

Holocaust Survivor

Oral Histories

EMANUEL TANAY

March 16, 1987

Copyright c1987 by the Board of Regent, University of Michigan--Dearborn

All rights reserved. No part of this transcript or videotape may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the University of Michigan--Dearborn.

Could you tell me your name, please and where were you born?

My name is Emanuel Tanay and I was born in Vilna, which at that time when I was born wasn't Poland, it was Russia when my mother was born and it was Lithuania when my mother went to secondary school and it was Lithuania, capitol of Lithuania Republic now, but it was Poland when I was born.

Were you raised in Vilna?

No, I, my parents who were dentists, moved to a small community just south of Krakow called Miechow and that's where we lived throughout my childhood and that's where I was in 1939 when Poland was attacked by Germany at the outbreak of the war, and I remained there until I went into, under false papers, but I was in the ghetto, you know there were various stages and when a ghetto was formed I was in Miechow in the ghetto.

What do you remember about your life in Miechow before the war started?

The life for Jews in a small town was really quite different depending on, I don't know what else to call it, but your socioeconomic status. Most Jews in small towns were rather poor and quite orthodox, quite separated from the Polish population, from the Polish culture. There was a handful of people like in our town who were, who were professionals like my parents, I think there were probably four in our town. Four families like that. So, that's a very important aspect of the Jewish experience in small towns. And that would have been true even in the larger towns of Poland.

Now, how large was your family?

My family was very large both on the size of my, on the side of my mother and my father. My father's family was a very well known Rabbinical family, in fact there is a well known, I guess you would call it an equivalent almost of a saint, zaddik, the Radoshitser Rav [spelling from Encyclopedia Judaica, c1971] was my great, great grandfather and they all lived around Keltzer which was the capitol of the Province Voyavootsfoyed in Polish. My mother came from Vilna and there was and her maiden name was Kovarsky and that was a very large family of Kovarskys in Vilna. So these two, uh two large families certainly are in my childhood memories.

So you had aunts, uncles and cousins...?

There were seven, my mother had seven siblings and my father had six siblings and two sisters of my father emigrated just before the war, one of them, the other one a long time before to Australia and they survived. My mother had three sisters who survived, which is pretty unusual, two of them survived the massacre of Jews in Vilna and one of them survived in Forest as a partisan, Clara Kovarsky and the other one, Sonya, survived in the infamous camp Stutthof, which is again quite unusual for two women to have, to have survived. Another sister of my mother's um, survived in, in, in Israel, they were in a, they went to Israel in the late 20's one of them and there was another one that went there in the early 30's.

Um, what about your immediate family?

My immediate family consisted of my parents and a five-year younger sister and myself. They, my mother my sister and I did survive, my father was killed in the camp Plaszow in Krakow, in fact in contrast to so many others, I know exactly how

my father was killed and by whom. That was described to me uh, was the manner of death for so many other survivors of their loved ones is pretty anonymous, but in my case, I know that Amon Goeth was the one who executed my father for a specific type of an event that had occurred.

Can you tell me that story?

My father was a dentist at a camp known as Lotnisko that is a Polish word for airport, but it was a, a camp in Krakow where Jews were working. They were building the various, you know, it had to do with, with the German air force, there was a camp, a labor camp, it was on the general supervision of the Gestapo and the head of that camp was Plaszow, but the Lotnisko was separate because the Jews worked there. And my father was a dentist there and also was in charge of sort of the health. He was the health officer. And he did have an actual office there. And he had an assistant that was working with him who I knew very well from the, from home. He brought him from Miechow to Krakow to that camp and Leon developed typhus. Now the standard treatment for typhus in camp was immediate execution. And my father having had this separate office did hide Leon in that office in the hope that he would recover and would not be executed. This was discovered and Goeth, Amon Goeth, uh came to the camp and executed Leon and intended to do the same with my father. The only thing was that the commander of the airport who was of the same rank as Goeth did not permit him to do it. There was a confrontation, a real confrontation that was really a well known event at the camp. And my father remained there, however the commander went on vacation and then

Goeth came and got my father, took him to Plaszow. My father attempted to delay it in the hope that uh, the commander would come back, and uh told Goeth a story that he had a lot of gold in Miechow and in fact, Goeth and my father, a few others, went to our home and they were digging for the gold and didn't find it because there wasn't any and then my father was executed by Goeth. That was told to me by people who observed it, after the war.

Just a question about that, did you know of or did your father know of Oskar Schindler when they were in camp?

Oh yes, my father knew Schindler and I was not quite um, aware of it after the war but I heard about him at the time. You know, at the time when my father was in that camp, um, I was in a monastery. And the monastery was very close by to the, it was just outside of Krakow, Krakow and uh, it was very close by to that camp where my father was. And there was a German there by name Schwartzner, he was from Innsbruck, who uh, who was very helpful to my father. And he would take my father out of the camp and hire a, you know like a taxi, but it was a horse driven vehicle, and bring him to the monastery which was unheard of. Uh...

To be with you?

To visit with me. Now, that was possible uh, cause you know there's another interesting aspect of it. My father and like myself, spoke fluent Polish, which not all Jews did. In Poland, in fact, very few Jews could speak Polish in a manner that you wouldn't recognize them as Jews. Another thing was that my father did not appear like a Jew so that he could get out and he did have false papers, Polish papers even

though he was in a camp. So he was always, his hope was that if anything developed dangerous, he would immediately leave the camp and live on the Aryan side. So he was sort of playing for time. However, he miscalculated, but he was being helped by this particular German, Schwartzter. And sometime later down the line when I had to leave the monastery and was in great danger, uh, I knew where Schwartzter lived in the German district of Krakow and found him and he helped me to stay with him a few nights until I found some other way so, here was a unique situation uh where a German was helping a Jewish youngster or was helping my father.

What do you think would have happened to Schwartzter had he been discovered?

Oh, had he been discovered, he would have no doubt gone to concentration camp. He might not have been executed like a Pole, a Pole who would have assisted a Jew would have been shot on the spot, but a German most likely would have been just sent to a concentration camp.

Do you think he knew that?

