United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Melvin Galun
October 29, 2009
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audiotaped interview with Melvin Galun, conducted by Gail Schwartz on October 29, 2009 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Rockville, Maryland and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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

MELVIN GALUN
October 29, 2009

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Melvin Galun, conducted by Gail Schwartz on October 29th, 2009 in Rockville, Maryland. This is tape number one, side A. What is your full name?

Answer: My full name is Melvin Galun.

Q: And is that the name you were born with?

A: No, the name I was born with was Mendel Galoon, and I was at various times also called Misha, which -- yes.

Q: And where and when were you born?

A: I was born on May 10, 1940, which incidentally was also the day that Winston Churchill became prime minister of England.

Q: And where were you born?

A: I was born in a little village -- little town by the name of Nisrege, which is a bit of a distance from Kowal. I was actually born in Kowal. Kowal was the big town and the hospital was there. Nisrege is a place that very few people have heard of except Hasidim because it was the home of a famous Hassidic old master by the name of Reb Mordechai of Mishizh.

Q: And the country?

A: Country was -- well, it was Poland when I was born there, it's western Ukraine. It is, of course, u -- part of Ukraine now. When I was born there in 1940 it was still part of Poland. At the end of the war it was occupied by the Russians and integrated into the Soviet Union.

Q: Mm-hm. Let's talk a little bit about the background of your family.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Your parents' names were?

A: My mother, Esther Galun, neé Elbert married my father, Yorel Galun. He was killed, I actually never knew him. He was taken away by the Nazis when I must have been maybe a year, a year and a half old. My mother survived the war and we both came to the United States, she passed away in the late 90's.

Q: Where was she from originally? Was she st -- also from that town?

A: She was from that same town, they were both from that same town.

Q: And do you know how far back her generations went, or not?

A: I haven't made up a family tree, it's something that I'm -- I've been talking about, in fact, with a cousin's daughter in Israel. But they went back for quite some time in that area. That was part of this -- the [indecipherable] of settlement in --

Q: And did she have brother and sisters?

A: She did. My mother had -- well, it men -- her family -- originally my grandmother had 10 children. Four survived. A son didn't survive childbirth. The four that survived together the war, two brothers and two sisters, my mother and her sister Rachel and her two brothers, Herschel Swi and Zelig. And we were together off and on during the war in the forests, and then after the war in DP camps.

Q: Let's talk about your f -- your father's family. I know you said you don't --

A: Right.

Q: -- really don't remember your father, but what do you know about his [indecipherable] and how long -- was he from that area also?

A: Yes, he was, and my father -- my paternal grandparents, Admonis and Rachel had three children. My father, Yorel, his little brother, Zisa, or Zisl, and his sister, Leia. My father and my mother's younger brother, who also was killed in -- in -- by the Nazis, her younger brother Ruvin, married each other's sisters. He -- he was best friends -- my father was best friends with Ruvin and he married my mother and -- and Ruvin married Leia. Sadly, when we ran away to the forests later on, and my father and Ruvin had already been taken away at that point, Leia refused to go. She had -- they had three children, three di -- girls, and they also perished.

Q: Do you know what your father did as a trade, or a --

A: They -- they were in the textile business and I can't tell you how sig -- my mother would as it was a significant business, I have no idea whether it was a dry goods shop, or you know, really something more significant, but they were in that business. They were fairly well-to-do in -- in that small town.

Q: Okay.

A: That's -- that's all I can tell you, yeah.

Q: Yeah, are you -- do you have any siblings from that marriage?

A: I have no si -- no siblings, I'm an only child.

Q: Uh-huh, okay.

A: I'm sure they would have had more children if -- if -- you know, they were quite young at the time. My mother and my father were in their early 20's. And -- and my mother incidentally came from a -- the poorer part of town, she was from the wrong side of the tracks, so my fu -- she married into -- somebody of more means than her, because my -- my mother, like I in some ways, I lost my father when I was one and a half, she lost her father when she was five. So may -

- my grandmother, after whom I'm named, Menachem Mendel, died when she was five. So they grew up and so my grandmother was left with all these children and they grew up in utter poverty.

Q: Do you know if your parents were religious?

A: They were traditional. They weren't the -- I mean --

Q: They were observant.

A: They were observant, yeah, they observed holidays. My -- my uncles and my grandmother, may she rest in peace, who also survived the war, my -- my maternal grandmother, Chava, you know, she was with us until '48, when they left for Israel. But she was quite a religious woman, as were my uncles, my mother's brothers. And my mother and her sister, maybe it was partly life in the United States, became, you know, less -- I mean, they were more secular as the years wore on.

Q: Mm-hm. Now, I know that your memory doesn't start for --

A: Right.

Q: -- for a few years.

A: Yeah.

Q: But can you just -- from -- from the time you were born til the time your first memory is, can you maybe just fill in that space a little bit for us to say what -- what you heard happened in that town. Your first memory was when? Let's -- let's start from there.

A: My first memory is actually I would say that e -- that the end of 1943, maybe the beginning of '44 --

Q: Oh, okay.

A: -- when we were liberated, because we were in the forests and the Russian army advance -- it could have been ’44, I may be -- it -- it -- it probably would have been ’44, passed the Russian army as it advanced westward --

Q: Okay.

A: -- would have passed that point -- at that point. So --

Q: So --

A: -- so we were --

Q: -- your family stayed in the town?

A: No, they didn’t stay in the town.

Q: Okay, what’d they do after then? That’s what I want to know --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- what happened with your family? Obviously you don’t remember.

A: Yeah -- no, I’ll -- I’ll -- I’ll -- I’ll try to fill that in.

Q: Between ’40 and ’44.

A: Right.

Q: Okay.

A: We lived in the town and in fact my mother said that we even had a German officer who was one of the nice ones at that time, quartered in our house, because what they used to do is to put the officers into people’s homes, very often. And she said he was quite sympathetic to the Jews, but was removed at some -- at some point. My father and my Uncle Ruvin, when -- when rumors started to come up that bad things -- that there was a threat -- rumors of threat were in the air, and my father and his -- and -- and my Uncle Ruvin actually started to moo -- to try to get into

Russia and then maybe bring the families with them. But a lot of Jews were going east to Russia, even though they knew it was no picnic and they'd wind up in Siberia very often. But for some reason they couldn't get in and they were turned back and they came back into town and then eventually, when the Germans began to round up all able-bodied men and take them away for labor, and we never heard from them again. And -- and my mother variously said -- I still don't know and I still want to do some research in the newly opened ar-archives in Germany that he -- they were killed in Chelmno in the extermination camp, or whatever. But meanwhile we were left behind in the town and when -- one day -- and I don't remember, I wish my mother were around now to fill in the gaps, we -- she got wind that there was going to be some action against the Jews. So my mother alerted her brothers and sisters -- and sister and -- and my grandmother, and we left and ran away to the woods surrounding that town. And we remained -- that was the beginning of our period in the forests of the Ukraine, which lasted for a bit over two years, living -- if you've seen the movie "Defiance", living in holes in the ground or in huts made out of branches, but also moving around. People think it was a stationary, you s -- you settled down in one place, no, you didn't settle down in one place, you moved to -- from dangerous places to safer places. And you're constantly -- were on the lookout. So going through that kind of, you know, typical stuff, looking for food from surrounding villages or peasants.

Q: Did your mother ever tell you who was in the group? Were there other children? Were you the only child?

A: Well initially we -- when we left it was just our family unit. It was my mother's two brothers and their families, my aunt, who was a single woman. My Aunt Rachel was single, and my --

Q: So you were not part of a partisan group or anything?

A: Not initially.

Q: Not initially.

A: But eventually what happened was we were in --

Q: Let's talk about initially first.

A: Well initially -- the first night I can tell you my mother claims th -- because she -- they ran away, she said she didn't even have time to take wa -- it was already tow -- it's towards fall, I believe, getting close to winter and she didn't take any clothing for me. So come nighttime, you know, I was crying and you know, and she was ready to go back and she started to go back and she met a peasant along the way who said, where you going? And she said, we're going back to Nisregin, he said, the town's been burnt down.

Q: Are we talking about fall of '41? Is that what you --

A: Probably, is my hunch. But I -- you know, I -- I --

Q: Yeah.

A: I'm not keen on the dates. In any case, when we -- when we ran -- so she turned back and we stayed in the forests, you know, and we continued in our wanderings, so we'd meet up with other groups, and what happened was that people find each other. So there was other stragglers, other civilians, Jews, but in our peregrinations we also wound up meeting with partisan groups eventually, sometimes hostile and sometimes friendly. Sometimes -- we didn't have Jewish partisan groups like you -- you had sometimes further north in Lithuania, per se, but we met up with a number of different non-Jewish partisan groups. And they weren't all friendly. And -- but I do begin to remember -- you know, it's hard to distinguish sometimes what you've dreamed and what stories you've integrated from other people. I do begin to remember the lib -- the

liberation, when the Russians came in and -- and -- and thereafter. I was very sick in the forest, and this I was told by my mother. I developed -- because I was an infant, I was what, less than two years old when the war -- and I developed diphtheria and I was close to death, I mean, I -- s -- you know, so my mother took me to a field hospital, miles away, where the Russians treated -- th-the partisans and the military had a field hospital and she wanted them to treat me and -- and the officer in charge says look at all the people, we have soldiers in there and I don't have time for -- for you. So she took me back and -- to our encampment and through some -- I forget what she told me, they -- in e -- in essence they gave me what would today be considered a vaporizer treatment and it seemed to work, some remedy that they found, and I survived.

Q: Are there any other -- I hate to used the word anecdotes, but stories that your mother told you about that time, before you remembered.

A: Y-Yeah, I mean, she would tell me about what it was like to go and search for food, for example, and how dangerous that was. And some of the people, because you would -- you would have to leave -- you were in the forest. The forest was both safety, but it was also deprivation. Safety in the sense that organized armies don't go into forests. Not out of fear, but you know, it's -- you -- you just don't. I mean, you don't bring in tanks and armor and what have you into forests. So you -- you -- so people can hide in a forest. On the other hand, you're deprived of food and y-you know, we weren't hunters, you know what I mean, it's not like -- yeah, I mean people ate -- you know, they ate berries or they ate mushrooms of they f -- whatever they found. But they would also go out, leave the forest and go to some peasants that they knew or some farmer, because the woods were still in the area and we wa -- we had not yet wandered far enough into it, so you were able to leave and go and get some food. But of course that

presupposed that the -- th-the peasant you were going to was not going to sell you out and was not going to inform the Germans that you were there. So it was fraught with danger and of course some of the people that they knew, other Jews, were killed on these missions. So she would tell me about these things.

Q: How would you describe your mother? She sounds like a very strong woman to have gone through this, and kept you alive.

A: She was -- I do [indecipherable] describe her, an-and the way I have described her is she was great in a crisis, but she was not so great in dealing with normal day to day life. And I really mean that. And there are certain people who, when they face a crisis can galvanize and mobilize all their -- you know, their -- their resources, psychological, physical etcetera and move into gear. And there are others who are paralyzed by it. And she was able to do that.

Q: Well, here she was a young woman in her 20's --

A: She was a young --

Q: -- with a baby.

A: That's right, a young woman with a baby. And it's something that -- it wasn't until I was much older that I was able to appreciate what it took.

Q: All right, now let's move up to your [indecipherable]

A: Yeah.

