United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with David Wisnia
April 7, 2011
RG 50.030*0619

PREFACE

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Transcribed by Heidi J. Darst (File One) and Andrea E. Wabeke (File Two), National Court Reporters Association.

DAVID WISNIA
April 7, 2011

Question: This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Cantor David Wisnia, conducted by Joseph Toltz on April the 7th, 2011, in Princeton Junction, New Jersey. It's a very great pleasure for me to be here to talk to you today, Cantor Wisnia, and I'd like you to start by talking to me about your background of training, your musical life and your family life leading up to the invasion in '39.

Answer: Okay. I think I might have an easier time if you would be asking questions,

Q: Okay. Good. Okay.

A: okay, because I don't know what I'm leaving out, what specifically you would like. For instance, I was born I have a problem there 1924, 1926.

Q: Yes.

A: I got myself so oriented to say 1926 or '24, I'm sorry, that that's what I used when I came to Auschwitz.

Q: Right.

A: During the selection, I wanted to move over with the guys who were at least 18.

Q: Yes, of course, yes, so you were safe.

A: So... now, I'm still not sure. I went back to Poland to find out my birth certificate in Sochaczew. Forget it, can't get it.

Q: Yeah.

A: We even had a deal with a dedication of a cemetery in Sochaczew that I went back to. And we knew the mayor. It didn't do any good. There's no records.

Q: Right, right.

A: So when my first I I was a member of course, my father's name is Elijah. My mother's name was Machla (ph). Lived with my family until I finished the Yavneh school system in Sochaczew.

Q: That was only primary school?

A: Yes. Yavneh.

Q: Yes. Yavneh was was Hebrew and Polish?

A: Hebrew Polish. No Yiddish was allowed.

Q: Right.

A: As a matter of fact, I distinctly remember having I did something in Yiddish, I said a couple of words, I had to write it down 500 times. So it was a whole the idea was design a school

Q: Uh huh.

A: you were going to learn modern Hebrew, period.

Q: Yes.

A: That's it.

Q: Yeah.

A: So everything was in Hebrew. Every subject was in Hebrew.

Q: It was a private school.

A: As a result private, oh, God, God.

Q: And exclusive?

A: And the reason quite exclusive, for one reason, because you had to be able to afford it.

Q: Right.

A: Because people as a matter of fact, I remember we paid for for other people too. We were sort of considered you see, Poland doesn't have a middle class, or never did. You were either wealthy or you were poor. And, you'll pardon the expression, piss poor.

Q: Yeah.

A: Most Jews were quite poor.

Q: Yeah.

A: Could not eek barely eeked out a living. My father was a businessman. He had a place in Warsaw where he employed some people doing furniture. I explained that to you, you know, like

Q: Yes, the upholstery.

A: upholstered, right,

Q: Yes.

A: for businesses. He employed other people. And my grandfather had a business in Sochaczew itself. He was making these fancy caskets, you see, like you see this here.

Q: And these were these were caskets not for Jewish funerals though.

A: These were no, that's correct.

Q: Right.

A: And as it turned out, God must have looked down upon the whole situation. And because of one of these guys who worked for my grandfather, I was able to survive when I escaped from Warsaw. He's the one who saved my life.

Q: Yeah. So getting back

A: Yeah.

Q: to your family. So you were are you the youngest?

A: I was a member no, I was a middle child.

Q: Okay. So your other siblings?

A: There one my older brother there were three boys. My elder brother was two and a half years older than I. My younger brother was two and a half years younger than I.

Q: And you had sisters?

A: No.

Q: So it was just the three of you.

A: No. Three. Three

Q: And their names were?

A: The older one was Moshe. The younger one was Dov Berela (ph).

Q: Dov Berela. It's always Dov Berela.

A: So... well, it's redundant, but what are you going to do.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: That's if you wanted to use Yiddish, so...

Q: Yeah, sure. Now, tell me, then, how

A: We all went to that school.

Q: Right. Is that where you found your love of music, or was it earlier?

A: Well, no, the love of music came from my father. My father was a big opera buff.

Q: Ah, right.

A: So I learned, believe it or not, E lucevan le stelle when I was nine years old. I don't remember it anymore, but it's always in my mind, so...

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Tosca.

Q: Yeah.

A: And and when I came to Warsaw, you know, and I started with David Eisenstadt in the big choir, he's the one he was so impressed with it, that was

Q: Yes.

A: you know, for a kid nine, ten years old.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I used to go into Warsaw quite often because my father took me. And I must say that I was probably favored among the three brothers because I was an ex I was a good student, I was a top student in the school in Hebrew. I took the Hebrew. I had a very good ear for for music.

Q: Uh huh.

A: And I became a member of the, what's called the dramatisch kreis, dramatic circle.

Q: Yes.

A: I have a picture at home. I hope on the way back I'll show you. A picture at home where I have remember Tippy (ph) said something I'm going from one thing from another, but I think you will get the point. Sarah Tippy (ph) had a friend, Sarah, that marched in from Majdanek and I recognized her.

Q: Uh huh.

A: I don't know if you know that story.

Q: No, no, no, I don't know that story.

A: Writer's story.

Q: Yeah.

A: 1943.

Q: Yeah.

A: And Tippy (ph) saved her life

Q: Yeah.

A: actually.

Q: Yeah.

A: She just passed away two years ago. I did the funeral

Q: Right.

A: in New York. She was my mother. I should have known that Tippy was much older than I was. Who knew?

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: The where was I? Let me get back to the part of being being the favorite because I sang.

Q: Yes.

A: I sang. When I sang, Sochaczew was a small town

Q: Yes.

A: even though it had thousands of Jews. But the synagogue, I became the soloist in the synagogue in Sochaczew.

Q: What was the name of the synagogue in Sochaczew?

A: I don't remember.

Q: There was just a was it only one synagogue?

A: The only major

Q: Okay. So it was like a it was the major synagogue.

A: There was a major big synagogue. And there was a Beis Medrash,

Q: Sure.

A: which was for the ultra, ultra orthodox.

Q: Yeah, sure.

A: But the synagogue was also, and that was Cantor Helmer.

Q: Okay.

A: With choir, with he taught me music. I started with the Solfege, you know, do re me fa sol la ti do.

Q: Yes.

A: The whole and that's they took because I had a beautiful alto, obviously. I don't sound it too now. And I became the soloist of the choir. We must have had I'm trying to remember how many people two, four, six, eight, ten, about 12 or 14

Q: Uh huh.

A: in the choir.

Q: Yeah.

A: All male.

Q: How old were you when you became the soloist of this choir?

A: I would say about nine, eight. And also, I appeared in a in the theater in Sochaczew. As a matter of fact, I know the people still live there.

Q: Really.

A: I go back there. Whenever I go back there, there was a kino, which is movie house.

Q: Uh huh.

A: The building is still there.

Q: Uh huh.

A: I appeared when I was about eight years old. I appeared do you know (schnemich david?)?

Q: No.

A: The story of the two, like two pyramids from Moscow. I must have been around eight years old. I was the halutz singing a song. And on the other pyramid was this Sarah, who came into Auschwitz.

Q: Right.

A: She was my mother.

Q: Right, right.

A: So who

Q: That's the connection.

A: looked at age. And we played played in the theater.

Q: Right.

A: So I was always singing

Q: Acting and

A: and acting and singing. I was the youngest one. I have a picture in my home as a matter of fact, I think we should. You'll see the group, the dramatic circle, and I'm the little kid, really.

Q: Tell me, how did you get to Tlomackie Synagogue?

A: Oh. Everything until 1937, we lived in Sochaczew.

Q: Okay. Then you moved.

A: Then we moved. My father used to come home on Friday

Q: Uh huh.

A: afternoons by bus. I used to go to the central place in Sochaczew. He used to come bring all kinds of goodies, because you didn't work on Saturday or Sunday for whatever reason. Anyways, stayed, and Sunday you went back.

Q: Uh huh.

A: So in 1937, they wouldn't take me out because I was too too important in the town. Everybody knew me. I was like a little star in the you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: In 1937, we moved to Warsaw. We moved to the same street where my father had the his factory but about six, seven blocks further east

Q: Yes.

A: than the pla because the place where he had the factory

Q: And this is kroch (ph)

A: was Krochmalna

Q: Krochmalna.

A: 15.

Q: Yes.

A: Which was it's no longer there at all. It was destroyed during the Uprising.

Q: Yeah.

A: It was 100 percent Jewish, that area.

Q: Yes.

A: But we did not get an apartment over there. We got the apartment Krochmalna 43

Q: Right.

A: which was way near the major thoroughfare. And that became, by the way, the wall of the ghetto.

Q: Yes.

A: So we were lucky that we were living in the place there.

I got to the in '37 when we moved into Warsaw, I my father enrolled me in a Hebrew school. I think it was Shneur, Zalman Shneur or something on Dluga, on the street.

Q: Uh huh.

A: D L U G A. I don't remember exactly. Continuing like a Tarbut. You follow?

Again, Hebrew.

Q: Yes.

A: Hebrew. That was like a gymnasium.

Okay. And as I moved into Warsaw, as we moved into Warsaw, my father took me for an interview with Avram Hirsh (ph). Avram Hirsh? Davidovich (ph), who was the director of the Nozyk choir.

Q: Yes.

A: At that time, Sirota oh, by the way, before that, Sirota came the first time. That's when I became so popular. Sirota came for a concert

Q: To your

A: in Sochaczew.

Q: Sochaczew, yeah.

A: Sochaczew. And Cantor Helmer brought me up to his home and introduced me. And I was doing oot`hi l`ratzon tamid, avodat Yisrael amecha, you know, of the

Q: Yes.

A: Schlossberg R'tzei.

Q: Yeah, the the lower part.

A: I did the lower part.

