

Interview with Mr. Edward E. Grosmann  
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 David Zarkin on June 23, 1984, with an interview for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust Oral History Project. I'm speaking with Edward E. Grosmann of St. Louis Park, Minnesota. Mr. Grosmann, please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name, if it is different
- A: Edward Elias Grosmann. And my Jewish name is Eliahu Grosmann.
- Q: And where were you born?
- A: I was born in Medzilaborce, Czechoslovakia.
- Q: And what year -- date?
- A: March 29, 1921.
- Q: And was that town known by any other name?
- A: Yes. Under the Austria-Hungarian regime, it was known as Mezulaborce. And in the Jewish community, they used to call it Mezulaboritz.
- Q: What were your parents' names, your grandparents' names or your great-grandparents' names?
- A: Well, I can only go as far as my grandparents. I do not know about the great-grandparents. We'll start with them. On my father's side it was Eliazur, and his wife's I didn't know because she died very, very young before I was born. My mother's side, my grandfather's name was David and my grandmother's name was Dina. My mother's name was Blima and my father's name was Chaim.
- Q: What were your parents' occupations?
- A: My father was a peddler. As far as I know, most of the time he spent in the United States except for a few years from 1919 through 1925. So he came back when I was born and two other members -- siblings. And my mother carried on a very small general store in Czechoslovakia, in our home town.
- Q: Where were your parents born? What town?

- A: My father was born in a small village, Mikova. And my mother, I believe, was born in Medzilaborce. At the time they were born there was no Czechoslovakia in existence. There was Austria-Hungary.
- Q: What languages were spoken at home?
- A: It was mostly Yiddish, except when my mother didn't want me to understand what was going on, she spoke Hungarian to my older sister.
- Q: Would you say that your family was secular or religious in practice or orientation?
- A: My family was religious in practice and orientation.
- Q: Were they Zionist or hasidic?
- A: They were hasidic.
- Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?
- A: Yes, very much so. Starting from the age of three and continued until I was 18 years old. We studied in a cheder. From the age of three until about 10, 11. Then we were in more formalized Talmud Torah until about 14. And from 14 until 18 I was in a Yeshiva in my hometown.
- Q: Which is like a college, a university, or...?
- A: Well, the Yeshiva, actually was over and above the secular education. It was concerned only with Jewish education.
- Q: What events, either local, national or international were you aware of from the mid-1930s to 1941?
- A: I was very much aware of the rise of Nazism in Germany, because the newspapers and the Jewish community was very concerned of what is going on in our neighboring states -- and especially when we saw the fall of Austria. Then we really started getting very seriously concerned.
- Q: Were there any meetings or gatherings?
- A: Yes. The Zionist activity, which was not very dominant in our community, took on some very important aspects. Speakers came from the more enlightened part of our country to tell us what's going on and how important it is to go to Palestine in order to escape the disasters that our brethren in Germany and Austria were already facing.

Q: So did many of the people go?

A: Some. We had a few people who had left our community against the wishes of the elders of the city, who were very much opposed to the idea of creating a Jewish state in Palestine.

Q: Why was that?

A: The prevailing philosophy in the community was the very traditional approach, that when the Holy One will decide that the Meshiach should come and redeem His people, redeem the people of Israel, at that time they will be ready to go. Any other approach of resolving the problem of creating a state was totally in opposition to the existing philosophy in our community -- though I must mention, we had a very small group of Zionists, of which I was one, that were actually in conflict with the prevailing philosophy, and we were continuously fighting with the establishment, who could not see the need for the creation of a political state in Palestine for the Jewish people.

Q: Did you try to get to Palestine?

A: No. I did not get to Palestine. When I may have had a chance, I did not try very hard. When it was too late, I have tried and at that time, I did not succeed. In 1939, many of the young people who have been already deeply involved in the Zionist movement, we have appealed to the Jewish Agency for affidavits. And we were promised to get them. But we don't know if we ever were awarded those affidavits. Hitler marched into Prague -- and all contacts, all practical contacts with the outside world diminished to the degree that really we didn't know what is going on outside in our behalf, and we only know we saw already the big problems -- the big clouds encompassing us.

Q: Were you still getting information through the newspaper or radio?

A: We were getting newspapers. Information was coming in in clandestine ways, and we knew exactly what was going on in Germany and in the places where Hitler was already creating his mischief.

Q: Did you have any contacts with gentiles during this time? The time we're speaking of is just before the outbreak of the war.

A: Yes, because I was going to public schools, and I had quite a few non-Jewish friends. In fact, in my community, because the majority of the inhabitants of our community was Jewish -- I would say almost 60 to 70% were Jewish -- I have never felt any anti-Semitism. I never felt any persecution until 1938 when Slovakia, which has declared itself independent from Czechoslovakia, has adopted the Nuremberg Law and became an ally of Nazi Germany

Q: I what kinds of settings did you have contact with gentiles, other than school? For instance, in your family business that you had?

