

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Bert Fleming
May 16, 1996
RG-50.030*0365**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Bert Fleming, conducted by Joan Ringelheim on May 16, 1996 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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BERT FLEMING
May 16, 1996

1:01:14

Q: Good morning.

A: Good morning, Joan.

Q: Can you tell us your name and the name that you were born with, because I know it is different than your name now, and when you were born and where?

A: I was born September 17, 1916, in Hannover, Germany. My name at that time was Bernard Fuchs, and I was born and raised in Hannover; and until 1936, I went through the schools and read the Nuremberg law, and it became too hard for us. I had to leave the university because no Jews could study further.

Q: Let's go back a little bit. Tell me about your family -- about your mother and your father and sister.

A: My father and mother both came from Łódź. They had left Poland around when the war broke out, 1914 -- no before that -- 1913, they went to Elsass-Lothringen, which is part of France now and was at that time also. And there they lived until 1915 when they went to live in Germany. Father was a custom tailor, and he built up his own studio and built up a wonderful clientele. He was really the number-one custom tailor in Hannover. And my mother, may she rest in peace, died very young. She died already 1928, when I was 12 years old and is buried in Hannover. My father remarried in 1932 and had another son in 1933 and -- when I had to leave the university, I went on hash'alah¹ to be processed to go at that time Palestine. But my father got sick. He had a very serious operation, and he asked me to stay back and take care of his wife and son. So, this way, that is why I did not go to Palestine at that time. Then in 1938, there was a big Aktion² by the Germans where they took all foreigners, that means stateless or not, of German nationality -- Jews -- and collected them all in a concert hall in Hannover, and -- where we stayed for a day and a night. And then they took us in cattle trains to the Polish border.

Q: I'd like to go back. It must have been very difficult when your mother passed away at such a young age for you?

A: Yes.

Q: And when your father remarried, I gather you didn't stay at home after that happened?

¹ It is unclear what the interviewee said, however, it sounds as if he said "hash'alah." The figurative meaning of "hash'alah" is "on loan" (Hebrew).

² Any nonmilitary campaign with political, racial, or eugenic ends (German).

A: No, I left home. And -- I could not stay at that time. I just couldn't live with her. It became impossible. So, I had left when I was 14.

Q: And you lived alone?

A: I lived alone, yes. I lived with friends, with their parents. I rented a room there. And I earned money, and at that time I paid the rent there and lived until the Aktion started.

Q: But you remained close with your father and sister?

A: Well, I had to, yes. My sister got engaged to be married with a -- not a Jewish man -- but we liked him. He was a very nice man. He was a dress manufacturer, special designed dresses. And so how far back do you want me to go now?

A: You can certainly talk about this, sure.

01:06:01

Q: And when the Aktion started, as I mentioned, we were sent to Poland, and when we came to the Polish border, on one side we had the SS with the bayonets pointed at us, and on the other side we had the Polish with bayonets pointed at us, and we were in no-man's land for 48 hours before some intervention the Poles opened the border and let us into a very small village. The name is Zbaszyn. There -- I was always an organizer -- so when we went there, there was no housing because it was a small village and here we were about 2,000 people. So we organized. I took a few young people and we put handkerchiefs around our arms, our sleeves, and then we went and cleaned out pig sties where the cattle was and also some housing which were empty. So, there we took care of the old people and the sick people and the children; some children were born right there. And we were in Zbaszyn until six weeks before the war broke out. In the meantime, a lot of people who had family in Poland were released and they went to their people, and so my father also went back to Łódź because he had two brothers living there with their families and I stayed until the last 100 were liquidated in Zbaszyn because it was just about six weeks before the war started. Then I went to Kraków with -- myself with some people that I had befriended and then later to Czestochowa. In Czestochowa, I stayed until I think it was September 1940. The ghetto in Łódź had already been closed the first of May. So, one evening a car came with a man named David Gertler, and he came in where I lived in Czestochowa, because I had corresponded with my sister in Łódź, so she knows where I was. And she had sent this man with an SS man in a private car to pick me up in Czestochowa and took me into the ghetto to be reunited with my sister and father.

01:09:07

I was not too long in the ghetto, just a few days, when I got a call from Rumkowski,³ an Elder of the Jews, for a long interview. And there he said, "I want you to take over the labor department because we have to register every Jew, every child in the ghetto because we have to give them work." For work we will get bread and we can live. So we registered --

Q: Let me ask you something. You're how old at this time?

A: At that time I was 24 years old.

Q: What was your sister -- your sister's name is?

A: Dora.

Q: What was she doing?

A: She was the executive secretary of the Rumkowski.

Q: Did you know this when you were writing to her?

A: No. I knew it only when I came to the ghetto.

Q: Was it surprising to you that she sent an SS man to get you?

A: Yes, only then I realized why she could have done it because of her position. She was able to do that.

Q: Did it worry you when these people came to the door?

A: At first, yes, at first. But immediately when he told me who he is and what he came for, naturally I was relieved, and naturally I went with them to be reunited with my family.

Q: When you saw your family at first, did your sister explain to you about Rumkowski and tell you things about him so that when you met him you had some idea?

A: No, she just told me of what is going on and what has to be done because Rumkowski was in a position to deal with the Ghettoverwaltung,⁴ to tell them you give us material. We will manufacture it and in turn you give us food and whatever we need.

³ Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877-1944); Chairman of the Judenrat in the Łódź ghetto.

⁴ "Ghetto Administration" which also oversaw the activities of the Judenrat (German).

Q: Let me ask you something in terms of reflecting back a little bit. When you were in Hannover and the Nazis took over, you were in some sense fighting the Nazis, right?

A: Yes.

Q: You remember the Maccabees?

A: Correct.

Q: Can you explain what that organization was?

A: It was an underground organization of students who, like me, had to leave the universities, and we decided to make sabotage. We became, like in other words, terrorists and we got hold of explosives and we broke up -- we bombed their trains, any transport of the SS people and stuff like this. So, we really gave them a hard time.

01:12:10

And in 1936, I was arrested for the first time by the Gestapo for three weeks, interrogated every day, the same questions asked, but they could not have any proof or couldn't tell anything of what I had done, so they had to let me go. That was in 1936. Then in '38, I mentioned to you already, I was sent to Zbaszyn in Poland.

Q: So, when you got to Łódź, what did you think the Germans were doing in the course of the war to these Jews, since you had already experienced the Nuremberg laws and kicked out of the university, and at least some violence against the Jews?

A: Absolutely, yes. When I came to the ghetto, and I was told and I saw with my own eyes, of how the people have to live in the ghetto, and naturally I was right up in arms. I could not digest it that easily. And when the Elders of the Jews called on me to head the department, and naturally I was pleased that I got to do something productive for the ghetto, even though people today have said I worked with the Germans and helped them, which is naturally it's nonsense because if we would not have done what we did in the ghetto, in 1942, that ghetto would have been liquidated completely and no one would have survived. And thanks to Rumkowski, and thanks to his negotiation power he was able to convince the Germans, and actually the Łódź ghetto became a model for all the ghettos in the other areas. So, three days and three nights we registered all the people.

