or things like that. People didn't like to be with us. It was pretty gory. And you really couldn't jump for joy. These were kids, no matter what uniform they wore. That was in March. April 11th came around and Patton's Third Army people came around and approached Magdeburg. On Eisenhower's instructions they did not go into the city. They didn't want to meet up with the Soviets before they were ready to do that. They didn't want to end up shooting at each other so there was a hiatus. The Americans approached and then held back. The German SS disappeared, reappeared. I hid among some old discarded clothing in the basement of one of the barracks. They came through with dogs to find me. I don't blame the dog for staying away from me. I had a terrible nervous digestion at that point, and even the police dog could not stand it. They caught me twice. Once I crawled

underneath some bunks in the barracks. They found me there; and then I escaped to the plant itself. As an electrician I knew where everything was, so I was able to hide out successfully. And I stayed there until the American army was firmly in Magdeburg. So from up there, near the top of the plant, I saw the white flags of surrender and the American tanks coming in. I went shooting down the fire escape. This poor G.I. I'll never forget his face. I was an unpleasant apparition. But life came back.

06:44:20

Q: What happened to the Germans?

A: They surrendered.

Q: They just surrendered.

A: Yes.

Q: Were there any attempts that you noticed to retaliate against them by prisoners?

A: There was only one case where an SS man, now in civilian clothing, who had originally been in Poland and had a little Polish flag in his lapel. He was recognized and the prisoners beat the devil out of him, and there was a Jeep with an American war correspondent. He said wait a moment, wait a moment. Do that again. I haven't got it on film. So the poor guy got beat twice.

Q: I'm sure you weren't weeping for him.

A: No. His name was Shuller. He wasn't very nice. I was at that point emaciated. I weighed about 80 pounds and I had to put some weight on. The American troops that came in had been on C-rations or K-rations for months and all they wanted was some warm food and I ended up cooking pancakes. I don't know how many hundreds of pancakes I fixed until those troops left. Then the British army moved into Magdeburg and in the meantime I had been looking for that chief engineer who had been so incredibly unpleasant. When the SS pulled out, he patrolled the plant with his dog and tried to find his old slaves. So, I found out where he lived, talked to his neighbor, a charming lady and her daughter. And they promised they would tell me when he comes back. He had fled to the country. So one day they told me that he was back, and I went after him with a very unpleasant looking knife, a "pig-sticker." He was thoroughly intimidated, came with me. I took him to British Field Security Office--FSS Office--and turned him over to the sergeant. And then I had to fill out the form, and he looked at it and he said, "Are you from Riga?" and I said "Yes." "Do you have an uncle by the name of Aaron?" I said "Yes." He said "Well, we used to do business together." He said "Don't worry about that guy, but as for you, don't talk about it to anybody, but we are changing occupation zones and the Soviets are coming back here. So, if you don't want to go back to Riga, get out of here." And I told Bella and her husband that, and this little caravan soon thereafter left Magdeburg. Five of them in one car, my sidekick and I, each on a motorcycle. I had purchased from the chief of police an I.D. card identifying me being born in Marseilles. I didn't speak French, but neither do the Soviets. That worked. Just in case they find me they'd have to send me back to France. I was fine until we got to Neuwied am Rhein, which was initially in the American zone and was then taken over by the French. And they were concerned about this Frenchman who refused to go back home. So I had to leave

and the rest of them left at the same time.

06:48:05

Q: Now, just logistically: you spent the last several years in Ghettos and camps. Clearly you don't have belongings. You don't have money. How does one get around? How did you purchase the fake I.D. How did you get from place to place?

A: Purchasing the I.D. was a box of American cigars. That is an open currency, cigars and cigarettes. The Germans gave each former prisoner a double ration card and enough money to buy the food on it. That still wasn't very much, but I went back and having a card saying I was from Polte camp was very nice. It was so nice, I went back twice more. Now, I had three I.D. cards. Three sets of ration cards and money to buy three sets of them. I was swimming in food. I needed that. I needed that food very badly. Also, we liberated--we stole, or broke open--a food supply warehouse for the city of Magdeburg and we, the ex-prisoners and the German civilians helped ourselves. And I came back to our pad with a barrel of 25 kilos--50 pounds--of butter and a bag of flour and I went into the pancake business. No, getting the food at that point was not a problem. And eventually I doubled my weight. I became fatso. In the summer of 1945 I rebuilt my system. It didn't take too much. It was boring after that. I felt the need to do something. And after Neuwied, when we got back to Frankfurt, I went one night to a German bar. I did a lot of that. I became the youngest alcoholic on record I think, but drinking my booze in that bar there was a G.I. who was fairly lost. He and I had a conversation of some kind in pidgin German and pidgin English and he asked if whether I had any relatives in the states, and I told him that when I was two weeks old an aunt came and visited us in Latvia from New York. I knew her name, but her maiden name. Then we

