

Interview with Mr. Peter Gersh
By David Zarkin
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

- Q: This is an interview with Peter Gersh for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project by David Zarkin at Mr. Gersh's home in Saint Paul on March 31, 1983. Please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name if it is different.
- A: My name is Peter Gersh, and originally my name was Pinchas Gerszonowicz.
- Q: When were you born?
- A: I was born the 21st of January, 1921.
- Q: In what town and country were you born?
- A: I was born in Poland, and the town is Mierhauf, by Cracow.
- Q: Was it known by any other name?
- A: No.
- Q: What were your parents' names, your grandparents' names or your great-grandparents' names, if you can remember them.
- A: My parents' names were Yutka Gerszonowicz. My mother's name, Chana. And my grandfather's name was Gershon Gershonovitch. And from my mother's side is Midlich.
- Q: And where were your parents born?
- A: My parents were born in Wlodzislaw. This was a town approximately 20 miles north of the town where we lived.
- Q: Do you know where your grandparents were born?
- A: The same town. Wlodzislaw.
- Q: And your great-grandparents? Do you have any idea?

A: The same. It was a predominately Jewish population, about 90% of it, the Jews in Wlodzislaw.

Q: And what were your parents' occupations?

A: My father was a machinist. We had a small shop.

Q: And your mother?

A: My mother was a housewife.

Q: What languages were spoken in your home?

A: Jewish and Polish, but mostly Jewish at home.

Q: Was your family secular or religious in practice or orientation?

A: My parents were very religious.

Q: Were they Zionists or Hasidic?

A: I would say something in-between.

Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?

A: Yes, I went to cheder till I was Bar Mitzvah, approximately thirteen years old.

Q: What events, local, national or international, were you aware of from the mid-1930s to 1941?

A: I was always interested in the current events, not only from inland, but international too. I read a lot of papers and books.

Q: So you would say that papers and books were your primary source of information? Or did you hear any news over the radio? Or word of mouth?

A: Radio, but it wasn't very popular at that time. Not everybody had it. Once in a while only. But mostly from the newspapers.

Q: In what setting or settings did you have contact with gentiles?

A: School.

Q: Did your family do business with gentiles?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you ever have gentiles in your house?

A: Yes.

Q: Before the outbreak of the war, did you have any encounters with anti-Semitism?

A: Yes. Poland, that was unbelievable. They were preaching from the pulpit and they were more anti-Semitic than the Germans ever were -- the Polish people.

Q: It was mostly from the churches , preaching from the pulpit?

A: I would say, yes. They were Catholics predominately there. They were influenced by it. Of course everyone had "his Jew", the Polish people. They thought, "You aren't like the other ones are." But in general they were very anti-Semitic, the Polish people.

Q: Did that affect your family and people in your community? Have any direct effect on you?

A: Of course it had, yes.

Q: Can you remember any particular way that it might have? Did people boycott your business because of that, or anything like that?

A: Yes, yes. They did.

Q: Did you have any relatives that lived outside your community?

A: Yes, I had uncles.

Q: Where did they live?

A: They lived in Wlodzislaw. There were uncles there, and they moved in other cities, then, Ulkush and Vulburum. They moved away, because they had the same occupation, all of them; there were seven brothers from my father, and they all -- because the grandparents were, too -- they had a small machine shop, so there wasn't room for them, so they moved in adjacent cities in order to exercise their profession.

Q: I see. Do you know what became of them?

A: They all perished.

Q: Do you know when they died?

A: 1942.

Q: Do you know any details about their death?

A: Yes, from one uncle that came to our city when he escaped from Wlodzislaw. He survived only, after they evacuated or finished the ghetto, cleaned out all the Jews. He escaped and he came to our town, but unfortunately I couldn't rescue, I couldn't help him, because we were taken away. So he, too, perished, and I don't know where or when.

Q: Did any of your relatives serve in the military?

A: No.

Q: How old were you at the outbreak of the war?

A: I was 18 years old.

Q: And how did you receive news of the war?

A: It was through radio and the newspapers.

Q: Do you remember where you were at the time when you first learned of the outbreak of the war?

A: Yes, we were expecting it, because it was brewing for quite a few days. So everybody was tuned in to radios or whatever you can find, newspapers. Nobody did anything, because the world was stopped completely for quite a few days, and everybody listened and waited for the unfortunate news.

Q: What was the reaction of the Jewish community where you lived, to the outbreak of the war? Were there any meetings held in the synagogues, or didn't that work? How did people feel about the outbreak of the war? Worried, or...?

