

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Shony Braun**  
**March 9, 1992**  
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## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Shony Braun, conducted on March 9, 1992 in Los Angeles, California on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

## **SHONY BRAUN**

### **March 9, 1992**

Beep.

False start, take 2 is up. Actually, we'll keep one, we'll repeat one.

I want you to describe the transport and then the arrival in Auschwitz, and why don't you as you describe it, give me your age and -----.

Well, the transport was approximately 4 days as we were, and there, there were so many so many things happened even before the transport that probably I will skip it in and go right into what you, to answer your question. There were, we had no water, we had very little food, just the food which we took from home before we had to board the cattle cars, and there were a lot of , lot of people died, mainly children and older people. For instance we were so compact, we were like Sardinians. If you sat, you couldn't get up, and vice-versa. At, on the fourth night we, we arrived to Auschwitz, and we had to wait, and the train was waiting. Then, all of the sudden the doors opened, slid open, and we were ordered out. As we stepped out, head prisoners called Kapos rushed at us using their whips and so did the SS. They were beating, they're kicking, they're hitting everyone they could reach. And we were ordered to form a line, stand in line, men in one, women and small children in the other. Why the whip and the kicking and the beating was going on, after we lined up, I noticed that a SS, high ranking SS officer approached. He, that was the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele. The angel of death. The man who would decide our fate. Instant death in a gas chamber or lingering life of -----, slavery. We had to file by him. As we did, I noticed that he had slender stick, actually it was a conductor's baton, being a musician, even at 13, so I recognized it, and he was waving it to the right or the left. He was pointing which way each individual who filed by him to go. My mother and younger sister, my Goldie, who was only nine years old. She was motioned to the left, along with my mother. My older sister Violet was motioned to the opposite side, to the right. My brother Zoltan, who was 15 and my father they, they next were in line, they were also motioned to the same side where Violet, my older sister. By the way, Violet was 18, I don't know if I mentioned it or not. But my turn came. To my great surprise, Mengele stopped me, motioned to stop, and he says, "Tell me little boy, how old are you?" "I am 13," I replied. Previously coached to say more than I was because this way I had a better chance to survive, and being sent to work rather than being sent immediately to the gas chamber. When he was, Mengele was sort of looking at me with a suspicion, suspiciously, because I really didn't look, no, not even 13. My frail body, and pale, you know I didn't go out to play foot, football, soccer

with the boys, but I was always practicing the violin. So, but miraculously he was motioning me to the group where my father and brother were. After the selection was over, my mother, my younger sister, and the group that they were in were led away. I didn't, now that I've seen them, did ----- . They were taken direct to the gas chamber, and they were told that that you have to take a shower, in order to camouflage really what they wanted to do, the SS will issue a towel and a bar of soap.

We better stop for the siren.

Sync take 2 is up.

Beep.

After the selections were over, my mother, my younger sister, and the group they were in were led away. I didn't know that I have seen them for the last time. They were taken directly to the gas chamber. There was actually a house where was written the words, "Bade." Means bath. And each one of them were issued a bar of soap and a towel, and then they said, "You have to go in there and take a shower," but in reality, that was the gas chamber. As soon as they went in, the doors were locked behind them, and then the gas was flowing, and everybody had died. The terrible thing, maybe, to add to that, I should say, was that then the SS would send some of us prisoners to go and pick up the dead bodies and cart them away. When, when we were just getting to ourselves what happened, we were taken to uh another barrack, we were stripped completely, and had to take a little shower, and the very same gas chamber where these won-wonderful people and the poor, poor children were taken and were gassed, we really took a shower. When the, the gas where there were flowing through the pipes, now they let water through. I know because I was in it also to shower in reality. Then we were assigned to a barrack. We managed somehow to stay together. My father, my brother Zoltan and me. And one night, as we were standing in line to be count-counted, that was the final count, and Kapo, which means head prisoner, and we're going to be fair from now on, they were as a Kapo, came to our line, and he was picking prisoners for what they call a Zonder commando. And he, among other prisoners, he picked me too. A Zonder Commando had to go around to the camp, and pick up the dead, only the dead bodies, and cart them up to the crematorium. Now being in the Zonder commando, that meant separation from my father and brother. I was assigned to a different barrack. And, one occasion as I was picking up a body, I noticed that this, this man was not dead at all. And I turned to the Kapo, and I said, "Herr Kapo," you know, uh, "If we would give a little food or a little water, this man would, would survive." And then he turned around and hit me with his fist in my face so hard that I fell over, and he said,

"You are not here to tell me who would survive. We're not here to make people survive. Now if you're not going to uh keep your mouth shut, I'm going to put you in the crematorium also. Now pick up that body, and put him up," and we did it, I, I didn't say no more, anything. But, all my life, even today, even as I am telling you this, I have the most awful feeling that I really had to burn my fellow prisoners, had to go and cart them out to the crematorium so that they would be burned, and they were alive. So we were doing this for about oh maybe 6 days. Now in that group where I was working the Zonder Commando, there was another Commando, a father...

Now we do have to reload.

Beep.

Beep.