parted company. He took that information back to his father in a letter. The young man's name was Oppenheimer. It was a clothing empire. They were filthy rich. He turned that information over to one of his minions and they found this aunt in New York rather nearby and another aunt, and an uncle and untold cousins. So, they now had word that I was alive, and they went -- they didn't know where I was so they went to the American Red Cross and asked to find me. Well, after this drinking episode I heard that the U.N. Relief and Rehabilitation Administration could use volunteers, so I went to them. I was interviewed by a young man who was a school teacher in New York, and he put me on.

Q: Where was this?

06:52:05

A: This was outside Frankfurt. The headquarters was in part of the old I.G. Farben structures. The same place where they used to make cyanide gas for the prison camps.

Q: So you had made your way to Frankfurt to the American zone?

A: Yes. So, now I worked for the U.N. I was given an uniform, a G.I. uniform with the UNRRA patch on the sleeve and I was somebody. My assignment was to go through every incoming letter for the Central Tracing Bureau which supervised all the findings of missing people all over Germany and Austria from anywhere in the world, except from Germany. I would identify the most promising avenue to inquire about these missing people. So, I came across the request from the American Red Cross for me from those people in New York. I was the quickest case we solved.

Q: The people were writing in from everywhere about their relatives?

A: Yes, from anywhere. About 400 letters a day. It was a incredibly hellish parade of human misery. Every letter was a missing relative and it was inspiring to do something. The military governments of the four powers were military. They were not responsive to this additional burden, especially not the Soviets who didn't do anything on it. And so I took one of my famous boxes of cigars to the local postmaster and explained to him what we were doing. What these nondescript brown G.I. envelopes designated and word got out and I had an army of post men working for us. We were incredibly successful. We solved about 400 cases a week.

Q: How did you solve these cases? What was your process?

A: I sent out questionnaires to where I thought was the best address to try. If the people still lived there they responded on the questionnaire, and I had positive I.D. I also went through our death files and saw if we had them on record.

Q: Cards as far as having come from the Germans?

A: From the Germans, from the camps, yes. It was a marvelous operation. It was the most important piece of work I ever did in my life and the most satisfying. When UNRRA moved its headquarters to a little place called Arolsen, near Kassel, I went with that job. I don't know, should I go into the politics of it?

Q: Sure.

06:55:52

A: There was little love lost between the U.K. politically and the United States. In UNRRA, they were able to -- they being the British administrators were able to force every American out of any important position. The only one left was a friend of mine named Tip Westfall who had the innocuous job of supervising three ladies in something called statistics and organization. I joined him because I found that some of my found cases didn't make it out, didn't notify the people even though we had found the positive answers. So, Tip, who was former professor of English, asked me to join him. I turned my section over to a Luxembourg fellow and I became the eyes and ears, gave him the information and he wrote to Governor Lehmann, who was then the Director General, to no avail. Then he wrote another one to Fiorello LaGuardia, who came in after Lehmann and Butch LaGuardia came to Europe and fired that crew that committed this kind of sabotage and we found a thousand files that had not been acted on. I think that it ties in with the British access to India in the last century with the British access to their territory in Palestine and was tied in with that kind of thing. The head--General Morgan--of UNRRA in Europe, who was a relative of the royal family. He was Eisenhower's aide-de-camp during the war. He was untouchable until Butch Laguardia came on the scene. He fired him.

Q: So you think they didn't want to help people because maybe they would get to Palestine?

A: They wanted to impound that information, take a bite out the U.N. and turn it over to a Red Cross organization that they would control. And it just further eroded our contact.

TAPE #3

07:01:08

Q: You were saying that you certainly did not get cooperation from the British in terms of trying to find missing people?

A: Or from the Soviets for different reasons.

Q: Were you getting help from any other international organizations?

A: No, the international organizations got our help. We were the central organization. We had the death records from the camps. We had the last available information about people, and we had access to the military governments who would accept our inquiries, and then also the German postal service.

Q: So you fed this information to the various relief organizations?

A: We fed it back to whoever asked for the information. If the information came from the American Red Cross we fed it back to them. If it came from a constituent of a Senator we were particularly nice to them. It was really a international service. It was not directed towards specific organizations.

Q: Did you have contact with any of the missing persons themselves?

