United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Ernie Pollak
March 2, 2010
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PREFACE

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ERNIE POLLAK
March 2, 2010

Answer: In the town, in **Romania [indecipherable]**.

Question: And in roma – Romanian Hungarian, was your name **Ernie**, or was it **Erno**(ph)?

A: **Ernu**(ph).

Q: **Ernu**(ph). And can you tell me the name of your parents and your siblings?

A: My – my father's name was **Yorel**(ph) **Pollak**. My mother's name was **Malka**(ph) **Pollak**. My oldest sister was **Bluma**(ph) **Pollak**, my older brother was **David Pollak**. And another older brother was **Misha**(ph) **Pollak**, and then was my name, **Ernie Pollak**. And my younger brother was **Shlerma**(ph) **Pollak**, and my younger sister was **Menicha**(ph) **Pollak**, and my younger brother, another younger brother was **Ishmael**(ph) **Pollak**.

Q: And –

A: We're eight children.

Q: And you were number five of the eight?

A: Number five, yeah.

Q: Of the eight. Can you tell me something –

A: I was number four, I'm sorry.

Q: Number four, I'm sorry. What your life was like before the war? Can you describe your religious affiliation, was it a religious home, what your language you

spoke at home, your father's occupation? What can you tell me about your life before the war?

A: We spoke mainly Yiddish in the house. My father had the butcher store, kosher butcher store in the town. And as far as religion, we were quite religious. We went to shul almost every morning.

Q: Was it a Chassidish family?

A: Yes, well this – that time I would not know what – you know. But I know we – somebody used to always call **[speaks foreign language here]** you know, with the five boys. So this is the way the saying used to be. So this is how I know, and I remember that.

Q: And what type of schooling did you go to? Were you at a cheder, yeshiva, or a secular school?

A: We went – we went – I was too young to go to yeshiva. My older brother went and we **[indecipherable]** town from – from – from us about six kilometers, which we had a **[indecipherable]** yeshiva there. My older brother, I remember, went to that yeshiva because he was older – older. **David**.

Q: And were you in cheder, or –

A: After we finished school around two – two o'clock or three o'clock, I don't remember, we went straight to the cheder.

Q: And tell me something about the composition of the town. Was it a mostly Jewish town? Were there much in the way of relationships between the Jews and the non-Jews in the town?

A: Well, it was not – it was not – I don't – I – this I cou-couldn't tell really, because I remember when it used to be Christmastime. We had to close the windows and close the doors, and lock the windows for the protection, otherwise all – all the windows would have been broken from the house. Cause this is the way it di – because th-they demonstrated during the day Christmastime. Not the Jews, but the non-Jews. And that's what brought up the hatred, a little bit. But then during the rest of the year, my father had the butcher store, here was kosher and here was non-kosher, different part. So they used to come and buy meats from us.

Q: And at school, did the Jewish children and the non-Jewish children socialize together at all?

A: This is a hard question to answer, because when children get together, you know, they love each other, or they not – they hate each other, not e – but there was nothing really involved that we hate each other or something, just fun. But later on, you know, when I was already 12 years, 13, I remember certain things, yeah, in school. But by that time the Hungarians already occupied us, in 1940.

Q: And in terms of secular languages, did the Jewish community speak Hungarian or Romanian?

A: My father spoke Hungarian, because he was in the first World War, and that was during the Hungarian time. And most of them spoke Romanian and – but that – somebody else spoke Hungarian, I really don't know. You know, it's tough.

Q: And extended family, did you have an extended family living in the same town?

A: I – y-yes, in the same town, next door was – lived my father's sister. And the town next, two kilometers away, lived his brother. So it was always together, you could walk – Saturday you could walk the three kilometers and meet, you know.

Q: And holidays you spent together?

A: Holidays, sometimes but not really, because everybody had a big family, and you didn't have homes that big, you know.

Q: So **[indecipherable]** Oh, let me record again. So what about your grandparents, were they in the area, in the town?

A: My mother's father lived about half a kilometer away from us, on this side of the town, and we lived almost on this side of the town. But the cheder was across the street from him, the cheder where I went.

Q: Yeah.

A: And he was a very religious person, you know. So the kids who came into the syn – to the synagogue Saturday morning, they were afraid for for **Selig**(ph). His name was **Selig**(ph) **Lassa**(ph). Because he just took a look, and everybody was trembling.

Q: What was his occupation?

A: This I wouldn't know, you know, what his occupation, because I think he lived to be 80 or 85 or something, you know, because he was quite old when we – we knew him, because my mother was the youngest get – to get married, and she was born in 1994.

Q: So let's fast track a little bit, and I want to ask you about 1939, with the start of World War II, did news reach **Romania** about the invasion of **Poland**? Did you have any knowledge of what was going on in **Germany** and **Poland**?

A: Mm-mm.

Q: No.

A: No, beca – not completely, you know. The only knowledge we could know, if somebody came from that area, from somewhere in **[indecipherable]**, because there was no telephones in the town. There was no electricity in town, and once in a while you just got the newspaper from somewhere else, you know. So it's – and nobody

really knew until later, whatever happened in **Poland**, or whatever happened somewhere else.