A: There was despair. I mean, people were worried about it. But nobody imagined to what extent that will change everybody's life.

Q: That's the next question I was going to ask. How did it immediately affect you and your family's life economically and socially after the war broke out?

A: Economically, it didn't affect maybe as much. But first of all, my brother and I set out to escape. And we actually were marching east towards the Russian front, because the Russians occupied half of the Polish territory, so everybody tried to get there. But we were on foot, and the Germans proceeded with their motorized divisions, so we were overtaken, and then we turned back and went back to our hometown.

- Q: So do you have any recollection of when the Nazi occupation of your hometown occurred? Dates?
- A: It would be the 7th of September, 1939, when they marched in.
- Q: What actions did the German forces take in the early months or years of the occupation that you can recall?
- A: At the early stages, it wasn't too bad. It was the Wehrmacht, or the armed forces. They were more lenient and actually, we were the only machine shop in the town. We spoke Jewish, which is similar to German, so we actually did some work for them, and repaired some things.
- Q: Can you recall any specific anti-Jewish measures or legislation by the occupation?
- A: Yes. If something happened to a German soldier or somebody from the occupation forces, they took hostages. They took fifty people. They kept them, actually in seclusion, so if something would happen to anybody, they would execute them. They were afraid for violence or that somebody will revolt, or do something to somebody from the German occupation, so that was instituted first. Then they started to recruit people for work, clean-up work, and...
- Q: And were people contained in a ghetto in your town?
- A: No, no. Not until 1941. Then they took a few streets in the city, close to the synagogue, and converted it, and put some walls up, that nobody could get out.
- Q: During the first year of occupation by the Germans, did you have any knowledge of what was going outside of Poland, and what was going outside your community? Did you know anything about any other ghettos? Or any mass killings or any concentration camps at that time?
- A: We did not at that time, not in 1939. That would be later.
- Q: When did you think you first learned about what was going on?
- A: The first when we learned is in 1942. First they took several hundred people in boxcars...
- Q: From your community?
- A: ...from our community, and took them away. and at that time we knew they were going near to Bergen, to Belsen, to Belz, close to Lvov. That was in the eastern part of Poland.

- Q: How did you learn about that they were going to Bergen-Belsen?
- A: First of all, we had some people that escaped from there. A girl, her name was Tiflubiteh, she's now living in Toronto, and she escaped close to the city, to Belz, where she escaped from the train, from the boxcar. We knew about it. A lot of people were traveling -- Polish people -- which informed us.
- Q: So then what were the dates and circumstances of your deportation?
- A: I was, as I mentioned before, I was recruited to fix automobiles and locks, and all the machinist works.
- Q: You were fixing automobiles and trucks?
- A: Yes, not for the army, for the local administration. That was German occupation force, but the administration, actually. That wasn't any more the army. The army were only the first two, three months. Then they sent in people that occupied, like the mayor, a German, and all the administration. The Polish people, they didn't have nothing to say at that time any more.
- Q: So you were working on the vehicles, so you weren't one of the first, then, to be deported.
- A: No, I was one of the last ones, actually, to be deported.
- Q: Do you remember the date?
- A: Yes, that was in 1942, in November.
- Q: And you remember who ordered it? How it came about?
- A: The Gestapo. They sent us to -- because we were profession that they needed -- we went to the airport in Cracow.
- Q: Did they contact you at your home, did they come to your door, did they send you a letter, or how did it happen?
- A: No, they told us that they are going to transport us. We were only, at that time maybe, 15 people, because I had some people helping me.
- Q: So your family, what had become of them in the meantime?
- A: When I went, my father was still at home, because he was also a professional, so he was spared, that they didn't go with the big transport where they sent everybody away. And my brother was a tailor, which they needed also. And my younger brother, he helped me. And my mother and a sister, we had people, a

German that we got to know, and he worked at construction company in Cracow, which is 40 kilometers from our town, and he took them and he kept them through the war. My mother survived and she passes away in 1975 here. My sister was here also. Survived, kept hidden by a German. He was just in a private construction company, employed, and he lived in Poland.

Q: So you were the only one in your family that was deported?

A: No, my father, myself and my two brothers. We were at first sent to the airport in Cracow. That was a military airport. We were employed as machinists fixing autos and cars.

Q: What was the means of transportation that they used to deport you?

A: Truck. Because we were only about 50 peoples. Otherwise, other people that they deported to Belz, they were transported in boxcars.

Q: And what were the traveling conditions like in these trucks that you were on?

