

This is an interview with Lewis Lax on April 12, 1983 in Washington, DC. I'd like you to tell us a little bit about where you grew up, and your earliest recollections of life in Europe, and where you were when the war began, and your first recollections.

Well, I can practically recollect from my age of seven years old. And actually, we were-- I can't say I'm a different Jew than anybody else. We were Jewish. But it was an unusual story because Jews in Poland were not popular as agriculture, or farmers, or things like this. They were mostly, I would say, bookkeepers, and storekeepers, and business.

My father was an agriculture man. And he was running a big farm, big ranch, and we were five brothers and two daughters in our immediate family, plus cousins and other family, which you would say there would be about 30-35 people of immediate circle of family. We were very proud of being agriculture and farmers. And we spent all our summer vacations, mostly, on the farm. And we lived in the city. We-- beginning, I lived in the city of Lublin in Poland.

Was the farm near there?

I beg your pardon?

Was the farm near Lublin?

The farm was near Lublin. It was called Siedlecka and was near-- south of Lublin, near Zamosc. That's the biggest town. And we-- the kids were also, like I said before, in the grammar school we were going in the city of Lublin. And later on, to make it shorter, I went to Warsaw.

I-- being a young boy, I was a very-- mostly, I couldn't believe that there was a hatred going on between the Polacks and the Jews and things like this. And I couldn't believe what my parents used to tell me, that I should beware, and watch out, and be on the guard all the time, that they're very antisemitic, and they are against the Jews.

And being a young boy, I always used to disagree with my parents on it until I reached college and I found out that things are really different, and my parents were right. And I begin to see the true Polish people when we had to stay on the left side all the time standing up during lectures and during the--

What year was this?

I would estimate this was somewhere in the year 1933, '34, something like this. Because I just go by when the war broke out. It was just shortly before the war. They call it lawkowa. That means-- lawkowa means a bench. And we had to be on the left side, standing up. And of course, needless to say, we had a quota. You couldn't get in so easy.

But my parents were extremely, extremely poor education. The Jewish education and the education was the only thing what they said you can take with you. They prepared us all this time despite that we had fairly good living, good life. And we didn't starve from hunger or something like this. And later on, after we-- I graduated-- my oldest brother is still alive in Warsaw, by the way.

And after I did graduate and everything, then came around the recruiting for the army. And each man at the age of 21 had to go into the army. So when I went into the army, then, in 1939, the war broke out. And I was caught right in the army.

Of course, you know the history that it didn't last too long. It lasted about three weeks. And the Germans surrounded us because they were going with horses against tanks. And the Polish people was completely misled, their citizens and everything, and saying about the-- how strong they are and what everything. It was a strictly propaganda. And they were completely destroyed.

So I myself walked from-- when they took us prisoners, I'm sorry, I back up-- we-- the Germans let us walk with the highway going both sides. And they-- yeah. And they told us to walk towards Lublin. And I was taken somewhere in a

small town by the name Leczno. And in Lublin, they started gathering us together.

And on the way home, I decided to disappear. And I hidden myself in a stack of hay. And I waited until everything quiets down and disappear. Then I went home back to our farm where I lived. And I threw away my uniform and my-- everything that I had in the army. And I went back to work at home.

And by-- when I started, it didn't last long because all of a sudden, when I worked there, I got acquainted with a so-called German district-- I would say a councilman or something like this of this city. And he liked my work and everything.

So he gave me a so-called permit, a Besuchsschein, that I'm working with the-- for the German Army as a Jude. And I cannot be taken to any Zwangsarbeit. And Zwangsarbeit means work-- forced work. But I do voluntary work. And that kept me for a while.

Where was your family in the meantime? Were they with you on the farm or were they back in Lublin?

My family were-- my family, no. My family-- the farm was taken away from my father. And my family was in Lublin. They-- the town Lublin, you heard about it. And they lived over there. But it's-- little by little, when-- beginning when the Wehrmacht came in, they only had to put on the armbands. And they had to walk out. You had to take off your hat when you met a German soldier and things like this. You couldn't walk on the sidewalk.

Now, naturally, I-- anything what they announced, I was doing the opposite. And I felt that I'm going to come out much better that way. So being associated among the Polish people and being brought up on a farm, I didn't have the look for Jew, I always mixed.

And I didn't identify myself as a Jew at all. I've been always trying to be under the so-called iron papers, different looks. I didn't put on the armband or the star. I didn't put on the yellow star. I didn't took off my-- I didn't never took off my hat when I met Germans. I walked around like any Polish citizen.

And like I said before, I worked in a small town, Chodel, that's south of Lublin. And I've been-- from there, I've been smuggling to my parents by horse and wagon food to them. Because the city people didn't have any food. The Germans slowly, slowly took every day something away, less and less.