Q: But you remember people coming from other towns, making it into **Romania**?

A: Yes, I – I remember that, but as a young boy, you're not that much interest what he has to say, you know, because you wouldn't understand it much.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: You know, really. I'm telling the truth.

Q: So 1940 your life changed. What – tell me about the year 1940.

A: In 1940, when **Hitler** told **Horthy**, whatever his name was, from **Hungary**, you can re-occupy this area, **Maramures**, you can re-occupy that you had it the first – before the first World War. So the soldiers came and traveled days and nights. You know, they – they could not have that many soldiers that they should go around and we should see them for two weeks. But we saw the same guys coming the same day.

Q: And how did that change your daily life?

A: It – not at the moment, the first year it didn't really change, you know? The only thing is, we had to learn a different language and we went to **[indecipherable]** school, and we didn't understand anything what we – because it was Hungarian already, **Hungary**. So you didn't understand anything, because we went to Romanian school as children, you know.

Q: Was it the same teachers, or did they bring in all new teachers who were Hungarian born?

A: I'm sure they ki – brought in the teachers, because the teachers that we knew – and I really didn't know whether they speak hungar – I know my father spoke Hungarian for one reason, because the soldiers must have had on their agenda certain things that **Yorel**(ph) **Pollak** was – was a **g-gender**(ph) **urmeshda**(ph) they call it that time, like a – not a general – not a – in the army, like a – how do you call it? A little officer, you know, in the army, in the first World War. So the soldiers who passed through my town, some of them stopped in our house, and they wanted to have some wine to drink and this **[indecipherable]**. So I knew, but we were not allowed to go into the room when they talked to my father, as children. Nobody was allowed to know.

Q: And your father never told the children –

A: He wouldn't – he wouldn't – he wouldn't hurt us, you mean, he wouldn't say that that's what they said, and things like th – but later on, we felt something is not right. But at 1942 already, I had somebody come, a friend came from – who went to **Budapest** a half a year before. **[indecipherable]** And he says, **Ernie**, you're already 13 - 14 years old, 15 years old, 15 and a half years old. Come to me with – to **Budapest** and you'll learn a trade. What are you gonna do in this small town? I was

very good with my hands and making, you know, certain things, you know, in jewelry or anything. So he says, come, you're gonna become a jeweler.

Q: And did you take him up on that?

A: And I went right after **Pesach**, when he went back. I went back to **Budapest** and I couldn't get anything on the jewelry, I couldn't get – so he says, let's go to a dental laboratory, maybe you're gonna be – they're going to teach you to be a dental technician, cause he was there in that place also. But he quit after a while, you know, so I went in there and I stood there til the Germans came in, for a year and a half, almost two years.

Q: So w-were – from 1942 to 1944, you're living in **Budapest**?

A: Lived in **Budapest**.

Q: And did you have any contact with your family, did you know what was going on in **Mamorsha**(ph)?

A: Yes, because we used to write, we used to write almost every week, you know, in Yiddish we used to write the postcard. But my older brother was with me that time, because he also wanted to come to **Budapest**, away from the small town, let's put it this way.

Q: And was the motivation for coming to **Budapest** because they thought it was easier to earn a living, or because –

A: Yes.

Q: – they were politically safer?

A: No, easier to earn a living, because politically I did not – I don't know whether anybody as young boys and girls thought about politically at that time, but they saw that you could sense certain thing. You sensed it, but you didn't make anything of it, as long as you were okay. But to make a living had gotten harder in the town, so I figured I got to learn a trade.

Q: And from the postcards that your family sent to you, did you have a sense that their life changed over those two years?

A: Yes, the last year especially.

Q: And how did it change?

A: Changed – they were not allowed – let's say, soon as the ger – soon as the Hungarians came in, and my father was a butcher in the – in the Jew – in a – in a strictly Orthodox sense, you know? And a – and you have to slaughter a cow or a calf or a sheep in a certain way to be kosher. You have to slaughter. You have to get a **shochet**, right?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So we used to have our own place, you know, we were three butchers **[indecipherable]**. And we had the same place, we just – to take the cows, or the

calf, or the – the – to slaughter. But as soon as the Hungarians came in, they forbid you. You're not allowed to get a **shochet** to slaughter. How do you have to slaughter the cow? You got to hit it right here.

Q: And so wa –

A: Which is – that's ridiculous because when you're slaughtering, the reason why you slaughter the cow, because you're – you're taking all the veins, which are here, and the blood comes out from the animal. So this is what you call it the kosher. Nothing could happen to the – to the – to the meat, or to whatever. So that **[indecipherable]** so, right away, even while I was still home.

Q: So did your father then begin to continue on as a butcher but for non-kosher meat, or did he stop working?

A: No, he st – no, no, we still had the meat, kosher meat, cause instead of going in during the day to slaughter, you went in two o'clock at night.

Q: And to provide for –

A: And we were hiding it.

Q: And did he continue to sell it to the other –

A: Yeah, we took my older brother – took my older brother **Moishe**(ph), and me and my father, and we went down and we took the **shochet** and they slaughtered it.

Q: And did other Jews in town continue to buy it –

A: Yes.

Q: – surreptitiously as well?