A: It was only 40 kilometers, which is about 25 miles. It took only an hour-and-a-half or two.

Q: And what happened at the airport then?

A: At the airport? We had barracks. There were a few hundred Jewish people, because they worked in the Landmanschaft, which was in agriculture. They worked in the field. They had a lot of leaders there, and a lot of them were the professions. We were, actually, in barracks.

Q: And what did you do there in these barracks at the airport? Did you work there?

A: No, in the barracks, we lived there, we slept there only. To work, we went to tailor shops which they established. Or a lot of people worked in the fields. They raised, they did harvest.

Q: Were you continuing to work on vehicles then?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: And how long were you there, at the barracks?

A: There I was only four months, because my sister and my mother, they needed some papers. I had some Polish people that worked there at the airport -- Poles -- and I got in contact with somebody that's supposed to make some papers that my sister and my mother, that they aren't Jewish. False papers, actually. And I got caught with the papers. Somebody, another Pole, reported it to the authorities.

And then the Gestapo came and they arrested me and they wanted to know. And I got beaten so that when I went to the toilet, the only thing that came is blood. So they transported me. At that time they established the concentration camp in Cracow, Plaschau. That wasn't even finished yet. I was arrested and taken there, and not in the camp, but in the jail, of the Cracow Plaschau concentration camp.

Q: When did you arrive there? Do you remember?

A: That was in March, 1943.

Q: Did anyone else go with you?

A: No, because I didn't implicate anybody.

Q: How were you processed or registered into the camp or jail?

A: There was no processing. I don't know if they kept names or papers. That was immaterial to them.

Q: Can you give me a description of what the camp was like --to the best of your recollection?

A: At that time, that was the Jewish cemetery, Jerusalemska. The street, it was in a suburb of Cracow, Plaschau. And there was an Arbeitslager, which was a camp for people there working, Jewish people, and across from the cemetery there, they constructed their concentration camp. When I came there, that was just started. They had only a few barracks.

Q: What were the living conditions like there?

A: (Laughs). First...it evolved. They built new barracks, and there were beds erected on top of each other, and there were a few hundred people in each barrack. They always brought some new people in, from all sorts. They caught people from Holland, from Germany, and from Belgium. And at the end, in '44, they brought a lot of people from Hungary.

Q: Can you tell me what a typical day was like at this camp?

A: A typical day was at 5 o'clock they had Jewish musicians, in the morning, to wake up. On the trumpet they played the -- like in the army--

Q: Reveille or something like that?

A: In the morning, yeah, to wake 'em up. So everybody got up and we got to the kitchen where they served some little soup or bread, and then everybody went to work. It was strictly a camp where everybody worked. They had a lot of tailor

shops, and they had a lot of manufacturing, products where they made, and a lot of 'em went out to shops in the city. They were escorted by the SS.

Q: Were you working/

A: I worked inside. At that time, I had a friend. They had a lot of horses and wagons, a few hundred horses. And a friend of my father, he was in charge. When I was imprisoned there, and he found out, he told me that I can be saved only if I say that I know how to shoe horses. And that was so. I told them that I know how. And I started, and that's how I was saved, and that's how I got out from the jail. I was in concentration camp still, but I wasn't jailed any more. In jail they came in every few days and took out 30, 40 of 'em and shot 'em. So I was lucky to be spared. And so, I established a shop in there, in the concentration camp. I told them what I need for equipment, and they got it, and I had quite a few people helping me, including my father, my brother. They were there too.

Q: Were they transported there at the same time you were?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: And what were the sleeping conditions and the food conditions, and the health and medical conditions like, there at the camp?

A: It's barely to survive. I mean we still could survive and live, but so many people...if somebody didn't work, they just shot 'em. And that's what we went through, all the time, either torn by dogs...

Q: Excuse me?

A: Torn by dogs. There was the commander of the concentration camp. He had a few dogs always with him, and all he had to say, to "Get somebody." Then you saw this. And all the time, it was one hell there on the cemetery. Everyday you see people marching up, and they shot by the SS. That's always the fear! The depression! That nobody knew, from the last minute, is approaching. So that was the worst. But living condition? Of course it was no picnic, and a person was hungry all the time, but you still could survive.

Q: Was there any communicating among the prisoners? Did you get to know any people in the camp?

A: Yes. There was the outside camp where some worked, and some worked separated from the living quarters. In the evening we went back. There was "appell" where everybody was counted, and then we went back in the barracks, and that was electrical wire, fenced around, and in there you could go and communicate, and then it comes 9 o'clock and the lights were out, and everybody had to go to his own place, and to sleep, because they counted again there.