A: Even though I was going to school, I was very active in this very little small business that we had, and I would say most of the customers were non-Jews, who came from the out-lying areas to do their business, whatever business there was. And we created some pretty good friendships to the degree that we had some of the gentiles with whom we dealt with hide my sister for a while during the time of deportations.

Q: In your community before the outbreak of the war, did you have any encounters with anti-Semitism?

A: As I mentioned before, I have never encountered any. I have never felt persecuted. I have never felt any anti-Semitism during my first 17 years of my life.

Q: Before the war, did you have any relatives living outside your community?

A: Oh, yes. My grandfather and his ancestors lived in this town, Mekova, which was about 20 miles away from our town, Medzilaborce, which was the county seat. It may be interesting to note that they were among the very few farmers who farmed the land before Jews were allowed to hold land. The legend goes that supposedly they had settled the land many centuries before, and they believe, we have no proof, that they may have been among the wandering immigrants from the Inquisition, who found their way, somehow or another, in that part of -- at that time --Austria-Hungary.

Q: To your knowledge, what happened to them, and when?

A: There isn't a single survivor from this entire group of at least as I was able to count, more than 150 ancestors, descendents and relatives. All of them perished during the transportations, including my family. I do not know how anybody who was at that time left in Europe could have survived -- except myself

Q: What age were you at the outbreak of the war?

A: I was 18 years old when Hitler marched into Poland.

Q: How did you receive news of the war?

A: We were reading the newspapers. First of all, our community, unfortunately, was not far away from the Polish borders, and we saw the German marching machine passing through our town, which was the visual part, but the worst part was because we had been following the crisis, although we were young people, but we

were politically very much aware. Even though we couldn't afford buying a newspaper, we were able to get newspaper by sharing the expense in the community, and three or four families used to buy a newspaper and share it, and we were following the news through the newspapers and then also there were a few radios in town and we had access to listen to the neighbors' radios which gave us, most of the time, the internal news, but once in a while we were able to catch also clandestine news from London. There we got the true news.

Q: Do you remember when you heard that the war had started? Was that a memorable date or moment?

A: Very, very much so. I remember very much the moment when the war had started, because at that time, there was a great celebration by the existing Soviet government who was a member of the Nazi regime at that time. A big jubilation took place on the radio that the "German brothers -- the German allies -- will be able to liberate their "oppressed" and persecuted brethren in Poland who were oppressed by those "terrible Poles."

Q: And what did you make of that news at that time and date?

A: Although we could not believe at that time that the things that we have been hearing clandestinely about various prisons in Germany and in Austria -- of taking Jews and torturing them -- we were afraid. At least the chills were going through our backs that we may encounter the same situation that's going on there. The Jewish community in general was very, very sad and very worried about the fate that's going to befall us.

Q: Did they get together in any kind of meetings or anything?

A: Yes. The things that we used to do is, we went to shul, and there were prayers, praying and entreating the Almighty to save us and help us. And all the discussions in the Bet Hamidrash, in the shul, were only what's going to happen, about the fate of the Jewish community.

Q: How did life change economically and socially after the outbreak of the war?

A: It changed terribly, because it didn't take very much longer that the existing regime "Aryanized" our little business, kicked us out and gave the licenses under which we were able to scrape out a meager living to a non-Jew, and took over the little store. So our life as respectable citizens in the eyes of our non-Jewish citizens dwindled down to zero as a result of this happening.

Q: We already mentioned that there were discussions about the possibility of going to Palestine. And you, possibly some others in the community favored this?

