

**Rene Tressler**

**Tape 1, Side A**

**February 20, 1997**

**RG-50.106\*0061.01.04**

### **Abstract**

Rene Edgar Tressler was born April 16, 1927 in the small southern Bohemian city of Strachonice, Czechoslovakia and had a brother who was 5-years older. His father was a musician who frequently traveled and his mother had a busy position so a maid cared for the children. His parents divorced in 1937 and soon remarried. When Rene was two months old, the family moved to Most and then Teplice where they left hurriedly when they learned the Germans were coming. They moved to Usti where they resided when Rene was in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. The family practiced Judaism by lighting Friday night candles, attending synagogue on the High Holidays and having Rene and his brother Bar Mitzvah. Around age 10, the family moved to Prague where he lived with his grandparents for one and one-half years and then moved in with his mother. His new father went to Palestine to pave the way there for the rest of the family but soon no one was permitted to leave. Rene was thrown out of the gymnasium and then the high school because he was Jewish and attended the Jewish School until it closed. Then he spent his time at the sports stadium that remained open to the Jewish community and helped Jews with their belongings who were transported. Rene experienced wearing the Jewish star, walking and tram restrictions and food rationing. When Rene was 14, his brother who was a Zionist volunteered to help the Jews at Thereisenstadt. Rene and his mother were forced to follow him a year later.

This part begins when Rene's brother voluntarily goes to Thereisenstadt with a Zionist group to help organize it for the residents. Soon Rene and his mother were requested to move from their modern apartment to an old one. They were visited by an SS who fell in love with Rene's mother but she strongly rejected him. This incident might have caused their deportation November 20, 1942 to Thereisenstadt. Luckily, they were under the protection of Rene's brother who had his mother live in the Board of Elder's building where he resided and Rene live in the Youth Home and become a soccer player. As a player, he was given extra rations. At first Rene was assigned to the electricians but later worked as a dental technician. The SS realized that the Board of Elders were deporting less people than indicated as they listed some dead people. Therefore, the Board of Elders and family members including Rene, his mother and brother were deported to Auschwitz on December 18, 1943. The train ride was a horror to him as the quarters were tiny, with no food and little sanitation and he saw people dying. They were allowed to skip selection but got showered and tattooed and were assigned to the family camp. Men lived separately from the women and Rene helped at the Children's Barracks by carrying soup from the kitchen.

This tape discusses Rene's experiences in the Family Camp of Auschwitz where he spent his day in the Children's Barracks. He explains how the various groups left either to be gassed (the earlier group) or sent to a work camp (1<sup>st</sup> the men, then the women, then Rene's group). Rene was sent to Blackhammer (?) with mostly others his age where he dug ditches. They were off on selected Sundays when the entire camp was required to view the hanging of 5 chosen prisoners. When the War was coming to an end, the entire camp of 4,000 went on a death march to Grossrosen (?) where only 1,000 lived to reach. Then they went by train to Terezin where they were bombed and placed on a bus to Buchenwald with just the 60 or 70 survivors. Rene tells of an unusual experience he had about 3 years ago when he and his wife tried to find Blackhammer by car but could not. Suddenly a man on a bicycle appeared and told him that they had reached the spot and when Rene turned the car around, the man disappeared.

This 4<sup>th</sup> tape discusses Rene's experiences from Dresden to Buchenwald where the Germans attempt to liquidate the Jews. Rene escaped the killings by jumping off of trucks five times. He is liberated by the American Army but is in poor shape. He is taken to Prague where he rejoins his parents and recovers. Then he finds his brother who has recuperated from TB and moves to Israel. Rene remains in Prague for 20 years, studies journalism at a university, and refuses to become a Communist. The Communists do not accept his writing as work so he performs construction work periodically. Rene gets married and escapes to the US where he continues to write about the Holocaust. He does not wish to remove his tattoo as it indicates his experiences.

### Summary

00:00 Rene Edgar Tressler was born April 16, 1927 in the small southern Bohemian city of Strachonice where they produced fez hats and motorcycles. They lived there for two months. His father was called Beje (?) or Frederick and his mother Bedchizka (?) or Frieda. He had a brother, Harry, born February 22, 1922 who is now called Taizy (?). His father was born in Prague, the capitol of Czechoslovakia and his mother in Berna (?), the capitol of Moravia which is part of Czechoslovakia. His father was a music professor and musician and taught temporarily in the town where Rene was born. They mostly lived in Prague where his close relatives amounted to about 75 people of which about 64 perished in the Holocaust. His parents divorced in 1937 and his father married a German and his mother married a Jew. His father was protected by his Aryan wife until the last 3 months of the War so he pretended that he was blind and used a white cane and slept at a friend's house. He was supposed to transfer to a camp for mixed marriages but it did not happen. Rene, his mother and his brother went to a camp and all survived. His mother died in 1987 at age 85.