To my great surprise, Mengele stopped me and talked to me, and he was asking, "Tell me little boy, how old are you?" I said, "I'm 16 and I can prove it." And I was gesturing to go into my pocket because I had the, this birth certificate that we falsified birth certificate, because previously my father, when we still, when we're still home, I have to qualify that we're, we're told, we were told by--unless you, you do, your minor children, like I was 13 before, I mean uh, before we were taken you know, and uh my uh sister was 9 years old so unless is getting uh different birth certificates, we're not going to survive. Now, we children didn't know about it, but our father did. So, paid a lot of money for that, but we did get certificates. So I pulled out, uh, but, he was looking at me, and miraculously he mo-waved me to the group where my father and my brother were . Now in the Zonder Commando, there was a man who was about same age as my father, and he had a son who was in the same barrack where my father and brother were, and the son was about the same age, maybe a year or two older than I, and he heard, word came to him that the very same barrack where his son was going to be evacuated, and they're going to go to France the very next day. So, he contrived an ingenious plan, and he says, listen, I tell you what, because you like to be with your father and brother, and I certainly love to be with my son. Now, when you see that all the prisoners running from every direction to regroup the final count, in the evening, go in, go into the line where my son is, and my son is going to take, get into this line, where this barrack line is and no one, nobody the wiser because we were only numbers, so the plan worked. He was reunited with his son, and I got back in the barrack where my father and brother were. Next morning, next day, we were off to France. I found out later that the very same day when we were transported to France, that all the Zonder Commandos were killed because the SS feared if one of the commandos or not, uh specifically the commandos, would escape, would tell the world of the atrocities, and of

the, the terrible thing which the SS did to humanity. Because we were more witnesses to their uh machine, you know, death machine, than any other prisoners, because we were the one who were picking up dead bodies and, and took them and burned them on their order. And, I tell you, the image of this father and son will haunt me for the rest of my life. Now in, when we arrived in France, I was put to uh work in an ammunition factory, and in that factory they were making, it was and build a, I don't know exactly if the V-2 rocket, but rocket which was designed specifically to shoot airplanes, and of course, mainly the Americans and the Russians, and that was su-a such a tremendous force, they would, they would all the, all the uh the airplane if, if it got in contact with a rocket it would be torn to pieces. I was cutting parts to that rocket. Then, later, I was put to a machine which automatically filled explosive caps with the gun powder. One day a French prisoner approached me and he says, "What would you do to stop Hitler's madness? Would you give up your life?" Without hesitation, I said, "Yes." Now, I was operating a machine at that point, as I, I think I mentioned that, which beside filling uh, uh gun powder, we have to go back to that, I'm sorry. Yeah. Can I do that now?

Yeah.

This French captain, uh forgive me, this French man, is, I forgot to tell, uh, what his rank was. He was actually a uh, captain in the underground movement, resistance movement, who was smuggled among us as a prisoner, and he organized a sabotage movement. So, this is how he approached me and if I would be, because to him, I was the most important person by, by working on that machine which filled gun powder, the caps with the gun powder, and he said to me, "I tell you what. You see those civilians? Those are all French men. Electricians. They were working around the ammunition factory." And he says, "I tell you what you do. Now these men will supply you sand, and I want you to put in this capsule which you've been filling with gun powder, sand and very little gun powder. So the machine that I was working would be filling the gun powder automatically as I just, all I had to do is just put it on. But now I had to put sand and mix, mix it with the gunpowder. And it worked. I mean it was fantastic how easy it really was to do that. One day, some new transport came with new prisoners, and another prisoner was put in that very near me, the machine, working, cutting parts, and it turned out that that was an a SS spy, wanted to know, they already detected, they were, they found out that this weapon, the second stage in impact did not work. And that was the idea. I didn't know that, I found out later that the sand was needed to uh, uh how can I say that stop the second stage from exploding, and uh, our leader was identified, this French captain. He was hanged, and all of us who were around that area had to watch him die, and we were not allowed to avert our eyes from him nor move away. After that, about 60 of us put, were put in, in a horizontal line and asked to stand still. Other words still stand,

or stand at attention maybe in, in uh English, and an SS officer was going down the line picking prisoners at random. He passed me, and then was coming back and passed me again, they picked my right the one next time. And the third time he still went down the line just looking at prisoners which he sort of wanted to kill and passed me again. Three times I was to be taken to be shot to death, and all three times I was passed by. Now the ones that were chosen, they had to step out of line, they were taken out of the camp and shot to death. We were sent back to the barrack, and then were sent some Kapos and we had a beating in a ----- . I can't tell you we, our...face and, and body and, and, and were puffed up and, and uh as many of them, their ribs were broken in because we were around that area. Now I was a saboteur, and I got a, a uh sort of a form like a uh half circle written on my back and I, I 'saboteur.'

(Sandy talking in background).

You can just start with "I was a saboteur."

I was a saboteur, and then go on. So I was a saboteur, and I was marked as such, on the, on the jacket of my back, and every time, I, any, a Kapo would pass by me or an SS officer or an SS guard, either would spat at me, spit on me or kick me, so, I believe in God because God saved my life so many times that that I was not patriot, in spite of all the three times that the SS went by picking people at random, um passed me by. I don't believe that was a coincidence. And uh, it was God's way of protecting me. And anyway, about two weeks later that I had that Saboteur jacket, all the jackets were taken from everybody, and for the, I couldn't belie-believe it, we had back new jackets which was clean, and the word saboteur disappeared off, off of my jacket, so I was again not molested anymore as a saboteur, but freely could walk back and forth over where I was working. So, I also give credit to God for that. Now, I must tell you something is an extremely interesting, and maybe one of the million or ten million or hundred million that can happen. I have to go to Cleveland, Ohio for a second, uh because it's, we are still with that sabotage things. Uh, when I was in Cleveland in 19, in 1958, -----fifty, I was studying in the university, and um, one of my -----uh gave me a check. Now he was an American, Hungarian and Jewish like myself, except I was not American unfortunately, and uh, he gave me a check to pay up a debt, which I uh, had been paying, paying, and never got smaller, so he says, "Go in any bank, and cash it." But you see, he didn't have an account in that bank or any bank in that area, and I didn't have an account anywhere at any bank. So, in fact, I didn't even speak English, very little, and I said to him, "How do I do this? I mean," "Oh no," he says, "It's very simple, here's the check, all you do is go up to the teller, and just say, cash, cash, give me cash." I said, "That's all?" He says, "Yeah." Now I went into, looked around where is a bank and I'm coming from uh around lunchtime you