- A Yes, there were quite a number of young people, and especially the younger people, who at a much earlier stage of our lives realized that we must find a solution. Even though we were never persecuted, we knew that in order to go to the university, we would not have a chance because there was a secret “numerus clausus” practiced, where only so many Jews were able to attend the highest institutions of learning. And this alone, and when we saw in the beginning of the ‘30’s what’s been happening in Germany, we felt that it would not be very long that the same fate will befall our country, which at that time, was the most democratic country in the whole of Europe.
- Q: When did the Nazi occupation occur?
- A: It’s hard for me to say, because I lived in the part of Czechoslovakia which eventually became Slovakia in 1938. Although, officially, there were no Nazis -- there were no German or SS troops in our community -- nonetheless, we became a Nazi state right after the division of Czechoslovakia when Chamberlain sold out Czechoslovakia through the Munich conference to Hitler. At that time, Slovakia immediately declared itself as an independent state and they immediately instituted the same laws as they prevailed in Germany -- the Nuremberg Laws -- and they started immediately at that moment forcing us to wear the yellow stars. I was kicked out of school. No Jew was able to attend public school. Where he went, he goes to Jewish schools. That actually was the beginning. This is how we felt the rise of Nazism in our country. We were very unique in this respect, because this was the only state which was a free state, in the eyes of the Slovaks, but actually they were just puppets in the hands of the Nazis, and were following through their orders to the “nth” degree.
- Q: So was there an actual “Nazi” occupation then?
- A: There was no Nazi occupation. The same people who have lived with us, who were neighbors, became the Nazis. They were the ones who were carrying out the orders of the Nazis. The majority of the population was rather timid and afraid to the degree that those we considered our friends in the non-Jewish community have become very, very cautious and stayed away from us, because they were afraid that some of the deaths were given for “associating” with Jews. In fact, association with Jews was considered a crime. It was criminal, and it was punishable by penalties and also imprisonment.
- Q: You talked that there were barriers getting into the university, and you had to wear the yellow star, and that they followed along the lines of the Nuremberg Laws that the Soviets promulgated. Were there any other actions that were taken?
- A: Not the Soviets -- you mean the Nazis.
- Q: I mean the Nazis, excuse me. Were there any other actions that the government there in your locality took against the Jews?

A: You mean after the Nazis came to rise?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes, very much so. We were picked up from our homes. All the young people had to report and do public labor, cleaning the streets, helping build some roads -- for which you were not paid. We were taken away from our homes with no provisions from the government to provide food, so we had to worry about the food, and we had to leave our families, totally, without being able to assist them in survival.

Q: Were you contained in a ghetto?

A: Well, I was not contained in a ghetto, per se, because it was a very strange situation in Slovakia. We were an independent country, as I declared, under the regime of Nazism. The army, itself, was able to maintain a degree of independence under the German rules. And as a 19 or 20 year old man -- all the 20-year-old people had to be drafted into the army -- I had to subject myself to the draft, and I was drafted. Like all the other non-Jews, I was drafted in the Slovak army, and in 1941 I became a member of the so-called Slovak Armed Forces. But because we were Jews, we were not taken in to the fighting forces, we became a part of the labor forces. And we wore a uniform somewhat different in color from the uniforms of the non-Jews. Also, instead of having a gun, we had a shovel. This is something very rare. This is not known at all about our particular group, and I thought this may be very interesting.

Q: Had your community always had a history of separating people out according to what religion they were? Was it registered at the courthouse? Or, with the local government, what religion people were in the community?

A: Oh, absolutely, because the government itself collected the religious tax from every citizen in the country. And every member, every citizen had to declare what religion he is, so that the amount collected from the citizen through the normal taxation was given and divided to the Jewish communities, wherever they were. You see, in addition to the income tax, there was a small percentage which was a religious tax. And the Jewish community collected from the government a certain amount of the tax, which was then distributed to the various Jewish communities. And the Christians had the same way.

Q: Well, during this time that we're talking about, when you were in this labor force, did you have any knowledge of what was going on outside your community? About other ghettos, about mass killings, or concentration camps?

A: Yes, we had very much so, because in 1939, after the Polish war, we had many, many people, many "smugglers" -- refugees -- among them Jews, and some of

them my relatives, who lived on the Polish side, told us what was going on, that the Nazis who have been there have taken people out in the street and murdering them in cold blood. And that was in 1939 and early 1940. And many smugglers who came from Poland, already was telling us about the creation of ghettos in Poland, and also, we knew what was going on, because Czechoslovakia was divided. The western part of Czechoslovakia became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia -- the Nazi regime -- and we, Slovakia, where I lived, was under the Slovak government. And we had heard that a big ghetto is being created in a small town near Prague which was called Terezin, and that many of the Jews were collected there and taken away. And the transports started to the east for labor purposes -- from Bohemia and Moravia -- while nothing was happening, yet, in Slovakia. That was during the year 1940 when I was still home.

Q: Were you actually then deported to this labor camp? Or was that voluntary?

A: I marched in. I was drafted as any other soldier. In 1941, I started duty as any other soldier, going through basic training in the same shape and form as all the other normal soldiers went through, except, instead of using a gun, we used a shovel. And this went on from October, 1941, until January, 1942. And then we were sent away from the basic training into labor battalions, in uniform, under the supervision of gentiles who were normal soldiers of the Slovak Armed Forces. What our job was, we were building roads and any other war-important projects. We performed the labor for these projects.

Q: And what were the living conditions like?

