

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Siefried Halbreich
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Siefried Halbreich, conducted on March 10, 1992 in Beverly Hills, 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.

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SIEFRIED HALBREICH

March 10, 1992

Beep.

I want you to describe for me how you survived the inhuman treatment at Sachsenhausen and how you resisted it. What were some of the things that happened and how you resisted it.

Uh, I arrived at Sachsenhausen the beginning October 1939, and I have to go a little back in time because I was the only Jew who came with this transport from Vienna, and how do I get to Vienna? After 10 days serving in the Polish army and retreating, there was no other way we couldn't resist the powerful German army. We woke up one day, and we're facing two fronts, enemies, in front of us in the East the Russians, and the back of us uh Germans. We did not know what to do and our colonel said we should wait, he is going for new orders. He never returned, and actually I waiting up today for him to find him. And we had no other choice just to dissolve the formation, the battalion, and we told the soldiers they can where they want to. I got in the little town, there was a little village. I bought a civilian suit, throw all my identifications away, and uh, I decided I'm going back towards the Germans. Not because I love the Germans, but I want to see what's happened to my family, to my parents and to my sister and brother. All other officers, we went the other way, East or give up to the Russians, and of all those peo--officers, there's not one alive because they all were killed in ----- by the Russians. So, going actually the wrong way, the only one I am the survivor. I survived. I came home, the, my parents still lived in their apt, and uh naturally most of the Jews were gone, they escaped. Most went to towards Russia, and uh, then all of the sudden, I hear from my former boss in the pharmacy where I worked in Taranovitz, Taranofsky Gorde. He in the meantime bought the phar-a pharmacy in Auschwitz, and when he heard that I'm alive, he called me I should come to see him, and I came there, he was very happy to see me, and he explained to me, "Sig, you have to help me because I don't speak German, and here the military, I have to supply the hospital military sup--uh, uh, military hospital and I cannot talk to them." So I said, "Fine okay, but you have to go to the Commandant of the city and ask for a pass, otherwise you cannot come from Silesia, from Katuvitza, to Auschwitz." Auschwitz belonged to the state of Krakow, and Katuvitza belonged to the state of Silesia, so we needed a pass. I went there to the Commandant in the office and uh asked me what I want, I said, "I want to see the commandant." "For what reason?" I explained to them, and after a while I was called in, an older, older man in uniform was sitting, but I reco-recognized right away, on his epaulets here he is a doctor, medical. And uh, he ask me my name, and he said, "What is your name?" And I repeat it. He said, "You have--Is your father still alive?" I said, "Yes." "What is his name, first name?" And I told him, "Leopold." So he smiles, and says, "You know, I know your father since 1914. He came to sub-commission to Breslau. Is now Rosnau, Poland, in order to be uh taken to the Austrian army, and he asked me where's my father, and, and what I want. Well, I explained to him that I'm being here in the pharmacy I work, that he gave a, a pass, but I travelled about maybe 10 days from Katuvitza to Auschwitz, but then I was in Katuvitza in the morning, I went for supply, medical supply and took it to Auschwitz, and one night, I wanted to uh go home, I come to the station, I go in this, in the train, and there coming 2 SS officers, and controlling, and asking if there are Jews. I said, "Yes, I am a Jew." And, I show him the pass, and they tore apart pass and they throw me out. I stayed

overnight in Auschwitz, and the next day I went again to the Commandant, he was very angry that they tore his permit, and he gave me one much clearer saying that I am a necessity there and I bring the medications. Next day, in the evening, same day the evening, they did the same. They threw me out. So, I said, "Doesn't make sense anymore." I didn't go back to Auschwitz. I walked to the border station in the evening, and I caught on the border station the train back home to Katuvitza, and I didn't go anymore. About two weeks later, the Germans started to register all Jews, Jewish men from 18 to uh 45. What's happened? Oh you will go to work for us. Didn't say where or nothing, but on a certain day we're supposed to be at the train station and we will leave. And I had friends still there and we discussed it what to do and I decided, I am not going. I'm running away. And a friend of mine who wanted to go with me, we decided we're not going, and two days before the transport supposed to take place, we took a train to Boyton, this was, now it's Poland, and from there we took a train to Vienna, and from Vienna to the Yugoslavian border. I had a map and I knew already where to go, where to get off. We came to the border, that were full of military, but nobody bothered us. Nobody, no police, no military, and right by the train, there was a small road up into the mountains. We went up to the mountains, we walked all night, and we saw already at night the border downstairs between German and the Austria and the Yugoslavia, and we knew already we are now in Yugoslavia. And all of the sudden, a, a soldier, Yugoslavian soldier, halt, stop, "Who are you, where are you going?" Well, we explained to them in Polish, that we are Polish officers, and we want to get the, get out of Germany. He took us down to the border station, and uh officer took a testimony from us, and, and said, "What do you want to do?" "Well, we want to go to France to join the Polish legion." But we had in mind actually go to Palestine, and he said, "Oh, sure, you can go but you need uh passports, a visa. Well, the Polish Council is still in Zagrip, go there and you get your passports and then you can do what you want to. But in order to go there, he gave us a sergeant, a soldier to ----- . The Russian army, Yugoslavian army, to take us to the station. This was just two minutes away because we were on the border, and this soldier was a German spy, a Korwat?? And he instead to take us to the station, he handed us over to the Germans, and he said, "Here are two from our people." They took us in, they treated us very well, and uh after a couple days being in -----in jail, they took us to Grodz. It's a larger city, and there we were about, I would say maybe two weeks in that, in jail. Again they treated us very well, and naturally they found out right away, who we are, we are not only polish officers, but we are Jews, and active Zionists, so they didn't ask any question when they transported first me to Vienna. In Vienna stood overnight in uh jail, and in the morning, they picked us up, took us to the train station, and up to overnight to Berlin. In Berlin, there were, there were trucks waiting for us, and uh took us, took us to Sachsenhausen. So this was actually the beginning, and uh came to Sachsenhausen with me about 25 to 30 civilians, elderly men, very well-dressed.

Okay, let's stop, we have to reload.