know and I had -----you had to go back to school in the afternoon classes. So I saw a bank, so I go in there. Cleveland Trust, I remember now. And, I went up to, waited in line and went up to what was the teller, put down and I said, "Cash cash." And and he looked at me, so other words, we couldn't communicate. So he was a compassionate man, he said, "Okay, just a second." He came from his window and escorted me to the President's office. Now he spoke several languages. Now we're going to find out what this foreigner wants, he thought, probably. So, I started with uh, I spoke to the uh it was the President of the bank, and I said, uh "Parlez francaise?" "Sprechens-y Duetschce?" "-----Hungarian." He says, "Spreche Duetsche." I'm I speak German. Thank God. So we start, and we waited a little because the teller had to find out if there is money on this account, and he says to me, "-----," speak French, are you French? I said, "No, I'm a Transylvanian." But I was in France, and looking at my violin case being next to me, he says, "Did you study music there?" I said, "No." But then I relented what I doing in France, that I was doing sabotage, putting sand instead of uh filling up with sand you know with gun powder, and when, when actually uh one of these uh planes are what the plane would be obliterated. And he stood, from, he sprung up from his chair, ran, ran to me, grab my hand, "God bless you, God bless you." I said, "Thank you. Thank you." I mean blessing comes always well, so I thank you for it." He says, "No please," he saw my puzzled face, he says, "Please let me explain. My son and nine crew, he was a captain over nine crew, and they were bombing around that area where the ammunition factory was, and they were shot with one of these rockets, which penetrated the airplane but did not explode. I think they were caught on the wing, and or the tail, whatever, and when they got back to the bases, very carefully, they took that weapon, that rocket apart to see why did not explode, they found sand in the capsule." So we both hugged and started to cry, and I knew, I knew then that if I would have been killed and died, it would not be in vain, because I knew that at least ten people, nine, nine plus the captain, ten lives were saved because of my sabotage.

I want to jump to the incident in the salt mines.

Yes.

Okay, with my father.

-----electric wires, that resistance because, before we run out.

In September, we were transferred from France into Copendorf, which was a, a large salt mine, and was a terrible grueling work, and, and day of Yom Kippur, all of the sudden the whole area of the salt mine became dark, completely dark, and we put our uh hammers down and uh sat down



immediately. A little rest, at least a little rest. We thought it was God's will that on Yom Kippur at least, you know, sending us something, darkness that we can rest, and one of, one of the prisoners started to chanting the -----, and honestly, I can hear it, I can hear it now, like, then the other one got into, and then another one. We were also about 60 to 80 persons around there, and we're sitting, and then even those who did not know the words, and they did not probably even know the melody, but they were humming along, along, and in, in a miracle too, the entire section was full of, of, of, of the -----, the song of, of the Yom Kippur. We didn't know that the SS, we were not aware of it that the SS were listening in. Within ten minutes, the whole problem was found, restored and the light came on. Then we found out what was the source of the darkness. One of us in fact, it, he was which I did not put in my book that was a Hungarian uh Jew who used to show, in, he had secretly hidden his wife's and his little son's picture, and that gave him a little bit of will of, of, of living because constantly we had to talk him out of committing suicide, constantly, and my father was the one who always said, "No, you'll see, we're going to survive," and you know. But, he couldn't stand it any longer, and he went and cut the wire with the uh spoon made into sharpen the, like it was like a knife. He was beaten severely until he fell unconscious. Then we had to form another line, exactly like it was in France, and one was picked, the other one was let go, then he passed, the SS passed 2 then picked the third one the fourth, then again. So, here half of them were picked, taken out and shot to death. I also again was bypassed. So, I have, you have to, you have to puzzle, you have to think how come I didn't, I was saved one day before I would be killed as Zonder Commando, then in France I was bypassed three times. Now again, coincidences maybe. Who knows? I believe differently. So, we were severely beaten, the one that they were not picked. In, still in Copen Dorf, in February, my father turned 42. So my

Wait we are going to run out. We should just start another roll. We're going to run out in about ten seconds.

Beep.