Q: Lower part. And he did the higher part.

A: He did the high.

Q: Yes.

A: Of course, of course.

Q: Very nice.

A: Well, you can imagine that was and there were theaters. There were all kinds of 1934. When did Bialik die? I'm trying Hayim Nahman Bialik must have died in 1940 '35. '35. I sang for him.

Q: Right.

A: I did Luga (ph). My father took me once at the Shneur plays where he was visiting Warsaw. I sang noe de don nee doe feg poe (phonetic). I don't know if you ever heard that.

Q: No.

A: No. [singing] I was only about eight years old.

Q: Hmm. Hmm.

A: Took me into Warsaw. And I was sitting on his lap.

Q: On Bialik's lap?

A: On Bialik's lap. Really. He must have died this must have been 1934, so I was about nine.

Q: Yes. Yeah, eight or nine.

A: Eight or

Q: Yeah.

A: I was a little kid.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I sang that in Hebrew. Well, he was like I didn't know how important he was, so...

Q: No, no, no.

A: Now, anyway, the going back to we moved into Warsaw. I went for an interview with my dad. My dad or my mother took me, I don't remember, to Twarda, the street where the Nozyk Synagogue is still standing.

Q: Yes.

A: The leader of the choir was Davidovich. There must have been about 20, maybe 18, our figures don't hold me to the number that were singing on that little balcony. Have you been to the Nozyk Synagogue?

Q: No, but I've seen it.

A: You've never been to Warsaw.

Q: I've seen it. I've seen it.

A: Right on top, I used to stand at the end. I was a little kid at the end.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay. That was for about, I'd say, a year. And that was the time where Sirota and Koussevitzky sort of changed

Q: Roles.

A: roles

Q: Yes.

A: in the Nozyk Synagogue because I don't remember how it happened, but anyway, Sirota was first at the Tlomackie Synagogue, you know.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: But anyway, it wasn't big enough for my father for me to be

Q: Be at Nozyk.

A: at the Nozyk Synagogue, so he took me to Eisenstatd.

Q: Do you have show parents, is that what you're telling me? You know, this is not good enough for my little boy. [Laughing] So you

A: You know, Eisenstadt had they had they had an 80 piece choir.

Q: Yes, yes. Yes, absolutely. It was it was the pride of

A: Oh.

Q: of Europe.

A: And I will never forget the first time I was I did the solo at the Tlomackie Synagogue, V'chol Ma'aminim

Q: Which one?

A: V'chol v'chol, ma'aminim ma'aminim the choir with the choir. And I did the first word of each line.

Q: Right.

A: Oh, God.

Q: [Laughing] And and so you sang there I guess from '37 to '39?

A: Actually, from '37 to '38, I think I sang at the Nozyk Synagogue.

Q: Yeah.

A: At the Tlomackie, I was only for about six months, five months, six months

Q: Yeah, before the war broke out.

A: because the war broke out.

Q: Yes.

A: And that was the end. The war broke out on my birthday, and that's where I have problems with my age. I don't know whether it was 13th birthday or my 15th birthday.

Q: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: It was your 13th birthday.

Q: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: It was your bar mitzvah. So...

Q: Right.

A: Had a big party on Thursday night.

Q: Yeah.

A: I woke up about five o'clock in the morning, Friday morning. I woke up my father. Went into the bedroom. We lived on 43 Krochmalna. I walked up, I looked out the window. We lived at we had the fourth floor there. Looked out and I saw a squadron of airplanes coming over, high over a cloudless sky. Woke up my father. Dad I didn't say it in English, I said it in Polish. I said, These are not Polish planes.

Q: No.

A: They didn't bomb Warsaw.

Q: No, not at that stage.

A: They flew over

Q: Yeah.

A: the airport, Okecie, destroyed the 18 planes that Poland had. You know, they still has those

Q: Biplanes.

A: biplanes.

Q: Yeah.

A: Right. Not until 12 o'clock I woke up my father, I says, These are not Polish. Poland doesn't he said, Go back to sleep, they're maneuvers. I said, Maneuvers? This is September 1st now.

Q: Yeah, yeah, first day.

A: 1939.

Q: Yeah, first day.

A: Sure. It was five, six o'clock in the morning. Not until 12 noon did Polish radio

Q: Announce.

A: announce that the Germans attacked and destroyed the planes at the Polish airport. They told us.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: And we everybody started, you know, getting together, marching to the British embassy

Q: Yes.

A: and French embassy. And everybody went, you know, to see if England would honor their commitment.

Q: Yes.

A: And they did.

Q: Yes. And the French.

A: Supposedly. But that didn't mean anything, so...

Q: Yeah, well, it did that stage.

A: The war was over. You know, needless to tell you the details if you've heard

Q: No, we don't need to.

A: of that

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: because they used to artillery barrages into the ghetto.

Q: Yeah.

A: The ghetto into Warsaw. There was no ghetto.

Q: No, not by that stage.

A: Ghetto was formed in 1940.

Q: Yes. And your family didn't have to move.

Did you have to accept other people into the house?

A: Yes.

Q: How many people moved in?

A: My uncle, Moshe, with his wife and two let's see. One and they had two children.

Siskind (ph) and, oh, God, Sarelou (ph). Little babies.

Q: Hmm.

A: And then there was another family.

Q: Yeah.

A: So two families moved in. We had we had enough room, so...

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And because of your father's success

A: Yeah.

Q: in in business and that sort of stuff, were you able to live okay in those first years?

A: Well, we were able to do at first, but then they see, the Germans had squeezed the rations. It started look, they had a plan.

Q: Hmm, hmm.

A: They followed their program.

Q: Yeah.

A: So it didn't nothing happened immediately

Q: No, no.

A: at one clip.

Q: Yeah.

A: It was slow, lulled in. And now everybody with any brains, who didn't have any money, who didn't have any who wasn't doing well escaped over to the Russian side. The, what do you call it, border between occupied Poland and Russia was only about 40, 50 miles away.

Q: Yes.

A: So they managed to go north to Bialystok or to we heard stories that the people were filth, dirty, they have no food, they have excuse me. So my father wouldn't hear of it.

Q: Yeah.

A: He's going to let his kids...

Q: But your

A: Anyway

Q: But your brothers escaped?

A: My brothers, no, no, no, no, no.

Q: Okay.

A: My brothers were still with us. Everything was fine.

Q: Right.

A: As soon as we began hearing and things got much worse, you know, as far as food was concerned, as far as money was concerned, my father could not conduct any business slowly, that in November of 1940, we will have a ghetto formed in Warsaw. And we were lucky to have the what do you call it, our building in the ghetto, right inside in the corner of the ghetto, which was right next to the gate where the bridge was from one small ghetto to the large ghetto.

Q: Yes.

A: We were in the small one. So my brother went to Otvosk. That's where my family is from, my father's side of the family. Otvosk was down in, I'd say about 30 kilometers, 40 kilometers. That was the area where people used to go for the summer, I mean, the ones who could afford it.

Q: Yes, like a __.

A: Like a line. Right, right. The whole Wisnia clan lived in that area. So my father's brother. And that's where my brother went to because it made it easier, because in the suburbs it was much easier to get food.

Q: Yes.

A: In our Warsaw, you had to live by the rations they gave you. So when they closed the ghetto, it was first staffed by gendarmerie, German gendarmes, not SS. You see, they had

Q: Locals.

A: They were planned. It was planned. Gendarmes, German gendarmerie. German army.

Q: Uh huh.

A: No SS. Everything was fine. I was still going to school on occasion. I don't remember if it was every day. To Dluga we could walk. Trolley cars with stars of David on it. So everything was still fine until they attacked Russia.

Q: Yes.

A: '41.

Q: Yes.

A: June or July 22nd or something like that

Q: Yes.

A: 1941.

Q: Yeah.

A: All hell broke loose after that. We know we saw there was something wrong because the army that was guarding the ghetto changed completely. SS took over.

Q: Yeah. Because the rest of the army, the normal army would have been sent to the front.

A: That's right.

Q: Tell me, before we get into the

A: Yeah.

Q: the details of that particular period, do you remember any cultural activity that you experienced in the ghetto

A: In the ghetto itself, yes.

Q: between '39 and '41?

A: Yes, yes. As a matter of fact, I sang on the radio. I sang on Polish radio. I don't remember anymore what.

Q: Was that during the occupation?

A: Actually, it was I must have my dates

Q: That must have been before.

A: Yeah, must before, before.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: Before.

Q: But tell me, did you go to any theater? Because there was a thriving Yiddish theater.

A: There was a Yiddish theater.

Q: And there was a Polish theater.

A: There was a yes, we we did un infrequently. You see, they squeezed it.

Q: Yeah.

A: So it was a question of there were many people who had enough food, and majority of people did not.

Q: That's right.

A: So it started I don't remember really details, but all I know, it was not a good situation.

Q: No.

A: We saw it was wrong. [cough]

Q: Gesundheit.

A: But the whole situation changed

Q: Yeah.

A: as soon as they attacked

Q: Yeah.

A: Russia.

Q: Yeah.

A: My father used to go out, as a matter of fact used to go out to the airport. He knew carpentry because that was part of his

Q: His trade.

A: What do you call it? Trade.

Q: Yes.

A: So he went to the airport and he befriended one of the the airport that was bombed the first day. And there was the Luftwaffe sergeant over there who befriended him. And he used to bring home all kinds of goodies because he used to do some work for him over there.

Q: Right.

A: Okay. So everything was still fine.

Q: Yes.

A: And each I think day or two days or three days a week, they used to have like a truck that used to come to the komena, komenda,

Q: Yeah.