A: Yes, yes, they knew it, because the **shochet** lived in town, you know, so they knew it. But it gotten always a little bit worse, because when I – when **Hitler** came into **Budapest** in May, I think it was in – not in May –

Q: March.

A: March. March 17. Came into **Budapest**. I already had letters from my hometown, from my father, that in April, and before April, they already gathered them, you know, in the synagogue, and they already started the transports to **Auschwitz**.

Q: So I wanted to come and talk about your experience in **Budapest**, but let's just still talk with your parents. So when did you find out that your parents had been deported, and how much of your family – the Germans came in in March, and then you said already the next month they were gathered up?

A: Th-Th-They came in – they came into **Budapest** in March, but to my hometown they came in earlier. This why I said, because I got a notice from my parents in April yet, that we were gathered already to be shipped out somewhere, but I didn't know any place where, I didn't know nothing.

Q: And –

A: Where – where my brother – only my brother who was with me in **Budapest**, that's it. I didn't know nothing what happened with them the first two months.

Q: So who was still in **Romania**? Was your parents and the other six siblings?

A: Yes, because they were – the four of them that were younger, and my sister, and they were – yeah, my sister **[indecipherable]** so my sister was older, but were still home, you know. Only my second, the one who was after my sister, **David** and I **[indecipherable]** the fourth, were in **Budapest**, the rest, six, were already a-all home, didn't go no place. As a matter of fact, I found out after the war that my older brother **Moishe**(ph) was going to run over to **Poland** and hide some – somewhere there. But this is what somebody told me who I met after the war.

Q: So, now let's move to **Budapest**, and we'll move back in time. So, in '42, you come with your brother, and you become a dental technician.

A: Yeah, I worked in a laboratory.

Q: Now, tell me about the life in **Budapest** for you, away from your family, for those two years before the Germans came in.

A: It was not bad, let's put it this way. Really not – before the – before the Germans came in, it was not bad.

Q: And where were you living?

A: I was living in **Dabutsa**(ph), it was not far from the real – the synagogue, you know, I was living by mys – by a – by a – an older couple who rented me a room. Not my own apartment, or my own **[indecipherable]** gave me a room –

Q: And you're still religious at this point?

A: Yes. And as a matter of fact, the **Dahani**(ph) synagogue was not far away, and I used to go every Friday night to listen to the cantor. You know, it's used – things from home, so I – so I was going every Friday night to listen to the cantor because I wanted to, and my older brother did the same thing.

Q: And was your older brother living in the same house, or he was living elsewhere?

A: No, no, because they didn't have big rooms enough to have two people living there, so he lived in another apartment with somebody else, another older couple.

Q: But you saw each other frequently beside?

A: Yes, we saw each other frequently, yes.

Q: And so now, March 1944, **Germany** occupies **Hungary**.

A: Yes.

Q: How did your – tell me your memories of the day when you found out that **Hungary** was no longer independent.

A: Well, we looked out of the windows and we saw the marching. And each one came to sou – there's gonna be trouble, it's gonna be trouble. Because a few days

later, they already send out notices to the Jewish people like no – now, if I had to put down a stick here, and start a **[indecipherable]** and if somebody killed me during the day, he knew nothing is going to happen to him, because the Germans is not going to prosecute him, or the Hungarians, because he killed a Jew. So you were afraid to go out on the street.

Q: And you noticed a difference in terms of how the Hungarians treated you, apart from the Germans. The Hungar –

A: The Hungarians were almost the same way, you know. Almost – almost like the Germans. Now, but that time, I don't know how much control the Germans had yet, but the Hungarian army had a lot of control. I guess **Hitler** gave them the – gave them that they can do that. They called **munka [indecipherable] zwangsarbeit**, you know, forced labor for the Jewish people.

Q: And when were you called up for forced labor?

A: For forced labor I co – was called – even though you're supposed to be only 18 y – you're supposed to be 18 years old, but I was called up. And you had to wear a card with the s – with the re – with the – with the yellow band here, and gather here and then they took you to forced labor. Because by that time, the Americans – the Americans did a lot of damage to **Budapest**. They bombed a lot of things, important things in **Budapest**. And they marched us to clean up whatever they had there.

Q: And was your brother also conscripted?

A: No, my brother ran – somewhere was hiding. He found a – he found a family that he could hide, you know. And he had a girlfriend, you know. And to me, I think he disappeared during this time already. I didn't see him and I didn't know where he is, because see, either he didn't want to come out, he should be recognized. So I had to do things on my own, even though I wasn't 18 years old yet. But they took me to these kind of works. And then, month later, this was – let's see, this was May, June, July, around July already – I mean, rumors went down that they're going to ship us away to ric – to a camp, right. So, because we lived already in a ghetto.

Q: And –

A: It's called a close out there, close ou – I mean, the streets, just like let's say you – you – your **Connecticut** circle or something like this. So this is the streets that they have. And that was a ghetto there.

Q: And so you were in the ghetto and then each day they marched you forced la –

A: In the ghetto, each day, they knew because they came into the hall in the bottom, you know, in those – because the ghetto is, you know you're there, they have the big apartments here, and here is like a garage you can come in the middle, you know. And all you had to see, all the Jewish people should come down, you know, and

they knew who we are. So they forced us to the labor camp, because most of them were Jewish, you know.