- Q: Were there other people in the camp? Were the rest of them Jewish, were they gypsies, were they...?
- A: No, they were all Jews. Early in 1944 they brought in some Polish people.
- Q: In 1944. And you were there in that camp until when?
- A: I was there in that camp 'til January, 1945, the beginning of the year, right after New Year. The Russians were approaching already, camp of Plaschau, so we were put on horses and buggies, what we had, and we went west to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz we were only two weeks. That was because Auschwitz from Cracow - - from Plaschau -- that was only about 30 miles, at the most, and the Russians were approaching there, so we were taken from there, and transported to Czechoslovakia, to Buchenwald.
- Q: So you were in three camps, then, is that correct?
- A: I was in Auschwitz, then Buchenwald, and then in Flossenbug. That was my last camp.
- Q: Do you remember the names of the major German personnel at any of the camps that you were at?
- A: I wasn't long enough in Auschwitz to know anything about it, because we were completely isolated there from the other prisoners, from the other inmates. In our camp, yes. There was Hauptsturm Goett.
- Q: In which camp was that in?
- A: That's Cracow Plaschau. And there was Shuppker Anthoff.
- Q: You already said you were aware of systematic killing and fatalities, but did you witness any systematic killings or anything?
- A: Yes! (Laughter) Oh, gosh! Saw hundreds, hundreds of people.
- Q: In all these camps? Or in some of them?
- A: Yes, in all the camps, except in Auschwitz, we did not. But in Buchenwald and in Cracow Plaschau.
- Q: Was it a daily occurrence?
- A: Yes, it was a daily occurrence, yes.

- Q: So you were liberated then. Was that by the Russians?
- A: No, I was liberated by the Americans. From Buchenwald we were transported to Flossenburg, which is south, in Bavaria.
- Q: Who transported you?
- A: The SS. Just marching. We were marched, and in the march hundreds of people died.
- Q: How long did that take?
- A: That took about two weeks.
- Q: And then what happened when you got to Flossenburg?
- A: Flossenburg we were only about two weeks. The Americans were approaching Flossenburg. So we were transferred -- we were marched to Dachau.
- Q: Marched by the SS?
- A: By the SS, yeah, all the time, we were escorted by them. To Dachau. And on the way to Dachau, I escaped, in the woods.
- Q: How many days were you gone from Flossenburg when you escaped?
- A: Four days. In the night -- the fourth night -- that was a night was raining, and we were marching in the woods, or through the woods. So I run into the woods and escaped. I wandered around that night until I came in that village, German village. It was a farm. So I crawled in where they keep their, what do you call it... "schoineg"... their corn, and... their food that they stock. What they harvest.
- Q: Oh their silage.
- A: The silage, right. In Germany they have it out of wood. So high. And I climbed on top and...
- Q: Like a silo, almost.
- A: A silo, right. That's where I climbed. And I waited a few days there, and I lived on the...
- Q: On the silo? You waited on -- in -- the silo?
- A: I crawled in to the top. Very high so nobody can detect me.

- Q: How did you breathe in there? Was there ventilation in there?
- A: Yeah, it was open. On top of it I was.
- Q: How many days were you in there?
- A: Four days. Then the Americans...
- Q: How was it possible to keep track of days...I guess you could see the sun come up, perhaps? How did you eat?
- A: Just the corn, or grain, or whatever that was in the silo.
- Q: So you were in there four days. And what happened then? The Americans came in?
- A: No. They brought in Russian prisoners in the same silo.
- Q: Who brought in Russian prisoners?
- A: The Germans.
- Q: The SS?
- A: The SS, yeah. They brought them. They had some Russians. I don't know from where. They were working maybe someplace, and they brought the men there.
- Q: Did they see you when they brought them in?
- A: No, no. Because I was way up on top. And a few hours later everybody disappeared, so I knew that something incredible...
- Q: Who's everybody?
- A: The prisoners, the Russian prisoners. And the people that...
- Q: Were they Russian Jews?
- A: No, no. They were Russian Russians. Prisoners of war.
- Q: And then they disappeared, the Russian prisoners...
- A: Yeah, right. I didn't hear anybody, so I climbed down, and there were the American tanks already, and the American soldiers, rolling by.

