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This is tape two, side A, of an interview with Ernest Fontheim on June 4, 1997. The interviewer is Randy Goldman.

Yeah, as the war finally came home to Germany, we were delighted to see in the official Wehrmachten, armed forces report, that was issued at the end of each day. Finally, German place names, names like Argen, Koln, and so on, instead of names like Zabororja, Minsk, Halokoff, Kiev, and so on. That already felt like a liberation. And there were more and more German place names now in the official army reports. And all that happened, the government maintained the official line that the war will be won, that there will be a final victory.

As the fronts on all sides collapsed, of course, preparations were made for the defense of Berlin. I have to say that of all the insanities, that may have been probably the biggest one. There was no reason really to defend Berlin. And the Germans should have done what the French did in 1940, declared an open city and surrendered. But of course, that was not to be.

Instead, throughout Berlin, tank traps were built, ditches were dug, and the Folkshdum was called up finally for participating in the defense of the city. And often, they would even grab civilians from the street and just incorporate them in some unit. The battle itself began in earnest on April 16, 1945.

I never forget that day because even though the Russian front was on the east side of the Oder River, which runs north-south and about 50 to 60 miles east of Berlin, so it was pretty far away, but the artillery barrage was such that the ground under Berlin, under the city was rumbling and slightly shaking. And of course, in battle reports, which I read long after the end of the war, I can see the reason why. That was the biggest concentration of artillery ever. The Russians spent about two months getting ready for that assault on the city. And they had assembled a density of artillery, which was unheard of. And they raked the entire German front for hours and hours.

As I said, at that time, I was living in the Berlin borough of Tempelhof. And so the communist-- I mean, secretly communist-- janitor of the house that I lived in, I also got some information of how the Folkshdum members were called up. And in fact, he showed me such a call up order that a friend of his got. So I kept a copy of that and then typed on a typewriter that I had available my own call up order every day so that, if I had to have an errand to a certain part of the city, I would write myself a call up order that I had to report there for duty.

The reason was that there were groups of Folkshdum people either grabbing civilians from the street or also sometimes just confiscating their bicycle. I did almost all of my commuting by bicycle. Public transport had all but ceased to exist. There were still a few subway lines that I thought would run intermittently between a few stops until they came to a place where there was an artillery or bomb crater shutting down the rest of the line. So that was surely not reliable transport.

But the Folkshdum did have the power to confiscate bicycle for service, so I always wrote my marching order always in such a way that it would say I have to appear with my bicycle which, for purposes of my service, is confiscated by the Folkshdum, the militia. I kept visiting a number of friends, and there was a peculiar atmosphere then. By that time, the Russians were still far away from Berlin. But nobody knew how the Russians would take the city, what would happen afterwards. After all, the city was still totally dominated by the Nazis. Not just the military, also propaganda-wise, Goebbels's voice was everywhere-- in newspapers, on the radio.

And it seemed as if a deep chasm sort of separated us, our today, from what would happen tomorrow after the Nazis are gone. And nobody could really imagine how it would be like. From day to day, of course, the Russians worked their way closer to the city. And in fact, the way they planned their attack, instead of entering the city from the east, their units passed by Berlin to the north and south and then closed the pincer west of Berlin and then entered the city from the west. And then the joy of hearing German city names in the official army report was replaced by the even greater joy of hearing subdivisions and districts of Berlin mentioned in the army report, like parts of Shallotenburg, which is a well-known borough of the city, had fallen into Russian hands, or the suburban railroad station of Erkner has been taken by the Russians. It simply seemed unbelievable that these place names where I had been sometimes only days before were already in Russian hands.

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In fact, there was a curious situation developing. People could make telephone calls into parts of the city which were already occupied by the Russians, which were behind the Russian lines. That was a weird thing, really. And visiting people-- one usually parted never knowing whether they would see each other again, and instead of the German auf wiedersehen, which means, really, see you again, one would say goodbye-- we'd say [SPEAKING GERMAN]. That means, survive it.

And as I said, nobody could even imagine how life would be once the Nazis were gone. Berlin was, of course, under constant bombardment, and in the beginning, when the first artillery shells fell on the city and in the inner parts of the city, Goebbels distributed a news release saying that these are not enemy artillery bombardment, but trial runs of a new German miracle weapon which is going to be used any day now to throw the Russians back again. And there were people who believed this nonsense.

Yeah, so there's a city-- and of course, also, electricity slowly stopped being supplied, and water stopped being supplied in Berlin. Even though it had already been drained by evacuation of children and infirm people, there were still, I think, between three and four million people in the city, and to imagine that city was headed into chaos without running water, without, at least, reliable electricity. And the gas lines in many places had been, of course, hit, and so there was no gas supply anymore for cooking.