I can't do all the chronological details of your story, and I know all those details, so that if I need to lead into a story, I can do that-----

Beep.

I want to know how you resisted the inhuman treatment at Sachsenhausen, what some of the things that happened were and how you survived it, what you decided to do.

Uh, when I came to Sachsenhausen, I was taken by an SS man to the barracks, to the Jewish barracks, there were four, consisting of four barracks, a Jewish camp, which was in the main camp, but separated. And, uh, then naturally, when I came in, people surrounded me, prisoners. Uh asked question from where, and uh what did I do, and I told them, I am a polish Jew, I was caught on the border, and brought in. All other inmates who were there already, about I would say twelve, twelve hundred, they were Polish Jews mostly, but living in Germany. So, I, when I came there was the first, not only Jew from Poland, but the first Pole. There was no other Pole here in Sachsenhausen. I was the first one. Uh, I got friendly with the, naturally with uh my inmates, and uh, they told me where I am and then what the conditions we lived, and how they treat us, and they slowly prepared me for all those misdeeds which were done to us, and uh, I remember at night, we spread out the straw sacks in the room in order to, to rest. There were two, sometimes three on one straw sack, uh together, and we were so crowded, we didn't dare even at night say, to use uh, uh the toilet. Because we were afraid when we came to come back, there were nowhere to, to lay down. Once it's happened, you had to sit on the side somewhere in the corner, and to, to wait till the morning comes and to get up, and uh, about treatments, in the beginning, they didn't treat us special hard, but since there was no work, they had to do something with us, so right in the morning after we got the coffee. They called it coffee, it was a black hot water, we were taken in front of the barracks, and we had to sit down in a crouching position, and you have to remember it was already winter in November, it was very cold, and we couldn't move. They noticed that somebody wanted to change the position, one leg to another one or something, they went in and beat them up, but they were sometimes killing too. Uh, we were sitting, some people for instance got a hold of a s-empty cement bag, and they put it under their shirt, uh in the back in order to get a little warmer, to protect, be protected by the uh, from the cold. But when they noticed that they just killed this person. And naturally???? by this condi--in this condition, lay--standing there or sitting there in this position from the morning till about noon, our hands, fingers were frozen, the toes, and people died even froze to death. And the next morning when the SS man came to take a report, he never asked how many people, he asked first how many dead? This was, he was, this was more important for him to know how many dead because the dead people, the bodies we had to lay next to us in order to be counted, and uh, give the report, and then we were interrupted, we got food. We did not go in to consume the, the, the lunch, we called the ----- . In German, in Europe, it is dinner, at uh -----noontime, and we got a fairly, in comparison to later on, we got a fairly well nutrition food. We got the soup, uh sometimes we count a piece of meat. We got fish soups, we got uh beans or pea soup, and uh, this was all, but it was sufficient. First of all, we didn't work. Later on, I would say it got even better with the food, because the way they occupied the countries from one country to another one, we recognized right away where they are. We didn't get information. We didn't have papers, nothing, we didn't know what's going on. But according to the food, -----all of the sudden, they served us butter. This is, we know, they're in Denmark, something. All of the sudden, we got the asparagus! That must be Belgium or Holland, and uh this went on, and we did not know what's going on at all. Nobody told us that there are pictorials of the, their being beaten. We didn't know from nothing. From nothing. And this way, by coming out every morning with the sitting there and the crouching position, this went on about January. Nothing else to do. Nothing else. All of the sudden in January we were called out, we're going to work. They gave us coats, naturally the striped coats, and we marched out. I would say about 25 to 30 minutes of march, when we came to an empty huge field. And we found out we are going to build a factory. A red brick factory. Naturally we had to start with the ground moving. It was extremely hard because it was all frozen. And, it was very hard work, but it was not the worst. The

worst were the treatments around us. They did not let us work. They beat us up, they chased us around. Uh, people were overrun by the little uh cars filled with, with uh earth, with sand or something. Were just overrun. And they did everything possible just to hurt us and naturally a lot of people passed away. Or they were shot or they killed when somebody couldn't work anymore, dropped, so they shot him. And on the evening when we had to the job, we had to carry the dead, the dead ones, the bodies in to the camp back to be counted, and naturally to uh be buried. Uh one day, it was maybe uh, yes in February, we marched out, and the order was not to talk. We couldn't talk, was not allowed to talk to each other, to the neighbors, when we marched and not to look around, because when you looked around they were allowed to shot us. They said, he wanted to escape. Well, they did it quite often, because for everyone that was shot under the pretext that he wanted to escape, the SS man got a week furlough, so they make a big business out of it, but it was too much already, and then they got the order not to do it anymore. For instance it, they took your head ge--head wear, and threw it on the side. Go for it. When you went for it, they shot you. And one day, we marching, and I feel I am observed. But I didn't dare to look on the side who it is, and here the SS man comes closer to me, and say, said in Polish, "Sig, what are you doing here? You couldn't get away?" And I turn around, it is a friend from high school. He was a German, and was inducted into the SS. From that time on, when he was on duty and marched with us, and guarded us, he always left me on a certain place a piece of bread, and this was part of my survival. All of the sudden, he disappeared. And we walked, we walked, we marched every day, and less and less people survived. They just couldn't take it. They were for instance very pious Jews, who refused to eat the sausage or the butter, so they lived only on the bread and on the coffee. How long can you live? They, they, they just went very fast. And outside it got harder and harder, and one day, I got to talk to a German prisoner, young fellow, he was a communist, for this reason he was taken to the camp, given to the camp. And he was in charge of the uh group, uh the carp--carpentry group. It's a carpenter group, and uh I talked to him, and he ask question, "What's going on?" I said, "Oh, it's very bad. I don't know how long we can make it because it's, it's too bad."

We have to reload.

Beep.

Beep.

SS

After the sitting in the crouching position, and it got warmer, we had another method. They chased us around these 4 blocks. We had to run. About every corner, there was an SS man and hit the people who passed. And we stronger ones, I would say younger ones, we tried to protect the older ones. When they actually went, had a mind to get rid of the older ones. So, when they started to hit, we run under it, and protected the older, the older men, and we got hit. We did it on purpose to save the people. And uh, but how long could we take. We, we, we became weaker and weaker too. So, and then in the meantime the older ones were mostly gone. The, the, there is the statistics say that uh the prisoner in a concentration camp's life span is not longer about 3 to 6 months. But when you survive, and you're lucky, you can survive in general. So, this was one of the resistance.

