

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Norman Belfer
May 31, 1996
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Norman Belfer, conducted by Joan Ringelheim on May 31, 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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NORMAN BELFER

May 31, 1996

Q: Good morning, Norman.

A: Good morning to you.

Q: Can you tell me your name and where you were born and when you were born?

A: My name is Norman Belfer. I was born in a town in Poland called Borisov [maybe Borjislav??](ph) on September 27th, 1922.

Q: And was your name Norman at birth?

A: At birth my name was Nachman. It's a Hebrew word.

Q: Can you tell me something about your family?

A: We were a family of -- we were seven children. I had four sisters and three brothers. I was the youngest, and my father and mother, also. My father was actually killed in Plaszow, shot by one of the SS-men with two other guys. My mother survived for a little while. She wasn't from Plaszow??, but she was sent -- when they evacuated all the women, she was sent to Auschwitz, and obviously she perished there.

Q: Tell me about your parents before the war. What was your father doing and your mother?

A: My father was an orthodox person, [but] he had an exporting business of feathers and down. Primarily we exported to Germany, America, Austria. European countries, but also to the United States. He was a very intelligent person and very good-natured person. Very charitable. So was my mother, very lovely. Great parents and great people.

Q: Did your mother work in your dad's business, as well?

A: She helped along, especially when there were purchases, I know. We had different places where we used to purchase the feathers and down, and this particular town where we lived, where I was raised as a youngster, we had offices and a warehouse. And she sometime would help decide what price to pay for this or that.

Q: And tell me about -- you had four sisters and two older brothers -- can you tell something about them? They were all older than you?

A: One of my married sister with two children, the oldest. She tried to escape and hide at some friends' -- her husband had some Gentile friends, and they rented a horse and wagon to take some belongings. And they were supposed to go to a certain town, Csarnoviets?, but for

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some reason they were intercepted in the middle of the night, and they were all -- my sister and her husband and two children were killed.

Q: What was your sister's name?

A: Wilma.

Q: Wilma. Was she the eldest of all of the children?

A: Yes.

Q: And what were the three other sisters?

A: My brother -- my other sisters? One was _____, she also was married and had two children. And, as a matter of fact, one of her -- three of my sisters wound up in Piotchów (ph) from the ghetto there in Plaszow. And when they evacuated PLaszow, they also -- all the women were, they took my sisters and my mother. They sent her to Auschwitz, but my sisters wound up to be -- I heard after the war they were sent to Gdansk [or] Gdingen, where they worked in a factory where they were manufacturing uniforms for the German Army. But only days before the Russians came to Gdansk, they were told they're going to be exchanged with German prisoners who are -- who were captured in Sweden, there in Sweden. And they were put on boats. They gave her a quart of bread, you know, and they put them on boats, you know. There over 10, 12,000 women. They torpedoed the boats. And how I found out is about less than a hundred women survived. They kept them to clean up. And one of these girls I met after the war in Italy, and she was a friend of my sister, who was there. She saw it all.

Q: What was family life like? You were the youngest, were you the pet of the family, or . . .

A: Yes, in a way I was. Yes.

Q: Were you spoiled?

A: Yes. To a degree. They say I was, I don't think so.

Q: Were the sisters married when you were -- were they that much older than you, or did you live all together?

A: Two sisters were married; two were single. Still, they were young. I was at that time, when the war broke out, I was just under 17.

Q: Did you family go on outings? Did you go on vacations together? Did you all feel very close together? Did you have good relationships?

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A: We had a very good relationship. We would go -- my parents would go to a resort area near Kriniza, it was a resort. And I remember they used to take me along, and my sisters or brothers -- I don't remember what they did exactly, you know. For recreation, I mean.

Q: There was big difference in age between you . . .

A: Yes.

Q: . . . and the next brother, so you didn't necessarily . . .

A: My next brother was nine years older than me.

Q: So you didn't play with the brothers and sisters, or did you?

A: I did play with my two younger sisters, yes. And my brothers, first of all, Arthur married when I was about -- my oldest brother -- he married when I was maybe eight or nine years old. And he lived in Kraków the whole time. My brother, Maurice, eventually also lived in Kraków, born in a town on the German/Polish border called Holshov?? (ph). In German they call it Koenigshuette. And my brothers were running -- we had two factories. One in Kraków and one in Holshov (ph). These factories were processing feathers and down for export, you know. I was a student. When I was of high school age, they had no high school in that town. So I lived with one of my married sisters in Kraków. I went to Hebrew high school for three years, and then the war broke out.

Q: Do you remember friends that you had during this period of time? Did you have girlfriends, because you were a teenager in high school?

A: Yes, I had many friends. In particular, I had one girlfriend. When the war broke out -- they lived in a different town, and they came to Borisov. And I was very fond of her, and she, as a matter of fact, when I -- I had a job. My parents arranged -- my father arranged a job for me to work for a German company, construction company. They felt if you worked for a German company, you may be -- it's a lot safer. So when I went there, there were also women and she was one of them. I knew her before, and she had also a sister there. And one day, it was just before Yom Kippur, you know. Just Erev Yom Kippur, they came, the SS men. Took all the women away. And certain men who didn't look fat or were old and some young ones. As a matter of fact, they also -- you know, they had lines of men and women, here and here and here and here. In other words, they sorted. And they sorted me out to go to with the ones who eventually went to Treblinka. But one of the supervisors, I think it was an engineer, used to bring clothes to all the SS men, to the SS men who were sorting. Oh, he's a very good worker. We were building barracks, so he put me back in the middle of the ones, you know, of the one who eventually survived.

Q: Norman, I want to get back a little bit before the war.

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A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember hearing things about Hitler taking over, the Nazis taking over in Germany when you were growing up, starting in '33 and afterward?

A: Yes, we did hear.

Q: Were you worried? Was the family worried? Were you

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wondering what was . . .

A: I remember only one thing. That in school we were -- they were teaching us how to handle rifles, you know. Not where I went, but many high schools. And there was a saying going around, "We are so strong, we won't give a button," you know. That was -- if Germany ever comes, we won't give a button. But when Germany occupied, they said they didn't give a button; they gave the whole uniform. That was the saying, yeah. They actually ran over Poland within three to five days, it depends on where you lived at that time.

Q: Was there a lot of anti-Semitism when you were growing up?

A: I would say yes. I had an experience, it's coming back to me, when I went to first grade and I was about six or six and a half years old. And after school, we were walking. I was walking with a couple of other kids. They told me, you know, "You're Jewish?" I said, "Yes." "You killed our God." I said, "What do you mean?" They said, "Yes, you did." So I went home, and I told my mother. She said, "Don't pay attention to that. That's not true." So that's the experience I had when I was very young. In the future when I was in high school or they call it Gymnasium, we had to wear uniforms. All private and public students had to wear certain uniforms, but you had a number on your left sleeve, you know. An insignia, which told you - - people would know if you went to one particular school or another different school. So I remember in the summertime you wanted to go certain places, over to the river, the Vistula river, and we had the number removed, you know, the number that was snapped on, you know, not to show that you came from the Jewish Gymnasium, you know, the Jewish high school.

Q: Was that unusual or is that typical for Jewish students to go to Jewish Gymnasium?

A: Only a certain amount.

Q: Did it cost a fair amount of money?

A: Yes. I don't know how much, but that's where I learned some English, you know.

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Q: Really?

A: Yes. It started there. As a matter of fact, they taught German and English and Hebrew. And Polish, of course.

Q: Did you like school?

A: Yes, I was a very good student.

Q: What did you like best if you had special subject?

A: I liked math and I liked history and languages. I was very good in languages.

Q: Tell me what you remember most about your mother and your father when you were growing up. Is there any incident that comes to mind or feeling?

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A: I can only say that the children were the most important to them. They wanted their children, obviously, to be well and well educated. And it was a very happy home. As a matter of fact, my father was successful by Polish standards at that time, and he built a house in Borisov, which was a two-story. It was the tallest, you know, -- tallest house, it was either two or three stories. It was two stories and like an attic, which there was some rooms there, you know. So they called it the skyscraper. It was a very tiny town. We were very respected in the community, and my father was very active in the community, you know. As a matter of fact, we had a telephone, number two; the police was one, and we were number two. That shows how many telephones you had in town.

Q: Did you go for walks with your father? Did you talk a lot with him, and similarly with your mother? Was there private conversations?

A: Yes. But I can't recall exactly. My father would always try to find out what I was taught in school and how much I -- how much knowledge I have acquired, you know. He would test me every once a while.

Q: And would your mother do something similar?

A: Yes, but more my father. My mother was always busy with, you know, keeping the house in order and preparing meals. And when the married children would come home, it was like a big holiday with a big celebration.

Q: Was she a good cook?

A: Yes, very good.

Q: Do you remember anything specific that you really loved that she made for you?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Do you remember any specific food that you really loved?

A: Yes. For breakfast she used to make rice, you know, and butter and milk and sugar. And she had baked special little cakes that she filled with blackberries and stuff like this. This was -- usually she would do it Friday for the Shabbat, you know. And other dishes, gefillte fish and all that. She was a very sweet woman, but she was not a person that would like to travel, you know, except they would go to that resort, as far as I remember. And they were come to Kraków, of course. My father very often stayed in Kraków. Most of the time, he would go there on a Sunday and come back Friday.

Q: So your mother had simpler tastes than your father, you think?

A: No, no. Women were different, you know. They did not take -- did not play the same role as men.

Q: What do you remember when the Germans came in? What do you remember about the beginning of the war?

A: I remember very well, unfortunately. What happened, I believe on the third day of the war, the Germans -- we heard there was shooting all around, you know, from distances. So my parents decided we should go -- we had a warehouse, and also my sister and husband from Kraków came to town, to that small town. And also Arthur's -- my brother, my oldest brother's wife and three children came also to Borisov (ph).

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And during that time, the Germans when they came in, we were in that warehouse, and we had steel doors. We locked ourselves up. We had some neighbors and friends there, you know. The Germans came in town, and they start pounding these doors, you know, shooting. And they say to come out or else. "Heraus, heraus." Once they started shooting very heavily, we decided we'll go out because eventually they'll -- when we came out, they started kicking us, beating us, you know, to run, they showed us, to run to the square, the little square there in town. Only maybe a block or two blocks away. We had to run; even the little children we had to carry. Some houses we saw were burning, put on fire. Because wherever they didn't want to open doors and so on, they sometimes poured gasoline or whatever, and a couple of bullets ignited. When we were on that square, three people -- I don't know who they were -- they shot in front of everybody. And they left, you know, they left. So my parents decided not to go back to our house, we should go to the church. There was a church nearby. We felt the church will not be bombed. We were afraid of bombings. We all went to the church, and

the priests there recognized my family. And they said, "You Belfers, you Jews, get out." They pushed us out. The other Jewish people, they told them -- they pushed all Jewish people out. Even Gentile people, or course, who had never seen a Jew wanted to be there. So we left. So we didn't go to our house. We had an uncle who lived like on the outskirts of town. He also had a warehouse. We were there one night, and they were shooting all night in the area. We were afraid -- everything was on fire. We saw fires and so on. Then the Germans, of course, occupied. They took over the police station, you know. And they also -- some of the Polish policemen became -- they started working for the Germans, you know. It was quiet for a little while.

Q: Can I go back a moment?

A: Yes.

Q: When you're with your sisters and the kids and your mother and your father, as well as -- I mean, pretty much the whole family is together?

A: Yes, except Arthur. Arthur was -- he left Poland to the United States on a business trip. And the reason he expected to leave after the Jewish holidays in September, you know. But he says -- he said that because it looks, the Germans, who knows what will happen. Let at least one of us be out, you know. So he left. He couldn't take his wife and children. They had passports, but he was lucky to get his wife and children out. What happened is in New York he met a friend who was also in the feather business, by the name of Rudy Ehrenhaus (ph), and they became partners. And Arthur was very upset. Who knows what's happening to my family in Poland, you know. So Rudy says, "You know, let's meet with my father."