In February 1945, my father turned 42, and we didn't have nothing to give him. We at home always used to exchange gifts. We children would put our little pennies together to buy for our parents' anniversary or, or birthday, but here we had nothing. The Nazis stripped us of everything. So I came up with the idea to give a ration of bread for a day to him as a birthday present, and I told Zolton, and he liked the idea. So, in the evening, we held out our hands, said, "Father, for you." He wouldn't think of it. He knew that bread, it means nourishment, it means life. We were starving. In fact we were on starving ration and that was the idea, let them work as long as they can and then drop dead, and then they're just going to take them away. We were not there really ever, ever to leave the concentration

camp, any of us, none of us, but here's the bread, "No way," he says, "I'm not going to take it. You need that little nourishment." But we ins--kept on insisting so finally, not wanting to hurt our feelings, he accepted the gift, and he said, "Thank God that allowed me to live long enough to witness that gracious love from my sons." It was like, like he would have sensed being his last day on earth. Next morning at 5 o'clock, we were already in line to go to the salt mines, but one prisoner was missing. After several recounts, the prisoner was still missing. The Kapo sent him to the barrack to look for him. They found a missing person sleeping in a corner, my father, so they dragged him in front of the SS, they picked him up from the cover, and it was bitter winter, and he just had his, his underalls on, his uh practically nothing, and he was ordered to stand still or at attention, and then the Kapo went to the SS and was whispering something, so when the SS turned to the and they asked the uh assembly and they said, "I understand that that dirty Jewish dog has here two sons. I want them to step out of line and come next to him and see what his punishment going to be because he kept Germany from victory ten minutes, because that's how long it took to find him. Then he gave a hard swift kick to my father, and this signaled the kapos to start it, the punishment. For every, every for every side, every corner, they started hitting him, kicking and beating him until he fell on the ground and Zolton and I begged, went on our knees, and went, begged the SS to s-to stop it and went and tried to grab the arm of the Kapos, then the, the hitting and the beating and the whipping were on our backs. And they were beating my father until he collapsed, and was so badly beaten he was unrecognizable. I started to chant the 22nd song. -----  
----- . Oh God, my God, why hast thou forsaken us? So the beating finally stopped when my father was motionless, except for his lips, and I saw that he was trying, trying to say something, and I came close, and then I heard he was reciting the Shamah, the Declaration of the Faith of the Jew to God, and it says, "-----," Hear Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Then he became very silent. He didn't speak no more. He didn't move no more. We went, Zolton and I we went off to the salt mine. The first time in my life that I lost faith in God. I was born in an Orthodox family. My father was a wonderful, wonderful human being, a very pious Jew. That he wouldn't harm a soul. In fact, in the concentration camp, he kept people alive, really alive, the lots of them went and touched the barbed wire to end, they couldn't stand it any longer, and he used to say, "No, no, you'll see, like God sent Moses to get the children of Israel out of Egypt, of our bondage, you'll see that he will send somebody to free us, and in fact, to take us back to Aris Israel." That means go to our homeland, Israel, and it was like, like, like he foresaw that. Like uh it was a prediction or, or not a prediction it was a, a prophecy sort of, you know. Now that wonderful man, no more. And I said, if God allowed that to happen, there is no God. If, if God allowed for, for him to be killed, then I don't believe anymore, and it thank God that it didn't last long because on the very same night, in my dream, my father appeared, and he said, called me on my Hebrew name "Yitzhok," he says, "Don't ever lose your faith in God. God is real. And you'll see that you will survive." What was, what was so strange to me that he said, "You," singular. He didn't say the plural, "You," meant that you and Zolton will survive. He said, "You will

survive." Meanwhile, Zolton was so angry and so out of beside him uh what we witnessed that said uh, he's going to go and spring a -----, grab this SS guards, or SS officers neck and he's going to choke him to death. I said, "You couldn't get two feet next to him, close to him. Not even two feet, you will be shot." He says, "No, I will do it. You'll see I will do it," and Zolton was even though he was not quite 16 years old, he was very, very strong, since what like some people practice God knows what all day long, he was muscle build up, bodybuilder, I mean it incredibly so, and he says, "No, and I just go and I crush him to death because he killed our father." And I said, "Zolton, I tell you something. A miracle happened Zolton, my father appeared to me in my dream, and he said we should believe there is a God, and we should never lose our faith in God because we going to survive." He said that. You know our father, even in dream, said, he never said anything that wasn't so. So Zolton gave up the idea killing because that would be killing himself right away. Now, not long after that in the beginning of April, we were transferred at, from, from Copendorf to Dachau. The trip from Copendorf to Dachau was the worst that I have ever accounted. On one occa-one instance, in one occasion the SS stopped the train, there were American fliers very, very low, they wanted to see what is the train because there always cattle cars, you know. We were transported in cattle cars, we were so packed that I'm, I'm, I'm telling you worse than when we went to, to Dachau, I mean to uh Auschwitz. The Dachau trip was the worst I have ever, ever experienced. We were, for instance, you couldn't even sit down. Once you sat, like the same thing uh in Auschwitz, except in Ausch-----going to in Auschwitz, it was a little more, uh even if you didn't have uh no food and no water, but at least there was some more room that we could move a little bit better, but here there was no way, and the worst was that if you tried to move, then a bickering among uh prisoners themselves because they were trying and were shoving and pushing and, and, and, and were hitting uh with, with the elbows among prisoners. So, what happened is the American fliers came low enough because they want to see the SS stop the train and took cover under it and start shooting at the at the uh, uh airplane, at the pilot, fighter pilots. They shot back. The Americans shot back, and the bullets would go through the top of the cattle car, unfortunately hitting quite a few of the prisoners, and one man who, who was standing, now you could not sit down anymore, and there was a three days trip. He was all of the sudden says, "I am hit!" And then slowly he was going down and he landed on my foot. He was moaning, he was hurting terribly say, "Shut up, shut up, don't, don't move, don't scream." So the next, about a few hours later, he died right on my foot, and in -----I was trying to push him off, because it was terrible, my food got numb, and I couldn't feel anymore but it was so uncomfortable, and I tried to push him off, and the others wouldn't let. There were j-just no room. There were absolutely none. So, when we finally arrived at Dachau, I was overwhelmed with happiness seeing from the other car, Zolton my brother also survived.