- Q: What happened with the SS? Where did they go? Were they captured by the Americans, or you don't know...?
- A: No, I don't know anything about it. But later they captured a lot of 'em.
- Q: What happened when the Americans came? You came out of the silo and...what was that encounter like, with the American soldiers?
- A: Well there were Jewish, American Jews. And we could talk to them, and they understood us, and they took us to the next town.
- Q: Which was what? Do you remember the town?
- A: The town was Floss. It was a little village nearby. That's where they put us up and the German families, they told them to give us food and shelter.
- Q: When you say "us" who was with you at the time?
- A: There was already that came out, a lot of people there. A lot of people that were marching to Dachau.
- Q: How big a group would you say...
- A: Oh, there were a few thousand.
- Q: So the Americans took you to Floss, and did they put each and every one of you up in a German home? Was Floss in Poland or Germany?
- A: That's in Germany, in the east. That's in Bavaria. Because from Poland, the Russians occupied half of Germany...
- Q: They put you in individual homes? Is that what they did?
- A: Yeah in homes where they told them to give us a room and food.
- Q: Let's go back here a second, before we continue talking about what happened in these German homes at Floss, and bring me up to date as to what happened to you. You were in the camps with your brother and your father...
- A: At that time I was alone. I didn't have anybody. We were separated.
- Q: What became of them?
- A: My father went to Grossrosen, a transport before I left.
- Q: Was Grossrosen a camp?

- A: That was a camp near Breslau, in Germany. And (sigh) we went there, and we couldn't find any sign of, and nobody knows about it, what happened. My brother...
- Q: You went there after you were liberated?
- A: After liberation, yes. My brother, he was in Valdenburg, in Germany.
- Q: Is that a camp?
- A: That was a concentration camp, but a work camp, where they work in factories. And he survived, and I met him after a month. I was liberated in April -- the end of April -- and I met him in June. So I found my brother. And then I knew...
- Q: When you say you were liberated in April, was that when you met the Americans at the farm?
- A: Yes. That was in April, 1945. And because I knew that my mother and sister, they were hidden in Poland, by the German. So I went...I took a motorcycle, which you could get at that time, because a lot of Germans were...so I got hold of a motor cycle and I went to Czechoslovakia, to Poland, to Cracow, in order to find out if my sister and mother survived.
- Q: How long were you in Floss?
- A: The war ended May the 8th and I was in Floss until the beginning of June.
- Q: And how long did you travel on the motorcycle looking for your mother and your sister?
- A: From Bavaria to Czechoslovakia is approximately 700 miles to Poland. So I went through Prague, and traveled east, and it was in the evening, I saw a Russian. He was from the army -- a guard. So I asked him if there's a place where I could stay overnight, because it was getting dark and I didn't want to travel any farther. So he took me someplace, and sure enough, they took away my motorcycle, and they threw me in a cellar, where they keep the potatoes in Czechoslovakia. Without windows -- just in the ground --a hole -- with a door on top. They locked me in there. And then I was there for 48 hours.
- Q: Why did they do that? Did they explain? Or did you ever find out?
- A: I said I was in the concentration camp, and I want to go back to Poland to find out about my mother. They didn't believe it. So they locked me up. So after two days they took me to the headquarters and there was a Jewish...

- Q: Headquarters of what?
- A: For the Russians. Headquarters, someplace.
- Q: Do you remember the town...or was it in the country?
- A: It was in the middle of someplace, near a town, I don't remember exactly where it was. And they took me to the headquarters with the cocked guns, and...
- Q: Pointed at you?
- A: Pointed, yeah. And they took me there, and luckily there was a Jewish officer, a Russian. I told him, I was in concentration camp in Plaschau, and I was in Buchenwald, and now I'd like to go back to find out about my mother and sister. So then he let me free. The motorcycle I couldn't get from him. Like he didn't want to give the motorcycle up. So I walked, and went by train, until I came to Cracow, and luckily my mother and sister survived.
- Q: And you found them?
- A: I found them, yes.
- Q: How did you find them? By luck, or...
- A: Not by luck. I knew. I knew where they are.
- Q: Somebody had told you then.
- A: Yes, yes. Even from the concentration camp, I had opportunity to visit them.
- Q: How did that happen?
- A: You wouldn't believe it. Even the SS, there were some people there that were sympathetic. If they could, they would do you some favor.
- Q: The SS?
- A: Yes, yes. Some! That was very rare! They took me there one day, and I visited with my mother and sister. I didn't tell 'em, of course, I didn't tell 'em who it is. I just told them I had some friends I would like to visit there. I couldn't trust them so far that to tell them my mother and sister. I said I had some "Polish friends" and I'd like to visit, and they took me there and then I saw my mother and sister.
- Q: And where were they located? What town was this?