A: Oh, yes. That was the real welcome feedback that kept us alive because we worked very very hard. It was a 7 a.m. to 11:00 at night effort, because at 11:00 at night the kitchen would close. So, it was the only meal during the day that broke me away from that effort. It was truly important to combine these people. I would get letters from folks in South Africa, and anywhere in the world, grateful that they had been reunited with their families. It was very welcome. I saved all those things and then lost it in a move. It was a very good job.

Q: Was there any kind of special sensitivity that you had to have in terms of dealing with this?

A: Or unsensitivity: you were dealing with flesh and blood. I had lost my family and I had perhaps in that respect additional sensitivity to others, but basically it was grit your teeth and do it, but by all means--do it. So, it was, like I said, it was the best job I ever had.

Q: Were there many of you? How many people were working there?

A: Well, I had the L section in the tracing bureau, and we did the lion's share, about 90 percent of the work. I had ten typists. I did all the screening and I did identification work. I didn't trust anybody to do it for me. I just liked the results. That came to a halt when I received the visa to come to the States. That came in April. I was on the ship in May.

Q: Of '46?

A: Of '46. I was met in New York by my uncle and two aunts and this incredible gentleman from an ethnic society, a Latvian society in New York who gave me a \$20 bill, since I had no money. I had nothing else. That was neat. I was able to spend that on the subway system

and learn what New York is like and get a job as a busboy in a place called Farm Food Restaurants, near Radio City Music Hall. That job lasted until August. I had signed up to get my so-called first papers. The first step in the naturalization process. When you do that you sign up for the draft and the draft got me and I was in Ft. Belvoir, in basic training, that same fall.

Q: Before you were a citizen?

A: Yes. And then I was shipped out to Italy. They wanted to send me to Potsdam, because I could speak German and Russian, and I objected. The Soviets have a system of dual citizenship, and so they could put their hands on me and then I would sit someplace in the Gulag and wait for the State Department to help me. So, I didn't go to Potsdam. I asked for a different assignment and for the reasons given I was shipped to Italy to the 88th division up north in Gorizia. I was in S-2, the intelligence section of the battalion. We took care of, among other things, the 175 German PWs who were assigned to the battalion and that was an interesting ying-yang sort of change of positions. They didn't know about my background, and I didn't enlighten them. Unlike Stutthof, they had a club in the city. They had Class-A passes. It was a different kind of a life. For Christmas they invited me to their party and in their toast they said, "Well, you know, it's a changing world. Today it is you, tomorrow it is me." I came back in May of '47, was discharged, and I now had a G.I. Bill, so I promptly went to school, found out that I was still able to sit on a school bench and then went to work for Westinghouse in Buffalo. That was fine until July of 1950 when the Korean War broke out. I had by now received my citizenship and I thought it was only fair and proper that I would sign up for that war. America had been good to me. So, I signed up. I was assigned to the Signal Corps Intelligence Agency in Washington, and then the Corps of Engineers

Technical Intelligence in Fort Belvoir and then I was shipped off to Berlin to do some intelligence work for the American Army, which I did until July 1953.

Q: What was it like being back there?

07:08:55

A: Interesting. I'm sorry. I didn't answer that. It had its different aspects. Basically I was a civilian while I was there or at least I appeared to be a civilian. I was now in a different capacity. I drove a volkswagen with German police plates. It was a different world, and one thing that came out of the war experience was adaptability. I adapted to this life. I am told that I did good work. When I came back to Washington to be debriefed, some Colonel jumped up and saluted me and, through me, the effort of my group. So, I was content. I also met in Berlin an American girl who was there working for the Army but not in the Army, and we got married as soon as my debriefing was over and I was out of the service. That brought me to the University of Cincinnati. That was in 1953. I went to work for G.E. and in 1955 I became a nuclear engineer. Anybody could be that because it wasn't taught in colleges. We were self taught. We worked during the day and taught ourselves at night in groups until we became good enough in our trade. I did that until -- I just retired in 1994, not before my company, which by now is Raytheon, was able to send me to Europe to represent them all over Europe, mostly in eastern Europe. I was able to go back to Riga and see the place as the guest of the Latvian government, not at the end of a bayonet. I saw the Rumbula burial places. There was one part of it that was particularly impressive. It was a long box about six feet by six feet by 18 feet long and from it, roughly every five seconds or four seconds came the sound of a shot. Since this was the burial ground of my family, it was

impressive. I was not successful in selling anything in Riga. Subsequently a friend of mine notified a mutual friend, my old buddy Sasha Bergmans, in Riga that I was alive living at this point in Holland. We corresponded and I managed to get to Riga to meet with him, to meet with three other surviving members of our class of '41. We had an incredible reunion.