And I had to go in there and smuggling into them food and things like this. Well, that-- all of a sudden, one time, came the Majdanek people. We didn't know at that time that there Majdanek. We never heard of it. And they gathered up all the people from the town, every man. And they just round up everybody, took them on these big trucks, and hauled us away. And nobody knew where they hauled away and what they hauled away. And I got in with it.

These were the Poles as well as the Jews?

No, no, just the Jews.

Just the Jews.

Just the Jews.

How did they know? How did they find you?

Well, they took-- they had people, Polacks, going around the police with them, the city police. And they pointed out which house is Jewish and everything. And they and they had the Ukrainians. And Ukrainians were the helpers, the German helpers.

A couple of Gestapo men came with them. But they were rounding up the people. And the police pointed out to them where the Jews lived and who the Jews are. In a small town, you couldn't hide yourself. So they took me.

Was there any resistance? Did they come for you during the night or during the day?

No, during the day. They just surrounded the whole town and said, everybody has to get out. If we didn't get out, they shot him right on the place. There was one resistance of a young fellow, I remember, was about 18-year-old. And he resisted. And they shot off his whole mouth. And then they took him aside and they shot him right there, right on the spot.

Well, after that, I got into Majdanek. And Majdanek at that time was a concentration camp. But they didn't have any gas chambers. I got into Majdanek. When I was in Majdanek--

This was what, about 1940, '41?

Was probably somewhere in 1941, something like this. I don't exactly remember.

So you had lived relatively peacefully in the village and worked on the farm until then?

Right. Not on the farm, in a small town. I was employed as a dentist. So I was graduated. So anyhow, when they took me to Majdanek, and when I was in Majdanek, they put on the stripes and everything. And I was there.

The only problem I had was right in the beginning that I just wanted to send something, some notice to one of my friends. Because my parents weren't there. My parents were already gone. So when I had to figure out a way how to send a message where I am so they can interview and try to get me out. And this was right in the beginning.

So I've been working there. And our job was-- is to take all the jewelry, all the gold, and separate the diamonds, and things like this. The trains began to come back-- from where, we didn't know. Trains with clothing and trains with the jewelries, and all the so-called-- the [YIDDISH], what they called and everything.

And our job was to segregate the gold from silver, silver from gold, and this and this. Was all a separation. Well, anyhow, I was there about two weeks. And it started getting worse and worse. The food was very bad. I don't have to tell you. There was sawdust bread and a piece of margarine.

Were you living just with other Jewish prisoners? Or was it a whole mixture of people?

Yeah. No.

Just Jews.

It was Jewish prisoners. And I have seen that if I don't get out from there, it's going to be the end. So eventually--

Was-- everyone there was working then? There were-- in different jobs.

Yeah, different jobs, everybody's working. There wasn't like-- right away, they've been killing them all or something like that.

Was there some other industry going on besides sorting out these personal belongings?

Well, no, nothing specially at that time. It was just people-- just torturing people. They were shoveling dirt from one place to the other. They were fixing the roads and doing this. It wasn't anything constructive.

Constructive work, right.

No. But anyhow, the way the camp was is they had-- the first row were Ukrainians, the Belorussians, Russians, and the Ukrainians. The second row was Lithuanians. And the third row were the Germans. And they were always with barbed

wires, three fences, and barbed wires.

Now, I spoke a little Russian. So I knew the Ukrainians speak Russian. So I approached them. And I said, listen-- I had nothing to lose. I said, listen, you see all this gold, and all this jewelry, and everything? If you deliver a message here and there, and you bring me a note back, I will fix for you a package that you will be fixed for your life. Well, naturally, if they caught you, that was death penalty right away. Not death by shooting, but death by hanging you by the toes. And there was a couple of incidents like this where we had it.

What had the people done?

If you would steal the jewelry or something and they caught you stealing. Well, who needed jewelry? You couldn't eat it. But I used it as a mean of sending out a message. So I did succeed with the guy because they were very hungry for money. And you could buy them. And I gave them the address and everything. He delivered the message to one of my girlfriends and her mother, which we worked together there.

And they immediately interviewed with that-- like I told you, that councilman what I worked. And I had a special permit. And he somehow interviewed. And after four weeks, I got out from Majdanek, which was maybe 1 in 1,000,000, I would say. They honored because it was signed by the governor and was signed by Himmler.

So they honored this thing. And they let me out, which it was only, again, a short time. From there, when they started liquidating, I got noticed by that German guy that he says, I'm not going to be able to save you. You better start disappear. So I and-- the mother, by the way--

Where did you go after you left Majdanek? Did you go back to the village?

I went back to the village.

And worked as a dentist?