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His father was a diplomat from the German government, not at that time, but before the World War II. And his father said, "You know, I have friends. Let me talk to a few friends. Maybe we can do something." So he met with the General Consul or Ambassador or Nicaraguan government. And he convinced them, he paid a certain amount of money, and they -- my brother had a picture of his wife and three kids. They said we can give you only passport. So they superimposed the wife and three kids on one picture, you know. And they sent the passport to Poland, and they had a problem finding, but it was delivered, I believe -- I'm not sure whether it was my mail or by messenger, the Nicaraguan government -- from the Nicaraguan government or consulate. Once she got the passport, she was very -- we weren't sure whether she should go or not go. Because that time was miserable, but it wasn't hot, like, they weren't killing people on the street. They may beat you up or they may have arrested some or -- whenever they arrested or shot somebody, they said oh, because there was -- some Germans were killed, you know, in the neighborhood or whatever. They always had excuses, you know. Should never happen. But you still could live, you know. Food was available, you know. Not everything, but nobody starved. But my parents didn't know -- were told you have to do what you think is right, you know. We would like all to go with

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you if we could. She went -- had to go to the police station, she's a Nicaraguan citizen, and the children -- they said they can't do anything. You have to go to Berlin. So they gave her a pass to go to Berlin. They went by train to Berlin. They came to Berlin, they stayed in some hotel, and she went to the German authorities to get her exit visa, you know, to Nicaragua.

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[short interruption]

Q: I think we have to stop and change the tape, so we'll finish the story. Norman, could you continue the story about your sister-in-law Rochelle (ph), she was in Berlin?

A: Right. When she was in Berlin, she went to some agency where they give you exit visas, but they kept refusing. And only after about six months being in Berlin, they finally gave her an exit visa. Berlin was bombed during that period. They had to run to shelters, you know. The exit visa was to Portugal, and from Portugal they went by freight boat, you know, to Cuba. And my brother was waiting for them in Cuba. That's -- that was a very difficult trip, I understand.

Q: Did you know that she was safely in Cuba?

A: We didn't know anything after she left Berlin. From Berlin we had communication. After that I don't think we had any communication.

Q: That must have been a difficult decision for her?

A: Yes, very difficult. What is very unusual, she was a blonde woman. Didn't speak one word of Spanish, you know, and they let her through, just like that.

Q: And now the whole family is in Poland? The rest of the family is in Poland?

A: Yes.

Q: Before you started that story, I was asking you about what was happening during the initial bombing when you were all trying to hide in that church with the children. How were the children reacting, the children of your sisters?

A: We had to calm them, they didn't understand what was going

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on. They were very young. But three of them are in the United States, three of the children now. One is a graduate attorney from Harvard Law School, and he's a very successful businessman. And the two daughters are very lovely, very well educated, very successful.

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They have families, all have families.

Q: You went to your uncle's house because your parents did not think you should go back to your house?

A: Yes.

Q: What happened then?

A: The reason we didn't go to our house was too large and too obvious, you know, we felt. We didn't want to be -- also, my father also was very well known in town. We just felt to go to a different place. But after a while, we did move back. We did go back.

Q: So about how long did you stay with your uncle, do you think?

A: Only a few days.

Q: And then you went back to the house?

A: Then we went back to the house.

Q: And was it fairly safe at this point?

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A: It was quiet, didn't know. What they did is when they occupied a city, they left only a skeleton of SS men of Gestapo or whatever. And the Polish police became their helpers, so called, whatever. They worked together.

Q: And how bad was it? Did it go back to what seemed normal to you?

A: It was almost normal, yes. Almost normal. I remember we used to go for walks, you know, with my friends and sisters, you know. My friends. On the street we lived on, we used to walk all the way to the end of town, you know, and into the areas that had agriculture, you know, gardens and so on. Orchards. Used to walk. In the beginning it was -- we didn't know how bad it's going to turn out. Nobody believed. Why would they -- people of military age certainly may have been more skeptical, but young or old or woman or children, nobody felt that they were going to touch anyone.

Q: Did you go back to Kraków to school or was school finished?

A: School was finished. Couldn't go back to school. Yet to travel, you needed a special permit. You couldn't just travel. The police had to clear you.

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Q: Did your married sister who was in Kraków come to your parents' house also?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: So you were all together?

A: Just before the war broke out. When they heard it's going to be hot, war is imminent. All from the big city they came, yeah.

Q: So what did you do then? There's no school. What was your life like in the beginning?

A: It was very difficult, but you were only thinking at that time how to survive, you know. Everything else was not relevant. We had several families living in our house, you know. The children and all that, but we were happy that we can -- we hope we will be able to live through the war.

Q: What was it like to get food?

A: You can get food, but it was more expensive, you know. And you can get everything, but you can get enough food not to starve.

Q: And was your father's business immediately confiscated, or did he have it for a while?

A: Immediately confiscated. They put German trustees, they called them. Like a German work force, the name escapes me here. "Treuhaendler," or something, like a trustee, yeah.

Q: And was your father able to go to work there at all?

A: No, my father never went there because he wanted to stay with -- take care of the -- once everything was confiscated, nobody was to go there. However, one of my brothers, Maurice, went there. I don't remember why, but it could very well be that they asked him to come, you know. And he felt by going maybe he will get certain benefits, you know. In a way he did get certain benefits. When Borisov (ph) was -- all the Jews were taken away, you know, they didn't know where they were going. They loaded them up on these trucks. They said they're going to labor camps. But why were you taking little children and so on? You couldn't -- you wouldn't want to leave the children there. So everybody took their children. Some people refused to go, they were shot. And some houses, you know, where people were hiding, they burned the house down. So everybody had to leave. This happened the same time that I said the day before Yom Kippur when they evacuated the camp where I worked, which maybe 10 kilometers or 20 -- 15 kilometers away. They took all the Jews out of that town. My parents knew something is going to happen. They had prepared, you know, with some friends who were good friends of ours, Christians. And only maybe a couple of miles they lived outside town. They had a big orchard. What they did is, they were afraid -- at that time we had only three sisters, two children, my parents, you know. And this Polish family, they planned for

us if everything -- because we heard that certain towns were being -- all the Jewish people were being taken away. That my parents decided and my three sisters and two children to go to that place. And what they did they built a bunker underground in the orchard, and they stayed there for several weeks, maybe two months. They couldn't take it anymore because it started to get very cold. At night sometimes they would go into their basement in the house, you know. But they were afraid, the Polish family was very afraid if they were caught, they would be killed, too. So this family was getting paid every week or every two weeks. My father had a thought. He says if he will pay them, who knows, one day they may get tired of them and deport them and so on. So we had a manager in Kraków, that's where my brother knew a Polish gentleman who worked for us for many years. He would go there every 10 days, every week, and pay a certain amount of money. We used it to buy food and whatever.

Q: You mean your brother would go back and forth or this man would go?

A: No, this man would go. He was a Christian person, so he had a little freedom. In addition, because he worked in the feather plant, he says he's going to buy feathers, you see. That area had a good production of feathers. So it was a good excuse. But after a while, one day that manager -- one night that manager would come at night or early morning. Late night or early morning. My parents would complain very heavily, they said they can't take it anymore. And the ghetto, there were no Jews around that area anymore, and no Jews in Kraków except in the ghetto. And if they found you outside the ghetto, you were -- they would shoot you or kill you, whatever. My brother, Maurice, was successful with this German trustee. He told the German trustee, "You know, you look like a very nice man. You've been treating me right. Can you do me a favor?" "What is the favor?" He says, "I have parents and sisters in hiding. Can we -- how can they

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get into the ghetto?" Because the ghetto was quiet. Food was scarce, but people survived. People would live in -- a family would live in one room, or they slept on the floors under the table, on top of the table. No room, you know. This particular German trustee said, "You know, I have friends. We can bring you to the ghetto, but it will cost a certain amount of money." So my brother says, "I don't have a lot of money, but I can give you some -- and I have some jewelry." You know, he sent a truck and two SS men in the middle of the night, and they arranged also -- how you call it -- code. If the Polish family would see a German military truck he should have -- he had a flashlight to light so they'll know where to stop. They took my parents and my sisters and two children to Kraków to the ghetto. This must have been sometime in October, November you know.

Q: In 1942?

A: Let's see. It's '40, yes.[thinking] '42.

Q: Do you think your brother took a chance by talking to this German?

A: Definitely did. But the reason he -- the way I understand it, took a chance, they all took bribes. Not openly, but they took bribes. As a matter of fact, the ghetto could get almost any food you wanted, but you had to pay very highly. How the German guards, if you paid them off, they let certain people daily, they will bring in food.

Q: So it was a big black market?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Now, Norman, prior to this because in some ways we've glossed over almost two years.

A: Right.

Q: What are you -- before you get to that camp or that company where they made barracks, what were you doing? Were you in forced labor for a year or two?

A: Yes, I was. What happened in Poland, we had in the wintertime, we had a lot of snow. Very cold. And the German trucks couldn't ride on the roads, so they had to mobilize all

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the young people in that town. They said we need a thousand or 500, whatever. And we had to go. They kept us there from early morning till late at night, while it was still light. And also in the summertime, the roads were all -- after the winter, the roads were damaged, so we worked on the roads to fix up the roads. You had to have volunteers. They would call up -- there was a Jewish community little center, you know, around the synagogue. They would call up the leaders there and say we need so many men. So we had to organize and send them so many men. At one time, they also said we have to have so many kilos of gold to save your town, so they collected jewelry, whoever had silver to buy them off, you know. It may have bought them off for a week or a month, you know. That's what happened.

Q: So when you were working on the roads, you were shoveling snow, and then repairing roads?

A: Then we were patching up holes, cleaning rubble, or all that leftover, you know.

Q: Now, did you go back to your parents' home at night?

A: Yes, at night. Yes.

Q: So you were working what? Ten hours a day? 12 hours a day?

A: I would say 10, 12 hours, yeah.

Q: How tough was this?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: How tough was this to do this work?

A: It was very tough, but as long as you feel they didn't kill, you know, nothing was wrong.

Q: Were you ever beaten?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Were you ever beaten on these . . .

A: Yes. During that period, I've been kicked and so on. Nothing severely, but later years, yes. I'll tell you later.

Q: Were you afraid when you were in this -- in the forced labor, were you afraid of what could happen? Was there a lot brutality or did it seem random to you?

A: Was a lot of brutality, but when you were in the camp already, they managed to take, make you weak and took your will away because you couldn't fight. You couldn't -- you had to look straight and . . .

Q: Are you talking about where you were working in the barrack manufacturer, right?

A: Yes. You had to show, you know, you are willing to work and you're not resentful, or you're not, you know -- you have to keep a straight face.

Q: Explain something to me.

A: Yes.

Q: You were working on the forced labor for almost two years, right?

A: Right.

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Q: Your parents are at home?

A: Yes.

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Q: This is before they go into that hiding place?

A: Yes.

Q: And your parents think that maybe if they get you into a German factory work of some kind .
..

A: Yes.

Q: . . . that things will be better. You'll be inside working.

A: Yes.

Q: Yes?

A: Yes.

Q: Now, how did they arrange this? Who did -- how did they know who to go to, or was it obvious at that time?

A: It was obvious. There were people in town who made, you know, if -- you had to pay a certain amount of money. And there hundreds, young people in particular, men and women, they felt by working there they might you. When I say money, I don't where they paid \$100 or \$1,000, I don't know. So they took you.

Q: So there were men and women working in this factory?

A: Yes.

Q: And you lived there?

A: Yes, in a barrack.

Q: In a barrack?

A: Yes. They had barracks.

Q: They did have manufactured barracks, or was that . . .