For me, the crucial day was Sunday, and I remember distinctly Sunday, April 22, 1945. By orders of Goebbels, who, besides all his other officers, was also in charge of the defense of Berlin-- on his orders, all fruit stores were ordered to be open. Now, anyone who knows Germany and German mentality must be aware that the closing of stores on Sunday, of all stores, was something absolutely holy. There was nothing. There was always one day, one Sunday-- that was the Sunday before Christmas-- where stores were open. That was a tradition. But on all other Sundays, nothing. The world had to go under in order to be issued for stores to be open, and that, of course, exactly was what was happening.

Their world was going under, and it was obvious then that what Goebbels wanted to avoid is that the food stores and the shops might be maybe taken by Russian troops and rather than have that happen have it distributed to the population. And in fact, there was enough food there that he also announced the distribution of all kinds of special rations, the ration coupons. And of course, most coupons were dedicated-- like it would say for 100 gram of butter, or 100 gram of meat, or whatever, this and that, but there were certain coupons always which were un-assigned. They were just labeled with a letter, like A, B, C, or something, for special occasions.

And so he announced that on coupon A, everybody would get so much of this food and on coupon B, so much of that food. There was a tremendous amount of these special rations announced. Now here I was with my 16 food ration card for 16 people, so I basically went wild. I went for-- and of course, that was in the days before the supermarket, so you had to go to the butcher separately, and to the baker, and to the dairy for each particular type of food. And so I was busy for a long time buying all that and bringing it into the room which I occupied in Tempelhof and thinking how I can get most of it out to Potsdam to my friends.

And then-- but even more overpowering was that on that day, finally, beaten German army units started to stream in to Berlin, and that is a sight which I will never forget. I think that made that day-- I can say without equivocation may be the happiest day in my life. Anyone who has seen German soldiers in ordinary life, or during the war, or on parades, they always looked spick and span. There was not a button missing. There was not a spot, and they looked well-shaved, clean and was a certain aggressive stride and demeanor.

These guys who came back-- they were dirty, unshaven. Their uniforms had buttons missing. Many had bloody bandages around their head or their arms in a sling. None of them bore any weapons, and they had that dull look of defeat in their eyes. When I saw those guys, I finally-- even though I knew the war was lost for Germany, of course, somehow, intellectually and mentally, but now I saw it with my own eyes.

And I almost lost my mind. I got on my bike, I remember, and bicycled along and felt almost like-- thanking each of these soldiers for the way they looked. I am somewhat of a history buff, and I had read reports of Napoleon's army streaming back from Russia after their defeat in 1812. And these guys looked exactly like those descriptions of Napoleon's defeated army, and then the eerie thing was that, now and then, truckloads of newly-outfitted soldiers who

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looked clean and fresh and with weapons drove into the opposite direction towards the front, which was probably just-- I don't know-- 10 or 20 miles or so away, if that much.

But then I finally grabbed a hold of myself, and I went back to the house. And these German apartment houses are always sort of built with a courtyard in the back. And the rumor spread that there was one person, apparently, who, for some reason, owned a horse, and he couldn't feed that horse anymore. And so he decided to have it slaughtered by a professional butcher, but of course, there was no refrigeration either. So he couldn't, say, keep the meat forever, so he invited just anyone from the house to serve himself. So it was incredible. I got myself a long, sharp knife, and went downstairs, and cut a big chunk out of the upper thigh or the rear end of the dead horse that was laying there as another sort of trophy.

And then another rumor spread that there was a huge freight yard of the German railroads about less than a mile away from that apartment building, and the rumor spread that the Wehrmacht, the German army, had just abandoned and was thrown from the freight yards and that there were many freight cars loaded with food. And I got on my bike with a knapsack and bicycled to the freight yard, and I saw already people screaming there from all over. And then the freight yard was periodically raked with machine gun fire from deep-diving Russian fighter planes, and to avoid being shot, I sort of scoot the bicycle away. And I had to-- anyway, I wasn't on my bike. It was, of course, tracks, so I walked, pushed it.

And then I threw myself down, pressed myself against the-- what are these-- wooden ties, I guess, the railroad ties until the planes had gone, and then I would get up. So then I came to a railroad car which was loaded with big of vats full of butter, so each one maybe 50 pounds or so on. And so how do you-- and it was solid butter, so how do you grab solid butter?

I had a huge screwdriver in a tool kit on my bike, so I got the screwdriver out, and sort of staked out a huge cube of butter, and took it with my hand, and threw into my knapsack, which at other times I had taken potatoes in with dirty peels, and coal, and so on. So what I decided-- if the outer layer of the butter is covered with dirt, I'll just cut off a layer and inside it should be clean.

Anyway, so then I took that back, and my room that I had in that house was like a veritable food storage place. Incidentally, as a sidelight, when I came back after the war, I was told that maybe half an hour or so after I left that place, the Folkshdum turned up there, collected all males, put them on trucks, and drove them out to the front. So I was spared having to fight the Russians.

And then I decided I better get out-- on the one hand, I didn't want to get out of Berlin because I felt a tremendous inner excitement. To see the fall of a major capital which had a sort of world-dominating role played was, to me, like, say, witnessing the fall of Rome to the Germanic tribes, whatever, 2,000 years or so earlier, and that filled me with excitement.