We have to reload.

Beep.

Beep.

Second sticks??

After we arrived at Dachau, I knew if something wouldn't happen soon, I would not survive. I could hardly walk, let alone do the chores or the work that I was required to do. For a second I'd like to go back to my childhood. When I was 4 years old, I got lost in a forest. My governess took us, took, we went for a walk, and we landed in the forest, and she sat down, after a while we got tired, and she said, later that she fell asleep, and when she woke up, I was nowhere to be found. I was wandering around and hopelessly lost, I started crying, and a little gypsy woman, a young gypsy woman I should say, was picking mushrooms, flowers, heard my cry and took me into their Gypsy camp, and that, this the first time in my life that I heard violin music, and it was beautiful. They could make it sound like a bird, chirp like a bird. They could play fast, they could play sweet, slow, I , I was just ----- . So, later on when finally I was home, I said to my parents, "I want this," and I mean-----the violin, "I want that, I want this." After about, I was four years old, as I mentioned, but a year later, when I was five, then finally they gave in since uh every single day I was pestering them for, for that violin, and I start formally taking lessons. When I was ten I gave a concert, it was my first debut, uh in ----- . And, when I was 13, I finished conservatory, which the diploma is right there, so it seems like my uh career was really well-established to go on tour, and uh, something high??? However, a man named Hitler, thought it differently. Now, here I am in Dachau, and I was just praying God, "If you're not going to help me, I'm not going to survive." And at night, one night thereafter, an SS came to the barrack holding a violin up, and saying, announcing, "Who can play the violin to come to the front room, and if I like you the playing, I'm going to give food and water." When you mentioned food, we would do anything, and water, I mean anything. We couldn't think, talk, we dreamt about food. Nothing I could uh we had but food, food, food. So hungry. So, I eagerly volunteered, and so did two others. So we went to the front room where three Kapos, the SS and the barrack doctor were waiting. The violin was handed to the older one, it's about a 40 years old man, who tuned it, and the first few notes were shaky because he hadn't played the violin uh about a year or so like myself, but thereafter, he started to play the Zircon, Da Zarcon? One of the Sonatas. So beautiful, I had never heard anything like that in my life, and I thought what am I doing here? I mean this is, the man is going to get the food. The SS grimaced. He didn't like it, and signaled the Kapo. One Kapo went, took the violin away from this wonderful violinist. The other one picked up an iron pipe and went behind this wonderful man, and he hit him so hard, that he cracked his skull open. Blood and brain

was splattered all over the floor. I got terribly scared. I've seen death around me but never nothing like that, and immediately I realized like in the past, they don't want really playing, they did not want that violin music, they just the way, that's a joke. Now we kill another one, and we having fun by that. So now the violin was handed to the next man who was about 25, and he was so scared that he couldn't play a straight note. He was standing there shivering, and, and, and, and (plays quivering violin simultaneously) just going like that. I never found out if he could or could not play. Well the SS was terribly angry. He says, "You said, you come out, how do you dare come out, and say that you can play? And you expect me to give you food for this?" They started kicking him and, and they were beating him to death. Now was my turn. When I came out of the barrack, I was intending if I have a chance to play, I'm going to play a Sonata by ----- or one of those encore pieces, beautiful pieces by -----, after all, I was classically trained. But I was scared stiff. My mind went blank. When I got to him, I said, "My God, my God, how does the Sonatina start? How does Fitz -----piece start? How does anything start?" And I noticed that the murder Kapo went for his pipe again. Was picking up and picked up his pipe and was walking toward me. Every nerve in my body was concentrating on the blow that I'm going to get killed now. And I was standing there about maybe few seconds, maybe five maybe ten, motionless, and then, incredibly, my right hand and my left hand started to move in perfect harmony, and this what came out of the violin. Plays. Beautiful ----- . Everybody looked at the SS, and the, the Kapo with the iron pipe waiting and waiting for the sign, "When shall I hit him?" And the Kapo was singing and humming the melody, and he was tapping his fingers uh at the at the table which like it was ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, so hitting the rhythm, and said, "Let him live." So really honestly I got food, but I was so terribly overtaken by what I've noticed, what I've witnessed that I couldn't eat it. So, but they let me live. The Kapo picked up his, up his guitar and accompanied me, and that gave the SS an idea. So, that wasn't the only time that I played for them. We had to go and entertain the SS. And after that specific debut which I did in the front room, I could play anything, it was okay. I could play anything, but when the SS got tired of, of our playing, our Kapo came along and accompanied me on the guitar. Then they played differently. He says, this is -----, this is enough. So there we have to stand next to a brick wall, all of us, the Kapo also, and they were shooting at us, there was, I have to, I have to say the truth that it was accident shots. They were missing, they were aiming at uh my head for instance, right between my eyes, aiming, and at the last second, a little move, and the bullet went above my head, or side of me, and sometimes it came so close that I could f--I could feel the wind of the of the bullet. If somebody didn't, didn't have that they don't know what I'm talking about. You know? And every single time almost, was praying, I said, "God please, let him kill me because it's too much, it's just ten, fifteen, shooting at you, and I, at the end, I looked like a, a bloody mess because from the brick uh wall, little brick, chunk of bricks it would sometimes hit me and they would cut me, but he never, never touched a

bullet-----until later. I have to tell you that, it was very, there was, again, I use the word "debut," in quotation, and that night there was the back doctor, a French man, who heard me and he was drawn to me immediately because he had a son about the same age as I, and was very talented, and studied the violin, but Mengele thought he was too young to live. Mengele did not pass him in Auschwitz. So, he was also in Auschwitz, and wound up in Dachau like myself, and but not at the same time as I was. He was already there, that uh doctor. And uh, he said, "When we're going to get liberated, I take you and you're going, I take you home, and I'm going to make your dream come true, you're going to be a great violinist, I'm going to take care of you, and in fact, you're going to be my son."