Q: -- and what -- what you said your first memory in [indecipherable] before --

A: My first memory was actually being liberated.

Q: Well, describe that, what your memory --

A: Oh, there's another anecdote, you asked for anecdotal information. I actually had my first

taste of alcohol when I was a child in the forest, because one of the groups, the -- this again my mother told me, not that I remember it, one of the partisan groups we met up with -- and -- and the relation with the partisan group, even if they were unfriendly, they were like protectors, you know, so you wanted -- civilians wanted to be near partisans. On the other hand, you were also -- sometimes feared them. This group was not well disposed to Jews apparently, but they took a liking to me because I was a cute -- according to my mother, a cute child. So they took me -- they would take me away. They would ad -- literally take me away from her and take me to their camp, a military camp and there taught me how to drink booze. So -- but my own memory that I can, you know, say this, I remember this, was actually riding out of the forest on an ox drawn cart heaped with whatever belongings people had. So when you see those films of refugees, you know, and in that's -- you know, I remember sitting on top of that cart and being afraid I'd fall down.

Q: Did you have any idea, being a toddler at the time, what was happening? Was it something good, was it something scary? You know, do you remember being scared or do you remember being excited?

A: No, probably scared.

Q: Yeah, because you were in the car --

A: I -- I would say that the -- the -- at that time, you know, there were, a little bit later -- because the war was still going on.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And we were, in our part of western Ukraine, because don't forget, the -- the geography is -- I mean, not --

[interruption] Excuse me, does anybody want tea or anything? No?

A: Anyway, when we were liberated, this was only the beginning of the westward march in a sense, not -- not quite the beginning, but it -- I would say the -- the war still had a long ways to go. But our area was clear, but it doesn't mean the war stopped, we still experienced air -- air raids, for example, constantly the Germans would come over and bomb, and I remember those.

Q: What were they like?

A: So we -- we were --

Q: Can you describe --

A: When we were liberated -- yeah, I can -- I -- I can describe it. I remember running with my mother into -- we think of air raid shelters as being something under a building and you know, room, and you sit there and -- you know. Poor lighting maybe, but you -- you know, you're comfortable inside some place. The air raid shelters very often that the Russians or Ukrainians had were simply ditches dug around the perimeter of the town or sometimes in the town, but sometimes on the outskirts of the town, because they knew they would bomb in the town. So they would dig a ditch -- ditches on the outskirts of the town and when the bomb -- when the sky was lit up by these lights, the planes would come over and the search lights would go up, you know, to look for the planes and stuff, you would be running, the civilians would be running to the outskirts of town to these ditches and would, you know, jump in them and you'd sit there, you know, hoping they wouldn't have a stray bomb hit you on the head, and seeing these planes, you got, you know, all the stuff going on around you. So I do remember that.

Q: You have memories.

A: Yeah, I have memories of that. When we were liberated we moved to a town by the name of -

- this I remember, is Rafalovka.

Q: What langu -- by the way, what language were you speaking to your mother?

A: Well, my native tongue is Yiddish.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: My -- I mean, had I grown up in normal circumstances I would have also spoken Ukrainian or Russian or whatever. I did speak Russian when I was a child.

Q: But at that time did you understand Russian -- at the -- before --

A: When I wa -- we were liberated --

Q: You -- you -- you --

A: -- an-and we lived -- and we moved back into town, I learned Russian.

Q: Okay, but up to that point you only knew Yiddish

A: Basically --

Q: Up to the lib -- liberate --

A: -- basically, because in -- in the house -- in the home we -- we spoke Yiddish.

Q: Yeah, yeah. But I meant when you were in the forest and -- and of course you were -- were too young.

A: Well, I probably learned some Russian too --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- but -- but it wasn't like going to school --

Q: But you didn't [indecipherable]

A: -- I wasn't old enough to go to school, so I would -- obviously I had to communicate with the Russian partisans and stuff to the extent that I could. So I did speak Russian, I can -- yeah.

Q: Where did your mother get clothes for you di -- while you were still a two year old, three year old, four year old?

A: Well, whatever I had, I had, I mean I have no idea where she got additional stuff. They could have sewn things, or you know, or gotten them from, you know, surrounding connections, I don't know.

Q: So you said now you're -- you're [indecipherable]

A: Yeah, so we're in a town Rafalovka, th-that -- when we were liberated, and we had -- I remember this -- that we had -- we lived -- again, it was my -- my mother, my aunt, my grandmother, Chava, my uncle at that point, one of my uncles, Herschel was taken away to the coal mines in the Doniets basin, Donbass, which is one of the world's big coal mines -- coal mi- mining areas. So he was taken away with his family. My other uncle, Zelig was drafted, so after spending two and a half years in the forests, he's drafted int-into the Russian army. We stayed in Rafalovka with -- and we had a cow. I remember that we had a cow for milk.

Q: Where did you live in the town?

A: You know, I don't remember. Probably in some bombed out building, I don't remember that.

Q: Okay.

A: And then we moved from Rafalovka -- we -- we stayed there for maybe a couple of months, three months, I'm not sure. But then we moved to Kowal, which is the town I was born in. And they're all in the same area, basi -- I think Rafalovka is north of Kowal, northeast. And we moved to Kowal and we moved into a -- what people did was to move -- find the housing that was not totally shattered. So even if a house had been damaged by bombing raids, but it was in reasonably good shape, you moved in. You fixed it up and you lived .And that's what we did.

And we -- again, we lived as a -- as a family unit. And -- which included my mother, her sister Rachel, my grandmother. My Uncle Zelig had been taken away but his wife, my Aunt Sosil remained with us, and he had two sons, Aaron and Menachem and they stayed with us. And they were like older brothers to me, they're -- they -- I was five, four or five and they were six, seven years older than I, maybe eight years.

Q: Do -- do you remember seeing other little children your age?

A: That's interesting. I wasn't old enough to go to school. I don't really, not at that point remember other little children. It's -- it's interesting, I do later. But I do remember my -- my cousin Aaron, may he rest in peace, who was like an older brother to me, and I going to the train station -- and people had to make a living you know, we -- the war was going on. So one of the things that I know they did is the women started to bake bread. And they would bake bread and give it to me and to Aaron and we'd take it down to the train station and try to sell it.

Q: Sell it.

A: Sell it to soldiers, sell it to whoever was willing to buy it. I remember that. I remember long, mile long marches of Russian troops coming through from the east and going to the front.

Q: As a little boy --

A: Yeah?

Q: -- what did that mean to you? Did you want to be a soldier? Was it scary, or was it wonderful [indecipherable]

A: The Russians at that time were my heroes. And one had a very -- it's -- it's -- it's hard today and -- and -- and you know, knowing with hindsight. W-We -- we were liberated by the Russians. We knew their shortcomings and the shortcomings of the system they were trying to

impose. But they were also our liberators and our heroes. And yeah, I admired them. And in fact, I remember in Kowal, because my mother also -- at some point they started to sell vodka. How they s -- made vodka, I have no idea, but somebody got -- knew how to do it and they -- and it was a barter economy at the end of the war. So people with -- salt was, for example was -- was a commodity that was amazingly expensive to get. And you need salt. I mean, you can't do without salt. So people would trade vodka for salt. And I remember one of the Russian soldiers who came in, and I wish I could remember his name, but he was a tailor and I wanted a uniform. You're talking about how I felt about the Russians and -- and he made me a uniform. The only thing I remember he -- I even had epaulets on me so I could look like a Russian soldier. The only thing I couldn't get was the red star that they wore, and that was my big disappointment. But that's the way, you know, i-it -- it was, life was ironic that way, I mean --

Q: Do you know, going back --

A: Yeah?

Q: -- some years earlier, if your parents were members of the communist party?

A: No, not at all. My father was very active in Betar, so he was a -- he was a right winger. They used to call -- call us because I joined Betar in DP camp when I was a -- a -- six, and they used to call us the Jewish fascists. But no, we -- we didn't have any -- any communists in -- in the family.

Q: So he was a Zionist

A: He was a Zionist, oh yeah, absolute. Ardent, ardent Zionist.

Q: -- your mother was

A: Ardent Zionist. And my mother was too.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: My mother was too, and ma -- in -- and the rest of the family, I'd say those that were politically conscious at all were more left wing Zionists. They wound up in Israel and today they're more right wing than I am, so --

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Melvin Galun. This is tape number one, side B. And you were talking about how you ha -- your -- your -- your parents were Zionists, but you know --

A: Right. Yeah. Well, my father --

Q: Anything else?

A: Yes, my father was very active and there is no doubt in my mind that Israel could have been a destination had he survived the war, for us. I know that I wanted to go to Israel. When I wound up -- when my mother decided to come to the United States, for me, I had a deep sense of disappointment.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Okay, that's -- we're back in Kowal you said, and you -- you --

A: Yeah, well from gur --

Q: A soldier made you the --

A: He made me a uniform.

Q: -- uniform, minus the star.

A: I remember my fa -- I admired the soldiers. I remember the first one of them demonstrated me one evening how to fire a rifle, and of course f-for a little kid that's -- I mean, I didn't fire it, I

couldn't even hold it, it was -- but -- and I learned to sing Russian songs, some of which I can still remember. A couple.

Q: Can you sing -- can you sing a line or two?

A: Huh?

Q: Can you sing a line or two?

A: Oh, I ra -- I would -- yes, I can.

Q: Yeah, do it, do it.

A: I can in a good -- no, but I'd ra -- rather not, thank you.

Q: Okay, okay. Did you -- do you know if there were any incidents of anti-Semitism between the Russians and the Jews at that time? Or did you exper -- did anybody say anything to you --

A: We experienced it later, a little bit later --

Q: But at this point --

A: -- down the road. Not at this point, although we did know the misgivings. We had a neighbor that the -- the Russians themselves, non-Jewish Russians had about the system. We had neighbors -- the-they were -- admired the United States greatly. We had a neighbor who was a prosecutor, they call them procurator in the -- in the system. But they were quietly critical of the system they had and that that was our first ec -- exposure that maybe things were -- you know, I was -- little kids are not politically sophisticated. But we left Kowal I would say -- I'm trying to sort -- I would say probably in '44 - '45, we left Kowal. We stayed there for awhile. We moved on to Chelm, which is connected to Kowal actually by railroad, it's -- they're both railroad junctions. So Kowal -- Chelm is further west. And Chelm is already Poland proper.

Q: Poland. What was that journey like? Do you have any [indecipherable]

A: I don't --

Q: -- you don't remember.

A: -- I don't really remember, but I remember living in Chelm, you know, I remember living in Chelm in a also semi-bombed out building. I remember -- one of the childhood memories I had was the -- one stairway didn't have a railing and walking up was always scary to me. I said, what if I fall off, you know.

Q: Why did your mother move to Chelm? Why did she choose that?

A: I can't really say, but the urge to move west was there, somehow, I -- unspoken, I don't know, I -- I never asked her. People also -- one of the things people don't understand is there was no home to go -- left to go to. So you kind of -- you'd go elsewhere, you know what I mean, but going deeper into Russia was not something that they would have found attractive. So you went west. I mean, you -- you -- going back to our town was not an option, and with that -- that was the case for many Jews, most Jews I would say.