But on the other hand, I really felt that I wanted to spend these hours with Margaret, and so I finally-- what I did is I wrote myself a marching order for the Folkshdum which said that my battalion that I belonged to had to report for duty in Potsdam, which-- I had earlier mentioned the suburb where Margaret and her parents had found a place. And I put as much into the knapsack as I could-- I mean the most vulnerable things, of course, were the butter, and also, the chunk of horse meat, and then a few other things. I forgot what it was.

Anyway, it was a knapsack just full with food, and by that time, also, the army had taken over traffic control. And at each major intersection, there were transportation officers directing traffic. Of course, what there was was the traffic was all military by that time, military trucks, and jeeps, and this sort of thing. And there was a major intersection near the house where I lived, and I went up to the officer in charge and told him that I had been ordered to report to Potsdam and whether he knew whether the highway to Potsdam was still open or whether the Russians had cut it.

By the way, the Russians then were always referred to by their nickname, Ivan, so Ivan in English. So that's how you talked about them was the Ivan because nobody really knew it, and the officer's answer was that he knows only what goes on within a radius as far as he can see in each direction. And he didn't-- it was just total chaos, and those idiots

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were still fighting and defending the city.

And by the way, at each of these intersections, like that also, there were heavy guns put into place so that in case Russian tanks would appear, they would immediately be subject to heavy artillery fire. So anyway, I decided to see whether I can get through to Potsdam. There were rumors that the Russians had already cut that highway. And I got on my bike with my marching orders and everything and set out, and that trip to Potsdam was a major experience. The highway was mobbed. Potsdam was in a direction sort of southwest of Berlin, and now they were sort of away from the Eastern Front.

And it was full with people and all kinds. There were groups of allied soldiers, British and French, who were obviously prisoners of war and which you had seen throughout the war always in groups but under heavy German military guard. These guys-- they were simply walking down there. Nobody even-- they were part of the population. Nobody even gave a damn that they were supposed to be under German military guard. I suppose they were trying to get home or something.

There were foreign laborers. There were people who pushed some belongings they wanted to save in baby carriages or in little wagons that they pulled and then now and then a fancy, big Mercedes with a driver leaning on the horn to make way while slowly making its way getting some big shot out of the city before the Russians would take it. And then in the midst of all of that, periodically, Russian fighter planes would swoop down and rake the street with machine gun fire. And then everybody, as if blown away by the wind, would vanish to the sides of the road-- and they are sort of rain water ditches on each side-- and lay down there until that danger was over and then get back up and walk.

It was the most incredible-- I bicycled part. I pushed. There were some areas where there was a-- one area, I think, where a water main was broken, and the water was almost knee-high. So you had to wade through that. And then finally, I arrived at the bridge which connected Berlin to Potsdam. There was actually-- at the Western outskirts of Berlin, there's a River Havel, spelt exactly, by the way, the same way as the name of the President of the Czech Republic, H-A-V-E-L. That river also separates Berlin and Potsdam.

There's a bridge leading over it, and that's how you get them from Berlin into Potsdam. The name of the bridge is Glienicker BrÃ¼cke, which became famous several decades later, which I couldn't have known at the time, of course. It's famous because that's where often spies were exchanged-- yeah, that was, of course, West Berlin there, or it became later West Berlin. And among others, for example, the Jewish Refusenik Anatoly Sharansky, now an Israeli minister and Natan Sharansky, was exchanged there and given freedom on that bridge.

Well, anyway, that bridge I saw already at the distance was completely-- there was like a chain across the bridge of SS checking carefully everybody's papers, but I had my Folkshdum ID and my marching orders to report to Potsdam. So I figured nothing can happen. I had in my breast pocket, also, the gun which I had bought on the black market through that janitor, but I was hoping not to have to use it. And of course, there was such a sea of humanity, they obviously didn't really have the time anyway to do very thorough checks, but they found my papers to be in order.

And then I passed through, and I had to still bicycle through a major part of Potsdam because a [INAUDIBLE] where that orangery building was located was on the other side of Potsdam. And then I appeared, and they had already almost given up hope that I would be able to get out of Berlin. So that was the 22nd, but I had still a lot of food left in the apartment, so I decided the next day I ought to go back and pick up some more food.

And when I arrived at the Glienicker BrÃ¼cke to bicycle across, the commanding officer told not just me but everybody else that Russians were reported nearby. Oh, yeah, and of course, all bridges had been supplied with explosive charges so that at the approach of Russian troops they would be blown up so that they couldn't use the bridges. That was another part of the insanity because while the Russians could have used the bridge, these bridges also were part of the German infrastructure, which, at that time, was already almost totally destroyed and under those conditions, with a lack of war materials and so on, wasn't easily rebuilt a bullet in those days. But the Germans and particularly the Nazi party were so fanatic that they completely disregarded the needs of their own population, even.

But they had it coming. With all of that, my thoughts always go back again to the period of the deportations and how

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brutally the Jews were treated, and nobody gave a damn about them either at the time. And furthermore, I didn't even know yet what had become of my parents and everybody else who had been close to me or whom I had known, and I was still hoping to see them back once that whole thing was over. And I decided to go across the bridge anyway, hoping that they wouldn't dynamite it soon.