A: We were -- they did build some barracks, but primarily what we did, unload railroad cars. Different materials, cement, you know, lumber and so on. Then I became a so-called carpenter cutting lumber and nailing, you know, some wood down to make these barracks, yeah, these structures.

Q: Would you consider this another form of forced labor? You didn't . . .

A: Positively, because they didn't pay us anything. There's no payment. They fed us -- also, there they starved, they fed us twice a day. In the morning, you got some -- a quarter of bread and some soup, like water, you know. And then when we came home at night, you had just the soup. Some potato peels also.

Q: Now, did you go to work for this firm in this camp-like atmosphere . . .

A: Yes, yes.

Q: . . . at about the same time did your parents go into hiding?

A: Before.

Q: Before?

A: Before. Several weeks or a couple of months at least before.

Q: Now, when your parents -- are you able to keep communication with your parents in spite of the fact that this is a difficult situation?

A: It was very difficult. I risked my life to see on two occasions. Two, maybe three occasions.

Q: Can you explain those occasions and why you did that?

A: Yes. Two reasons. One, I wanted to see them whether they are well and so on. So how I did it, and I had a cousin there, too, in camp. And on one occasion, yeah, he came along. We -- early morning, they had a sentry there, and they had reflectors, you know. Big lights which were rotating. So we watched as the light weren't there. Ran out of the barrack, and there were forests not far. Into the forest and walked, so through the forest and through the fields and it was a walk maybe an hour, I don't remember, or an hour and a half. That's how I saw my parents, but my cousin I didn't

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want him to come to see my parents. I didn't want him -- he would stop like a mile before, lay in the field. I was afraid if I'm caught -- if we're both caught and they torture us, "What are you doing here?" I felt I would be able to take it, but I didn't want to risk him, too. So I would see my parents, and they said, "It's good you're working there, but we have it very difficult here," and so on. Another time I went with my cousin, my parents said, "We're running out of money. We have buried" -- my sister had a house, a small house, you know. She had buried some coins, some gold coins, some jewelry just in case, you know. So I went there with him, we dug -- in order to get it out, it was in a jar, you know. And when it came

out, there was a Polish policeman, so we stopped. He said, "Hands up. Hands up." And he came close to us, but he didn't have the gun, he had a rifle. When we saw he had a rifle, we actually -- I don't know how my strength -- we both jumped on him and dropped him. And we took the rifle, we threw it away, and we ran into the fields. That's how it happened. Went back to camp.

Q: Did you knock him out?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Did you knock him out?

A: We may have, because he fell down. He was so unexpected, he didn't hear. I believe I kicked him in the stomach, and my cousin pushed him, you know. I knew we were going to be killed, so, you know, you -- I didn't have the strength, what you call it. When you're really in danger, you gain extra strength.

Q: It's interesting that you both did the same thing at the same time.

A: Yeah.

Q: Without even talking.

A: Yeah, that's a reaction.

Q: You went to your sister's house?

A: Yeah.

Q: Not your parents' house? And where . . .

A: Well, the stuff was in my sister's house, because our house was too obvious, you know.

Q: And where was her house again?

A: Only a few blocks away.

Q: And then you ran back to the camp?

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A: Yes.

Q: And did you get -- did you get these coins to your parents?

A: Yeah. I didn't go back to the -- no, I didn't go back to the camp. I went back to the Polish family. And I said, you know, since my parents are in Kraków, I'd like to go there, too. And I didn't tell them why, and I said I wanted to borrow some clothes. They had a son about my height, and I borrowed clothes, looked like a farmer, you know. It was in the winter, and I went by train, you know, from ___???_____ -- that's where the place -- Kraków. When I got off the train -- I bought a ticket and everything -- when I got off the train, they asked for identifications. They didn't ask me. You know, they didn't ask everybody.

Q: All right. Let's stop and we'll take a break.

A: Yes.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: All right. Norman, I just wanted to make sure of something.

A: Sure.

Q: After you went to your sister's and got the coins and you hit this guy, and you and your cousin never went back . . .

A: Never went back. You see, there were fields right in the back of my sister's house, you know. Corn growing. So we ran for maybe a hundred yards, you know. We ran to that and we hid, and we were crawling, actually, for a while until we were far away. Nobody caught us.

Q: But by the time you went back to that farmer, your parents and your sisters had all gone, and your father and mother had all gone to Kraków?

A: Yes.

Q: They had all been to the Kraków Ghetto?

A: Yes.

Q: So you went and asked for these clothes, they were not there?

A: No, they were not.

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Q: Did you pay him for these clothes?

A: No, no. They treated me very well.

Q: So you didn't resent the fact that they wanted some money?

A: I didn't know that. I learned that later, I didn't know that at all.

Q: So how long did you hide out in the fields before you thought it was safe. . .

A: To go?

Q: Yeah.

A: I would say we were there -- it was very early morning, so we were there for maybe a couple of hours. But we were crawling like, you know.

Q: Now, what were you dressed like before you took on these farmer's clothes?

A: They had work clothes there to wear, you know.

Q: So they were identifiable?

A: Yes.

Q: So what did you now look like when you took this train? What did you have on? Do you remember?

A: I had a very heavy shirt, you know, pants, very heavy pants. And a jacket, you know, and I had a winter hat, you know.

Q: Did you use the coins that you had to get on the train?

A: No, no.

Q: You didn't have to pay?

A: Yeah, I paid. I had some money you had to pay. Not coins, no. The coins, as a matter of fact, I hid them around in my socks, you know. There weren't many, but few, you know. Everything was important.

Q: But you didn't have an identification card?

A: No.

Q: And no one asked you . . .

A: Nobody asked.

Q: . . . when you went to the train station?

A: No. And even more than that, after that I knew Kraków well from the railroad station. I went to the next trolley car, and two German SS men or Gestapo -- I couldn't tell -- they had people waiting for the trolley. They also asked for identification. About the middle of the -- they were on a motorcycle, they asked a few people and then they left.

Q: So you were very lucky?

A: Yes.

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Q: Now, did you . . .

A: My hair was light, light brown, you know. And I had blue eyes, so maybe that helped, you know, I don't know.

Q: And you spoke fluent Polish?

A: Yes. But if somebody's suspect, they could identify right away. Especially if it's a male, they really -- that's the first thing.

Q: What did you do then when you got to Kraków?

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A: I went by trolley car up to a point, and then I walked to our factory, you know. Before I went to the factory, I went to the manager's house or apartment. He was only a block or two from our factory, and he knew who I am. I said, "We have to hide. You have to find a place to hide me." He said, "Stay here until it gets dark." Then he took me to the factory, to where the warehouse. Made room, so between bags, you know. So I knew he would bring me food every day. I was there for several weeks. Maybe five, six weeks.

Q: And what were you doing? Just sitting?

A: Nothing, I was reading.

Q: Where did you get the books from?

A: He would bring me stuff.

Q: Really?

A: Yeah. I just -- I knew if I go out, because even I couldn't go to the ghetto. If I go to the ghetto, go out, you know. My brother would have to make other arrangements. Didn't want to take a chance. So what my brother did, he met some people who were smuggling people out of Poland. And you have to be of a certain age, you know. I was the proper age, military age. What they did is they would bandage you up and put an Italian uniform, put you on a train. The train stopped in Italy, in Kraków, from the Russian front. And that's how people got out. Not many, but some. Unfortunately, I didn't -- I couldn't make that. The reason I couldn't make it, while I was lying in that warehouse, I got a dream. I woke already, a neighbor of mine, of ours in Borisov, she always loved me. She was a woman of the -- a childless woman, and she really -- I was like -- she treated me like I was her child. And she came to me in my dream, says, she called me "Nauchmush, Nauchmush, don't go there. Don't go. Don't go." She begged me, "Don't go." And I woke up, and I said I don't know what to do because my brother had arranged -- you know, I've said it since -- her name was

Golda. I'm not going to go. The two guys who were supposed to pick me up -- this was early morning, you know, it was at dawn -- they were caught next to our office, you know. And they were shot on the spot. One was a Jewish guy, one a Gentile. And I found that out later, so I was just lucky.

Q: Did you ever have such a dream that -- a premonition type dream in your life?

A: I had another dream later after the war, and I'll tell you later about it. Then the manager would come around there, and sometime my brother, you know, during working hours. I said -- they told me about it. I said, "I want to go to the ghetto. I want to go. I cannot stay here forever, you know." Going out, or maybe you can find a place where they will keep me or whatever. I said, "The whole family is in the ghetto, I don't want to be here. I have a place I want to go, the ghetto." So this -- when my brother went to work, he had one or two SS men with him. They had like two or three people walking with him to the place of business. He told one of the SS men, he felt maybe he could --something, through that German trustee, maybe he can help. He has a brother who lives out of town, and he's in the forest, but he would like to come to the ghetto. Can you help him? He said, "Of course." So one late afternoon after work, my brother told the guy that I arrived, I came here the other night or last night. He paid him something, you know. He took me to the ghetto. I gave him another - you know. I had no clothes or anything, but I wore the same stuff that this fellow in the Polish family gave me, you know.

Q: So this was December of '42, you think?

A: Yes.

Q: And can you explain again, where -- is your brother living in the ghetto and working outside or . . .

A: Yes. He was living in the ghetto, working outside.

Q: And where was he working?

A: In the feather factory.

Q: The same one? The same feather factory?

A: The same feather factory. They needed -- they didn't know much how to process and manage. So they called him back. And he thought by doing that he would be saved, you know.

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Q: Now, when these two guys picked you up, how did they treat you? Or the one SS, I don't

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know who picked you up. Was it one?

A: One.

Q: One person.

A: Well, he said, "Where do you want to go?" I say, "I'd like to go to the ghetto." "Jawohl." That's all he said.

Q: That was it? That was the extent?

A: Yeah, that's the whole conversation.

Q: And how did he get you in? What was that process like?

A: How?

Q: Yeah. I mean, you walked to ghetto?

A: We walked.

Q: But getting inside?

A: Once you were -- they were all friends, you know. In other words, these guys who took people out of the ghetto to work outside the ghetto were almost all the same guys. They knew all the -- at the gates were friends. All the gate watchers, you know.

Q: So there was no process?

A: No.

Q: You didn't then get an ID?

A: Nothing.

Q: Nothing? Was there a -- well, let me ask you, what happened when you first walked in? Did you know where your parents were and your family?

A: I knew it because my brother told me.

Q: And where were they living?

A: I don't remember where, but they were living, yeah, with a relative who was in the ghetto before. They were originally from Kraków, and their name was Anisfeld. We moved in

there, and there was another family, there were three families living there.

Q: And what was the space like?

A: The space was -- I remember the two bedrooms and a living room, which was made a -- and even next to the bedrooms you slept on the floor, you know. And they had something else when we came, there was not enough room to lay down, so there was on an upper floor was like enclosed veranda, you know. Balcony. We somehow managed, whatever, we slept there, you know. And there was food, we ate, you know, everybody ate together, you know. We helped each other.

Q: What was the mood like? The mood of people?

A: The mood? The mood was very sad, but, you know, you get used to it. You know you're always in danger, you almost -- well, getting used to it is very painful, but if you really took it to your heart, you couldn't survive. You had to be very disciplined and very strong mentally, I think. Because many couldn't do it; many [not] were fighting back. They didn't care if they got shot.

Q: What did you think of those people?

A: It's hard to say. It's hard to say. It's just -- they just couldn't make it. I was in a situation once like that almost at the end of the war. I gave up. Like I say, they didn't feed us for four or five days. And we were on these barges, you know, from Melk to Linz. Then we had to walk I don't know how many kilometers, but we walked at least two or three days without food. So it was called the March of Death. I didn't even know, but I heard that after the war, you know. They did this in many camps. I don't know, half or three-quarters didn't make it. We were so hungry that I couldn't believe it. I personally ate grass. At night we had to lay down in the field. We had no water, nothing. It was -- you prayed you're dead. You didn't care.