Q: Do you have a sense of your mother's frame of mind that time? Was she full of tension, or -- she was your mother and you were a small child. Did you have an -- a sense as a child that she was tightly wound going through all these very challenging --

A: Well, I'm sure she was --

Q: I'm sure she was --

A: -- but she was --

Q: -- no, I meant on the outside [indecipherable]

A: -- no, no, no, I'm sure she was. She -- she was -- she was -- yeah, she was a nervous woman, but she was also an enterprising one. And even there when we moved to Poland -- I mean, don't

forget, Poland was no long -- Poland was now occupied by the Russians.

Q: Right.

A: We were Polish citizens. I mean my -- that little card I showed you says place of birth, Poland. So I -- we were not stateless in that sense, we were Polish citizens, because western Ukraine where I was born was Poland when I was born there. But you asked about anti-Semitism or do I -- in Chelm -- in Chelm we did experience anti-Semitism, and I -- and I remember it. I remember it as in --

Q: Can you describe some of those --

A: -- as a little incident with a dog being sicced on me by -- by Polish children and I --

Q: And how did you handle that?

A: Probably I me -- I don't remember, but I probably ran home crying to my mother. But we also remember a small pogrom that took place.

Q: In Chelm?

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q: Well, you -- how man --

A: I mean those were -- they were always -- there were beginning to be incidents of anti-Semitic nature almost immediately in the wake of -- in the wake of the liberation.

Q: Did -- did -- did you experience that pogrom at all? Do yo -- do you have memories --

A: Not personally --

Q: Okay.

A: -- I mean, I don't ha --

Q: Not personally.

A: -- no, I don't -- I don't have any memory of it. But I -- I remember hearing talk --

Q: Hearing about --

A: -- about it, yeah, I remember hearing talk about it. I wasn't -- you know.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And we also lived, but this one I can't place, we -- we moved from Chelm to Lódz, which is another big Polish [indecipherable]

Q: How long were you in Chelm?

A: A few months. Maybe six months.

Q: A few months, oh, okay. And then to Lódz?

A: Then to Lódz. One of the things that happened and I -- I should interject that I forgot to, is my -- is son -- th -- my uncles -- my uncle who had been sent to the coal mines, Herschel and with his family, and my Uncle Zelig, who went to the army, we were all reunited. How Herschel got out of the coal mines I don't remember, but he came back with great stories. One ince -- well, my Uncle Zelig I remember c -- his army unit was passing through Kowal and he said, I want to visit my family. And they said okay, you have an hour or whatever, and he came back and -- to visit his family. And we said, you're not going back to the army. And that same night we left and we crossed over into Poland.

Q: Oh my [indecipherable]

A: Of course he would have been shot had he been -- you know, the Russians realized it. So he essentially deserted the -- the Russian army. But one of the incidents that I didn't tell you, and -- and that is significant, when I -- many, many years later when I went to Israel, because after the war the family split and two brothers went to Israel, two sisters to America. My Uncle Herschel

would tell me this story, that when we were in the woods, there was one night early on when it was cold and I -- I was crying. And my Uncle Zelig was -- got panicky that my crying would attract attention from the Germans, and he -- according to Herschel, started to strangle me, and -- until they were able to overcome him and stop him. He always told that story -- I mean, I loved both my uncles dearly. They were very -- two different characters and he would -- so I never -- you know, I never knew whether he told the story to provoke him or to -- you know, but that's what it was like. So -- so, anyway, to come back, we wen -- we then --

Q: To Lódz?

A: -- Lódz and then we --

Q: How long were you in Lódz?

A: I -- you know, I don't remember. I -- I would say by the beginning of, or middle of -- trying to remember -- '45 - '46. Again, we didn't spend more time than a few months, maybe half a year in each town.

Q: In each town, yeah.

A: And then we moved to -- to Germany.

Q: So up til that time you don't remember really playing with other little boys your age, or anything like that? You didn't have a childhood, an early childhood?

A: I remember -- no, I don't really. I mean, I di -- I'll tell you someth -- I remember some of the Polish kids, but I remember not being -- being wary of them. I remember --

Q: Even at the age of five you had that knowledge.

A: Oh yeah. Oh yes, oh yes.

Q: These children were different than you.

A: That's right.

Q: Could you understand Polish?

A: Polish was actually something I never learned.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I -- I spoke Russian, but I didn't speak Polish. I don't remember anyway. My mother did, my mother spoke Polish and Ukrainian and Russian and all that. I -- one of my early memories when we were liberated was going to synagogue with my Uncle Zelig, the one who allegedly tried to choke me. And was a very -- it's a wonderful memory which I stored away. I mean simply -- I remember it was a beautiful, sunny day and was kind of a sense in wa -- it was a Sabbath. It was a very peaceful kind of experience.

Q: Can you describe any more, or --

A: No, I mean that's -- I mean --

Q: Where -- where -- where was this at the time?

A: Thi-This was in Poland.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: This was in Poland and it's the first experience I remember having in a synagogue, other than in Kowal, when we went back to Kowal, I'm trying to remember if I visited th -- the synagogue there with writing -- because the Germans often used the synagogues as round-up places and -- and there'd be writing on the wall from the -- but then we wound up, after Lódz we wound up in East Berlin, my mother and I, and --

Q: How did you get there, by train?

A: We -- we crossed borders illegally.

Q: How did you do that?

A: On trucks, backs of trucks, or wa -- you know, people or -- ther-there was an organized -- I can't say Israeli, but it was like -- there was something called the Bricha, which got a lot of Jews like us out of eastern Europe, you know, to points west or points south. Sometimes people wound up in Italy, too. We wound up in East Berlin, my mother and I in a bombed out building in East Berlin, my uncles in different zones, I'm trying to remember where they were. But they were not in the communist -- they were not in the Russian zone. They got into the American zone, I think one may have been in the British zone.

Q: And you and your --

A: There were four zones --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- i-in -- in Berlin.

Q: Wi -- and you are in the --

A: We were in the Russian zone.

Q: Russian zone.

A: And of course this was in the early days and right after the war, 40 -- middle of 1945 and so things were still a sense of -- I mean, it's like if you look at films, American films from that time, they speak about Uncle Joe and that everything was friendly and these were our allies and blah, blah, blah. But of course shortly thereafter the Iron Curtain came down in '46.

Q: You're talking about Uncle Joe Stalin?

A: Yeah, oh yeah, absolutely. And so there was a different spirit that existed then. And so we were in the Russian zone, but then at some point people said well, you know, things are

becoming a little more strained in terms of relations. Maybe we better get out of here, because the restrictions will be imposed. Because before that you were able to get on a train and -- and there was no wall, of course, there. The wall was built much later, the Berlin wall. But you were able to get on a subway and go from one point of the city to another, no problem. So the fact that you -- somebody lived in the French zone, or the British zone, or the American zone, didn't matter, you could come and visit them. But we got out of the Russian zone and came to the American zone and sort of towards the end of '45, maybe beginning of '46. And we wound up in Munich and then in one of the first of five different DP camps, displaced persons camps.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: One of the e -- es -- asides I want to say, one of the things that always fascinated me is in the forest my grandmother was with us, but she was a kosher and a very observant woman, is how she survived the war never eating anything un-kosher just amazed me. I have no idea how she --

Q: [indecipherable] a vegetarian.

A: Yeah, probably.

Q: Did y -- did you grandmother ever talk about Shabbat or any of the holidays while you were -- in those years in --

A: Yeah, later, yeah. She -- she was --

Q: Or your mother, did your mother talk about holidays while you were --

A: Yeah, I mean we --

Q: -- running for your lives?

A: But I don't remember, you know, how we observed them --

Q: In -- yeah.

A: -- in -- in -- in the very early days. Later on I do, I mean, when we got to Germany and we got to the first DP camp, which was Poking, P-o-k-i-n-g. That's the one, the picture I showed you before.

Q: Right.

A: We standed -- and we lived in barracks essentially. These wer -- these were long rows and barracks just like you see in stalag --

Q: How did your family know to go to that particular one?

A: Well, I think by that point when we got to Munich, we probably got in contact with the Jewish community and -- and some of the relief organizations, because what was set up at that time, it may have be -- been the be -- it was the very beginning of the United Nations. And so they had an organization even before the United Nations, the relief works association, whatever they called it, they had something called the IRO, the International Relief Organization. And so we -- we would have contacted them. My mother certainly would have. She was -- I told you she was enterprising. Even in Poland, I mean, she started to do a little bit of -- of you know, handling and -- and -- and you know, moving around in -- to make a living, scrounge up a living. So she would go on trips to various places and so when we got to Germany, she would -- we would have -- you know, by '46 we would have been in touch with the Jewish community, or the -- some of the relief organizations and we wound up -- how the decision was made to go to Poking, I mean, it probably wasn't our decision, they just sent you there.

Q: Was this, for a six year old child a fearful time? Do you have memories --

A: I-It was a -- a time I -- I will descri -- well, let me -- let me -- I -- y-y -- I was interviewed a number of years ago. Somewhere if I find it I'll send it to you, but -- an article in the Washington

Post, somebody wanted to know why I was a Zionist. And the woman who was conducting the interview, and I said, well, I can give you a sh -- very short answer, or I can give you the long answer. She said no, I want the long answer. So I told her about -- a bit about my background, this. And I tried to describe the feeling of what it meant for Israel, because I was in DP camp when Israel was established. The world was very gray, very threatening, s-still -- still threatening in some ways. You felt defeated in spirit. Not just personally, but also as part of a people. You didn't even -- you know, I -- I know I sensed that. In other words, if you were a Jew, how could you not feel defeated? But also, of course, if you're a child who has lost the parent and who has lost -- you know. So you feel -- you feel a s -- a sense of anguish about ya -- everything. So, when Israel was established it was just the opposite. It was sunshine, it was freedom, it was strength. So suddenly people who are ex -- terribly weak and have been beaten by everybody are suddenly on the ascent. So that early time was definitely a period of grayness and -- and no question. And just like our barracks, I mean, if you look at them, they were just these dingy, gray on the outside barracks, in which each family got a room, essentially. My grandmother, my mother, my aunt and I shared one large room, and we put up a curtain across, you know, a blanket or something.

Q: What did you do during the day?

A: Well, I'm --

Q: We're talking about the first camp.

A: First camp I actually start school.

Q: You did.

A: I'm six years old, I start school and I remember that. But my grandmother -- and I told you,

my grandmother was -- was Orthodox, observant woman, and she was in [indecipherable] the school was conducted in Hebrew, everything in Hebrew, because even though it was 1946, they had to choose a language that would suit everybody, so they said Hebrew. And all the subjects we're talking here [indecipherable] it wasn't taught as a language. It meant my math books were in Hebrew, my geography, history books, blah, blah, blah. But my grandmother said well, but what about Yiddishkeit? She understood that there's a distinction between learning secular subjects in Hebrew and so she also put me in something called a chayder, and I wound up going to a chayder from Lubovich. I -- first they put me in with satmar, we had a very large contingent of satmar in the camp. But I didn't like satmar for lots of reasons including the fact that they're anti-Zionist and so I wound up going to Lubovich, and you know, learning Hebrew the way it's pronounced in Israel in the morning, daytime, and learning it differently pronounced in the afternoon. So I was getting two different points of view of Jewish history and pers -- my perspective was totally schizophrenic.

Q: So you spent the days going to school and to chayder.

A: Going to school in the afternoons, I wa --

Q: And now you're with other children.

A: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Q: And what was that like for you for the -- in a sense for the first time?