05:00 After Strachonice, the family lived in Most and then settled in Teplice where Rene attended elementary school. They escaped to Usti when Hitler occupied Sudetenland and

heard he may come and occupy their town. They left their large apartment without taking their valuable musical instruments, library, furniture and clothing. They thought the move would be temporary as Chamberlin would fix the situation. They lived in a mixed neighborhood as there was no specifically Jewish area. Rene was in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades while living in Usti. There were a few children in his class who called him "dirty Jew" but he did not take it seriously as he was not very Jewish and did not know what it meant. His parents told him to ignore the taunts and not to fight but once he fought. His family helped a boy in class whose family did not have sufficient means. Rene would bring him lunch every day but once he forgot both their lunches. The boy got angry and called him, "dirty Jew" and hit Rene on his head with his pencil box so Rene beat him up. The boy and his mother came to their house and showed his mother the black eye that Rene had given the boy.

10:00 When Rene's mother told the boy's mother the entire story; she got embarrassed and apologized for her son's behavior. Rene then stopped bringing lunch for the boy. He felt no persecution from the students or teachers in his public school and felt that persecution was not common in Czechoslovakia. Rene received little formal religious training. His mother attended synagogue on the high holidays and sometimes he joined her. He did not understand the need to attend but knew he was Jewish, though not what it meant. Hitler and the Holocaust made him aware that he was Jewish and more knowledgeable about it. They lit Friday night candles and said the prayer. Both Rene and his brother were Bar Mitzvah. The family did not keep kosher and his parents worked on the Sabbath which was common for Czech Jews. There were few orthodox Jews in Czechoslovakia. The family mostly spoke Czech and at age three, Rene learned German from a German maid.

15:00 She left two years later speaking Czech and Rene speaking German. He spoke about 80% Czech and 20% German. Some of his older relatives spoke broken Czech so they spoke German to them. Rene played keyboard and guitar which he learned from his father. He played classical guitar but was not professional. After the camps, he preferred playing soccer. He enjoyed soccer, hockey and ice skating as a child but his brother hated sports. Rene was extroverted as a child and believes he still is. His father was constantly traveling abroad conducting orchestras and his mother held a high position in a coal concern, Weyman/Pechek (?). His mother was Executive Secretary for the Director when they lived in Usti. Since she was rarely at home, they had a maid, and, sometimes, a nanny for him. When he was 10 or 11, the family moved from Usti to Prague and never returned so never saw their beautiful furnishings again. His grandfather lived in Prague. His mother married a man who had lived for 18 years in the US. They did not own an apartment in Prague and had left their bank account in Usti. Rene did not feel that the divorce was a hardship as his father was never at home prior the divorce and afterwards he saw him more frequently. Rene lived with his grandparents as his mother and her

husband only had a one-room apartment. He feels his grandparents did little at raising him. At age 15, he went to the concentration camp.

20:00 When Rene was young he was close to his brother but his brother did not care for him. Rene would copy his brother and then his brother would stop doing those activities. Once Rene's brother took him to a soccer field and Rene was chosen first which embarrassed his brother so he stopped playing soccer. Another time his brother brought a guitar home and Rene picked it up so his brother stopped playing it. His brother used to write short stories. Once he wrote a Christmas short story and the neighborhood cried over it. Then Rene started writing so his brother stopped writing. After Hitler occupied their area, his brother, age 18 or 19, became a Zionist. He became friendly with Jacob Edelstein who organized a group to prepare Thereisenstadt for the Jews. Edelstein took 21 people including Rene's brother and Edelstein became a member of the Board of Elders. Before the Sudetenland occupation, Henlein-Gaulieter (?) arrived to organize the occupation. Germans marched through the town with flags of Usti and those who sympathized put up flags and banners. The family above them on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor were Germans and placed a large banner on their balcony which overhung down to Rene's balcony.

25:00 The Germans stopped marching when they came to Rene's house and saluted him and said "Hail Hitler" and "Juden Araus" (Jews out) as thought the banner was on Rene's balcony. Rene laughed as he was Jewish and not a Nazi. Rene was not impressed by the marchers. His mother did not explain the situation as did not want him to worry. He was happy to go to Prague as he did not have to attend school, he liked Prague and his grandparents lived there. Rene did not realize what moving meant. He did not know that there were other refugees moving to Prague. His mother married a Jew from Baltimore who went to Palestine to pave the way for them to come later. It happened that her husband was one of the last ones able to leave as a few weeks later they realized they could not follow him. Rene quickly made new friends in Prague and did not miss his old friends in Usti. First he was placed in a gymnasium as he had finished the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The gymnasium was to prepare him for university as he wanted to become a gynecologist.

30:00 **Tape 1 Side B** He was thrown out of the gymnasium after a few months as he was Jewish. Then he was placed in a high school where he was thrown out again for the same reason. Slowly he became aware of his situation—that he is Jewish and did not have the same rights as others. He was happy and did not take it too seriously. Then he was admitted to a Jewish high school where he had fun and played sports. No one called him, "dirty Jew" there which was nice. Students and teachers had called him, "dirty Jew" in the gymnasium and high school. He felt safe on the street as no one recognized him as being Jewish. Few German children came with the occupiers. Rene became somewhat aware of politics, the world-wide situation, and the War. He learned that Germany had

occupied Czechoslovakia and did not like the Jews, and that later Germany wanted to separate the Jews from others and, finally, transported the Jews to Lodz, Poland.