Q: How did you do that?

A: Well, I got a staff and I got an office and people came day and night. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people, and we were able to do it in three days and three nights and everybody who registered also got where to go, to what factory. So we delegated people directly into the various factories.

Q: So, Rumkowski sees you and tells you to head -- did you head this department by yourself at that point?

A: At that point, yes, I organized it myself.

01:15:00

Q: So, how long did it take you to figure out this organization after he had spoken to you?

A: Well, I was given people to interview and I interviewed the people and whomever felt they could do the job I would tell them, yes, they were hired.

Q: So how many people were on your staff at that point?

A: At that time I couldn't tell you exactly. It was over 20. Between 20 and 30 people.

Q: Now, when you registered, did you have cards printed out so you could register people?

A: Yes, we had books and later on we made big index cards. But people themselves, they got a piece of paper with where to go, where to report to, to what factory, and with this they were given i.d. cards and cards to be able to get food, like food stamps, coupons for food. And this entitled them to a soup. There were various soups around the ghetto where the people who worked the factories were able to get a soup. Some a little bit heavier, some a little bit lighter soups, as you can imagine. And as the time passed, I had, for instance, I took a very sick-looking person out of a factory and delegated him to a kitchen while I took a healthy-looking guy from the kitchen and put him into the factory. So, with one signature of mine I made a friend and an enemy, which you can understand. The ones who worked in the kitchen, they were sitting. They got a little bit more to eat than the others. So, this went on, then, until 1944 --

Q: Now you're moving too fast. When you're registering people, there are clearly some elderly people and there are kids who probably can't work.

A: They still got cards. They still were registered.

Q: And did they go with family members to certain factories or would they stay in an apartment?

A: They would register but they would not actually work because they couldn't work. They were unable to work, but if we would have left them without registration, without i.d. cards, they would die for hunger because they wouldn't get any rations.

Q: So, everybody is registered whether they are really working or not.

A: Yes, everybody had to be registered.

Q: And when you came into the ghetto and you're registering there are almost 200,000 people, right?

01:18:01

A: Yes.

Q: What is happening with housing at this point? When you came in was everybody living where they're supposed to be living or are they moving around?

A: Well, they had since the ghetto was closed the first of May. Naturally, all these people coming from the other side of the town into the ghetto had to be housed. So, naturally, there wasn't enough housing available for every family. So you found in most cases that in one room lived four families. In every corner a different family, OK, and the conditions naturally were unbearable to live, really, because there was no running water. There were no toilets in the room. People didn't have bathrooms. They would have to go to outhouses. And they would have to go and pump the water from a pump and bring it up into the room. So, the conditions naturally as you can imagine was anything but human.

Q: And were there a number of pumps in different parts of the ghetto?

A: No, mostly in every house they had some water supply, but it was like I said: no bathroom and not every house had running water.

Q: Were you living with your father and your sister?

A: Yes, in the beginning.

Q: I gather that your father's second wife and child had left?

A: No, she had left in 1939 to England. She was a nurse by profession and she got a job in England as a nurse, so she took off with her son and went to England.

Q: And had your father wanted to go and they didn't allow him to, or you don't know?

A: She didn't get any papers for him. She got papers just for herself and her son, and father was very active in the ghetto also being a custom tailor. He was always working and had also quite a few tailors working together and they made for these people, even for the people in the ghetto. He had to make their suits for them, right.

Q: Once this big registration happened, with all these people, and all of the people are going to their particular factories or work places, what is then your job? What are your responsibilities once that happened?

A: Well --

Q: What would be a day?

A: They were always going movements on. People had died from hunger. They had to be replaced.

01:21:02

OK, so, there was always a lot of switching of personnel because you can imagine so many people and so many various factories, so there was always something going on where the department of labor had to act accordingly, right. So, there was always something going on that kept us busy.

Q: Were you meeting with Rumkowski regularly?

A: Not regularly but often. He came to my office or I was called upon for meetings. And -- oh, yes, frequently I saw Rumkowski, yes.

Q: What was your relationship like? What kinds of things would you discuss? Would it only be business or were you also discussing the situation?

A: Well, if we were socially somewhere together, then yes, I would talk with him a little bit about various subjects and incidents which occurred which I wanted to know more details about. And also, about my background, what he wanted to know. But otherwise, he was very busy and there wasn't much time for socializing, except when we had concerts. We had our own orchestra, and so it was really a city by itself in itself.

Q: Was this a hard job for you?

A: It was not an easy job, and especially when the Aktion took place when they asked for 800 people or 1,000 people or 2,000 people to be sent out allegedly to other working camps. I had no dealings with this because I left this to my partner, to Czenszenski.

Q: When did he come in?

A: He came in about a year after I had the office organized, and then later on when we got a transport from Czechoslovakia there was also a gentleman who was told by the Eldest of the Jews, by Rumkowski, to work with me in the department of labor, especially for the Czech people. So, we had actually three at that time heading the department.

Q: And who was the third?

A: Anders was his name. He came from Prague. Terrific elements in that transport. Professionals, very intelligent people but unfortunately they died like flies.

01:24:00

They could not adjust themselves to the conditions of the ghetto. When they came into the station in Marysin, where we had our railroad station, they asked, "Where we can get a taxi? Is there a hotel?" As funny as it seems, but at that time, the tears came into my eyes when I saw these people and unfortunately we lost so many of them at that time very fast.

Q: Now, you said that when -- the department of labor was somehow involved in the deportations?

A: Well, naturally they were asked by Rumkowski to select certain people at random to be sent. The first transport for instance were the three Fs⁵ in German: Fleisher,⁶ Fuhrmann⁷...what was the third F? I don't even remember the third. Well, in any case these three groups, from three groups the transports, the first transports went to a labor camp and a lot of them survived, thank heaven, because they really went to working camps because Auschwitz came later on and naturally we didn't know that. We had no dealings with the outside world and there was no communication with the outside world...and the Łódź ghetto.

Q: There was no underground radio?

A: Yes, underground radio, I myself with a friend of mine, Dr. Smulovitz, we had a radio. We listened to the radio at nighttime and we lost a very important person because of that -- Doctor...Irene, she would remember the name. He was shot because he listened to the radio. He was caught listening to the radio. That was a very dangerous thing to do but we did it.

Q: What did you learn when you were listening to the radio?

A: We learned about the war what was going on but naturally of what happened with us we did not being informed through the radio, we didn't know. Only much, much later we found some little paper in one of the cattle carts that came back, that they went to Auschwitz -- "Oswiecim" it's called in Polish, and -- but it was a rumor but nobody really

⁵ The interviewee is probably referring to occupations, not surnames.

⁶ butcher (German).

⁷ carriage driver (German).

had facts because nobody returned from there. But they, a lot of people survived even Auschwitz and Birkenau.

Q: But the 1942 transports went to Chelmno.

A: Which we did not know, I did not.