A: Living conditions were as good as any other soldier. We got the same pay as any other soldier. We got the same food. And there was absolutely no persecution under those conditions other than we were wearing a blue uniform instead of a green uniform. We were in the same position as the gypsies who were also collected, who also had to march into the Armed Forces, but they wore a brown uniform, we wore a blue uniform, the normal soldiers wore a green uniform. This went on until 1943. And we were shifted from one area to another. But always in uniforms, and always receiving the same pay, the same food. There is the only time where the supervisors have exerted their power in expressing their feeling, in this country, about anti-Semitism. We had the right to worship -- I happened to be in a group which was a religious group -- and for the holidays we didn't get time off, but we were able to arrange with the supervisors to make up the time of our quota. What we had to perform in our work, either during the evening or during Sunday, when we were not working. We were allowed to worship in our own way in the barracks where we stayed. And not only that. It was agreed that we would not have to accept non-kosher food. There was no meat available, but we were able to get other supplies, like beans and peas and bread, which made up, in terms of dollars and cents -- in terms of the kronas -- the amount of money which was allocated. We were able to get other foods, so we wouldn't have to eat the non-kosher food. This boggles your mind, probably.



Q: No, I'm stuck on that thought that you mentioned about the supervisors.

A: Well they were actually soldiers.

Q: Do you remember who the commanding officer was?

A: There is a book that was written in Israel. Covers the whole situation. I believe it's about to come out, momentarily. It covered that period of the experiences of our group. There were over 2,500 of us all over Slovakia. We created what was called the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, and there were several battalions. I happened to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. In 1943, apparently the pressures from the Nazis came upon the Army, and they said they will not allow any Jews to be members of the Slovak Armed Forces, who are their allies. We were all honorably discharged from the Army and what we have learned after the war, that the Minister of Defense of the Slovak army was a humanist. He knew what was going on in Poland. And he felt, at least he can save those 2,500 of his Jews. He kept us, and we performed tremendous labor. Tremendous. But it was always under the threat that if we will not make our quota, we will be deported. And we knew already what was going on, because at that time our family was already gone -- it was terrible -- to Poland. We were the only Jews left in Slovakia out of the maybe 100,000 Slovakian Jews. He said he will not allow, under any condition, to take these Jews. They wanted to transport us to Poland --that he delivers them over to the SS. The SS was already active at that time, very much. It was in the middle of the Russian war, and there were big problems for the Germans. The SS wanted us out. They wanted us to Poland -- or to Auschwitz. And what happened was, the Minister of Defense said, under one condition. He's going to release us if we will be able to continue providing the labor which we have done so faithfully for the Germans -- in Slovakia. And what happened was, we returned the uniforms and we stayed at the same place where we stayed as soldiers, with the exception that the Army supervisors have left, and the equivalent of the SS in Slovakia, which were called the Chrinkaguard -- I don't know if you heard that name before -- the Chrinkaguard was the equivalent of the Slovak SS -- that they will become the supervisors. Which happened. From 1943 in June until 1944, October 28, we stayed at the same barracks, performing the same labor. Happened to be in a brick quarry. But during that period, our co-workers, who were gentiles, in that brick factory cautioned us that they have heard rumors in the community that the SS is coming to pick us up. And those rumors, they're going on from the time when we became civilians. So we used to pick ourselves up and run off to the woods, and hide out for about two, three weeks. Then our gentile co-workers came back to us and told us it seems like everything is quiet. We need you in the factory. Why don't you come back and help us. So this was going on for about 16, 17 months. And one unsuspecting day, it was the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 1944, the whole community where we worked was surrounded by several thousand SS -- no Slovaks -- SS, with machine guns and cannons to capture us. We about 410 of us. And we heard over the microphones

telling the local population, “Anybody who’s going to hide any of those Jews, they and their family will be executed on the spot and their property will be burned down and confiscated for the state.” So we were all surrounded. We were picked up, and within 48 hours we were in Auschwitz.

Q: And how did they get you to Auschwitz?

A: They picked us up, they surrounded, they picked everyone up, and they manacled us like criminals and they brought us into Bratislava.

Q: By foot?

A: No. They were about 2,000. They had about 60 or 80 trucks -- lorries. And we were thrown into the lorries. A few of us at a time, because they were afraid of us. They took only 5, 6 in one truck, with 10, 15 SS. We could do ‘em as much harm as we could do to the people who live on Mars! They brought us into Bratislava overnight, and from there they brought us to the concentration camp in Serat. And from Serat, they took us directly to Auschwitz. We arrived in Auschwitz on November 1, 1944.

Q: And what happened when you first got there? What was it like?

A: When we got to Auschwitz, we were in the last transport going from any place in Europe to Auschwitz, the last one. There were no more transports coming to Auschwitz after we arrived. When we came down, we saw the chimneys. We smelled the smell of burning flesh as we arrived there. And we already knew, because there were some people who have come back to Slovakia from Majdanek and others, and they told us what’s going on. They told us about Auschwitz. And they told us that none of our parents and none of our relatives are most likely alive. We knew all the children and all the older people would be killed on the spot. And we were very surprised when we arrived there, we saw big dogs and the yelling, but they did not divide us. They took the whole group -- we were about 800 people -- they called only two names out. Those were two informers who informed the Germans on Jews. Those are two people they called out, and we never heard of them. We heard that they were executed by the Germans when they arrived in Auschwitz. But whole families were taken in Auschwitz, in Birkenau, to the Tziganer camp. Have you heard of that?