Oh, he knew that, no doubt about it. Yes. Well, he wasn't the only German who has uh, helped my family for example, in the ghetto, in Miechow, there was one time a liquidation of the ghetto. See there were various stages, there were various liquidations and uh, one time my parents were caught with a liquidation, they couldn't get out of the ghetto, but adjacent to our house in the ghetto, but sort of separate from it, was the German post office. I mean the post office for the town and it was operated by two or three Germans who were in charge of it. And then it was Polish people worked in the post office and the postmeister, the man who was

in, the German who was in charge of it, who would come to my parents as a patient, even in the ghetto, did hide my mother, my father and my sister. I was away at that point. My parents located me somewhere else and he did hide them for two days in his, in his apartment, which again if discovered, and his assistant was a vicious Nazi who went around the ghetto and if he had the slightest opportunity, he tormented and sometimes shot Jews, if he would have discovered that, uh, no doubt that German would have been, I don't even know his name, I don't know who he was, uh, but I know him, I remember him clearly, I would almost recognize him on the street, he was called the postmeister, uh, but uh, so he was,...assisted too. These kinds of things did happen.

Let me take you back for a second to before the war again and we'll come back to this.

Was your family religious?

No. My family was not religious even though my uh, father's family was a well known rabbinical family, in fact my great grandfather was the Radoshitser Rav known as the zaddik from Radoszyce and uh, there were many religious leaders in the past, but my father and my mother were not religious.

So you went to public school in...

Oh, yes, I went to public school and in fact, in my school to my recollection, I was the only youngster, particularly the only boy who looked like the rest of the kids. You see, I didn't have peos, I didn't wear you know a hat [he gestures] and I looked like the other kids which created an interesting kind of situation. I spoke Polish perfectly, I didn't go to cheder you know the school that all the Jewish kids

immediately as the school finished, the Jewish kids had to run because they had to make it to the cheder, the religious school which had greater to do with the fact the Jewish youngsters didn't do so well in school. In the Polish school, because they didn't have time for homework, because they were so involved with the cheder in the small towns and one of the activities after school as I remember was for the Polish kids to chase the Jewish kids and taunt them, beat them up, do variety of things of that sort. I was exempt from that because I looked too much like them. But I would always get involved in it and say now come on fight with me too as a youngster. This is a very vivid memory in my mind. I also had the opportunity sort of to be unrecognized even as a child. In other words, I could go someplace and people, Poles, would not know that I am a Jew. You know, the greeting in Poland, between two Poles, was a religious one. You know Poland was a very Catholic country. If you met somebody on the street, or in a village or so, you didn't say good morning, but you said a religious type of greetings. Now you didn't say that to a Jew, you see. Now, that wouldn't be true of me. If I walked someplace or so if I, I would be greeted in that manner, because there was the notion in those small towns particularly, that the Jew can always be recognized. If a Jew said good morning, you right away knew from the accent that he was a Jew even if you didn't know from his appearance. You looked at the Jew, you right away knew in Poland that this was a Jew, which was critical later on, because you know, when people later on retrospectively ask, why didn't Jews fight or hide or whatever, it was very difficult because Jews were so readily recognized as Jews. Which incidently, the Germans

couldn't do. See Germans could not recognize a Jew as a Jew, but a Polish person would usually recognize a Jew right away.

But you as a child, identified yourself as a Jew, though?

Oh, clearly. I always identified myself as a Jew, even though often, if I chose not to for some reason, out of fear or whatever or some situation, I could not to. Most Jewish kids didn't have that, that option even by the manner they were dressed. I mean clothing itself right away gave you away. Speech gave you away as a Jew, your habits, you know even gestures and so on. That's, you know this is a whole area in itself that is very difficult for, I think, American Jews and non-Jews to recognize. This tremendous separation that existed in eastern Europe, in Poland particularly, between the Jewish and the non-Jewish community.

Was your family at all observant, did you celebrate the sabbath on Friday night?

Oh yes, yes, yes. No not Friday night, but we celebrated the major holidays and I would go uh to the synagogue. We celebrated, for example, Yom Kippur, we would spend, my father and I would spend in a synagogue and, it was you know in my town, my father was sort of viewed with some degree of ambivalence by the Jews. They were proud of him because he was quite assertive and came to their assistance many times, uh and they called him sometimes "the goy." Sort of disparaging in some way, but when we went to the synagogue, my father knew how to daven, how to pray you know, and the term pray doesn't quite convey the meaning of daven because this was not only uh praying was a skill and my father was very adapt at it and they were always amazed, I recall that, that it would be sort of a certain admiration for my

father because he spoke Hebrew from his childhood and spoke Hebrew not only that Lushen Kodesh, the language as it was spoken in relation to praying, but he also knew the modern Hebrew.

Were you Bar-mitzvah?

Yes, I had Bar Mitzvah in, there was already during you know, I was born 1928 so I was Bar Mitzvah when it was very dangerous to be Bar Mitzvah, but it was at a synagogue and I recall it very vividly.

Do you remember where you were when the war started?

Oh, clearly. I remember it very vividly, uh I, in fact, when the war started we were in Miechow and there was a party in my house in my parent's home for the Polish military who were in our town. Their high-ranking officers because they were setting up the defences when the war broke out. And I remember clearly that the officers revealed to my parents that there would be a retreat up to the River Vistula and then no more. That'll be the real defense. And my parents, based on that information decided to go east and we started, we abandoned our home, that's in September of '39 and tried to go across... uh go east and escape the advancing German armies. We never succeeded we spent maybe few weeks in this effort maybe two weeks maybe I don't remember exactly and then ultimately we returned.

Had you or your parents heard anything about what was happening in Germany, were they frightened about the invasion?

Oh, there was a tremendous fear about the war, the fact that the Germans would be coming and we were certainly aware of the anti-Jewish measures in Germany. If

fact, in our home, lived an engineer from Germany who was expelled because he was, his parents were of Polish backgrounds. You know that Hitler expelled all the Jews who were not born in Germany or whose parents came from the east. So we were pretty much aware of what was happening in Germany, but you see here, one has to make a distinction between the extermination measures, if you will, and the measures that were simply persecution. Polish Jews were very much accustomed to being persecuted, oppressed. Sure that was a little more, but it wasn't all that different.

So when you heard those stories, was there any great alarm, or was it just "here it comes again...?"

