

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Chaim Engel
February 12, 1992
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Chaim Engel, conducted on February 12, 1992 in Bradford, Connecticut 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.

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CHAIM ENGEL

February 12, 1992

Will it be in the form of a question, you ask me questions, or?

I will ask you questions, but I imagine that you will definitely -----.

Beep.

Describe for me arriving by train in Sobibór, and what it felt like to arrive there, and how you learned what was happening.

Uh, we came from a place in Isbitsa, a, a town in Poland, and, uh, we, we didn't know where we're going, we, and the place that they, they guarded all the Jews and that they send them, and they send them away, we were hiding there, but the Germans didn't leave so we eventually we had to come out, and then they took us all to a train, to the station, in uh, in uh, -----train, cattle trains, and they loaded them as full as possible, and we, the whole night we travelled without food and things. It was so crowded in this place, we hardly could breathe. Some people just fainted and probably died there too. And we arrived in the morning at Sobibór, and uh, so, they opened the, the trains and they all unloaded us with screaming, and...with people with whips and...Anyway, they unloaded us and they put us on two lines, and I was with my brother in the front of the line, and uh, they picked out from this transport 18 people. Now, I happened to be one of the 18 for no reason. He asked me, uh, "Where do you come from?" I said, "I come from Lodz," but that doesn't really mean anything, they just picked 18 people, they probably needed for some people to work there, and uh, they went, the rest of the transport went, as usual to the gas chambers, what we didn't know yet what happened, and us, they brought to the quarters of the others, other inmates lived there. And the same afternoon, they brought us to work, and the work was to separate the clothes from the people who had just come and were gassed. We, when we came together with the other inmates, they told us what's going on here, that the people get all killed, we didn't know when we arrived, uh, later they told us, and uh, that they, the people get all gassed. At that time was still, uh, they didn't bury, they didn't burn yet, later, a little later, started to be, to burn the, the, the bodies. So, but, us they took to work, and we had to separate these clothes of these people. In these clothes, I found my brother's clothes and pictures, I have a few of them, and that's the way my, my brother died, and I later met in the inmates, some people, where they came originally from the place where I lived in Poland, after the war, ----- the war, and, uh, I found some people what they knew my father, and my father came there a few months before me there, so he died there too. And uh, uh, you can

imagine, you come and, although we hear it a lot, talking about they killed the people, but it was so incomprehensible, we never believed it really happened. We always thought, "Well, it's just, you just wouldn't, couldn't believe it. It was so, so unacceptable to think that that is true, that I really didn't believe it till I really saw it what happened. And uh, and uh that was our first experience when we arrived in Sobibór, and later was uh, mostly, we had uh, steady jobs, we got steady jobs. I was separating clothes, so there was a group who always went to separate the clothes. So we separated in different uh grades, the good clothes, we packed separate, and the bad ones we brought to the waste pile, where we put all the waste there, so uh, that was really, this, all these clothes they sent later to Germany. The shoes, the, the, the clothes was good because they what they used. With the same trains where they brought the people, they brought the clothes back, take it, they took it away. And, uh, it was, it was, the, the food was just unbelievable, you couldn't live from the food what they gave you there. We called it some spit soup, there was some -----, with, you couldn't eat it really, and some people didn't make it, they really died, they couldn't live from that what they gave us. Now we worked at the separating the clothes so the people what came with the transport brought with them some cans of food, sardines, things like that, so we had, we went over it, we went over our hands, so, so it was, was very strict not to take it and stole it, but you were hungry so you didn't care too much, and a lot of people got caught, and they got shot, killed, just to show that they shot them for just taking a can of food like that. Well, we still keep doing it because that's the way you can survive. Uh, the, we work till, always till the dark, till the sun went so they, they always had to control if they have ----- but during the day, so around 5 o'clock, they brought us back to the, to the living barracks. Now the camp was divided in, it was a part where the Germans lived, and there was a part where we lived, and there was the working group, where we worked, and there was the Lager Drei, what we called it, -----, where the people got and, and burned, but that's the final stage, it was. Uh, the, to come back a minute when the transporter came, there's a lot of people either sick, half dead, or dead, they took us, they took these people and just threw them like a, on trolley wagons, with this, like a, coal-miner's wagons with the, uh, swing back and forth, and that's the way they transported things, so these people who's dead or half dead, they threw just on one pile and that went direct to the gas chamber. Uh, the life was there, uh, to be honest, in the beginning, in the beginning when the transports came before me, there was no any group, work group, in the, uh, Sobibór. It was small, they, after the transporter came they picked out about 50-60 people, and they took care later for cleaning up, as I said, after the transport, and, and then they shot these people. But somehow for, it looked for them not efficient enough, so they picked out people, so when I came in camp, there were there maybe 100 people worked there. Uh, so and, and they worked was we cleaned up just the mess after the people, did separating the clothes from the trains, cleaning, things like that, so as I say, we had uh the, the, the job was, I had the separating the clothes of sorting the clothes, but not always because if it came some special things, what they

found some special job, they picked you just, and they let you do, so I was once, they picked me to, they cut the hair of the women, and that was in our barrack about, about 10 mo-10 feet-from, of me, ten feet from uh, yard, ten yard, about from the gas chamber, and they took us about 20, 20 people went to this barrack, and we had to cut, randomly cut the long hair from the women, the people, when the women came in there naked with children and things like that, was terrible view, terrible view. Some people, the Polish people they knew what's going on, but we had also people from Holland and other countries, what they were not aware really, they still believed that they still, nothing goes to happen, and they asked us questions, but the Germans were around in a room like here, and they couldn't, they couldn't, we couldn't talk with them, we couldn't say anything because if we would open our mouths, we would go with them together, so we didn't do, so sometimes I was caught, they called me for this kind of work, what we did, it was a horrible thing. Now, as I say, we had, uh, uh, permanent job, a permanent job, mostly was the kind of work, but when the transport, when no, no transports, they usually took us for work uh, to dig or to the woods. They really had work, and if you weren't fast enough, they beat you up, they give you 25 on your, with a whip on you uh, behind, and uh, we were sick sometimes, we had fevers with 40 degrees, so you were not so fast, and they beat you up, and we, we didn't, we didn't try, we tried not to say they are sick, because they are sick mostly they told you that, that, took you directly to the, to the gas chamber. So, some, later on were more people, if it was, somebody couldn't, or they put in a room, no doctors nothing, a room to let them sometimes a day or two, but if you were more than day and two, they took you to the gas chamber. So the life in a camp was like I say uh miserable even, although they, we worked there, and it was not a work camp, it was really a death camp, at, where people came directly to the gas chamber, the people who had worked there was not, as I said, just take care after the transport to clean up the whole thing. So it was not a work camp. So the people uh, uh, uh, how should I say, had, people didn't make it, they, they, for, for, food as I said was not good and they, they beat them, and they gave them to hard work, and, and after that, in the evening, if one of the Germans felt like muscling you...