Yeah. And I worked for a short time. And then, like I said before, he gave me notice that he says, I wouldn't be able to save you because they are now out to liquidate the whole village, and the whole town, and everything. There wouldn't be one Jew left. And he stuck his neck out. And so I took the mother and I took her daughter.

By the way, she was a dentist too. She worked in the same town. And we went to Warsaw. From there, we went to Warsaw. When we came to Warsaw, I made a couple tricks-- trips for them because they lived in Pulawy.

And coincidentally, I had to hide them out because they were really looking Jewish. They couldn't stick their face out because the Polacks were worse than even the Germans. The minute they seen a Jew walking on the street, they reported immediately to the Gestapo, immediately took them, or they tried to blackmail them for money. And some were even dressed up with Gestapo uniforms, with SS uniforms, and with the-- they said this is-- they are the Gestapo. Turned out later, they're not, they're just blackmailers and tried to get money out of the Jews.

So to make the story short, I mean, we went to Warsaw. And I'd been hiding them out for about two years and paying off all kind of money-- with jewelry, with gold, with this. And finally--

What was happening in Warsaw during this period? Were people being forced into the ghetto, and you were staying outside?

I was staying outside. The ghetto already was formed you know in there. The wall was-- we was constantly standing in Warsaw in a special house, where this lady knew we were Jewish because she knew. It so happened an incident that the people what blackmailed us made contact. So you made contact to another place. And then they came in with another group and they blackmailed.

So I noticed that this is a setup, that they want all the time more money. So I finally disappeared. And I went to a lady in

Warsaw where I knew her and everything. And I said, look, I'm going pay so much in gold and so and so. And give us a room where to live. So they did give me a room. And we lived there. And everything was going fine.

I was working in all different kinds of business, from making alcohol, smuggling alcohol, to making cigarettes. I mean, we did all kind of things, and having a Polish partner, and things like this. And the life was going on. And we were constantly still on the aryish thing. Then I got involved with-- I had to change my names because always, they ask for passport. Then I got involved that I went into the church.

Let me ask you a question. At this point, did you know-- do you have any idea where your parents were, where the rest of your family was?

At this point, my parents were taken away. Everybody was already taken away to the-- where they were taken, I don't know. Because I was coming back to Lublin and I didn't find anybody. Lublin was liquidated one of the first towns.

So by the time you got out of Majdanek, they had already cleared Lublin? Or was it later?

No, no, it was a little bit later. When it-- it started moving pretty fast. So when I came back to Lublin, I didn't find anybody. Lublin was completely liquidated. And that's why the news came in to us, which was about 35 kilometers. 35 kilometers is maybe 20 miles. The news started coming in that they liquidated Lublin. And this is going to be next.

So this was about the time that your friend, the local governor, told you to hide?

To disappear, yeah. Well, the-- he wasn't a government, he was like an assemblyman, councilman. But anyhow, the story started moving on pretty rapidly. And when you say about Lublin, the parents were gone, all my brothers were gone. At least I knew.

But then they-- in Lublin, what they did-- Lublin was probably 130,000 Jews. So when they liquidated, they still-- next to Majdanek, they left a small little fraction of people there, which they need for work. And they told them, these people will survive. It's like a little ghetto they made. But didn't last too long. They liquidated everything there. So where was I? I was-- when I came to Warsaw.

You were in Warsaw. You had gone to the woman with the gold. And she was going to-- she gave you a room.

She gave me a room. And I'd been hiding out. And like I said, I've been conducting regular business. I couldn't get a work. And so finally, I had to get a new name. So I went into a church. And being a lieutenant in the Polish Army, I adopted a different name. At that time, my name was Joseph Laskowski. The name was changed. And he gave me a passport.

By the way, that was in the church. And I decide a new passport. And with this passport, I could have walked around. And I was never stopped. On the funny side, the guy what we-- was Polish and the cigarettes, what we-- the mission of the cigarettes factory was that we used to buy leaves on the farm, which we used to travel on the train, bring the leaves to town, and then shred them.

And then from shredding, we had about three, four women stuffing them. They used to be those stuffed cigarettes. And from this, we made a living, and a big living. Cigarettes was a big, important factor in manufacturing. So we sold the cigarettes. And that's the way we had money to survive.

Now, who were your partners in this venture, Poles?

There was a Pole what actually he looked like whole Jerusalem, believe me. He looked Jewish. Matter of fact, he was a big antisemite. And he was very mad because every time he walked, he was stopped. And when you were smuggling anything, you-- that was a bad, bad thing. They could arrest you. So he was very, very annoyed by that. And what more, he was that more-- he hated the Jews.

Why didn't he turn on you? Because it was too lucrative?

He didn't know. He didn't know.

He didn't know?