There was alarm, I recall you know as a youngster overhearing my father talking to a tailor who came to the house. You know in those days uh, the tailor would come to the house to make my father's suit and the tailor was a German Jew who spoke broken Polish who was expelled from Germany. This would be early in, sometime in '39. And my father talked to him about, you know I was overhearing it, about the activities in Germany and what will happen if the Germans come in etc. etc... And I recall the tailor saying to my father, oh, we'll make it, Jews have a hard skin. Twarda Skóra. And I remember as a youngster, I must have been what 10, 11 at the time, I took it very literally. I somehow thought Jews have a different kind of skin, I mean is it more... you know harder [they both chuckle] you know I didn't quite... he was using it as a metaphor, but that isn't how I perceived it. See there was the

notion, all right these are oppressive measures, but we are used to it. That's been the Jewish experience. This is a little worse, but it's not gonna be all that different.

How long after you returned to your home did things... was before things started to change, get bad. Do you remember the Germans marching in, for example?

Uh, oh you see when we came back to Miechow, the Germans were there already. In fact, it's an interesting moment. When we come back to Miechow, my father, my mother, my sister and I, at that point the Polish population was looting Jewish homes and just as we came in, and our home was a very nice home, in fact, I believe was one of the nicest, if not the nicest home in town, they were about to enter our home when we arrived and since my father was educated in Vienna and spoke perfect German, he solicited the help of some Wehrmacht officer who prevented the looting of our home. So you know, at first, strange as it may sound, it was a German who protected our home from being ransacked. So in the beginning there was a great deal of fear but there was nothing that unusual and however that slowly changed. You see, people in this country sometimes have the notion that we in Poland suddenly were confronted with this terrible prospect of being annihilated. Well that wasn't the case at all. It came very slowly, in steps. At first, you know there was no difference how the population was treated, the general population, and how Jews were treated. Then somehow Jews were singled out. For example, in our town, the first major event against Jews occurred when a kind of a detachment was brought into town which was called the Schwartzers, the blacks. They were, there was a unit

wearing black uniforms and they were not Germans. They were Lithuanians. And they were put in charge of dealing with Jews.

What did they do?

They would gather Jews take them to... make hard work of all kind. Be abusive, and as time went on, they would shoot someone for an infraction of a minor nature, you know, at some point you had to wear an arm band if you did not have an arm band, you got shot if you were not wearing it. Jews could not go outside of town at first, and then the ghetto was formed, then the ghetto was closed. So you see, there were progressive incremental type of measures that were introduced until ultimately the deportations begun. And even then, we were not aware of what was going on. You know, anyone in 1942 reading the New York Times would know more than my parents knew at the same time, living there. The, the communication was virtually nonexistent. Let's say, to find out what was happening in Krakow, which was only 40 km from Miechow, you know, I travelled this morning to get here from my home more than 40 km, uh, was really a major feat. So there was no communication. Uh, you didn't know what was happening, even when the deportations started, our community hired a Pole to follow the trains to find out where they were taking them. And he came back telling us, uh, I overheard this... my parents were discussing it, uh, he lost the track. He followed it as far as he could and then he couldn't, he didn't know where the trains were going. Whereas, if you read the... now I know from retrospect having seen it, if you read the New York Times at the same time, you would know where they were going.

Um, when the ghetto was formed in Miechow, was it in Miechow?

Yes. The ghetto was formed in Miechow. A number of streets were designated as that's where the Jews will live. So, we had to move from our home into uh, another home, which was still relatively nice since again, as I mentioned before, my parents were dentists, they had German patients. That is, there were only at that time, I don't think there was any other dentists in town, than my parents. I think they might have brought in someone, somebody else, but I'm not sure. My parents were the only dentists, so the Germans also would come in, even into the ghetto to have their teeth worked upon by my parents. For example, the chief of the Gestapo, a dreadful type of a character who everyone was terrified of, would come in and have his teeth worked upon by my parents, which meant that we had to have, my parents had an office and sort of larger quarters than most people.

How old were you when the ghetto was formed?

I would have, I was 14. I was 14 when the ghetto was formed. You see, again when you ask about dates, you know I have given great deal of thought to reconstruction of these events and it's very difficult to pinpoint exactly the dates, but it occurred in 1942, which I would have been 14 years old.

Do you remember how it felt as a 14-year-old having to leave your home?

You know the amazing thing is that life goes on particularly for, for, for children, even under those dreadful circumstances. You know, I do recall that my friends and I would play in the ghetto and uh, you know there were certain activities that were exciting. Adventuresome even. You see, it's not all... uh, there was socializing

activities too. Life went on even though it seems all so dreadful. But people played, people even got married, at first, and had children and so on. Life went on.

When you um, what did you take with you when you left, did you take anything?

When we moved, we took most of our belongings, again I, in our case it was a little different, because we moved into smaller, but quite comparable quarters. Now many other families, people would move one family in one small room or maybe two families in one small room, you see. Uh, maybe an apartment would be divided between two or three families, so that was pretty, pretty difficult. You see Miechow, which was a small town, was a county seat. Now there was some other small towns where Jews, where there were no ghettos. Those Jews were brought into Miechow, so you had this small ghetto which, incidentally at first there was nothing that separated it from the rest of town. You just simply, they said, Jews have to live in these streets. Once you were there, suddenly one day they put up walls separating the ghetto from the rest. But they didn't do it right away.

Brick walls, or?

Brick walls. They built, they built a brick wall, large brick wall with a small gate that opened up and the ghetto was completely cut off from the rest of town. But, they didn't say you couldn't leave it. You could leave, you couldn't leave it after 6:00, there was a curfew, but up to a certain point, you could just walk into town and walk and so on. Then there came another measure. Jews could not leave the ghetto at all except by special permit, o.k.? So again I'm stressing that incremental nature of

all these measures. It wasn't a sudden type of, it all was dumped upon us. It was done in a very slow fashion.

Were you still going to school?

No. There was no, no official school. I did go, I had a teacher, but that was illegal, and in fact it was punishable by death. Almost everything you did was punishable by death, o.k? So, you know it's interesting how children, youngsters react. I remember that I and my friends would count how many death penalties we would incur for what we were doing. For example, we would go outside of the ghetto without an arm band, after you were 13 you had to have an arm band. So, it was death penalty for walking without an arm band, death penalty for leaving the ghetto, death penalty for being after 6:00. Or whatever the time was. At one time it was 8:00 then it became 6:00. Uh...