01:27:04

As a matter of fact, some of the first transports could write into the ghetto. We received mail into the ghetto from these various camps. So, how we were supposed to know that they are going to their death? Nobody actually knew, nobody knew.

Q: And you think Rumkowski didn't know?

A: I don't think he did because he heard the same rumors that we heard.

Q: What was daily life like? What time did you get up in the morning and where did you eat? Did you eat at home?

A: Well, I finally got myself an apartment and I found Irene in 1942. I engaged with her in 1942.

Q: Tell us about your meeting.

A: We had a date to meet at a friend's house.

Q: Why did you have this date?

A: That evening. And, well, I saw Irene when she walked on the street, and I fell in love with her, just by seeing her the way she walked. And then when I saw her face, so it went with it. So, I said to one of my O.D.⁸ men, who was always my lifeguard if you want to call it, I said to him, "I want to meet this girl. I want to meet this girl. You have to make a date for me." And it happened to be that I was at that time I had a slight cold or something. I was home and -- no that was afterwards. So, finally we made a date and he made a date with her not telling her that she had a date with me. So, he made the date with her and it was late at night and she was an hour late and he still was there but he was just about going away when she came. And she came and the whole night she was sitting and talking and I was serenading her, playing on my violin and finally she fell in love with me, too. So, then one evening in November, the 11th of November to be exact, we had -- in a friend's house, she was ready and I went to her parents and I asked for her

⁸ Ordnungsdienst [Organization for public order" (German).

hand. I want to marry their daughter and they allowed this. They said, "OK, you can marry our daughter."

01:30:00

Then I went to the party where we met for the evening and I said, "Congratulations we are engaged to be married." And that was then the way I met Irene and then we married in June of 1943, by the Elders of the Jews, together with 18 or 19 other couples.

Q: Did you life change?

A: Since then? Well, to me in my eyes, yes, because she's a wonderful woman, very bright, very intelligent, and down to earth with a lot of common sense and a tremendous intuition. She knows things which happen later on, she knows beforehand. And so then I got an apartment with a room and a kitchen and I lived there with Irene then. And...so, I got up in the morning like seven o'clock, was at my office at eight, and Irene was also working in one of the factories and we lived there with the various happenings during this time in the ghetto which is already known today by everybody who is interested in it because it's a matter of documentation already of what had happened in between '42 and '44. We have lost a lot of people by transporting them out of the ghetto, by attrition, and as the time passed by more and more and more starved. Of course sickness, hunger and in 1944 the last transport to Auschwitz was the next to the last transport, there was also was the Elders of the Jews, Rumkowski, and all his staff and his wife and his brother, and they went to Auschwitz and unfortunately, as we learned later on, he was immediately killed when he got to Auschwitz. And then we were the last transport out of the ghetto in '44 and we did not go to Auschwitz. We went to Sachsenhausen.

01:33:01

Q: Let me go back and try to ask you some details.

A: OK.

Q: I know that it's difficult. Did people come to you and ask you for favors? I mean you were in a position to make decisions?

A: Yes.

Q: So you must have been put in situations where people asked you to do things.

A: Yes.

Q: For them and other people?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you talk about some of those kinds of difficulties?

A: I will not remember the details, but one thing was certain, that I did not take any bribes. Nobody could buy me, and I did it to the best of my ability and to my conscience. So, if somebody asked me a favor and I could do it I gladly did it, and if I couldn't, I couldn't. I had to say no. But that I did really select someone to do a favor, no, I did not.

Q: There were some mass demonstrations and strikes early on.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have sympathy with these strikers or did you find them disruptive?

A: Well, these people did not know the background of why the happenings what happened so they tried, they thought by striking or by demonstrating they could better their lives by getting maybe more bread or more to eat, but it didn't do any good because Rumkowski did the only thing he could do was what he did. All right, he was a little bit rough, but if you put yourself into his position, what could he have done? Like for instance, the transport when they asked for children, his heart was breaking, but what could he have done, because if he wouldn't have done it, it would have been worse. Because, for instance, a transport was supposed to go out of the ghetto and they could not fulfill the quota, they came in and blocked off, you know, two or three or four houses and took everybody that was found in there and sent them away. So, what was the lesser evil? Nothing could have been done.

Q: Do you remember that day when he gave that talk about "give me your children"?

01:36:00

A: No, I don't remember, and I wasn't there. I wasn't there and I did not take part in that.

Q: Did you hear him speak?

A: No, no, I learned it when I saw the film. I knew that a transport had to go out, but I did not hear the speech. I wasn't present when he spoke.

Q: Did you decide not to go or were you just doing something else?

A: I tried to stay away from all the various Aktionen.

Q: Why?

A: I didn't want to take part in it.

Q: You had police protection?

A: Yes.

Q: Two guards with you?

A: Yes, well, they stayed in the office to keep order because when there is a line of people outside everybody wants to be the first. Everybody tries to be -- so they kept order.

Q: So, it wasn't to protect you, or was it as well?

A: The main reason was to keep order and then also to protect me.

Q: Were you in danger, do you think?

A: Listen, in a position like I had, well, naturally people, as I mentioned to you before, with one signature I made a friend and an enemy at the same time. So, naturally, not that I was scared or something like this but everybody had to be careful because you never know what people do when they're desperate. So they kept order. Now, then, as I mentioned we were the last transport. Only 800 people were left in the ghetto officially to liquidate the ghetto. We were sent to Sachsenhausen. In Sachsenhausen, we were there for two weeks and then we were bought as slaves by a firm and we went to Koenigswusterhausen, where there were new barracks put for us and naturally also straw mattresses. We worked and made to cut certain wood and plywoods which we sent away to be assembled -- we didn't do the assembly -- and we understand they were boxes sent to the eastern front against Russia. They would put certain ice-melting stuff in there, like some flame throwers or something like this, and thank heaven the war did not last two weeks longer because I probably would have been shot for sabotage because what I cut on the circular saw was a quarter of inch too long, a quarter of an inch too short.

01:39:10

We dealt with centimeters. It was a half a centimeter less or half a centimeter larger, so, but it wouldn't fit together. So, thank heaven it ended when it ended because otherwise I probably would have been killed for sabotage.

What else can I say, what else can I tell you? In the mean time I had other experiences, like my back was broken -- not broken but fractured, because one day I had to go into the forest to build some tank traps and next to me was a man, an elderly man, who could not work. So I did something for him so one of the SS men who watched us came over and told him to work, and he was just leaning over his shovel and said, "I can't, I can't." So, he hit him, and when he hit him I said I will work for him. I will do his part. So, he gave me over the back with his rifle and I had a slight fracture of L-2, as they call it in that

language. And I was hiding for a while because I could not stand, but thank heaven it healed. And I needed an operation which was performed in 1966 and thank heaven everything is all right. So any further details you would like to know?

Q: Yes, I want to go back to the ghetto.

A: Let's go back.

Q: You had a newspaper or more than one newspaper in the ghetto?

A: We had a newspaper in the ghetto, yes.

Q: Do you remember the name of it?

A: No. It's a blank.

Q: What kind of a newspaper was it, do you remember?