A: okay, on Grzybowska, which was only about three blocks away from us. And they used to go by bus by bus by truck over to the airport. They used to bring him back. Okay. One beautiful day, I don't remember exactly when, I guess it must have been August or September of 1941. My father did not feel exactly the greatest one morning, and he said why don't I go to the airport. Same Wisnia. By the way, because of that, I get paid from

Q: From the Germans

A: the German government,

Q: for being

A: would you believe it?

Q: Yeah.

A: They had the record. They have names.

Q: Yeah.

A: It's absolutely unbelievable.

Q: Yeah, yeah. So you went to the airport.

A: I went to the airport to work.

Q: Yeah.

A: When I came back

Q: Everyone was gone.

A: Let alone was everyone, I couldn't get into the house, the whole block. There's no record of this anywhere. They tried from what I found out from the people when I finally got the word to our section, it's called (falitsuv?) Krochmalma. Okay. Our building, 43, I couldn't get over to the building. Why? Because I heard there was was all blocked off by, what do you call it, Polish police, Yiddi Jewish police, SS on the outskirt, because they tried what they call resettlement. So used to drive in with a truck, give a square block or a building or two buildings do you follow me?

Q: Yeah.

A: a certain number of minutes to pick up their belongings.

Q: And get out.

A: And get out. They were going to take them this was the

Q: Like a (schpira?)

A: talk this was the talk of resettlement.

Q: Yes, yes. And I assume that your family all went to Treblinka. Or was it Treblinka

A: They weren't going. They weren't going anywhere.

Q: Yeah, no.

A: They just tried to find out how long it was going to take. Because they didn't take anybody. That must have been a trial.

Q: Oh.

A: But my father, if I remember if I know if I remember my father, he was a wise guy. He probably wouldn't listen to them.

Q: Yes.

A: You follow?

Q: Yeah.

A: I found my father, my mother this is tough. Oh, dammit.

Q: Do you want to stop? We can stop.

A: [sobbing] I'm sorry.

Q: It's okay. That's okay.

A: Ahhh. I finally made it into the building. And on the outside, there was a group of corpses. I found my my mother __. I didn't know what to do.

I'll be all right.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: I didn't think it would still do it to me.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I ran. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know where to go. I remembered across the street from our house, there used to live on 44 Krochmalna two Polish girls. It wasn't a Jewish area.

Q: Yeah. What were their names?

A: Only I know the first. I wish I knew their last name. I've been searching for them for 60 years and was never able to find them. Vonda (ph) and Yadja (ph).

There were two young girls on the first floor. We were very friendly. Used to play, used to anyway, I tried desperately to remember where I knew that Vonda they had to move out, you know, when the ghetto was formed.

Q: Yes, of course, because.

A: I knew they moved to Praga

Q: Yeah.

A: which was a suburb of Warsaw.

Q: Yeah. Non Jewish.

A: And the other side not of course. Of course. Non Jewish. And I made it. I took a trolley car. Nothing. I didn't know really what the hell I was doing, so...

Q: Sure.

A: So I got out of here. I had to get away from here. So I figured maybe they want to kill the whole area or whatever was going to happen, I didn't know. So I made it to the place, to Praga where she was. I knew that Vonda, the older one she was about two years older I guess than I was working as a waitress in a restaurant in Praga. I knew that from before; how, I don't remember. I went there, she was working. She saw me through the window. She motioned to me to wait in the little garden there. She finally came out. What are you doing? What are you doing here? I told her my family is no longer. I says, I have to get out of here. She says, Where do you want to go? I says, I want to go to Sochaczew. I didn't even think fast. There were no Jews in Sochaczew. Why the hell was I going to go to Sochaczew? I figured I had to get away from here. So she at the end of it took me to the train station.

Q: Uhhuh.

A: Bought my ticket to Sochaczew. Put me on the train. And I went to Sochaczew.

Okay. I came to Sochaczew. We had a big three story actually threeandahalf story apartment house in Sochaczew that my grandfather and father together as partners built.

Q: Yes.

A: I didn't know there was curfew. Was in the middle of the night. It was about 11 o'clock at night that I got to the station in Sochaczew. I walked from the station to Staszica, which was the street where our building was. And as I approached, somewhere I guess how could I think straight, anyway, at that point. I see the facade of the building is still there at 17 Staszica Street. But the whole inside is burned out. The Germans burned out all the Jewish buildings. Only the skeleton remained. You know what I'm talking about?

Q: Yes, yes, yes.

A: I reached closer, there's no nobody there. I started knocking on doors. I knew all the Christians there. Remember, I grew up there.

Q: Yeah, yeah. You you you were

A: And we were very, very friendly and everybody knew my grandfather

Q: Sure.

A: and father.

Q: And you were a personality

A: Well

Q: musically.

A: but the Christians even knew that.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: So I started with the you know what a mangel (ph) is?

Q: Yes, yes.

A: I knocked on the door of Schmiguelska (ph). I'll never forget. She says, Davidek, she says. Little David. She says, Get out of there. There are some Germans over here. I can't do anything for you.

I sat there, I want to stay overnight. Anyway, I started moving around to some people until finally somebody took me in.

Q: And this

A: A person by the name of Prusky.

Q: Right.

A: P R U S K Y or I. I used to play football with the kids. She took me in, the mother, and gave me some food. And what happened, I told her the story. She says, David, you can't stay here because in this building there are some Germans and they're going to denounce you, they're going to kill you and kill me too. So but, she says, you know who lives around the corner from here, she says, and she told me how to go. There's a fellow by the name of Milesky, Vladik (ph). He knows you since you were a kid. He used to work for your grandfather. I found Vladik. And I'll never forget that man. If you talk about a righteous gentile. When he found he cried his heart out when he found, he says he says he walked out of his wooden bed that he had. He says, You sleep here. I'll sleep on the floor. I'll never forget that. In the morning, he says, I'm gonna take you across the bridge. The Bzura River is there, right there in Sochaczew . B Z U R A. Take you across the bridge. It's guarded by gendarmes, Germans. He says, But you'll go with

me, a big hat, you know, like the what do you call it ? The poy the poylish, you know. He says nobody and besides, I was blond anyway, so...He says, I'll take you across the border. He says, It's about five miles from here. I'll take you you have a cousin living in the ghetto in Czerwinsk. That's how I got to Czerwinsk.

Q: Right.

A: He led me across the border.

Q: Uh huh.

A: I'll never forget when I saw the first I'm trying to remember, was Friday night. I saw candles in the window and I walked over, knocked on the first door when I got into Wyszogrod, which is the town before right after the border. He went back to Sochaczew, and I he told me to go to Czerwinsk. He said it's only about a kilometer or two from here. And you have a cousin over there. You'll be able to stay in the ghetto. It's okay. Because I didn't know. It was.

I came to the first house and I knocked on the door. And when I opened up the door, I saw the picture of Jesus in the __ and I said, Oh, my God. I didn't know what to say. You know, you're supposed to say certain things when you walk into somebody's house in Poland, particularly (fabrenta?) Catholics, really. And I I don't know how I excused myself. I says, I need to go my Polish is fluent, of course. Big deal . It's my language.

Q: Sure.

A: So I go to, what do you call it? I want to go to Czerwinsk. She must have realized that I was Jewish. So she told me how to go and I went to Czerwinsk. The only problem

to cut this story short, the problem when I got to Czerwinsk, I didn't have any papers. And in a ghetto particularly, this was

Q: No rations.

A: Germany. No rations.

Q: Yes.

A: Most people you tell it to, they don't know what you're talking about.

Q: Yeah, yeah. You got no papers, you got no food.

A: I couldn't eat.

Q: Yeah.

A: Couldn't eat.

Q: Yeah.

A: So they had to report me to the police. They reported me to the police.

Q: Yep.

A: I stayed with them for a number of weeks, I don't remember. I started singing over there. You know, singing saved my life.

Q: What did you sing, do you remember?

A: Bei Mir Bist Du Shoen. You know that one.

Q: Yeah. So you were like basking in the street. Is that what you were doing? I mean, you were singing? Or were you just singing for the for your family?

A: I was singing for the families. I was singing for the police. I was singing for, even in Czerwinsk.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: They knew this is the singer.

Q: Right. Right.

A: Joseph, Joseph, won't you make your mind up, you know that one?

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Oy, Yossel, Yossel, won't you

Q: Yossel. Yep.

A: I knew it

Q: Yeah.

A: in English. You name it. And then I learned a German song. I learned what was it? [speaking German]

Q: [Laughing]

A: I got news for you. That saved my life in Auschwitz.

Q: We'll come to that after we've had lunch.

A: [Laughing]

Q: So we're going to break now because we've got to go to another appointment.

A: You gotta so anyway, I was in what do you call it?

Q: In Czerwinsk.

A: In Czerwinsk for a little bit until they liquidated the ghetto in Czerwinsk and moved everybody into Nowy Dvor.

Q: Yes, on the other side of the river, Mazowiecki.

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Okay. So we were

A: From Nowy Dvor, I was one of the last transports from Nowy Dvor to go to Auschwitz.

Q: Yes.

A: My cousin with her two children probably went to either Chelmno or something around there.

Q: Yeah.

A: She want she wanted me to go with her and, I don't know, something told me not to do that.

Q: Yeah.

A: So...

Q: That's amazing. Okay. We're going to pause

A: Yeah.

Q: here.

A: Come.

End of File One

Beginning File Two

A: Where did we leave off?

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Cantor David Wisnia. Is it Wisnia or Wisnia?

A: Wisnia.

Q: Wisnia. What was it --

A: Wisnia.

Q: -- when it was in Polish?

A: In Polish, Wisnia.

Q: Wisnia?

A: Wisnia.

Q: Wisnia, with V.

A: An A at the end, Wisnia.

Q: Okay.

A: Which means cherry, really.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Cherry tree, because my -- I understand some of my ancestors on my father's side had cherry trees.