Was there rationing as well, do you remember the rations?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You know, rationing, it was in fact a food uh was a tremendous problem because you see even the Polish population had starvation type of rationing and the Jews were given virtually no food. So you had to, through black market activities bring the food from the Polish side into the ghetto. And that was again, very, very difficult and once again, punishable by death. For example, bread that wasn't, that black type of, and I don't mean black bread like you might think of it here, but it was sort of a watery black ration bread. If you had any other bread, and it was found in your home, you would be shot for that. Meat, you would get shot for that, there was one well-known character, a Gestapo character, who would come into

the ghetto and at random walk into a house and if he found certain things, he would shoot the person who was the head of the house for this infraction. And all that, you know this, but there again that increased. That wasn't right away like that. But then it would happen. There was a tremendous terror when one of those characters would walk into the ghetto which was you know, teeming with humanity in the streets, there was no traffic of any kind, uh, the street would be deserted. There would be nobody. And he would just walk through the street you know, uh not, no sign of life.

Was there disease?

In our ghetto there wasn't that much disease. There was oh, episodes of typhus, and incidentally, my father was in charge of sanitation, uh in fact on his arm band [he gestures] that he had I recall that written that he was somehow the sanitation commissar or something like that, I forget the name. I remember also the big confrontation my father closed the mikveh you know even in the ghetto, the ritual bath, mikveh was in existence, and when there was an epidemic, and it was sort of illegal was attached to the synagogue and the Jews would do it. You know, they continued to try to hold on and because the sanit... there was, it was a danger and I remember one time my father closed it and there was a tremendous anger against him for closing it because there was an epidemic at the time. But the epidemics in our ghetto were controlled, and there was no, I don't recall any major like in Warsaw ghetto I know there were major epidemics of typhus. That was not the case.

How long was your family together?

We, a number of times we separated. You see the liquidations of the ghetto. Let's see the ghetto, I am assuming at it's height was 6,000 people in our town. Then there would be a liquidation and it would be smaller and smaller and smaller. But when they did have one of those liquidations, children, women, were the ones who were first deported. So, when you found out that that was happening, my parents would either hide me or send me someplace or my sister. There were a variety of ways where we had to be separated, then we will come back to the ghetto. Because you know, they would liquidate the ghetto, then Jews would come back, and things would go back to normal. Maybe for six months or, and so on. [pause] So there were a number of such separations. But the ultimate breakup of the, of the family occurred sometime in 1942. That is, my, I went to the monastery, my mother was on false papers and my father went to the camp. See the, the danger was greatest to children. Children were the first ones to go. There was the notion that able bodied men or women who could do work would be spared. And it was all playing for time. We all understood that something terrible was happening, but there was the notion that any moment Germans would be defeated and we would be liberated. You know, America would come into the war. I mean there was the notion like for example, if they only start the war in the beginning with England, they will never make it. Okay. Or if they start war with Russia, I remember we thought, oh, that's, that would be the end of them right away.

Um, your parents sent you to a monastery, what were the circumstances surrounding that?

It was shortly before the ghetto was liquidated and my mother, in contrast to my father, was sort of obsessed with a notion that something terrible is happening. She couldn't quite put in words, but she was full of fear and she talked to people she knew. Polish people. What can be done, my father didn't quite believe it. He had more of a notion that uh, that these were all rumors, uh Germans are civilized people, I mean here there are excesses because of some individual situations. So he was much more uh, given to the idea that things will work out whereas my mother was full of anxiety and she was the one who arranged with some woman that she knew who, who had a, my mother used to buy, it was a bakery on the Polish side. And my mother could leave the ghetto, again she had the permit to do so. She talked to her and through her, she arranged for uh a man who was in the monastery named Godumski, to come and pick me up and take me to that monastery just outside of Migeewa in Krakow, near Krakow. And that happened really by sheer coincidence and that very night when the final liquidation of the ghetto has occurred, so when I was sleeping in the home of that woman to be picked up next morning, we discovered that the ghetto was surrounded and was liquidated and I didn't really know what happened to my family, but I was taken by that man, Mr. Godumski, to Krakow and then we went to the monastery and he introduced me to the Opat [Abbot], the head of the monastery, whom he did not tell that I was a Jew. He told him that I was a converted Jew. And uh, and that we were in danger, and would he accept me into the novitiate, you know, to study for priesthood. And I was accepted

by him. And that's where I was for most likely less than two years, year and a half until I was denounced as a Jew and Gestapo came one night to get me.

Now, Mr. Godumski?

Godumski, yeah.

Godumski, he knew...

Oh, he knew, he picked me up from Miechow. He knew, he later on even, my mother who escaped the ghetto, and that's a complicated long story, also was in Krakow and there were contacts between Godumski and my parents and so on. Um,

But he also knew like, the German soldier, that what, what the punishment would be if he were caught doing this, do you think?

Certainly, that every Pole knew that assisting Jews was very dangerous and most likely would end up with death penalty or on the spot or at least being sent to a concentration camp.

Why do you think he did it?

You know, it is always difficult to understand why people were endangering their own life to help, to help others. I think people did it for very individual reasons, it was something that simply they had to do. Uh, and it was usually some type of personal encounter. I, I have not encountered any one who did it for some ideological reason. Mostly it was a person-to-person type of situation. Um, obviously, there were some who did it for money. But those who did it not for money uh, did it out of a personal commitment to save somebody else's life. More likely someone will jump

into the water to rescue a drowning person. Why do they do it? Others will stand by and do nothing. Um.

Do you think the Opat knew?

Oh, yes, he clearly knew. He knew that it wouldn't matter that if I was a converted or Jew or not, but he also knew that I wasn't a converted Jew, because I'll tell you how he let me know that. I was sort of like his personal valet, if you will. And um, one time when I was serving Mass, you know, I was... he went by and he really sprinkled me very heavily with the holy water and afterwards I asked him, because he had the twinkle in his eye as he did it, I asked him what this was all about when I was in the privacy of his office, and he with a smile said to me in German because he was a Yugoslav, he was sent from Rome to be the head of the monastery, he was not Polish, he said "sicher ist sicher" which means "sure is sure" and he laughed. What he was saying, [laughing] was he wanted to make sure that I was sort of say "baptized," or he knew that it wasn't true.