A: Well, daily routines, what has to be done, some what happened, and really I don't recall right now. It's a blank.

Q: Do you recall whether this was a newspaper put out by the Jewish council and Rumkowski or was this done by --

A: Oh, definitely within the ghetto.

Q: But by the organization of the ghetto as opposed to --

A: Yes, by the organization not because everything that came from the Ghettoverwaltung would be on a poster.

01:42:00

Q: Was there any underground newspaper?

A: Not that I know of.

Q: Now, when you went to concerts, did they have cafes and concerts? Were there a lot of different sorts of cultural activities?

A: Well, they had the theater and the orchestra. Yes, they gave concerts.

Q: Did one have to pay, use the money from the ghetto to go, or was this free?

A: No, it was free.

Q: And what was the money used for?

A: Inside, people bought themselves cigarettes, hand made cigarettes, various things. It didn't have any value outside the ghetto, it was only within the ghetto.

Q: Did this money have Rumkowski's picture on it or some of the money?

A: Yes, oh, yes.

Q: What did you think of that?

A: At that time it was absolutely natural for me. It was an organization. It was a city.

Q: Was anybody else's picture on the money?

A: No.

Q: Were there coins as well as paper money?

A: There were coins, too, yes, but mostly paper money. What else would you like to know?

Q: What kind of a hierarchy between people who came in richer and people who came in poorer and people who came in from outside, the Czech transports, the German transports? Do you remember gypsy transport coming in?

A: I don't recall. We got a lot of transports coming from little villages and towns around the vicinity of Łódź, but I don't remember.

Q: Do you recall whether there was a difference in treatment with the people who were already in Łódź from the people who were coming in from transports who might not, then had to get apartments or parts of apartments? Do you think there was a distinction between those people?

A: Well, I would say that some of them who were affected by the newcomers, as you want to call them, because they had to share a room with them or whatever, so naturally they might take objection to it.

01:45:12

But in general, everybody tried to help, actually, the other.

Q: Was there sufficient -- I don't mean a lot of food -- but could every one get something to eat or was there a lot of starvation among certain groups, do you think?

A: There was starvation, absolutely.

Q: That must have been very difficult?

A: It was difficult. It was difficult because the bread ration which varied from time to time was too much to die but not enough to live. But eventually and slowly people starved, starved, and no resistance to sicknesses and a lot of people got tuberculosis and just died away. So, it was very much decimated by people going on transport, being sent out of the ghetto and by attrition, and died by starvation. So, from the 200,000 people coming to the ghetto, there were in 1944 maybe, maybe by estimation, I estimate maybe 30,000 or 40,000 people left. They either died away or were sent on transports.

Q: Was there a different kind of work for men than there was for women in terms of the division of labor you have there?

A: Well, naturally, it is as you have today, too. There are certain jobs women can not just do and men have to do it, but I don't think there was any distinction made and women had to do the same work as the men, at least they were delegated to do the job. Whether they could do it with the help or without the help it's a different story, but we could not make any distinction between the various genders.

Q: Who took care of children if both parents or every adult --

A: There were Kindergartens. Children had to go and stay over the day and were taken care of, which was one of the fortés of Rumkowski because children was his life.

01:48:12

Before the war, he was heading an orphanage and they were taken care of but naturally the same thing. They didn't have enough food and a lot of children died.

Q: Did the children get a ration or did the children share the parents ration?

A: No, they got their own.

Q: They got their own?

A: Yes. Every head had to get a certain ration. That's why they had to be registered. Whether a child or the elderly, it doesn't matter. They had to be registered to get the i.d. and to get the ration card.

Q: When you remember the people that you were seeing and talking with, do you remember if people were depressed, they were frightened, or was there a kind of accommodation to life?

A: No, no, it was very dim. People tried to live as good as they could. In other words, they tried to make the best of it but naturally you can not help it. They had to be depressed because nobody knew what the next day would bring. And so, the whole situation made it so that you had to be depressed.

Q: So, you were depressed, too?

A: Absolutely, absolutely. Because I saw with my eyes of what had happened to these various people. I saw them. They hardly could walk and they had to go to the factory. So when you see the people walking hardly being able to put one foot in front of the other and knowing that they have to go to do some job otherwise they wouldn't eat, you couldn't help it. You had to be depressed. You couldn't put a wall around you because you lived with it.

Q: Do you know people who committed suicide?

A: I personally didn't know anybody who committed but we had plenty of suicides, yes. They could not just take it anymore.

Q: Did you ever think about it?

01:51:00

A: Of suicide? Not at that time. Well, I was prepared for it.

Q: How?

A: I had made two rings, one for myself and one for Irene. We were able to get Zyankali⁹ and put it in the ring for when the time would come where we suffered to such a degree that we couldn't stand it anymore we could take it. But then my mother-in-law, may she rest in peace, without us knowing it, she removed it. We didn't know it because we never used it. We never took it off, but the ring survived in my violin and my daughter has it now.

Q: Were you thinking about the ring in terms of the transport or just that the situation would get so bad?

A: No, just the situation where we couldn't stand it any more.

⁹ cyanide (German).

Q: When was -- or did it become clear to you late in 1944 that these transports were not resettlement and were not work camps? Did you know?

A: We still didn't know. We had rumors but we still didn't know... We didn't know that the transport before us went to Auschwitz, that we are not going to Auschwitz, that we are going somewhere else. We didn't know.

Q: Did you have dealings with Biebow¹⁰ or with the Gestapo?

A: Not directly, not directly. He came to my office maybe once or twice but I had no personal dealings with him, no.

Q: Any of the German personnel that were in Łódź, did you have dealings with?

A: I had some dealings, yes.

Q: What was that like?

A: The one I dealt with was personally to me very nice, and I had not seen that he committed anything to the contrary. And he himself was not on the same level as the others. By "on the level" I mean psychological because he felt with us, but he couldn't do anything, but at least he gave me some lift up.

Q: But he didn't indicate to you what was going on?

A: No, no. Oh, no. He didn't divulge anything of that sort.

Q: Were they brutal inside the ghetto?

A: Oh, plenty of brutalities in the ghetto. I saw where they played football with a baby and took the children and threw them right on the truck.

01:54:05

Sure, we saw brutalities. I saw brutalities where the Kripo, the Kriminalpolizei,¹¹ which were in the ghetto, which had the sole purpose of selecting jewelry and all valuable from the people. They were sitting at the window and shooting at random, like a sniper. By the way, I had him arrested after the war, but he was able to escape so they asked me for help to find him. So, I told them the next time I find someone from the war criminals, he won't be able to escape.

¹⁰ Hans Biebow (1902-1947), was the head of the Łódź ghetto administration.

¹¹ criminal police (German).

Q: When they were doing the shooting --

A: At random.

Q: What went through your head that this meshuggenah¹² guy is doing this, or this is a policy, or I got to try to stop it, or there's no way to stop it? Did things go through your head, confusing things, when you saw this?

A: Confusing in what way?

Q: What does this mean? I mean, you had been in 1936 to '38 blowing up trains, right?