Q: And so when you were in for forced labor, were you living in the ghetto? Were you already moved to a labor camp?

A: In the – in the – in the – in the ghetto. In the ghetto. Because I remember the Holocaust Museum's name, what is the street where you –

Q: **Raoul Wallenberg**.

A: **Raoul Wallen** – I saw him.

Q: So wha –

A: He was still there when we – he gathered us – you know, a lot of Jews who were below 18, you had to be still, you know, gathered us, because I would have been 18 in 2,000 – in na – in – in September, but that was, I think, a little before September, because I think they were – he came from – from **Sweden** bu – **Sweden** bu – but we didn't know anything about it. So he told – spoke to hundreds or maybe thousands of Jewish boys and girls, you know. What was the talk? **Hitler** wants the Americans should – I should **[indecipherable]** to the Americans. They want 10,000 trucks and he's gonna let 10,000 boys and girls go to **America**. Jewish. But the Americans refused the trucks, so the Germans came right away to cross **[indecipherable] Austria**.

Q: So let me ask – move back a little bit and ask you two questions. One is if you can describe a little bit more about the type of work you were doing in the labor battalion, and the other is, when you talk about having seen **Raoul Wallenberg**, do you know any people who made it to the glass house, and were saved through him? If you can address those two areas?

A: No, no, I don't know. Really I wouldn't know. But you know, you didn't – you didn't go there every day, because you weren't in the ghetto, you know, in the place that's a – maybe it was in the shul, in the synagogue that he gathered us, or somewhere else. But you know when you're this age and you – one day you come and one day you don't come. It's – it's not something that – that – that – that – that – that you believe something is going to happen, you know. You hope, but – and then they just disappeared, everything.

Q: And did you have enough to eat in the ghetto?

A: In the ghetto nobody had enough to eat. That – they gave us, let's say, a bread, for three days, a pound of bread, or four days. Now, you tried not to eat it, correct, in **Mauthausen**, you tried to eat every day a piece. But you had to sleep with it, you had to hide it, you had – otherwise somebody stole it from you.

Q: So after a month, say you left – you were taken from the ghetto and –

A: We were – we were – we were walked, we were not thre – we – we – they didn't – see, let's say this is **Budapest**, **Hungary**, and this is the border to go to **Austria**. And **Mauthausen** could be here, maybe 500 kilometers, or I don't know how much. So we walked from here, over here and here.

Q: So –

A: Th-They made us sleep in certain places, I'd say –

Q: How long was the march?

A: It took maybe a month, or maybe six weeks, or maybe two months, I don't know exactly.

Q: And do you know about how much – long you were marching each day? Was it 10 kilometers, 20 kilometers?

A: This – well, you marched, because – this I wouldn't know. No, you just obeyed orders, you know.

Q: Right. And but all day long, you got up in the morning, walked –

A: Right, right, but – but the – the funny thing is this, because I been saying those things too. Once we crossed the border, is we didn't – we didn't sleep outside because it – the winter started to come, you know, in – in – in September, October, there's cold already. So – so, in certain places where they knew the – let's say they took us into a place like this, which in – can take in, if you want to sleep 30 - 40

people, so they put in a hundred people. So you couldn't sleep, you couldn't lay down. You could only stay. Now, if somebody died – I se – I been saying this all the time, if somebody died, you didn't report it to them, you just took them as – as a pillow, and you slept on them, you know. So that was a difficult situation, walking and stopping, and walking until we reached **Mauthausen**.

Q: Who was guarding you while you were walking? Were these Hungarians, or –

A: No, once we crossed – we went, we crossed the – from ha – from **Hungary**, that was the Austrian army.

Q: And in **Hungary** it was Hungarians?

A: **Hungary** was Hungarians, yeah.

Q: And when you were walking, what were you wearing? Were these the clothes you had with you from the ghetto?

A: Well, I had – no, see, it was too late for that time when we came to the ghetto, or the changes, the clothes like you see in the movies that you had those stripes and **[indecipherable]** no.

Q: So it was civilian clothes.

A: We did have – we still have the – had the – only the clothes that we came with, you know. Nothing else but a pair of pants and a jacket an-and a shirt or whatever, and that's it. Cause you couldn't – we were not allowed to take anything with you

while you were walking, cause you didn't have nowhere to put it, no place, you know.

Q: And then when did they – did they feed you once a day, or week, or –

A: In the ghetto they fed us once a day, lunchtime. So in other words, they gave you a bread for three, four days. You had to be your own master on it, to eat it one time, or you can not eat nothing for the next three days, or just cut it, or – or tear off a piece and eat today and tear off a piece and eat tomorrow.

Q: And while you were marching?

A: While we were marching, you know, it's – it's – it's gonna be stopped, because they have nothing to feed us when we were walk. They brought us a soup sometimes, you know, later on, because let's say we stopped five o'clock, two hours later they brought in the **[indecipherable]** you know, for everybody something. But food, forget it, it's not really –

Q: And did they –

A: This why people died, mainly cause you didn't have any food at all.