And he was taking a risk then, too.

Oh, clearly he, incidentally, he ended up in Auschwitz. Not because of me. But he died in Auschwitz. Um, he not only did assist me, unbeknownst to me, he did have number of Polish underground people in the monastery, uh mascarading as priests and when this was discovered, he was sent to Auschwitz.

Do you remember his name?

No, I don't.

How were you denounced?

I was most likely denounced by another priest who sort of gave himself away and that's how I picked it up. He was my teacher of catechism and he might have picked up somehow that I was Jewish because um, on that particular day, I encountered him in a hallway in the monastery and we talked about something and he corrected my pronunciation. And you know, I had no accent; in a contrast to my English, but in my Polish I had no accent, [laughs] which in Poland meant being a Jew. Because you know, Poland was not a, Polish society was not a heterogeneous society. It was either you were either a Pole or a Jew. Uh, and that right away caused me anxiety when he corrected my pronunciation. So that night instead of sleeping in my cell, we had nice small rooms called cells, I did hide in an organ. And uh, when the Gestapo came to get me, um, I could even hear, but I was inside you know, an organ and uh, in the early morning hours after they left, I escaped.

You were how old?

Um, I would have been then 15.

Um, before we follow through on this, the night before you left for the monastery, do you remember what transpired in your, in your home?

Oh yes, I was sent off by my parents, I was, um I remember certain preparations were made, like for example, in my pants my mother sewed in some money, you know, that in case I needed it and so on. It's not all that clear, certain things are clear in my memory, others are not. I remember that night sleeping there and then, it wasn't far from the ghetto and in the early morning hours when the ghetto was surrounded I remember hearing, hearing it, observing it. I remember going to the

train station with Mr. Godumski and they were scrutinizing people pretty carefully at that time and in this town, I was very well-known. My parents were very well-known, so you know, it was a pretty risky type of situation to get out of town and we made it.

Was this the last time you saw your father?

No, no that wasn't the last time I saw my father, uh because as I told you when I was in monastery and my father was then in that particular, uh, uh, camp, he would come at least a number of occasions he came to the monastery and uh, even later after I left the monastery, I didn't see my father but there was another man who after I escaped monastery, Mr. Godumski put me in touch with another man named Stephan Yagojenski who lived in a small town, not town, small village, and um and he sort of adopted me like, he was older, he was in his early 20's, and uh, he lived, he was working supposedly in that village repairing the church organ and he claimed that I was his brother or nephew actually, the Polish word for it is "brat cioteczny" which it means "a brother by aunt" but he dropped the other word and usually referred to me as his brother, which was helpful not only did he take me in, but also by having a brother like that, it sort of enhanced my cover.

Did your father continue to see you there?

No, no, no, no. But Yagojenski would still be able to go to the camp and um, and somehow get in touch with my father.

Do you remember the last time you saw your father?

It would have been in the monastery, the last time. But I remember the last time I had a communication from my father. Uh, in fact, there were two times when I had the communication from my father after I saw him. Once was when to my great surprise, a young man came to the monastery looking for me and he was clearly a Jew, even though he didn't, but he looked like a Jew, and he had a letter from my father and it turned out it was a young man who escaped from Treblinka and my father gave him my address and told him, and told me in the note to help him because he must survive. And I did hide him in the monastery until some other contact was formed to help him. He never did survive, I know now, but I did help him. There was, I think that was the last communication I had from my father.

Until, when you found out later that...

Until there was that one more when we decided to go to Hungary. See the, obviously we are jumping over lot of activities, but we can't cover it all here.

Okay, why don't we stop for a moment with you having escaped from the monastery...[break]

Can we continue with the story, you escaped from the monastery in the middle of the night?

Yeah, I recall when I left the monastery was in the early hours of the morning and I... Mr. Godumski happened to have been in the monastery at the time and he and I went to this village where Stephan Yagojenski lived and he took me there. He, I recall the positive being the church, in the village church, he told me to go and pray, you know like, and he went to see Stephan and then this Stephan came by, and I was kneeling then and sort of praying and he just walked by and looked at me a few

times, came around put his arm around me and said, you can come with me. So you know, he came and sort of over looked me over if he was gonna do it or not. He decided yes, and from that point on, for a time, I lived with him. I don't recall exactly how long, because you see he lived in this village himself illegally because he was a member of the Polish underground and his name, he lived on a false name himself, his name was Jan Schmalitz, because he was involved in a sabotage in his home town against Germans and there was, you know, there was a, an award for capturing him. So he lived in this village working in the, on the village organ, the church organ, which needed no repair, his father was a manufacturer of organs. So he was himself and when I lived in that village, somehow it became known, they recognized or whatever, that I was a Jew and he was informed that because you know a village was in danger if they found there was a Jew hiding. Sometimes they would burn the village. So, he was advised that I would be denounced and both he and I left the village and went to another place, and another place, and another place. So there were, you see, living on false papers, or Aryan papers as I did, was a constant struggle. You know, every so often events would happen that required help of others, resourcefulness of one's own to survive, I mean, I would be on a train let's say, and somebody would recognize me, who had known me from the town, cause it wasn't all that far, I mean, and would yell at me. You know, "this is the Jew from Miechow." I would jump from the train. Or there would be other, there would be for example roundups of people in Krakow where I, where they would round people up in order to take them to Germany. Poles - for labor, forced labor. But before

they did this, they would take you to a shower, where they took you to a shower as a Jew you would be recognized because only Jews were circumcised. You know? So, you had to escape from that. I mean there were innumerable events like this. There was a constant succession of such events, you know, I recall being in a another village and the police coming to get me and I escaped through the window. So...

This was Polish police?

At that time it was Polish police, yes, there were, oh I had number of encounters of Polish police. See, one problem with being a Jew on Aryan papers in Poland was that Poles would recognize you sometimes, even someone like myself who had all the advantages in terms of language, customs, remember by that time, I could pray, I could, you know, when I first went to the monastery I was fairly familiar with Polish prayers but not really very well. But by that point, I certainly was much more familiar, but even then you would sometimes be recognized.