We have to reload.

Beep.

One day the SS came to our barrack and said, "Jews, Poles, Germans, any prisoners, out of the barrack. And Russians too. We're going to be evacuated." The Americans are close and they did not want us to fall in the Americans' hand. So, the barrack doctor would come and he said, "The barrack doctor is there and he is going to determine who is going to walk, who is able to walk, who will walk." It's the very famous death march, by the way, "And uh the others going to be put on cattle cars or on the train." And we're going to be evacuated, we're going to Tyrol. However, the truth was that we were taken, we were taken into a forest nearby, and the barrack doctor was also brought just to camouflage the whole things so that we're not going to find out really why we've been tak--taken in the forest. We were taken out of the barrack in fact. Now, he knew, and he was helping people to get organized would in a horizontal line, and the machine guns were hidden from our, our view ready to fire. And then all of the sudden he said to me, turned to me, this doctor, he says, "Alex, Alex, run, run!" And I then realized that it was no evacuation, it is the end. And I ran right into the forest for cover, and as I was running again chanting the Shamah Israel, uh the Shamah is Declaration of Faith of the Jew, something terribly hot entered my chest. And then I had difficulty breathing and I fell, and I was on the ground and I saw that blood was going, falling down on my body, and the doctor noticed the same thing, and I did not hear a shot. In other words, I did not hear the sound of the shot. I just heard something hit me and, and I was bloody, blood flowing, but I, I did not hear the shot, and then I had difficulty breathing. The doctor came right, right away ran toward me and he sort of on one knee down on the floor and took my pulse and, and SS guard was running right behind him with drawn revolver aiming to my head, and the this wonderful French doctor sort of turned back to him and he says, "Don't shoot. Trois minutes--kaput. Don't shoot, in three minutes he'll be dead." So the SS turned to the doctor and says, "Let

this dirty Jewish dog suffer for 3 minutes because he's not worth the cost of another bullet. So he went and signaled another one of his compatriots, and they started the shooting. And the machine guns, that day, were something like 17,000 killed. Machine gun. Of course, they started the day before I'm sure, or or two, but we didn't know about it, and when uh, the trucks came, and the bodies were thrown on the truck and carried back to the camp, uh to, to be uh cremated or thrown in the ditch. The doctor gave order that the, his French prisoners were the one who have, no they were the Zonder Commando, and he told them that when they take the, pick me up and put 'em on the, throw me on the top of the bodies. And I don't know anything about it, I was unconscious, but you can see how many death or dead bodies were among them because I was just wounded. Mortally wounded, but I wounded, I was not dead. Meanwhile, we were supposed to be thrown in the ditch or be cremated, but as I said, he, when we arrived in the back to the uh to the uh camp, they took me off of these bodies, and took me into a French barrack, and then he changed the insignia of a Jew to a Frenchman, to a French origin. He had tweezer or pocket knife. He fished the bullet out of my chest without any anesthetic, and next day, a wonderful Americans liberated Dachau, and the first thing what we did, they were uh, with their attention, the American's attention called on the very sick ones and the mortally wounded ones or wounded ones, and this is how somebody called the attention on me to the Americans, and they took me immediately to a hospital uh in Dachau right away, is there Dachau first, and they attended to me so I was told later that the doctors found very definitely that I will not survive because I had -----, I had blood poisoning, and I had typhoid fever, among other thing that were, plus being malnourished, and frozen feet.

Now I want to ask you a couple of questions. Can you tell me how much mental or spiritual resistance played a role do you feel in the camps, not just for you but for others around you? Was it important?

I would say spiritual, my uh, uh, my opinion about it, did not play a lot of role because once we got in and we were coming down, lower, uh lower than animal, there was no more, no more any spiritual uh, most people did not believe anymore in God, and the very, very religious ones like my father uh who did, and there were not that many who really believed. In other words, it was not, you could say that the spiritual uh feelings what dominated uh the camp, not at all, this is my findings and my opinion. In fact, so much so that a lot of people went or wanted to commit suicide by ----- . And the only reason they could not do that because of the mass suicide happened at Auschwitz, then later at Dachau which I experienced, were stopped by the SS, in a very stupid way, may I say it since they said, "If anybody comes three feet near to the barbed wire, they're gonna shoot him." I mean this is almost ridiculous because this is what you wanted, except you didn't wanted to, to die with blood flowing but you just touch it and then electrocuted. It's a better way than being shot to death. And really honestly, it happened even if you just accidentally got three feet or, or a little bit beyond that the, the SS from there, from their tower, would always the machine gun was aimed out into, into the camp, they would shoot you so that the mass suicide stopped, but not because uh they were spiritual and, and they believed in, in something that they should have believed in, you know?

What about other physical resistance other than the sand in the rockets? Were there other times where you know of sabotage?