Q: So of your group – you started with about a hundred? About how many people died en route, was the mortality rate –

A: I wish I knew, but because y-you know, y-you're talking – first of all, you're talking to a very young person, you know, who did not experience anything of the sort. And it didn't think that it should go into my mind to watch –

Q: Right.

A: I only think I watched because they told you when you walked, let's say here, five people walked in the street, and they announced it in German, if somebody's going to step out, is gonna be shot. So everybody was – was very, very alert, just to walk exactly behind anybody, not to step out this way from the line.

Q: Now, when you were walking, did civilians, Hungarians or Austrians ever stop and sort of look at you? Did you ever see people –

A: They stopped, but they didn't say a word, you know. They laughed, they didn't s – didn't say a word, I mean, it's nothing.

Q: Did they come out thinking that it was something interesting to see, or was it just –

A: Oh, they enjoyed it. This is the way it looked to us, you know.

Q: So were you walking through towns, or in the countryside?

A: Most of it the countryside, you know. Sometimes you had to walk through a town, because in order to find somewhere to put us up, so the towns had – either they had the churches, or they had other things. **[indecipherable]** you could – you

could – stalls, you know, from – for the cows. They took the cows out and they put us in there for the night, you know, things like this.

Q: And at any point did they they tell you where you were marching to?

A: No.

Q: So eventually af – you arrive in **Mauthausen**, or –

A: Eventually we arrived in **Mauthausen**, but **Mauthausen** was so full that they didn't have empty space for us where to put it – put us. So they built, you know, for the outside, those – th-those – how – th-they build now f – you know, when – when the –

Q: At barracks?

A: Tents.

Q: Tents.

A: Tents. Tents, you know, they built for – they built tents. I mean they built not small tents, they built tents that could take in a thousand people.

Q: And tell me what your reaction was when you saw **Mauthausen** for the first time. You've been marching for a month and then you get to this place. What was the first thing that crossed your mind?

A: Scary, very scary. You don't know what's hap – gonna happen. You did not know nothing. The only thing you heard, a lot of bombing at night, because I think

the Americans already bombed these places. Because they bombed **Budapest** and the Americans **[indecipherable]** was still there. And they bombed, you know, so th- that's the only thing we could hear.

Q: And did you get to talk to any of the prisoners who had been there before?

A: No.

Q: So you had no idea what it was, or –

A: No, because there was Jews and non-Jews prisoners and a lot of Russian prisoners in there also, o-on those – in the regular barracks, you know, it was very, very big.

Q: And when you arrived, did they issue you camp uniforms, or you stayed –

A: No. This why I'm saying this, I found this picture in my pocket.

Q: And did you have any work assignments once you got there, or you just –

A: Most of the time no, because you know, every – every barrack had – had a – a **kapo**, a leader, a Jewish leader, that's it. The Germans said, you're going to be the **kapo**, you're going to be responsible for those thousand people. They cannot go out unless you take them out. We tell you to take mi – take out 10 or 20 or 30, and go there and there.

Q: What was your impression of the **kapo**?

A: I really don't know, because m-maybe I – maybe when you're younger than – they were older people there also with us. They probably would have known certain things or they would have, you know. But my a – my impression was to just keep quiet and don't mix in, and don't do just you are t – what you are told. That was my impression and this what I did.

Q: And so one day was pretty much the same as the other for your last time –

A: Right, the same. You see, as – as – as they came closer, the Germans – I mean, the Americans, you know, occupy this part of **Austria** and this part, they came **[indecipherable]** closer – I'm talking months later, they used to take us out to work on **schützengraben**.

Q: Describe that.

A: **Schützengraben**. This is for the – for the army it was you go into those foxholes.

Q: So you were digging them, or –

A: Yep, we are digging, digging and digging, di-digging, and digging and digging and then brought back, you know, brought back you know, but – and then the Americans still came closer, right. So this was already January, February. In February, I think, in the beginning of February they marched us out from **Mauthausen** – or – or in January, I'm not sure – marched us out from **Mauthausen**, and they took us to a place, **Gunskirchen**.

Q: And was life there any different than **Mauthausen**?

A: Worse. Because that was in ou – in the mountains, you know, and it was raining and muddy. You – you – you couldn't even go and lay down to sleep, you can only stay, because the mud was still here.

Q: To your –

A: In the barracks, with no floors. Til – til May the fourth, of the liberation.

Q: Describe liberation day.

A: I talked so much about that liberation day. We get up in the morning from like I said, the **kapo**. Me – not me, because the older people who were in the camp. So the **kapo** going in and out, several **kapos**, knock on doors – on there. They didn't know what happened. So I don't know, at 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock **[indecipherable]** people looked out, they didn't see any Germans in the uniforms, they didn't see any be – if they saw a German he was running this way, you know. So they came in and told everybody, something is wrong, something is going on, you know. But by two o'clock, you know, the **kapo** came in, says the German left because the Americans are coming. But we have to wait til the Americans are going to come here, because yo-you don't know where the Germans are now. They are not here. If you go out now, you might find a German who can do harm to you. So we were in there, but some people, older people, younger people – I was too weak and too young to s – to

– to think, went out from the – from the – from the barracks, and they went to the – where they had the food that – you know – and started to open up the stores there, whatever they have sas – and they started to bring it into the camp, you know. The reason why I remember these things, I was too weak to go there, so I stood by the door – my wife, I used to tell her that story, and this was a funny thing, what happened. I see one fellow, maybe a little older, a year or two than I, which I never knew him, comes in with – with something in his hands like this, a jar like, you know.