Q: No.

A: To the Tziganer camp, which is the gypsy camp. This was a camp where they kept a few months before us a big group of deportees from Terezin. And there were the whole families together. We were there for a number of days, and the lagerfuhrer, who was a German political prisoner, who has been in prison for many years, we asked him, “What is going to happen to us?”

Q: What's a lagerfuhrer?

A: Lagerfuhrer is the camp director who was also a prisoner. You heard of the kapos?

A: They're like police?

A: Yeah, but the lagerfuhrer was a prisoner who was responsible for the whole camp. And the kapos were his workers, his supervisors.

Q: Was this a Jewish person?

A: No, it was a German political prisoner, a Communist most likely, who was imprisoned by the Nazis. In fact, in this camp, there were all kinds of people. There were homosexuals, who had, I believe, blue signs. And the political prisoners had red signs. And the Jews had yellow ribbons on their arms, with the stars in the front and the back, and the striped suits. And we asked him, "What's going to happen to us?" He says, "Well, I can only tell you, you may be called into the Himmelkommando." You know what Himmelkommando is? To the commander, to the heavenly commander. "Like your brethren were called in two months ago." They did the same thing to a complete transport from Terezin." They brought 'em in, to the same camp where we were, and then one day they took the whole camp, women, children, young and old, labor-capable and young people -- they were all taken to the gas chambers and liquidated. And we were very concerned, because we knew already well, that there was a division, they picked out the younger people and the older people, they're going directly into the gas chambers. We were concerned. We felt, "Well, this is it!" I can remember very clearly on November 14, two weeks later, they asked that the women go separately and the men go separately and the children go separately. Then we felt, "This is it."

Q: Where did they want you to go to?

A: They sent to the right all men, on one side all children, and on one side all women, but without distinction of age. And there was a big line of people. This was 900 people. They lined us up, and we started getting these numbers.

Q: The tattoos.

A: Yes. And they were two Jewish boys, who were tattooing this particular group where I was. They says, 'Well, we believe that you're not going into the gas chambers. Because otherwise they would not be tattooing you.' And they were doing the same thing with the women. They took the children away. There was a children's camp. They put the children in it. And then after the tattooing was done, we went to the so-called "cleansing prospelet," this so-called shower bath. We were afraid, because we heard of the baths, but we really went through the

baths, and we got the uniforms. We were brought into the general camp, but I was brought into a group of people where they were mostly Czechs, for some reason or another. This is how they placed the Slavs, together with some of the previous arrivals who lived in certain camps. And the children were in a children's camp and the women went to the women's camp. And they started sending us out. The following day we were sent to dig up -- that was November 14 -- rutabagas on one of the fields that they had. The mud was to the knees, and we felt, "Well, this is it." Under such conditions, we felt we are not going to last very long. And this was going on for two, three days. And one day, a kapo came in, who was also a political prisoner with a red triangle, he wants 20 Czechs. And we had a conference. You know, Jews always have conferences. "Shall we dare to volunteer?" And we decided we can't lose too much. Things were so bad, if they get much worse, we won't be around very long anyhow. So we volunteered. He said, 'Tomorrow at 5:00 -- he took down the numbers, we were no longer people -- I was B14083, see? -- "I will have these 20 numbers, and I want you to be right here in front of the barrack, and I will have two SS men pick you up and bring you in to your new labor place." We didn't know what is going to happen. What happened was, we were taken from this barrack to the women's barracks, where they had a so-called weaving factory -- only about 100 steps away from where we were. The kapo was there and he told us there was an enormous warehouse full of plastic waste, of pieces of plastic. And the 20 of us were supposed to take this waste and distribute it to a group of women who were mussulmen. You know what a mussulman is?

Q: No, tell me.