Uh, there were I'm sure uh many, now for instance we found out that the, the lager fuehrer which means the uh the elder, there was one who is equivalent to the kapo, but he was already there for God knows how many years, and he was made by the SS, the head of the entire barrack. One person, the head of the entire barrack then the one that we had as I understood, he was a double agent. A spy for the Americans, and, and secretly he was sending messages. Now I found that one out, out after liberation. However this one interesting uh note about Dachau, in spite of all that it was my experience being shot and all this, I don't know 17,000 something killed, and there were still several thousand left in the camp, which the Dachau, the camp Dachau was mined. Nobody knew that. And the only reason that the Americans liberated Dachau when they did instead of doing it two or three days later because again an SS uh Guard or Officer, who was also a double agent, through the darkness during the night, went over the, the American line and throw that next



very next day and I don't know the hour, the very next day, the entire Dachau is going to be mined, it was blown up. And not one of the prisoners is going to stay alive. So, the Americans came before that could have happened. Saved many, many lives. That was not known to many, and I cannot tell you, not because it's a secret, and I cannot tell you just how I found out, but I found out from a source, which very reliable.

We have to reload.

Beep.

I want to ask you about support systems. You had a family for a long time with you that helped you in the camps. Did you see a lot of other people who had friends who helped them or, or did you see the opposite? Was there, were ethics abandoned?

What, you talking about a family meaning my brother and, and...

And your father.

Yeah. Okay, I'll answer truthfully. There was a lot, very unfortunate what I seen in the camp among prisoners. They were instances when instead of some giving present as we did to our father, and giving up a piece of bread, which was, that was your ration, and we're talking about a piece of bread, I'm talking about it, was a little bit of size you know. Uh, they were stealing from each other, and there were unfortunately uh sons who turned against father or father against son, so that they can survive. At that point, not everybody, but I have seen quite a few, that they turned against each other and they were really, as I mentioned earlier, they were animal, they became animalistic. It was incredible. No matter how low we got, meaning me, uh and my, my brother plus of course father, and also others, they would not do that, and I have seen it done, yes.

I want you to tell me about age again. I want you to tell me how there was a selection in Auschwitz. Who was selected as if I don't know anything about it. And I want you to do the story of you coming up in the line with Mengele, again as though you haven't told me before, just do it fresh again. So maybe you want to do the whole selection of your family again just coming off the train. Give a good picture of how the selection was done.

Well, when we, when we uh, the doors were opened and we had, we were ordered out, then, as I mentioned earlier, head prisoners called Kapos which were rushing toward us, and start hitting,

kicking, beating, and the SS would hit us -----faster, and stand in line, man in one, and women and small children in the other. And, after we lined up, I noticed a high-ranking SS officer, in fact, what I noticed he was having a monocle and peering through that at us, peering at us with this monocle, and that was the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele. The Angel of Death, so-called Angel of Death, who decided our fate. Either you get immediately to the gas chamber or you had to stay and, and, and feel the pain of being alive. It was uh lingering torture ----- . And as I mentioned also that he had a stick in his hand which I identified as a baton, and he was like a conductor, conducting the people that they had to file by and, to the right and to the left. First was, first were in our family, my mother and uh younger sister, Goldie, her real name in Hungarian was Oronco. And they were sent to one side, to the left. Violet was the next. She was 18. Oronco was 9. She was sent to the opposite side to the right. That was followed by Zolton, and of course my father and Zolton, they were also sent to the same side as Violet, whose real name in Hungarian is Iboya, which means Violet if you translate it into English. Then came my turn, and as I was, I was walking, was almost by Mengele when he gestured to me to stop, and then turn to me, very sweet voice, like a father, "Tell me, little boy, how old are you?" I said, "I'm 16, and I have the proof." And he looked at me, I'm sure he didn't believe me. In fact he had a sneer, sort of a smile on his face, which later I identified or at least uh saying that maybe he said to himself, "You're going to be sorry that you lied to me because death in a gas chamber will be easier than what you're going to go through," but nevertheless, he did motion me toward the group where my he ----- my father and brother. When the selections were over, my mother, my younger sister and the group they were in, they were led away. That was a time that I didn't know that I will never, never see them again. They were, were taken directly to the gas chamber. They were actually taken to a, as I mentioned, there was building which, building there that lettering, 'Bade', Bath. And then, then they were issued a towel and a bar of soap, and telling...

That's, we got that part before. When you think back on all those things, tell me the things you remember from your senses. Sounds or smells or things like that that you that stick out in your memory.

Believe it or not, here sometimes, when I go by where, where the building streets, and those are the that category of , what do you call this in English by that, it's, it's, it's tar I think, they're laying the tar down, the smell of the tar brings back awful memories to me because those tars we were working on building also roads. Certain sounds, if you want me to uh tell you what kind of a sound, sometimes, I don't even realize why all of the sudden I just feel that I am, I am cornered, I am like the animals, it's, it's no, no way out, and then I realize that that's something triggered ----- ---in me, that what I saw in the concentration camp. And the worst thing probably is the

occasional dreams that that my family appears and not in a favorable position. I see picking up my mother, although I did not pick up my mother, but picking up my mother and my little sister and putting on the cart, and carting to the crematorium, and I would like you to know that I never never, never spoken to anyone about this, I I'm speaking about that. Do you know why I'm speaking about this now? Because, I believe there's so many things that one locked in. Maybe if I speak about it, I will be cured of these reoccurring dreams. And lately thank God, it's not coming back that often as they used to, but it still does and then Sherry, who is sleeps right next to me, goes, she will wake me up, and she knows, she does not ask me, "What kind of a dream did you have?" She just wakes me up and she knows. It was a bad dream going back to Auschwitz and Dachau. Actually I was in four camps. Started with Auschwitz, France, Cependorf, and now, then Dachau.