Q: Ah, and that's why.

A: And that's -- that's where they got their name, Wisnia.

Q: So Nowy Dwor, this is where we finished.

A: Okay. We got to Nowy Dwor.

Q: We got to Nowy Dwor, yeah.

A: And Nowy Dwor was strictly a resettlement operation where each week we didn't stay very long in Nowy Dwor. After about two or three different transports that they gathered from the whole area, and that was Germany, remember. That was – that was Germany that annexed that part.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: They started sending the people, you know, on trains.

Q: Yes.

A: As a matter of fact my cousin, Figulea (ph), with her two children, first -- on the first transport, went her father, who was sort of elderly -- elderly, must have been what, 60 or 70, and at that -- when you're 10 or 15 --

Q: That's elderly --

A: -- or 16.

Q: Yeah.

A: -- that's elderly. Then Figulea (ph) went. She wanted me, I was almost tempted to go with her, because she needed somebody to take her. Her husband had died quite awhile back. So I was sort of like the protector, and I don't know, for whatever reason, my friend, who lives in Israel now in Haifa, who was with me, whose number is two numbers higher than mine -- mine is 83526; his is 83528 -- came on the same transport. I knew him from Warsaw, Zlotnick, Zolog (ph) Zlotnick, Israel, living now in Haifa, still living in Haifa, and he said, don't -- don't go. You stay for the last transport. You'll go with us. That was my buddy. So I let her go by herself. They went to -- I found out later, they went to Heiligenbeil. They never even had a chance --

Q: No, no, no.

A: -- of survival. Forget it. I was on the last transport from Nowy Dwor. Yeah, what I wanted to mention, they went on a passenger train.

Q: Yes.

A: Which was extremely unusual.

Q: Those were cattle cars.

A: Who would have thought?

A: Yeah.

Q: They were going on passenger trains. They were being resettled to the east. That was the story of the Germans and we bought it.

Q: Yep, yep.

A: Okay. Look, when you're gradually deprived of your rights, of your life --

Q: You forget, yeah.

A: -- you forget. You don't think in those terms. This is the most educated, most erudite people you can think of in Europe.

Q: Yeah. Why would they be doing this.

A: They're going to kill little children? They're going to kill women?

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: All the people? Anyway, last transport, we arrive in Auschwitz. We had no idea after about two or three days --

Q: Where you --

A: -- traveling on sealed wagons, you know, the -- what do you call it?

Q: Box cars.

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. Tell me --

A: Cattle --

Q: Cattle cars.

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me – what – what – this -- this is '41 -- no, '42, early '42?

A: ’42 --no, that was not early '42. That was September of '42.

Q: September of '42.

A: August, September or October '42.

Q: Right. Right.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't know where we stopped, we -- no food, no water, no -- horror, 50 or 100 people in there. Well, you've – you’ve known. You've seen the --

Q: Yeah, yes, yeah, packed in.

A: All right. We finally -- we tried to get up there and see, look where we were. We knew we were going on the side lines of Warsaw. We knew we were going somewhere to the east from Nowy Dwor, but we certainly didn't know that we were going south.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Okay.

Q: Yeah.

A: When we were -- I think somebody yelled out he saw some kind of an eradam (?indecipherable?) I think they saw.

Q: Yes.

A: Which meant going south, but who the heck knew. We didn't know.

Q: Yeah.

A: We arrive in Auschwitz-Birkenau. On the siding of the train there when we arrive, you know, the old rush job, you know, where the SS, you know --

Q: The dogs --

A: -- beating you, get over here with the dogs with the guy with -- where I thought it was Mengele. It wasn't Mengele yet. Mengele hadn't been there yet. I found that out after.

Q: Yeah.

A: But it was a guy who looked like, you know -- I says I will never forget the boots for heaven's sake. I heard somebody say in German -- and I understand German. I learned German, (?a lieb en achsen sin lager.?) I didn't understand what the hell that meant. And they start separating the men. There were still lots of women and lots of children. There must have been about 1,500 people. That was the last transport from Nowy Dwor. Men get over to the right. Yeah, the women over to the left going on trucks. Women, children, young kids. I almost went over to them. You know, I figured well, what the hell.

Q: Yeah.

A: All right.

Q: Yeah.

A: But I learned my lesson in don't expect any good things from the Germans. So if you can walk, fine, and particularly, I moved myself over to the side of the men, lined up in fives, and this guy, about three rows of fives, an SS man leads us in. They go away immediately, the men -- not the full, whatever went in. I found out of course from my

book, out of the 1,500 who came in, 570, which was a high number, because there were mostly men, you follow me, younger --

Q: Younger feet.

A: That was the last transport, on their feet, right.

Q: Yeah.

A: -- went into the camp --

Q: And that was --

A: -- selected there and the rest of them went on trucks.

Q: Trucks.

A: Now, we don't know from nothing. As a matter of fact, what's his name, Zlotnick (ph), my buddy, his sister was about two years older than him, a gorgeous tall girl, although, they didn't take any women from that transport.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay. They ride off into a little forest over there. That was a little white house. Some of the guys who came in with their wives, with their families, you know, wanted to find out after we got in, where are the women? Where are the children? So the prisoners started to laugh at them. So you see that big fire out there, outside of the perimeter of the camp? They're dead. There's the machine gun them to the best of my knowledge, first.

Q: Yes.

A: And then burn them in pyres of wood with whatever they did, and I think after about two or three months, the crematoriums were finished. We were building -- we were helping to build the crematoriums.

Q: Yep. So were you processed in – in --

A: I was processed in Birkenau.

Q: Yep

A: Immediately.

Q: Yep.

A: We went into a -- we were tattooed.

Q: Tattooed, head shaved?

A: That's right.

Q: Yep.

A: Tattooed, everything --

Q: And all the hair shaved?

A: All the hair shaved --

Q: Yep.

A: And we went into the sauna.

Q: Deloused --

A: For regular – regular -- we didn't know.

Q: Yeah, yeah. No. There was no gas at that stage?

A: No, we received – no, there was no gas yet.

Q: Yeah.

A: We received the -- what do you call it, clothing, whatever.

Q: Whatever you could get.

A: You were a big guy, you get short clothes. You're a short guy, you get big -- like in the Army.

Q: Big shoes, small shoes.

A: Okay.

Q: Yep.

A: So with wooden clogs. That was the worst, those heavy wooden -- I don't know if you've ever seen them --

Q: Yeah, I have.

A: They call them the Holland --

Q: Yeah.

A: No socks.

Q: In winter.

A: Oh, used to rub on here, terrible, terrible. You could hear – you could hear you coming from ten miles away.

Q: Yeah.

A: You know, clank. So anyway, we're assigned to cell block 15, must have been about 450. The rest of them I think went to a different -- I don't know where -- or maybe the whole 570, I don't know, went into that particular -- in cell block the altestewayouzef (ph) This was the Polish --

Q: The Polish --

A: He gave us a talk when we got in there and each one got -- we got four men sleeping in one of those, either four or five. I don't know, some of them were five. I always managed to get one on top --

Q: Good idea.

A: -- immediately. Sure. I wanted to be on top. So and I was only, I would say about two or three days, I was like every other prisoner, because I was assigned to the job of cleaning, you know, picking up the bodies from the ditch.

Q: Yes. These are people who had committed suicide?

A: Committed suicide, right.

Q: By electrocuting themselves?

A: Yes --well, what they did know -- let's say this is the perimeter of the camp, right?

Q: Yep, yep.

A: A trip wire, okay, with just a little trip wire, a ditch, electrified by a wired fence, sentry box. So not that they needed an excuse. Anybody wanted to commit suicide, very easy. You put your foot over that trip wire, which means you're trying to escape. The guy would shoot you from the sentry box. Many of them, that's what the German transport did, about two months later, when they found out what was going on there.

Q: Yes.

A: So that was my job for the first couple of years [sic], to put the bodies together on two, three guys, you know, heap on a wagon, a wooden wagon, bring it over to a particular cell block, line up and then it went to the crematorium where, crematorium – not the crematorium, the pyre of woods where they did them.

Q: The pyre, yep.

A: I only did this for about I think eight or nine days.

Q: Okay.

A: Maybe two weeks.

Q: Yep.

A: Not even that. One night after coming from work in the afternoon, the blockalteste: Is there anyone here who sings?

(?Indeciperhable?)

Sing. You sing. Everybody, hey, Wisnia, get down. Sing. I get down from my booksa (ph). There was a place about the size of this, the middle of the regular tiers of beds, of those wooden booksas (ph), and that was right there. There was a door to a special room for the blockalteste, who was -- he was the boss of life and death really.

Q: Yep.

A: And I sang. From that moment on, my life changed.

Q: What did you sing?

A: Buy me a (?undeciperhable?). Joseph, Joseph, won't you make your mind up.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Hebrew, what did I do? He couldn't care less, as long --

Q: Didn't matter what it was?

A: Didn't matter what it was.

Q: As long as --

A: I sang.

Q: -- you entertained him?

A: I sang.

Q: Anything in Polish?

A: Yeah, sure. (?undeipherable?) Oh , he loved that. That was very popular. I knew every song. This was my life.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: So from that moment on, he says, okay, tomorrow you're not going to that job. You're going to stay right here in the -- it was like a revelation.

Q: And you were the stubendienst?

A: I became a stubendienst. Actually, I couldn't become a stubendienst because the stubendienst had some pull from somebody. So I became the assistant to the stubendienst.

You talk about -- what do you call it, protect ya. Oh, God.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Then they came to select people for the various commandos, you follow?

Q: Yep.

A: I don't remember how often I went out to work. I didn't go out to work very often, but the greatest privilege was when it came to the roll calls, because remember, it was cold as hell all the time.

Q: And that went for hours?

A: Hours. People used to die standing there.