A: It was fun, I mean I -- I just --

Q: Did you know how to talk to them, did you -- cause you had been in a world of adults.

A: I had been in a world of adults.

Q: Up to that time.

A: Yes --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- absolutely.

Q: But it was easy to --

A: Yeah, I still remember some of my childhood friends, very much so. And I -- and I remember some of the adventures we had.

Q: Such as?

A: Oh, we g-going to the surrounding farms, there were German farms that surrounded us, stealing vegetables and -- from their fields. Walking to the outskirts of the camp, where there were craters from bombs that unexpl -- finding unexploded bombs, or going to -- I remember there was -- there were like warehouses, huge warehouses on the outskirts which had been bombed out, it was dangerous to even walk in there. And we'd go, you know, kids are like that. You know, walking around and of course when my mother would find out she'd be very upset and very angry. Walking around, finding all sorts of stuff at th-the -- this is what wartime is, nan -- and aftermath of a war is like, I mean you find stuff. You find unexploded shells, you find goodness knows, you know. But we were in a camp of our own, we were not in touch. The adults were, some of the adults. My mother learned German. But I had no contact with, let's say, German kids. You lived in Germany, but this camp was a community unto itself.

Q: Mm-hm. Did the other Jewish children -- a-again, you were young --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- talk about what -- what was happening, were they -- or what had happened to them during the war, or -- was that a topic of discussion or you were just playing games and going to school?

A: They probably did, but I don't remember it --

Q: You were still very young, you were very young.

A: -- and I -- maybe we didn't -- didn't focus on that.

Q: Yeah.

A: You know what I mean, I -- I had --

Q: Did you have a ball to play with, or --

A: Yeah, we --

Q: [indecipherable] games?

A: -- yes, we -- we had a soccer field, I remember people started, we -- we'd go there, we started to -- trying to re -- we -- we got -- started to get stuff from the States, I mean, packages from -- with crayons and pencils and coloring books and things like that.

Q: And the food was -- was substantive?

A: You had communal --

Q: Dining room?

A: Yeah, communal -- I th -- I -- I think so. I think so. Except for the Shabbas meal. I think I ate my Sabbath meals at my uncle's, cause they lived across the hall in the same building and the Sabbath was always spent eating at their table.

Q: Mm-hm. With blessings and things like that?

A: Yes, yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I also remember going to a summer camp.

Q: While you were still in this first --

A: In this first camp, I -- my cousin Aaron, may God rest his soul, took me -- he and I went together, he was in the older unit, but he took good care of me. I don't remember that. In a

different mo -- ba -- in a different camp in Germany, which was sort of nicer than ours was.

Q: Mm-hm. You didn't mind leaving your mother at such a young age? Here you had been so close with her all during the terrible times?

A: I probably did mind, but you know, it was a necessary experience for me. Yeah.

Q: And how long -- so how long did you stay in -- in that first camp?

A: First camp we stayed until 1948. Early ’48, maybe like -- yeah, early ’48. My -- my --

Q: So that’s the camp you were in when the state of Israel --

A: No. I-Israel was born in May ’48 --

Q: Spring -- May ’48, okay.

A: -- and we moved --

Q: You moved before May?

A: We moved before that.

Q: Oh, okay. Mm-hm.

A: I can’t remember was -- what happened in ’48 was also important. My two cousins, the ones I was telling you about, Aaron and Menachem, my like two older brothers -- because I didn’t have any siblings, my -- my Uncle Herschel had two daughters and my Uncle Zelig had two sons. My -- my older cousin Menachem just passed away this year, so [indecipherable] he was a source of -- he was like a brother. They want -- they wanted to get into Israel. And we all joined Zionist youth movements in the camps because --

Q: In the camps.

A: Yeah, i-in -- in -- in Poking. So I joined the right wing movement, I joined Betar, they joined left wing movements. And they wanted to go and get into what was at that time still Palestine

illegally, and they wound up getting turned back. But they didn't get sent to Cyprus, they wound up on the French Riviera, which was one of the -- we used to crack up about that. And they wound up in Nice, but then they said we still -- we're going back and they eventually got in and fought in the War of Independence. So their parents, of course, said we're not going to leave them in Israel alone, we're going after them. So they left. And then my other brother als -- mother's other brother, my other uncle, also went to Israel. So they wound up in Israel and we wound up, you know, coming here eventually. But it wa -- so they left from Poking. We then went to another camp, the second camp, Heidenheim. And in Heidenheim --

Q: Why did you change camps?

A: We were not asked, we were -- they were -- they sent us there. They sometime disbanded camps. I don't remember what happened with Poking exactly. It -- it may have been, but sometimes they said this camp is at an end, you gotta go elsewhere. Or someth -- you know, I really don't recall what the reason was. We went to Heidenheim where we had -- which was a much nicer in terms of the living arrangements, cause we were in a -- I remember it being a house. Now whether we had one apartment in the house, which is probably likely, and we had a garden in the back. Even in Poking in the -- in the barracks, I remember we s -- the people started to raise chickens and I had my own little garden that I planted. I ra -- my interest -- I have an interest in gardening, it goes back to then. My Uncle Zelig and I raised pigeons together, except I saw them as pets and he saw them as, you know, a food source. But when we moved to Heidenheim is when, in the school, th -- I was in the choir and they taught us songs. I still have the songbook, which was written out by hand, to sing on the occasion of Israel's establishment.

Q: You gotta sing one or two sentences of a song. Can you sing one or two sentences?

A: Oh God, yeah, I ju -- I -- I -- I remember those songs, yeah.

Q: Just one. Can you do one line, or two?

A: Sure.

Q: Okay.

A: [sings] That's it.

Q: One more line. One -- one more line. One more line.

A: Anyway. I mean I -- I have -- I have -- I have my report cards from those schools.

Q: Uh-huh. So you stayed in a second camp?

A: We stayed in the second camp for I -- you know, I can't remember exactly how long. This was '48? I would say probably til the beginning of '49, maybe. And then we moved to a third camp --

Q: Okay.

A: -- called Wasseralfingen.

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Melvin Gal-Galun. This is tape number two, side A, and we were talking about your life in the DP camp. Were there newspapers or publications?

A: Yeah, there were publications, there were newspapers, and --

Q: Such as?

A: -- and there was radio. I mean, I'd -- we listened to the radio to get the news. I was always interested in -- in news, of course, especially from news about the Jewish community and Palestine, the nascent state of Israel. We all joined Zionist youth movements. What happened was that emissaries came from Palestine, Israel. In those days a Palestinian referred to a Jew, you knew -- you knew the other residents of that area as Arabs, they were not called Palestinians. So emissaries came over to organize the kids into sports clubs, youth groups, etcetera. Some of them were -- had specific ideologies. So the s -- so you had labor Zionists, you had religious Zionists, and you had -- you know, the -- the one I joined, which was Betar, which was considered right wing Zionists, or nationalists. But I was very much aware of the news in pre-state Israel, no ca -- and -- and -- and you know, pre-state Palestine when the Haganah and the Irgun were fighting the British, for example. So the Haganah at that time had a policy called Havlagah, restraint. Irgun was not, the Irgun believed in hitting back, which some considered to be too provocative and that -- you know. I actually used to cheer for -- for Irgun, you know, as the -- you know, other Jews, different places, but that depended on your own outlook and your own -- your own experience. But I was very much aware of what was -- what was going on, as were the other kids, I think. Yeah.

Q: Mm-hm. I know you said you were at the next camp at the time of the establishment of the state of Israel --

A: Th-The [indecipherable] yeah.

Q: But preceding that, had you heard of a man named Hitler? Did that name mean anything to you?

A: Oh of course, of course.

Q: What -- what --

A: Of course.

Q: -- again as a six year old, what is a six year old's perception, seven year old's perception of some --

A: Well, I mean I -- I think --

Q: Or did you know what had happened the pri -- I mean, did your mother tell you what had happened, or wa -- what does a mother tell a six year old child about the terrible things that happened?

A: Well, I mean, I -- I think you certainly knew who Hitler was. I mean, that -- not -- not just knew, but you knew that i -- I had a sense of the --

Q: In other words, I'm trying to get a six year old's perception.

A: Right, no, I -- I understand and I can -- I can relate to that more easily on the positive side. I know that the Russians were my heroes because they liberated us.

Q: Right.

A: The Americans were heroes, but the Americans were also sometimes seen as not being tough enough on the Germans, an -- oddly. So the stuff, if you read history now, that -- you know, th-

the Russians did some terrible, brutal things when they went west and we all -- we know that. I just got finished reading a book not long ago about the -- you know, the battle of -- of Berlin. And so they did some awful things. But don't forget, if you're a victim of Nazism, you want revenge. So war means some terrible things are done on all sides, so you mean as a child I certainly was aware of Hitler as the -- you know, the ultimate evil to beset the Jewish people, but I was also aware, from what my mother told me about, that he was only the latest and greatest if you will, in a long line of people as -- as the Hagadah says, in every generation somebody rises against us to destroy us. So I was aware of that. I was also -- there was something else that -- that maybe my -- when you don't know who your father is or was, you can grow up with -- you hear stories. And my mother helped in some ways to give me this mythic vision of my father. What kind of man he was or would have been, I have no idea. I can speculate about it because I knew some -- you know. And -- and -- and -- and -- and on my father's side, I mean sadly, of the family there was almost nobody left that I could even say, well he would have been like this, or like this guy, or somebody else. My father's side there were only two relatives left that I met. One in the United States, the one who actually brought us over, who was his -- his -- my father's uncle, my great uncle and his sister in Brazil. I never even knew what my father looked like until my aunt -- great aunt in Brazil sent us a photo. So yeah, I mean, you grow up with a child's perception of all these -- these things, but -- but I think was also fairly grounded in reality.

Q: Well now we're in your second camp, [indecipherable] the state of Israel has been formed. Were there specific celebrations at the time when you heard?

A: Oh sure.

Q: What did -- what --

A: I mean we had -- they had celebrations throughout, it's not like -- the ki -- the camps --

Q: It wasn't a specific --

A: -- the camps, it -- the camps developed, and this is the -- the -- the -- the beauty about the Jewish people is the ability to bounce back from utter despair and -- and grief is -- is amazing, because di -- don't forget -- I mean, I was in the first camp a year or half a year after the end of the war.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And people started writing newspapers, and people published newspapers, people started schools again and people -- so there's a whole -- they started an institutional framework. My aunt -- my Aunt R-Rachel was married in the camp, I remember that wedding, I remember going there. I mean, I ca -- you know, we had meetings, we had political groups. So life swung back into action. I don't remember specifically -- I do remember singing in the choir and how exciting it was when Israel was born. But I don't remember any other -- yeah.

Q: Yeah. And anything else about that second camp you want to describe?

A: I remember just -- I -- I remember in the second camp we already would go into the town, because th-this camp, unlike the other one, which was kind of a circumscribed area was closer to the town, you could actually walk out -- it was actually part of the town but sort of on the outskirts. And -- and I reme-member feeling a sense of jealousy. Yo-You know, the Germans were not back yet, but somehow this was their country and --

Q: Jealousy on whose part, on your --

A: On my part. On my -- that -- that this was their turf, this was, you know --

Q: That you really didn't belong there, is that what you're saying?