But then I was finally stopped. As I said, when I came to Potsdam the day before, there was a place where a water main had broken, and the water was almost knee-high. Well, when the next day I came back, it was even higher, and it was under a bridge. And it was practically impossible to-- you'd have to swim across, and of course, I would have been completely wet then. And anyway, I didn't have the stomach to do it, and how would I have taken the bike through it? So I just returned without having been able to get into the city again.

There was constant artillery bombardment, of course. The 22nd by that time was over. That was the day when I went out. The day where I made the unsuccessful attempt to return was the 23rd, so that is over now. Then there were several days-- there were several days of fighting, and finally, on the-- and finally, yeah, what we had to do, also, is-- we finally decided-- we meaning all of the people who lived there as refugees-- to transfer to the basement. There was a huge basement that was full of simple benches and, actually, no electricity, only some candles we had occasionally. And we just sort of hoped to wait out the worst danger.

On the 27th of April, there was still no change. There was still artillery rumble, but we didn't know what was going on. So I decided I ought to go out, and look, and see what's the situation as I went out and didn't see a soul until I finally saw a man in what looked to me like the uniform of an engineering-- the German army had engineering battalions which had brownish-type uniforms, which were used in support of the troops to build, quickly, bridges over rivers and things like that.

And so I shouted at the guy and wanted to know whether he knew where Ivan is. His response was to point his gun at me, and shout back at me in a language that I had never heard before, and run toward me as I stood there with my raised arms. And then he grabbed my left arm, saw the watch, gave it a strong jerk, pulled the watch off, and vanished again. So from that I knew that the Russians had arrived, which I related downstairs.

And from then on, we frequently were visited by Russians who came down there. They were interested only in two things. One was women, and the other one was possessions of any value. They took everybody's watches, of course, and other valuables, and many women were taken not just once, but innumerable times. And so that went on for a day or two and, of course, caused everyone to be totally demoralized.

And then I think on the second day or so there was an artillery unit actually stationed in front of the orangery building. Fighting was still going on in the neighborhood, and that artillery unit was under the command of a colonel who made a more educated impression than the run-of-the-mill Russian soldiers and in particular, he spoke fairly fluent German. And so Margaret's father went up to him, and introduced himself, and told him that we are Jews. That's the first Russian word that I learned. Jew means yevrey in Russian. And we were treated just like the Germans, even though we had suffered under them, just the same with the Russians.

So the coronel pulled out a piece of paper and wrote something down in Russian and said, in the future, Russians sort of tried to attack us or molest us, to show that paper. And then he got orders to move on, which he did. And then, now, unbeknownst to me, also, by the way, the Russian commander in the area had called on all German forces to surrender. And furthermore-- in that order, also-- had declared that any German who tries to evade-- any German soldier who tries to evade captivity by putting on civilian clothes will be treated by the Soviet armed forces exactly the same way as he would have been treated by the German forces.

And as the German-- because the German forces-- I mean that was already going on for a month. Any deserter was, after a brief, cursory so-called "military tribunal" was immediately hung from a tree and with a sign around his neck, "I am too much of a coward to fight for my country and for our women and children" and something of that nature. In other words, what it meant is that if a German civilian was found, he could be immediately executed by the Russians because he would interpret that as the guy being a deserter trying to evade captivity.

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So I was out on that day, and that was, what, I think a day after that colonel came, either the same day later or the next day. And again, a Russian soldier was in the neighborhood. As soon as he saw me, he pointed his gun at me and pointed me toward a tree. As I said, it was in a park there. And I saw immediately that he was going to execute me, so I shouted down into the basement for Margaret's father to come up because he had that paper that the Russian colonel had given him in Russian.

And he came running up and handed the paper to that Russian soldier. He looked at it and made a motion with it as if he was wiping his rear end with it, put it in his fist, and crumbled it up, and threw it away, and told him to wait there, too. Then I stood at the tree while he aimed at me, and at that moment, the only thing I could think of is, I survived the Nazis, and now I end up like this.

And I could hear the click of the trigger, but nothing came out. And he did that two or three times, and then he got mad and sort of threw his gun on the floor and shouted to me in Russian, which I didn't understand, and pointing at the tree where it obviously meant that I should wait for him there at the three to be shot when he comes back with a different gun.

And of course, then Margaret's father and I-- we immediately ran-- there were some bushes not too far away-- and hid right at the bottom there. And it wasn't long-- I don't know, maybe five minutes, maybe less-- when he came back, and you heard him shout. And I was just sweating with fear because it wouldn't be long until he found us. And all we heard is he kept shouting, and then new voices appeared, more voices, which, since we didn't know Russian, I don't know what all these voices were saying. But apparently they had to move on because the voices became more and more distant and then finally ceased, but we decided that maybe the guy is just lying in wait for us. So we waited there for at least an hour if not more, and I was completely silent until we were sure that he really had left the area.