- 35:00 By '41 Rene understood the situation. The Jewish school closed in early '41 so Rene had nothing to do except go to the sport club, Hagibor (?) in Prague as it remained in the hands of the Jewish community. Rene played soccer there and became friendly with Fred Hirsh, the director of the sports stadium, who later became the leader of the children's barracks of Thereisenstadt. Rene shows a photo of 11 boys who played soccer at the stadium and he is in the middle. He explains that 5 survived and 6 died. Next to it he has placed a photo of 11 other children that he acquired from the museum in Buchenwald where he was liberated. Rene indicated that he had knowledge that the war had started but saw no violence as there were no fights or bombardments in Prague until after the War. The War ended May 9, 1945 in Prague but he was not present.
- 40:00 There were restrictions for the Jews as first they could only use the last car on the tram and later could not use it at all. Since they could not use public transportation, the children had to walk about four miles to the stadium. They were not allowed to cross the main road, the Golden Road, on Saturdays or Sundays. Since they wore Jewish stars, they were recognizable. They had to walk a mile out of their way to use the underpass at the National Theatre to cross the street. The children were not as troubled as the adults about wearing the star. Sometimes Rene would cover the star with a bag and use the tram but he was never caught though others were. The stars were to be sewn on but they sewed them on with snaps so the stars could be removed. He was told to wear it so did so. He did not realize the seriousness until later so made fun of it. Rene said he still has an invitation to his Bar Mitzvah. He was a member of a Jewish choir led by Professor Vatel (?) who did not survive.
- 45:00 They tried to create a touring choir in order to go to unoccupied countries to escape. They thought they were equal to the Vienna choir and sent a manager with one million dollars to Switzerland to make their arrangements. He was never heard from again. Rene said that 50 children from the choir died and he was the sole survivor. He held his Bar Mitzvah with the choir and wore the choir uniform. It was held in the Duchy (?) Street Synagogue, a pretty synagogue, which later became a carpet museum. Though he sang in Hebrew in 1940, he did not know its meaning. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was occupied by Germany so was no longer Czech. Some synagogues were still open for the High Holidays and Bar Mitzvahs were still held. He did not wear a star at his Bar Mitzvah. They celebrated with a luncheon though rations limited the food. Restrictions included a curfew which did not permit them to go out on Saturday and Sunday and they could only use the rear platform of transports.
- 50:00 Then came ration books and later none for the Jews so they obtained food from the Black Market. Rene only spoke a little with his grandparents and not about politics.

After a year and a half with his grandparents, he moved in with his mother in a modern apartment building which belonged to a religious group of Czech Brothers. The church occupied the first two floors and the apartments were above. The next serious happening was that his brother volunteered to go with Edelson and the Zionists to Thereisenstadt. Transports to Poland were beginning. Since he did not have school, he was told by a Jewish organization to help carry the possessions of people being transported. Rene just knew they were moving; did not know about concentration camps. Some of those transported were elderly. Later they were thrown out of their nice apartment and placed in an old quarter of Prague in an old apartment with another family. They had three bedrooms for 7 to 10 people. The other family left first for camp so for awhile they had the apartment to themselves. It was hard to say good-bye when they moved but he was unaware of the tragedy brewing. He knew the family was ordered to move out. Rene continued to go to the sports center until November '42 when he went to Thereisenstadt with his mother.

55:00 His brother voluntarily went to Thereisenstadt in '41 against his mother's wishes. His brother traveled there in a private passenger train with no guards. Upon arrival no one knew why they came. Then they were placed in the Fortress city and never came out. Rene has a book about Czech Jews as to who survived and where they were transported to. Rene was 14 when his brother left and he missed him but his life did not change. He spent time at the sports stadium when he was not helping the transports. By that time, Rene knew that the Jews were isolated from the Christians but thought it was a temporary arrangement for the war. He thought that when the War ends, all will return to normal.

58:00

**Rene Tressler**

**Tape 2, Side A**

**February 20, 1997**

**RG-50.106\*0061.02.04**

### **Summary**

00:00 Rene Tressler's brother had voluntarily gone on the ST transport with Edelstein (?) to prepare Thereisenstadt for the Jews on November 4, 1941. It was called "ST" for Staub or leaders and the brother became one of the leaders. There were 23 leaders including Freddie Hirsh, the leader of the youth Habibor (?) where the children spent their free time. Freddie was a popular person and he became more popular in Birkenau where he was the leader of the children's block and later died. When Freddie left Prague, someone else took over to lead the games. Most of Prague was unacquainted with the Zionist

group. Rene did not hear from his brother after he left. His father had married a German and Rene would occasionally visit him in his Prague apartment. Their father knew the brother was leaving and his brother visited the father to say, "Good bye." They had friendly relations with the stepmother and knew her German family before the occupation as in '37 still lived in Usti and went on vacation to visit his father who lived with his in-laws in Cumertow (?). It was 60 miles from Usti.