A: Yeah, yeah. And it was a beautiful place. I mean, the outskirts I remember really liking. We went -- I remember going with my mother and some of her friends, because she had some friends, she had -- you know, she was socializing. She met my stepfather, whom she would later marry in the United States, actually in the first camp. He was the movie projectionist, we had a movie the -- set up in the barracks. Which was a whole other story, that's an experience I remember. But we -- we -- the second camp was -- was -- oh, we would go on trips to some -- th- this was part of Bavaria, the camps were in Bavaria, which was beautiful. And parts of Bavaria was like being in the Swiss Alps. So we -- I remember one place we went to called Ludwigsburg, named after German King Ludwig. And it was gorgeous, you know. So -- but I knew that wasn't us, you know what I mean, I knew it wasn't ours in the -- in the -- I thought I -- I -- I lost my train of thought, yeah.

Q: Let's jump back, you said your mother met your stepfather.

A: Yeah, in -- in -- what happened in the -- I -- I said that li-life sprang back, you know, in terms of institutions. We had a movie theater in camp.

Q: First camp.

A: In the first camp. I'm sure we did in the other too, but I don't remember it. And was -- it was set up in a -- in large barracks again, and my stepfather Saul -- Shaul, whom she wound up marrying when she got to the States was the projectionist. And he was a jack of all trades, he was a very talented electrician and he could make things. So he made me -- he took a cigar box, I remember this, and sh -- he made me my own little slide projector with a cigar box so that I could take bits of film that they snip off from a movie trailer or something and show it like -- pu- push the film through the opening and it -- he'd project it on the wall. He used to have me -- let

me sit in the back, you know, where they sit, the projectionist sits. So they made up, he lost his entire family in the war. He had been newlywed when the war broke out. Lost his wife, lost his parents, his brothers. And he came from White Russia. And --

Q: His -- his full name?

A: Shaul -- Saul Pikus. P-i-k-u-s, that was my mother's second name. And his father was a school -- headmaster of a -- of the school and h-he -- he had nobody left.

Q: Mm. Now, you are -- y-you had gone -- y-you had been in two camps.

A: Right.

Q: And then?

A: And then we wound up going to a third camp called Wasseralfingen. I don't remember much about that camp except having a crush on an older girl. Oh, and the family split. My aunt, who had gotten married -- I told you my Aunt Rachel married and from Heidenheim they were sent to -- and she had a -- a kid, my cousin Susan was born in camp also. She was -- I -- I loved Susie. Oh, she was -- she's seven years younger than I am, so she was like -- and -- and they left to another camp, we split, and we went to Wasseralfingen. And in that camp I remember there was a girl whose name I no longer remember. But I would have been nine and she was probably 11 or 12 or something. I remember having a giant crush on her, but other than that I don't remember anything. And of course continued going to school there, same kind of thing. And the -- and the foundation, I speak some Hebrew now, a bit. Enough to kind of get around Israel. But the foundation for it was really based on those schools, the first three years of my schooling was in these camps.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: And then from there -- all these camps were -- Heidenheim and -- and Wasseralfingen were both shorter term camps, like six, seven months. Poking was three years, ’46 - ’47 - ’48. And then we went to a place called -- now it escapes me. There was -- there was a final destination.

Q: Another -- another camp?

A: Another camp before, but that was for a short period before we went to -- to -- to port, to Bremerhaven -- Bremenhaven to come to America.

Q: So that’s when your mother decided to --

A: My mother decided that -- you know --

Q: Not to go to Israel.

A: Not to go to Israel. She felt that as a widow with a child that Israel was a nice new state, but as such she --

Q: Too hard.

A: -- she would have to face greater hardship there. So we had -- my -- my father had an uncle here and he signed an affidavit to sponsor us. We were able to accelerate the process and --

Q: What did the new -- the United States mean to a nine year old? Were you looking forward to going?

A: No, I told you, I had my heart set on going to Israel.

Q: Right. But once --

A: So in some ways it was disappointing. It was daunting. It was certainly daunting, I mean wa -- but I remember the ship, I remember coming over, I remember the ship, the u --

Q: What was it?

A: -- the USS General McCray. It was an army transport and we took -- we arrived -- next

Thanksgiving is 60 years since I arrived. We arrived on Thanksgiving day, they didn't even let us disembark until the following day cause it was a holiday.

Q: Now this is nine --

A: 1949.

Q: -- nine.

A: And so --

Q: How -- how long a voyage was it?

A: 10 days, a week? I'm not sure. Not sure.

Q: And you pulled into New York?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did that -- did you see the Statue of Liberty?

A: We saw the Statue of Liberty, we came in -- I can't remember if it was at night with all the lights. I had never been in that big a city, you know, with --

Q: You were coming into New York harbor?

A: Right. I remember being met by our American relatives and being taken to -- guess they lived in Burrough Park in Brooklyn.

Q: You did not know English, of course.

A: I did not speak a word of English. And the first memory, I walked into the place, their place and they were watching -- or my cousin -- they had an adopted daughter, was watching Six Gun Playhouse. I don't know if you are old enough to remember that. And then I remember they were taking me, cause it was already getting chilly, shopping for a heavier jacket than I had.

Q: When you arrived in New York and your mother --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- mother saw relatives, was that a -- was it a particularly emotional time for this young woman to be in United States after all that she'd lived through, now losing her husband, raising this young child? Do you have any memories of that being an emotional scene, getting off the boat and seeing the relatives?

A: I don't remember an emotional scene.

Q: But you were young to --

A: Yeah, I -- I don't remember an emotional scene. They -- I mean, I'm sure they were warm and friendly --

Q: I know. I just meant --

A: -- but if it wasn't -- yeah --

Q: -- it wasn't overwhelming for your mother --

A: Right --

Q: -- going through so much.

A: -- and it -- it wasn't close family. It wasn't like being reunited with your brother.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: These were -- these were cousins who had left many years before.

Q: Yeah.

A: And, you know, we went to live with this uncle who had signed the affidavit for us, so we essentially had a furnished room in an apartment. The building belonged to my uncle, but we had just one room. And my mother went to work almost immediately in the garment district, sewing in a -- in a shop, making children's clothing. And -- and I, after having my first hot dog, this is

another early memory, is being taken to Nathan's in Brooklyn to have my first hot dog, which probably cost 10 cents at the time, and -- and then s-starting school here.

Q: Mm-hm. What was that like for a child who doesn't speak English?

A: Tough. Tough. It di -- it didn't take me a long time. I was fortunate that it didn't take me long to learn the language or the -- the fundamentals, but the first couple of months were tough, yeah. I remember feeling very strange and out of it and i --

Q: Were there other refugee children?

A: Some, but most of the kids were American kids. It wi -- my mother enrolled me in a Yeshiva.

Q: Oh.

A: So the advantage I had was that -- and it was an Orthodox Yeshiva, my -- th-the -- the -- the rabbis spoke Yiddish. The other children spoke English, by and large. And it was tough. I remember feeling left out. You know, I have to check on -- my oldest and best friend also came over at the same time, we met at that Yeshiva. He was -- he's a survivor from Paris and lost both his parents in Auschwitz. When I met him in Yeshiva, I remember I felt lucky that I had lost one parent, he lost both. So --

Q: Did the teachers ask you about what happened to you during the war?

A: I don't think so. I -- I -- I think they -- no, I think they just accepted it. I mean, in some ways it -- we -- I also became a bit of a behavior problem to some of them, because I was -- I was ahead of -- they -- they put me, because of the language inability -- I was much more advanced in my year -- now, in a Yeshiva you have studies in the religious section --

Q: And in -- in the secular.

A: -- which is like in the morning.

Q: Right.

A: And the secular subjects in the afternoon. You'd have lunch in between. I was doing bang up job in my religious studies because of my knowledge of Hebrew, blah, blah, blah. They thought I was going to be a genius and I was good at my -- I mean, I got to the top class in my religious studies two years ahead of time, so I had the same teacher for three years in a row. I -- I loved that rabbi. In my secular subjects I was also good, but in -- only in math.

Q: Right.

A: Because that's an international language, so I was actually ahead of the kids. The teacher would give me the test papers to grade. I knew more than the rest of the class. But of course in the other subjects, where language wa-was an issue, I had to catch up.

Q: Struggled, mm.

A: And it was a struggle, but it wasn't so much an intellectual struggle, cause -- cause I wasn't a dummy, but it was a sense of loneliness and you know, isolation and that -- that kind of stuff. So that was kind of tricky. But it -- you know, kids make friends kind of easily. All right.

Q: And then you stayed in that school for how long?

A: Stayed in that school from -- from 1950, I guess, '49, cause we arrived at the end of '49, so I figure until '54.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: They had a -- actually the first year of high school was like a middle school [indecipherable] you know, was -- was there. And then went on to Yeshiva Universities High School in Brooklyn.

Q: Okay.

A: And oh, i-it was in some ways fun, I have some good memories of that first Yeshiva.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: We used to cu -- Yeshiva [indecipherable] we used to call it YTC, your torture chamber. But I had -- th-they used to use me because of my proficiency in Hebrew to greet visiting dignitaries from Israel and I remember there was an Israeli wrestler around at the time. I don't know if you remember this, Raphael Halperin was his name. He was like oh, big stuff. He'd be on television. So when he came to America to visit and I had to greet him, that was really --

Q: He came to your school?

A: At my school. And then they, one day -- and this man is no longer alive, the Minister for Social Welfare in the Israeli government, Yosef Burg came, and I greeted him. So, it was kind of fun.

Q: Mm-hm. And then you -- so you -- you became an American teenager?

A: Yeah, not your typical teenager, I -- I won some nice awards at the school, for my Jewish studies primarily. I did pretty well, I was in -- in -- in my English studies til I was wo -- what are they -- I was salutatorian. Number two, didn't make number one. The number one guy was a -- a classmate of ours who used to memorize books. He was like amazing guy.

Q: Were you interested in athletics?

A: Yes and no. I -- the answer is -- and I'll tell you what I mean. I -- I regret that I never actually played enough.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But I was interested as a spectator, you know what I mean? You ask me any question, to this day, although I have senior moments, of course, about scores and baseball. I mean, I got into -- baseball is such a foreign game, and I really got into that. It's -- I still remember my first in --

from the school -- you know, the triple A has these school crossing guards with the -- we used the wear the -- took us to our first baseball game in the early 50's. A no-hitter pitched by Carl Erskine against the Chicago Cubs, five nothing.

Q: By the time you were finishing high school, did you feel then like an American, or did you still feel like a refugee?

A: No, I felt I -- I felt like an American. There were always little things that happened, you know, I remember when -- this is -- when my English was really good, very quickly, after few months.

Q: With no acc -- with no accent?

A: With an acce -- well, I had th-this spi -- that's what I was going to tell you about. My English was good. To this day there will always be somebody in a crowd who will say, are you American born? Somebody can pick up. I couldn't pronounce the A. I couldn't distinguish between Barry and berry. And what I remember, we went to camp. I went to a summer camp run by a -- an outfit that's no longer around, the Hebrew Educational Society. They ran a camp in Bear Mountain, New York. The kids would make fun of my inability to pronounce the A. They also made fun of my name. You know, my name is Menachem Mendel. And how did I get the name Melvin? Well, the American relatives got together. There was a powwow, I remember this. And they said, let's choose a name with an M. And they said Melvin. Well, a few months later Jerry Lewis -- remember Martin and Lewis, when they used to be on? Jerry Lewis made fun of the name Melvin. And it became like the worst name that you can have. So hence I was Mel after that. Did I feel -- the answer is yes, I continued to feel like a refugee even -- I mean, part of me became very American, but even in high school there would be periods when I felt that these

other kids are more fortunate than I am because they're real Americans and I'm not.