People like to believe in humankind, and to believe in heroism. How do you feel about that after what you lived through?

Well, I will tell you one thing. I have to, of course, it's very personal. When I arrived and I uh, to Cleveland as I mentioned and got to go with this uh, uh ----- . He finding out what I have done was certainly not short of heroism, that what I was filling sands in capsules that I, that I know, which I already told you, there was ten, however since then, accidentally, one in a million again, I found another fighter pilot who was saved, who was shot by one of these shells, one of these rockets and escaped certain death. But, he this Bank Director wanted to make me into a hero. He wanted to get the newspapers, in fact, the only thing what I accepted was an invitation to his son to meet personally, and his family, and we had a dinner, but he wanted to alert the newspapers and all this, I said, "No. I did not do it for being a hero, for heroism, uh to take advantage of, maybe my career would go faster. I believe in something, and I was ready to give my life for that."

We have to reload.

Changing film, Camera roll 8 is going up; Sync take 10 is up.

Beep.

Okay, so tell me why you risked your life and committed sabotage.

Well, all honestly, I didn't believe that we would ever get out of there. Down deep in my subconscious, maybe, I was hoping yes. Believe, no. And when he said, "Will you give up your life?" that that really meant for me that I'm going to die because I didn't believe that we could get

away with it, but since it wasn't only that conversation between me and the this captain, the French captain. It were much more that we talked, not uh we couldn't sit talk uh like I'm talking to you because there were SS guards around it, and they would not like prisoners to converse. However, here and there we would, uh we could say a few words to each other. Uh, I really did not believe and I thought, if that helps, if just one person helps then Hitler did not uh get what he really wanted, to, to annihilate all the Jews, to kill all the Jews, or destroy the world. I was taken from home, a beautiful home, meaning home life, not as a building I'm speaking of. Very orthodox family. Very close-knit family. And, what I have seen over there and going to, I figured sooner or later I must meet my death because I just couldn't go on dodging the, the bullets so to speak ----- . I was not picked and there I was not picked, and then one, one of these picking and innocently, the people that they were around that managed the ammunition factory were taken at random. It was 30 people, they were not saboteurs at all. I was a saboteur, the captain was saboteur, and somebody else saboteur, and another thing, but they were not bad. If they were around anyone in the uh in Copendorf, which was the Salt Mine in Yom Kippur, I didn't cut the wire. It's only one man did it, but he was from our group. Half of these people were picked and shot to death, and the other half were beaten or, or almost to death, you know, so, how could I, how could I believe that I would be surviving. In spite of all the with my father who was a very strong force, and I still feel his even, even beyond the grave, believe it or not, I still feel his, his force on me, but he told me, I still trying, and I wish to God I could be half what he was, but at least started to fashion my life according what he, how he lived. Of course, I'm not speaking of keeping kosher, which we're not, but all the other decent and good things what he did, and there was one decent thing to do: sabotage. If and when the occasion arise, arose, and then it did.

Tell me about the Symphony of the Holocaust, tell me about the pieces you're going to play.

Well, the, I must uh very briefly say that uh, the Symphony of the Holocaust, the melodies came to me while in, in Con-Concentration Camp, and here is another thing that probably helped survive bes-beside God's will. Because when I got, they had this, this -----, that terrible -----, that I was about to touch the uh barbed wire, I would say to myself first, "Why don't you, why don't you just "play," (in quotation) meaning play, goes through in your head. Why don't you just play that movement which you just learned from before you were taken Mendelson's Violin Concerto. Let's see if you can rem-remember. That gave me strength. I went through while I was hitting the with, with the hammer or I was uh lifting the heavy uh things which I, I really couldn't lift, but I lift it because there is a world to lift you know that stone, the salt stone. Some of them they were dynamiting, you know, and they were not telling us in time, so they killed many, many of us. But anyway, so that gave me also an incentive to live, so this is how it started, and then another

concentration camp, which where I went, different melodies came to me. I couldn't write it down, but it came over and over and over, and when I had a chance I wrote it down, but only about 5 or 6 years ago that I completed it in a form of a symphony, and of course, I will play some excerpt for it, from it, but, in all honesty, what I am saying, all those pain, all the sufferings, I wrote it on the symphony in such a way as certain instruments, like the flute or the clarinet or bassoon, and the violas and the violins, that they talking, they telling the story, the instruments telling the story, but in this case we still will play just a little excerpts from here and there.

Tell me about the three movements.

Actually there is five movements, uh, the first one is entitled, 'The Song of the Holocaust,' the second one is the prayer where we turn to God to liberate us from that terrible, terrible ordeal, and the third one is 'The Song of Liberation,' which is rhythmical. When we finally saw the soldiers coming in, whoever could form a circle, start to dance a certain you know style or aura???? Then when we realized that even though we survived that our loved ones were gone and we went to the to the ditch looking to the grave, see if we, if we recognize some of them. At least we know what happened. And that's 'The Song of Commemoration.' It's a slow rhythmical song, but life goes on and then we realize that our lives were given back, a new beginning, that we're alive, and we're happy so we felt as free as a bird, and this is the joy of life and freedom and, and one point in that song toward the end in a Credenza, to, for the violin of course, I imitating a bird, for a short, just a few bars, but I'm imitating a bird to express the joy and the freedom. So that's the fifth movement. But they all are short.

Let's cut. The following is 30 seconds of room tone for interview with Shony Braun.