Q: Yep.

A: So. And they count -- they didn't now how to count. They didn't have a system. If you read -- what's a her name, Tippy's book, you'll see. She's got it tagged right. They had no system.

Q: Yeah.

A: They needed the prisoners to help them with the system.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: That's why they have a stubendienst, a kapo, a blockalteste, you follow, and if were you in with these --

Q: You were in?

A: You were in.

Q: Right.

A: And my job, and I really -- believe me, if I ever prayed always one more day, let me, I've got to -- but I'll tell you something. You know, somebody just asked is me, to what do I attribute my survival at one of my speeches. It took me a long time to figure it out, but I knew the first day when I got undressed in front of the sauna before we went in for the shower, I was standing in front of an SS man who was about 6'6. My eyes fixed in to his belt buckle. You can imagine how tall he was. To me it looked that tall, right? This is in front of the sauna. I'll never forget this as long as I live, and I look in, and what does it say on the belt buckle -- you won't believe this -- I don't know if you ever heard that, Gott mit uns. Okay. God is with us.

Q: Is with us, yes.

A: Swastika here --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- in the middle and then SS insignia on the side. I swear I looked in there, and for a second I had to hold myself back from laughing. I says you son of a bitch -- I didn't say that. I said not the God I learned about. I'm going to do everything in my life to outlive you.

Q: Yep, yep.

A: I already saw what was going on there, and from that moment on, you will not believe, I said to myself, 750 Grand Concourse, Bronx, New York; 723 Gates Avenue, Brooklyn, New York. Right. I didn't have any pencil. I didn't have anything. I used to be the fancy writer in the house -- in my house. So every time we had -- my mother had two sisters here in the States. One of them who came in the first world war, elder sister, who lived on the concourse in New York, and the other one who left about six months before the war broke out. Her younger sister came to her. She took her down before the war. Her name was Helen Borenstein (ph). That played quite a trick on me because I screwed up the addresses. Wait till you hear this one.

Q: Wait for the purse war thing, but yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: So that was -- so that was the preservation --

A: The preservation –

Q: In your – in your --

A: What gave me --

Q: In your mind.

A: And I'll tell you something, what gave me, at that moment, I says, it's not what I learned. No, God isn't with them, not the God that I know. I'm going to try to outlive you. I did.

Q: Absolutely.

A: I did. And you know, I used -- somebody asked me why do I come in with it now. I had -- I told that story before but I delivered a speech about three months ago, four months ago over here at -- where my granddaughter lives. The teachers wanted me to come and tell them about World War II. Okay. I came in and one of the kids -- you want to hear? This is incredible. All assembly of the high school, one of the kids gets up – and I'm pretty good at geography. So I walked over. I wanted -- I like to show them, how did so many Jews get there, to Poland, and I'm a history buff. So I know the history of the Jewish people.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay. And I like a -- what do you call -- a blackboard, and I draw Poland, show them how the Jews got from the -- after the Spanish Inquisition. It's incredible, and I'll tell you, that's better than any history book, and I show them exactly where Auschwitz was, where Warsaw was, where I lived, right, and I tell them after I finish -- I wasn't even finished. One of the kids gets up, I ask -- I love to ask, "Any questions?"

One kid, sitting there, gets up and says, "Sir, if there was something what made you really survive all this?" I says, well, it's not easy to give you an answer, I says, but I prefaced it by telling, "Look, this is a public school. I'm not going to tell you, but I had a very good religious background." I said, "By religious I don't mean Orthodox, but I

know – I know my history," I says. And all I learned is something that made me -- the first moment I got in there I told them this story of being – of looking into this SS man's middle, right, and seeing Gott mit uns. Listen to this, the kid gets up and says, "You know my grandfather" -- this could have been -- I tell you, I couldn't have planned it any better. "My grandfather came here from the Ukraine and he had one of those, and it says Gott mit uns" -- listen to this -- "one of those belt buckles. We erased the swastika and the SS, but Gott mit uns is still on there." I almost flipped out.

Q: What did you say?

A: I didn't know. I didn't know -- I didn't say a word because I was afraid. I was really hesitant. I says --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- what happens if his grandfather was an SS man?

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: How did he get – how did he get this belt buckle? Did he get it from -- I'll tell you, the people there, I couldn't have said anything better in my whole speech, because it lent credence to what I told.

Q: Yeah.

A: It was unbelievable. That's why I'm telling you this.

Q: That's amazing. Actually, that's an amazing --

A: This just happened about two months ago.

Q: Wow.

A: Over at the -- what do you call it? Pennington High School. Unbelievable. So anyway, it did the trick.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Yes.

Q: So now back to after you were doing this job for -- after -- I mean after you became the assistant to the stubendeinst.

A: Yeah.

Q: And --

A: I got the job in the sauna.

Q: Yeah.

A: The(?undecipherable?).

Q: That was the next job?

A: Yeah.

Q: What were you --

A: They selected me.

Q: Yes.

A: I was -- we used to use the Zyklon B gas to gas the clothing.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: You follow me?

Q: Yeah.

A: In the sauna.

Q: To disinfect.

A: In the old sauna, disinfections, right.

Q: Yes.

A: So we used to put on a gas mask. We had an an SS man by the way who was a very decent guy. He brought us into -- I looked for him at the end of the war. I couldn't find him.

Q: What was his name, did you know?

A: George, his first name, that's all.

Q: That's all, yeah.

A: He became friends with the kapo of the --

Q: Of your -- of your --

A: Of the sauna.

Q: Yeah

A: And I have pictures of the kapo of the sauna with other people, but I don't have a picture of him. I looked for him, because we knew when Debruekfeld (ph), he used to come and give us all the political --

Q: All the news?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: And he knew. He knew.

Q: Yeah.

A: He came back one day and told us that his job was to pour

in the gas --

Q: Into the top.

A: -- in crematorium number two from the outside.

Q: Yeah.

A: And he said, "I'm not going to do it anymore." He started to throw up, and he said, "I'm going to probably not be here. They're going to send me to the Russian front." He was scared to death. They never did. He never did it after that. Okay. So there were decent, of course --

Q: Of course.

A: -- there were decent.

Q: Otherwise, you wouldn't have survived.

A: Never, never.

Q: No one could have survived --

A: No, no --

Q: -- by themselves?

A: -- not with that a system, correct, correct.

Q: It's not possible, no.

A: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: So -- so now, there was -- I want to move on to the time -- I don't know how much further this was when you fell asleep and didn't – and weren't up for apel.

A: This was -- I was already working in the sauna.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I don't know how long, months. I can't tell you the exact dates, but anyway, you're only dealing with about two and a half years, anyway, period.

Q: Sure, sure.

A: So I know when this happened. There was one chamber that was a dry chamber in that sauna, okay, in the old sauna building. Okay. There was a place where we used to gas the clothes, a place for showers, because the prisoners used to come in about once a month or whatever, you know, for lousing.

Q: Yes, delousing.

A: You know.

Q: Yeah.

A: Delousing or whatever.

Q: Yeah.

A: Right. Delousing, right. I should get it right, because lousing is different. Okay. Sundays -- it was a Sunday. It was very warm in that chamber, and the guys who worked there, there were about three or four other fellas, okay, went in after the morning roll call. We had a morning roll call, the apel, which was less than a few minutes, and the 1:00 o'clock was the big apel. Wisnia goes to sleep there, and I wake up. It got so quiet. It must have been about 10 after 1:00 and there's nobody in there. I look out the window of the sauna and I can see (?indecipherable?) the general, with his desk, in the middle of the road of Birkenau. The whole camp is standing at attention so to speak. They're looking for Wisnia. You can imagine. They didn't know yet who it was, but they knew there was one --

Q: Missing.

A: -- person missing. When I woke up --

Q: Well, the number actually.

A: Hmm?

Q: It would have been the number.

A: One number, yeah, yeah.

Q: The number.

A: They had to get the number. They knew what cell block, because we stayed all on the outside lined up. There was somebody missing from that cell block. I woke myself up, and I see everybody, and I started to run from the sauna, from here all the way through the barracks, the side of the barracks down to cell block 15, which is on the left, and I tried to hide in between the people, but they wouldn't let me, because they already found out there was somebody missing there. You can imagine.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: You talk about luck.

Q: Yeah.

A: The SS man who is doing the count comes over to cell block, blockalteste tells him that, you know, this is the fella's here.

Q: He's arrived?

A: Brings me up to the center road. There's the desk with the general taking the count, right, from all the cell blocks. You realize, there must have been 50,000, 40,000 prisoners. I'm talking about men, just men. The women's camp is on the other side.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay. He takes me, and guess who is the SS man reporting to the -- what do you call it?

Q: The one who drops the canisters in?

A: No. George.

Q: George, that's what I mean, yeah.

A: George.

Q: The one who was -- who was your --

A: George is the SS man who is taking me over there.

Q: The sauna.

A: And he winks to me. I'm standing next to the ditch, it was sort of like water, with his gun in one hand and with his hook, like a meat hook, and he goes over to me, and says, "You make one move and you're dead," and there's the general standing right there. He's saying it for his benefit. He's winking to me. Okay. I didn't move. All right. I knew I was in trouble. I immediate -- I knew that was the end. I got sick after that, right, a couple of -- I had a regular trial in the schreibsteube, you know, where they do the records and I was sent in for three -- to three months in the strafkommando.

Q: Which is hard labor?

A: Which is -- it's like -- I'll tell you, it's a -- they would have killed -- if it was anybody else, they would have killed them immediately. They just would have shot them. Okay. I could see it. He's like punching me or -- I'm standing up, figured oh-oh, Wisnia you really did it now. About -- I got -- I don't know if you call it typhoid. They put me in cell

block number seven. I guess a combination of everything, that did it, and the boys from the sauna used to send in all kinds, to make sure that I was okay. Remember, I wasn't a regular prisoner anymore.