We need to reload.

Beep.

Before we talk more about the transports, tell me again about the different kinds of camps as though I don't have any idea, I don't know what a death camp is, I don't know what a work camp is.

Well, there were the, the, there were really different kinds of camps, concentration camps and death camps. Concentration camp was more based, the people worked there. Also they got a lot of them

killed, and they muscle?? them, but not the way, the death camps were made especially for--full transports of people came there and just brought them to slaughterhouse, killed them. The few people that worked here didn't count, we didn't count as a worker, because we were just cleaning up the mess after. So, the death camps was about 5 or 6, and what there was defin-just for transport and direct to the gas chamber. No matter young, old, strong, weak, child, woman, child, man, doesn't matter, and we were in a camp like that, so it is a little deceiving because when we say we worked there, uh, because it was not a work camp. As I said in the beginning, it was not even people working, they picked out from every transport a few people, and later on they shot them, and after they cleaned up, they shot them. So, that is the, the, the really the difference between the work camp and, and uh, a death camp. Now, in, in this, that camp they had about, about uh, I would say about 20 maybe 20 Germans who were there, and then there was a group of about 200 Ukrainian guards. What, that is the main force what they had to protect, of to keep us in this camp and to, to take care of, of the camp. Well, some of them were so horrible, like, Frenzel [NB SS-Oberscharführer Karl Frenzel], for example. Uh, some of them, they just, it was like a pleasure for them. That, it is not that they just had to work there because they are all volunteers. They belong to the SS, but they all volunteered to go there, and some lived out their life, what they were in normal life, they were probably nothing, really, in the society, and they had all the power. They could, whatever they did, nobody dared take no account of it. The Frenzel, if you want to shoot something, somebody, that's what he did, he had not to give account up to anybody why he did it and what he did, so the power was so strong, that they, it was some, think it was the people took, did it, because they had the power. How many times Frenzel shoot one body, and the worst of them was Wagner [NB SS-Oberscharführer Gustav Wagner]. Now Wagner was a man of about 28, 30 years, and he was very bright, he was very suspicious, and, with him, you have to be very, very careful, we had a mas-when he came to the camp, we had a special name for him that we, one person told it to the other one, "Be careful, here he comes." We called him Vaicro. Uh, that was the name. But, so we knew that he comes there, so everything what could be suspicious, whatever, you just were out of the way, you just were out of the way, you just disappeared because if he didn't like the way you look or the way you act, he just took you out and shot you. So we were careful as far as that, as far as Wagner is concerned. Uh, there were some, what, you have to be careful with them, but not to the degree as with these people. They just worked there and they sometimes beat you up, but they were not of this caliber what these 2 were. There was uh Baker, and Neumann [NB SS-Hauptscharführer Johann Niemann], was a commander. So, so there were all, all the, and they were was Gomerski [NB SS-Scharführer Hubert Gomerski], a boxer. Now, he once he was bragging to another German, because I understand German. He said, they had a, he had a special whip made for him. Thicker than all the others had, and he bragged that with 12 hits of the head, he could kill somebody. He killed a Jew -----. He was in Lager Drei [NB Camp III] where they

gassed the people. Some worked, worked, especially Deoves, he was one of them, what he works there in this camp, in, in Lager Drei where the gassing was going on. And the Ukrainians, they did, didn't have much to say because they were under the command of the Germans. They were guards more, the guards where we worked, sometimes they help the Germans, or were by themselves, so there was just somebody watching over us. So we really didn't have anything, they didn't have the authority over the Germans, they wouldn't start to beat you whatever because they didn't have really the access to that. Um,

Were there any who were at all kind, ever?

The Germans you mean?

Germans or Ukrainians.

Yeah. Well, it was the one German, it was, he worked in the, where the shoes, shoes-----, and he was later on trial in Germany, he was caught. And we were witness there. And we mentioned, I knew he once gave to, prisoners, he gave to those people, he gave some bread, and uh, he told it in the court in Germany, and he got only 2 yrs in prison. Now, none of them was good, even, just, did that, maybe, there were older family people, they had wives and children, so maybe he had some compassion for somebody and he did it, so, but most of them, there were, there were, they were terrible, they went off for 3months, winter vacation, and because we had a lot of people brought nice things, especially when there came transport from Holland, they brought nice stuff with them. So when they went on vacation, they took a lot of the stuff, the suitcases was not big enough to load it up and take with them home, some clothes, gold, because we had, people brought with them gold and eve-because everybody when they went they could take only as much as they can carry, so he tried to make the small-smallest thing whatever value, so is diamond, gold, money, and all these things what came to us, a lot came to their hand, because we sabotaged a lot, we put it in fire and things like that, but still enough over that they, uh, they had a handover, and oh, everybody when they went a three month's vacation, after 3 months vacation, they took with them big suitcases as much as they could have, and ----- at home. So uh, as far, that was the really the Germans, uh, there were all of them, we had to be careful with them, and during the, happened a lot of things where people for example, they were, a small group worked outside the camp, and they group, with two Ukrainians, and there were these people made an uprising there, and they killed one of them, and they ran away, and they caught some of them, and they brought them back, and they want to punish them, so they took, uh took them back, and we had to be guarded together in a -----, and they shot them, and we had to see how they shot them. There was another time happened,

something similar happened, for the 2nd time, so they make it to more, more, more make it more punishable, they put us up, sit us up in a row, and every tenth, they picked what will be killed with them. And I happened to be number 9 in a line like that. So, uh, that was only an example from things what happened so many of the things happened. Uh, as I said, the food that they stole, they shot down, we have to see how they do it because not to steal, although we kept it any doing. And uh, I, I don't know, similar cases happened so many of them, uh, just, just to make our life miserable, you see.