Q: When did you become a citizen?

A: I beca -- that's a very good question. I -- actually my citizenship was a -- what they call a derivative citizenship. My mother became a citizen first and then for me it was just, you know. So I don't remember the exact year. Probably -- I want to say --

Q: Five years after you got here?

A: Maybe a little later, maybe -- maybe a year or two later.

Q: Mm-hm. Did that mean anything to you, to become a citizen?

A: To become a citizen?

Q: Yeah, that many --

A: Oh sure, yeah. My mother went to night school and she took -- she took courses and -- and she pa -- you know, I still remember the questions and all that. Yeah, I did -- it did mean a lot to me. But I also have -- people who grew up with that kind of sense and th-this unrequited love, if you will, for -- you know, and regret that I never went to -- didn't go to zi -- I mean, I've been to Israel umpteen times and very close to my family there and all that. And I love America, I mean I -- you know, it goes without saying. I mean, I'm a patriot. I mean, I really consider myself a patriot and I -- and I find some of the stuff I read now in the paper, the -- th -- some developments intolerable, you know, when people kind of disparage the country, or -- you know. But as -- as a kid here, ye -- it -- you -- there are certain things that leave scars and they never go away. It's like if I go to a doctor and get -- I -- I had, when I was a teenager, I had a -- a duodenal ulcer. Went away. It healed completely. If I go to a -- and they take an x-ray somebody will say, oh, there's a scar there. The same with this. If you -- I -- I had -- there is a sense of homelessness

one grows up with, with that kind of background, and it's hard to fill that. And that's no reflection on -- on America, which is -- gives a home to so many people. But if you've had that kind of background and -- and you've moved around a lot as a kid, that's hard to fill that void.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mel Galun. This is tape number two, side B, and you were talking about sense of homelessness that --

A: Right.

Q: -- people with your background would have.

A: Well --

Q: Did it stay with you all these years?

A: It has stayed with me all these years and I would say that it's -- it's a special sensitivity, okay? It's like if you grow up -- and I think a lot of these things are foundational, I'm not saying anything profound, but it -- it's simply that if you grow up with -- with a sense of rootedness when you're young, that stays with you the rest of your life. It doesn't mean that when you're traveling to a foreign country you don't experience a certain discomfort at not knowing the language, oh -- but you -- it's different. If you have -- don't grow up with that, and if you've missed it for the first 10 years of your life, it's very hard to replace something like that, and it means you carry it with you into all sorts of situations. It may take you a little bit longer to adjust to a particular thing, or may -- you know. But you do carry it with you and it's not that you can't -- you know, we learn to articulate certain things and we become aware of them, but that doesn't mean that they -- there aren't certain predispositions that remain there. And I think that -- that

happens, and I -- and I know about it, bu -- you know, and -- and -- and also attempts I made to overcome it. I -- I had a job for ORT, wonderful organization that did a lot for Jewish youngsters like me in the camps. I remember ORT and I rem -- when I wa -- came for the interview with ORT, the m-man interviewing me, who was David Dubinsky's son-in-law, Shelley Appleton, a wonderful man, and Shelley said -- asked me what I knew about ORT. I said, I don't know anything about your American organization, nothing whatsoever. But I said, I do remember it. I remember the ORT workshops from my childhood. That impressed him. So later on I had a job working for the international office of ORT and I traveled the world. When I would travel to different countries, whether it was in South America, or di -- I would feel -- re-experience that sense of rootlessness that I'm telling you about, but in a more, I think in a more heightened sense of it than another person would. And I felt that sense -- so we carry our sense of home in us. And I think that it's -- it's hard to replace. If y -- if y -- if you didn't develop it by a certain a -- it's hard to replace it and it does have -- leave an impact, cause that's what I talked about, leaving a scar. It's there.

Q: You finished high school, and then --

A: I finished high school and -- in Brooklyn Talmudical Academy used to be called it's -- Yeshiva University used to have two high schools, one in Manhattan, one in Brooklyn. And then went on to Brooklyn College, majored in political science, and didn't have a particularly distinguished academic career, and graduated in 1961. And my mother asked me what I would like for a present upon graduation, and I said I wanted a trip to Israel. And so my friend Gil, the one I was telling you about who lost both his parents in Auschwitz, he and I -- he had just lost his grandmother, he and I decided to go to Israel together. And I decided, having a bit of a flair

for the dramatic that I didn't want to notify my relatives in Israel that I was coming. And my mother said, my ga -- you can't do that. You can't -- I mean, it's a fi -- another country, it's thousands of miles away and what if they're not home, this and that. I said look, we both speak Yiddish. I speak Hebrew, he speaks French, we both speak English. How can we get lost in Israel? So we get to Israel and sure enough I go to my uncle's house, nobody home. And I -- but I had -- I won't bore you with these stories, I had the most dramatic and memorable reunion with my family whom I had last seen when I was eight years old in DP camp. And it was really wonderful. So that -- that sort of brought things full circle.

Q: You stayed there how long?

A: I stayed in Israel at that time for, I would say, a little over two months. Volunteered to go out and work in a kibbutz, waiting -- working in the cotton fields.

Q: Which kibbutz? [indecipherable]

A: Gesher HaZiv. It's a beautiful kibbutz north of Nahariya, toward the Lebanese border. Used to be known as an American kib -- an Anglo-Saxon kibbutz. It was established actually by Americans from Habonim, and they used to host a lot of Americans who wanted to work there. So I ju -- we just went up there, took the bus and walked in. We didn't -- we weren't on any organized program, we said, we want to work. They said fine. So we -- we had a lot of fun. A lot of --

Q: Did you still have Betar leanings at that point?

A: I never joined amer -- that's interesting, that's a good question. I never joined American Betar. The answer is yes, I still have Betar leanings to this very day. And when I wound up working in the Jewish world, in nonprofit Jewish world, I actually was responding to a blind ad

in -- in the newspaper. And my boss, knowing of my right, and the sort of right of center Jewish leanings and wi -- he hi -- we were hosting, I remember, a visit by Ariel Sharon one time. He said, I want you to take him around the campuses. So I did. That was one of my [indecipherable]. I spent -- I spent almost a week with General Sharon and his wife. Late wife. So --

Q: So you spent the two months, came back to the United States?

A: Yeah.

Q: And then? And that's when you started working?

A: Yeah, I -- well, I me -- I -- I -- I had a number of jobs before the Jewish world, but they were sort of --

Q: Temporary?

A: I taught for a couple of years. I wa -- I was a sa -- a -- a -- a being -- in those days -- you should pardon the expression, we had an -- and -- a -- not a politically correct term to use, but we used to have what were known as liberal arts cripples. I don't know if you remember that term. That meant that you graduated college with a major in some of the social sciences, history, political science, whatever, and then you said, what do I do now? So people usually wound up teaching or, I don't know, working for the welfare department at that time, whatever. I just finished the -- the -- reading a very good book where the guy -- I'm reading this and I'm saying, gee, he had the same experience I did. Except he was a lefty, he was -- he was a communist, actually car -- card carrying --

Q: What did you major in -- in?

A: I majored in political science.

Q: Oh, you said that.

A: So I did wind up teaching and during the f -- I don't know if you remember, there's a -- a watershed teachers' strike in New York, Ocean Hill-Brownsville. I was teaching in Bushwick section. Joyce was teaching --

Q: Teaching high school?

A: Teaching -- I was teaching junior high school. Joyce also. Joyce was teaching in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Both of us were very liberal, but liberal in the context of those days. We actually moved into Ebbets Field apartments, which was built on the gravesite of Ebbets Field. And it was an integrated development, you know, one-third Hispanic, one-third Jewish, one-third Black. And we both taught in ghetto schools.

Q: When did you meet her and when did you get married?

A: I met Joyce in '62 on a blind date and we married in '63.

Q: Okay. And then after you finished teaching what did you do?

A: So, I was coming to that. There was a teachers' strike.

Q: Oh, right.

A: So suddenly she and I are both not working. No income. Ah. You know, not -- you need to sustain yourself. So I get a call one day from her late uncle. The -- my friends used to call me SuperJew because Jewish affairs was always part of me, not just because of intim -- intellectual interest, it was in my gut. So her uncle, who also -- her aunt and uncle were both teachers, so they were in the same position. And he called up and he said, there's an ad in the "New York Times" Sunday Times education section, you know, the week in review. He said, it's you. So I applied for the ad. It was to organize Jewish students in college campuses. And I sent in my application and I got the job. And that began -- that was one of the most fun jobs I've had.

Fascinating because a lot of my so-called kids are now 12 years younger, but friends of mine, and -- and --

Q: What was the name of the organization?

A: American Zionist Youth Foundation at the time. I don't think it's around any more. Did some important work. And then I went to the Zionist organization of America as their national youth director and then from there to ORT.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: And it --

Q: And what were your duties at ORT?

A: Basically my -- my -- I was in charge of their organization department. So it meant doing essentially what -- what ha -- life comes full circle -- what I had been doing on the college campuses I was now doing internationally for ORT. So that if they needed a new organization in Sao Paolo or somewhere, my boss would say, go in there and form a new committee or strengthen a committee and so on. It was working with the volunteer dimension, cause ORT has two dimensions, there's the -- the school system, the educational programs and there are the support organizations that -- volunteers that help to sustain the school system. So my job was to deal with the volunteer organizations and help them function and to solve problems and what have you.

Q: Were there other -- many other refugees like you on staff at ORT who've had experience --

A: Yes, yes. My -- my former boss was in fact in the partisans. And yo-you've heard of the partisans of Wilna. And his -- his commander was Abo Kovner and Harmatz is his name. Josef Harmatz. So yeah, th-the -- but there were a few other --

Q: Did you feel a closer connection to people with that kind of background, that you have, that --

A: Not necessarily. Sometimes. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It really depended.

Q: On personalities?

A: Yeah.

Q: [indecipherable] on personality.

A: It really depended on personalities. And in general -- I mean, look, I mean I -- I can't say -- I was much affected by this stuff. I'm very Jewish, I'm very -- but that doesn't mean that I only eat, sleep and drink this kind of stuff 24 hours a day, you know, you --

Q: Are you still with ORT now?

A: No, no, I'm -- I'm retired now.

Q: But you stayed with ORT until you retired?

A: I stayed with ORT til 90 -- think '93, and then I spent a few years with Yeshiva University and then did working with the Sy Sims school of business, raising money for them, and then worked as an independent consultant running campaigns, fundraising campaigns for either endowment or building campaign, you know, capital campaigns. And then went to B'nai Brith for a stretch. That's -- that's what brought me to Washington.

Q: That's [indecipherable] And you came to Washington what year?

A: '98.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: It be -- close to '99. It was actually the end of 1998. Great town, I like it.

Q: Can we talk a little about some general issues --

A: Sure.

Q: -- at the moment. Do you think it was an advantage that you were so young at the time that you really weren't aware of the danger of what your mother was going through? Was it an advantage being young instead of being a lit -- a bit older and maybe knowing more of what was happening?