- 05:00 There were several events in '41 and '42. When they lived in the modern apartment in the Czech Brother's Church, SS Uberstinban Furher Hertzner (?) visited them seeking accommodations for German tourists. Rene's mother was requested to offer housing. One day a man in civilian clothes came and asked them to agree to move to another apartment immediately rather than wait until forced to do so and Rene's mother agreed. His mother did not understand by whose authority they should move and he replied it was the SS Furher. They moved to an old house where another family lived who was to be deported shortly. The other family was transferred to Lodz, Poland which left Rene's family with the entire apartment. The SS Furher came one day and fell in love with Rene's mother who rejected him and punched him in the face. A few weeks later, they were transported to Thereisenstadt.
- 10:00 Otherwise, they probably would have remained in Prague. Rene was never physically or verbally abused on the streets of Prague. Although there was anti-Semitism in Czechoslovakia, it was not violent. Rene heard of physical beatings on the streets of Poland. Notification to leave came with a postman with a note to sign as required to assembly at a certain place. The man came at midnight. Although his mother was unhappy to go, she was glad that would see her son. On November 20, 1942, at age 15, he went on transport CC to Thereisenstadt along with 1,000 people. The Thereisenstadt Memorial Book indicates that 873 people died and 154 were liberated in 1945. Their assembly point was where business fairs were held and they slept two nights on wooden floors with blankets or mattresses.
- 15:00 Each person was permitted two bags which they filled with clothes. During the day, he played with other children. They were given some food but could not leave. They did not see the guards who stood outside at the gates. There were toilets and washrooms. They walked to the Bubonich (?) train station. Rene never took anything serious, especially as a teenager. He looked forward to seeing his brother and just thought they were moving to another city. Upon arrival in Thereisenstadt, they stood in the large hall Schloister (?) Hall where they lay on the wooden floor until it was decided where each would go. Most of their luggage was stolen. Rene's brother arranged that they stay in his building where the Board of Elders resided. Each Elder had his own small room but no bath or toilet. His mother shared a large room with other mothers of board members.

- 20:00 Rene was placed in the Youth Home and shared a small room with eight children. He was free to visit his mother and his brother anytime. Though locked in the city, they could roam the city freely. Most of the living quarters were worse than his and his mother's. It was more like a ghetto than a concentration camp. They thought that they were in the worse place on earth but later realized it was paradise compared to others. It was used as a gathering place for people to be transported to Auschwitz. Everyone had to work. The Germans tried to make it an exemplary place to show the Red Cross so they were permitted to have a theatre, orchestra, concerts, and a soccer league. There were people from all over Europe and some were well-known professional soccer players. Rene was proud to be chosen as the youngest on the league. Teams were divided according to work places which were led by SS or German professionals. Rene was assigned to work with the team of electricians. There were about 100 electricians under a German leader in a work place with laboratories. The German leader took care of the soccer team so they had the best uniforms and shoes. There was competition between the SS and the Germans so the soccer teams were provided to perform like horses and given special rations.
- 25:00 This included long salami, several loaves of bread and margarine which would be sufficient for others for a month. Rene knew that life is unequal, that some get more than others, and did not think much about it. Soccer was entertainment for others. One winter he was bored so his brother arranged for him to work in the dental laboratory where he repaired dental plates. He was officially a dentist rather than a soccer player. He saw his mother and brother every day. His brother did not discuss decisions made by the Board of Elders. He had his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday while residing there and does not recall anything special. Perhaps his mother made him birthday bread which is made by putting coffee into bread and sprinkling sugar on the top. He mostly talked about girls and soccer with his peers. He had girl friends and a group of girls got excited to see him playing. They played in the yard of Dresden Garrison, the women's residence, which had three floors with balconies all around. Five or six thousand people stood on the balconies to watch the games. There were no classes in Thereisenstadt except for very young children. The youngest ones lived in what is now the Holocaust Museum. They had concerts and a coffee shop where music was played. He got tickets from the electricians for the coffee shop.
- 30:00 They were given a substitute for coffee and could only stay for two hours at a time. **Tape 2, Side B.** They had fun. There was a primitive theatre with a stage, scenery, costumes and instruments. Rene's activities including dating, playing soccer, visiting his grandparents (mother's parents), and his aunt (mother's sister), all died in Auschwitz except his grandfather who died from prostate in Thereisenstadt. Rene's mother's sister, Euca (?) and his stepmother came to Auschwitz three months before and placed in



Birkenau. After three months they were given a sign, 5B6, which meant special treatment (gas chamber) after six months. Freddie Hirsh had the same experience.