This is tape two, side B of an interview with Ernest Fontheim on June 4, 1997.

So we finally emerged from there, and there was not a soul around. Then we went back into the basement, and there was a tremendous shot of relief. Apparently downstairs somebody must have seen the Russian soldier pointing his gun at me, so the rumor had spread that both of us had been shot. And so when we appeared alive, obviously the joy was great.

So then finally came the 1st of May, 1945, and the 1st of May, of course, is a big Russian holiday, a Soviet holiday, and it was for the soldiers. By that time, things had quieted down a little bit, although not too much, and a large group of soldiers visited us. It somehow spread around that Margaret's father, who was in general very handy, was also very good in some simple dressing up wounds and things like that, and we had, of course, for our own purposes all kinds of medical supplies. And there were some soldiers who had-- I don't know what it was anymore, some open flesh wounds somehow. And anyway, he treated them. And then that was also a piano around for some reason, and he played the piano. And to celebrate them, he played the song "The Internationale" which is the international Communist Party song. And that made them all very happy, and they became somewhat friendly.

And then I remember one soldier-- he was a giant of a guy-- pulling out of a dirty pocket some equally dirty photographs of obviously family pictures, wife, children, or something. And with some tears streaming down his face, he said they were all killed by the Germans, and then after a while, they said they needed all of the women to come along. And so obviously we were very uneasy about that, and then we said what they wanted-- there was very difficult communication, obviously. None of us spoke Russian, and they only knew sort of a smattering of some German words.

Anyway, it turned out they had nearby some battalion or regiment camped, and to prepare for their meal, they needed people to peel potatoes. And so we immediately-- all of our males volunteered to go, and so they took the women and the men along to about-- I don't know. It wasn't far away, a quarter of a mile or so-- where they were camped and put us down. And they had piles and piles of potatoes, and so we peeled potatoes for them.

And in fact, they had discovered, apparently, somewhere a storage shed that was full with potatoes, and they needed more from there. One of the Russian soldiers took Margaret's father along to help him carry them in a sack or something, and when they opened the door of the shed, the first thing before they even saw the potatoes-- there was a dead German woman lying, so the soldiers just kicked her away was his foot and said something like kaput, which is a

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German word for broken down. And then they gathered the potatoes and brought them back, and then we peeled potatoes. And then we were actually taken back by them.

Oh, while we peeled the potatoes, they had accordion players there. They played the accordion and sang songs, so for a while, it became even somewhat romantic. And they also gave us some meat dishes to eat, which was hearty and even if not exactly gourmet style. But we were always hungry in those days and would have eaten anything.

And then we were taken back by them again to the orangery where we all stayed. But there were also, still, less pleasant incidents, and robberies, and so on, so a day or two later, I decided that we need, really, some more firm protection and that by now, since the city-- there was no more fighting, even nearby. There must be a city commander, and so I got out and said that I will try to find where the commander is and see whether we can get some protection.

And of course, I had no idea-- the city picture was totally changed. A few days before, the last time I walked in the city, it was full with Nazi Party uniforms, SS, Wehrmacht uniforms. All of that has vanished as if swallowed up by the Earth, and all one saw was Russian uniforms. And the traffic was the traffic police. They were all women, usually very hefty-looking women. The most prominent feature-- they were all unbelievably heavily bosomed, and they carried two colored sticks, I remember, I think one red, one yellow, which they waved and some prescribed form with the left hand and with the right hand, indicating which direction could move and which had to hold. And actually, they did it in a very snappy military fashion. I enjoyed, actually, looking on, just seeing them perform these duties.

Now, in the meantime, in order to find where the kommandatura was-- kommandatura is a Russian word, actually, meaning the command office for the city commander. And I was always pointed in some direction, so I just kept going in the direction that I was pointed at until I arrived in front of a huge villa. And that villa was beleaguered, actually, by two huge throngs. As I found out in a minute, one were Germans, and the other one were foreigners, practically all of them forced laborers who had been deported to Germany and who obviously went there for help in trying to get back to their home countries. They were Frenchmen, Belgians, Poles, everyone.

And the other throng were Germans. The one person I remember was a German medical officer who was in charge of the local military hospital where the Russians left him in charge. These were all soldiers with fairly heavy wounds. He came to complain that his nurses were being constantly raped and therefore could not fulfill their duties to the patients. And I decided immediately not to identify myself as a German, so I stood with the foreign laborers. Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention, also, when we left that village overnight, we had taken along also all our real identification because obviously we knew the war would end within days or weeks, that we could then establish our true identities.

And among other things, I also had saved my Jewish star, which I then put on, and as I said-- and I waited there together with all the foreigners. And so it was, of course, a slow process, so finally, it was my turn. I was ushered in, and I was in some sort of a front room, entry room, a waiting room, whatever, and was told to wait. And then one from behind it, apparently, was the real office, and then one officer came and took a look at me with that star and sort of shouted something in Russian to the back. And then an officer with more stars and so on, who seemed to be the commander, came out-- he was a short, stocky, heavyset guy-- took one look at me, and then asked me in fairly good German, you're a Jew? And I said yes, and then he went toward me, embraced me, and-- sorry-- told me that I was the first Jew whom we saw in weeks or months. There was no Jew left anywhere.