A2: Honey.

A: Honey. I didn't know it's honey. So I j – I was laying down there and I jump up and I grab it. And it made him full of honey on his face, and he was very angry at me. But I had some honey, and – and started eating. And then I didn't see him again, we didn't – no, we didn't. But – I'll tell this later on. So by f – I think it was around four o'clock, was no – who had watches, but we just looked at – was around four o'clock that the Americans came in. And they opened the door, so they says, you can go any place you want. So where do you go from d – you don't know – nobody knew where. So they directed us to go into the town, it's called **Wels**. **Wels**, it's 30 kil – 30 kilometers or less than **Linz** – from **Linz**. So we all went into that town, I don't know how many thousands of people, but a day later – we slept outside,

because there is no place where to sleep. A day later and two days later and three days later, we were still walking around **[indecipherable]**, but the Americans came with their **Jeeps** and grabbed us, put us in in the **Jeep** and brought us to **Wels**, because **Wels** had room for thousands of people because it was an **SS** camp, officers' camp. And everything was empty, so they brought us there, you know. So we are there and they didn't know how to feed us, so they gave us too much food. A few days later, I je – I remember on a Sunday morning, hundreds of people were laying outside hardly breathing because their stomachs swelled up, you know. And – an-and I found right there, some of my – some – two people from my hometown laying there.

Q: Had you known they were in the camp before?

A: No, no I didn't know. What happened to them, I don't know, I think one of them died, but what happened to the other one, I really don't know. But then the Americans got somebody in and they – and they advised them what to cook and what to serve for those people, otherwise **[indecipherable]** are gonna die.

Q: Were there any Austrians still in the town?

A: Yes.

Q: And what was their attitude to what was going on?

A: Yeah. They were – just nothing, I mean, they j – they just looked, I suppose. I mean, nobody had any conversation with them. Not me, and not – not my friends who were with me. Friends – those people who came with me. So we just looked and looked and looked, you know, so – but – until the Americans came and took us into the **Jeep**, said, let's go – no, come. So, I remember else, I'm – I'm a week, two weeks, three weeks, I think after the fourth or the fifth week, I don't remember exactly because nobody counted. I'm in the – in the – taking a shower, because it has community showers, like the people, you know, here for the women and here for the men. And I'm walking out dressed up to take a shave or whatever it is, and a girl comes over to me. And she looks at me. She says, I know your name. So I almost dropped dead. You know, she said, what do you mean you **[indecipherable]** in Yiddish **[indecipherable]** she says, your name is **Ernie Pollak**. So I figured right away somebody knew. Says, how do you know? She says, I was with your sister in the camp. Her name is **Bluma**(ph) **Park**. So I says, oh my God, tell me exactly where, you know, this was at – it was already four or five weeks, I don't know exact. So she says to me, she is in **Bergen-Belsen**. Now, **Bergen-Belsen**, I don't know how many hundreds of kilome – kilometers, because it was in **Germany** – it was from there. Now I would not – I did not expect that I'm gonna figure th – say to myself I'm going to go to **Bergen-Belsen**, how am I gonna go to **Bergen-Belsen**? I

don't know. I don't have good clothes even, I don't have **[indecipherable]**. So she says, when I came here, I came from **Feldafing**, an – another **DP** camp. She says, you come with me to **Feldafing**, you know. She came to see her brother, she found out that her brother was – was in **Wels** with me. And she's, you come with me, and then from there you gonna go to **Bergen-Belsen**, which is not that far. So I went to **Bergen-Belsen**, it took us three months. We got to **Bergen-Belsen Erev rontef – Erev** Rosh Hashanah. Can you imagine how – how long it took us to go there? I found some people from my hometown, you know, and I started asking questions. You know **Gans**(ph) **[indecipherable]** his brother, you know? And he says, your sister was never here. Whoever I asked, your sister was never here. Nobody knew what – what I'm asking, nobody knew her, nobody – so, I don't know why she said to me that my sister is in **Bergen-Belsen**. But I was glad I was there amongst some other people that I know from my hometown. And then, a year later – and I'm just jumping certain things because there's a lot of things from here til the year later, I just want to bring two things together about that fellow that I took the honey.

Q: Yeah.

A: He came with his sister from **Romania** back to **Bergen-Belsen**, because he also said something, because we are sitting, you know, in **Bergen-Belsen** with friends, having lunch or something. **Ber-Bergen-Belsen** was also a camp which it had a –

A2: A **DP** camp.