While you were running from place to place, were you wondering about the rest of your family, what was happening to them?

Yes, I was in contact, very nebulous contact, but my mother and sister were separately, see from the very beginning, my father made the decision that we should never be together, because it was known that if we were together, it was easier to discover for a man that he is a Jew, all they had to do was drop my pants and they knew I was a Jew and that was being done all the time. So even when we had false papers, even when we were together, we never admitted that we are related, I had a different name, my name was Jan Voycheek and my mother's name was Aroyek,

and my sister they had different names. So we were totally unrelated. I always addressed my mother even when some point when we were together by the Polish word "pani", lady. I never spoke to my mother in anyway that we were related because you see there was the danger. A woman could always deny and you couldn't really prove it that she was Jewish, but with a man there was no difficulty. No one in Poland was circumcised but Jews.

As a 15-year-old, was this hard on you, separating yourself psychologically and physically from your family?

Yeah, it was hard but you see when you are struggling for your life, you are not really... maybe it varies from person to person, I must say in retrospect as a psychiatrist and as someone who has been in analysis for ten years, I must say I must have been a very strong youngster, because I always had my focus on survival. I never became profoundly depressed or... I became depressed after the war, when the war was over, when suddenly, and my mother survived and my mother became "pani doctor" which means, you know, she was treated... you see during the war, I was more in charge than my mother, because I was more resourceful than my mother in a variety of matters. So I had to look after her, but after the war in the initial period, it changed. I then became depressed. But during the war, I never did become depressed or anxiety ridden or anything of that sort. Now I have known others who have. I have known others, you know, let me give you an example how people react differently. I was in a situation much later in Hungary, oh actually, not in Hungary, it was, no it was Hungary, but we were trying to go to Yugoslavia, that's down the

line, but let me get ahead of the story, and uh, we were in Sighet, which is where the Gestapo headquarters, and it was a makeshift prison. We were told there were just I think fourteen or fifteen of us, we were with the underground, we were trying to cross the border, it's not all that essential to my story here, they told us that if one escaped, five would be shot, for every one, five would be shot. Or two people who were, or three in fact at first, escaped who were the leaders of the group, they escaped, and the Chief of Gestapo came in and we were sort of lined up, and with his white gloves he was beating on the bars asking for volunteers to volunteer for execution and a fellow that I knew quite well by name Somic, he volunteered. He was depressed, he was, he just gave up hope. The second person who volunteered was me. But I volunteered not because I wanted to die. I volunteered because I said, you know, in their perverse thinking, they're not gonna kill the people who volunteer, these are not escape risks, the ones who don't volunteer are the escape risks. So I volunteered the second. And I was right. You know, I was right. So you see, the same behavior can be, see and Somic never survived and I did. Even though we both were liberated from that situation by the underground, the point I'm making is that some people, whether in camps or on the Aryan papers, had that will and resourcefulness to survive and clearly that's true of me and many, many others. I do, as a psychiatrist who has been involved with great many survivors, I definitely believe that no one survived simply as a gift of someone else or as an accident. It was an active act, it sounds redundant, but it was an act of will and an achievement of that individual. In camp or outside of camp.

The other prisoners in that situation, were they killed?

From the people who were in that group, to my best knowledge, there are in addition to myself, two who have survived.

Were they executed by the Gestapo at that point?

There were some who were executed, but some who were executed too, attempted suicide. Two who were older men, which means they were in their thirties, you know, cut their wrists, two brothers, I remember that. Cause they just wanted to die.

Let me jump ahead, too. Do you think this has affected the way you reacted to circumstances after the war or the way other survivors reacted after the war?

Oh, no doubt about it. You know, I'm sure that this is a rhetorical question on your part, because you know, you would not ask, "have you been affected by having been hit by a truck?" [laughs] It's self evident that if you get hit by a truck, you are affected by it and I think I might have been more fortunate, as a good friend of mine who survived in concentration camp once said to me, "Well, you know, you had the great advantage of having always been in a situation where you could in some way do something," he said. I don't know if that is entirely true, because I think maybe in a camp, one could still do something, but much less, where as if you were on false papers, you were more in an active role. So, I consider myself more fortunate than many of the other survivors, but clearly I and every other survivor, is first of all a victim, a living victim, but a victim nevertheless of terrible circumstances. And when you are a victim, you suffer some scars. I have also been in the fortunate situation of having had access to treatment after the war, which many survivors did not. Many

survivors actively avoided it even if they had access to it. That's part of the condition of traumatic neurosis, or as it now called post traumatic stress disorder, is to avoid treatment, because treatment is a reminder of the painful experience, so you don't want to be exposed to it.

Do you think that has something to do with why survivors have not been willing to talk more freely?

Certainly, certainly, you know, I'm an example of it myself, you know, during the war, one of my [Pause] one of the forces that kept me was the idea that I will tell the world what happened. That, I, you know, I sort of had a mission, I have to survive because at least somebody has to tell the world what happened. I'm gonna write the book, I even had a name, a title for it. And you know, when I arrived in this country, in the United States in 19... in January '52, I was actively involved right away in some preparation for writing a book about my experiences. And now, [laughs] thirty some years later, I still haven't done it. So, there is the resistance, you know, in doing it, there's a lot of ambivalence about it and fear and difficulty in talking about it. Survivors are reluctant to talk even to each other about these experiences. Because they are, you know, there are certain experiences if I try to tell you about it, I would break down crying. So I won't tell you about it. [He chuckles.]

Are there things that remind you of some of the experiences you had or what you observed during the war on a regular basis?

Oh clearly, clearly, clearly yeah. That's you know, that's a daily occurrence of every survivor. Or, incidentally of almost every person who has suffered, that's not

necessarily a survivor of the genocide but someone who is a victim of post traumatic stress disorder let's say Viet Nam veteran. There are lots of reminders in daily living.

Like for example...