Then he asked me in his office, and sat down, and told me to tell him how come that I wasn't killed. So I briefly told him what had happened to me and also that I was actually together with a family of friends and that we needed some personal protection. And then he told me I should, as soon as possible, bring the whole family. He wants to meet him. Oh, and of course-- I forgot. His name was Major Shike, and of course, he was a Jew himself.

So yeah, the only thing, then-- before I left, he asked me-- he said he wants to keep my yellow star as a souvenir, so I gladly gave that to him. And then I went back, and I forgot. These are the same day or the next day. All four of us went there and met Major Shike again, and he awards us a piece of paper in Russian. That one was not thrown away by anyone. In fact, I still have it among my souvenirs, and in fact, I never knew what it really said. And of course, with the Russian immigration to this country here during the last decade or so, we made some Russian friends in Ann Arbor, and I had that guy translate it to me for the first time, what, 40 years after Major Shike gave it to me. And it simply said that

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every possible protection is to be given to the [INAUDIBLE]. He wrote it in one word. I guess he didn't realize that it was a first and the last name-- family and also that we are supposed to be supplied generously with food.

Oh, yeah, he told us also that the Soviet army was soon going to start handing out food to the population, and there will be very small, restrictive rations, like so many grams of bread, and this, and that. And so there will also be long lines, but with that piece of paper, first of all, we did not have to stand in line, but we could right away go to the counter. And also, we should buy whatever we sought or needed to buy and regardless of what the official nations are.

And you can imagine the pride. After years of being always kicked to the back, now we could go to the front, and the Germans had to stay behind and wait. And so that went on for-- then our life got much better, and we were not molested anymore. But the next thing was, of course, he wanted to get back to Berlin, and so I guess we had to find out whether there's a suburban railroad line going from Potsdam to Berlin. And so I suggested I go to the railroad station, which was also several miles-- that castle was somewhat out of town of Potsdam-- and to check the railroad station and where the trains are going.

And when I got to the railroad station, it was an incredible picture of destruction. Somebody should have painted or at least photographed it. But of course, in those days, we didn't have a camera, and I didn't have a talent for a painter. But the railroad-- there was hardly any railroad car that was standing on its wheels. They were laying on their sides. There were bomb craters all over, and one locomotive apparently, due to some force of some explosion, was standing on its heads, on the front end, with the wheels on the side, a totally grotesque picture. And wires were hanging, and single lights were dangling down or overturned. I mean you had to take one look and know not only that nothing is running now but nothing would be running for weeks, probably, or months, or longer.

So I walked back to give that report, and on the way back, along one of the streets I saw a sizable group of Germans coming under guard by two Russians, one Russian in front with a gun over the shoulder and one Russian behind. And they were wearing not the usual army uniform. It looked similar to the army uniform, except that their military hats were green. And these were actually the NKVD troops, which-- they were the forerunner of what later became KGB.

And so I walked along, and they came toward me. And as they passed me, the soldier in front asked me for my papers, and I had my Jewish ID. And naively I thought the guy knows immediately that-- it didn't say "Jew." It just has a J printed on top of it. And furthermore, of course, it was in Roman letter which are used in German and not in Cyrillic, which the Russians use.

Anyway, he didn't even look at the ID. He took the ID, put it in his uniform pocket, and told me only a few words he knew in German. One of them was come. It means come. And then I tried to tell him that ya yevrey, and he just waved me off. So then I suddenly found myself a prisoner of the NKVD, and we walked for several blocks. And I noticed it seemed totally random. There were some Germans whom we let pass by and then, again, one he would take along. I couldn't figure out what, if any, principle governed his-- and by now, having seen the Russians operate, I'm sure it was random, that there was no principle involved.

So anyway, we finally stopped at a large villa which had been confiscated by the Russians, and on the side of the-- we walked over to the side. On the side of the villa a table was set-- sorry. A table was set up, and behind that table there was an officer, also with a green hat, next to a civilian. And we were lined up in front on the other side of the table at a certain distance, and then we were called up one by one to sit down. There was one chair across from them to sit down and being asked questions.

When it came to my turn-- and by the way, the interrogating officer looked exactly like a brutal SS man, except the uniform was different. When it came to my turn, he asked-- the questions were asked by him in Russian, by the way, and the civilian next to him was an interpreter. Then he gave it to me in German, and they were all very standard, harmless question, my name, my address, my father's name, that sort of thing, date of birth.

And after the last question, then he turned that thing that he had filled out, that sheet of paper, over to me and asked me to sign at the bottom. Now, not only was everything that he filled out and so on in Cyrillic, but then there was a long paragraph below the filled out part of text. So I pushed that thing over to the interpreter and asked him politely to-- I

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wanted to know what I'm signing-- interpret it to me. But instead of translating it into German, he told the officer that I wanted to translate it, and then the officer barked something that didn't sound very appealing to me. And then the interpreter said-- he said, my boss says if you don't sign it right away, he beat you to death right here on the spot. So I signed it and was convinced at that time and somewhat even today still that I probably signed that I'll volunteer to go to Siberia.