A: A **DP** camp, yeah, because you know where **Anne Frank** was?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: It's jus – it's – **Anne Frank** was in **Belsen**. And **Bergen** was a – was an **SS** camp, which it had 10 - 15,000 officers there, you know. And ben – berry – when vi – the liberation was, they took from **Belsen** th – where **Anne Frank** was, all boys and girls in here to the **Bergen** camp, because they had where to live there, but in a concentration camp. So it became **Bergen-Belsen**, together. So I sitting at a table, and this guy was sitting with his sister, you know, I mean that's much later, about half a year later, or – or – or – or 10 months later. And we are talking, what do we talk, with him and with him and with him, we telling the stories about camp, we telling the stories about camp, we telling what happened this. And I happened to tell that story. The guy sitting in front of me, he said, you son of a gun, it was you who did this to me. And **[indecipherable]** you know who.

Q: So –

A: So I apologized, what can I do? But we were friends, all the way. We came to the **United States** aga – together, and he wasn't – he wasn't in a – used – I used to invite him to – to my Bar Mitzvahs to the kids, and th-that. So it worked out, you know, thank God, you know.

Q: Now, did you ever find your sister?

A: Well, in order for me to find my sister and the rest of them, it's – it's a story, if you're ready. **Bergen-Belsen** was a camp for thousands of boys and girls, thousands of them. And we – you know how it was, there was nothing to do. There was nothing to do. You go again to eat lunch, you go again to eat breakfast, you go again eat. Was nothing. It was separated by **Bergen-Belsen** and five different camps: camp one, camp two, camp three, camp four. And each one had about a thousand boys and girls or – or maybe more. You had to get a bicycle to travel somewhere, so after I was there six or seven months, the **Haganah** came down, the Israeli hag – soldiers, maybe a hundred of them, dressed in civilian clothes, cause **Bergen-Belsen** was under the – the eng – the – the – the – **England's** occupation. No, not American, was **England**, you know. And they started to get 50 people here in this room, 50 people here in this room, 60 people here, or a hundred people here. And they used to talk to us, what you should do. And nobody knew whether anybody survived. So they used to say like this here; you, I'm gonna give you five postcards; you I'm gonna give five post – postcards. Write the name where the postcards should go, to your hometown; whether it's **Romania**, **Czechoslovakia,** or – o-or it's **Hungary**, or – or – o-or it's in **Poland**, or it's in any of these places. He says, I don't care how long it's gonna take to get there, just write the name to go there. And

write not the name, just write to the city hall. This postcard should go to the city hall for **Osovish**(ph) let's say, to my hometown. And in the other side write, my name is **Ernie Pollak**. The first Jew who comes into the town, give him my postcard. Don't you think I wrote one day, I wrote next day. About three months later I get a postcard from my younger brother.

Q: He had survived **Auschwitz**, and –

A: No, he was in **Auschwitz**, but he – they send him from **Auschwitz** to a camp, to a labor camp. And he says to me, your older brother is alive, and your older sister is alive, and they are in this and this town in **Romania**. I came to my homet – to our hometown, and there's nothing here. Don't come home. I'm gonna come to you. Of c-course I wrote the address where I am, this why the postcard came to me. Says don't come home. It took a few months and then he got to me. So we were already –

Q: So – so was 1946?

A: – two brothers – yes, 1946.

Q: So, first time in four years you had seen him.

A: Yeah.

Q: And were you able to communicate with the older brother and sisters?

A: Well, he told me that my older brother – as a matter of fact, years – a little while later, my older brother, like I said in the beginning, that he and his girlfriend – he

had a girlfriend in **Budapest** – he found her after the war because they were liberated in December, I think, '44. He found her, they got married and they got home, he went home, December **[indecipherable]** not in **Budapest**, it was – well maybe to her hometown. And she had a baby girl, and she got very sick, she fell off a table, something with her foot, she – and they had to go to **Vienna**. Later on, I don't know when this happened, maybe a year later, she had to go to **Vienna** when she was a year old, or three years old, in order to fix her leg. But while he was in **Vienna**, he stood there already for a while, you know. And then he came to **Bergen-Belsen**. I don't know – I don't even remember why they came to **Bergen-Belsen**, but he came to the **United States** after this.

Q: So, and, of the rest of your family?

A2: Never came **[indecipherable]**

A: What?

A2: Never came to – never came to **Bergen –** I d – I don't –

A: No, I thought he didn't come to **Bergen-Belsen**, I don't remember.

Q: So, of the rest of your family – so that's three brothers. Did any of the other five siblings survive?

A: No, no. It's – it's – as a matter of fact, when I got to **Bergen-Belsen**, and I met him, yost – your – what's his name? **Gans**(ph)**, Gans**(ph), I met, from my

hometown, and the first thing he told me, I was with your father, and with your brother **Moishe**(ph) in camp together, but a few days before the liberation, they moved us from one place to the next place, and we had to walk and walk. And your brother went out of – ran – went out of line, **Moishe**, and he ran to a store, and – and the **SS** ran after him. But your father ran after him also, to bring him back, so I heard two shots. So they must have shot both of them, cause only the **SS** came out, and your brother and father didn't come out from that store. This is two days before the liberation. That's all I know.

Q: And the rest of your family you never heard?

A: Because they were too young anyway, because I know my mother got killed in **Auschwitz** with the rest of the three or four sibling, a little girl. Because one was born 1930 – '30, one was born 1938 –

Q: And –

A: – an-and one was born 1934.