Q: No, no, no. Yeah.

A: I was working in the sauna, that was a quite a --

Q: A privilege.

A: Quite a privilege.

Q: Yes.

A: Sure. And I didn't live by the rations. We could --

Q: No.

A: We could organize. We could steal anything we could --

Q: Yeah. Yeah.

A: -- from the clothing that came. You have no idea what people brought.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: Okay. So after I got a little better, I come out and go back to the -- to my sauna job. I don't think I stayed there for three months. I think I stayed for only about six weeks or seven weeks. I had to go out to work and that wasn't fun, you know, being in the strafkommando. They gave me a mock hanging when I walked in, put me on kleea (ph), you know what I mean --

Q: On a noose?

A: -- on a hole regular, and then did the trap door. I fell straight through. That was the initiation into the -- but the kapo from the sauna must have said something to the

blockalteste from the strafkommando, take care of this kid, I mean I don't want him to die here because I was his boy.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: So the wind up, I come back to the sauna and I only -- it only got better as I went along. One of these days, one of those days, Tippy comes on an excursion to the sauna, you know, to check on the system there, whatever, with her SS people, and she sees me on the side, and I was in very good shape, and we start exchanging glances and we start saying a few words, and a romance develops. Okay. I didn't know how old she was. Look, to me, it's a woman. She was a girl.

Q: Yeah.

A: So she came quite -- I think we must have -- that was '43, throughout '44.

Q: Yeah. You met regularly?

A: Yeah. Whenever she could get away or come to the new sauna. We moved, by the way. That old sauna was moved to a new location between crematorium four and five. They built a new sauna.

Q: Right.

A: Must have made a whole big deal. It's there, still there.

Q: Right.

A: So.

Q: Yeah.

A: But we met, yes.

Q: Something about singing saving your life in that strafkommando? No?

A: Where? I did in strafkommando too.

Q: You sang there?

A: Yeah.

Q: That -- that helped?

A: Of course. Of course.

Q: And who did you sing for?

A: The blockalteste, the same. Remember the man in charge of the cell block.

Q: The kapo or the blockalteste?

A: No, no. The blockalteste. He was the --

Q: Life or death?

A: Life or death.

Q: Yep, yep. And so this strafkommando liked music well?

A: Strafkommando, of course.

Q: And he -- and he -- and he would request music as well?

A: Sure, would request --

Q: Was he -- was he a Pole?

A: He was a Pole -- no, no, he was a German.

Q: He was an German. A politico?

A: He was -- no.

Q: He was a green?

A: He was a green.

Q: He was a green badge?

A: Right.

Q: Right.

A: He had a black uniform.

Q: Yeah. Yeah. So he was a criminal?

A: Sure. He was a criminal.

Q: What was he like?

A: To me, there weren't --

Q: He wasn't so bad?

A: No, no.

Q: Yeah, well, I mean he -- like he -- he --

A: I'm sure he must have beat everybody.

Q: Yeah, sure.

A: It was -- this wasn't a --

Q: It's not a holiday. It's not a holiday camp.

A: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: Okay. What did you -- so back to the sauna, and then --

A: Fast forward to 1944.

Q: Yeah. So fast forward to 1944.

A: Okay.

Q: You're having -- you're meeting Tippy regularly. You're working back in the sauna?

A: That's right.

Q: Yeah.

A: Working in -- we moved over from --

Q: You moved to the new one.

A: -- the regular camp to the new sauna. I have my own office in the sauna.

Q: Wow.

A: I have quite -- I was an old prisoner --

Q: Yeah, sure.

A: -- who knew everybody.

Q: Yeah.

A: Even the Germans. You follow me?

Q: Yeah.

A: Even the SS men, when they looked at my number, I'm here. They said he must know somebody. Okay.

Q: Yeah, that's how the system worked?

A: There was a kapo, the kapo of the Bekleidungskammer, Klauser, who was an Austrian, never knew he was Jewish. As a matter of fact, my friend Shia Kaulfus (ph) went to his funeral in Austria. He was Catholic but he had a Jewish ancestry so he was a taken in there.

Q: Yep.

A: Sure.

Q: Yeah.

A: I used to sing for him.

Q: German songs?

A: I was -- German songs.

Q: For him. He liked German songs? (?indecipherable?)

A: He liked German --

Q: Sort of the like the popular stuff or --

A: I'm trying to remember.

Q: That's okay.

A: It's little difficult.

Q: No.

A: But you know, it was mostly popular stuff.

Q: Sure, sure.

A: So.

Q: Sure.

A: But it is singing that saved, there's no question about it. It was -- it singled me out as different from anybody else, and I was. Consequently, of course, I got more food. I got different food. I got access to everything I wanted.

Q: Yep.

A: As a matter of fact, when I used to meet Tippy in one of the blocks that was lined up with clothing and there was a special place, a hiding place about a story high where there was clothing. We used to get in there through the side so.

Q: Tell me, when the crematorium, was it four or five --

A: Yeah.

Q: I can't remember which one was blown up.

A: Four.

Q: Four. That's when, I'm guessing was --

A: That was '44.

Q: That was the end of '44?

A: Yeah.

Q: And transports had already stopped by --

A: Hold it, no. Transports stopped in November of '44.

Q: November, so yeah.

A: Well, let me tell you, when I -- fast forward to '44. We're beginning to hear artillery, you know, at night. We learned to distinguish, ba-boom, ba-boom. We knew it wasn't German.

Q: Yeah.

A: It would have had to be -- we were closer to the Russian side of course.

Q: Sure.

A: You know where Auschwitz is?

Q: Yes, yes.

A: Krakow.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Czechoslovakia.

Q: Yeah.

A: Near the Ukraine.

Q: Yeah.

A: Going in that direction. We're beginning to hear, and we figured survive another week, another month. You know, that was the whole point, try to survive. Eventually, we knew, and George told us they're going to lose the war. He knew it.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: He knew it. As a matter of fact, he used to tell us, the Russian front is -- it's about 50 or 60 miles away, and they were scared to death of the Russians. Well, because of what they did to the Russians, you can imagine.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

A: It's no surprise. So that was the greatest fear among the SS is that they were going to be sent to the Russian front.

Q: Yes.

A: Because they knew that had they done that, anything out of the __, that was the end. So are you all right?

Q: Yeah. I'm just checking.

A: So at one of the liaisons with Tippy, she -- we agreed and we made up our mind if we're going to survive, at the end of the war, let us meet in front of the Jewish Community Center in Warsaw, (?undecipherable?) and I figured -- I don't know why I figured it was going to be there. I figured let's meet over there. Okay. I go on the transport, on the death march.

Q: To Gleiwitz?

A: To Gleiwitz, on --

Q: This is what --

A: On one of -- this is in December of 1944.

Q: 1944. Yep.

A: They stopped gassing -- I remember the uprising, because the sauna was right next door to the crematorium. I remember the boys running around and the machine guns were set up, and they locked up our areas so that they shouldn't come into our -- we knew what was going on.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: So the windup was that after they finished that, they actually stopped the gassings.

Q: Yes.

A: What do you call it, this was after the large transports, after the Hungarian --

Q: After the (?indeciperhable?) transports.

A: The whole -- I remember (?indeciperhable?) bit when they took them -- they were supposed to go to the train station but they went to crematorium five. Oh, it was -- I knew the whole story of what was going because I was privy. I wasn't a (?indeciperhable?) you know.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yes, yes.

A: So I knew what was going on.

Q: Yep.

A: The windup was that we -- on the march, the march was not good. I escaped from the march. That was my first attempt to escape, but they rounded us up and again they didn't shoot us, because we are strafed, you know, and then when we tried to walk --

Q: By Russian bombers?

A: By the Russian planes, and wait, you're talking about something playing a trick on me, the Russian planes we saw stars, red stars, right? Who cared, red stars, green stars, as long as it wasn't the swastika, right? They attached themselves, and believe me, there was something for us to see, some of the Germans, wounded, no arms, no legs. They used to attach themselves with trucks, tanks, follow the column. Remember, you're talking about thousands of people marching. Not too far, that wasn't near Gleiwitz. That was in a different place. Yeah, we stay over in Gleiwitz in the train depot. Then they put us on a train -- open train to Dachau.

Q: Yes.

A: Okay.

Q: Yep.

A: Okay. From the open train, I escaped with about 12 other guys. We made our way, I don't even know where, but we saw there was chaos. There was a, what do you call it, a strafing or bombing. We didn't know who, by whom. Anyway, an SS men starts searching and he winds -- winds us -- rounds us all up, brings us back to the train and we get back on the train. Why he didn't kill us, I don't know. Okay. We go to Dachau. We arrive in Dachau. No point in going into details. Open cars, freezing. God almighty. January. February, probably. You can imagine in Germany. Okay. We wind up -- I come into Dachau. If you ever saw when I came into Auschwitz, no comparison. This was ten times worse.

Q: Yes.

A: Why? No place to sit. No place to stand. No place to sleep. No place to eat.

Typhoid rampant. From all over, you know --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- they got the people.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I knew already then, if you could only again survive a little bit, you know, you might make it.

Q: Yeah.

A: I talked to myself.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: So the windup, I hang around the schreibestube of, what do you call it, Dachau, around there, the closest barracks on the side. I don't know how long we were in Dachau. But in Dachau itself, I saw -- this was worse than Auschwitz, for me it was worse. I couldn't. One day I see a sign up there, must have been about a couple of days or something like. Anybody who can carry a -- is it 50 or 75-pound -- not pound, kilo of something, of cement, report. We need to work -- they were – they wanted to work on the underground hangars for the airplanes. It is now -- must be February. Okay. Everybody's strong enough. I'm strong enough. I want to get out of here, because I'm not going to be able to survive here. I don't know anybody. No longer privileged prisoner. You can imagine.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay.