- 35:00 He felt pretty safe as he was covered by his brother so was not deported. He expected to spend the rest of the War in Thereisenstadt and thought the War would end soon as Hitler was not doing winning. The adults were well-informed. The Czech guards (Czechniks) brought information and material including letters and packages into camp which was illegal so they risked their lives. The only Germans he spoke to were those with the soccer team. When Rene saw SS in German uniform, he got scared but there was no physical abuse while he was there. He heard about people being punished by hanging which happened prior to his arrival. There were police around and Rene knew that he would be put in jail if he did something that was not permitted. The Edelstein (?) group was responsible for the transports but may not have known the destination was Auschwitz. Rene occasionally saw Edelstein (?) but did not speak to him except about soccer. The Elders arranged each transport to leave with 40 or 50 less people than names listed as they listed 40 or 50 of the dead.
- 40:00 The railroad was in the middle of Thereisenstadt. The Germans did not take an exact count of passengers against the list but one day Commander Sidle (?) found a name of the man who fixed his roof who had died on the list. Then he found other names of dead on the list so he jailed Edelstein (?), the elders and their families. The Elders and their families were placed on transport to Auschwitz but Edelstein (?) and his wife were shot. Rene left December 18, 1943 for Auschwitz on a journey for four or five days. It was a horror to be in the cattle car as there was insufficient room to sit on the floor, only one bucket for sanitation, one window with bars and barbed wire, no food and no water.
- 45:00 A few people died in each car. It was a horror to see the dead bodies. Rene was with his mother and brother. His mother was strong and courageous. Rene leaned on her and she made him feel better by saying that they'll get through this and be fine. The people in the car could not help each other, even the sick, except pass the bucket around. He saw people falling, dying, and starving. They could not get out of the car even at the many stops. They had no idea where they were going but people would look through the window and make guesses. He arrived at B2B camp where he was tattooed on his arm. As soon as they were let out, he realized that it was a concentration camp. He hoped that he would just have to stay temporarily. Rene did not go through selection. Usually Dr. Mengele picked out the old and sick for the gas chamber. His was the only transport that had no selection and not given striped clothes though all their possessions were taken away.
- 50:00 When the doors of the car were open, they were beaten with bars or rifles, people cried and yelled, and the dead were thrown out. His mother said not to look, that they were old and sick. Some people got hit on the head. Then they were marched to real showers.

They got their clothes back and were tattooed. His number is 170955 which is a little larger than others because he grew a little afterwards so the number got larger. Though he felt terrible when he got tattooed, it was just a small worry as he was concerned as to where he was going to live and what he was going to do. The tattoo was not very painful. Men were separated from women and his brother went ahead of him to be helpful. His brother's number is: 170954. Their camp was a family camp, the only one with both men and women. It was a small camp, just 2 to 4,000 people. The camp had two rows of barracks. Transitional camps with one row of barracks were where you stayed a short time before the gas chamber. Freddie Hirsh was a German Jew and did not know Czech well but was military-minded and very athletic. In Prague he advocated exercise, discipline and being physically and mentally fit.

55:00 That was helpful for soccer. He talked back to the Germans and succeeded to get special barracks and rations for children. He spoke to the Germans in a military manner which they respected as he was German. Rene stayed with his brother. The women and the men were separated. Sleeping quarters were horse stalls with many levels of sleeping planks. There were about 1500 people in one barracks. Rene worked in Freddy's childrens' barracks. They were there for three months. The children, up to 16 years old, stayed there during the day. Since Rene was close in age to them, Freddy spared him from the normal adult life. Rene carried barrels of soup to the barracks from the kitchen. They had a children's theatre in a primitive way.

60:00 Since the books and writings were in German and they wanted to make a Czech play, Rene translated the German into Czech. He thinks one play was "Snow White." The children were as young as four years old so were not aware of their situation. They managed well with Freddy's help. There were teachers from Thereisenstadt for the children and young adults 20 to 30 years old who had ability to care for the children. They knew there was a crematorium as they saw the flames from the chimneys and heard there was a gas chamber but chose not to believe it.

63:00

**Rene Tressler**

**Tape 3, Side A**

**February 20, 1997**

**RG-50.106\*0061.03.04**

### **Summary**

00:00 Rene Tressler describes his life in the Family Camp. He participated in the same activities as the other children except he carried in barrels of soup for the children. He

was not permitted to partake of this soup as he was considered an adult and was given the thinner soup for adults. Their activities included theatre and reading groups. The Germans supplied them with books that they had confiscated which were usually in German. The Children's Barracks had a library of about 50 books including fairytales and picture books. Since Rene knew both Czech and German, he translated the German into Czech which they could use for their plays. Each group had their own teacher. Rene was in one of the older groups for 14 to 16 year olds of about 20 to 25 children. There were about 200 to 400 children in the Children's Barracks, Block 31. They did not have "appel," roll call so Rene had to start the day with appel with his barracks before going to the Children's Barracks. Appel consisted of standing in front of their barracks where the SS counted them to assure that no one was missing. They had to count those who died and those who were sick.