When we came in the evening back when the food was given out, the hard food, no, the evening in Sachsenhausen we got a piece of bread, a quarter of one bread, and uh a piece of margarine or a, a

piece of sausage, and this was exchanged again. The religious ones they didn't want to eat the sausage, so we exchanged it with a piece of bread, or sometimes uh, uh we got uh what was it, yeah we exchanged it, so they can eat it. And later on, at night for instance, we laid down, and we were happy we can rest, but they didn't let us rest at night either. They came through the windows, through the doors with water hoses, wetted us, jumped over us, stepped on us, want to, this way they killed again. I don't know the reasons, sometimes we thought, oh, there is maybe a victory because they got drunk, and they came and did what they wanted with us. When they maybe uh, uh were beaten on the Russian front, so they lets their anger out on us -----, but there were so many methods. At random for instance SS man picks somebody out, hit him in his face. Just throw me once, maybe took the first one or the second hit, the third hit, or but this, he got more furious that you resisted. So he pushed you down, and all he did with his boots, with his leg, stepped on your throat, and killed you this way, so we knew already, when he hit you, the first second time, drop, so he was happy that you dropped. But it's again, this was part of the resistance. This is saved us of our life.

Let's just cut and wait for this plane.

Beep.

-----specific experience that happened at----- where uh the politics inside the camp actually ended up being a threat, so just describe to me that incident, how it happened, what...

After being about uh two years in Sachsenhausen, we were 400 selected Jews s-uh, being transported to Gross Rosen. Naturally, we don't know what's happened, where we go or nothing till we arrive. And when we came there, they didn't even let us into the camp. In front of the camp, they right away made us work, digging the, uh, I mean, working at, at the ground and was extremely hard was, was all granite, and not only working again, there was uh not a commandant, the leader of the SS with a very infamous man, rude man, young and even small man, not strong at all, but he had a dog. He never was without the dog. And he, the dog attacked the people, and we were just flabbergasted, we didn't know what's happened. After two years in, in another camp, you already get used to it, you know how to adjust yourself, but here you come brand new, and they start all over again, but much worse. There was a new camp consisted only in the beginning of six blocks, barracks, and at night we were taken to our barrack, and this was our barrack for the whole year, and the conditions were there much worse than in Sachsenhausen. During the day, we had to march to the stone quarry, I would say maybe twenty minutes away, and it was in a mountainous uh terrain, and uh, there they had to work, we had to work in this, this quarry carrying the heavy rocks, (cough cough), and uh people died like flies. On the way back, we had to everyone carry one big rock on our shoulders to the camp because coming home, I mean to the barracks through the camp after the report, counting how many people are left, or how many the, the same amount of people is coming back who went out of the camp, they said, "All go back to the camp, to the barracks, but the Jews remain." And we had to continue to build the camp till 12 o'clock at night. So, oh we got food. When we came to the barracks, we were so tired, that we just didn't have any appetite. We fall asleep. And in the morning, 5, 6 o'clock right away, up and again the same thing, and there were naturally first of all I want to mention the first half a year we didn't have no water at all. We couldn't wash ourselves, and uh, soap we had, so when we left in the morning a little coffee so we just washed ourselves on the face and this was all. Our underwear we never changed

in six months, and pretty soon a epidemic broke out, a typhoid epidemic because our uh undershirt was jut infected of lice.

We have to get to the politics, we have to get that or we're going to run out of film.

And uh one day, I'm in the part, in part A of the, the barrack and uh the assistant of my blockeldest comes to my part of the barrack, and tells the blockeldest that he wants me ----- of lice.

You have to get to the politics and the, we have to get to that or we're going to run out of film.

One day, I'm in the part, in Part A of the barrack, and the assistant of my blockeldest comes to my part of the barrack, and tells the blockeldest that he wants me in his part, in, in Part B to stay with him, and uh, my Blockeldest had nothing against it, he said, "Fine, okay," and I transferred. But I heard somebody saying, "Sig, be careful because he wants to finish you off tonight." I said, "Why?" "There are rumors that you accused him of smuggling uh drugs." I had no idea, so I said, "Please go in the other part, and tell my friend what's happened, and he should go and to see the doorman, the gate man," because he was a friend of my from Sachsenhausen, this was one who was in charge of the carpentry, and he was transferred before we were transferred , and he became there the gate uh you call it a runner. And my friend went to him, he went to the uh camp oldest, he was a German, a criminal, and he told him about what's happened. He came to the barrack, and told my blockeldest, you transfer just this man from your room, I want him to be transferred to you and you are responsible for him. And I was retransferred the same time, before the night started. Transferred there, and the following day, the, the assistant, the blockeldest, the, the blockeldest, he was a Pole, a Pole from Silesia. He spoke very weak German, very weak Polish, a mixture, and they took him to the hospital, they gave him a shot and they, they finished him up because he was a denouncer too. He denounced to the SS to the Germans what's going on with the camp. This was politics. I had no idea, it never came to my mind, accusing somebody of smuggling drugs, we didn't have no idea what drugs mean because we couldn't go to hospital.

Okay, we have to reload.

Yeah, I forget myself, you know I have -----.

Change film, Camera roll 4 is up; Sync take 5 is up.

Beep.

I want you to just tell me about specific incidents of resistance that you did or that you witnessed in Auschwitz.