Describe a little more of the resistance that you did when sorting the clothes, the things you stole, and put away and...

Well, well, when we were there, there always was a hope of a talk, of, of dreaming. The one day we would go and be free. Now, we thought, first of all, we, we sabotaged a lot what we could, like the clothes came or linen, things like people brought with them. We ripped it off and we threw it in away just to, to not to give them the, that that, the fruit of it. And later, we took also, we put some money aside, uh, because, we digged it and then we threw it in ground because I figuring if it comes a day, that we have something we can take with us, because the money didn't have any value for us, we couldn't buy anything or do anything with it. So, just we, we figured if we're out, might be, some money might helped us. So we, there was, the, the fire, they have a fire where they burned all the waste, documents, uh, papers, things like that, so the man what worked there was a friend of mine, and I gave him, when I brought the vase, I took it with in there and he digged it in the ground. And I'm at a fact when we are so far we knew we go to run away, we put us up a -----money on my leg and uh, in my belt things like that, and uh, and we took this with us, what happened to be also helped us when we got out of the camp. And, as far, as far as the, the separating the clothes of the, when the people came, they had to leave all the luggage, they had to leave in, well, I jump back a little bit, but to give you a little picture, I'm not so good in details, I know so many similar stories happened.

Let's reload anyway because we only have about 1/2 a minute so we'll put another ----- on.

Beep.

Okay tell me about it.

Well, they came transports depending uh, usually was it about 2, 3 times a week. Mostly was it about a thousand people, something like, they, they came. Sometimes, if they came from a shorter

distance, they were not, they were normally people could walk out of as much as they were allowed and, but sometimes there came transports where they gave enough, bigger, further down distance, they came sometimes were dead people, half dead people in these train, trains, and it was the horrible, the most horrible thing what you could see. There was so inhumane everything treated, so inhumane that it's just unbelievable that were people can treat people like that. It was really uh, the only work I have, well, they call it Holocaust, they call it Genocide, it is a slaughterhouse. People came there just to be killed. To like cows you bring to slaughterhouse, they brought men, wives, children, everybody was just to, to go to the gas chamber. Until they were already dead, they, they, was a horrible thing to look at the whole thing, all this, because it people were they half dead, or not dead, they treated just like garbage, like garbage. You wouldn't believe-----, I could never, even if I was not by, and I was thinking about it, I, I, I said that couldn't be, that is unbelievable, the things like that, but really that what happened. They just brought the people and treated them like garbage. Worse maybe. So uh, mostly was it, as I say, around 1000 people, and uh, they unloaded ------, everybody has to leave his luggage, and the the men, the two, told them they go to take a shower for, disinfection or, and they, they went straight to the gas chamber, and the women and children, then they took them, but they, they cut the hair of the women, as I said, because the hair had some value for them. So uh, and there was, just unbelievable, when I think about this, what happened, that is just unbelievable, the, the women and children crying and, and some realized what's going to happen, some not, but, uh, it's the most horrible thing that really you could say. Now as I say, transports came two, two by two three by the week. And I took about 2, 3 hours and everybody was dead. But not more than 2, 3 hours that they brought them to the gas chamber, the gas chamber, and gas chamber as I said in the beginning when I came in 42, they didn't burn yet the people. After every transport, they put them on layers and put sand in, and some, some stuff to not to get uh, the smell of it as it could be a sickness, or...and later on they start to burn so all of this, this bodies what they had what you buried, got later burned too. Now we had, always was a fire, or smell from bones and meat, things that smell from, till all the, till all the camp even, and uh, but there was, in the summer was about a short period when was no transports. Uh, that seems it was already so far they had already most transports from Poland, they had already liquidated all the people, and then they started again, and that is a time when we started to think uh, one day, it's our turn because, uh, if they don't have any people more around, and so they don't need us, and then we, then it will be our turn to go. So, we already started at that time to think how to make the escape. Uh, but uh, uh it was, we were not, we were not really in the, I was not really in the group that organized because the people were organized that were, there was, had to be very secretive done. Uh, you want me to go over to the, to the uprising?

Yeah, but let's first start with the transport that came from Belzec, and I guess they all got shot, and

you sorted their bloody clothes and you found the notes.

Well, one day, came a transport, and they locked us up in our quarters, we were not allowed to go out. Usually when transports came, they took us out to help unload the people from the train. And so they shut us, uh locked us up, and we couldn't see, and then we heard a lot of shooting. Was a lot of shooting going on. So we didn't know really what's going on, so the next day, when we came separating the clothes, we found all these clothes full with blood, and uh, as we separated clothes, we always looked in the pockets and sewing and things like that, and I found in one of the pants, I found a note what says from where they come, they came from Belzec, another camp similar to ours, and he's write in Yiddish, it said, he said, "Take revenge." That's what he said. So, we knew from where they came, and that is what happened to them. So, we knew that what happened because Belzec was a similar camp to ours, and they were the people like we what worked in the camp, so they, they knew the people what came from Belzec, they knew what's going on so they resisted and they didn't go just like lambs to the slaughterhouse, so they resisted, they shot them all, in the trains they shot them, and uh, so we thought that happened, one day will happened to us because the transports are finished so they would do that and then came the idea which, uprising and doing something to get away from it. That was the transport, I don't know how many people, it was a lot because the clothes, was a lot of clothes there. And the bodies they took away, you see, the group, there was a group of people worked with the, by the gas chambers. We, we didn't, we didn't see these people, we saw them, but we never had, allowed to have any contact with them. Although they sent over, they went with the same trolleys that I mentioned, they went for supplies, they came to our camp to take the supplies, so sometimes they brought us notes that they dropped us that we know what's going on that the Germans couldn't see, because we were not allowed to talk with them. So, we knew what it is. So, these people moved away all these bodies, and we had only the clothes to deal with because the Germans was thought that we don't know what's going in Camp 3. They told us all the kind of stories, well, we knew exactly what's going on. So, that was it for us, that up-that uh train from the other camp that came. Uhhh...