- 05:00 Appel sometimes took all day and they had to stand at attention in all kinds of weather – freezing or very hot. They did not have coats and wore their own clothes from Thereisenstadt. Their shoes wore out as the ground was muddy so many lost their shoes in the mud or broke their soles. A row of multiple wash basins were in one barracks where the water was ice cold and sometimes brown or black so not fit for drinking. The only liquid they had to drink was the fake coffee in the morning. Rene was healthier than others, possibly due to being physically fit. By that time he felt Jewish as everyone in the camp was Jewish and he knew that Hitler wanted to kill all the Jews. He spoke to his peers about sports and girls, the same topics as he spoke in Prague and Thereisenstadt.
- 10:00 Sometimes Rene also spoke with his peers about their surroundings (gas chamber, crematorium) in a humorous way ("fly through the chimney") as it was hard to believe they existed. They would say that the dead had to be burned in the crematorium. They saw carts filled with the dead being taken to the crematorium. They were fearful and hoped that it would not happen to them. When people would indicate that transports were being taken straight to the gas chamber, his peers would say that they're just saying this as they were scared. He recalls one Capo in the Family Camp, a man, Fisher, who had a hunch back and previously was a hangman. Some Capos were Polish or German prisoners and they walked through the camp. During that time, Rene never left Camp B2B. The girls his age in the Children's Barracks seemed the same as the boys, just trying to survive. Rene thought the girls might have had more physical problems.
- 15:00 Rene did not feel more mature but more experienced, just like the 5 and 6-year old children did. They all knew about the crematorium and the gas chambers and tried to be adult or heroic about it. At that time, Rene was not interested in being intimate with the girls. In Thereisenstadt each boy had to have a girl friend but not in the Family Camp. As a group, the people did not try to help one another, just themselves. He heard of people being helpful in other camps but in the Family Camp, there might have been a few who helped each other but it was not organized. Although there was some talk of

resistance, nothing was organized. When he left the camp, they had quasi-organized resistance. Freddie Hirsch's group had arrived three months before Rene's and after Rene was there for three months; Freddie's group was told they were going to Heidebruck (?) to work. They were placed in the A Camp and then loaded on trucks and disappeared. Later Rene learned that they were gassed so that left them with one-half fewer prisoners.

20:00 Rene learned that Freddie committed suicide. Freddie had a friend who could remove him from the transport but he did not feel that he could leave his group and someone got him veronal, a poison, which he took and died. Rene heard about it and was horrified but was not 100 percent sure that the group went to the gas chamber as he did not want to believe it. Later he heard that the group sang the Czech national anthem on their way to the gas chamber. Rene did not want to get into a worse mental state so chose not to believe it. When Freddie left, the Children's Barracks was under the direction of Horst Brenner (?) and another person and the activities continued. Rene does not recall holding a Seder. After three months there were rumors that they were leaving so they started to panic as knew that six months is all the time they had. They had some hope as knew that Hitler was losing and needed workers for the factories as the factory workers were being drafted into the military. Rene wanted to believe that they would be sent to the factories.

25:00 He heard about a men's adult transport for those who are 18 to 40 or 50 years old. His brother was placed in that transport and saw them embarking the train as it was nearby. He was happy as they never took a transport by train and saw them leave. The following day his mother left with the women's transport. He saw her in a striped uniform embarking the train which left. The next day there was to be a selection to take 100 people to a working camp. Everyone undressed to show their muscles and Rene was chosen with 60 children his age along with a few adults and they were put on a truck. They thought that if the truck went left, it was going to the gas chamber and they planned to try to kill the guards and run away. They would try to get through the gates as they would rather die this way than in the gas chamber. When they left, the Germans put up the canvas over them and the truck bumped to get around the holes in the poor road so they could not tell which direction they were going. One boy got so scared thinking they were going to the gas chamber so jumped out and got shot.

30:00 Actually they went through the gates of Auschwitz to Blackhammer (?). **Tape 3, Side B.** It was both a sad, tragic moment and a happy moment when they left because the boy died but they were taken to a working camp. The working women's camp was in another section. Rene did not know where his mother and brother were but was happy that they were all far from Auschwitz. Each morning they marched to the Oversheevazer (?) Factory which produced for the war machine. They were bombed daily and some of his friends got killed. They had been in Auschwitz for six months and now it was June or July 1944. His job was to dig ditches for pipes. Here the food was slightly better than Auschwitz; they had wooden floors, there were only two levels of beds, they had

windows and had wash rooms with clean water. Conditions were improved but they worked hard. On the Sundays when they were off, five prisoners would be hung. The hangman was Pierre, a non-Jewish Frenchman physician from the resistance. He had been caught with the French partisans in the French mountainous area.

35:00 They had been looking for a hangman and after trying several people who did not work out, they used Pierre as though a doctor who could heal people, could also kill people. Hirsh, a Czech doctor, perhaps a non-Jew, was in charge of the infirmary. Everyone wore the same clothes with no insignia and came from many different places so Rene did not know who was Jewish except for the 50 or 60 people on his truck. The Germans found "illegal" stuff on people so hung them. One boy found a red wire on the ground which he used to tie up his shoes that had wooden soles and a canvas top as his laces had broken. He just got hit 30 times with a stick which was light discipline compared to those who got hit 50 times but his heart gave out and he died. They knew the Russians were coming closer at this time. Rene only received an occasional hit or punch on his nose for skipping a step. One SS punished those he disliked with gymnastic exercise for five hours during the night.