Q: Did you then understand better the people who committed suicide in the ghetto?

A: Yes. Still I felt sorry for them. You see mostly young people.

Q: Young people who committed suicide?

A: Yes. And older. But older, if you are 35, 40 is old. All young people who could work.

Q: How old were your parents when you went -- approximately at this point?

A: My father was killed when he was 55 in front of the whole town. I'm sorry for breaking down.

Q: When did that happen? Was that in Kraków?

- A: In Plaszow. And my father was an organizer of the brush factory, he and a brush manufacturer had a brush factory and several other factories in Russia. A metal factory and others that I'm not -- wasn't even aware of. Because you couldn't walk from one place to another. You could only walk where you work and to your barrack.
- Q: Let's stay in Kraków for a little bit, because those three months are very significant. Were your parents glad that you came to the ghetto to be with them?
- A: Yes.
- Q: Was that helpful?
- A: Yes, because they felt that outside the ghetto was more dangerous. There they didn't kill people unless somebody committed something crazy or if you smuggle in something. I know I remember two young boys maybe 12 years -- 12, 13 years old, of a friend of ours. They looked very Gentile, you know. They would get out of the ghetto, smuggle. There are ways of getting out. Either the guards let you out if they know you, because they went out to buy food and bring food and they would sell it. Maybe they gave the guards something, or I know of cases where they went through the sewer lines, you know. Which I have a long story on that I'll tell you. They
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- would get out and come back and bring food in, you know. But these two boys were caught and shot.
- Q: Were there actions in the ghetto so that the Germans just came in and just took people out, and do you remember anything like that before March?
- A: I don't remember.
- Q: Did your parents talk about that, that they were coming in and just taking people and shooting them or taking people out of the ghetto?
- A: I didn't know, I was not aware of any. Once you were in the ghetto, you didn't walk any place. You stayed in. Only if you had to buy some food, you know where to, so . . .
- Q: So there was not work in the ghetto?
- A: No. Except they had some factories -- they had certain factories like the brush factory started in the ghetto. The reason it started, the Germans were short of brushes. And there was a shortage of bristle, and there was a brush manufacturer there who met with my father and my brother. And my father said, "You know, I heard there is a shortage of brushes. Maybe you

should make it from feather quills. You know, they have large feathers, smaller feather, medium sized. You can make different density or softness or hard." So they employed 200 or 300 people. The same was organized in Plaszów, they had a big barrack and that's where they made brushes.

Q: So did you father organize it in the ghetto? Did he oversee it?

A: He and a brush man. His name was Saltz.

Q: S-a-l-t-z?

A: Yes, or S-a-l-z, you know, I don't know. I don't remember his first name. Maybe Jonas, but I'm not positive. And we felt that if we -- in the ghetto and if you work and they'll be needing you, they will not touch you. So the whole family subsequently worked there.

Q: How are your sister's kids at this point? How are they getting along in terms of not having quite as much food as they would have under normal conditions? What was that like for them, do you remember?

A: The kids were fed first. They were not, you know -- the parents would starve, but they would feed the kids. And the kids knew from five years, six years old not to yell, not to

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cry, not to -- they were brought up in such an atmosphere.

Q: And are there two children with you all? Is that . . .

A: The two children were in the ghetto, yes. When they evacuated, when they circled the ghetto, you know, evacuated the ghetto . . .

Q: You're talking about in March of '43?

A: Yes, March 13th, yeah. Children were taken away, and old people looking old were taken away -- I mean, on a different -- they had lines of people. Ones on one side and on the other side. Nobody knew why they do that. Maybe one goes to one camp, another camp or another ghetto. We didn't know. The children and women, they took away. They were all taken to Auschwitz or whatever, or Treblinka. And some were shot, also, in the ghetto.

Q: Did you see that?

A: I saw, yeah. Yeah. I saw people lying that had been shot, yeah. Had gun . . .

Q: Was the ghetto divided into two parts? There was an A Ghetto and a B Ghetto?

A: I don't remember. I don't know.

Q: And were your sister's children taken during this evacuation?

A: One little boy was in the hospital. He had a very bad cold or whatever. And when they encircled, they actually threw the children out through the windows. Just like that. This boy may have been three or four or five. I don't remember the ages. He had a sister who was seven or eight. We -- when I say "we," my parents or my sister and her husband -- she has a husband living together, too. My sister's husband. We dressed her up and they made her up and gave her high heels and it was cold there, a big coat. And they smuggled her into the Plaszów.

Q: Your younger sister?

A: No, my niece.

Q: Your niece?

A: Yes. But she stayed there only for a while. Then they took and rounded up the children, you know.

Q: What do you remember about March 13th and 14th when they were liquidating Kraków and a certain group . . .

A: Yes.

Q: What do you remember what it was like, the sounds, the smells? Was it chaotic? Frightening?

A: It was very calm. You lined up. Some people went into hiding if they had bunkers or this or that. And since my parents and sister knew how it is to live in a bunker, they said, "Maybe it won't be so bad." Nobody knew how bad it's going to be. Why would they kill innocent people? Young, old, I mean no one understood that. But once they started marching us, you know, and they were starting to scream at us to run, to kick, and take people apart. You go here, go there. That's a tremendous -- there was a lot of commotion, a lot crying and a lot of pleading. They treated us -- animals wouldn't treat other animals like this.

Q: How did you analyze the situation? What were you thinking about when you saw all of this? Or were you thinking?

A: I was thinking why -- I couldn't understand why we don't get any help from outside because they saw what is happening to the Jewish people. We all had very good relationship with friends and business friends, personal friends. Even relatives, there were intermarriages and

so on. Nobody helped. Didn't help. As a matter of fact, if somebody didn't look Gentile, you had -- I would say a majority would point you out to the police or it just was impossible to understand this. It's very difficult. When you're all so run down, you know, you don't sleep normal and you don't eat and the tension, it breaks your human feelings. It breaks it down to an indescribable way, it's impossible to explain. That's what happened when we were surrounded by the German Army or Gestapo or SS, whatever. They all are the same. They had a license

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to kill or to beat or to spit on you, and there was no law. They could do anything if you're Jewish. But what turned out is they did -- they started with the Jewish people in Plaszow. But they also subsequently, you know, only weeks later, they brought in truckloads of Christian people, Gentile people. You know, they were different. And they were shooting them on a hill there. They made them undress, and they were beaten. Some of them who didn't want to, they would machine-gun everyone. And sometimes they made them dig their own ditches. They would bring them in truckloads, mostly young people. It was -- when we saw that, we knew this is going to be very, very, very difficult to survive.

Q: All right. Let's take a break. Are we both okay? Norman, before we get into -- you've explained part of the day going into Plaszów. I just wanted to go back to the ghetto for a moment.

A: Surely.

Q: Do you remember anything about the pharmacy in Kraków?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: I don't.

Q: Was there any other kinds of things you wanted to tell us about the Kraków, your few months in the Kraków Ghetto that we haven't talked about?

A: I saw misery. People in the streets were begging for food, you know. There were so many beggars and sick-looking people. And what I really for some reason I did not go around anyplace. Maybe my parents told me, you know, because they felt you're young and you're more -- they felt young people were more vulnerable because we had an experience, which I'll go back later even Borisov. I can say it now?

Q: Sure.

- A: One night they were knocking on our door, and we didn't answer. We lived on the second floor, you know, down below. And they were knocking, then they shot into our window. So my father said I'll go down and open up. In the meantime, I was in pajamas in the winter -- in the back window where they had a roof, they had another small house, a roof. I jumped out of that window I mean in pajamas barefoot and run down four houses down to a neighbor's house. What happened is that they were picking up young people. So they had a fear, whatever it is they tried to keep me away from whenever possible. So I didn't go too many places.
- Q: In Kraków during those three months, what did you talk about, since you were together a good deal, I gather?
- A: Yes. We prayed and everybody prayed to God, and they said -- which brings back a story to me. I was in Plaszów then back to Kraków. I was in a barrack where they had a rabbi and he had three sons. They were there from Hungary; I don't know how they came there. And the older son was always saying, "Gott, Gottenyou, Gottenyou [dear God]." He was saying, "You Tatte," you Dad," you know. He said it in Yiddish, you know. "You promised me Messiah is going to come every day. You promised me you will come in the morning, you will come at night, you will come at noon. He isn't coming, when is he coming?" So -- the Meshiach, you know, the Messiah. People were so preoccupied with their trouble that they didn't discuss much except how to survive. How can we protect ourselves? What should we do or shouldn't we do, and so on? That was most of the, you know, if you heard of a tragedy here or there. You didn't hear much. No newspaper, no radio. For radio, you know, you got killed having a radio or a weapon. There was nothing. Nobody had anything.
- Q: You heard rumors?
- A: Yes.
- Q: And did you hear rumors specifically about Auschwitz since it was so close to Kraków?
- A: No, I didn't know anything about Auschwitz. No. Even when I was in Plaszow, I didn't hear. We didn't know even about Treblinka, any of these camps. We only knew it after the war. I didn't know.
- Q: And did you hear about mass killings, mass shootings?
- A: We saw when they took away kids and women and elderly. People say, "Who know what's happening? Never believe that." Just the human mind didn't believe that this is going to happen. We didn't believe it. The only mass killings I could see when I arrived at Mauthausen, even in Plaszów there were killings. There wasn't mass killings, except when they brought in people from the outside, yes. We didn't see them being -- but we knew because they took so many young people to dig up ditches, you know. And they would bring truckloads of people daily, shoot -- made them undress. They would beat them to undress

and shoot them and bury them -- and then had to bury them. I had one friend who survived. He was Jew, he was shot in his arm. When I say a friend, he became a friend of mine. I met him right after the war in Italy, and he had a left arm, he had two bullets or three bullets in they left there. And I got friendly with him, he said he heard in America they have some medication. He meant penicillin --

04:07

whether I could get -- I told him I have a brother there. So I wrote to my brother and he did send some penicillin. And they operated on his arm, but it was not completely useful, you know. He played dead, that's how he got away.

Q: Do you remember after you marched in or were dragged into the Plaszów camp, do you remember what it was like that first day? Where you went, what happened for those first few days?

A: There was -- the dates in Plaszów?

Q: Yes, when you first came in.

A: Oh, came in.

Q: August 13 and 14.

A: Yeah, they assigned, you know, barracks. You could take along certain belongings. I mean some -- but they took it away from you. They took everything away. And eventually they gave you -- there were uniforms, too. I'm not so positive, striped uniforms. I'm not sure, I know Mauthausen and the other camps, yes. What happened is the same day, you know, just you live, there, whatever. They assigned so many people per barrack. Then they took us out, we had to carry stones. In other words, Plaszów was a Jewish cemetery. All the tombstones were split, you know, with sledgehammers. And they were building roads. There not enough roads in the camp, so they had my mother and my sisters, I saw them carrying stones for weeks, you know. Then they organized the brush factory, we started working there. It was like paradise by comparison.

Q: Now, who organized the brush factory? Did you father organize it?

A: My father was gave the idea to the brush man. My father didn't know brushes. He told him we can substitute, you know, quills of poultry to make they call them Ersatz brushes. Whatever Ersatz, more like fake, you know. Fake brushes, whatever.

Q: So did they move the factory from Kraków into . . .

A: From the ghetto into Plaszów, yeah.

Q: Did the whole family work in Plaszów then?

A: Yes.

Q: Including your mother and your sisters?

A: Yes, and sisters.

Q: Was that unusual or did they have women working in the factory?

A: What?

Q: Was it unusual that there were women in . . .