After a year being in Gross Rosen, again, we were sent on a transport. And I wanted to mention that out of this 400 who had previously, here had previously came from Auschwitz -----to Gross Rosen, 17 of us were alive from this 400. And again, transports a day, in a train a few hours, and here we arrived in Auschwitz. We did not know that in Auschwitz there is a camp, not at all. And we arrived in the camp, in the main camp, we were quarantined in Block 11, and as you know, between Block 11 and 10 there was the Death uh place, and uh, it was, we couldn't see anything,

we heard only shooting. We couldn't see because the windows were covered with iron uh shades. They left us alone the first time they, they ----- us in Auschwitz because in other camps we had numbers what we're going ----- . And uh, we stayed about ten days there, then they formed a transport again, and about, I would say 1,200 of us who came to Auschwitz from all parts of Germany, from all camps, it was right after the Final Solution. And, as you know, final solution means all Jews should be killed. We were from all camps from Germany brought the Jews, remaining Jews to Auschwitz, and here all of the sudden, they made a change. The war went on, they lost Stalingrad, they had to retreat, and they needed manpower. So, they came to the idea, why should we kill them all. We leave the people who are able to work alive, and let them work and then they're through when they cannot do it anymore, then we have time to kill them, so we went marched about every 5, 5 miles, no 5 kilometers, maybe 2 to 3 miles, and we ended up in Buna, Auschwitz, this is Auschwitz 3. This was a labor camp, it is a concentration camp, but not a death camp. We had no crematoriums, we had no gas chambers. The sick people were sent, transported to the main camp or to moved to uh Birkenau, this was Auschwitz too. This was a strictly death uh camp of destruction, a death camp. When we came there, in the beginning, they asked us our profession. I gave my profession, I'm a pharmacist, and next day they decide to send me to go to work to the hospital. Came to the hospital, there were naturally people already working and since there was no pharmacy, they put me into the internal uh disease dept. as a male nurse. And, after a while, they made me in charge of the male nu--of the the this uh department of the Internal Disease, and there were doctors from all countries, famous doctors, professors from France, from uh Rumania, from uh Hungary, from Czechoslovakia, from all over, from Poland, and we naturally took care the best we could of the sick people. And here again, what to do with those sick people of pneumonia, or pleuritis. Medications we didn't have. Once in a while the administrator, a sergeant, came and left in a room, 12 sulfa, sulfa tablets, and 12 tablets it's enough for one person a day, but when I have 30, 35 people laying in a room, whom do I give it first? So, we consulted with the doctor. What do you think? Whom shall we give it? And we decided to give it to the youngest who has the biggest chance to survive. Sometimes we had 3 and 4 and we would like to save them, so I was on very good terms with the administrator. He was sergeant, he didn't care much what's going on, he ate his apple, or smoke a cigarette, and walked around in the hospital, but never interfered for nothing, didn't beat anybody, nothing. And uh we got to know each other, and I went to him once said uh, "Norbert, we need more tablets." He never said no or yes. For this question alone he could take the gun and shoot me. He didn't never say anything. He walked out of the camp, and after an hour, he came back and I found another bunch of pills, on the on the table, and this way we could s-save more people, or sometimes when he brought from the main camp, from the hospital, material, medi-medications for the SS hospital, which was not us, was outside, he took me out in order to put everything away where it belongs, to put it in order, and at the gate naturally asking where do you go with it? Oh, I take him out because he's a pharmacist, and he put everything in order for me. Naturally, I took advantage all of it. I put medi, medications as much as I could, and brought it back, but when I knew in front it's a gate, there is a man who will pursue, an SS man who will search me, I left it there, and later on he brought it back. So, it was a to our advantage, and naturally we were able to save more people. When it came to the selections, we did not have a steady SS doctor in our camp. We were all in Auschwitz 1, and when the selection took place by us, I would say every 7 to 10 days, different doctors were assigned to come to different camps and make the selections. There came different doctors, because only that, only one at the selection, and naturally, Mengele was, I recall about 5 to 6 times, during the time when the selections were made, and uh before the selections, I was already

transferred from the, from the camp, from the hospital to the reeducation camp. As I told you before, I don't know why I was selected. I assume because of my lang--knowledge of languages. Because the reeducation in camp was not uh occupied by regular sur-uh prisoners like we were sentenced forever, because we had no hope or how long uh, there was no timetable for us. You stay there, when you die it's fine. Who knows what will be later. But those were prisoners who worked in the Germ-in Germany as forced laborers from all occupied countries. And they worked in the -----farm industry, in the factory which we built from scratch in Auschwitz, in Buna. And they came for different crimes they committed. They overlapped the time coming, returning from va-from vaction, from furlough or they uh didn't show up at work , or they run away from work, and I have to take care of them. And, in charge of this camp was not the SS, but the political, the Gestapo of this special camp. Well, this camp was in our camp, but separated, about 5 barracks, and I was in charge of it. And uh, the SS man from the Gestapo came every 2nd day, every 3rd day to inspect it, and I gave him the report, he looked around. But I got to know him better. And older man, he came then every day to me, and we had lunch together, in my camp. So the SS man from outside actually came to me just for chat. Every day. And I served him, I have to say, in this camp in Auschwitz, I never ate from the kitchen, from the, from the from the prisoner kitchen----

We have to reload.

I had to organize, I knew how to organize. I went to the uh kitchen, I told the, the cooks, listen uh, I have young people here. They need to eat.

Okay wait.

Give me more. Yeah. Oh, we're reloading.

Beep.

-----how the camp was governed. What a kapo was what a blockelder was.

You know, I would like to finish up the resistance, will take a few minutes.

Okay.

This man came to me daily, and we got to talk to naturally, we didn't, he was a very simple man, not, no education, I don't know if he finished even uh, uh elementary school. And one day I ask him, "Mr. Vicolek, from where are you?" He said, "Oh I am from Silesia." I said, "You don't have to tell me that you're from Silesia, according to your language, the way you speak, I know right away. But from what city?" "Oh, I'm from Tarnovitz." I said, "What? I'm from Tarnovitz." "What is your name?" "Halbreich." "Where did you work?" He said, "Oh, I was a baker." "In which bakery?" He gave me the name, and I said, "You know, when we were students, every morning, my, my our mother sends us for the, the fresh baked goods," in his bakery, so we got closer and closer and uh one day he comes he said, "You know, I think tomorrow the doctor is coming to make the selection because we never knew when he's coming. So that was enough for me. As soon as he left, I went to the hospital to my friends, well, I was there daily anyhow. I said,