A: Yes.

Q: After you left Łódź you were also doing some sabotage. In Łódź did you think about that or did it seem like the situation where one couldn't do anything?

A: Exactly, you couldn't do anything. You were helpless. What could you have done? Well, naturally you felt awful, but what could you have done? You were helpless. You couldn't do anything. This led also to depression. There was no way. You felt like doing something, especially with my hot blood, but what could I have done? We had no weapons. People have asked me, "Why didn't you make a riot like they did in Warsaw?" Because with whom and with what? The Warsaw ghetto had dealings with the outside. We didn't. They could trade something for weapons. We didn't have anybody to trade with, and we didn't have with what to trade, so how can we compare the Warsaw uprising with Łódź ghetto? Oranges and apples.

01:57:02

So naturally whenever we saw any brutality, it hurt. You wanted to cry out and you wanted to kill the guy, but could you have done? You were helpless.

Q: Let's take a break.

A: OK.

End of Tape #1

¹² crazy (Yiddish).

Tape #2

04:01:01

Q: Bert, can we go back to your earlier years for a few minutes? Tell me a little bit about your boxing career?

A: Well, it wasn't much of a career, but I started boxing when I was about 12 years old, and I started to get into the ring with my name on the poster. I must have been 14 years old and I was a junior welter featherweight. I started boxing when I was about 12 years old, started training. The Jewish sport club Bar-Kochba had no boxing in Hannover. We had no boxing, so I joined the Heros-Eintracht boxing club in Hannover. And when I was about 14 I was ready to go into the ring. My name was on the poster and I started boxing as a junior featherweight and I did fairly well, and I was just about ready to go into the championship fights when I was paired against one who was not very friendly towards me because we went to the same school and he was one of the first Nazis.

04:03:07

When it came to a championship fight -- no, I'm sorry. I have to go back now. I got him into the ring and I fought him and I won. I won that fight. Then about a year later, at that time the Nazis started already but I was still allowed to box in that club. I fought him the second time and he lost again. Then I saw him for the first time in a SS uniform and when it came to that last fight I just could not hold back but, and I hit him with everything I had and I knocked him out, and he was the one who arrested me in 1938 to bring me in the concert hall where we were sent away into no-man's land. So, that was my boxing career. Then, naturally, I could not go any further because at that time the Nazis were in full swing and full force and a Jew could not any more be in any public place for that reason. So, this was the boxing career to answer your question.

Q: Do you think having boxed was in any way a help to you?

A: Well, I lived in sports. I played soccer for 15 years from when I was a youngster until -- sometimes as a goalkeeper. I played two games, at 10 o'clock in the youth and at one o'clock in the second league. So, I was pretty good at it, too. I was a pretty good goalkeeper. And I was an oarsman in high school, and field and track I wasn't too fast in running, but I was in very good physical condition and I think this has helped me in going through the other bad environments I was forced into.

Q: Now at the same time you were involved in music. You were a violinist?

A: Yes. I did not play officially anywhere. I just played for myself and as Irene told you, I serenaded her our first night meeting. And I played with my daughter. The violin has a very, very sentimental value because it survived the holocaust, and we had as when I

walked away from the ghetto that was the only thing I took with me and I kept it until I came to Sachsenhausen where they took it away from me.

04:06:16

And they took a accordion away from another colleague, but when we came to Koenigswusterhausen, to the factory where we were slaves, they gave me the violin and they gave him the accordion under the condition that he play for them. So, every so often in the evening we had to play for them and entertain them while they were drinking and laughing and so on. And it helped me also a little bit in the assignment, because as I said, I was on the circular saw, but at one time we had to go to an outside commando to a tank trap, and I had that incident with that elderly man of ours and where I could not see him beaten because he could not do his job so I had to take it for him. I mentioned that to you before, and so this is the violin, and I played until not too many years ago, but my fingers are a little bit arthritic now. They are getting stiff so it wasn't for me anymore, so I gave it as a Bar Mitzvah gift to my grandson. He has not played it as yet. He is very good on the piano and he's a tremendous flutist, but maybe one day he will take up the violin, too. He's a very ambitious guy.

Q: What did you play for these guards at the camp. What did you and your friend play?

A: In the barracks.

Q: What kind of music?

A: All kinds of music, operetta, waltzes, I think at that time known hits.

Q: Popular music?

A: Popular music.

Q: Did you play in the ghetto other than for Irene?

A: Well, not officially as I said. Privately yes, amongst our friends, yes.

Q: Did you play with a group sometimes?

A: Yes. I did that, too, and also I had the violin on one of our cruises -- oh, no, I didn't have the violin, but I played the violin on the cruise. It was amateur evening, a talent show.

Q: This was after the war?

A: Yes, it was after the war. That was the only time I played the violin officially for a crowd.

- Q: Can you talk about your barber and what he did for and what you ended up doing for him?
- A: In the ghetto, I had a barber coming every day to shave me and when I needed to give me a haircut. Naturally when you see him every day you talk about everything, also intimate things in their lives and we were very friendly and he was a nice guy. And when it came to the curfew into the -- I should take you to the time when nobody was allowed to go out of the house because the Gestapo planned an Aktion where they wanted to have everybody in the house where they could easily get them and transport them away. I took this barber, his wife and two daughters, and locked them in my apartment for the three days where the Sperre¹³ was in effect, and in doing so I probably saved their lives. Even after the war we saw each other regularly and they never forgot what I did for them and thanks to me I think they are alive. Unfortunately, the barber and his wife passed away last year, but the two daughters are living, one in Boston and the other one in Pittsburgh.
- Q: And Irene didn't know you had done this?
- A: No, after the fact she knew about that.
- Q: Irene was also --
- A: I sent her to Marysin, a little bit outside, the periphery of the ghetto. So, it was not included in the Aktion and then after she knew from them. I did not tell her anything but they told her. She found out from them what I did.
- Q: You talked about yourself before that you never allowed yourself to take a bribe. This was not something you would do?
- A: No, no.
- Q: And there was one circumstance where someone actually came in?
- A: Yes, he wanted a favor from me and he offered me -- I don't even remember what it was, but he offered me something and I took him by his collar and threw him out of my office.
- Q: I bet he was surprised at this.
- A: Well, I don't know if he was surprised or not but he was not very friendly towards me afterwards, and I couldn't care less. But I did everything what I did with a good

¹³ This term is a derivation of *Gehsperre*, or the ban on movement within the ghetto. The policy was instituted concurrent to the violent *Selektion* process and prior to the deportation of the Jews to Chelmno.

conscience so I could sleep in peace because I didn't do any harm to anybody knowingly. So, whatever was in my power I did for what I wanted to do not what I could get out of it.