He didn't know, no. He didn't know that I'm Jewish. As a matter of fact, he came in and told me the stories. And I had to swallow all that stuff because with these antisemitic remarks and things like this, I had to swallow and keep quiet. And matter of fact, what happened later on, when we had to walk together, I says, you walk on one side of the street, I'll walk on the other side. Because if they stopped you, I don't want to be-- go with you. But he didn't catch on.

And this was going on for months, and months, and months. And finally, one night-- pardon me, let me back up. So anyhow, I got involved also with the AK. They called it Armia Krajowa.

The AK was the most fascist, the most righteous Polacks you ever got. Otherwise, they were bigger antisemites than even the Germans. They were really, really the right. Maybe you heard about the General Bourke in England, Anderson's army, what went out to England when Poland was liquidated.

So I got involved with these people just in order to survive. And I went to the underground with them. And I worked with them. So being in Warsaw close to about a year and a half, we tried to do everything under the this world to raise money. Because you needed money to buy ammunition. The ammunition was bought from the Germans and from the SS men.

And so there was a constant thing going on-- holding up banks, and taking money away from the Germans, taking ammunition, taking-- whole loads of ammunition were disappearing. So by being with them, I discovered, again, what the Polacks are. They're really Polacks.

And at that point, we-- I went into the ghetto. And we made contacts with the ghetto about smuggling in ammunition. Because I've been doing this job for them. And I felt-- I convinced my friendly Polacks that we can get a lot of money out from the Jews.

And this way, we can smuggle in. And that's where all the underworld already, the underground in the ghetto started smuggling in through the sewer canal. The canals tried to smuggle in weapons, and ammunition, and things like this. So we started--

This was before the fighting in the ghetto began then?

Before the fighting in the ghetto, before the fighting. So I've been crawling. I knew, practically, all the canals like I knew the streets in Warsaw. And we started smuggling this, and getting in, and getting out, and getting in. Because it was all fenced in. There was no way out. And in the ghetto, we made all kinds of contacts. And the ghetto already started liquidation. At first, they started on the children. First, they started on the sick people. And they started on the old people who would-- couldn't work.

Did you spend time in the ghetto?

Oh, yeah.

You would go in, and then you would surface, and then you would sneak out again.

And I'd sneak out again.

Where did you stay when you were there?

Well I had contacts with all these underground people and things like this. And I stood in front-- I lived in-- first in

Nowolipki before, when I was in Warsaw before, and studying, and going to school. So anyhow, the AK was very happy. And they-- because they really raised a lot of money.

Go ahead.

They raised a lot of money. And they were really searching, putting out propaganda, putting out papers and things like this. And the Gestapo was constantly after that. There were a lot of, lot of interesting incidents which I think they're important at this point, when I was outside, how we worked with the SS and the Gestapo. Because it proved that people will do anything for money. And we needed this-- start this revolution. So it's the only way was is to buy from the enemy all these weapons and all the ammunition.

Did the people in the ghetto know that you were Jewish? Or were you to them part of the Polish underground, not part of the Jewish underground?

First I was the Polish underground.

So the Jews thought--

First I was Polish.

--so everybody thought you were Polish, including the Jews?

Yeah, in the Polish underground. And we had all kind of contacts. Well, this was, again, going on for a while, like I say. And then, all of a sudden, when I was in home sleeping at night, we had the room rented, and that was on the Mokotowska 8, right next to a church and right close to the Gestapo. We were next to Gestapo building. We felt that this is the best way to hide because they not looking there.

Anyhow, somebody probably spilled the beans. And they arrested my girlfriend, and her mother, and myself into the Pawiak, which was the famous jail. You've probably read the Miller 12 or something. Anyhow, it was there. They arrested me and they took me over to the Gestapo. And they started interviewing. And they found out that I'm Jewish.

How did they find out?

By-- they integrated me and things like this. They found out that I-- no, pardon me, no, that was later. No, they took me to the Gestapo. And they took me to the Pawiak as a political prisoner. As the AK, I was the AK political prisoner. So when they took me there, they put me in to the jail. And in the jail, I found out that my brother, Herman, which disappeared from the city of-- [AUDIO OUT]

--and was in that jail, I found out.

Pawiak?

Pawiak. Then in Pawiak, my brother was shot because he was a electrician and a radio man. And he was working in the Pawiak there for the Germans. But they caught him by delivering scripts, what they called messages, from one cell to the other. And that's the reason they shot him. So this was maybe two weeks before I got there.

Anyhow, so I found out about this loss. So later on, they interrogated me for about three weeks, going through all kinds of methods that I should spill who my collaborators are, and who the people are, and what-- and how I work. And naturally, among the collaborators was also a doctor what belong to the AK.

And when he was putting on all these compresses and massages, when they brought me back from the interrogation, he whispered to my ear and he says, listen, if they ever ask you what you do, tell them that you are a locksmith. I didn't know why or what.