"Listen, tonight release all the young people who are able to work for one night." So they released them. Next morning they went to work. And when it came to the selection, the doctor came, he had in front of him, all this 120, 130 people and he selected. So this way, we were able to save at least a few young people. But between the 120, all of the sudden we see some young people there too, who could survive when they would stay maybe a day, couple days, three days longer in the hospital. So, I, I, the adm, the administrator, the sergeant, had to take the numbers of the people whom the doctor designated to go to the gas chamber. So I went again to him, I said, "Norbert, between those people, I have sent three young people, a cousin of mine, or a relative or a friend's son, cross him out." He crosses him out. So instead 120, there were only 119, 118, but he couldn't cross out everyone, you know. But at least we saved, this was our resistance. Now it comes to transport them. The trucks came, and we were loaded those people on the trucks to go to Birkenau, to the gas chamber, and those people were not any more in their mind, they lost their minds, they were sick people who would die anyhow. But they had the strength to take off the jacket, to take off the shoes and throw them over the truck, so other people who are still alive could wear it. Isn't this resistance? See, we couldn't resist uh physically. There was no way, we didn't have arms. We were sick, we were uh, uh entirely without any means, but this was our resistance. And this went on and on to the end in Auschwitz. And then, Auschwitz, again was evacuated because uh the Germans were beaten, they came closer and closer. The other camps, the previous camps in the east, they were in, in, where, where, they were possible, they had the chance to destroy, kill the people who destroy the camps, so not to leave any trace of it to the Russians, but the Russians were so close to Auschwitz, they didn't have no time anymore to kill us or to destroy the camp. So, they put us on the death march. There were 65,000 people from all 39 branches in the neighborhood of Auschwitz, what we had put in the march for ten days. Most of the people marched partly people who had taken on trains, on open freight trains, and driven to Germany and tried to put them into place them in into different camps, and I ended up by train ten days by train, only once we got food, and here again, I had my armband, that I'm the camp oldest of the see uh, we had a good office of uh, uh reeducational camp, and I took one car and put sick people on there, maybe 15 to 20, and I had uh blankets to cover them, where, on all other cars, there were people standing because there were , they put in 100, 120 people, there was no place to uh, to lay down. But slowly when the train went for the ten days, people just died. Simply throw the, the bodies over the board, in the woods or where, and they had more place later on. But only twice we s-no, whenever we stopped the train to change the uh, uh the eng-engine, so people came, civilian people came closer and wanted to give us food. The, the Ger-the Germans didn't let us. Especially when we went through Czechoslovakia. The people -----tried to help us. They didn't let us. But I was the only one allowed get off the train. And I took water, and handed it out to the pe--so not the train was st-standing, hour, two hours sometimes, three hours, and I only handed off give, give water to the prisoners. Then once during the time, they gave us food. Uh bread and sausage. What they ask in every car, how many people? I said, "I have forty." I had maybe 20 on there, so I got double, so I took this food, you know what was left from us, all distributed it again to friends in the other cars. This was resistance. And we can go on and on. Now you want, you ask me another question.

Tell me about the hierarchy in the camp, what a Kapo was---

You have to start from the beginning for the SS first, yeah? There was the Commandant. The Commandant was s-uh located at uh the main camp in Auschwitz, but since there were many

branches, for instance, there were 3 main camps, Auschwitz 1, 2 and 3. There were camp leaders. There were high-ranked officers too, but they were under the command of the commandant. Then naturally were Sergeants and were lower-ranked SS men, who guarded what they have to care in the, the office, and they all naturally were armed with the guns, and uh mostly they treated us very bad. They beat us up and they killed us and uh terrible. I have to say, there were exceptions too. There were SS men, who were on duty but especially when they were by themselves, they didn't hurt us at all. They were there, and we could, we had a little breathing time, but when they are more together, these men had to treat us the way like the other ones. There couldn't be an exception because otherwise they would get suspicious or they would probably uh let them out of the SS, these I mean, uh, he would end up in a camp. But they had to be very careful. But there were these kind of people. -----and they take us. This was S, the SS man in the in my in Auschwitz in the in the hospital, this administrator, he was very good to us. Then, between the, they couldn't do all these things to observe us and to guard us. Though they had in the camp, the Camp oldest. It was in prisoner, and mostly a German, a criminal. Sometimes there were even political, they were mostly because of communists, they were communists, who were naturally in Germany brought into the camps. After the, the -----of the, after the blockeldest, there was his assistant, was the same thing a criminal, sometimes even a ----- . It depends how the set-up in the camps was. Within different camps was a different set-up. And then were the Kapos, who were responsible for the people at the uh, uh the workplaces. They marched out under his command, and the same thing, there were bad ones, mostly bad ones, and there were good ones too. And they had the assistants, but this actually was a part of the hierarchy, hierarchy, how you say--

Hierarchy.

Hierarchy.

All right, we're just running out. We just ran out.

So Kapo is below blockeldest?

I wouldn't say below, it's entirely different.

Beep.

You have talked about in the past a kind of a mental resistance, a reawakening you called it, being alert all the time. Can you talk to me about the importance of that in survival?

Yeah. Uh, the first three years, the two years in Sachsenhausen, one year in Gross Rosen, uh, we were robots. We turned, u,h into animals. They purpose of the Germans was to not allow us to think. To put up a resistance or something, and uh they just treated us really like animals, and we turned to animals. The sicknesses, the hunger, the starvation, you know. It leads you to uh different thinking. You, you were just looking when uh next to you the, the person was, was laying on half dead, so you were just looking you could get a piece of, piece of bread which he has hidden under his head, you know. And uh, you were stealing from your other friend when you had the occasion. There were moments, you know, when we got in the piece of bread in the evening, so I ate the whole thing at once. At least, at least I can sleep a few hours, and the other ones, they cut