A: Mm. It's a good question. I think I suppose so, I -- I -- on -- on balance. Not everybody had that advantage, I mean they had -- there's also a disadvantage of being young. I mean, y-you just reminded me of a very painful memory or story that I -- my Uncle Herschel -- I told you my mother had two brothers who went to Israel. The one with the two daughters, who always regretted he didn't have a son, but he did have a son. And they had a child and -- who was abandoned in -- in the forest. Anyway, so th-there are i -- you know, the same pain is experienced somewhat differently by children and by adults. So yes, to answer your question, there are advantages, but there are also disadvantages. And the -- the ability of an adult to articulate or to do certain things, an-and certain actions that an adult can take that a child can't, are -- you know. But the advantages are also burdens. And I remember feeling as a child, one of the things I remember, the burden that a child feels, especially when you're a certain age, not -- not when you're very little, but when you're older, when you're like eight, nine or so and you're already developing a little bit of a sense of yo -- of yourself is being very, very much upset about this sense of impotence and weakness. An-And I felt it both as -- as a child, knowing what -- you know, feeling all the resentment, feeling all the -- you know, the anger, and not being able to do anything about it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: A-And that's something that -- it -- it's very hard to relate to unless I -- this is where I

sometimes tal -- when I talk to my friend Gil, the one I was telling you about, he and I can both relate to that, we don't have -- you know, we know what we're talking about. It's not just an intellectual abstraction for us, it's an experience, and it's very tough.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: So, y-you know -- and I -- and I understand survivors. I'm not talking i -- you know, there are lots of reason why y-you know, I've never spoken about it, even with my own kids. Some of them are not necessarily -- s-some is -- is that it's very painful to talk about this stuff. So it's easier just to block things off and to kind of -- I think one of the great things, and I say this, that in what you're doing, and what the museum -- I mean, I remember when I worked in the American Zionist Youth Foundation, when one of the first exhibits came around. This was actually like a precursor of the museum in a sense, that was sent to -- we were sent, because I was working with colleges, with campuses, we were organizing a tour for this exhibit. And was a pri -- it was -- who was involved in it? God. Eli Zborowski, I don't know if you know Eli. Eli Zborowski is -- has been for many years the chairman of Yad Vashem, or American Friends of Yad Vashem, sorry.

Q: [indecipherable] Zborowski, yes.

A: He is -- was the owner of Schaeffer pen or something. I remember him, he's a well-to-do man who's done a lot of stuff to create this awareness and all. And I appreciate what people have done with that. I couldn't do it. I really appreciate what they did.

Q: You couldn't do it because of what?

A: I -- I find it too painful to deal with it.

Q: Painful.

A: Yeah. My friend Gil went to one of the i -- gone -- when we went to Israel, ’60 w -- ’61 - ’62 and then he said I’m going to do research and write about the Holocaust. He’s a sociologist. Great. He went to the Hebrew University or wherever, I mean, he started to look through the stacks, couldn’t do it. You know.

Q: Yeah.

A: So you know, you appreci -- but there are different people, you know, there are people who can do it. My old boss Harmatz at ORT that I’m telling you about, one day I put on “Nightline.” Remember “Nightline” with what -- what’s his name, I forget his name already.

Q: Ted Koppel.

A: Ted Koppel, thank you. So you can say Howdy Doody. But Ted Koppel suddenly says, and I have here Mr. Josef Harmatz. He was doing a program and I said, it’s Yosul, what’s he doing here, on Ted Koppel? Ted Koppel did a program. After the war there were a bunch of Jews who wanted to go and kill ex-Nazis. Koppel did a program on it on “Nightline.” And Harmatz was one of those. So, you know, I’m saying there were all sorts of people. But of course he’s older than I am so he would have been probably in his late teens by then. When you’re a kid of eight or nine, or five or six, you f -- you’re aware already of what’s going on around you, and what wa -- what happened, and you heard the stories, but you feel a utter sense of helplessness. You feel your -- you feel, really feel a sense of victimhood. I had to talk to kids here at the Jewish Day School a few years ago. My friend [indecipherable] finagles me always at -- and she said, can you talk to the kids about, you know, your experience? I said sure, okay, I’ll do it. I tried to get the kids to understand. I said, I’m not a hero. Cause the kids a -- I -- I’m not a hero. I’m not being falsely modest, I’m really not a hero. I’m a victim. There’s a difference, you know.

Q: Let's -- with some of the things that you've just been saying, do you feel that you would be a different adult today if you had not gone through what you went through?

A: Oh, un -- unquestionably, yeah, no doubt.

Q: In what way?

A: I mean, I don't know, I mean I can tell you wha -- in one way is that I would probably be less cosmopolitan in a certain way. There's a certain, you know, knowledge of the world, that you may not have gone about it through positive experience, but that's what happens. You've been around, you've been wandering around and so that brings a certain familiarity with things that other people didn't grow up with. I -- I don't know. I mean, I don't know if any -- I can ar-articulate it more. I think that the -- all you can do is, in a certain sense is that the suffering makes you able to, if y -- there's a big if in between, is you -- you can teach others, perhaps, sometimes about it. But to do that you have to be able to open up and in a lot of -- a l -- a lot of us can't, u-unfortunately. That's just the fact. It's hard. But I've also learned as I got older, not to -- not to be too self confident in my hunches sometimes. You know, I would think that when I was growing up that these kids who grew up here and had it -- you know, had stable home life, they had it better and all. Well, not necessarily. In certain ways they did, in some ways they didn't, I mean it's -- you know.

Q: Did you identify -- because you had mentioned about difficulties of others, did you identify or be active in the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's and 70's?

A: I wasn't particularly active, but that's not because I -- I didn't support it, I did support it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But I -- in -- it -- only because I wasn't an activist in that sense. When I think that our need to

-- we both -- we were both liberal -- a liberal couple, Joyce and I. But old liberals change. I mean I -- I did more. I mean, I -- I sort of became more closer to a NeoCon than -- yeah. But I -- I wasn't active and that's not because necessarily an -- an ideological reflection as -- so much as I -- I just -- inertia, in a sense.

Q: You -- do you -- do you have children?

A: Yeah, couple of kids. One living in Arlington, single, Josh. And Julie is living in Malvern, Pennsylvania, married with two redheaded boys.

Q: When the children --

A: One is there. The other one, I don't know if you can see him there.

Q: Oh. When the children were little --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- and -- and were the age that you were up to the -- did that bring back memories of your childhood?

A: Of my own childhood?

Q: When they were that little [indecipherable] the first part of your life. Let's say the first 10 - 11 years.

A: Si -- I don't think so. I don't think so.

Q: But you did say you had a greater appreciation of what your mother did for you, wha -- I think --

A: Well o-of -- yeah, of what she did and -- and of -- but more so of --

Q: Once you became the parent.

A: -- of the difficulties and of -- yeah, that she faced. And that it's not as simple as all that. You

know, when you're growing up and you're relating to somebody as a child and you know, you -- you're -- you're having fights or you're having -- you know, th -- it -- it -- it's different, I mean, you get older and you say gee, I'm now -- you know, the first time it hits you -- I -- yeah, I remember the first time it hit me that I had outlived my father. I have to think of my father as a -- as a kid. But I think that -- no, it's appreciating the difficulty and -- and -- and that, you know, yo-young people are -- think they know it all, and I thought I knew it all, that's all.

Q: When your mother remarried did she have more children with your stepfather?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: No.

Q: So you're still the --

A: No.

Q: -- only child.

A: And I -- one of the things I regretted was not having been able to get closer to my stepfather. He died very young.

Q: Right.

A: He died at the age of 49 of a heart attack.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I liked him, but my mother overshadowed him, she was too tough for him in some ways.

Q: Did she ever remarry again, or --

A: No.

Q: No, she didn't.

A: No. She remained widowed after that. See, she was twice widowed after relatively short periods of time.

Q: Yeah.

End of Tape Two, Side B

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Melvin Galun. This is tape number three, side A. What are your thoughts about Germany today? Or in general?

A: I -- t-today I -- you know, I -- we haven't been -- we have not -- I have not been back to Germany.

Q: You have not been back since --

A: I have not been back to Germany.

Q: Since the DP camps?

A: Since the DP camps.

Q: Because?

A: Well, I was going to say in-initially there was a barrier, there was a real barrier there, but by now it's no -- I would go back, it's not like I am boycotting, I would go back today.

Q: When you say there was a barrier, you mean a psychological barrier?

A: Yeah, a psychological barrier. I really didn't like the Germans. That's to put it mildly. Joyce when I met her had a German pen-pal and it became an issue, became like a -- a -- an irritant in our relationship. And that pen-pal's sister came to visit, and we invited her to our apartment. This -- way back when we were young. And I said, look, I can -- I can deal with individuals and I judge them as individuals, but if you ask me how do I feel about Germany, I still had, you know. And -- and I don't say that I've even overcome it, except it's many years thereafter, I'm aware of what Germany means and what it -- its government is like and what its relationship with Israel is all about. So, you know. Have I come to terms with what the Germans did to the

Jews? Absolutely not, I will never come to terms with that. But you know, do I think that Germany has been at the forefront of countries that have really tried to come to grips with its history and with this issue? Yes, absolutely. I have to acknowledge that. And I d -- and I -- and I don't want to give vent, sometimes, you know, we all deal with periods of paranoia and you know. I think the Germans have tried in -- in all sorts of ways to come to terms -- even in their relationship with Israel. I was just reading a wonderful piece about that, how they, you know, some can feel a real sense of responsibility.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So --

Q: Do you speak German?

A: I don't speak German, but I can, because of my knowledge of Yiddish, I can read sometimes some stuff in German and make some sense out of it. And it's a language that I probably -- well, I was toying with the idea of maybe learning it. But its grammar is too complex and kind of -- I find grammar can be -- I -- I have a -- a -- a -- an ear for languages, and -- and I -- my pronunciation is usually very good, but I can't stand grammar. And the German grammar is too complicated.

Q: Oh. And in the DP camps it was Yiddish and Hebrew that you sp --

A: In DP camps it was Yiddish and Hebrew.

Q: Yiddish and Hebrew.

A: My mother spoke --

Q: Even though they were in Germany.

A: -- my mother spoke German because she would --

Q: [indecipherable]

A: -- go into town and you know, conduct whatever affairs she wanted to. So it happened, people picked it up, but I -- you could read -- when you were in the camp, you were really in a -- a self contained community.

Q: What were your reactions dur -- during the Eichmann trial? Do you have memories of that?

A: A sense of pride in the people who had abducted him. I followed the trial like everybody did, almost daily on television. I felt -- y-you know I feel -- listen, we felt -- I felt a sense of the historical justice, but I -- you know, did it mean that it evened the score? Absolutely not. It was -- I don't know. I don't know if I have any -- any thoughts beyond that. I'm a great -- I -- even at that time there was controversy about did Israel conform to international law, was it the right thing to abduct somebody and all that. I'm a great believer, unapologetic, in Jewish power, absolutely. So I was very -- that was ma -- the overriding thing was it's about time that we did this. I'm glad Israel executed him. I'm glad he is the only one that Israel ever executed in its history. Israel has no capital punishment. But we -- we have -- I mean, I -- we're [indecipherable] we have a sense of loss, which is -- is there, it can't be -- you know, even -- even a state of Israel, let's say, cannot even out the score for the loss we experienced. That's just the way it is. It's a great gain, but it doesn't -- and this is something else. The loss that we suffered was not just in people, it was on history. I was talking to my cousin Menachem who just died this year and my aunt, my mother's sister is still alive. So she's approaching her 90's, but Menachem, unfortunately was very ill and died in his 70's. My aunt, however, has dementia so I can't ask her anything and I'm -- and we don't have a family so I was on the phone with my cousin Menachem's daughter, who is now 50. And of course she wants to know her history. I

said, we gotta do a family tree. But now it means filling in gaps, you know. So we lost that historical thread. That's why I do appreciate the kind of work you're doing here and what, you know, what everybody does. It's -- it's fabulous.