But anyhow, it so happened, after-- when I got out in the hospital, when I was thrown in in the cell, there came in a couple Gestapo men and says, what is your trade, and what do you do? And I said, I'm a locksmith. So they say, we're looking for a locksmith. So there was-- right in the jail was a conspiracy going on. So I went into work in a-- what they called the-- it was like a-- we made doors, we made locks, we made-- [AUDIO OUT]

You were working as a locksmith. Did you-- how did you learn that profession?

I had no slight-- I didn't have the slightest idea even how to hold a screwdriver, except that I'm handy from doing the dentistry. I was technical man's more like. And little by little, I learned there. And we kept on working.

And what we had is we had no modern equipment, as you know, because we had actually a transmission running on belts. One motor was pulling. And this was the whole factory. And all the prisoners, the political prisoners, were working there and things like this. And when it's meant to be, it's meant to be.

So anyhow, the transmission was coming out, originating in the basement. I don't know if you can picture that, and the wheel was in the basement, and then a belt was pulling one wheel, then another wheel. And it was like a transmission belt, old fashioned. So the belt fell down. The guard told me to go down and put down the belt.

So when I went down to put on a belt, being an old underground sewer canal man, I started thinking. I said, why can we not get out this way sometime or do something? And you got to be very cautious and very careful. So I started talking with the doctor.

And I started talking because he was the one with-- I trust him because he-- whatever he said was right. And he was a Polish doctor and been working there in the hospital. And he says, well, if you have an idea, he says, let's all go. And when we start figuring, I says, well, I know how to get into the canal. But I don't-- wouldn't know how to dig and how to get in there under the wall and really dig through that you hit the center of the sewer canal and go through there.

So again, I-- we were free of walking in the court of the jail-- work and everything. On the jail, they had a Jewish plumber. And he was limping. And at that time, I said, well, I'm the only one that I can talk to him because I knew a plumber should know what is going on.

So I went over to him. And I said, listen, I am Amhu. And he looks at me and he says, I don't want to talk to you. You're a Polack, an antisemite. I don't talk. And don't get me-- they going get me killed I said, but I am Amhu. I'm reciting in Hebrew. And I will tell you any brocha, anything you want.

He says, listen to me. I have a good idea. He didn't want it-- it was going on probably for a week like this. And I passed his eyes and I passed his eyes. And finally, I said, what have you got to say? He says, look, you know at the end what's going to be. After the Germans don't need you anymore, They're going kill you. So why don't you come and listen to me what I have to say.

So he finally gave in and he listened to me. And I gave him the plan. And I said, look, let's start digging here and here. Go down, you will see it yourself. I have a way, as long you know how to hit the sewer base, then we can get out. He couldn't believe it.

But later on, he says, I know every canal in Warsaw, he says. And maybe, he got an idea. Well, we were digging whenever we had to go to the toilet. We organized about six people who knew about the problem. And after three weeks and eight hours, we made it. And we cut it through.

And 12 of us went out. This was a historic thing. 12 of us went out. After we went out from there, I again joined up with the army. I don't know what happened to him. He disappeared. But I went in. And I got my papers and everything. We went out to Zoliborz. It's an outskirt of Warsaw.

When you say the army, you don't mean the Polish Army, you mean the underground.

The underground, I'm sorry.

The Polish underground?

The Polish underground.

You became Polish again?

Yeah.

OK.

Became Polish again. I went out there. And we went to the woods. From that time, we lived in the woods for a long period of time. Then we came back from the woods, I went back to the ghetto. And then the uprising-- the ghetto was burning.

How did you-- why did you go back to the ghetto?

I just had to go back because I had too much heard what is going on and everything. And the ghetto started-- at that time, the ghetto started burning and everything. We took-- we've seen that we lost everything. I came back again to the AK.

And then we lived from the woods for a long, long time. We had bunkers and everything. Germans knew that we are there. But they didn't dare to come. And they were scared to come into the woods. And they didn't-- they couldn't go with bombarding and things like this. But then--

What did you tell the people with the AK was the reason for your going into the ghetto?

Well, they-- I wanted, again, smuggling ammunition, and see if they need anything. So I was like a courier. So from then on, when the ghetto was liquidated and everything, we again took another year, and we lived in the woods. And we operated all our functions with the underground. And we had a lot of missions when we-- the underground with the AK was attached to the Allies, the English and the Americans. We had everybody there. It was an international camp later.

When you say that, do you mean that Americans were sneaking in?

Well, there were Americans volunteers and there were all kind of-- we had contacts with England. All the time, we had England-- General Bourke was directing from England. We had contacts. We didn't know the names. We didn't know who is who, who was a lieutenant, and who was a general, who was what. But this was-- it was operating.