Let's go back and talk about how supportive all of you in the camp were of each other.

Well, uh, although you think we all had the same, we dealt the same uh lot, of the same, how do you say? Lot? Same...

You all drew the same lot.

Lot. Uh, there were some people who had had some different, you to look out for it. It was there,

for example, a German Jew, but he was a Kapo, a Kapo, a guard, I don't know his, known name, kapo what it is. In the camps, you had, they gave the Jews a, a, some of them, they gave him a whip, and he didn't have any, much power, but sometimes they tried to be holier than, than holy, and he was the one, he came up to the Germans and he said that we should have numbers, we didn't have numbers because on, on our wrists, numbers, because the numbers was only in the camps where work camp, a lot of people. Well, with us, we didn't have numbers, so he came with the idea for numbers, and we heard about, we know about, so we decided we going to do with him something, and uh, we just, he was a spy for, spy for us, so one day we just, uh, k-killed him. We gave him, or maybe they could, could, Thomas, was, he was the medic there, and he gave him some pills, and we beat him-----, and we killed him, so we said he died from...cause, so we go rid of him. But, otherwise, you know, uh, we had want the same thing to, uh, concerned us, but each group, these small groups still would keep separated. It's, it's not that you always become friends because the different people, uh, as far as camp concerned, we all did the same thing, but as far, in the evening we were together, so we kept with some people what appeals to you, and some people not. So you really don't share everything even in a camp like that, you don't share anything one with the other. Matter of fact, with, after the war, we met a lot of survivors, doesn't mean we're all friends with the survivors because we are really, each one is different. So, it was the same in the camp, but, uh, as far as we're concerned, it's none of our, beating and hurting and muscling us, that was the same for everybody. Um, otherwise we didn't have any traitors because we all were Jews and some were sort of like the German Kapo, he thought he might be a different-----longer, but, uh, that didn't work, everybody had the same, same thing.

What about spiritual resistance?

The resistance?

Did you pray?

No. No, you see, if the people were very strict religious from home, did something, practiced something to a certain degree, uh, but the being in the camp uh, if you were before that religious then uh, then you practiced it and believed in it, and if you're not, we didn't pray, and we didn't do any things like that.

Beep.

And now, uh, let's go to the uprising and talk a little bit about the planning, but also talk about how

you felt during the whole thing.

Well, it may sound strange, but while I was in camp, and I was not really 100% alert, I didn't believe I'm there, I'm there. It was so unrealistic that I just couldn't believe that they killed people, people come here, I'm here--it just looked to me like a dream. But, if you are full aware, you know what's what was going on. And, I heard, as I say, I was not one of the organizers, but I hear the people talking about, although we saw it ourselves, how do we get out of here? There was uh, talking about plans, how to make an uprising, how to get out of here. Well, there were many plans, and some realistic and some not, and, although they had a plan already but I don't think there was the courage to implement it. With all, maybe they got plans what it was, it was really these two things to have a plan, and two things to do it. And, about a month before the uprising, there came a transport of Russian prisoners of war, Jewish Russian prisoners of war from Minsk. Well, in this, this transport, they picked out about 25, 30 people, and they were all soldiers, all, one was a captain, that was a Sasha Pechersky, and they wanted anyway, the first day they came that we told them what's going on they want to run away the first day. So we told them it's not too easy--first of all, mines around, and the population outside is not too friendly, so it is not so easy just--it has to be planned. And we told them that we have our plans by itself, and so, when we said, why don't we talk it over, maybe we can do all together, and that happened really, they started to talk to us, meeting every evening very secretive, and was in a small group what really was that would organize. Although the plans were always the whole camp because you couldn't just run away a few. So, in, they, Pechersky and Freedland [**NB** Leon Felhendler a.k.a. Feldhendler], that was the other one from the Polish group, and they came at a plan up what sound to be sound, and uh, the plan was that uh, uh we came always five o'clock ----- before we came back to our quarters, living quarters. And there was different groups were from different places, and there were always one or two of these Germans what supervised us. So it was decided in this group, that in each group, one or two of these people will be assigned to murder the, murder the German who it is on guard there, just hide him and go through like nothing happened, and uh, till 5 o'clock should be, this hour should be the, the uprising happens. So, they cut the wire slow, and also they picked a time when the bad, the Wagner, and Frenzel, Frenzel no, Wagner and the head of the camp, they were on vacation because if Wagner would have been there, I don't think that would have happened because he had a nose for all these kind of things, any suspicious, he knew, it was very quietly, he went, you don't notice him, at once you see him. So, it would have been, would have been very dangerous, but he was on vacation and also, as I say the head of the camp, and uh, so there was assigned to kill the German on the, on uh, on the walk there, and hide him. And it was also, where we lived, there were workplaces, like a Goldsmith, a tailor, a shoemaker, and was a work only for the Germans, they said, was not for us, for the German. And, they made an arrangements for