Q: And **Bluma**(ph), who – she sat –

A: **Bluma**(ph) got married to our cousin **[indecipherable] Klausenborg**(ph).

Q: Before the war.

A: Befo – no –

Q: Afterwards –

A: After –

Q: Oh, so she did survive.

A: After she was liberated, yeah, after. This what he said to me, my ran – he – he's – my younger brother send me the message, says, **Bluma**(ph) is home, and **David** is home, you know. And he had – the husband she married had three brothers in **Israel**, so he wanted just to go to **Israel**. So they went to **Israel** – I think I was told, I'm not a hundred percent sure, I was told that she went with the – with the **Exodus** boat, I'm not a hundred percent sure, but the **Exodus** boat went in 1947.

Q: Right.

A: And they wouldn't let them into **Israel**, so they – they – they went over – what is that –

A2: Cyp –

A: **Cyprus**, they went into **Cyprus** for a year. Then when **Israel** became a state, they moved them into **Israel**.

Q: So when were you able to communicate with her for the first time?

A: When I was able to communicate with her the first time, that – I don't – I don't remember exactly when, I must have, because my – yeah, because after **Israel** became a state, I was able to communicate with her.

Interview with Ernie Pollak
March 2, 2010

Q: And let us go back to **[indecipherable]** so how long did you stay in **Bergen-Belsen**?

A: **Bergen-Belsen** I stood til 1949, September.

Q: And then –

A: Then I came to the **United States**.

Q: And why did you decide to come to the **United States**?

A: Well, to me and my younger brother, there was something, you know – in 1934, one of my mother's sisters – my mother had four sisters and two brothers in **New York**. One of my mo – my brother's sisters came to my hometo – our hometown, because my mother gave birth to a boy and she wanted to name him – to name the boy after her husband who died in – in – in **New York**. But the husband – in – not new – yeah, but her husband had a brother in the small town – in the middle time, you know **[indecipherable]** brother. Now in the Jewish religion, if you want – if the brother is alive, in the Orthodox religion, and if you have a boy and you want to give his name **[indecipherable]** the person, hi-his wife has to get **Halitzah**, separation. So whi – she came from **New York** to my hometown – to our hometown, and he gathered the full synagogue and they made – the rabbi made **Halitzah**, in other words a separation from her husband, who was dead, and this little boy can be named on his name. So this how I knew her, and then you know, we se – my

younger brother said look, we have very no – whoever remained alive, your sisters went to **Israel**. We have to wait to go to **New York** to see the rest of the family. And this is what we did.

Q: Let me just ask a couple concluding questions. You began the interview by talking about your life before and that it was a very religious home and you were going to the synagogue every day. Did your attitude towards religion change as a result of the war?

A: It's – it's – it's – it's a funny thing that you ask. We remained three brothers and a sister. My brother married a cousin, and he was religious, but my – my – my sister married a cousin and he was religious, the one in **Israel**, and they observed everything religion – quite religion **[indecipherable]**. My older brother became Orthodox also, because he was Orthodox always, and he didn't leave. So a matter of fact, I have a kosher home and sometimes he realized and he used to come and eat in my house. And at one time he realized that it might not be as kosher for certain reasons, I don't know. Then he says, I'm not going to eat in your house again. So I went to **Brooklyn** and I brought in food for him, you know **[indecipherable]**. But my younger brother, **Shlerma**(ph) – and I used to talk to him, you know, but I didn't say anything; he became an atheist. So I says **[indecipherable]** sometimes, why. He says, if God could stay up there and watch two million boys and girls as young as I

get killed, He didn't do nothing, he says, why should I believe in Him? I am relig – I'll go – I go to synagogue, I sometimes read the Torah sometimes here – here in new yor – in **Washington**.

A2: **Leisure World**.

A: **Leisure World**. And we observe, we have a kosher home, but I'm not as religious as I should have been, or – or as – and it – I f – I feel comfortable like this, you know.

Q: And before we ask – then we ask, is there anything else you think is important to know before we conclude? How your earlier experiences changed your life after the war, influenced the decisions you made after the war?

A: Well –

Q: Career-wise, family-wise, anything?

A: – I – my family is – became my first, you know. I met her not even a year I was in **New York**, right? And then we got married in 1952, yeah.

Q: And then we – and your wife's name?

A: **Lucy**. And thank God, you know, we build a nice hou – home. I have two children, a daughter and a son, and I have five grandchildren, three boys, and they all have a kosher home, you know. And my granddaughter in – my – my daughter belongs to **[indecipherable]** and my older – my granddaughter, who's already 17

years old, she reads the Torah day re – every – every month. And I just came back here, she read the **Megillah**, part of it. So I'm happy. And – and I – my – my son sent the three children til eighth grade in Hebrew schools. And thank God –

A2: Jewish day.

A: Hm?

A2: Jewish day.

A: Jewish day school, yeah, to a Jewish day school. And it works out okay, he's married happily and my daughter's married happily and that's it.

Q: Thank you. Well thank you so much for talking to us. We've been talking to Mr. **Ernie Pollak**, doing an audio interview for the Holocaust Museum, March second, thank you very much.

A: Thank you.

A2: Your second interview.

Conclusion of Interview