40:00 Rene felt he kept going by surviving minute by minute or hour by hour. He often thought of his family as wondering where they were. He only knew a few relatives who had died in the gas chamber. Every free Sunday, the entire camp was forced to stand at the marshalling area and watch the hanging. The camp had a small crematorium. Three years ago Rene and his wife went by car from Auschwitz to look for Blackhammer (?). It was late and they asked people in Polish if they knew where it was and no one heard of it. Finally they asked for the factory by name and found it. It was dark in the middle of the forest and the road was bad. They saw the chimneys from the factory but still could not find the camp. Suddenly a man appeared on a bicycle in front of their car. He spoke Czech/Polish. Rene inquired where the camp was and the man said it was right there where they were. Rene saw a rusty plate on a tree that indicated the camp used to be there. The man said to go through the path in the woods and you will see it.

45:00 It was dark and Rene turned the car around and the man disappeared! Rene drove along the grassy path and after 100 meters, he came to a ruined metal, steel and cement gate and found the entrance. There was no fence left. He saw a monument and the little crematorium which was used for those who died in the camp. When people were cremated, the watchman would put the ashes in a large hole just outside the gate. Rene tells a story of a boy who had escaped with the assistance of the hangman and the watchman. The Germans did not notice this and the boy found shelter in the woods with the daughter of the forester and stayed in their shack. The girl also took care of a pig farm and delivered food to the Germans. One day the boy and girl ran away and jumped a train carrying fuel out of the factory to the front. There was an air raid on the factory and the train. The train was hit and the boy jumped but the girl was exploded by the fuel

tank. The boy was found unconscious and taken to the camp. German civilians would use the Czech camp doctor as he was famous. The railroad guards loaded the unconscious people and took them to the camp.

50:00 The boy was to be hung. The Russians were coming to liberate the camp. The camp went on a death march to Grossrosen (?). 4,000 people left Blackhammer and only 60 or 70 arrived in Buchenwald. There were insufficient guards for the 4,000 prisoners so they shot some who walked too slow or left for bathroom purposes. The guards divided into two groups, one with the prisoners and one went by truck to the next point. There was no food for the prisoners except once near Prodnic in Silesia, Poland but it was insufficient for everyone. They were told to remain in the snow in their clothes and they will bring a new load of bread but the prisoners were shot. Rene walked with a Pole, Swintick (?), in his 30s, who was the kitchen distributor of coffee and bread and protected Rene. Swintick (?) shared with Rene the bread he stole from the kitchen.

55:00 It took about 11 or 12 days for the 1,000 people to march to Grossrosen (?). Twice they slept in a barn with straw and once they got hot soup. They would drink the snow. When they arrived in Grossrosen, they were fed and remained for three days. Then they were taken to the railroad station and were locked in a barracks. The Germans did not want to count them so locked them up. After a day or two, they traveled by train for 13 or 14 days to reach Terezin. Upon their arrival, the train was bombed and the camp was leveled. Rene's group was in an open wagon on the train and many were killed so only 100 prisoners survived. There were no rails left and Rene saw piles of soil, metal and wagons. Only his car had not been touched but people died in his car from the falling debris.

60:00 Rene was unconscious as a wooden trestle had hit him. He found it leaning on the side of the wagon and the other side was implanted in someone's body. They were taken by bus and the German prisoners were separated from the non-German prisoners. They were placed on the plaza and picked out by their clothes. Then they were put on broken down buses and taken to Buchenwald.