example, they made him a suit, so they said to come there, and we fitted on the suit, so there was somebody what was hiding there, and when they came in, they just saw him, killed him. And this hap-same thing happened at the goldsmith's so they killed there a few, and also where we separating the clothes, there were people assigned to call them in for some question, to the warehouse, and there they killed them and put them away in the, in, in, in this ----, they put them on a...Now, and there was, somebody was in the office who had to be killed, and there were 2 people assigned for it, and the last minute, one of them got scared, he didn't want to go. Now, we were already condemned people. We were condemned from the very beginning. But especially, it was so far in this, in this uprising, there were already 10, 12 of these Germans were already dead, the wires, the telephones were cut, so we couldn't stop any, it was just ----- . If there's any chance, we have to go through to the very end with it. So, I went there instead of the other fellow to get into the office, and I, I found a kitchen knife, a pointed kitchen knife, and I went with the other fellow, and we killed this fellow dead in the office. And I came out full of blood, I had some cuts, I had even cut myself, I'm filled with blood, and some of us in the group, in the group for the people went back to the work, so she, she knew I was there, she came there, she took a handkerchief, put on my bandage on and wiped off my blood, and we were lucky, they came a truck with -----, two Germans, and I, I just came out and he, he probably didn't see me because he just came, otherwise he would seen something wrong. And that was the time we went back to the living quarters. And all the groups came back, it was 5 o'clock, and all the groups came back to this main gate to the living quarters, and that was so exciting and, and nervousness, and soon everybody start to yell, and to run on different directions. Now some people run in the mines, and got killed, and some people just refused to move. They sat down and gave up already on everything. And some people we, we tried to run to the main gate and then Frenzel came out with a machine gun, and we, everybody stopped, but there were some people from us who they had guns of rifles they, because we worked, the living quarters were farther away from the working place, so they have people what, were next to the living quarters had more access to the warehouse there, and they could take some guns. This in, in the, in the movie, I think, is that, that some people would work with the Germans there, they had access and they stole, it shows in the movie, and uh, so, I took Selma by the hand and I, I figured, if we don't run here we are dead, and I grabbed her and we run to the main gate, and people after us, and that is the way we came out from the camp. Now, uh, outside the camp is a different story again. I don't know if you want me to tell you that, but anyway, that is the way we came out from the, from Sobibór.

Do you know what happened to the people who sat down and didn't come out?

No, these people they all got shot because after the uprising they liquidated the whole camp, and

they didn't want to leave any traces. This is also the reason there's not much information about Sobibór till later on when the survivors start to tell their stories, because all the other camps, when the Americans came to free them, they found gas ovens, they found bodies, they found everything. With our camp, was, after the uprising it was in, in October 1943, that was still in the war, so when that happened, and this, and they liquidated all of the Jews, so they just, they just, uh, erased the whole thing. They liquidated, they put the wood, new trees on, and there's no, no trace, no nothing left. So, the people what ran away, uh, they were later cold, the weather was cold, was just shot on the spot. Now we were, we ran the whole night in the woods. And, in the morning, in the morning, we came to, very dawn, uh dawn, we came into a village, and, as I say, we saved, we saved the money when we might run away, we took this money with us, and (cough) that helped us to get, I gave the many uh, dollars, I don't remember what it was, 20, 30 whatever dollars, for him was it a fortune probably, and he kept us during the day, he kept us in his, on the -----, and in the evening we went away. There were a lot of people, they caught, we were lucky they didn't catch us because a lot of people they caught in the place there, they all got shot, so, really, what, to my, to my best knowledge, there came out maybe 50, 60, 70 people, except the Russians, the Russians went in a different direction, they went to the Buch, and they wanted to come back to Russia, so I don't know how many is left from them. But, in the, this side, is probably around, was 50,60, in my best knowledge. So the camp was completely liquidated, uh, no trace of it, and uh, and our story was later, we ran from, well, during the day, as I say, we were trying to hide, and at night we walked because I knew a little bit, we looked on the big, the, on the big uh, how you call it? Big wagon? The Big Dipper? On the stars, Big Dipper is the right word? Because I thought I go this direction because I worked before the war, I worked at a farmer, and, and I know how good or bad, he was good to me, so I figured...

Let's stop, we have to reload, so we'll start with the Big Dipper.

Beep.

Before the war, before I came to Sobibór, I worked with a farmer, and um, so I thought I will go back in this direction. It was the only thing I could think of. That was not sure they might have helped me, and uh, so we went in the woods, and at night, and during the day we always ----- for money, maybe somebody will keep us over the day. There were very few times we were lucky that they did. Mostly we spent in the fields somewhere hidden during the day without food or anything. Uh, we went sometimes into to where we walked and we passed a house, and we wanted water or something, nobody of the population want to give us any food. But every time we approached a house, we had a lot of gold coins, I don't know, we had diamonds, whatever, and we

offered them, we said, we give you everything what we have if you want to keep us till the war is over. And, surely we were not too successful, it took us a few weeks till we approached one farmer and we said the same thing, we offer you, we give you everything we have, we showed him what we have, so he said, "Well, I live too condensed with other farmers here, and I think that might not be so good idea." He said, "I have a brother who lives about 10 miles away from here, and he lives more isolated, and he might be willing to do that." So he took, put dress Selma up as an old lady, and me put on a long, the long -----, what they have, and covered me with branches, and he drove us 10 miles. That probably was the dang-most dangerous 10 miles that he drove because on the open road, if the Germans would have caught us, we all would have been dead on the spot, and his whole family might have been killed, because the helping Jews, but anyway we were lucky and he brought us there, and the brother agreed on it, he said, "It's fine." So, he brought us to this brother, and we were with him, uh from...October, that was October, uh, 43, and till um, about June July 1944, that was uh, the, the Russians moved up -----in Poland, and they stood there for 6 months there, so we were in this part, Helm, was by Helm, what is more to the Russian side, so we were freed really in 44. Uh, they, they gave us just, for the circumstances, he gave us king's treatment. I mean, he gave us food, we had a bucket there for our toilet, and he, there was hardly to live on, but it was the best it could be, there was, how, in this times, what could we expect more? So we always grateful, grateful to these people, uh, we had scur, scurp, scurbies, or whatever the name, scurbies?

Scabies.