And so then-- and actually, a few of the people, after that interrogation ended, were sent home. Others were not, and of course, I was in the latter group. Then after he was through with all of them, we were led around to the back, and in the back yard there was an air raid shelter ditch which the Germans had dug during a war to protect against air raids. And what it was is-- it's a ditch about, I would say, 3 yards wide and about 5 feet deep, at most, maybe a bit less. And then over it was a sort of pre-cast concrete arch that extended the length of the ditch, and that pre-cast concrete arch then would be covered or was covered with Earth and something planted on it so that it was camouflaged.

But you could go in for protection, as I said, against bombs, or artillery, and so on. And they used it now as a prison. Of course, it was totally damp, and there were benches in them. But it was very damp and unpleasant. And then there was a guard with a gun at the exit, and the only reason for anyone to go out is if somebody had to do some business. And to guard who stood there knew only one German word, we were told, and that is scheisse, which is the German slang word, actually, the total equivalent of an English, means shitting. So if somebody had to go, then he was taken out, and what they had rigged up there is, between two trees, they had fastened a horizontal boom at about sitting height, chair height. And you just had to sort of sit over that boom, holding on with your hands, and do whatever you had to do, and then go back again into the ditch.

And after a few hours, we were even brought some food. It was in a bucket, which is used in Germany or, I guess, here, too, for washing floors, and they had in there some nondescript soup with a few pieces of meat sort of floating around in it.

Yeah. Then later that day-- that was all still in the morning, and then we get something at noon, that food. And then the afternoon, somebody shouted down, all Germans out. Again, there were Germans and non-Germans that they had collected. The non-Germans were always the forced laborers that the Germans had deported into Germany. But anyway, all Germans were called out, and I immediately decided, I'm not a German. And so I stayed in there.

And they were actually taken out to peel potatoes for the Russians. It was a fairly large group of policemen, and investigators, and so on. And after they were finished, they were told, OK, now they can go home. Then I thought I could hit myself over the head. If I would have gone out with the Germans, I would be out and free now. Well, it was the wrong guess.

And then a night came, and we had to sort of sleep sitting up on that bench in that damp atmosphere there as well as one could, and the next day, various people were called up for more interrogation. Yeah, and then I had started up some sort of talking acquaintanceship with a Czech engineer who had been taken by the Germans to work on some war plant. And so he was called up, and he was brought down by the guard after, whatever, maybe half an hour. And he was hardly down and had sat down, and he looked already very disturbed when another officer who looked also extremely brutal appeared with a-- he had sort of a baton, a sort of wooden stick, in this hand, waved it in front of the Czech guy, and shouted at him in Russian something that didn't sound very pleasant.

And when he was gone, the Czech guy told me that the Russians doing the interrogation told him that they have evidence that he was not forcibly deported but that he volunteered to work for the Germans. And of course, he denied that, and it wasn't true, he said. And that guy who came down shouted at him, if you don't admit the truth that you volunteered to work for the Germans, you'll stay down here until you starve of hunger. And then he told me-- by the way, he knew Russian, also, that Czech guy. He told me-- I told him a little bit about my story, that they probably won't believe that you are a Jew, either.

Anyway, later that day, before I was even interrogated, we were all called out and marched off. And I thought now, actually, that we are headed toward some place where we were being shipped off into the Soviet Union, and I was sort of looking around whether there would be away to make a quick escape.

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There was just-- there were two soldiers, one in front and one bringing up the rear, each one with a gun, and it would have had to be somewhere where they couldn't immediately-- anyway, it never came to that. We only walked about two or three blocks, and then we were asked to sit down on the street in front of an even bigger villa which was also occupied by these same green-headed soldiers.

And then we were called up one by one into the building for interrogation, and some people actually, after they came out, left. Apparently, they were told to be free. And others came back and joined us. And when I was called in, there were two interrogators, and they struck me immediately totally different. The Russians, which I had come across so far, all looked pretty uncivilized and brutal in sort of a raw way. These two guys-- they also looked brutal, but they were well-shaved. They looked brutal, maybe-- it sounds funny to say-- in the SS way.

They had elegant uniforms. They talked fluent German. They seemed to be very educated but made a ruthless impression that way. But anyway, they wanted to know who I am, which I told them, and then exactly as that Czech had predicted, they told me that they won't believe that I am Jewish and, in fact, that they have some evidence that I was working under orders to blow up bridges to delay the Russian advance and how I could prove that I'm Jewish. And then I told them, well, you have my papers because they confiscated-- then they both laughed, indicating, these days, anyone has forged papers.