A: A mussulman was a person who has reached a point where they have lost the looks of a human being. They were totally human skeletons. And they were supposed to take this material and weave it into ropes, which ropes were supposed to go to the German navy. And this -- this was in front of the SS who were inside the big warehouse -- this kapo said, "I will expect of you that you will behave yourself in a proper way, that you will do a good job for the German war effort, because we have to win this war. And if you're going to do well, you're going to stay in this barracks. You won't be sent outside. If you won't, if you think the labor that you did before was hard, you haven't seen any labor yet." The SS left, and this kapo came over and said, "Listen, guys, I am a brother of yours. I'm a Czech, but I was in Stettin, I was a Communist -- and I'm here because of my beliefs. I'm going to help you, but you people, you cannot do anything that will jeopardize my life. I will come in from time to time in the presence of the SS. I'll beat the living hell out of you. I'll yell at you. I'll kick you. I want you to know, I will do it, because this is how it works here. Otherwise I'll leave you in peace. Just mind your own business." This is what happened in Auschwitz. For some odd reason, he picked me -- I was the youngest, I believe.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: Gottfried. I remember his name. I can see his face, like today. And he said to me "I hold you responsible that all goes well." That could have meant a death sentence, because if something doesn't go right, I would have been the one to account for it. A few days later, the Sharfuhrer in the SS comes in with our kapo. And the kapo started beating everybody. And this Sharfuhrer was the SS in charge of a number of barracks. He said, "Give me a man who will be responsible!" So he picked me. So this SS man took out a bag of stuff and gives it to me. He says to me, "Here I have my personal belongings. I am not going to tell you what I have here. There are cigarettes, there are other things. If I'm going to miss one cigarette from this bundle here, you see those two big dogs?" They had those very big dogs. "They're going to tear you to pieces." And he meant it. We had a conference, those 20 Czechs, and I told 'em what happened to me. I told 'em. I have to safekeep it, because apparently he was afraid, himself, to keep it where he was keeping it, because somebody else was above him, and they were looking what he has stolen, what he has. So I had to be his confidant.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: No, I don't remember his name. All 20 of us, every day, we were guarding that little bundle,, because we knew that our lives depended on this little bundle, whatever it was that is there.. And this was going on until January 18, 1945. As a result of being where we were, I personally feel I survived. I wasn't a strong fellow, and I was inside a building, in the winter. It was a very cold winter in Auschwitz in 1944 and 1945, an early winter and very cold. On January 18, we were ordered to get into 'appell," that we will go on trip. This was the time of the evacuation of Auschwitz. I was standing in line with my friends and suddenly this SS man was searching with a microphone. "B140983, if I don't hear from you within the next five minutes, I'll find you, and you'll be executed on the spot for disobeying orders." I came out. I was afraid. I don't know why they picked people. I forgot totally about the bundle because we knew we are going on this big death march, already. This was the 18<sup>th</sup> of January death march from Poland when the Russians were coming in. And my friend said, "I think you should be going. He'll find you anyhow and then we will all be in trouble." So I went out and he kicked me. "Why didn't you come out immediately?" He kicked me and he had his dogs with him. He says, "I want that bundle." So I went back to that barrack and fortunately nobody touched it, brought the bundle and he opened it. There were cigarettes. I remember the soles -- there were soles, shoe soles. And there was some perfume there. And he started counting the packs of cigarettes. And I thought he may give me a cigarette. He gave me a kick -- it hurt me for weeks -- and he says, "Get lost!" I lost my friends, because in the meantime, the march started. We were about 20 or 30,000 people marching out of Auschwitz, and I came with new people. I didn't know a soul. We marched for three days from Auschwitz to Gliwice and it was a disaster. I would say from the groups -- there were 200 people in a group, or 500, I cannot remember -- it was snowing bitterly, and I would say half the people sat down. We saw, from previous groups, the bodies lined up in the ditches. Anybody who sat down or who

remained behind, the SS pushed 'em into the ditches and killed 'em. It was a disaster! It was an awful disaster! I would say more than half that never made it to Gliwice -- in our group.

Q: How far was this?

A: From Auschwitz to Gliwice? Overnight -- during the night -- we were put in some kind of haystack. But I would say, probably, maybe about 60 miles? It was a very long road. And we came in there half dead -- very decimated. And we were there for about two days, and there they started again. We didn't know what was going on. They asked all the Jews to come out, because in Auschwitz, we left together in groups, the Jews and the non-Jews were all together. And we came out. I didn't try to hide, because I had the whole city of Jerusalem on my face, but there were some Jews, looked very odd, blondes, and you could never distinguish the difference between them and non-Jews, but they -- the Polacks, the bloody Polacks -- anybody who tried to hide among them, they called 'em out. They called 'em, "Here is a Jew!" to the SS. And that guy, they took him away to a separate place.

Q: These were Polish prisoners?

A: Polish prisoners. That's why I have never had any heart for the Poles. And we were lined up, thousands of us, and finally I wound up in a big train -- open train, open car.

Q: Like a flatbed?

A: Flatbed, yes. First of all, a group of us, we were the first ones to get in, and they loaded. They loaded those flatbeds. I would say by the time when we took off, there wasn't room to breathe, physically. There was no room -- absolutely none. They gave us a bread -- one bread to each prisoner. And we saw, not far away from the train station, a big group of people --also prisoners --- standing there behind gates. And we took off. And we traveled from Gliwice all over Poland. Czechoslovakia, and we came all the way to Mauthausen. The concentration camp, Mauthausen.