Scabies. We had a, a very bad uh, we needed, we needed some ointment, so we still had some, I think, a gold fountain pen I had, so I said, "Why don't you take that and bring us some ointment." And he brought us, it helped us a little bit. So, uh, my wife probably say he mistreated us, but I don't think so, I think he treated us very well, he just, he took us in the house, and...Now, where we slept, we slept in the barn on top, we put straw down, and there, we could never straighten out, always, once in two months, three months, we had, we could down and wash ourselves, so and then, when they did, they still looked if we don't have hidden there where we slept, were hidden there some valuables, because they always thought maybe they didn't, we didn't give them everything we had. So anyway, um, that is our, till the Russian came, and they freed us, and then he brought us to Helm, which was in Niederstow, and we thought that the only survivors in from the war, but there came there more survivors from different places, and we, Esther Raab we met there, you know Esther Raab, and uh, and some other people, and then we moved up to, to Lublin, and uh, because Lid, uh Selma was Dutch, so there was already, there was a lot of Dutch prisoners of war happened to be, they wanted to send them back, and all the Dutch people. So somehow I got with

Selma there, I had some people help me, and we went from, from Poland we went uh, Odessa, with it was with the Black Sea we went, no, it took us first three months, it took us to Odessa, and then they kept us there for 3 months, and then with the boat we went to, to Marseilles and to Holland.

Now, I want to go back and ask you some questions about that whole time. How, how did you, how were you able to handle sorting the clothes of your brother?

Well, that's hard to put in words. Uhh...it, it was a horrible thing. I was just like, like another man, I became uh, I , it uh, I couldn't believe it, what happened. But uh, you were always under the pressure, you couldn't express even your feeling, you just had to live with it and go on. You always had under the pressure from the Germans to move, to go fast, and to----- . We didn't have much time really to devote time to things like that, so it was, it's just unbelievable to, to tell how you feel at a moment like that. It is like, it's worse than somebody dies in the family because he was murdered. He was uh, slaughtered, put in a gas chamber, so, I don't know really how to express that. It was like they cut a arm off of you.

And, you talked about how you created gold to live through one day or one minute. Can you talk about that.

Well, as I say, we, we took with us this money because if anything could help us, probably would be the money, what we were right because the compassion for us, compassion for Jews was not at all. The population didn't help you at all, even for a, a, a sip of water or something like that. Unless you hit some unusual people that went for money, but some people didn't go in for the money because they were afraid, and it was ----- to be afraid because if they caught a Jew in somebody's house, the whole family got killed, so, I could understand that in a way, and uh, as matter of fact, while we run away, one day, we were in the fields, and there came two, the wooden wagon horse, uh how uh how uh, a wagon with horses, 2 people, and they didn't know that I speak Polish, so I went on one, and Selma went on the other, and when they drove away, the woman said, "Oh, we would take care of them." In Polish. That means they go over to the Germans or whatever, they thought they had caught some Jews, so I, I jumped off, and I said, "Selma, jump off too." And we jumped off, and they went away, and we ran away. Otherwise how, how uh, uh antisemitic the people were there. They didn't cooperate with the, on top, what they were afraid, but there was also hatred for Jews always, so uh, so, we, we were lucky, I don't know how to say how lucky that we found some people, that they took us in in their house because it was very, very unusual. As a matter of fact, a friend of mine, what uh, went away also with money, and he went also to farm and he said they would take him in, and in the evening he took the money from him, he killed him with

a ----- . So, so there was, even if they showed some they want to help you, that was not yet help, they just wanted the money. And uh, also the farm where we were hidden, uh, he had, uh, not father, or a, a neighbor, he said, "Be careful, try not to snore, sometimes at night, that you don't hear, don't talk," and things like that because he said if the neighbor will find out, he will go to the Germans and tell them things, so but the, try to be as careful as possible. And one time we had, it happens out in a tree not far in the house, there was, on the top there was always uh storks came there. And uh, we must have talked or watched or things like that and the storks are gone. So the farmer came to us, he said, "What do you do? The storks are gone." And, and they have a superstition if storks are on a place and they go away, could be danger. So he want us already that we go. So he said, "Don't look. Don't look out." They had a little opening where we could look out. He said, "Don't look because they see you, and that's they run away." And we stopped it, and the stork came back, so we were lucky on that too. Probably my wife will tell you more about...

So do you think survival was luck?

Yeah. Yeah. You see, uh, it was not you were smart or you knew what you do. If we ran somewhere and it was sss--a road split, you went right or you could left, go right, left.

We have to reload.

Beep.

Okay, let's go back to -----

Well, I really think I was lucky, as I tried to explain, you, you didn't know where you go, which direction is good, uh, the right could be good, the left could be good, we came to this farmer just by accident, I mean, it's not a planned thing or something like that. So I really say it was really luck, it wasn't a wise and smart and uh, I knew what I'm doing. I didn't know what I'm doing. I just happened, we went and we came to the right place at the right time, and that is really what I'm thinking, it's not, not I was smarter than other people that survived. The luck was with us.

So, you don't think there were choices that Jews had.

No, no, there was not any choice. Of course, all the people were already dead, and the Polish population, they, they, in a way, they were happy what happened because a lot of the Jewish houses they got and, they were hiding things from the Jews that didn't come back. As a matter of fact, it's

Freedland that there was the, one of the, from the Poles' side, the, the, one of the organizers from the uprising. He came back after the war, and he went after, a year after that, he went back to get the house and his barns back, and uh, other people lived there. They killed him. Because he came to pick up the house. So, there was no any cooperation, any compassion. It was just, in a way, some peo-some people, I don't want to generalize all of them, a lot of people were really happen, happy, what happen to the Jews because they got businesses, and also they change the ----- anyway, but anyway, they had a lot of profit off it. The houses, all the houses. You see this in the other movie, you see how he came back, he talked with the people what lived in the houses of the Jews, and, they're happy they got the houses, they didn't give back.

You don't seem like it would be easy for you to kill even that German that you killed. Tell me how you felt.