the bread in pieces and left two slices for the morning. They got up in the morning it was gone. This was unbelievable. Unbelievable. Or, sometimes shoes. One stole from the other one the, the shoes because he had better shoes, you know, and uh, this really like animals acted, and the Germans were very happy with it because we didn't do, put up any resistance. We just did what they told us to do, and then came all of the sudden the part in uh Auschwitz, when I went to Auschwitz, when we put into, I was put into the hospital. Here all of the sudden, you were protected from the climate, from the harsh winters, from the hard summer. You're under roof, and you're not controlled like outside. You do your job, you take care of sick, sick people, keep the room in order, this is all. In the evening we were assigned to the ambulance because all the people came during, from their, from work, returning from work, they came to the ambulance, we treated them, they had different kind of wounds, were hurt or broken fingers or something, we treated them too. And uh I became a doctor sort of, I performed uh minor surgery, and the doctors who stood by, they said, they think you should be always a doctor, you shouldn't be just a pharmacist, and I had no medical background, you know, and uh, all of the sudden, your mind opens up. You have time to think. What are we doing? How long we'll be able to do it? There has to be a way to help each other. And I came to the idea to try to resist, to do help people to stay alive as long as possible. We had no other way to resist. Later on, we formed an organization, underground organization, the resistance, and here too, we just couldn't take anybody, just every, anybody who came across. We had to be very careful. It took us months to find trustworthy people, so they wouldn't give it out to the to the Germans because this meant death. We helped people in escaping, prepared them to escape. For instance, when I became the in charge of the reeducational camp, there was the man in charge. A, a, a Jew, and not, a half-Jew, his father was Jewish, his mother was non-Jewish--a German Jew, but he was there, and one day in the beginning, right in the beginning, he tells me, "You know, Sig, would you like to escape?" I said, "No." "Why?" I said, "You see, I have bigger chances to survive here, and I have a purpose to be here. I can help other people. What good it is I would escape, I would be lucky, I would some in hiding, so I saved myself, but what about the thousands and thousands of other ones who are suffering? And I am in a position, I can help people, and this is the purpose I stay." He all of the sudden escaped. They couldn't find him, and for sure, he could not stay alive because he didn't speak Polish and even when he got to the, to the forest, to the to the Polish resistance, to the AKA, he was killed because they wouldn't trust him, they would thought he is a German spy. They killed him for sure. And uh, next morning, I had to give out the report, how many people are alive, and who are -----ready to work. The SS man comes and I noticed he was not, in the, in the barrack because he slept under me, I slept on top. He was gone. So, I give up the report, and he says, uh, yeah, and I said, "One is missing." "Who is it?" "The blockeldest. He walked out." They knew already because they didn't know where is the one missing. They saw the, the fence torn, and he broke through and went out. I was called to the Gestapo, the man in charge. Uh, ask me uh, "How, how is this possible? The man escapes and you didn't know about it?" I said, "I noticed in the evening about ten, eleven o'clock that he is missing, but it's really quite often he stayed in the main camp, like I for instance I went to visit my, after the work I went to visit my friends, so I came late home...", this is all, we were the only ones who were allowed to pass, because we had our bands and we were in charge of the, but no other prisoner could get out, but we were allowed to go from one camp, from my camp to the other camp, to the main camp, and I said, "I didn't know this, in the morning I see he, he is gone. And I reported it just now in the morning." He said, "It's funny that you shouldn't know about it." I said, "Look at, I just took 4 or 5 days there. I didn't know this man at all. We hardly spoke, especially privately we had no time to, to talk, and at night we slept, I didn't know, I didn't

know this guy." "Okay." They sent me back, a few hours later he called me back, "You know, Halbreich, I decided you will be the next uh man in charge." Okay, I needed help because I was in charge of the ambulance in this special camp in the reeducational camp, but the other doctor friend of mines took my place and I was in charge of this camp. Now there are prisoners coming and going every week, other people coming, new people and other people going home back to work, and mostly young ones I tried to help. I got the kettle of the soup more, I got a few breads more, I could help not only them but my friends in the main camp too. They came in the evening, they had dinner, and they gave them -----, I organized clothes, and I helped them all over. And uh, there were cases, for instance, one day uh I'm in the camp and I look around, a big Commandant passes, going into the main camp, and he stops me, calls me to the gate, he says uh, "Campoldest, what's happened, how come those, those people are around here?" I stood on attention, and I said, "Commandant, I have an order from the doctor to keep the younger people in the camp and their performing light work, putting the garden in the, in the order, cleaning, uh the bath, the, the toilets, and so forth." He says, "Ha!" and walks away. That's all. Oh, that's fine. I got away with it. Next day, just by coincident, the doctor passes, goes into the hospital, and he stopped me and asked me the same question, and I told him, "I got an order from the Commandant to keep the younger people. See when they would get together with one word, I wouldn't be here. They would shot me immediately. This is how I resistance. We dared to do things against the Germans. There is another case. One day the man in charge, the Gestapo calls me to his office, he says, "Out of the camp." I had to get out of the camp, with the guard naturally, and he said to me, "You know, Halbreich, tomorrow, we're expecting a transport, and between those people there is a man who killed a prisoner. He didn't...

We've got to reload.

Beep.

Can you talk to me about how you feel or maybe don't feel that support systems, families and friends, who were in the camp, helped you as a form of resistance? Among prisoners, keeping up friendships or if you feel that they didn't keep up friendships.

You mean in the camps?

In the camps.

-----in the camps. Certainly, we formed groups. There were very close knit groups. We helped each other. We protected each other. We cared each other, and just a little detail in Sax-in Grosrosen, I remember, uh my friend Jacob who was with me from the beginning, who run away from Katuvitza, was all the way with me. One day he comes and has in his fist, holds his fist, he said, "Sig, guess what I have?" How can you guess? So he opened his hand and he had a piece of uh a orange peel. Dried up a little piece of orange peel, and he broke it in half and we shared it. Now, and then in Gro, Sachsenhau-in Gross Rosen, in the first Christmastime, before Christmas, the Germans told us we can receive packages. So, I wrote to my mother, we couldn't write yet that time, in Sachsenhausen, naturally it was all censored and all the cards in German, and maybe every 3, 4 months, we could exchange, we got mail. So I wrote to my mother that we can receive packages. I don't know the situation that time, you know, where they were, but uh all of the

sudden, very soon, I got a package, and I was the first one who got a package. And opened it naturally there was for Friday prepared like usually for Shabbat for the Saturday, you know, a twist, and a cake and some chicken, fried chicken, some other things you know, and we were so happy. We came from work, we opened that gave, some shared with the uh barrack oldest, the blockoldest, and we, we se, let down, and we sat down on our beds, and ne-next to me my friends and we shared it. And, next morning we were all sick, because we were not used to this kind of food. We were always on this sickly diet, what we had in the camp, you know, no fat and no nothing, and here all of the sudden we get this, got all sick, we almost regret it. You know, and from that time on, nobody else received a package because the, the Germans confiscated everything. Was even the, nobody even heard that he got a package but it's confiscated, we never heard about that. The

Tell me about religious resistance. Was there ever religious resistance?