- A: They were in Popochin, which is about five miles from the concentration camp in Cracow-Plaschau.
- Q: People in the camp had told you that they were there?
- A: No, no. I knew. Because they went there before I went to the airport, where I worked for the military. When I was at home yet, in Mierhauf, that's where we took care of...my brother and I --my older brother -- he perished.
- Q: He perished from...
- A: My older brother. My younger brother survived. He's living in California.
- Q: Do you know the circumstances of your older brother's...
- A: Yeah, we were taken to the airport there -- to the military airport to work there. He was the tailor. He made all the suits and everything for all the people. The German people. And then two months later they locked him up, and they just finished them all. They locked him up in the local jail for a few days and then they just (sigh) they liquidated every one of them. There was no one left, because I came after the war to my hometown, and inquired about it, and...
- Q: And that's how you learned? What had happened to your older brother? Now, your younger brother had survived.
- A: My younger brother survived, yes. We were in a concentration camp in Cracow-Plaschau, then they (sigh) took them out, a few. By the end of 1945 they took every few weeks. They had some transports out of the concentration camp, Plaschau, but they took him west, inside Germany. And he survived there, so I found him also.
- Q: And did you inquire about other relatives?
- A: Yes, yes, but there was nobody survived. But one incident, what I will never forget in my life, is concentration camp at Buchenwald. There were quite a few Poles. And at one time, they announced, "Alle Juden raus" -- "All Jews out." They should get out from the barrack to the...there was a big, like a football field, a big field there, and they had "appells" every day where they counted in the morning and in the evening. Everybody should go out. It was almost the end of the war, so everybody tried to hide and not admit that you are a Jew, because they didn't know, looking at you, that you are Jewish. So "Alle Juden raus! Alle Juden raus!" they announced on the thing. So the Polish inmates, they came and dragged almost every one of them out! They could "smell" a Jew! I was lucky enough that I didn't get out at that time. So many people perished. Because the Germans wouldn't know the difference.

- Q: How did they perish after they drug 'em out? Do you know the detail?
- A: Yes. I had a cousin in Buchenwald. I never met him, I never saw him again. And before, I had contact with him. But the Polish inmates, they helped drag out the Jewish! I'll never forget that incident! So when I heard that the Russians occupied Poland, they should be there. God should do it so that they are there the next thousand years! 'Cause they were, in my estimation, they were a lot worse. If they had the power, nobody would survive.
- Q: During the time you were in the camps, was it possible to get any information about the progress of the war? You said at one time that you knew that the war was coming to an end there?
- A: We knew, because a lot of people worked in factories where other inmates, people, let's say Russians and French and Danish and Belgish -- from Belgium...
- Q: These were prisoners?
- A: They were prisoners also. Like in Buchenwald, Leon Blum, he was there -- the French Premier? The Jewish, from before the Second World War? Leon Blum? He was in Buchenwald, also. He died there.
- Q: So these people would give you information, then, about the progress of the war?
- A: Yes. You could always find out...like when I worked in repairing cars, they always had radios in it. I always could pick up either from Russia, or London, mostly. They had the broadcasts in German and in Polish.
- Q: You mentioned that you recall the SS in the camps. Do you remember any other specific units of the German Army or the Nazi police in the camps, or outside of the camps?
- A: Outside of the camps they had the Shutzpolizei and they had the...
- Q: What would that be translated to? What would that mean?
- A: First of all, they had the Gestapo, and then they had the police, actually, the Shutzpolizei, that means the occupation police. They were separate from the Gestapo.
- Q: I see. So when you found the surviving members of your family, then what did you all do?
- A: Then we went to Sosnowiec, which is a town near the former German border, the southeast corner of Poland, and there were quite a few Jews there.

Q: Survivors?

A: Survivors, yes. I came from Bavaria, from the American zone, and I decided to take everybody, and we traveled quite a few days, because the bridges were destroyed, through Czechoslovakia to Bavaria, until we came to Munich, and there was...

Q: How did you travel?

A: After the war? By trains and boxcars. But what would normally take one day, it took ten days, because the bridges were destroyed. We wanted to get out from Poland and get in American zone, because I came from there too, and I knew that it's a lot better conditions there than it would be in Poland or under the Russian occupation.

Q: So you went to the American zone in Germany?

A: In Germany, yes.

Q: And how did you arrange to travel there? Were there a group of you that did it? Or was it arranged for you?