Well, it is, is was really a moment when they put the knife on your throat, you do everything. That really what I do, to best desc-desc-describe it, that is the way it is. The, there was no choice, it was a question of survival. Uh, nerves, and, I don't know what carried me through because I'm not the type at all, but it was a ques-question of survival, that's what it is. So, I, every jab I gave him, I said, "This is for my father, this is for my brother, and this my, for all the jewish people you killed," and I really don't know how to tell it. It is only a question of survival, and if you have a survival in a desperate situation, you do probably everything. I think, to my imagination, probably everybody will be able to do the same thing.

How does your experience make you feel about humanity in general.

Well, human beings are, could be worse than animals. When I say it, I mean, because, and animal just, it acts, he is attacked, he reacts, he kills. A human being thinks it out, plans it. Is even worse, like the Germans, what they killed so many people. They just planned it, make it efficient and take advantage of everything, from the clothes, from the, from the hair from the women, use it up, so in my opinion it's even worse, so as far human nature concerns, everybody has a little animal in him. Depends the situation, and depends some upbringing. So, I really don't, I still want to believe most of the people are, are good people, but if you take a nation like the Germans, 60 million people, they knew a lot of them what's going on, and there was just cooperation. Very few really, what they really felt something that was not right. Very few. Because when we were on trials in Germany, we had uh, a welcome committee from the Germans in the place where we were to welcome as witnesses to the trial. They wanted to show some gratitude or something. And we met these people, matter of fact these people were here in our house, and we went to their house, and we ----

---- get the letters from them, but that is only very few, very few. So, the majority that can tell me --
-----, the majority of the Germans, they knew what's going on. Because so many knew what they did it, and they came home, they told their friends and their family, and things like that and they knew what's going on. There was a part that didn't know. I don't want to generalize anything, I don't generalize anything, but the fact shows that a lot of them knew what's going on. So, I still, I still have trust in human beings, but I still reserved, always with that certain reservation.

Tell me, was there a deception of the people in the transports, were they given receipts or was there a deception so they didn't know where they were going?

Yeah, uh, well, ----- it wasn't receipts or something. The deception was, first of all they came there, there somebody came and told them that they go to umlois, which in German that means to, uh, uh, no, disinfect, disinfect their clothes, and to go to work, and uh, they have these baths they have because it goes -----, some thickness around, so they kept in, and also what they did is when people came like from Holland, they gave them postcards and to write back to their house that they arrived here, and it is nice, and they go to work here, to see these, and the people that didn't come yet, when they get a note like that, so they had a hope they come to work here. So uh, that was a deception. To the last minute, they kept it a secret as was possible. So, uh, to the last minute, they did, whoever didn't know by then didn't know it till the last minute. So there was a deceiving really.

And now I want you to tell me about meeting Selma and how you got involved with Selma in a camp, and describe....

Well, when people in transports came (clears throat), some people had with them instruments, musical instruments. And when, in the first or first night or the 2nd night, there came, so the Germans want to have some pleasure out of it. What they did, they said that we all have to camp together, and the people would have these musical instruments to play, and, and we have to dance, we had dance, to see that there's some kind of sarcasm. You know, they burn the people, the family, and here we have to dance. And everybody had to ask somebody, and I happened to ask Selma, and that's the way I met Selma, and that is what we stayed alto, as much as possible together because, where we lived, the quarters, the quarters where we lived were barracks, where the women lived, and uh, and the others where the men lived. Now, from about after we ate till we had to go to bed, we were free to move around in this circle where we lived. So we met and we talked to each other. So, there where we met, and there we saw each other, Selma. That is where I in love with Selma, and that is till today.

And tell me how you took care of her, and how you spoke together, what language you used.

Uh, I, she spo, Dutch is a little similar to German and she knows some German, and I know German, so I, and I started to learn Dutch, so I, uh, we spoke, German was our language. So, that's the way we communicated. But -----, we walked also very often together, because she was sorting clothes, and I was doing the same thing, although not in the same group, but not far from, so we could sometimes talk to each other, and uh, in the evening, as I say, we talked to each other.

Did you take care of her?

Well, it was not nice to take of her, in fact, she took care sometimes of the things because she was very, she brought some foods, cans from the camp, more than, she was more daring than I, so she took some foods because in the evening, we, we ate the cans, whatever. We couldn't make any fire, thing like that, but we had cans of meat, sardines, whatever, and some bread, things like that, so we could take with us-----, and she did it. It was very dangerous what she did, but uh, but uh, that what we did. So, it was not really taking care of...You couldn't take care of more than it was there.

Would she have escaped if you hadn't been there?

No, I don't think so. As a matter of fact, I told her what happened, and I told her she is not allowed to tell none of the people, the friends and things like that because we were very afraid that somebody might talk too much, and the whole thing can be endangered. So, I told her, "You're not allowed to say anything." Now uh, the, the surprising, I didn't feel guilty about because the uprising was everybody planned it. It was not 2, 5, 10 people, so when the time comes, is early enough, did you know it, and they can take part in, because we couldn't do more, we couldn't do more than they did, and we ran all, randomly away, so there was not any...but the other way, if we would have told them, it might come -----on the other, the story would have come out, and it would have been endangered the whole thing.

Beep.

Well, the only thing I know is, uh, uh, one day, we lived in, in a small place, Pasha, and, and one day we heard that the, the Partisans, how, how I got to know, I don't know, they planned to kill the Jews that night. So, I took Selma, and we went, we took on a, on a, somehow I got a, uh, an auto, a big auto or something, they took us, and we went to Lublin, we ran away, we thought, we thought

that it would happen, and it happened, when we ran away they killed the Jews.

The Partisans?

The Partisans, Polish Partisans. They were very antisemitic. They didn't tell they take the Jews so quickly and, so, you see, there was, although, they were on the same thing against the GERMans but, but, not for the Jews. So, the only thing I know is what, what I said on this paper, that we heard that they're going to kill the Jews, and we ran away the same day and we went to Lublin for to find other people. That's what it is. That's all I can tell you about.