Q: That was in Poland?

A: No, that was in Austria. Not far. And this trip took approximately, I would say, about seven days, in open cars, never gotten out of the cars. During that trip from the 200 people, more than half died in the cars, and we had to throw them out. And when we were traveling through Czechoslovakia, the Czech people saw the cars going by and they came alongside the stations and they threw bread into the cars.. most of the people were killed not so much because of hunger, but because of the bread that was thrown in. Instead of the Nazis allowing proper distribution of food, they wanted to see those people, like mad dogs, how they're scrambling.

You know, when people are hungry, they kill each other for a slice of bread. So most of the people killed on that particular section -- on that strip -- they were fighting to get that small bread. We came to Mauthausen, and supposedly we were supposed to get out. And we heard -- all, everything was a rumor mill -- we will not be allowed to get out because there is no room left, because there were many camps, from other places in Poland that they came here before us, and they filled up the camp. There was no more room. So we remained for one day outside of Mauthausen, and we were going back the same route, but to Berlin. Took another seven days to come to Sachsenhausen, Oranienberg. I don't know if you've heard of these camps.

Sachsenhausen, that was near Berlin. We went through Berlin. I remember seeing Berlin from the open cars. There was a heap of ashes like we saw when our people landed on the moon. This is what Berlin looked like when we passed through. This was the only consolation that we had. And we came in there to Sachsenhausen, Oranienberg, which was actually originally a factory where they were making the Heinkel planes, the Messerschmitt. It was all evacuated. We arrived there, out of a full car where we had at least 200 to begin with, I don't think there were 30 of us left. I was, I remember, very, very hungry, very sick. The people died from hunger. They died from hunger because there was no food for the seven days. We never got out of the trains. The only thing that we had was the snow -- fortunately. None of us would have survived if it hadn't been for the snow that was coming down in our trains while we were traveling during all this time. We came down to Oranienberg, Sachsenhausen, we got hot water. And this is the first time that we had anything hot in our mouth in the fourteen days from the time when we left Gliwice.

We were there for about three, four days, and they told us we are going to go to some working camps. We were divided into various groups, and I was sent from Berlin, probably two, three days, to Flossenburg. We were sent to the stone quarries in Flossenburg. The only memorable thing that I remember in Flossenburg, is because in the next barrack there was Leon Blum. You know who Leon Blum was?

Q: No, tell me.

A: Leon Blum was the Minister of Labor of the French government. And he was Jewish. And he was a great personality in pre-war Europe. Very important there. The Germans didn't dare kill him, because they were afraid of the repercussions that they may have had from the local population in France who were their friends, so-called. If you didn't know who he was, it wouldn't mean much to you, so I would not even mention it, but he was a very important person in Europe at that time. We were going to the stone quarries for a few days. There was nothing to do in the stone quarries because we were so weak that we could no longer lift even a stone! We couldn't lift a shovel. So they decided they were going to send us to a so-called Ausencommando, a "planetary camp." So they sent us to a place

supposedly where we were going to build an airfield. We were as capable as building airfields as I am capable to walk to the moon.

People were dying very quickly in those days, because we all got dysentery. It was just a miracle how anybody got up. Every morning we found somebody else next to us in our bunk. The situation was very bad. In Auschwitz, at least, we had normal bunks, there was a normal life, but from the time when we left Auschwitz, either we were marching, we were in cars, or we were in those various barracks where everybody was fighting for a space to breathe. In a bunk like this, they put in six people. Every morning there were one or two dead, and when these died, it was somebody else that replaced them. So this was a total disaster, really. In the planetary camp, we were maybe about 300. We were sleeping in tents. And every day we went to the airport, supposedly pouring cement, but I don't think we did anything. Every day a few people died or they were killed because the SS got mad at them -- they weren't moving fast enough,

And suddenly the American Air Force started coming down. And every day, without exception, we had the American liberators coming down and dropping their bombs. That was supposedly used to be a training airport, and they were training pilots. We were very busy every day, because they did so much damage every day that we had to clean up. This was going on until April 24.

Q: What country was this in?

A: This was in Bavaria. On April 24 we saw the German armies coming closer where we were. This gave us a big scare. And the Americans were very prevalent. We saw, every day, the American bombs, the American fighters coming through. And we were gathered for a march. The rumors were that we were going to go to Mildorf. We didn't know why and what. We were marching. We were about 900 of us. We were marching, and the same thing was happening on that march like on the other marches. Everybody who just slowed down was shot. And then it was a Friday afternoon, on the 27<sup>th</sup> -- I remember this very vividly -- on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, we were resting on the shorelines of the River Issa, which is in southeastern Bavaria, not far from Dachau. We were resting there. And suddenly an SS man and the lagerfuhrer -- was a different one now -- came and said we are going to get a very important message. And the SS man read the message. On the order of Reichsmarshal Himmler, all of the heftlinger -- which is all prisoners -- are now freed and they are allowed to leave this unit. They can find rest in the neighboring area. They're requested not to commit any crimes until the American Army arrives here, and at that time they will be able to report to the American Army. And this was read by an SS man in the presence of the lagersfuhrer.