A: No, nobody arranged, you had to take care by yourself everything. I mean, you didn't even have to buy a ticket. There was a train, you just got on it. Nobody checked on it, and they just had some trains going.

Q: I see. And you were in a boxcar yourself?

A: Yeah, we were in a boxcar.

Q: And for how many days?

A: Oh, about ten days it took to get to Munich.

Q: What were conditions like in the boxcar?

A: It wasn't like before, because it was more roomy, because it's only to get there, because that's all they had at that time. That's all you can find to travel.

Q: Who was running the trains at that particular time, do you know, was it the...

A: In Czechoslovakia there were the Czechs were running, and in Poland they had the Polish people running the trains.

Q: I see. Where did you wind up in Germany, then?

- A: In Germany I wind up in Feldafing. That was a camp established for the survivors.
- Q: Displaced persons?
- A: Displaced persons, yes. There we were provided, by the UNRRA. They provided the food and the barracks. There were buildings actually. There were no barracks any more. It was the former German barracks for the soldiers. They made a camp there for the survivors.
- Q: And that's where you stayed? How long? What dates, approximately?
- A: It would be July, 1945, until the beginning of 1946. Then I moved to northern Bavaria, in a small town where I had some friends, a cousin living there. That was Munzburg, near Bayreuth.
- Q: Was that still in the American zone?
- A: That was American zone yet. But I didn't want to live any more in camps, and so I went to a city, and rented an apartment.
- Q: Did you have some work there?
- A: Yes, I did some work.
- Q: What happened with your relatives?
- A: I had at that time, I had everybody now.
- Q: They were with you?
- A: In Bergen-Belsen, I found a sister, yet, so we were...
- Q: You went to Bergen-Belsen and you found a sister?
- A: Yes, I got news that my sister survived Bergen-Belsen and we went there and picked her up. Then we were my mother and two sisters, and my brother. So we, thanks God, we were a sizeable family, which didn't happen very often.
- Q: Yes. So you all, all of you then, went to this small town in Bavaria? And you found work there?
- A: At that time, yes. I had friend, a German Jew. His name was Kobeit.
- Q: How did he survive?

- A: He was in concentration camp, also. But they survived and they were living there, in Munzburg, and he approached me, because he knew I'm from the metallic profession, if I would go with him.
- Q: Metallic profession?
- A: I mean metal. I knew about metals a lot because I was machinist still. He wants to buy in steel, or in some tooled machinery, and so on, because he lived in Germany, he had some friends there from before the war, that he had some connections if I would go with him. And so I said, yes, and that's when we established a company. Then we bought steel and sold it. From the steel mills.
- Q: You were kind of a broker?
- A: No, just a business. Like here, they had a hardware store, but this was on a little bigger scale, that you buy direct from the mill, and sell it to the hardware stores or to builders. So that's why I decided to leave the camp, because I had some responsibilities. I had two sisters and a mother to provide for and I had a brother.
- Q: Were any of them working?
- A: No.
- Q: How old was your younger brother at this time then -- approximately?
- A: He was at that time about nineteen years old.
- Q: Were you undecided at this time what you wanted to do? Where you wanted to be?
- A: Of course, yes, yes.
- Q: So how long were you there and in business with this man?
- A: Until 1949.
- Q: How did that go? How did you like that?
- A: Pretty good, yes. It provided. I married off my two sisters and made nice weddings for them. And my mother, we had a nice apartment, and bought nice things, and clothes, and so on. I didn't want to rely on anybody giving me any welfare, so I tried to provide for myself.
- Q: Did you have any thoughts then about possibly going to Palestine or the United States?

- A: Yes, either to Palestine -- or to Israel, at that time it was Palestine, but they changed the name later -- or to the United States. I was undecided. And later I decided to go to the United States.
- Q: When did you decide, and who did you have to see? What did you have to do?
- A: Well, there was the United Nations Relief Organization or agency, and you registered there.
- Q: When did you register there, do you remember?
- A: 1948. You had to take some tests, if you were healthy, and we all took the test and we came here to the United States, my mother, my brother.
- Q: And so you decided on the United States. Did you have any people here?
- A: No. I didn't have anybody, no.
- Q: Did you come right to...
- A: To Saint Paul. And that's where I stayed. (Laughter)
- Q: There wasn't any Jewish agencies involved that you remember?
- A: No.
- Q: There weren't. How long did it take you to get to the United States?
- A: We came by ship. Because we had to go through different camps, it took about six weeks until we landed here.
- Q: You maintain contact with the Jewish community here in Saint Paul?
- A: Yes, yes. I belong to B'nai Brith. And I am very active in Toastmasters.
- Q: Do you maintain any contact with any other survivors? Or any survivor organizations?
- A: Yes, sure, constantly, with people that were also in the concentration camp. But you can't just be among them, you just looking to broaden your friends to have different people with you, because you don't want to talk or be reminded all the time of it. I have plenty of nightmares without that. It's many times that I, in the middle of the night, scream and...(pause). Yeah, you can't just wipe it up, wipe it away. You can't forget it. Although you have to try and live a normal life.
- Q: Maybe you can sum up what you think it means to be a survivor of the Holocaust?