04:12:02

- Q: When you described the evacuations and deportations, and that you wouldn't go and that you sent your partner, was he willing to go? He didn't say, "I'm not going to do this"?
- A: Not that I know of. He was asked to do it and he did it because somebody had to do it and since I disqualified myself any old way I could, then he had to go and had to do what was asked of him.
- Q: Did he survive?
- A: He survived and he died I think last year in Israel.
- Q: Did you meet him after the war?
- A: No, I did not.
- Q: One wonders whether there are conversations about these circumstances or choices?
- A: I did not. I met, after the war I met David Gertler, the gentleman who came with the SS men and picked me up from Czestochowa. I met him after the war, yes. He had a store in Munich, in Germany, and I met with him. Unfortunately he also passed away in the meantime.
- Q: Do you have any memories of the ghetto that you think would be important to try to talk about that we haven't talked about?
- A: Not really, not really. But as I said, I did my duties as good as I could and I could not think of any details right now which are outstanding of the normal everyday routine.
- Q: Did you ever think of resigning that position? Did it sometimes get to be too much?
- A: Well, many times I thought, but I had no choice, because even if I wanted to resign, Rumkowski would have never allowed it. Because I mentioned a few times that I feel it's too much for me and he said, "You are doing a job, so do it, and stick with it."
- Q: Do you think he needed you?
- A: I tried to think, yes... because if I would not have satisfied in what I had to do, I think he would have let me know and he would have set me aside, whether my sister was his right

hand or not, but I think it doesn't have anything to do with it because by that time I showed my own abilities, I would say, in doing what I had to do, what I was asked to do.

04:15:21

Q: Do you think he would have punished you if you would have said, "I'm sorry, I really can't"?

A: I don't know, he might have. He might have.

Q: And your sister, can you talk about her and what she had to do as far as you know?

A: I think that my sister had many sleepless nights because she saw and knew more than anybody else what was going on inside and outside the ghetto. And one time I remember they took Rumkowski outside the ghetto and he didn't come back until the next day, so we had feared for the worst. But he came back and nobody ever spoke of what had happened. Nobody even tried to guess of why he was taken away and why he was brought back. In my eyes, he was not the despot, the demigod, as people made him or said he was, because as I mention to anybody I talk if not Rumkowski, no matter what he did, the ghetto would have liquidated in 1942, completely, without any resistance, without anybody I believe, without me being alive today.

Q: Do you think Dora knew what had happened when he left and didn't come back overnight, your sister?

A: She might have. She never answered the question because that's another thing that people wanted to know, of what transpired. She would completely ignore the question, so I don't know if she knew or she didn't know.

Q: Do you think she ever wanted to resign? Did she ever talk to you because she was so close to all of this?

A: No, no. She was so much involved that she never spoke with me about whether to resign or not to resign. She had three girls working with her in the executive office and she worked there very, very hard, I know, long hours, and I'm sure it was nerve-racking for her, but she was quite a character.

04:18:19

Q: Can you describe her?

A: How shall I describe her? Very bright, extremely intelligent, quick to the draw, down to earth, and a tremendous inside view of what is happening -- all the surroundings of her. She was quite a woman.

Q: So you were close to each other?

A: Yes.

Q: Or not?

A: Yes.

Q: Was she married in the ghetto or was she single?

A: No, they married after the ghetto. She married the brother of the second in command of Eric Jakobovitch. He was the vice president, if I can say so, and he was in charge of all the factories and he was a second in command. So, when Rumkowski was unable to do something, he was the one to enforce everything. He was the one to do it, and his brother married my sister after the war.

Q: Did she ever say what it was like to work with Rumkowski? Was he easy to work with or difficult to work with?

A: We knew it was difficult to work for him. She didn't have to answer that because everybody knew it was a horrible job for anybody because as I said, he really took everything out of you especially when you were that close like she was to him. He was demanding. He was demanding, and he wanted you to do something you better do it.

Q: Was he like this before?

A: I didn't know him before, but I know that he was a very charitable man and was always going around fundraising for his orphanage which was very close to him. I was told, because I did not know him, naturally, from before.

Q: It seems to me that the picture of any human being is very complicated, so someone damning a person or completely praising someone may not be quite appropriate. Do you think there was anything negative -- I mean you've said very powerful things about him in terms of what you think he was able to do that wouldn't have happened without him. Do you think anything negatively about him?

04:21:15

A: Well, one thing is he lost his temper very easily... and then watch out. That's what I can say about him, and you had to do what he wanted. And very, very seldom did I do against

what he said. If he said A and I wanted B, I went B. I was a hothead too, you know, but it never came really to a fight or something with him.

Q: So, you controlled yourself in spite of your rage?

A: I did, I did. Today I can say, yes, I controlled myself, but he was redheaded -- a hot guy.

Q: But he also had power, so that --

A: Tremendous power. He had absolute control of the ghetto. He was the man.

Q: So, that if he, if you went against him, he could get you deported?

A: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

Q: That's a bit frightening to be around.

A: Well, you lived with either or. You could have had the same thing from the Germans because if they didn't like something they could have done the same thing. So it was not an easy situation all around. All right?

Q: Do you think that these workers who had demonstrated these early mass demonstrations, many of them were sent in the early deportations?

A: Yes.

Q: Possibly because they had gone on strike?

A: Probably.

Q: Had -- and probably Rumkowski wanted them out because they were trouble in terms of what he was trying to do. Do you think they might have been the core of resistance or is that just a stupid idea?

A: Well, as I said, they tried to better themselves. They tried to get more food and they did not realize by the same token you have today's strikes which absolutely nonsense because what do they achieve? At that time it was even more ridiculous but they didn't realize that. They just tried and mobilize themselves and tried to better their condition.

04:24:02

But naturally it was in vain because what could they do? What could Rumkowski have done? Just because they demonstrated, he could not go to the Germans and say I want more food for my people, all right, and whatever we had we had to work for. So even

when I was interviewed by Ross (ph), at his interview with me, he said how do I feel today that I cooperated with the Germans. I didn't cooperate with the Germans. Just because we manufactured something the Germans could use, well, that was our livelihood. That was our bread. And a lot of people don't understand that. Okay, we made munitions parts. Okay we made something the German army could use, but did we have another choice? It was our work and our labor which saved us from complete starvation. What little we got but we got it because we worked for it, so there was no cooperation, you know, with the Germans. So that is a misunderstanding which still goes around in a lot of people. But they don't think. They just go with the masses. Why? Can you imagine that after the all documentation you see in public television and whatever, the Holocaust - - the American army when they went into these camps and made all these films of what they found and still people today can say denying that there was such a thing, that it is all propaganda. For what propaganda? Who won the war? The Germans and the Japanese. They didn't lose the war, they won it. The Marshall Plan lift them up until they are one of the biggest nations of the world. Am I right or wrong?

Q: Do you think that was a bad idea?

A: I don't know.

04:27:01

Q: Can you talk about the last few months when you think about 30,000 or 40,000 people left in the ghetto before the last deportations or are there more than that?