Yeah. Uh, I would say I come from a religious family. Not the kind orthodox family because our part where I lived in Silesia was belonged before to Germany. We were religious. We were strictly conservative. Not orthodox. Naturally at home we had Kosher, and uh, holidays, we didn't go to school. Saturday we went to school because in Poland, in Germany in Europe, Saturday was school, but we didn't write on Saturday. And uh, coming to the camp, naturally, there we didn't have our prayer books or other things you know to observe our religious belief, but in the morning when we got up in five o'clock in the morning was dark, we put the straw sacks in the corner, we stacked them up high up to the ceiling, and we find maybe ten, twelve, maybe 15 people before we were called out in the corner behind the straw sacks, and we prayed. Very hard, we didn't have anything to pray, but people were in a relig--into the religion very well-educated, and they knew it by heart, and we joined, but not naturally all--and there were people watching us we shouldn't get caught you know because this would be death. This would mean death. And this we continued in uh Sachsenhausen. In Gross Rosen it was impossible to do it, but I remember very well ----- about 5-1/2 years being in the camps on the holidays. We knew every holiday in spite, we didn't have calendars. We knew it. But when it came to Yom Kippur, we passed it. Not all, but there was a group of us, of friends. We fasted. We did not eat, in spite we get anyhow, almost nothing to eat, but we did not because we kept it for the evening, we went out to work, but we did not eat, but in the evening when we came back, the camp, the, the blockeldest kept the food for us because you know, we didn't eat, he gave us the food. The only one time I ate it was in Gross Rosen. In Gross Rosen, it would have been death without eating even the small portions we got during, daily, -----portion. Then we ate there. In Auschwitz, naturally, it changed. In my barracks in the block, in the, uh reeducational camp, we assembled Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we lighted the candles. There were about just 15 to 20 people, all we good friends, and we could trust each other, the Kapos uh, uh camp uh blockeldest uh assistants, and friends, well we assembled, and we prayed all day, and I, later on after the evening, I still -----food, and I have witnesses, and Norbert Wollheim one of it, and there was Dr. Silver who uh is a French doctor, a wonderful human being who knew almost everything by heart, all the prayers. And there was Dr. Unikover, a German lawyer from, from Breslau, who knew by heart the whole 5 books of Moses from the Torah. We went, we assembled and we prayed all these days. The two years in Sachsenhausen we did it. Naturally, I had again the young people, the non-Jews around the ----, and watching that the SS shouldn't surprise us, you know. And, this was all I arranged. So you dared you know. This was only way we could survive.

You talk about a secret of survival.

This is actually the secret of survival. There was no physical way to, to resist and to fight the Germans. But this was our way of??? survival. We were, we had, for instance, in Sachsenhausen, in Auschwitz, on Sunday when we didn't go out to work, Saturday, they had to go, I never worked in Auschwitz because I was always in the hospital the, the, the re-re-reeducational camp. But, it came Sunday, I had gathered young Jewish people, Zionists, from Poland, from Germany all together, and we had meetings in the barracks, and I talked and I had had uh give them history lessons, and about the future. There were people down, they gave up, and sometimes the situation was so bad that by myself I didn't believe it, but I never let the other ones feel it, know it, that I don't believe. In fact, they called, this is a uh, uh a eternal uh optimist, they called me. I never showed them that I am down already. I had the strength to make them believe they should hold on, they should fight, that it will be soon over. I gave them the hope. I don't know from where. I feel this is my education, my, my uh bringing up, up upbringing from home, and from school. I was always, I was five years old, I was already organized in a young Zionist organization, singing uh Hebrew songs, or going uh, uh Sunday on uh, we had trips uh on uh, uh bicycle trips, but we were in groups. We, I was always in a group, and it turned out from the beginning, I also became a leader of the groups, and this I continued in the camps. I learned it this was my upbringing from home, that I had the strength to act this way, and let's face it, I do it after the war too. I am engaged in organizations. I'm more away from home than at home.

Okay, let's reload one more roll.

Beep.

Uh, for instance, the Germans, the SS, the guards, they were trained how to treat us. I would say, in general, but they were never told what to do, how to do it, and naturally, they were, most of them, they had, actually everyone had a special method to treat it. One uh arranged for instance uh, uh boxing matches. They picked out two young boys, and they had to fight, and they were later on given a piece of bread for it. They enjoyed it. Other ones like I said before, the one who hits so long that you had to drop, so we found the way out, we dropped very soon, so he let us go. The other ones again beat us so long in his face, you know, till you had to die. And there were so many methods. One day during the work in uh Sachsenhausen, they picked at random a man and said, "Here, dig." He took the shovel, big hole, and when he was ready, they said, "Jump in." Well, the man wanted to jump in with legs first, they said, "Oh no, first with your head," and they buried him.

And it was close to in the evening before we go home, so it was maybe a half an hour before, and this SS man, he was satisfied with it he killed a man this way. He walked away, and we took the advantage, we went and uncovered him and we took him, carried him on our shoulders into the camp. We saved his life, see, there were so many other methods. They threw p-p-people in the open uh, we had toilets, you know, what were the toilets consisting of a piece of wood, and they had to sit, and they wat, watched you, you know, two minutes, and sometimes they went in and pushed them into the, how you call it uh, in English, and naturally, that man was killed in this mess, and this is unbelievable, unbelievable, what's in it, you see. And uh--

So there were good people and bad people.