A: They had women and men working there. You had to have a quota, you know, every day everyone had to have a certain amount of brushes. What happened is my father was like a supervisor, and my brother and this Mr. Saltz, you know. Since my father was very observant, very orthodox, even the supervisor had to have a quota of brushes. So my sisters would make more brushes. You know, they were fast, so he had his quota. And one Saturday morning one young SS man, probably in his early 20s came in, and he went over to where my father and two other men were talking or reading. They had a book open also. I believe it was a prayer book or something. He took them all three out, and he beat them severely, you know, with some kind of whip. He made him walk to a point, you know, only maybe 100, 200 feet. Made them undress, he was beating them. It was a -- he got them help, they ripped their clothes and he shot them. Just like that.

Q: And you were there?

A: We looked from a distance, but not -- we went closer. We maybe looked from 100 feet or 50 feet, I don't know.

Q: So your whole family saw this?

A: Yeah, we all went out when they took him, you know. As a matter of fact, took a knife -- you know, they had knives there -- and I was running. I was so, so upset. I felt like running, but my mother and sister held me back.

Q: You wanted to kill the SS man?

A: Yeah. I didn't care if they killed me, but they said if you do that, he'll kill all of us. So I didn't. They stopped me, yeah.

Q: Then what happened?

A: What happened after? Went back to work, you know. After work, a brother-in-law of mine was there and my brother, Maurice. They were buried right where they were shot, they opened a grave, a hole. Put all the three men in. We measured, there were some trees nearby. We measured, you know, we walked how many 20 walks this way, 10 walks, you know. We felt that after the war is over, whatever, we will give them a proper burial. At that time I was in Italy, you know, and we got a little established. So I told Maurice, "I really want to back to Kraków." So he said, "You go, I'll go too. We should go get our father. We know where he is, where he's lying, give him a proper burial." I got a dream that night we shouldn't go because he was burned, you know. They were excavated and burned. I didn't dream that they were excavated, but they all were burned. I shouldn't go, I shouldn't -- so I tell this to Maurice. Maurice says, "Oh, they're dreams." But only maybe a week later, a brother-in-law that I spoke of, he went back to Poland. And he had the same idea to go to that place. We didn't know that he survived, but we found out later. He went to that Plaszów place, he knew where they were buried. He says there were all excavated and burned, you know.

Q: So that was your second dream?

A: The dream is my father came and told me that. "Don't look for me because I'm on fire." It's something that's hard to believe, you know, but it's hard for me to believe but it happened.

Q: You must all have been very depressed after your father died. It must have been very, very hard.

A: Yes, very, very depressed. As a matter of fact, at that time my mother told me and Maurice that she -- she said, "You know, you both are young, strong and you do everything to survive to tell the world what these murderers did to us. Tell the world, you must survive." And she then said, "You're the youngest," she even told me a second time. "You're the youngest, you're strong. You're smart. You must survive." You know, the reason she -- she felt after that that we had no chance. No chance to survive, you know. Just in addition right after, they took children out that way. Or before, I don't remember before or after.

Q: But it became clear?

A: Pardon me?

Q: It became clear that this was mass murder?

A: Yes, yes. Why would they take children away? And then

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women, and then the men. And they had a very tricky way of doing it. Let's say when they organize to vacate Plaszów, they said we are going to a much better place, you know,

workplace. They gave us quarter of bread, a quarter of a bread. And we marched to the railroad tracks, but maybe 100 feet or 200 feet before the railroad tracks, they would stop. We would stop, and they would have like 20 people at a time, or 30 people at a time march to the railroad, to the boxcars, you know, railroad cars. Before you enter, they took the bread away, see. They did that deliberately, and I know this, the same thing when they put us on barges and so on. They didn't want to have any resistance. They would give you a kick or a hit and take the bread away, you know, and call you some nasty name. "Verfluchter Hund." Cursed dogs, you know, and so on.

Q: You were in Plaszów for more than a year.

A: Yes. Let's see, March till probably June, July.

Q: '44, that's March '44.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Did you ever see Hermann Goeth?

A: Yes.

Q: Gert?

A: Goetz, Goetz. G-o-e-t-z. Goetz, it's pronounced. Yes. I saw him many times, and one time it was dark already. But in the winter, you know, they had shorts. He came to our work -- where the brush factory. Everybody had to get up. I remember I was shivering, you know, because people next to me were, too. He came in, he looked around, and he walked out.

Q: What sort of a reputation did he have with most prisoners, do you remember?

A: He had a reputation for -- he would shoot I don't know how many people a day. Just whoever was in his sight or -- he would shoot or whatever. He was a very, very proud guy. He was riding something, riding a horse. Big, strong, vicious murderer. I mean, I couldn't -- no one can believe that people can be so vicious, so sadistic to kill people. If he went to look at certain sights and saw somebody talking or not working that moment or whatever, he would shoot on the spot.

Q: Were the other Germans like that, also?

A: Not like him. Not as like him. But he was -- also, once they called a roll call, you know, appellplatz there. Everybody had to get out. They had two or three young people, they brought them in from outside the area, the ghetto. And then they picked men and women just at random, and one sister they picked of ours. And they gave them 24 lashes, you know. They were -- they had to remove their pants, and they would hit them 25. I don't know how

she made it, but was bruised for weeks.

Q: Which sister was this? What was her name?

A: This was my sister, Hindele, with a whip, you know. They used it on her.

Q: On her back? On the backside?

A: They had two guys. One hit and the other one hit, just like that. Two guys hitting. They just picked people at random, I don't know, men, women. Mostly women, if I remember correctly. Yeah. They didn't do anything, just stayed in line like anybody else.

Q: Was there any sexual brutality that you know about?

A: I don't know of any.

Q: Do you remember Jewish police in Plaszów?

A: Kapos, yes.

Q: What were they like?

A: They acted like policemen. It's hard to tell. I -- we were not as afraid of them as others. They had I believe two faces. When they were with the SS men, they were more severe, but, otherwise, they closed one eye. But I heard that some were quite vicious, but I didn't have any experience. And I think that when they were vicious it had to do because somebody was watching us, someone was telling them to do. They thought they will survive. You know what? When they started shipping out people, you know what the first ones that they shot was all these kapos. They were the first victims.

Q: You were still living in barracks -- your whole family, I mean, now without your father, unfortunately. But the whole is working in the brush factory?

A: Yes.

Q: For that whole period of time?

A: Until the women were taken away.

Q: Until the women were taken away.

A: Yes.

Q: But you were also living separately in barracks?

A: Separately. Women and men were living separately.

Q: Right. Were you ever able to get together as a family except at . . .

A: Except at work. Otherwise, you couldn't.

Q: And could you talk to each other? Could you . . .

A: Yeah. When nobody was -- inside, nobody was watching, and we had codes, you know. Everybody looked through the window. The barrack had windows on side or maybe on -- yeah, on one side primarily. And we had like people watching. If someone would see, they had codes, you know. A code say, you know, we had almost by description who was coming.

Q: Do you remember the code?

A: I'm trying to think. I can't remember, it may come back to me.

Q: Was it helpful to you to have your family around, that you weren't alone? Or did it . . .

A: It definitely was helpful, yes.

Q: How so?

A: Especially my brother, Maurice. I think I was a help to him and he was a help to me because we were never separated. Just out of luck. Nobody knew your name, they always knew your number so . . .

Q: Even in Plaszów?

A: Even in Plaszów, yeah. They had numbers, yes.

Q: Did you wear patches or anything in Plaszów? Do you remember?

A: I believe they had -- you put it on your clothes. It was a little -- on your jacket or whatever. You had to sew on a number or whatever, and maybe a star, yes. The Star of David. Yes, I remember it.

Q: Now, even though you were there for a year, does it all sort of melts as if everything is the same in that year in Plaszów, or are there particular things that stand out in addition to horrible murder of your dad?

A: Yes, we had very little food. We are hungry all the time. We had to work very hard,

especially with these stones, rocks. They were quite heavy to lift especially if you walked

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distances, you know. And knowing also that we can't get out from there. There is no -- in the ghetto we felt closed in, but there was much, much worse. We saw all the barbed wire electrified. Of course, some people went to the wire, you know, and they were electrocuted.

Q: Did people ever laugh, or did anything funny ever happen in such a situation?

A: I don't remember it, but we had sometimes -- somebody would tell a story. They will tell a story, you know, and people would laugh.

Q: How did you get out your frustrations? You must have been frustrated.

A: You stopped thinking about it. You think only that one day there will be light out of the tunnel, you know. You had hope. You always feel it's not going to happen to you. That's how I felt.

Q: Maybe the next person, but . . .

A: Yes, you always feel it's not going to happen to you. I think it's even now -- some people are more pessimistic. Some are less pessimistic, and some who were very pessimistic didn't make it. They couldn't take it. Maybe the message my mother gave me, that also helped. I wanted to survive in order to tell the world what actually happened.

Q: Let's change the tapes.

End of Tape #2

Tape #3

- Q: Norman, can you tell me what was the worst kinds of things in Plaszów for you?
- A: Besides killing my father, I saw where the brush factory was situated, you could see truckloads of people brought up to the hill. Originally, we thought maybe these were workers or whatever, but a little while later we found where all the shooting was going on. And some were put on fire. They were burning them or whatever, there was a smell. And these were all young people, we saw them looking out. Some you could see in the open trucks. Some were closed, some were open. This was almost a daily -- if not a daily, several times a week, you know. And they were just slaughtering them like you wouldn't do it to an animal. This was going on, you felt there would be no end to it. You just, you know, but after a while somehow your mind becomes so dull, you don't want to think about it. It just -- it's hard to picture this even by myself what I saw. I can't accept that. It's like a bad nightmare, but it happened.
- Q: Does it surprise you when you think about it that you were able to take it? That you could see this every day, and still have the strength to go on?
- A: It does surprise me. But not in the beginning, at the end. It started with Mauthausen, it was hell on earth.
- Q: Well, why don't you describe the deportation out of Plaszów?
- A: How it was?
- Q: Yeah.
- A: On the -- when they made us go into the boxcars, after they pushed in as many as could fit in there, we didn't know where we're going. We went for, I can't remember how long we traveled. Not a long time. And we sat there for two days or three days. No food, nothing. People died in the cars, you know. It's tragic for me to explain, you know. People died, you actually sat on them because there's no room. You couldn't sit down, it was so in the beginning. There was no room. And what I found out not more than a year or two, maybe less than two years ago, that we were destined -- we stopped in Auschwitz. There was no room, so they sent us to Mauthausen. And some them, they did take off in Auschwitz. And some they didn't; they sent to Mauthausen.
- Q: And were you all men on these boxcars?
- A: Yes, yes.
- Q: And were you able to say goodbye to your mother and sisters?

A: No, they were taken away one day or one night in the middle -- or early morning. They didn't show up. All the women were gone. They didn't have an inkling, nothing.

Q: So you and Maurice are in this cattle car?

A: Yes. I even had a blade to cut, like a little saw that can cut steel. And I kept it, you know, under my pants, under my shoes. And I told my brother when I said, "Maybe we'll have a way of cutting out the window, the steel, or the floor when the train stops." We never used it, we didn't use it because there was no room. Plus I had an SS man on each side where the door was.

Q: Outside the door?

A: Outside. Maybe where the -- I don't know if they stayed there all the time or when the train slowed down and they came to a halt. You always had SS men, you heard them giving commands, you know.

Q: Do you remember the smells and the noise?

A: The smell, noise? No. People were not screaming or yelling or crying. No, I don't remember. Maybe when we were first taken to Plaszów, the women and children, yes, but later on they dulled our life. They took everything out of us, you know. We just were like sheep in a way. We had nothing to fight with. They starved out, tired out. We knew if we rebelled, we had no arms. They had machine guns. Just whatever somebody did, some people, say, one of these SS men

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would kick you or hit you, you would curse them back. They pulled you out and shot you right on the spot. We saw that, so everybody kept quiet.

Q: Did you throw away your . . .

A: My blade?

Q: Yeah.