A: Well, it all depends on what timeframe are we talking. We're talking 1944. We're talking about the timeframe between January or February '44 to September, October. There might have been about 60,000 or 70,000 people left, and all the transports took place at that timeframe. We were taken into the hospital and we stayed there to be transported out of the ghetto. A few days before Rumkowski and Rosenblat (ph), you know, the police chief and his brother and a lot of other dignitaries went with the transport to Auschwitz. We however, went, as I mentioned, to Sachsenhausen and then wound up in Koenigswusterhausen in that factory. And only about 800 people were left to liquidate the ghetto and they came out smelling like a rose because they found all these treasures which were left behind in the ghetto. So, they came out fairly well-off and today they are all set. More power to them because better than the Germans.

Q: So there's a group that's left to liquidate, to tidy up everything?

A: Yes.

Q: And they can obviously accumulate because --

A: Whatever they found they could hide for themselves and then Germany was finished and then they had what they took. What they found they had for themselves.

Q: Now you and your father and Dora goes with Irene and her mother?

A: Yes.

Q: And David --

A: David and her father and my father, we went together.

Q: All of you were together?

A: We were separated. We went to Sachsenhausen and they went to Ravensbrück, and then very late, it must have been, we were liberated on the 27th of April in '45 so that must have been in the beginning of '45 where a transport of women were sent where we were into another barrack, separated from us.

04:30:14

We had no contact and -- except when we went to labor, but I was in the factory, so, but they worked outside with some men also. So in the evening they were separated again. And Eric Jakobovitch's son, who lives now in Florida, he was at that time five years old or six years old and he came with his mother also. But Irene and my sister, they did not come with that transport. They were left in Ravensbrück and they were liberated by the Russians, as we were also, in April. And just only maybe 50 or 60 women and children came where we were. The rest were left, yes, and we were liberated the 27th of April 1945 at 4:00 in the morning the Russians came. Before, I must tell you, a very bad thing happened. We had also air raid trenches, and every night the sirens, you know, they came during the night we were working and at day time they were bombing. So every time there was an air raid we had assigned places in these trenches. The first few alarms I went with my father and we went to the place where we were supposed to be, but then I said, "Papa, we are not going anymore." I was lying on the floor under the bunks. On this end of the barrack my father was on the other end of the barrack and every time a bomb or grenade hit we called each other to make sure that we were okay because we had 66 shrapnel in our barrack, and where we were supposed to be there were four young brothers. They came originally from Pabianice. They were in our spot where we were and a grenade hit them full blast and all four were wiped out. It would have happened to us if we would have been there. That's fate. That's fate and that's kismet.

Q: Where was David?

04:32:56

A: David, he was taken -- oh, yeah, one day towards the end I was sent to the outside commando and when we came back that late afternoon, 70 men had been taken away from the camp, amongst them my father-in-law, may he rest in peace and my brother-in-law, may he rest in peace. They were taken together with the others. They were sent on a march by foot. They were supposed to go up to the North Sea, put on a boat and as a final solution being bombed out and drowned. And my father-in-law, he was shot, after the war had ended already, the third of May. He couldn't walk anymore and they shot him. My brother-in-law was able to escape at that time. So, that was the last few days. And I had my violin. That's all I took. Of course I had a few hidden items there. And I went with my father after the fourth or the fifth day after we were liberated because I said "Let's not go out because they're still shooting." And I went with the Russian commando to organize bread and meat and wurst and whatever. I warned people, "Don't overeat, take it easy," and sure enough a few people overate and got sick and blew themselves up. And I went with father and we went across a field and there was a trunk and it was covered with blood and I could open it and I opened it up and there were money, German money, the Reichsmark, it must have been at least a million or more and I said to my father, "Papa, if this is here full of blood it's not worth anything because I feel that the Reichsmark will be nothing worth after the war and there will be new money." If I would have known that until 1948 these Reichsmarks were good and valid, I would have been a millionaire at that time. I could have bought whole blocks of houses. I didn't even touch it. I didn't even touch one piece of paper money and I walked off with my fiddle. I went over to the Elbe River and there was a Russian commander and I wanted to go across the river because the Americans were on the other side. That's where I wanted to be. I didn't want to be with the Russians.

04:36:01

So, I went to the commandant and asked him if I could go with the first transport. They were French, French prisoners of war. They were allowed to cross the Elbe River the next morning and I went to the commandant and asked I would like to go with them. So, I go back to my hometown. So he said, "You are a German, so you have to wait until the Germans can go." So we smuggled, my father and I smuggled ourselves into the group of French people and we made it to the ferry boat and made it across the river. We went to the Americans. I went to the commander there and I introduced ourselves -- what we are and where we are coming from -- and so he asked me a few questions, how is "father" in Hebrew, how is "mother" in Hebrew and, "What kind of brakhah¹⁴ do you say over this?" And so I answered him so he knew that, yes, and since then the big love affair between them and us and they wanted to give us everything. I had to help him. I was as, as a, an interpreter for a few days until we could freely travel until everything was clear and before we would get the first papers to travel. So, once I was very eager to go home to my hometown. So the commander gave me a jeep, papers I could go everywhere to get gas. They called it petrol at that time, and papers that I could travel and that I have

¹⁴ blessing (Hebrew.)

legitimately this jeep. And so, I started driving and everywhere I asked for my wife, whether somebody has seen my wife. And nobody knew. Nobody said anything. Then I finally came to Hannover, to my hometown, and I started working right away in the town hall and registered all the people who were coming from the various camps and I repatriated people like Poles to Poland and Czechs to Czech and I took them all with various passes to the various border towns and I left them there and I took the buses back home because they were all from the post office. In Germany all the buses are run by the post office. Everywhere I was I asked people, survivors whether they know or have heard of my wife. Then one girl, showed it to her, which she saw the picture of the dolly said Irene was bombed out. She's not alive anymore. And later on Irene told me that she was told that I was bombed out. So, it took us ten months after the liberation that she found me back in my hometown.

04:39:03

Q: Did you believe it when this woman told you that she was bombed out?

A: I didn't know. And, well, naturally I was, I was, I was very unhappy. You know, I could not get over it that easy until I saw her and then naturally you can imagine, OK, after ten months of not knowing whether she's alive or not and then we started our life back together and a year later we had our daughter, our first daughter, and then in '49 we finally immigrated to the United States.

Q: Was there a problem with your name?

A: And we came here and the first dilemma was at the pier. I was the chief interpreter on board the ship and every time the office was down below and every time I had to make the announcement on the deck I had to go all the way up and down and up and down. It was quite strenuous, but this way I earned my trip over to the United States. I didn't feel like I get charity. We came to the pier and I had to wait until the last man left the boat and get them through the customs. Finally, we were the last. I had three big boxes, plywood boxes, big ones, and a total of 11 items of luggage so I had quite, I had all our belongings and a custom agent came and asked me to open up everything. I had three packers packing my trunks at home in Germany before I left and here all by myself it was already about eight at night at that time. Aviva, our daughter, got very sick on board the ship. She had 104 fever and she was at eight. Irene and the child was taken off board the ship and went to the hospital. I didn't know what happened to my child. I didn't know where they were and here I was crying. It was November seven. It was a very raw day, misty, cold and I had to unpack and naturally they didn't find anything. Somebody who loves me showed them that I brought up a fortune and I didn't declare it, but everything I had there was on my declaration, OK? So, to make it short, I had to put everything back into the trunk, nail them down and here they took it away into storage and I went to look for my wife and my daughter and it was not before 10 at night in the Hotel Breslin on Broadway that I heard that my daughter is in the hospital on Metropolitan Island at that

time, the Metropolitan Hospital, and I had 20 dollars in my pocket which went away the next day for the taxi fare to the hospital.