Q: I mean you're in better condition than most.

A: Yes.

Q: Having already been --

A: Well, many. There were – there were some. This was a group from all over the place, remember.

Q: Exactly. So there might have been --

A: So they get together, I think -- I don't remember exactly how many, and we're put on a train and they're going to take us to Muhldorf. Do you know where Muhldorf is?

Q: Muhldorf was --

A: Going a little further south, but --

Q: Yeah, into Austria.

A: Into Austria.

Q: On the way to Mauthausen.

A: I don't know. I was --

Q: I think so.

A: -- never in Mauthausen.

Q: Yeah.

A: So anyway – anyway, that's what they told us.

Q: Yeah.

A: Wisnia had enough of that crap. So I figured I am strong enough, and if I can hear – and there are -- as we get on the train, about two or three times, I don't remember exactly, we have air raids.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: You know, strafing of the train.

Q: Yes.

A: Now, who looks at planes, what strafing, right. We knew they get us out of the train into the ditches, also supported with clothes, but every day as I looked, the guards became older.

Q: Yeah.

A: You know, I had a pretty good eye for that point.

Q: Yeah.

A: You know, to see what's going on. How do you survive another day? So one of these, we made an attempt, a whole group, to run away, but they rounded us up. On the next time, I figured I ain't going with a group, I'm going by myself. Okay. No point in going into the details. I had a shovel over there on the side. It was one of the guys that was guarding us. I smacked him right in the head. As he was trying to gather us, there was nobody else and I took off.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Where do I go? It's just beginning, so it's now the beginning, I say, of March -- I would say the end of February, beginning of March, one day it's nice, one day it's --

Q: Horrible.

A: Horrible.

Q: Yep.

A: So I'm going towards the fire. I figured the only way -- no compass. Don't know my way. I know I'm in Germany. I'm outside of Munich, Dachau, but away from there because we -- we're closer to Muhldorf. Now, from what I understand, we didn't go to Muhldrof. We went up north to Merching. I found that out from the historian of the 101st.

Q: Right.

A: I wanted to find out where did I the meet you guys? Where was this? Anyway, I walk only at night, hide in the day. It must have been about two or three days in the barns, food, plentiful. Whatever the chickens ate, I had more food than I wanted. Okay. I get up one morning to find a place to hide and the whole war stopped. I didn't realize how important I was. There was no fire. I walked towards the artillery fire. There was no fire. I figured well, the war is over. Well, let me pull up. I get up on a little hill. I look down. There's the most gorgeous highway, but I'm trying to find a place for the, you know, for the day to hide --

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: -- because I wouldn't walk anywhere. I look down and I begin to hear a roar of tanks. If I ever prayed in my life, I sure prayed that time and said oh, God, don't let there be a swastika or don't let there be a black cross that they used to have on the tank.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: The column comes closer and closer and closer, and I see the first tank. There's a column of about 15, 16 tanks with trucks with a lineup, really, and I see the white star. Okay.

Q: Yep.

A: Now, to me, I thought it was Russian, because --

Q: It's a star

A: -- I was used to seeing the star.

Q: Yeah, the red star, yeah, white star.

A: Never dreaming that it could be American, really, couldn't have -- somehow it went completely out of my mind.

Q: Yeah.

A: So I start to run down from that incline. I have a note here from Sergeant -- Staff Sergeant Ballou. He says, "I still remember you coming down the hill." I start running down. The only thing that gave a me away, I didn't have much hair, but I had civilian clothes.

Q: So you didn't have stripes?

A: Oh, no. I had gotten rid of that --

Q: Right, right.

A: -- a long time ago --

Q: Right.

A: -- before we went to Gleiwitz, I had already gotten rid of that.

Q: Right.

A: Sure. I had civilian clothes. I come down and didn't have enough strength to get in front of the tank. Right at the ditch alongside -- I didn't know how important I was. The

whole column stopped. The war, it stopped for Wisnia. You think Wisnia is important, right? Out of the hatch crawls out a -- first tank stops, crawls out a Captain James L. Walker from South Carolina. I mean I knew words in English because I had learned words. You know, you don't learn sentences.

Q: Yeah.

A: You learn words, right? He crawls out. He immediately knew I escaped from somewhere. I go over to him. I says, "You, Russian?" He says, "No, no, no. merican." I said, oh-oh, they're trying to trick me. I says, "You, Russian?" He says, "No, American. Where ya come from" -- you know, with that southern -- I never heard such English in my life. I never heard English in my life, but not like this. He says, "Where you escape? Train? SS?" Something -- I got words. I says, "Yes, SS, train." He knew I escaped from a train. I should take him. You follow? I should lead the column where. Can't speak to her. I have a brain, I'm in the ditch and there's the tank, right, and the whole column is stopped. They all stopped. So he says -- I said to him, "Any Polish?" He got the message. I'm looking for somebody I can talk to, Polish. He said, "Yeah, we got one. Fred Wiltsack (ph), Fred Wiltsack." Yells down, and the road. You had to see the tanks. There was enough room for a jeep to drive by, takes a few minutes. A jeep drives up with Fred Wiltsack from Pawtucket, Rhode Island. By the way, he came to his bar mitzvah. I got him coming. Fred Wiltsack comes up and he goes over to me and he says -- starts talking Polish. His Polish was worse than my English. I couldn't talk to him. Couldn't talk to him. They want me take them where the SS is. I can't tell them.

Okay. Wait. I'm not finished. I had a brainstorm. I figured, you see, I heard the story that there were Germans disguised as Americans, you follow me?

Q: Yeah.

A: And I figured, you know, after all, you know, that I saw, I figured that can't be true.

Q: Yeah, yeah. You were very suspicious.

A: Can't be true. Can't be true. So I said, "Any Yiddish?" You see, you don't say Jewish, because in Europe, it's not Jewish, it's Yiddish.

Q: It's Yiddish, yeah, sure.

A: Okay. So I said to this captain, I says, "Anybody Yiddish?" He says, "Yeah, we got one." He yells down again, "Harry Weiner. Harry Weiner." Harry Weiner from Tarzana, California drives up on a jeep. The next jeep comes up, you know, like I have to explain to me -- you know what? He brought him up. It alleviated a little bit of my suspicion. And he started talking Yiddish. The other guy's Polish was bad, his Yiddish was worse.

Q: Was worse.

A: He came from Tarzana, California. It was a like a comedy of errors. Then they did something worse. He took me back in the jeep. They wanted to continue. The war was on.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: So he took me back. He wanted to put me in to check me out, in one of those weapons carriers that had the Red Cross on it. I don't know if you saw, the American

Army, they had normally following them. I refused to go in there. I was scared. I figured, you know, I heard that that's where they asphyxiate the people.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: And I still didn't believe it. I never left them until I came to the States. That was a slow process --

Q: Of building up trust?

A: -- with them, building -- not only building up trust. What they did is I became the eater of all their Spam. I loved their Spam rations, their chocolate. They all threw it away; they gave it to me. Then I got sick eating. They put me in uniform. They taught me how to use the Thomson, and let me tell you, that became my family, and really, did they become my family. I'll show you, __+ you know and by the way this is my grandson's --

Q: All right.

A: -- piece of music that he wrote. All right. Here's a picture of the ___ Synagogue.

Q: This is you?

A: That's me. That's my little baby machine gun.

Q: And who is standing next to you?

A: That's another -- I've been searching for him. He doesn't come. He doesn't show up. That's me and that's me too. That's in Zell Am See before we went to -- what do you call it? Burcheskan (ph).

Q: Right.

A: You know who that is, don't you?

Q: Who is that?

A: Who is the good looking fella?

Q: That's you?

A: Right. That's my wife.

Q: Yeah, who is the --

A: Menachem Begin.

Q: Oh. I thought so. I should have recognized the glasses.

A: Yeah, yeah. You want to see a good looking kid, that's me.

Q: Is that the original photo?

A: Yeah.

Q: Wow.

A: March '45.

Q: Yeah, amazing.

A: And here this is my friend, Fred Ballou. By the way, this is the group that came to last year's convention in Orlando of my -- that's me over here. And here is the group – this is what's left of my outfit.

Q: Wow.

A: You recognize me. I'm the youngest of the whole group.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, most of the them would be in their 90s, right?

A: They are.

Q: Yeah.

A: Sure.

Q: Yeah, at least.

A: 91, 92.

Q: Yeah.

A: This is Fred Ballou. I remember him. He saw me, I'll tell you, a couple of years ago, three years ago, I think more. He went crazy. Oh, baby, how come you look so good? I says, "I'm much younger than you guys."

Q: And so you stayed with -- with that company until you --

A: I stayed with the company until the war -- most of them went home, and of course, I was in Bar-la-Duc, France, which is outside of Reims, in one of the camps -- army camps, and my family found out finally that I was alive, meaning my aunt.

Q: Yes.

A: And they sent me a $25 money order they wired me, and I needed $25 like a hole in the head. I had more money than, I told you, Carter liver pills. I used to sell cigarettes.

Q: Yeah, because you were in charge --

A: Fifty francs --

Q: -- of the --

A: Fifty francs a carton of cigarettes I paid. I sold it for 1,000, and then we moved on to Paris.

Q: Yes.

A: I stayed in Versailles. I was stationed in Versailles.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And as luck would have it, I have a -- there was a captain -- a lieutenant, Lieutenant

George C. Pitser (ph) from Chicago, somewhere. I've been trying to find him. I can't find him. They got all kinds of Pitsers, and when saw me, he wrote me a recommendation. You should see the recommendation I got, and he was beside himself. I was like I became in charge of the grand decore in Paris of the PX. You know what the PX is?