A: I have to think. I must have, yes. Because when we came to Mauthausen, we came there at night. They undressed us completely, we had to undress. Nude. Not only that, we had to go on a chair or table and they looked all over your body and in your rectum. In your mouth, to see if we had any -- would have anything hidden, you know. Because they would find some gold, and maybe somebody may have had a diamond or a coin. They didn't give us any clothes for about two days. We had no barracks either; we are outdoors. Then they gave us some of these striped uniforms, you know.

Q: Was it cold, or this was in . . .

A: This was in July.

Q: . . . July or August?

A: Yeah. No, it was not cold. At night it was a little cold, but we all were sleeping next to each other. As a matter of fact, next to me was a German banker. He complained to me, he was talking to me. He said -- he and his son. He says, "I'm not Jewish." So I said, "If you're not Jewish, then why did they take you?" "My son is not Jewish," he says. "My father was Jewish." "What about your son?" He says, "He was born already Christian." His son, I didn't understand it. But later I learned that if you were -- you had to go like four generations, whatever. He was such a nice-looking, sweet-looking man. Maybe his son and I were about the same age, maybe that's the reason he talked to me and wanted his son to listen or whatever.

Q: You were about 23 then.

A: Yes. This was in '44, right? 22. '44 was 22.

Q: Being nude for those two or three days, that was very difficult for you and for everyone else?

A: Very, very difficult. You know, there is nothing nude.

Q: Did you have to . . .

A: You had to go to the latrine, there was no paper, nothing.

Q: Was there a latrine or did they make . . .

A: There was a latrine nearby. You know what some people did? They tore off the end of the shirt a little. And then they had no shirt after a while, nothing.

Q: Did it feel shameful to be nude for two days?

A: I don't think so, no. We thought they were going to kill us. Then the third day or so, there were mining quarries, you know, rock. They had big, big excavations, and they were blasting, mining rock. We had to march down, like in form marching down to the quarry. Pick up a piece of rock, you know, carry it up. I don't know, you had to walk maybe like 50 stories, dump it, drop it. And if somebody wouldn't carry it or complain, they would push them down. They were driving us like you would drive a sheep, animals. Beating on us on the way. If you want to lay down for a minute to rest, you know, they're calling you all kinds of curse names and hitting you. It was hell on earth, as simple as that.

Q: Did you watch them throwing people down? Did you see that?

A: I saw some people lying down dead when I went down, but I didn't see them actually push them. Maybe I did, I don't remember. It's so -- but being there only about a week or 10 days, every morning you had a roll call, you know. They had -- they say whoever is a carpenter, to raise their hand. So I, my brother, and a number of other people raised their hands. They took us out of that line and shipped us to Melk. Melk by comparison was paradise, but they brought in there -- the camp had about 10,000 people, that's what I was told. Ten, maybe 12, they brought in every week about 200 and always kept the same amount, you see. Didn't have enough food, with no hygiene. I wore the same clothes from Mauthausen to my liberation, you know.

Q: So how come Melk is a paradise?

A: I'll tell you. There they didn't -- there they made us go down and chute, pick up the rock, go walk up and sit it down. We didn't understand what did they want from us. They want to kill us, shoot us? No. In Melk, since I was a carpenter so-called, they took me, my brother, and how many hundreds that I saw, or thousands to a railroad station in Melk. A little before the railroad, a side, tracks, you know. Every morning we went to the Alps, we were there from, I don't know, an hour or two or whatever it took. Maybe less than an hour. And they introduced us everyone, you are going to this tunnel. They divided us. And the tunnels, instead of being carpenters, they made us -- they had air hammers. They were drilling tunnels. That's how you see my fingers are. It's not from arthritis, it's from damaging to the joints always. Once a section was completed, you know, we were drilling, and then they had carpenters shoring it up. That's why they said carpenters, but they put me into the drilling. They had shore up because the sandstone, sometime it came down. They put emission?? plants, I saw that every day, you know. You see, at least you did some work. You didn't -- you felt maybe there is some hope. I had two experiences there. One, maybe only a few weeks, maybe four, maybe six weeks -- I don't know -- time is very difficult to measure. One of the supervisors, a civilian engineer, he was always friendly to me. I mean, he would say where did I come from, what I did at home, and I explained to him I was a student. And how long I'm here, he

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asked me questions. At night going home, I told this to my brother, Maurice; we're discussing it, I said. He said to me, "I saw him talking to you. What are you talking -- I see he comes and talks to you. He doesn't talk to anybody, he talks to you. Maybe another guy somewhere. See, tell him that we have friends in Vienna." Because when he asked me where I come from, I asked him -- we have friends in Vienna. "Who is your friend?" I told him. I didn't remember, I didn't know. My older brother knew, he was already in business. He said - - we had a distribution center in Vienna, feathers and down, you know, like a warehouse. This guy Phillip Frankowski? (ph) was a junior partner and manager. You know, he was

running the show. So I said, "We have a friend. His name is Phillip Frankowski. Would you tell him that the two Belfer brothers are working here, are alive and working here?" He says, "When I go on my next weekend I'm going home, I'm going to see him." I said, "I don't know where he lives. I don't remember, but he probably is in the phone book." He went to see him, and the guy gave him a 100 marks to buy -- he says every time when you go back on Monday morning or Sunday, whatever it was, you see the two brothers, buy them food. He would bring bread, sometimes some salami, all cut up so it shouldn't be visible. Sliced, I had a very small pocket or whatever. Put it under my shirt, you know, and button the jacket. So I would say the last six weeks, that probably made us stronger to survive. You could have a little more food. I met Mr. Frankowski after the war, you know, and he treated us like we were children. He talked about the past, about my parents and my siblings. He knew them all. And after the war, he became the Commissioner of Traffic Transportation in Vienna. He got a car and a driver, you know. He was big person. And I asked him how come -- you were in the feather business now? He said he was a Socialist and he was always -- he was against Nazism. And now it's a new regime, and they gave him such a high position because he helped them along during the war. He would come to Italy, we would invite him. We would send him packages and so on. We became very, very friendly. The engineer, I never met; I never knew his name. Just when everyone asked -- Frankowski told me he gave him a name, but he's not sure he gave him the right name. Because he tried one time to contact him and looked all over in the phone book, couldn't see it. They probably, he tried in case, you know, he didn't -- he wasn't sure if maybe if Frankowski is a guy who may turn him in or whatever. We were all aware of these things. In other words, to protect each other.

Q: How many hours a day were you working with this air hammer?

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A: How many hours a day?

Q: About.

A: There were two shifts, so there must have been 11 hours or 12.

Q: And steady on this?

A: Supposedly steady, but I don't think we worked half the time. We also had a code word. We made noise, and, let's say, we had to drill into the wall to make noise, so in order to make half stay and drill into the ground, just let it run then. We say, we had a code, we say 23 or 11, we knew. Or the letters A, B, C, we knew in that area we had that code. It wasn't all over, it's just that group. So these tunnels were like a mile long. So they saw somebody coming, everybody was drilling and they walked away. We took it easy, we didn't stop completely because, otherwise, they would notice. They came around several times a day or every hour or whatever.

Q: Was that painful?

A: It shook you up, you know. It really shook you up. And occasionally they would take, let's say, 10 of us, 12. We had to shore up, also use I-beams. You know, these steel beams. It took four of us to carry one, I don't know how we did. Then they put six and -- misery. We had to learn how to lower, you know; otherwise, you cut your toes off. Dropped, some guy got weak, you know, and we had to learn to jump back. Then I got a cushy job; they made me a mechanic to this engineer after he starting bringing bread. How I was a mechanic, they had these little like railroad, little cars and tunnels as in the coal mines, you know, come out. I would grease the wheels, that was mine.

Q: That was your mechanical?

A: Mechanical, and sometimes they let me sit right out and come back. I would check whether there is enough grease there, whatever. That's my story there.

Q: Let me ask you something. You were talking about the men with whom you were working, that you were giving each other codes.

A: Yes.

Q: Was there also more than that in terms of friendship amongst you, not only between you and Maurice who were obviously very close . . .

A: Yes.

Q: . . . but was there a larger with whom you were close?

A: Yes, there not only Jewish people there. At that camp there were Gentiles and Jews and some Germans for political reasons.

Q: And were you helping each other?

A: Yes. During the work, yes. But there were occasions, let's see, when they gave out bread, you have to be watchful. Some prisoners, especially I remember there were Russian prisoners, too, from the war, they came in much later and they

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were much stronger. They would grab the bread from you, you know. We hid it under your shirt, but sometimes they knock you down to grab the bread. But, as a whole, no; we cooperated. We all cooperated. And it didn't matter whether you were Jewish or Gentile or Chinese or whatever. Didn't matter.

Q: You were all in the same boat?

A: Yeah. The same boat, didn't matter.

Q: Now, towards the end of your stay in Melk, you're getting this food, which obviously makes you somewhat stronger.

A: Yes.

Q: Which you think may have helped you in the next stage.

A: Yes.

Q: What then happened after Melk? Where did you go?

A: After Melk, they told us another lullaby, you know. They said we have much work, better place to work, or words to that effect. And we're going to go by boats to Linz. And near Linz, big factories and we wouldn't have to work in tunnels and this and that. You didn't believe. It didn't make any difference. I don't think we believed it, but some people may have believed it, I don't know. I didn't believe it. Instead of boats, they put us on barges and an SS man with a machine gun on every barge. They packed us up, except he has his own place. And we were afraid, we were talking to each other quietly. Maybe we should throw him or whatever, but there were so many other barges in back of us we thought they were going to kill us all so we didn't do anything. You know, they kept us on the barges, you know, slow moving and stopping and going maybe three days. No food, we were drinking the water from the river.

Q: From the Danube?

A: With the hand, you know.

Q: What time of year is this? Do you remember?

A: I should remember. Yeah, it must have been like April maybe. Let's see, April -- no, yeah, it was in April. It could have mid to the end of April, yeah. Maybe the third week in April, because we were liberated May 5th, so approximately. On top of it, we got off. They chased us out of the barges, all of us. "Einheitlich", means you had to -- four of them had to walk together. And you were responsible, everyone was responsible for the others in case somebody runs away. We start walking with no food. People dropped. I mean, they just sat down or they fell down. Couldn't walk. Whoever can't walk, they pull you into a trench off the road. They shot you or you died, I don't know. And the trucks were in the back of the marches, and they put them on the truck, loaded them up one on top of the other. The last day -- it must have been two days later -- first of all, we slept at night when it got dark wherever, in a field there. We were so starved and so thirsty, we ate actually pulled grass and

we ate grass. You couldn't raise your head. If you raised your head, you hear bullets flying. And get up early morning. Again, no food, nothing. We have to walk. We ask, "Where are we going?" They'll say, "Shut up, you Hund, you." Everyone was a dog to them. Some place they'll say you verfluchter Jude, you know. Cursed Jew or verfluchter Hund or whatever. They could say that to any -- well, Christians. Well, there you didn't even know who was Christian or Jewish. By appearance you couldn't even tell. We all lost so much weight, you couldn't . . . 5:28

Q: Norman, excuse me. We have to change tapes. Norman, you said towards the end of the march you were eating grass.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you actually keep it down?

A: Yeah.

Q: You did?

A: You swallowed.

Q: You didn't throw up?

A: No. I didn't eat a lot. I ate I don't know how much, but I didn't know what else to do.

Q: What were those last few days of that march like?