Now I'm going to ask you generally about age in the camps, and whether it helped to be a young person.

Definitely, it helped insofar, first of all, you think differently when younger. You, you, you have more hope, you, you, dream to something. Inadvertently you dream about something as a younger person, you are in a jam like that, you think you might come out. What I thought of it. Also, it was un-unrealistically to think that you would come out of that, but somehow, because you were young, you had your whole life before you, so you're thinking, I will come out on the...just unimaginable to think even like that. So that was help probably when somebody is young. When I said, the people, some people in the uprising was didn't want to go, mostly was it older people because they gave up on life, they had some life and they were enough of it. So they just didn't want to try it any--We were young, we still tried, we ran away, and that is mostly what had helped, it helped much to be young, yeah.

Do you have something particular that you want to say, that you want to add, your own feelings.

Well, what I would like to add only is that, that, Hitler didn't start to be big in one day, it started very small, and things, things can grow and be bigger, so never, never ignore when you see some bigotry or prejudice whether it's against Jews or the others, you never know how much it can grow. There is hatred in a lot of people, more than we know about, and you have to be very careful, you cannot ignore it. You have to react when you see it. How is react? You shouldn't take it for granted. You should, uh, think about there could be a danger, and then, apply what you can to help for the situation, and that's a matter of fact reason that we go and talk about it, because we're still around survivors that people believe and see what really can happen. Because the story is unbelievable, but that is really what happened. That people got the slaughterhouse and got slaughtered like cows, like animals, and that human beings can do that, and I don't think change,

people change now from 50 yrs ago. The right people do the right thing, the wrong people do the wrong thing. So, you cannot ignore that if you see things like that. You have to be sensitive, you couldn't say, "Ah, this one, the Ku Klux Klan, ah, what can they do?" You never know. So you have to be very alert about and react to it. That is what I would say, that we hope nothing like that can happen. But, believe me, it can happen. It's not the first time history, in history, that things like that happen, so they can happen, so you cannot just ignore it.

Can you talk about how difficult it is to describe in words.

Well, I don't think they found the right words in any language, or a human being is able to tell exactly what happened. The only one understands what really happened is the one who experienced it, who lived by himself through that, I can't, but it is impossible to tell what that really is. The words have not the same meaning what they one who tells the story wants to tell it because that's a life experience what only, only the one who really experiences can judge about, so I don't think, I, I, I, don't think anybody can put it in words. Even if you read it, it has not the same meaning for the one that survives or experiences and the one who listens to the story. The words has probably a different meaning. That's what I think, really it's impossible to tell the story. You do your best, you come with the best words -----, even if your language is very good, and you have all the words possible, you still cannot tell what really it happened. It also depends to the listener. If the listener is sensitive and wants really to feel, get the feeling of it, will understand more about it, but still not to the degree that he fully can understand what the one who experienced it. So it is really so tragic, there's not words for it.

Can you talk to me a little bit about heroism, do you feel that that uprising was heroic?

No, I don't think it was heroic. It was a question of survival, and some people have more courage than others. Uh, if I would have been the one to plan, I would never have come something of it, I'm not courageous like that. With the others, with their courageous, I might, I could take part -----, part of it. So there are people who are more daring and courageous more, and de-de-determined more, and there are, but I don't think what you call a her, a heroism. Uh, that was a question of survival. So you do think, some people are able to do more than others. So, I don't think it is heroism.

And now, can you just go to before the war and how you ended up getting, how you ended up in Sobibór.

Well, uh, when the war broke out in Poland, I was a Polish soldier. Uh, and, there was mandatory service for one and a half year. And I supposed to be, uh, everything would have normal on September the 15th I would have been relieved--released from the service. The war broke out September the 1st, so I was just in the middle of the war. And it was three weeks, as long the war lasted, I was a soldier, till they caught me, and, as a prisoner of war, and all the Jewish prisoners of wa--all the prisoners of war, they sent to Germany, to work there. We cleaned the streets in, in Germany, in Leipzig, and uh, all kind of artwork, what we did. And then, they decided, all the Jewish prisoners of war to send back to Poland. So, I figured the Jews they go anyway to the concentration camp, why should they keep them for prisoners of war. When I came back, I came originally from Lodz, a little ----- in Lodz, a big city in Poland, and when I came back my parents were already turned out of their house, just with what they could carry. So, somehow, I found out they were brought to Lubli--Lublin. Lublin is, uh, not far from the concentration camp for us. And, and uh, they were, they, they didn't take anything with them, just what they could carry, and so they had a very, very hard time. When I came there, I took a job with a farmer and I worked at a farm. Well, they gave me food and shelter, and I also something I could help my parents there, and then my brother got also a job. Then one day came all the Jews--farmers, they could work, they were not allowed to other jobs--a farmer there still was the, the, the very late last, the very late they could work as a farmer. That's the reason I could work as a farmer. And then it came that all the Jews have to come to, to concentrate in the city, to come back to the city. They took them to send them to concentration camps, to the death camps. So, I was a friend of mine and my brother and myself, we decided we don't go to this city, and we ran to the woods, but we couldn't get any food, we were for three days there, no any food, no shelter, the people, the Polish people didn't do, so, we said we have to go back again to someplace where still are Jews, and then we end up in a place Isbitsa. There were still some Jews there, and we came in the evening, and uh, we went some Jewish people, they took us in, and the same night, the same night, all the Jews drove all the Jews out of the houses, and concentrate them in the center of the city, and they took em to the camp. But we were hiding out in the attics, we hoped they might, they, the Germans came and they would go and then we could come out. But, they didn't go, and we didn't have any food, so for two three days we were hidden there, so we had to come out, and then more people were hiding, so they come out too. So they took us to the trains, and that was to Sobibor. That was the pre-story?? that how we came to Sobibór.

Thank you.

That's it?

Room tone.

30 seconds of room tone for Chaim Engel.

End room tone.

End of sound roll, short roll.