You know, sometimes almost anything. A smell of something can you remind you of some experience, a comment, an appearance of a person, you know. I walked into a lecture some time ago and there was a well-known psychoanalyst talking and I found myself uneasy, unable to listen to him. And he was a famous analyst and I specially went to listen and I was, then I discovered that what really made it so difficult for me is he had certain type of glasses, you know... rimmed, gold thin rims. They were the typical glasses that Gestapo men wore, the high-ranking gestapo men wore in, but I wasn't aware of it. I only felt an unease when I was there. Now being a psychiatrist I sort of thought about it, but it was a reminder, you see? I mean there are reminders like this virtually all the time. [Break is taken.]

Are there reminders also on a regular basis of pre-war life?

Yes. But you see, these are not painful. They are not, sometimes they might evoke some feeling of sadness, but you know, pre-war life is different as a... it's sort of was almost insignificant. I almost sometimes have a feeling like, my life began in 1939.

I mean, that is not entirely true, but in terms of intensity, it differs.

Let me take you back for a second. You spoke about Hungary and in our narrative you left off moving from place to place in hiding under Aryan papers. How did you wind up in Hungary?

In 1943, it became clear to me that we couldn't survive on Aryan papers. At that time, my mother was in Krakow with my sister, and I was by myself living in Krakow, and my father was in a camp. And uh, we had to do something. First of all we were running out of money. Then the episodes of being nearly discovered and escaping were increasing in frequency. And I first devised in a kind of a scheme for my mother and I to go to the eastern occupied by German zones where my mother would work and we tried to accomplish that by contacting the chairman of the physicians organization. My mother went to see him; he lived in Krakow. And he came up with the idea, instead of that, there is an underground which smuggles people to Hungary.

This was a Polish physician?

It was a Polish physician, yeah. His name was, I remember his name, he was the chairman of the physician organization. His name was Golob. And through him, we made contact with a group that smuggled people to Slovakia and from there to Hungary and that's how we ended up in Hungary.

Where in Hungary?

That's again a complicated story. We got across the border to, to, Kochitza, which was part of Slovakia at one point and then we ended up in Hungary and at that time was actually, relatively safe for Jews. Um, it changed dramatically a few months later, because the Germans marched in and a Fascist government took over and the Hungarian Jews, including the Poles, were being rounded up and evacuated so we were back in the same situation.

Were you aware of the Sztojaj government and what was going on in there?

Oh clearly, I remember that very day when he took over, I was sure, yeah sure, we were very much aware of it. I was, I remember the day when the Germans marched into Hungary and Sztojaj took over, in fact, it was very interesting that we were living in the house of the right-hand man to Sztojaj. He was the minister for propaganda. My mother who spoke no Hungarian, I and my sister, we spoke Hungarian quite well, because we learned it, went to the opera one time and sat in the same box with Sztojaj. I was in the general population, but in that box sat my mother, the minister of propaganda, our landlady [he laughs] you want an irony....

Did they know that uh..?

Oh no, they only knew that we were Poles. They didn't know that we were Jews. Clearly not, they were extremely anti semitic. They were constantly talking about getting rid of Jews and so on and so forth.

You were hidden by the underground, at what point did you...?

No, we were not hidden, we got some assistance from the underground. We came on false papers, same old false papers from Poland. And we pretended to be Poles. Not Jews. We continued the same thing in Hungary. We tried to tell Hungarian Jews that there is danger and so on, and they would yell and scream at us as some kind of provocateurs, because they did never believe that anything would happen. We were so suspicious we would never, even once we were in Hungary, and it was relatively safe for Jews, we were too suspicious, we would never reveal our identity openly as Jews any more.

And you all had separate names still?

Oh, yes, we always had separate names and we never admitted to being related.

Now how did you end up in Sighet?

I was, when the Germans came in, there was... and Rumania was safe still, you see, so sometime un in, it was June, in June of 1944, uh, a group of us were going through the border to Rumania and from Rumania you could go to Constance and there were ship, you could go to Israel. I mean not, Palestine at that time obviously, and that's what, that's how we got arrested crossing the border.

Then how did you escape from this?

It's a long story, uh we escaped really through, through an effort of mine, in a sense. You know there was a, one of the Gestapo men one time came to me and talked to me that he's a Serb that he's really involved with the underground etc., etc., And I believed him; which seems foolish, but I believed him and turned out it was right. And I gave him the address and contact with people in Budapest, my mother and he and she.... and it's a long story and I can't describe it all to you, but he, he rescued us. A long complicated story. And I rescued him later on. Because one day he escaped in his underwear, he was to be shot and I hid him. And you know, after the wars in Munich, he was being pursued by other Yugoslavs because they, and I hid him there in Munich. And through other contacts, sent him to Belgium because he was in danger after the war, cause you see, even though he was indeed helpful, there were other Yugoslavs who viewed him as a Gestapo man and I helped him.

So again, you were helped, by a non-Jew?

Oh clearly, I was helped, you know, it was the way the relationship between this man, Nicholas, Nicholas was his name, developed is that he would every so often give me a cigarette. I didn't smoke, but others did, and then, I was the youngest in the group, remember at that time what, we talking about, I'm 16, okay? So I was the youngest, and he was uh, we developed a contact, he talked to me and I talked to him and uh, then when he told me what he told me, I believed him. Which is, you know, again, there was a kind of a sixth sense that you develop. You had to on those situations sometimes go to somebody and reveal your identity and your predicament and you had to guess who would be helpful. Right? There have been many occasions when I would go to somebody and I would say, look, I am a Jew in hiding, I need your help. Okay? And, you know, I have never missed. Part is luck, but part is some kind of an ability to recognize that that person would be helpful, or recognition that someone is suspicious of you. Someone looked at you some way and you knew that person is thinking that I am a Jew. The next move that he's gonna make will be something dangerous and I better get out of here.

Did you spend the rest of the time, the rest of the war in Hungary?

Yes, I was liberated in Budapest. That was a strange experience, too. You see in the last days Budapest was surrounded and there was fighting house to house, everybody went into cellars. You know, because houses were being destroyed. But, they would be searching even those days, the Sztojay people would be searching for Jews. So we couldn't go there. Our house, it was a villa, didn't have a basement. We remained on the first floor out of fear of going into one of those anti-aircraft...

uh because Budapest was heavily bombarded and that's where we were liberated and there was fighting house to house and we heard Russians and we expected to be liberated by Russians and I remember when the Germans retreated from our house, I ran to the door, opened the door to have the advancing Russian come in and who walked in? but it was some guy who spoke a language I didn't understand and put a gun to my head was about to shoot me. It turned out it was a Rumanian troop, which I was totally unaware of, and on the spot I began to say to him something, Polenay, Polenay, and he understood that I was not a German or a Hungarian, and I wasn't shot.