There were good people, I mentioned before, there were good peoples who looked away, they gave you the breathing time so long as they were there, but only when they were by themselves. And sometimes you can talk to them. See, when I was in Auschwitz, and we, our camp was specially guarded at night, so, I walk around and the SS man calls me, he said, "You know Campoldest Olan? Soon it's all over. We are beaten, being beaten on all fronts, and uh, you, you will probably will make it, you will survive. Next day, the man, you know, walks around at night, has nothing else to do so he wants to start to talk. So next, uh next evening again with him, he said, "You know, I will give you a gun." I was surprised and stunned. I said, "You know what? I don't need a gun. For what should I need a gun? It doesn't help me. One gun?" I was afraid he wants to set me up, you know. No, he meant it, but I didn't accept. I didn't take the gun. So there were good ones too. But you can count them on the fingers. And the same was with the prisoners. You had good uh campoldests, who were reasonable, they looked a way, you know, they treated you well, and there were Kapos, good ones, but the majority were bad, were bad. For instance, there was a camp uh like a, how you call him, who was under the campoldest, but he was in charge of the technical part, everything kept in order, you know, the streets cleaned and so forth. He was a German, a communist too, but he was terrible, he didn't let a prisoner pass, he had to hit him. And after the war, right away after the liberation had started to work.

Let's stop for this -----.

Yeah.

That was 30 seconds of room tone with the lawnmower in background that started up a little while ago.

Take 11 is up.

-----bad ones, you were in a position, you could make a choice, okay?

Beep.

Well the same happens with uh, the prisoners who had responsible jobs. They uh, I would say the majority, they were bad ones, and uh, I have to say, to admit even, there were some Jewish blockeldests who didn't behave to well. But when we found out, we called some attention to it, that uh, hopefully the war will be over, and uh, they will not be too well-received after the liberation, and uh sometimes they changed and sometimes not, and we had cases after the war where people want to, to bring them to court, or they took uh care of themselves, and uh I was always against it, not to take revenge. Not only those special, but in general, I had, after the war when I was working with the American War Crimes, I had occasions to take revenge on the SS, on the Germans (background noise), but uh, when I intended to hurt somebody, all of the sudden, my arm refused even to -----, and in this moment, came into my mind, "My God, why should I hit him? When I hit him, I am not better than they, and I wanted to be a better human being." And I couldn't do it. And I have no feelings of hate, and then, especially now, it's already after 40, 50 years after the war, those younger generations, they are not responsible for it, for the co-co, what the parents committed, what crimes the, the parents committed. And I tell them in German when I go to, to

lecture in Germany, I tell them because they're afraid. One of the first questions, "Do you hate the Germans?" I said, "No, I don't hate them. I have no reason to hate them." But you should see to it that it should never happen. This is your, your responsibility. This is my way to...

Were you under pressure when you were a blockeldest to behave differently when the SS were around than when they weren't around?

Uh, one time we -----, it is very important to, I was called, I told you started by the uh uh man who was in charge of the Gestapo of our camp, and told me the next day uh there's a transport coming, and one man killed a prisoner. He didn't say a Jewish prisoner, a prisoner. And I'm standing and he said, "Did you understand?" "Yes." See what he had in mind to take care of this person. The SS they didn't like when somebody else killed somebody. They wanted to do the job by themselves. So this man was brought in, and when they marched in, we grouped I don't know maybe 30, 40, and I ask everyone name, and why are you in, and they gave me different reasons, and I come to this man and I ask him, "Why are you here?" "Uh, because I mishandled a prisoner." I said, "Oh, and what did you do?" "I beat him up." "Why?" He didn't work. I said, "Maybe the man was sick, was weak, he couldn't do it anymore." "No, I don't know, but I beat him up." I said, "That's all you did to him?" I said, "You know, I have different information that you killed the man." He said, "I didn't know, I didn't know," in Polish. I uh, it came to uh, uh distributing the food that afternoon, and I told the man who did give the food out, "Give him a full," uh, how you call it..."A container. He give him full container. He finished, I said, "Are you still hungry?" "Yes." "Okay, I give you more." He took 3 times, and then I said, "Lay down on the ground." Was outside, and start to rolled and naturally everything came out what he ate. This was my reaction, but the following day, I have to take all those prisoners who came in a day before to the hospital for checkups, and I let them know in the evening, there is this and this man who killed a prisoner, so the especially took care already the hospital. The following day, I sent him to work inside the camp, to a Kapo who was known as a killer, and I told him, "Listen, this guy killed a, a prisoner." "Fine." In the evening when they came back from work, they carried him in already, he couldn't work. He couldn't walk anymore. I said, "What's happened to you?" "OH, the work was too hard." He wouldn't admit that he got beaten. "The work was too hard, and uh I don't feel good." "Fine." Next day he went to work, he never showed up again because he took it right from the working place to the hospital, where he died. The following morning, I'm called to the SS. And he ask me, "Halbreich, what's going on in your camp? There comes a young man, a healthy man, and in two days he's dead. What shall I report to the authorizes in the city. And I already -----, I said, "You know, this man wo-worked in the coal mine. All his life underground. And here, he works outside exposed to the hot sun, the hard work, he got a heart attack." So he breathed easier, he said, "Do you know I can report it, and report it to these authorities that he died of a heart attack," but actually he died in a different way. Another time it was the last transport coming to Buna before the end. A transport of 400 French Jews. It was maybe in October, 44. And we were wondering, how come now so late coming Jews here from, from France, so we asked them, "Tell me, how did you get here?" You know, we were in hiding, and this one gave us out." So he reported it to the French police that they are hiding so and so many, and this is the city or the uh or the town, and they went and arrested them, handed them to off to the, oh, to the Germans, and the Germans put them on transport to Auschwitz. Now, we cannot have between us a man like this. So, he went to a check-up, and he never came out of the hospital. They gave him, our doctors gave him a shot and he died. We had, this was our resistance. What can you do?

Thank you. Thank you very much. We need to once more record the sound of the room...

Another 30 seconds of room tone for previous interview.

Okay, ready now.

End room tone. End of sound roll.