07:12:33

Q: This is your high school class?

A: Senior class. None of the others were around. And from there I went to Paris and then to Moscow to represent our government in the International Conference on Demilitarization of Chemical Warfare Agents. That was an interesting exercise. They're still talking about it. We had the reception at the Kremlin. Not bad for a graduate of Buchenwald. The entertainment was provided by a pas de deux from Tchaichovsky's Swan Lake and eventually, at which point I had no more film left in my camera, ten young ladies came out in little wraparound skirts to do a Can-Can on roller skates. In the Kremlin. But Moscow wasn't what it used to be. It was the second time I was there and I am told that it isn't anymore what it used to be either. But enough of that. I think that perhaps the second most important aspect -- one is to be caught and be incarcerated, the other is to come out and be normal, and to me that is perhaps the most important part in my judgment of my life: to be normal, to have human values, a sense of humor, and a dedication to human values. That's my story. Except for my marriage to Bella.

Q: Was becoming normal again difficult?

07:14:52

A: Yes, it was. I like music. Music is a language of emotions, and I can still not listen to certain compositions without becoming emotionally deeply involved. It was more pronounced in the earlier days, 1945, 1946. I was a bit of a nut. I couldn't stand the ticking of an alarm clock. I knew I threw several through the window, the time element. But aside from those idiosyncracies I think I slowly have reentered humanity. I have retained certain key thoughts. I have developed into an unforgiving American patriot. There is so much I have received in this country, among other things, my life--how could I be otherwise? This society accepted me, other societies did not, and still doesn't. So, yes that is one of the residuals and I have no intention of changing that. Incredible dislike for genocides in other places even though they are different from the Jewish holocaust. What is now going on in some parts of former Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union for example without entering politics. That is a very strong dislike I wouldn't have if I weren't burdened by those memories. My memories haven't gone away as you've noticed, they're still here. Perhaps more now than before, because I think more about it, because my wife, who was also in the camps in Magdeburg and married to a friend of mine subsequently, and we are now married to each other in our tenth year. She has given back to me my ability to talk about it and reflect on it, which I didn't have before. I have a daughter, two grandchildren. They are my monuments to teutonic inefficiency. That is something that I will not lose, but it does stand for reentry into normality. I don't know what else I can cite.

Q: I'm just trying to get a sense of the difficulty in really recreating your life because the life you had before was interrupted, destroyed, parts of it, and when you came here you had to begin again, and that must have been very, very difficult although you obviously have done it

successfully.

A: Well there is no alternative to it. I could do that or I could go sit at a funny farm. And I did it. Yes there was a price to that. There are still nightmares and they become reactivated, by some strange mechanisms I don't even know about. The reentry is not total. You don't experience something like that totally and then to negate what has happened, it cannot be done. The death of a family doesn't act that way. So, basically there is no alternative. It's just a matter of how normal do you become. Do you retain what was instilled in you as a child, a love of people, or do you become nasty and overbearing and discriminating. There are not too many things that I really dislike. I don't like stewed okra; I never developed a taste for it. I don't like people who tell ethnic jokes, because you cannot hate anybody without first diminishing it him, and an ethnic joke is intended to diminish the other guy. So, yes, I have my likes and dislikes.

07:20:35

Q: What do you think drove you through all of these years? What gave you the strength, what helped you get through it?

A: I think the remaining strong influence of my parents. I had a magnificently harmonious upbringing in spite of many ups and downs, and what they instilled in me couldn't be destroyed by a bullet and it wasn't. I still have those things. I still have my love of music and my emotional dialog with them via music. I know what it wasn't. It wasn't religion. I had parting of the ways with an ever-loving God who was an alien in that environment. It wasn't nationalism. It wasn't love of humanity. A chunk of humanity did that to us. So it was really

basically their influence. My parents influence and good common sense and not having any alternatives. If I had not survived I would not be here talking to you. The probability of surviving and being here is immaterial. It's very small. But then we start from a different premise. I really don't know how to answer that. There is no fundamental philosophy that provided the will to survive. Maybe it was just stubbornness, good old-fashioned stubbornness.

Q: Anything else you want to add?

A: I just want change the emphasis. I only mentioned it. The desire for love of all people, the desire not to see fatal hatred. We don't all love each other. I hardly know you well enough to love you, besides, Bella would object, but it's a different love. The actions of love is not fatal. But fatal hate is a different matter. The kind of thing that motivates extermination of civilians, not enemy soldiers, that is anathema. I hate hate.

Q: Thank you.