- A: (Sigh). It's unbelievable. I can't believe it myself, that I survived it. And, luckily, that I had the right profession, the right thing, that they needed me. I can't attribute that I became more capable than anybody else. I was lucky, lucky to survive. There were a lot of people more capable than I am, and they did not. It was just by chance.
- Q: Do you believe that any of the films or books that you may have seen or read about the Holocaust accurately tell the story?
- A: Nothing can describe it accurately. That's unbelievable. I lived through it, and I can't believe it myself, that things like this can happen. It's...it's...beyond comprehension.
- Q: What would be your feeling then about human nature, and non-Jews, and Germans, or Polish people?
- A: The Polish people, I don't know. I don't hate anybody. I might not love everybody, but I hate no one, even...but I don't know...on the bottom, the list of people that I hated, would be the Polish people. When they took everybody away from our city, it was in August, 1942. They came then, the people, the Germans that were the occupation force, and they needed people, because the Polish people there are not in the professions. If there was a tailor, or shoemaker, or any other profession, or to repair watches, there were seldom that you found Polish people that could do it. Mostly Jewish people. So they needed somebody. So they took out, maybe fifty people, they took out from the train, in order to have 'em yet, to work for them, to carry out the work what they need, the Germans, in the occupation of Poland. And the Polish people, they didn't give them any weapons, they had shovels -- that was the Arbeitsteins, they called them, that was the work force -- and they were guarding. The Poles with the shovels killed more Jews than the Germans with the guns!
- Q: Why do you think that was?
- A: Because they hated the Jews! They were just brutal! They were just brutal with hatred! They couldn't stand a Jew. And I blame mostly the priests and the Catholic Church. They instilled in 'em that hate every Sunday and every day they went to church.
- Q: Was there a Catholic Church located near where you live?
- A: Yes. A few of them.
- Q: Did you ever have any incidents with the Catholic youth you knew? Did they ever beat up the Jews?

- A: Oh, yes, yes, so often --before the war. And in the war they had a field day, that they could do anything they wanted.
- Q: On a somewhat different note, did you meet your wife in this country or in Europe?
- A: In Europe.
- Q: In Europe. In Germany, or in Poland?
- A: Germany.
- Q: After the liberation?
- A: Uh-huh.
- Q: When you were working in the metal business.
- A: Yes.
- Q: I see. Was there anything else you'd like to add that I may have missed in this format of questions?
- A: What I couldn't understand...(Laughter). I didn't think highly about the Americans -- what their process was at that time. They were so infested with anti-Jewish, a lot of them, that it's unbelievable.
- Q: This is the occupation force.
- A: The occupation force. And the people that processed us. I mean that there would be from the State Department. That was scary at that time. I thought, "We are running from..." but thanks God, it's a lot better. It got better with time. Through the years, it's improved greatly.
- Q: So there was some anti-Semitism exhibited by the American occupation forces.
- A: Yes, yes, yes. And especially the people from the State Department, that processed us. It's unbelievable.
- Q: Do you recall any incidents?
- A: There was constant reminders the way they treated us, the way they talked to us. They didn't hide it, at that time. It really was scary!
- Q: How much did you have to deal with these people in the occupation, in the State Department?

A: We stayed at quite a few camps where we went through. Each camp we stayed a few days, and they processed again, and they took pictures, and they took x-rays, and they asked questions, hundreds of questions, and really, it really showed.

Q: How come they kept sending you to different camps? Did you know why?

A: Until they had the transportation ready. Then we were in Schweinfurteng and Vichtburg, and then in Bremen, in the port city, where we waited for our ship to come. We went by military ship at that time. General Hahn was the name of the ship. Was an old broken down thing. I was quite disappointed at the way a lot of them behaved. I can't say every one of them, but there were a lot of them.

Q: This completes the interview with Peter Gersh by David Zarkin on March 31, 1983.