A: That march maybe a few hours away from Ebeebsee or half a day, you know, I told my brother I can't walk anymore. I just -- I couldn't walk. He said, "Norman, don't do that. Don't do it. We lasted till now, we'll make it." I said, "I don't believe we'll make it." I threw myself down on the road, you know, and I knew they're going to kill me. Two guys, two German SS came. One took me by my arms, and one -- threw me to the ditch. When the truck came, they picked me up and threw me on top of the truck, you know. Just like that on top of other people and dead people. Maybe a half hour later or 10 minutes later, I don't know, they threw my brother on top of the truck. They didn't shoot us. They took us to a camp and put us in a barrack. There's no place to sleep. They barely had places to sit. They did give you soup, only once a day. The soup was potato peels and hot water. If you were lucky, you had a lot of potato peels. And one morning -- usually they would wake us at dawn, you know, 5 o'clock, whatever -- they woke us like 3:00 in the morning, 4:00 in the morning, I don't know what time. Nobody had a watch, but it was very early morning. Zellappell call, they called it. You had to go that square. Every camp had a square where all the prisoners would gather. They would count, also, everybody. You had to stand a certain way and with a certain group. Always the same people. Sometimes we get lost, you know. If they recognized it, it was a big, big -- you know. On loudspeakers they said you know fellow Haeflinge is prisoner.

Haeflinge. The enemy is nearby and for your safety because they may bomb us, we will all go to work to the tunnels. They [in] Ebensee also had tunnels. People started yelling, "No, we are not going. "Wir gehen nicht" We are not going." They started to shoot at us, the sentries. Machine gun. I don't know how many they killed. I and my brother and a few friends, we went under -- we were close to a barrack. We ran under the barrack. And from one barrack, we went underneath to another and we hid there. We hid for several hours. I don't know how many hours. We were afraid to get out because nobody was in the street. Like deserted. We didn't know what happened. They night shift, I learned after, who wasn't in the tunnels, they blew up all the people. So consequently if we would have gone there, they would have blown us up. They didn't want to leave too much, what do you call, too much for the enemy to see. They tried to hide. Then we heard on the loudspeaker in English and German and Polish and Italian and French because all nationalities were there. This is the U.S. Army. Everyone who was in hiding or in barracks to come out. We didn't believe it, we stayed. Then we saw a U.S. tank, so my brother and two other guys were hiding. We were all [inaudible] don't believe it. Probably fake, you know. Don't believe it. Then we waited another, I don't know, a few minutes or half-hour. We saw people start walking the streets, the prisoners, you know. So we got out, so there were -- on the road there were American soldiers saying there's a kitchen, you know, they spoke in German, English, any language. "There's a kitchen down near the SS kitchen. We are serving food. We know you're hungry." So, of course, we went down and stood in line, they had many lines. I took -- they gave you a dish, too. So I got my food. My brother got his food. We went to the side and ate. And then we went in the next line again, and that was very unfortunate. People who went several times did not make it. They actually died of diarrhea and everything else. It's a pity that the army did not know that, you know. It's unfortunate. I did not take sick. My brother was a little sick, but he pulled through. He was okay.

Q: Did you feel like you were liberated, or was that . . .

A: You didn't believe it. It took a while. No, it took a while. The only thing I remember, we went to town and to a coffee shop outside, you know. So I remember maybe there were four, six, eight -- I don't know, we were walking. We sat down at a couple of tables. We ordered bread, all kinds of food. Coffee. Then we got up, we said, "Hitler will pay," you know, we told them. They knew the way we looked, the way we were dressed, still in these prisoners' clothes. Then we decided to go Salzburg. In Salzburg there were many displaced people in different camps came there, and we took over a military place where they have soldiers. Probably they gave it to us. And there they had a kitchen, your own kitchen where you could eat. They gave you food. And you could also sleep there. They had no mattresses, maybe a few, but you slept on the floor, you know. And one day in that place they had some notices. Anyone who wants to go to Israel to come to this square between street so-and-so, between streets. When I and my brother heard about it, of course, we want to go to Israel and many others. So there were many volunteers. What happened is the Jewish soldiers who served in the British Army came with trucks and they took as many at that time, maybe four, five, six trucks -- I don't know. They took us through the Brenner Pass to Bolzano. And then we went on trains. There were some trains, commercial train, to Modena. In Modena, we were like

five weeks. And we kept asking, "Why, we want to go to Israel. What are we going to do in Italy?" So they told us very politely and explained that the British Army intercepts every boat, and young people are taken off the boat. If you are either ill or very old, you know, or sick, whatever, you can go -- and women, yes. They took women and very old people, actually. Very few men or no men except when they're really sick. During that period, we contacted our brother, Arthur, who was in New York. We didn't remember his -- we remembered only Hotel Broadway and I got friendly -- I don't know -- it had to do with UNRRA, you know. There was -- no, this happened even in Salzburg, American officers, they used to come around. I told them I have a brother and so on. They talked to different people in their experience. This particular guy was from Chicago. I told him we had a brother in New York, but I don't know how to contact him. There's no mail. He said, "Give me his address." I told him his name and he used to live at Hotel Broadway when we went to New York. He wrote to Hotel Broadway, and then we left so we didn't see him and did the same thing in Modena; I talked to them. And he sent a letter to New York, and my brother sent us \$500, wired \$500 to an Italian bank. The bank didn't know where to find us, but they knew there were displaced people in that particular place. So they sent somebody, they took the name down and called the name. He said, "Our bank has some money for you." We understood mostly, me and my brother. We came there, we didn't know one word of Italian. So the manager says, "Do you speak German?" "Of course, we speak German." He says, "Come after 3 o'clock." So my brother says, "Why after 3:00?" "It's better," he says, "it's better come after 3:00. If you need some -- I'll give you some money now. I'll give you \$20." It was like 2,000 liras. No, no, 20,000 liras -- no, 2,000; I'm sorry. We came after 3:00. To show what a gentleman he was, he said, "The official rate is 100 liras. If I give it to you officially, you will get the \$500." One hundred liras, it's like half a million liras, you know. "Because you came now, you get 10 times as much, see?" So we got a lot of liras, we thought we're millionaires right away. What do we do? I put in my pocket, my brother put in his pocket. We had a couple of friends waiting outside. We told them, "Let's go buy some food." So we looked for a place. We saw a restaurant, a trattoria, and they displayed looked like chicken, bread, and whatever else, some food. We bought a lot of stuff, brought it back to the place. We shared it with some of our friends. One guy starts eating the chicken. He says, "This is not chicken." "Why it's not chicken?" "The bones are too thick for chicken." It was actually rabbit, but we didn't know. It was cut up. Anyway, that's -- after being about five, six weeks there, my brother, Maurice, says, "You know, I remember some -- our father and Arthur and I, we used to buy feathers in Milan, Italy." And he thought the name, and he remembered the name, Rudini (ph) and Pachitani (ph). He said, "Let's go to Milan." "Okay," I said, "we'll go to Milan." We hitchhiked to Milan. We didn't know where a railroad was. We didn't know -- we hitchhiked, and the guy dropped us off near the railroad station. The guy who -- it was a truck -- we didn't all. Even a motorcycle. It took all day to get to Milan, but we arrived there. The way we were dressed we couldn't go to any hotel, even if we had money. So we stayed at the railroad station all night, and early morning we went to the public place where you bathe and shave. Went out and bought clothes and dressed up, you know. We called up -- we were at the firm of Rudini and Pachitani (ph). They couldn't understand one word. They say, "Pronto, pronto." I didn't know what pronto means. So he said, "Do you speak German? Do you speak English?" He said, "Tedesco si." Tedesco is

German. I said, "Padrone," I knew that. We bought a dictionary. So one of the owners came to phone because he heard I say to ask what name. I said, "Belfer, Belfer." So he came to the phone, he says please come right up. And met us or either he came down. He was in his office on the second floor. He greeted us like we were his children and his partner. And they talked to us and they took us out for lunch. They even took us to a hotel, and said, "This is a decent hotel to stay, and don't worry about payment." We said, "We have some money. My brother sent me money." He said, "Come tomorrow morning. We have a lot of feathers and down." Because during the war, we didn't ship anyplace. We had tons and tons. Said, "We'll come." He says, "You can send it to your brother, send samples. Maybe you can start this way making a nice living." And that's how it started. That's why we stayed in Milano five years, and we became very prosperous. By prosperous, I mean we had a nice apartment, you know. We had a car and so on. We were working very hard after that. We were -- we went to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia to buy feathers, Hungary and all that.

Q: Was it difficult to adjust? I mean, to now there is no war, but there is also -- you've lost your family.

A: It was depressing, but the more you got -- I think what helped me is that I got something to do, you know, and make money. I know when I went to the hotel with my brother, there was white sheets and a bathroom. Pillows. We lived well at home, but I thought this is like palace. But you get, you know -- my mind worked, if I think back, like you have to do your best and show the world that you are a real human being and you can live as good or better than anybody else. That you are as smart as everybody else. I had this -- it's like it was always coming into me. You have to do what is good for you and what is good for your relatives. What is good for people in general. I felt that, the opposite of what I've seen during these years. I wasn't brought up this way, I felt this was a time in my life that would never repeat itself. I felt the world would not permit this to happen. That's how

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the process went.

Q: You thought the world had learned something so that this kind of thing couldn't happen to anyone?

A: I didn't know whether the world did learn, but I was angry at the world that let it happen and I always hoped. When I saw the people, they go to the opera and they go to all these fancy restaurants, shops, and all this, I said I don't know how we -- it hurt me more what we missed and lost everybody and so on.

Q: You lost a lot of your childhood.

A: Of course.

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Q: Your whole teenage years.

A: Yes.

Q: So that must be very difficult to get into, and I understand . . .

A: It was difficult, but I always -- because of my brother and also we had close friends, we tried to do the best -- I think we helped each other to overcome that.

Q: Were the Italians good to you?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Were the Italians good to you? Did you feel comfortable?

A: Extremely. Very comfortable. I'm very fond of the Italians. Whenever we go on vacation, usually if it's a little extended vacation, we to Italy. I love the Italian people.

Q: So it was fortunate to be able to go there and stay there?

A: Yeah.

Q: Rather than in a DP camp.

A: Yes. Of course, of course. And I helped a lot of people while being there. Somebody recognized me and so on. They came . . .

Q: Did you give people jobs when they came?

A: Not in the beginning, I didn't have any jobs in the beginning. But eventually we would have a plant, we had people working. We had an office.

Q: Did you have survivors working for you as well?

A: No, no. Except some cousins, we had some cousins we worked with and my brother-in-law eventually came because we worked with him for a little while.

Q: Now, Maurice married in Italy.

A: Yes, he did.

Q: Who did he marry?

A: He married a German young woman, but she was raised in Italy. Born in Germany,

Saarbrücken. And they have three children, you know. I believe one was born in Italy and two were born in New York.

Q: And when did you come to the United States? After five years?

A: Less than five years. I came in January 1950.

Q: Why did you come?

A: My brother had developed a business here, and he came to visit us because we were shipping goods to him. He did very well because with the shortage in the United States of the feathers and down, because the army used to use it up for sleeping bags and so on. He felt I have a better future in America, so I came to visit in '48. His son, he would say pull him out of the fire, you know, from the fire. Robert Belfer, he was bar mitzvahed. I came, I stayed here about three, four weeks. I went to Washington to Chicago. I didn't like New York particularly. When I got off the boat, the screaming with the taxis and fighting and dirt, I just never could adjust to it. So I went back. My brother came again and again. He says, "I want you to come. I want you to meet some nice Jewish girls."

Q: Were you dating in Italy?

A: Yes.

Q: Was he concerned about that?

A: I don't know whether he was concerned or just talk, you know. He said we're going on vacation. We're going to the mountains during the year for New Year's or right around that time. Mountains was Grossingers. When I came there the first time, I was looking for the mountains, they called the mountains. And that's -- I came and I started to work with my brother. And I worked for him, with him.

Q: What convinced you?

A: To stay?

Q: Yeah.

A: There was a point where he had an accident. He almost drowned at Long Beach, and they saved him, you know. I believe a couple of people got drowned, actually. He was pulled out, and he needed -- they removed part of his lung, one lung. We didn't know that. When we came, he told me all about it. We knew that he was sick, we didn't know -- he says, "You know, I could use your help, and it's better for you to come there. You'll meet some nice people," this and that. So my other brother didn't come. He came like three years later. My brother, Maurice.