Really, it was very exciting how it operated. And we were functioning. And our main missions was to destroy trains, destroy very important objects, military objects for the Germans. We followed the train with ammunition all the way down almost to Leningrad. But came to the last stop, we destroyed, something like this. And this was going on almost for a year.

And then you know about the uprising started, the Polish uprising. So I came back. They called us back to Warsaw for the uprising. And then we declared open war against the Germans. In the first three weeks, we been succeeding beautifully until the Germans started realize that it is not so tragic. Because we've been chasing them and they've been running. And they were found themselves between the Russian front, Russian lines, and our lines.

But then General Bourke declared that he doesn't want the Russians and he doesn't want the Germans. So when the Russians heard that, they said, well, let's start on Prague, city of Prague, which is right on the other side of the river Wisla, they call it the Vistula. And they stopped there on the other side.

And they said, let's wait. And we'll see what happens. And they occupied themselves in Prague. And they didn't move at

all. And it lasted about three to four weeks. The Germans started realizing that the Russians are not pressuring them.

They started coming back. And they bombarded, building by building. You know the history, what happened to Warsaw there. Everything was demolished. And we again were traveling from one part of the city to the other part. And they called it the Old Town, from the Old Town to the Middletown, from the Middletown to the river, side you know of the Vistula.

That was a tremendous, tremendous experience because we were cut off from food, we were cut off from ammunition, we had nothing. We lost again. So then we lost this uprising. Luckily, just about two weeks before that, the Allies declared that no matter where the Germans take a prisoner, has to be treated under the Geneva Convention.

And at that point, they took us prisoners of war. And I wound up in Stalag X-B Stalag X-B was near Bremen-Verden, you know Bremen is, on the port Bremen. And from there, I mean, we-- they took us by cattle wagons, trains, took us there without food, without anything. And we wound up there in the Stalag X-B.

The first four weeks, or maybe six weeks was terrible, really terrible. There's no food. We were completely with lice, and bugs, and no water, and no sanitary things, nothing too-- except what we had, some cabbage soup, which you couldn't find a piece of cabbage. And we had the sawdust bread again, a piece of margarine. And that's the way we had to survive.

Anyhow, the situation changed after the-- we were registered in Red Cross, with the Red Cross-- United States Red Cross. And we had a number. When the number came, our packages started coming in from the Red Cross.

You were still a German prisoner?

Yeah, a German prisoner was in. But we started getting Red Cross packages, what had 80 cigarettes. Well, 80 cigarettes was like \$8,000 today. And plus, when we had all the candies, and we had food, and cans, and things like this, things started looking up a little bit better.

When was it that you were taken to Stalag X-B? What period was this?

1944. 1944.

Late?

Late in the summer or something like that. And from there on, things started looking up. And I speak in German.

Did you know that the Americans were in France already? Did you know any of the progress of the war?

No. We didn't know. We didn't know until we really actually came to the Stalag X-B. And when we started this international market-- when you say international market, we had the French, we had the Italians, we had the Russians. And we were there. So international-- the prisoner-- I mean, not the prisoner-- the camps were divided only with barbed wire. But still, we smuggled from one to the other.

Then if you like me to mention it, the most organized prisoners were the French one because they had printing machines, they had radio, they had television. We knew later on what was going on. We-- later on, we know the progress, that they landed, they already coming. But we didn't know how long it's going to take.

So at that point, things actually for me, personally, were much better because I didn't use the cigarettes. And then I started working again in a hospital. And by working in a hospital, I was treated good because I had a lot of-- given to me a lot of food or something like this, the food I was bringing in to the camp.

And then, to our luck-- well, they transferred us from Bremen further to Hamburg. In Hamburg, I started working again in a hospital. And then I was an interpreter for the Polish prisoners because I spoke German. So I was interpreter. So

usually, they would assign a guard, a German guard. And they would assign 10 prisoners with me. And I was the interpreter. And that's the way we used to-- was supposed to carry out the work.

Did the Germans know that you were Jewish? Or did they think you were Polish?

No, the Polish didn't know, even. They would know, they would probably be the first one to report me. So i-- it's a funny incident. Because when you come to Hamburg, in Hamburg, either you had 12 months of rain or 12 months of sunshine. We hit rain. And it was really raining all the time while we were there in Hamburg stationed. And it was cold.

Our counting was always at 5 o'clock in the morning. We had to stay until the commander would come out and get the count. So we were standing about two hours in the rain. And it was cold. And we were hungry and things like this.

But I had a guy that was cooking for me and-- because I paid him with cigarettes. But the idea when I was-- when this was going on and having cigarettes, it all started, actually, with a cigarette, when that guard was taking me in once to work for the hospital. And it was raining. I would puff two cigarettes. And then I would throw down in the water and crush it.