And then I was sent down into the basement of that villa. The basement was, of course, concrete floor covered with a thin layer of straw, and I was greeted there by a chorus of other Germans, a new one coming in. And of course, in lying there with those guys, I found out one of them was the local Nazi party district leader. That's sort of the same position as that guy that we had there, and I said to myself, what an irony. Here I am in prison now with guys like that.

And then we will also, again, fed some nondescript food, and people were constantly being called up for interrogation upstairs. And then night fell, and then the guard would periodically come into the cellar and shine a flashlight into people's faces, looking for a particular individual, and then gave him up. In the next morning, I was called up again, and the same two guys were there. And they immediately took me into sharp questioning and said whether I had changed my mind and I'm willing to tell the truth now.

And I told them that that is the truth, and one guy walked up to me and said, you know, I tell you one thing. We have too many of your types of Jews in the Soviet Union, and you are all the same. You don't want to work, but you want others to work-- you want other people to work for you. If one thing, we'll teach you guys how to work-- and then with that, he lifted his jackbooted foot and gave me a powerful kick into my rear-- and now get down.

And the guard took me down again, and then other people were called up. And I forgot whether there was a third night or not, but anyway, the next time I was called up, the guard who did the bringing up came into the basement, pulled his pistol, and shouted into the room. Usually he called by name. Now he shouted, where is the Jew?

So I got up, and he pulled his pistol and said, you're going to be shot now. And that didn't sound real to me because they weren't shooting people there. And anyway, as I walked ahead of him, he sort of pressed the muzzle of his gun into my back. But somehow, at that point, I wasn't afraid. I felt that was just a ruse. And when I came up, there were these same two guys, and they again asked me whether I had a change of mind and whether I'm ready to tell them the truth.

And I said, that is the truth. Then they asked, well, how can you prove that you're a Jew? So I said, well, I know some Hebrew, upon which one of them rattled something in Yiddish. Then I said, well, that wasn't Hebrew. That was Yiddish. Then he said, oh, what's the difference? So I explained the difference to him, and then he smiled and then he said, well, what Hebrew do you know? In that moment, the only thing I could think of was a Shema, which I recited.

And then they both laughed, and then it suddenly struck me, these guys are Jews. And then they were just instantaneously switched. They were extremely polite, told me to sit down, and I must be hungry after that ordeal. And they barked some orders at some guy outside, and it was in five minutes he came with delicious rolls with sausage and salami. And then we had a conversation that day. He asked me what I want to do, and I told him of it. And then he said, well, OK, I should get out of there and go home.

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Now, the thing is this-- on the day that all started, when I was looking for the-- when I was looking for the railroad station and I had a light coat on-- and that coat, of course, I had left downstairs in the cellar, in the basement. But during the days that I was down there, you hear all kinds of stories. They were telling of somebody who was released by the guys upstairs who also had forgotten some personal belongings in the basement and said he wants to retrieve it, but the guard had a change of mind and just told the guy, he's not letting him out again, even though the officer upstairs-- so I figured, to hell with my coat. I'm free, and that's more important.

But of course, in those days, even a simple coat was somewhat of a fortune, but my freedom was even more valuable. I forgot to mention, by the way, on the first day when those Germans asked to peel potatoes and then released, I managed to tell one of them the address where the Haas family were living there in the orangery, and to notify them where I am because they had no idea.

So when I came back, they knew. That guy had actually notified them, and they had gone to Major Shike in hoping that all that needs to be done that he has to pull some strings to get me out. And when they told him where I was, he immediately backed off and said, well, there's nothing that-- these guys know what they're doing, and he cannot interfere. So that's an interesting sidelight on-- the system was exactly the way was the Gestapo in Nazi Germany, of course.

So anyway, after all of that, we knew that no trains were running to Berlin, but that's where we wanted to get to. And then in the meantime, my bicycle, of course, had been stolen by the Russians. That was after the watch. It was the next thing. So I couldn't even bicycle to Berlin, but I suggested that I walk to Berlin-- it was about 25 miles or so-- and go to the Tempelhof district where I had that room and see what's going on.

So I walked there, and right when I got there I found out, first of all, that the Russians had already instituted a German civilian administration, and in the borough city hall-- Berlin has 20 boroughs. In that borough of Tempelhof, where that apartment was in, then had its own city hall. And so I went up there, and I found out that they have lists of Nazis, particularly Nazis who had more prominent positions. And their apartments are available for people who are returning from concentration camps or were persecuted. So the guy told me that all I have to do is ask for a list, and I can pick the apartment I want to have.

And of course, I didn't want to make a decision, so I just stayed one night and then walked back again. And then there's another one or two days, and then I walked with Margaret's father, Mr. Haas to Berlin. There we had another incident where we were walking on this major highway that also goes through suburban city streets toward Berlin. We saw already at a distance there was a big hospital there, and the Russians, you could see, were busy there carrying the equipment out.

But as you come closer, you could see that they were basically Russian guards and German civilians carrying equipment, and so as we got there, the Russian guard immediately enlisted us to also help carry out equipment from-- they were dismantling the entire hospital, and we had to go in and carry out whatever medical supplies and so on.

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