So there were Germans in the house with you?

Oh, yeah, in from our, you see there was the German military that were shooting, they had a machine gun embankment. They were, it was house to house fighting.

As far as you know, those people thought you were Hungarians.

Oh sure, sure, the Germans were there, they were advising us how we could escape from the advancing Russians and we were asking them how we can escape and how, and they said it wouldn't be so safe. [laughs] We had no, we had no intention of going with them, but we were pretending and then they were apologizing when they were abandoning us to the advancing Russians. [He chuckles.]

After the liberation, you were sent to a camp, a displaced persons camp?

Oh, no, no, no, no. I was then in Budapest and I was you know, certainly not welcomed by anyone, the Russians were suspicious of us, too. How did you survive, you went and said you were a Jew who survived, they right away suspect that you

must be some kind of a traitor, how else would you survive? Um, but ultimately, no I traveled, remember my mother and sister and I were there together, we did not, I did not know what was the fate of my father, so I travelled. And the war devastate Europe, the war wasn't over yet. I travelled by top of trains, trucks, so on. I travelled all the way to Poland to look for my father. And in fact, I travelled between Budapest and Poland five times. The last three times I went with my sister and on those occasions, I also smuggled some goods, you know like silk stockings or things of that sort, which were in very, very short supply in Poland and you could get them in Budapest, and try to make some money also. But my mother remained in Budapest and ultimately then, we moved when I discovered, pieced together the story that my father wasn't coming back, because at first I was given misinformation that my father was alive. Then we moved to western part of Germany, Munich and arrived there in September of '45.

How did you and your mother and your sister finally deal with the news about your father?

We heard the first that he was sent to camp already in Budapest before the end of the war by some people who came from Krakow. Uh, how did we deal with this? I can't really tell you very specifically because it came sort of slow in slow increments, you know, it was pieced together. I was first told a story by a survivor, or a member of our community who when I came back a few times to look for my father finally, set me aside and said you know, I've been told to tell you [pause]....

You talked before about the obvious effect that this has on you after the war, what kinds of stresses did you feel right after the war? What was your state of mind?

Oh, after the war once the immediate demands of post-war survival, because of the danger, the difficulty the hardships did not cease with liberation, there was no help, no welcoming committee to provide assistance, but once we came to Munich and once it was sort of really over in a certain sense, I recall becoming really depressed. I remember spending maybe a number of weeks almost always simply lying in bed. It was a very kind of a like a period, I mean in retrospect I view it as a mourning type of experience, but it wasn't very prolonged and after that, I became a student, begun to study, and became quite, you know, active and so on. But the experience was even after the war was difficult for most survivors, remember that survivors were being were met with a great deal of ambivalence. You were not welcomed. There was suspicion who you were and how you survived. Even years later when you came to the United States, the question "how did you survive?" was often an accusation and not a welcome and why didn't you fight and why didn't you do this and that, you know, the non-victims particularly among Jews, had all kinds of complaints, in a sense, not clearly voiced, but they were there. Let me give you an experience; I think a story tells more than abstract words. I was an intern at Michael Reese in Chicago and I applied for residency at a hospital called Elgin State Hospital and I'm being interviewed for the residency, okay? The Superintendent named Steinberg, the Assistant Superintendent named Hafrin, the Clinical Director named Liebermann, all three Jews. They ask me questions about my interest in psychiatry, my internship, etc. And Michael Reese was a very prestigious internship and then they asked me how I survived. And I told them I survived on false papers. And at one point this

Dr. Steinberg says to me, what did you falsify to be accepted as intern to Michael Reese? Uh, you know, here is a psychoanalyst, a Jew, talking to a 24 year old survivor. So you see, I mean that is just an example. There has been, I believe, and there always is, considerable ambivalence towards people who have been in touch with the enemy. I mean remember, we are contaminated in some sense, because we have been in touch with this horrible experience, uh and we have been in touch with the enemy. The real, those who have perished, those who died, they are purified by the fact that they died. But, we, the living victims, we have not been purified.

How does one live with the persona of a victim so long after the war?

By avoiding it, you know, avoidance, denial are adaptive to some extent. You can't, if you become obsessed with any aspect of your life, you become sick. And I think that those of us who are able, and I consider myself among those, who effectively sort of separate that. We were able to um, to create a reasonable semblance of a normal life, I think particularly as time went on, one creates a certain separation. But never complete. Others have never made that transition.

Is there anything you want to add to this about the importance of making such testimony or what your hopes for future generations is?

I think one of the areas that has been neglected, I believe, is the survivor experience. That is, you know, variety of aspects have been talked about, written about, like people who died, who were annihilated or exterminated or whatever term you want to use, their resistance, but the people who survived, I think have been in a certain sense both in writing and teaching about the genocide, avoided. And that is why I

think it is a value that we are discussing here today, and I certainly would think that the project that you were involved in of talking to survivors who have had a variety of experiences, I think it is very worthwhile because one day, once the last survivors are gone, there will be less ambivalence towards survivors and more appreciation of survivors as people who have achieved a great deal. You know, prior to my analysis, I would have never thought of my own survival as an achievement. I always thought of it as an accident, like most survivors. Oh, I view it now as an accomplishment and achievement. I needed help of great many people. But it began with me. And I think that is true of most survivors and there is limited understanding of that. You know, we, for example, the whole notion that there could have been resistance misses the point. Resistance at that time was a form of collaboration. The true resistance was to survive. I was aware of it even then as a youngster. I'll never forget the January 1, 1943, or rather, December 31, 1942, I was aware that this was a landmark. I was on a train and I had a sense of victory. I made it beyond January 1, 1943. Because already then, the rumors circulated that Hitler supposedly said that if a Jew will be free after January 1, he will tip his hat to him. I mean there was that kind of a, whether it was true or not, I don't know. It doesn't matter. The point is, there was a sense of accomplishment and achievement just in the very fact that one survived.

Thank you.