And that guard, his name was Alfonse Braunas, I remember like today. He says, [GERMAN]. So I said to him, why? He says, you're the most stupid guy I ever seen? I said, why, what's the matter? He says, you know that I'm hungry for a puff of a smoke. And you take a half a cigarette, and you crush that cigarette, and you don't let me have it?

I says, you, a guy, an enemy what the-- takes me to work with a bayonet? I'm a prisoner of war. I says, why should I give you? I says, if I had poison, I would give you, but not a cigarette. And he says, [GERMAN]-- he says, I'm not so bad, he says with me. If you want to cooperate with me, I will cooperate.

He says, what's bothering you? I says, the first thing what bothers me that you have a rifle and a bayonet in my back. So he says, if I take the bayonet off and the rifle, will you give me a smoke? I says, yes. So anyhow, that's how it started.

To make the story short again, he became my best friend. He became such a friend that I mean, I can't sit here and talk for hours that on Weihnacht, which is Christmas, and he thought I'm Polish, he would come and bring a suit for me. And he would take off his uniform, I would take off my prisoner uniform, and we would go to the opera, we'd go somewhere else. It's unusual. You wouldn't believe it.

It turned out, later on, that this guy, Alfonse Braunas was in the navy. And he was thrown out from the navy. And that was a punishment to watch prisoner of wars because he was married to a Jewish girl. And he didn't want to relieve the name of where she is. He was hiding her up. And all the money that he made from the prisoners and doing the business with the French, and the Russian, and this, and this, he took it and was hiding out her, and paying off.

And he would never relieve the name because I know it's a fact. Because later, after the war was out, and we were liberated by the English, Schleswig-Holstein-- that's up north, that's right-- Husum, the town was named Husum-- we were liberated. And I came back. The English gave me a permit to look for my family. I came back down to Hamburg. And I met him.

And a matter of fact, I said, now, you're going to be shot and everything. I said, stay to the wall because I don't like you as a Nazi. And he says, if you want to shoot me, he says, go ahead and shoot me. And I was attached back to the English, to the English Army as a Polish subsidiary army. We had written on our left side Polonia, but we were attached.

I got acquainted with a Captain Weiner down there from Vienna, one captain in the English Army. And he gave me a permit to go and look for my family. Because at that time, the-- Germany was divided in the Russian zone, and the French zone, and the American zone. And I went to the American zone with another friend, another Jewish prisoner, which I found in the camp. We knew both we are Jewish, but we never talked to each other.

And when I came, first, I hit a town by the name Zeilsheim, you know, Frankfurt-am-Main. Frankfurt-am-Main-- it's on

the outskirts of Frankfurt-am-Main. And over there, we had enough of it. We didn't want to go back to the English Army. We didn't want to go back to the army. So we both walked in.

And we said, we want to identify ourself as Jews. And there was a UNRRA director. And he looks at us. And of course, we were fed well after a year. And we looked-- and had the uniforms and everything. We didn't look like we are Jews at all. So he says to me, he says, oh, we got a lot of Jews. Everybody wants to be Jewish now. He says, you must be the biggest Nazi in the world.

And he says, I'm not going to take you in as a displaced person. And I don't want you here. And get the hell out of here. I said, look, I will recite Hebrew to you. He says, we have a lot of people like this now. We don't trust you. Get out. It's impossible. You couldn't survive. Nothing.

So I said, OK. His name was Adam, my friend. I says, Adam, let's go. We go somewhere else. We had food, we had everything. We had a car. And so I said, let's drive somewhere else. We'll find another camp.

As I walk out the steps from that building where the director's office was, a guy grabs me, he starts hugging me, and kissing me, and he says-- my name was Ludwig-- he says, Ludwig, you are alive? I said, yeah, you see I'm alive.

I said, who are you? He says my name is Gartenkraft. I says, Gartenkraft? Well, who is Gartenkraft? He says, look, don't fool around with me. I were holding you on my hands to the bris. Your father and my father were the best friends.

So in a nasty way, I said, well, would you please go in and tell that idiot down there, that American UNRRA director that I am a Jew? He said, what kind of an [YIDDISH] guy are you talking? I says, go on and tell him. He says, he's a good friend of mine. I says, well, go in and tell him that. So he went in. And he told him. And since that, I became Jewish. That's the end of the short story. But that's it.

I appreciate it very much.

Thank you.

OK, guy, cut.

Did your--

Well, we were-- actually, when we came into Germany, and my friend took me in to the director, and he identified me, and I became Jewish, OK. And I was actually there stuck in Zeilsheim in the camp, was a displaced person. And immediately, after the shock and everything what was from the whole episode in the war, I wanted to get involved in some functions, in some work, and help out all these displaced persons.