Q: Have you been to -- back to Poland or Ukraine -- the Ukraine?

A: I want to go. I e -- I have -- no, the answer is no, I haven't been back. I've toyed with that idea, I want to do it. In fact, I spoke to Mishelin about doing this. I did a lot of traveling but never got to eastern Europe or even -- or to central Europe. I've -- I've thought about it, I -- and -- and I know people who did, who -- who went back to -- to the town where I was born, to Kowal. And today you can, you know, go on Google Earth and you -- it's amazing what you can do. But I -- I have mixed feelings about that too, I really do.

Q: In what sense?

A: Yeah, I don't know what I'm looking for. You know, I don't know why I would want to go back. There are lots of places on earth which I enjoyed traveling to. I mean, I enjoyed ga -- a few years ago going to Peru, or to Mexico or something. So why am I going there? What am I going to find there? I don't know. I am interested, I mean in -- in one respect, I do want to do something about filling in the gaps in my own family history, just so -- so my kids and my grandkids will know. And it's something we all fall prey to, I have a -- a vanity book that I have downstairs that it was given to me by a man who was -- when Reagan was president [indecipherable] very wealthy man from a s -- Iraqi Jewish banking family. I mean a billionaire. And he gave me a signed copy of his book, and he said it's a history of his family. I said why'd you do it? And of course he, you know, he hired somebody to write it for him. He said, because I want my children and grandchildren to know where they were coming from. So I said wow, this

guy's a billionaire, if he -- he -- but he also delayed. It happens to all of us, you know, so I feel I delayed, I mean, I should have started this process and -- and -- and your call was important in that, it really was.

Q: Are you -- d-do you consider yourself religious?

A: Yes. Yes, I do.

Q: Because -- I-I'm -- not because of your education at let's say Yeshiva High School and so forth, but because of what you went through? What are your thoughts in that general --

A: It's an amalgam of things. It was partly my mother's influence. My mother's influence is very important because quite frankly, it was important in my Zionist beliefs. It was important in my religious -- in my grandmother's. I sh -- I should say my grandmother. And in some way -- and when I think about it sometimes I say I -- because I became ultimately, after winding -- I -- I -- my first half of my career or first third if you will, was in youth work, organizing people in college campuses.

Q: College.

A: Leon Wieseltier of the "New Republic" was my campus rep, to give you an idea. I had a good -- the one talent I think I had was sizing people up. My mother was interested in a business career for me. My grandmother, Yiddishkeit, so I combined the two of them, became a Jewish fundraiser. I said, this is like. My religion, I would say was transi -- a religious sensitivity, if you will, was transmitted by these two women, but also by the Yeshiva, and by some of the teachers I had in Yeshiva, more importantly. The -- the -- my mother's and grandmother's may have been tinged a bit with superstition, which also comes from that part of [indecipherable]. I -- I've always -- I've -- one of my good buddies who is also one of my former kids, ise -- I -- in

quotation marks. I just -- he's a very successful lawyer in New York whom we just had dinner with. And he and I would always argue cause his grandfather was very important to him, his -- his grandfather was from Lithuania though, so they were the midnagdin. I came from there, I said Ukraine was the birthplace of Hasidism, right? There's always a little bit of -- you know, Hasidim are emotional and the others are rational and intellectual. I got the emotional part from my mother and grandmother and if you will, the rational part from some of my rabbis. I am religious. Was I -- but I was also angry at God. And I had this discussion with my oldest and best friend Gil, cause he'll always say -- we'll have conversa -- I -- I have used reference points from Genesis and from different books of the Bible, and he'll say how come you remember this stuff? I don't remember anything. And he says -- he always said he was a non-believer. And I said to him once, because he was talking wi -- full of anger at God, I said, are you sure you don't believe? Because if you're angry at God, presupposes that you believe. So I was angry at God. No doubt about it, and still am from time to time. But that doesn't preclude the fact, quite the opposite, it affirms it. And -- and th -- th -- I had -- one privilege I had and I -- I told you I had great experience working in -- in -- and when I was working as a college -- I was really a field organizer. I took around some wonderful people. I'd come back all excited at the end of the day. So one of the guys I took around was Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, I don't know if you know -- familiar with him. And I -- this is many years, it was probably his first trip to America. And they said, take him around to Jewish Day Schools or whatever. And I came back and I told Joyce, I said, [indecipherable] this blew my mind, you know? And I only dealt with bright peop -- they're all bright, you know what I mean, th -- you know. So I said, but he -- he -- I still remember what he said. He said, I would rather, when I'm working with students, I'd rather work with somebody

who is angry at God than somebody who is indifferent to God. Because if he says he -- if he's angry, he cares, and I can turn that around. If he's indifferent it's much tougher. So in that sense, yeah, I mean I felt myself like a lot of other Jewish people and kids especially, felt myself victimized, then abandoned and all of that. On the other hand, you know, go -- ge -- God can be the source of your anger, in a sense, or the object of your anger, but can also be a sense of your regeneration of spirit.

Q: Did your children ask you about your childhood when they were younger? And did y -- and if so, did you tell them about it, did you --

A: I've told them s -- y-yes, I have told them certainly, I mean, it's not like I've tried to a -- that I've tried to withhold things from them, no. And -- but it was kind of as an aside if you know what I mean. I -- I would tell them things, if it came up or if it was you know, but I -- I -- I wish I had done more. But I did tell them.

Q: When you say wish you had done more, in what sense?

A: I -- I guess I'm -- I wish I had undertaken a more structured way, ongoing way to educate them about the family, the history and all that. But, I mean, it -- it's not as though I went from one extreme to another, I mean, they had something, you know, they -- they -- they -- they certainly know. They went to Israel with us a few times, they knew the family. I would very much like to reconne -- it's hard to maintain a -- even your all -- it's easier today with email to maintain certain things, you know, but -- but still, to maintain a relationship geographically distanced is -- is tough. But I would like them to maintain a connection to -- yeah, to the Jewish people, to their family and hopefully to a sense of, you know, belief.

Q: Have you been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington?

A: Yes.

Q: And what di -- when you walk inside the building --

A: I've --

Q: -- did you have certain feelings?

A: -- been there a few times. Do I have a certain feeling? Yeah, I mean, I have lots of feelings. I -- I -- once we went -- God, I'm trying to remember the first time. Once we went with [indecipherable] because they -- there was something there that's dedicated to the stepmother of one of our friends, this lawyer I was telling you about, his wife's stepmother was one of the Righteous who saved -- and is mentioned in one of the exhibits in -- in the museum. I think it's a great place. I think it's a -- how can I put it? I haven't been to the new Yad Vashem, which I'm told is fantastic.

Q: Mm. Do you think it's appropriate that the Holocaust Museum is in Washington?

A: Oh, that's a good question. That's a very good question. I'm glad it is. Do I think -- but I don't know about appropriateness, I mean in terms of would another place be more appropriate, I don't know. I don't know, but I think it's a great museum, it's a great institution.

Q: I'm just saying when it first went up, some people said, you know, it didn't happen here, it happened --

Q: Right.

A: -- far away. Why do we have the museum here?

Q: Well, I mean, I can speculate, or let's say -- I mean, I'm sure I -- I don't remember reading the -- the arguments, but America is the locus and we've got three -- well two actually, two and a half if you will, great Jewish communities, each of which numbers about six million nowadays,

ironically, Israel and the United States, although we're always at 5.8 or whatever, we're all -- we've been at that number for -- since I arrived in this country. So I suppose in that sense it -- it -- there is some sense, since we have large survivor communities, that this is a Jewish -- this, if you will, it's a -- you know, you have Jerusalem and you had Babylon -- th-the -- the Babylon Jewish community. So we're in the place of bab -- we're -- we're two great Jewish communi -- Russia -- Russia still has a large Jewish community but it's much smaller, it's about two -- two point five million, maybe. These are two great Jewish communities, so it's thoroughly fitting that there should be a serious Holocaust institution in the United States, thoroughly appropriate. Is it -- it -- and -- and in Israel. Can I see it in another city in America? Yeah, could be in New York. New York has the Museum of the Jewish Herit -- which is nice in its own way, it's a different kind of institution. But I think it's a great museum and it does everybody proud, inclu -- including the government, including, you know, the Jewish community.

Q: Do you think that the commun -- the world community has learned from the Holocaust? Do you think it's [indecipherable]

A: God, you -- I -- I get very cynical some days because I spend too much time reading articles on the internet, but has the world learned? It has, but it's also unlearned. The answer is yes to both. It has unlearned and has learned. And that's the sad part and it means that great challenges still confront us. They're -- all one has to do is look at the daily news. Lo-Look at -- I mean, it's not just us. And y -- holocausts have been visited in Rwanda and in Darfur and in -- you know. Maybe smaller scale, but big enough. So yeah, th-th-the lessons haven't been fully learned, no question about it. I mean, how can you countenance what a guy like Ahmadinejad says? And then he gets feted at the U.N. and then he gets invited to Columbia? I mean, come on, you know?

But people don't realize this is a crazy world. Hitler was on the -- on -- on a list to be -- people recommended he get the peace prize back when, you know. So what makes us think that we are different, that we, you know, we've outsmarted everybody. I mean I -- I don't want to get totally cynical. Yes, we do learn, but we also unlearn lessons and we forget. And a new -- and this is th -- it's the same thing, I was just talking to somebody sitting next to me -- oh, that Bat Mitzvah we went to in New York. Wonderful guy. He said yeah, he was [indecipherable] talking about the exodus story and th-the -- a new pharaoh arose in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. It's a new ballgame. So -- and I think we're living through a particularly delicate time, but I don't want to get into politics, cause I know that's not your purpose here.

Q: Well, is there anything you would like to add, or that we haven't covered that you would like --

A: Well, I'm sure I'm gonna think of a lot of things after you leave, but I c -- I can't -- you know. I don't know.

Q: Any message to your grandchildren that you'd like to leave? Anything you'd like to say to them?

A: Yeah. I think that what I'd like to sta -- say to them is to stay strong and it's t -- it's two things, actually, re-remember, it says that at the end, when you finish the Bible, it says, Chazak ve amatz. And the other is, you gotta believe. You gotta believe. And I don't -- I don't care whether it's in a secular sense or in a religious sense. People see that -- that kind of dichotomy. I said, even if you believe in a secular context, you also gotta believe.

Q: Believe in -- in a secular context in what?

A: Believe in the integrity of an idea, that in -- i-in -- in essence -- I mean, I don't want to get too

deep. In the -- in -- in the Hebrew language there is really no word that is the equivalent of religion.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: It's belief. And you know -- anyway.

Q: Well, thank you very much --

A: Thank you very much.

Q: -- for doing the interview.

A: Appreciate it.

Q: This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Melvin Galun.

End of Tape Three, Side A

Conclusion of Interview