Q: Supplies?

A: The post exchange.

Q: Supplies.

A: Post exchange -- no, no. Post exchange, we used to get -- we had ration cards, you know, the --

Q: Yes.

A: Meaning the Army, the British, the occupying forces, ____ cards for ten packs of cigarettes a week, boxes of silk. You know, they used to send home, all kinds of goodies.

Q: Yep.

A: So I was in charge of that.

Q: Not a bad job.

A: And I had quite a story there. One of the guys comes in, one of the Jewish guys. He's now in Canada.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Bernie Wiesholz (ph) . I'll never forget. He's still around, and Bernie says, "Here, I can see you're not crawling down the mountain."

This is Fred Wiltsack. Fred is living. I send him a package every year, and Fred came. That's Fred.

Q: Yep.

A: That's Wiltsack. And this is Fred Ballou.

Q: Tell me about Berchtesgaden. So we --

A: One of the units --

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Of the 506 parachute infantry came from the under belly, meaning on the south side of Austria. I don't know who the other outfit -- there was a French outfit, and I was already -- the people didn't know, you know, that I wasn't an American. I picked up English like that. It's no big deal for me, and I spoke German. I spoke Polish. So I had an easy access here. We come in May, I think, 1st or May 2nd, something like that. We come into Berchtesgaden. The boys from my outfit, you know, was an only a group that we still had lost two guys who were killed.

Q: Yes.

A: You know, because the SS -- the Wehrmacht gave up.

Q: But the SS didn't?

A: The SS didn't give up so fast.

Q: No.

A: So I yelled out from one of them, one of the loudspeakers, you know, loud in German, what did I say? I'm trying to remember. Throw down your arms, you'll be like Greek (ph) ___+, you know, like, we'll treat you like --

Q: Like a --

A: They did.

Q: Yeah.

A: They did, and that lieutenant was beside himself because he figured like I was necessary for the war. If they only knew who I was.

Q: If the SS knew who you were?

A: Sure.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: So when then they opened up the big storage -- I don't know if you saw Band of Brothers, did you?

Q: No.

A: You ought to see that. That's about our outfit.

Q: Right.

A: I tell you I did that one night. I watched the program. They showed it on TV, and I yelled out to my wife. She was in the other room, __ "Come here." I saw the sign, Zell Am See, Saalbach to the left. I says, "Come, remember I told you a story that I was driving a motorcycle" -- I took away a motorcycle from one of the Germans, not only that, but anyway, took a motor -- I was driving a motorcycle straight down, Saalbach is here. Zell Am See, Innsbruck is here ,if you know the area, Berchtesgaden is here, right. I'm going straight from Zell Am See and making a left turn into Saalbach. I didn't slow down. I didn't know how to drive. I'm driving, I flew off --

Q: Off your –off the bike.

A: Off the bike, flew right into a field here. Thank God there was hay. All I remember is looking up seeing the wheels turn. I finally made it to here. Anyway, they opened up. They said, "Come on, David, take what you want." So what I picked up is a little Walther pistol.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: You never saw any stuff like this in your life, and a little camera with this ___, with the whole bit on it, Balda, B-a-l-d-a, a 35-millimeter camera that was gorgeous. First week I come to the States, I took my -- the gun I think is still in one of my – somewhere, that little Walther. I almost killed myself because I didn't know about safety at that time.

Q: Oh, gosh.

A: Little bitty gun.

Q: Yeah.

A: And God knows what that must be worth, but the Balda, I come down the first night, and I say to my Aunt Helen from the Bronx, "I'm going downtown to see -- to dance mambo." That was a crazy -- that was -- what do you call it? Not mambo, rumba, mambo, samba. Anyway --

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: I wanted to listen to the Palladium. There's a place in Manhattan. At the end, I take my camera with me. I go down to Hector's Cafeteria on 50th Street and Broadway, turn around to get coffee and cake --

Q: And the camera is gone.

A: And the camera is a gone. I wanted to kill myself.

Q: Oh, now, one thing we haven't covered, which is very important.

A: Yeah.

Q: These two songs, the ones that you originally wrote in Auschwitz. How --

A: 1,500 came in from Nowy Dwor, 580 men. These are the numbers they got. This is Polish of course.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: Okay. That's it.

Q: Yep.

A: That's from the German archives translated.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So the songs --

A: 1942 --

Q: The songs --

A: -- yes.

Q: The songs, that you wrote --

A: Yeah.

Q: The two songs, the one in Yiddish, the one in Polish.

A: Yeah.

Q: The one in Yiddish is based on the song ___ --

A: It's based on the melody of _____+.

Q: ___ which I found.

A: Which is a take off on Sorrento (ph).

Q: Oh, okay.

A: (Humming)

Q: (Humming)

A: (Humming)

Q: Yep.

A: But what I wanted primarily is to tell the story of what was going on with that little white house. That's when I wrote it.

Q: Yes, of course.

A: Now, before the march out of Auschwitz --

Q: Yes.

A: -- I had a guy who was working with me who just passed away about a year ago.

Q: This is --

A: In Herzylia.

Q: His name was?

A: Shia Kauflus (ph).

Q: Shia Kauflus (ph).

A: Okay. Shia says to me, before we were separated, before we went on that death march, he says, "David, how am I going to remember you?" I said, "Look, if we survive, whatever." He says, "You want me, can you get me some paper? I'll write out the" -- he says, "Write out the songs. I'll get you some paper." That's when I wrote this, that you see, all -- everything I knew. He had a couple of blessings --

Q: Yep.

A: -- he wanted. He didn't know nothing. I'm sure.

Q: There was also a bit of ___+ mama(ph)?

A: Yes, yeah, which is different. It's different, different. It's not the way you'll hear it on the --

Q: No, it's a --

A: Mamaler (ph). It's a different story altogether. But I wrote out the songs and I completely forgot it. Now, what you have in the Yiddish song is a complete description of the transports that used to come in. They used to take them into that little white house. I don't know if -- do you read Yiddish?

Q: I have to look at it and sort of -- I have to -- I've worked on the Polish song. I haven't worked on the Yiddish song yet. So I've worked hard -- we'll -- we'll show you --

A: Now, the Yiddish song gives you a complete description --

Q: Okay.

A: -- of what was going on.

Q: Okay.

A: That they were -- of what was going on in that little white house.

Q: Yeah. Well, I'll work on that in the next few weeks.

A: Now, by the way, Tippy told me that she was -- she was taken to the white house by -- what's her name?

Q: Mandel.

A: Mandel.

Q: To show her.

A: Can you imagine this? Unbelievable.

Q: How did he get it out and --

A: Okay.

Q: -- how --

A: Okay.

Q: -- on earth did he --

A: Too bad Shia isn't alive. He loves to tell the story.

Q: Yeah.

A: 1957, fast forward to 1957.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Shia went to -- I met Shia in Paris.

Q: In '57?

A: No. In '46.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Before I came to the States. I came to the States in February '45.

Q: '45?

A: The end of '45.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: He was at Boulevard Magenta. There was hotel where he was staying, and I used to bring him all kinds of -- because I knew Shia from the sauna.

Q: Yeah.

A: When I had given him this, he never said a word. He says he had it in a can. He calls

it senore (ph), and it's senore (ph), and I really don't have the exact, the way he told me. He had smuggled it out from the camp. I knew nothing about it. I come the first time to Israel in 1957. I visit Shia. Shia's married now, married to the girl in Herzliya who owns the movie theater anyway over there in Herzliya. She's Sarah, still living, and I come in there and I have to stay of course in Shia's house, and as we are about to sit down to dinner, he says, "Listen David, I've got something of yours." "You do?" He brings out this paper. I almost passed out. He gave me the papers, and that's what you see there.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Unbelievable.

A: It is.

Q: You know, I've never heard --

A: If they had caught him -- if they had caught him, he would have been killed.

Q: He would have been killed straight away.

A: Sure

Q: Yeah, and I think the thing is that, it's -- I don't know how he did it. I mean I just don't know, you know --

A: Well, going on the march it was rolled up, he says, in a can of some kind.

Q: Yeah, or a tube, maybe a metal tube?

A: A tube, that's what he probably took.

Q: Must have been something -- must have been --

A: He says --

Q: -- something very thin. What was the word?

A: Randala (ph)?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Yeah?

A: Could you look up -- you have a Hebrew dictionary, don't you? Which one? Do you have, a ___? I want to see what he meant when he tells me -- where is it? Hebrew to English?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Both ways.

A: He tried to describe it to me. __+ Here we are. __+. Senore.

Q: I never heard of the word.

A: Here it is. A pipe.

Q: A pipe. Yep. Okay.

A: That's where he had it.

Q: Yeah, yeah. That's it.

A: In a pipe.

Q: Yeah. It's quite remarkable that he would have thought to do that, but I guess, you know --

A: He wanted -- look, he figured --

Q: He wanted -- he figured the same thing as you.

A: He wanted -- sure.

Q: He wanted, you know, were anything to happen to either of you --

A: He just -- that's right.

Q: It was like -- it was almost like a message in a bottle, wasn't it?

A: That's right. That's right.

Q: Yeah. What I'm going to do --

A: He tried. He was telling everybody, God, he was telling -- he was so proud of himself. When he handed it to me, I'll tell you, it was -- I couldn't believe that he had kept it all along.

Q: Yes.

A: He was very enamored with me because I was much younger than him. He was about, oh, ten years, eight years --

Q: I know he is.

A: He was like my father --

Q: Yes.

A: -- for heaven's sake at the time. So…

Q: Yep. Okay. Well, I think you we are going to finish here --

A: Okay.

Q: -- the recording. So I have to read this little thing. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Cantor David Wisnia. Thank you so much for your time.

End of File Two

Conclusion of Interview