And so I became organizing a dental clinic. Now, that's an episode for itself because when the Allies came in, first, I was with the English, then when I was with the Allies, the Americans felt, don't disturb the Germans, and don't do this, and don't do that. And you're not supposed to be against them because they were actually only following orders. And they were military men and things like this.

Which I felt just the opposite-- it's not true because I have seen the facts. And I've seen that-- what the Germans and what the Nazis did to our people. So I felt, there's no use to argue about this. But get involved in deep work. And I worked about 16, sometimes 18 hours just to try to forget what is going on.

Immediately, when we came in, I came into that director, which later on became a very close friend and everything, and I said, look, I see a lot of people from-- they weren't nourished properly and everything. When I examined their teeth, I said, they shouldn't-- they need dental service. And they need help. And I said, food alone wouldn't do. They will lose all their teeth because they had a lot of bleeding gums, teeth practically falling out.

I says, I want to start a clinic here. There was an MD, a doctor, an English doctor by the name Weinstein. And he agreed

with me. And so we needed to equip our clinic. We didn't have any money. There was no funds.

So I said, well, I have a good idea. Why don't we take away from the Nazi dentists equipment and confiscate the equipment? Oh, no, that's not the American way. We cannot do that. We cannot do.

First of all, you got to find a Nazi was a Nazi way from 1933. Because if he became a Nazi later, he was forced into the thing. And I said, well, I'm going to do some research and find a Nazi from 1933.

Where did I turn? I turned back to my friend Alfonse Braunus, which was German, and he was against the Nazis, and everything. And I wrote to him a letter, so and so, and here and there, and that don't worry about me, I'm fine, I'll keep contact with you. But you got to help me. And he says, what do you want? What shall I help you with? How can I help?

I says, I want you to dig out for me some Nazist dentist. He knew the whole story already. I says, you got-- it's because I need some equipment. I need the two chairs. I need dental chairs. I need equipment, things like that. So he says, OK, you'll hear from me here. He made contact with me and he gave me a couple of names.

And by giving me those names, I started so-called in Yiddish schnorring this equipment. And wherever I brought, they rejected. They didn't want it. They didn't want it. Finally, we got the two chairs. And we got in the clinic, we got the clinic started. And I worked over there in the clinic for a long time. It took about three to four months. This was somewhere in the 1940-- at the end of 1945.

And everything was going good. I organized-- I had another friend, a dentist came from Russia. And we really did a lot of work. We dug ourselves into deep, deep, deep, and more deep into work. And we constantly kept busy. And all of a sudden, I received from the American consul that I'm supposed to go to the United States. I didn't know what and how.

Had you asked to go to the United States?

Yes. Well, I didn't-- at that point, I didn't remember. But while I was working in camp, a American soldier, a fellow from Brooklyn, used to come in. Whenever he had free time, he came. And he willingly spent time with all the Jewish refugees there, the DP. And he always met with me because I always talked to him.

And I says, look, I have somewhere relatives in America. I know about it. I don't know their-- I know their names is Lax. But I don't know their-- where they live and what. But I know that I have in America some relatives.

So he said, well, I don't know. He says, right now, I'm in Germany. But one day, he came in, and he says to me, you know what? I'm going back to America. He says, you mentioned to me that you have some relatives. How about, he says, giving me the name? And when I get, I'm going to start looking for them.

Well, he-- I says, here, this is the name. I gave him the name and everything. And he went to the United States. And I didn't hear. And all of a sudden came a letter from a cousin of mine, which we were kids when we were in Poland. His name was Charles Lax.

And he wrote a letter. I received the news through the radio from some soldier who came back to the United States. And he says, you're on this and this camp and you're living. And he says, I want a letter, want to hear from you. Well, the simcha in how I was helping, everything, and--

Where was he from?

He was from Brooklyn, New York. And when I came-- when I heard that news, I didn't know how this actually happened. But later on, I found out from my relatives and my cousins in New York and my cousins that he announced it on the Jewish Hour that the name-- fellow named Lewis Lax is looking for his relatives in the United States.

It wasn't heard by my cousins or my relatives, but was heard about a neighbor. And her name was Sikora. She lives now in the Bronx. A neighbor of Sikora heard that. When she came in running into her, she says, aren't your family name

Lax? Don't you come from Laxes? She says, yeah, we come from Laxes, what's the matter? She says, there's a fellow announced here that he wants to make contact. He's in Germany.

And that's the way I made a contact with the United States. And it was beshert, and meant to be. And I was waiting and waiting. We were corresponding. But the FBI sent me a letter that I have to immediately, in two weeks, to go to United States. And I said, I don't have an affidavit. I'm waiting-- you don't need an affidavit.