Q: How long did it take you to adjust?

A: Until I met Eleanor. Six months later. I didn't like the food because steaks, I remember. The first time my brother took me to a steak house, they gave you a steak like four portions, you know. They ate so much and so full, but I got used to it.

Q: Did you miss the pasta?

A: There was very little pasta at that time. Or fish, you didn't see fish in restaurants. Maybe a special -- special places. That I wouldn't go, it took me a while to find out. The diet was a little problem.

Q: Where did you live at first?

A: I lived with my brother.

Q: Arthur?

A: Arthur. I shared a room with Bob.

Q: His son?

A: His son, yeah. For a little while, a few months. Then my brother at that time also felt that he'd be needing me because he started -- he wanted to build a foam rubber plant on Staten Island. He picked the place, there was a big plant Wrigley chewing gum, that went out of business there. And we bought that plant, and we made mattresses and pillows some cushions and so on. That's where I met Eleanor, it was through her uncle.

Q: Why don't we take a break now and change the tape, and you'll tell the story about that?

End of Tape #3

Tape #4

Q: How are you doing? Are you tired?

A: Pardon me?

Q: Are you tired?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: No. It's a little warm, but I'm not tired.

Q: Okay, okay. Norman, can you tell us how you met Eleanor in Staten Island?

A: My brother built the foam rubber when I was very active and had a small interest, too, on Staten Island. And had an uncle supplied chemicals to us, certain chemicals for cleaning and some -- and also some supplies. And he had a business where they were cleaning hospitals, offices. I think he was also selling vacuum cleaners and stuff, household stuff. So he would come there very once in a while and I would give him orders. He said, "I've asked you so many times. Why don't you come, let's go out for lunch?" Every time I told him, "Next time, I'm busy," which I was. But one time I said okay. He took me out for lunch. Then he wanted to show off his place. He had a quite large place, it was a new building, nice offices. He took me through the office, so then we went to his private office. I said, "You know, you have some pretty girls working here. Especially this one girl was sitting here, you know, is very pretty." He said, "She's my niece, but she has a sister who is even prettier, an older sister." I understand the one who worked there was 16 or 17. So I said I would be happy to meet her, you know. So one day he calls me up again, and he says, "I'll give you a call then." So he called me, he said, "I'd like you to come to my house for a drink or dinner. Are you free?" I said, "Why do you want me to come to your house?" "I want you to meet my niece." I said, "I'll come." So we came there, he served us drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Then he said we're going to go to a restaurant in New Jersey from there, a special restaurant. I had my own car, so I said I would drive and they'll ride. I liked Eleanor a lot, it's true, from the first. She was very pretty and spoke very well. She sounded intelligent. So she was a little upset with me because I was always riding and looking. I told her that's how they drive in Europe. She said, "You can't drive like this. You'll get into an accident." I said, "Oh, no." We had a very nice evening. And then I used to stay in the hotel, the St. George Hotel in

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Brooklyn, after I left Arthur. But then I started to spend more time, and I wanted to take some courses in chemistry at Wagner College on Staten Island. The reason because we had a foam rubber process I wanted to know more. So I took an apartment on Staten Island, sublet,

you know. There was a lady there, she would do everything for me, you know. She would make breakfast and so on. So we knew each other about six months, we decided -- got engaged and then we got married within, I don't recall, a year or so, or less than a year. Nine months to a year. And I'll tell you why right away, January '52 I came in. I met her about a year -- took over a year. A little over a year, I knew her. We are happily married since then.

Q: So that really changed your life . . .

A: Yes.

Q: . . . in some significant way?

A: There were four children. Two boys and two girls. Unfortunately, we lost one son. He was wonderful boy, he was only 20 years old. And he was a wonderful student at the University of Pennsylvania. Went to Wharton School and was a year ahead in school. He went to Arizona. Eleanor has a sister, a married sister in Phoenix, Arizona. And from there he went up -- Eleanor's sister's son was planning to enroll at the University in Colorado. So instead of his parents staying, they asked Jim to take him. This was in August, you know, '76. That would be 20 years. In August '76. He would call us every other night, saying we had a good time, this and that. And his cousin would call his parents every other night, so we always knew where they were. He called us on a Friday night, we're having dinner, and he says, you know, he had such an experience. He met some old guy and told him certain stories. He was a very lovely personality, very great, great person. He called us he is coming on Sunday and what plane -- told us what plane, flight number, and we are

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supposed to pick him up. Saturday late afternoon around 4 o'clock, we had a call. Jimmy drowned. What happened is -- it's ironic. He was on the swimming team at the University of Pennsylvania, and a very accomplished swimmer. He didn't do anything wrong, but there was next to the University a few miles away, they had bicycles. It was a hot day. There were many kids there, University students. It's a reservoir, but it had some -- it had three coves for swimmers. On the waterway, they permitted boats, people were skiing, so one boat came into the cove where Jim was swimming. And when he saw the boat coming in, he took a dive and waited for the boat to go away. Because the boat came in very fast, and all of a sudden and made a curve into it. So when he came up, the skier hit him in the head, and the skier said she didn't know. She didn't think, she didn't see anybody. Then she said what she thought was a ball or a dog or something. The boat didn't even stop. His cousin was watching while this was happening, and -- but he was talking to some friend or girl there. They didn't yell to stop the boat, and Jim never came up. It took several days to find him. So it seems that -- that was devastating especially to Eleanor. To me, too, but she couldn't -- she still can't take it. Why? You always ask why did it happen to him? You know, why me? There's no answer to it. You search for an answer, but there's no answer to it.

Q: Do you have three other children?

A: We have three other children. Two are married. I have a son, Andrew, he is an attorney. He works in real estate development with me. One daughter is married and has a family. Andrew is married and has three children. Two boys and a girl. And my daughter, Carolyn, has also two boys and a girl. My daughter, Lauren, is single. And she works with me, too, in my office.

Q: So you kept the family together in the way that you all were . . .

A: Yes, we all live in the same area. We live in Great Neck. We live here most of the time now, because I work here, I work in New York. But the children are more involved in New York now, and I'm more involved here. But we are in daily touch.

Q: What do you think you learned from the Holocaust?

A: I learned that we live in a very cruel world. That there are very few people who really go out to help another person. Very egotistical. Very crude. Even the educated ones, because Germany was considered a very highly cultured country. Very good brains in so many fields. But it seems they had no hearts. There are very few people, you know -- it's not only you have a good mind, you have to have a heart. And some people are lacking their heart; they have no feelings or they do such outrageous things. They perform such atrocities, and

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look at how many criminals, even not on a large -- on a smaller scale. There's so many criminals all over the world now, and it's going up. I think it has a lot to do with upbringing, education, and the government has to be more strict about breaking certain laws. Shouldn't -- the punishment is not severe enough to discourage some of them.

Q: Do you think you adjusted after the war?

A: Did I what?

Q: Did you adjust? Did you somehow -- or is there still a piece of you that's . . .

A: I adjusted extremely well. Some of my friends did not adjust too well. I had a brother-in-law who couldn't adjust at all. He was such a wonderful person. He just -- he was always telling me about dreams he has all the time, and he wasn't well. He just couldn't take it.

Q: How do you account -- you had so much suffering. You were in horrible places.

A: Right.

Q: Plaszów alone, then Kraków could have undermined anybody. What do you attribute your being able to take this and assimilate it somehow and lead, obviously, a full life?

A: I think it's luck, fate. I didn't listen -- there were people that were as strong and much stronger. Big fellows and didn't make it, you know. It's very difficult for me to pinpoint the many things.

Q: Did Eleanor help?

A: To adjust after the war? Oh, yes. Yes, she is very understanding, very knowledgeable, very -- we personally helped many organizations, Jewish and non-Jewish, you know, people. After the war, we tried to help in nearly every cause through every means available to us. To a large extent, we are very charitable. I like in a smaller way to create harmony and respect for people for each other, regardless of their religion or their race or color. And I'm very broad-minded; although you would expect the opposite, I'm not. I am

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an optimist by nature, too. I always feel now things are going to be better, and, hopefully, they will be.

Q: Did it help that Eleanor asked you to talk about your experiences, so you didn't have to hold them inside?

A: I did not talk about my experiences to her for many years. I mean, I would just tell her a certain -- I wouldn't go into details like we did today.

Q: When did you start talking in detail and why?

A: I had -- almost had a guilt feeling not to talk about it, you know, and even my children, I talked -- I remember talking to them and Eleanor would elaborate maybe to them. Because I remember our older son was six years old, he wanted a certain bicycle that his friend had, our neighbor, his friend. And Eleanor and I took him on a Saturday morning to buy a bicycle. And he showed us which one, then he saw made in Germany. He said, "Dad, I don't want you to buy this bicycle. It's made in Germany." So he already -- he was six or seven -- if he knew it, the other siblings knew it, too. And I was telling them. When I went back to Poland only about seven, eight years ago, I told them about it. I took our son along and one of my nephews. Maurice, my brother's, Maurice's son, two cousins. We all went for the first march of the women, you know, from Auschwitz to Birkenau. I couldn't believe what they did to us, but I consider myself a very responsible individual. And I look out for the underdog and I pray for a better world. And never again, it should never happen again to any nation or to any people, wherever they live, whoever they are.

07:13:30

Q: Thank you, Norman.

A: You're very welcome. This is my father. His name was Benjamin. And he was a wonderful guy. This picture was taken during the war for passport purposes, and this skull cap that you see was actually painted on in the photograph after the war. Since he was a very observant orthodox Jew, we felt maybe he should have a skull cap on his head. This is my mother. Her name was Hinda. She was a very sweet, lovely and generous person. We all loved her, my family and friends, and whoever knew her.

Q: When was this taken?

A: This was taken also during the war, about the same time when they took my father's picture in order to have pictures in the event they wanted to get a passport. And these pictures I got after the war from my brother, Arthur. It's unfortunate that she had to have such a tragic life and she was gassed in Auschwitz, which is incomprehensible for anyone to understand, including myself.

Q: I'll take away the . . .

A: This is my sister, Helena, Hia.[on the right] She was my younger sister, she was very, very bright and very sweet. Has a lot of friends and was a very lively person. We all miss her and love her.

Q: How old was she around this time, do you know?

A: At that time she must have been, let's see, probably 19.

Q: Where do you think this was taken, Norman?

A: I think this was taken in Borisov, Poland, in the hometown where we were raised as youngsters. This is my sister, Sheindl[a]. The name Shayne, Sheindl means beautiful. She really was a very beautiful young lady. She loved life, and she was a very friendly person, very creative person. She always was studying and reading and was an exceptional young woman, and she was loved by everyone. The ladies on each side, I remember the one on the left side. The left side, her name was Nika (ph). The one on the right side, I don't remember her name, but I know they both were cousins the way I remember them. And all were very close. This is a winter scene, of course. The picture I look on is a picture of myself. This was taken after the war the first time when I arrived in Italy. It must have been the summer of '45, mid summer of '45.

Q: That's you?

A: This picture is a picture of myself I believe in Modena, Italy. The fellows on each side were

friends of mine. I don't remember their names, but I met them really in Modena after the war, yeah. This picture was also taken in Italy in September 1948. The picture was taken was for passport -- to apply for a passport permit, you know. This our son -- late son, Jimmy. My daughter, Lauren, next to him. My wife, Eleanor, next to Lauren and me, myself. Our daughter, Carolyn, lighting a candle for a party that was given in her honor. She was becoming a bat mitzvah. And next to her is our son, Andrew, who is an attorney in Great Neck, New York. They all actually live in Great Neck, New York. This is my wife, Eleanor, and our son, James -- Jimmy Belfer. The one on the left is Eleanor, my wife; our son, Andrew; our daughter, Carolyn; our son, Jimmy; our daughter, Lauren; and this is myself.

End of Tape #4

Conclusion of Interview