04:42:30

So, that same night I went to the waterfront and I saw a sign "help wanted", and I went in there and the foreman was also of German descent so we spoke German so I got the job. What was the job? 75 cents an hour cleaning the presses. It was a spare box folding box factory on Tenth and -- I don't remember this, it was on 70th or 80th street somewhere -- in any case what was my job? To clean with kerosene the printing presses and the cutting presses. Three months later I was an a sample maker. I made samples and I made one patent for them also, which was patented for which I got a dollar because it was made under their name and their time so I got a dollar for it and then six months later I took over the night shift. I was a superintendent for the night shift. I worked there another three months and every time I wanted a raise they said don't rush the seasons, don't rush the seasons. So, I quit and went to Bulova. "What I am?" "An engineer." And I started up at Bulova, a watch company, and they found out I had pyrotechnic experience so I went, I got clearance, secret clearance and I went on the missile program. It was a very interesting job I started there and I was with Bulova close to 11 years, over 10 years. Then I was involved in the correspondence with another outfit, Daystrom, who had to take a bid on a big program also in the missile field, and they had heard of me because I had made myself a name already. So, they wanted me, and another firm, TRW, in Cleveland, they wanted me so I went for an interview and first to Cleveland.

04:45:03

I spent the whole day and at that time we were in Scranton, we lived in Scranton and then I went to Stratford in Connecticut to Avco. I spent a whole day being interviewed there and they made me an offer I could not refuse.

So since my contract at Daystrom had a two year option that I felt I should not take, I went to work for Avco Lycoming in Stratford for 20 years, and I went up to, to become a director of a department with about 400 people.

04:45:45

Q: Did you get a degree in engineering here?

A: Yes. I finished up here, yes.

Q: And where did you go to school?

A: In Germany and here.

Q: And here.

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me, what happened to Aviva? She was in the hospital. We didn't --

A: Aviva, thank heaven, she came through with it after eight days. We had papers to go to Norfolk. So we took Aviva when she was all right, we took her to Norfolk. We had to take a ferry from somewhere down in Maryland, I guess, to go across to Norfolk, Cape May, I guess, Cape May it was. And we come to Norfolk and they received us there with open arms and brought us to an apartment, and Irene and I felt like crying. That much dirt on the floor, a refrigerator with a motor on top yet, you know, like 1850. And we looked at her, thanked her for it, and all night long Irene and I with the razor blades we're scraping the floor. The next morning, I met the people I should work with and I came back home and I said, we really thanked them from the bottom of our hearts, but we don't stay here, this is not for us. We went to New York.

Q: What about your name change?

A: That was also when I asked for first papers, I was called to the Immigration Office, and they started interrogating me for about three hours, maybe a hundred questions, and I said, "What is this all about?" I didn't sit down, they didn't ask me to sit down, I was standing. They interrogated me. Every week I was called. Every week I heard the same questions standing up. This went on for over a year, almost a year and a half. One day I come, "Mr. Fuchs, sit down." So I sat down. "Now we can tell you, you have good friends." I said, "What happened?" "They said that you were a Gestapo man, and that you have a lot of people on your conscious. But now we found out that it's not you. There was a Gestapo man with your name, Kommisar Fuchs." He said, "They thought it's you. We give you the papers now, and we allow you to change your name through us so you don't have to go through court." So we were driving home with Irene and she saw Rhonda Fleming on a movie house. So she said, "Fleming, that's a good name, let's be Fleming, so we don't have to change our initials, Bernard Fuchs, Bert Fleming, it's the same initials." So that's the game by what we become Fleming.

Q: Did you realize what they were questioning you about?

A: Yeah, well, they asked me what I did, where I was, what my duties were, and always they shook their heads, and always the same questions. Then I naturally I figured that somebody must have said something. But what? And they told me that they thought that I'm the Gestapo Fuchs.

Q: Can you describe the situation that there was someone in Connecticut who was also making accusations against --

A: I was supposed to have a speech about my experience during the Holocaust in my Masonic Lodge, and it was publicized that I will be speaking on this subject, and the Master of the Lodge called me up and said, "Bert, we have to cancel you." There was some accusation made that about, probably, almost the same thing of what the other accusations were. When I heard this, I went to my Rabbi, Rabbi Stein, and I said, "Rabbi, this and this and this happened. This and this accusations were made, and I would like to take this woman for a deen Torah."¹⁵ That means for a rabbinical justice, a rabbinical court. So he investigated very thoroughly. He called Europe. He called the organizations here of the former Lodge people. He finally came to the end result and told that woman, "You better keep your mouth shut, because he can sue you for everything you have." And he told me, "Bert, don't worry about it. Everything is fine."

Q: Did you know this woman?

A: Yes.

Q: And she was in...

A: I knew her by name only. I didn't have any dealings with her. But Irene knew them very well. And, but she passed away a year after what, after that happened. So that's the other happening I had. But I didn't worry about it, because you know I have a clean conscience and now I'm lecturing high school -- Merkaz students I lecture, and also some various speech, and I'm very active in B'nai Brith. I'm four years now the vice president, and I'm a Mason, and I'm very active in the Synagogue as well their federation. So we live a very comfortable life, and happy, as much as we can be happy.

Q: What do the students ask you, when you talk to the young students? Do they have questions or --

A: They ask a lot of questions, yes. But I must say that they were almost mesmerized when I spoke to them. They followed every word, and afterwards they sent, every student sent me a nice little letter thanking me of and the impression they had and what they have learned, because I left them always a message.

Q: And what was that message?

A: The message is: remember what we tell you, because we are dying out. So you have to tell your children; they have to tell their children of what happened, and make sure that it will never happen again. Have your ears and eyes wide open. Rot the weed out as soon as you see it. Any other things you would like to know? Did we cover it, all the territory?

¹⁵ "Deen" means verdict or court decision (Hebrew); "Deen Torah" is a verdict based on the laws of a rabbinical court.

Q: I think we covered a lot of territory. Is there anything you would like to add?

A: I had a very successful career before I retired. I had a very interesting job. I was almost in the limelight, and I've harvested the fruits of what I'd seeded because I was very lucky in all my endeavors. I was a troubleshooter. I found the trouble, I corrected them, I proved it, and that's not an easy task, and I'm very happy and lucky that I achieved it. I went up the ladder, not by prodigy, not by anything else but my own ability. That's about it.

Q: Thank you very much, Bert.

A: Thank you. I hope the archive will learn something, whoever will listen or read of what had happened, and really make sure that nothing happens again of that type. All right?

Q: All right. Thank you.

A: Thank you.

End of Tape #2

Conclusion of Interview