61:00

**Rene Tressler**

**Tape 4, Side A**

**February 20, 1997**

**RG-50.106\*0061.04.04**

**Summary**

- 00:00 Rene tells how he survived the bombing of Dresden and is placed on a broken down bus with less than 100 people and is taken to Buchenwald. He was still in good physical shape at this point and did not lose as much weight as the others. He was still capable of marching. At Buchenwald, Rene was put into the Jewish ORT wooden camp. There were also brick and cement barracks. His camp was in the middle of Buchenwald and was fenced off by barbed wire. It was only for Jews and they wore striped uniforms and did not work. Outside their camp were work commandos. The Germans tried to liquidate the camp by placing the Jews on a truck and driving them away to shoot a few. It was very disorganized and people helped prevent the inmates from going on the trucks. Five times Rene jumped off the trucks as there were few SS and German guarding them. The guards would yell at him but did not run after or shoot him as he ran away. The few guards stayed to keep watch on the remaining prisoners on the truck. The day before liberation, Rene saw an airplane flying over the camp looking for military so the inmates placed an SOS sign on the ground and the plane saw them.
- 05:00 The American Army came the next day at 3:16 PM to liberate them and cut off the power so the clock remains at 3:16. Buchenwald was liberated April 11, Prague was liberated May 9 and Rene came home on May 19<sup>th</sup>. A black soldier jumped down from his tank and embraced Rene and he fainted as he had no strength left. They became buddies. Rene was put in a make-shift hospital and woke up in a white bed. He was now skin and bones and was told that he was fine. He fainted again for 5 days and woke up on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, April 16<sup>th</sup>. When Rene came to America he realized that Sammy, the black soldier resembled Sammy Davis, Jr. Rene recalled a song that he sang in a high girlish voice when he was in the Ubal (?) choir in Prague, "Zeh und rab est Wizronstein (?)."
- 10:00 Rene Tressler tells us about a tree in Buchenwald where he ended his death march. Buchenwald is near Ettesburg (?), a suburb of Wismar (?) where Goethe and Schiller lived. Goethe wrote Faust while sitting under this oak tree where he also wrote "Riesling unter Heider," (Roses under the tree)." Rene saw the tree in the middle of Buchenwald which later fell in a storm, leaving just a stump. Rene was weak while residing there and still weak a month later in Prague. On May 19<sup>th</sup>, Czechs took them by bus to Prague. There were a few young boys his age in his group but not his friends as they did not survive. He knew one or two inmates in Blackhammer (?) including Walter Bressler who now lives in Israel. Most of the inmates were older than him. He was able to stay in the Y until he found his relatives.
- 15:00 The next day he went to the reparations office and in the courtyard of the old building was a wall as big as a football field. On the wall were little notes from people searching for other people. Rene thought it impossible to find anyone that way. His father always wrote in green ink and Rene searched and in a corner saw a note in green ink and it said, "Harry Tressler please come to a certain address." His father knew that a Tressler had arrived and presumed it was Rene's elder brother, Harry. Rene found his father in his

apartment. When his father and the wife moved back to Commerton (?) where her parents lived and had farms and buildings, they left the apartment to Rene who remained for 20 years. Rene's mother arrived from Bergen-Belsen three months later as she had been working in the American Army kitchen as their manager and they liked her so much that they did not want her to go. In late Fall, Rene was sent to recuperate in the mountains. His mother ordered a little plaque in memory of his brother for the family cemetery plot. Rene tried out for the soccer team in the mountains and got to Norfolk for his skill. His Army friend helped Rene escape to the US. When Rene asked for his mother in the sanitarium, he was told that his brother Harry is there.

20:00 Their mother took the train and found that Harry had recovered from TB. He was sent to Switzerland to heal and later worked for a Zionist organization and got married, had a child and moved to Israel where he now lives, though is sickly. When the bus arrived at Wencellaus Square, Rene was weak and could not step up and shuffled his feet. He quickly recovered and became a professional sportsman and writer and took journalism courses. He took a test of his high school knowledge after completing a 2 month course and was able to get into college. The Communists came and he lived there for 20 years. Rene escaped Czechoslovakia in 1965 and now lives here. He experienced life under Fascists, Democratic Czechs, Communists and 32 years of Capitalistic America. He considered moving here earlier but it was impossible. When the Communists asked him what is his job, he replied that he wrote poetry, love stories and created crossword puzzles to make a living. He was asked if he is a member of the Writer's Guild but one cannot be a member without being a member of the Communist party so he was forced to go to work. He would work temporarily at construction jobs, then would disappear which repeatedly happened.

25:00 He worked in the mines for nine months and endured a big explosion. The Communists said that he is so young and went through so much in the Holocaust that he should join them. He said he is not joining because he went through so much. The Communists were not very sympathetic toward the Jews. He tried to tell the world that Czechoslovakia was only partially liberated by the Soviets as the western part was liberated by the American Army. Rene returned to Prague after three years where he just wanted to be free, start his own life and not cry about the past. Some people cry about what happened. He lost three years already and does not want to waste more time. Rene has spent his time writing about it. Though he lost part of his childhood, he still thinks that he is youthful. He remembers the Holocaust on a daily basis when he writes about it but it was not a happy time. He has no nightmares but dreams about Auschwitz and waking up in his own bed.

30:00 Some pictures remind him of the Holocaust. **Tape 4, Side B.** In Rene's library, there are articles about Terezin and the Buchenwald report which recall those times. When his cooking comes out poorly, he says, "That tastes like the concentration camp." Movies



such as Shindler's List" remind him of his experience. Now few such movies are made about the Holocaust. Sentimental rather than suffering situations make Rene cry. He never thought of having his tattoo remove as it is part of what he went through and does not want to remove it. Some people deny that they were in a camp or that they are Jewish. A friend of his does not tell his children about the Holocaust as he is afraid that they would imagine that they would have to go through the same experience.

35:00 Rene feels that he won the fight and those who forget it, did not. He feels sorry for them. Though he is not a religious Jew, he considers himself a traditional Jew. He was born a Jew so there is nothing to do about it. He is proud of what he went through but wished he could have been a gynecologist in Ustee. It did not happen so he does not deny what did happen. He married a non-Jew, an Evangelic, in 1953 in Czechoslovakia on the night of Stalin's death.

38:00