There was no jubilation, because the people were so weak that many of them just didn't have the strength to get up. It was a sunny day. The wild flowers were out -- those yellow flowers that you get in the spring -- and it was very bright. A few



of us picked ourselves up. An instinct told us, "Move away, go away from here. Try to see what it really feels to be free." All the SS who were there, they vanished and we were free. And I and two other fellows, we went into the neighboring town, which was about three-quarters of a mile or a mile, because this is as much as we were able to walk. We came there in our prisoners' uniforms. We came to a farm and we told the farmer what happened. He said, "Okay, you can go in that haystack." And he brought us some boiled potatoes and we lie down there. And we just rested. It was a Friday evening. It was the first Friday that we were not in the SS hands. And there were some chickens, so we stole a few eggs and we ate them. The following morning the farmer comes and tells us the SS has been there and asked if there are any prisoners there. And he told 'em there weren't any. Because he saw they had been picking up all the prisoners in all the neighborhoods, he said to us, "I want you to hide. I have never seen you. In case you are caught -- I have been helping you, and you don't want me to get shot -- I'm not going to tell them you are here. Just stay here, because we already heard the American guns not far from that little town. The war isn't going to last very long. I want you to stay here and I will bring you food. Just don't leave or come out, because as long as you are here, we want to see that you survive that war." We were in that haystack for about four days. On May 2 we saw some tanks, and we recognized immediately those were not the German tanks, those were the G.I.'s coming through the highway of this little town.

We left the farmer. The G.I.'s picked us up. They threw us chocolate, and they took us to the neighboring town. We were still very hungry. I and a few others broke into a bakery. The bread was still baking. It was still half raw. We got hold of that bread, and we started eating. And I wound up in a hospital, unconscious. I was kept in the hospital there for about two and a half months, from May until about the middle of July. I found out I am under the supervision of the American doctors, and they brought me back to life, actually. One day I woke up, and there was a big celebration. I remember the lieutenant that was there. He was a doctor. His name was Siegel. I spoke a little English, because I took some English -- I was studying before the war -- and I was able to communicate a little bit, and between the Yiddish and the English, we got along very well. They asked me if I have any relatives in the United States, I told 'em I had a brother who lived in the United States. And I remembered the address. I was so ill, that I didn't remember that I was in the war. I didn't remember anything. I was totally blank, but I remembered his last address. He was also in the U.S. Armed Forces. And he sent the first letter -- that's when I woke up from that nightmare. And they put me in a recovery area in that town. The town where I stayed was Engsfelden. I remember very clearly.

Q: In Germany?

A: In Germany, in Bavaria. And I stayed there for two weeks. And then the Czech government sent out their own trucks to pick up the Czech prisoners, and we were brought back to Czechoslovakia. And when I came back to Czechoslovakia,

naturally, first thing, I went to see if anybody survived. And what I saw, I knew that the chances are very, very low. I happened to find one person from my community, survived from that transport that my mother and sister was on. And she told me what happened. My mother was murdered on Rosh Hashanah Raba, 1942, by a drunken SS. And my sister vanished among the thousands and thousands in Majdanek. And my other sister, my older married sister, was in Treblinka, and we found out they also wound up in Majdanek, and the whole family vanished. It was my two sisters and my nephew and a brother-in-law, and then lots of uncles and cousins and aunts. A big family.

But the Czech government, I must say, and I want to give credit to them, they were very good to us. Unlike the Poles and unlike the Romanians or the Hungarians, when we came back, we didn't come back as "Damned Jews!" We came back as national heroes. We were treated as heroes. I was no hero. I was just a Jew, and that was the only reason that I was imprisoned. And I didn't perform any acts of heroism during the entire war. I was just trying to survive. And the Czech government saw to it that we get back into as normal a life as we could, and provided the conditions and the financial means. First of all, we had to get housing and food, which they provided. At that time there wasn't too much housing, there wasn't much food. We got double rations of food. We got housing. And they helped us with jobs. They provided free schooling for those who wanted to attend school. They gave us cultural means to develop ourselves. We had free subscriptions to all the theaters in the community, and to the symphony orchestra. When I returned, I lived in Prague. I did not return to my shtetl because nobody survived there, and I didn't want to live in the shtetl. There were no opportunities, and it was no trace of any anti-Semitism in Prague. In Slovakia, where I was born, there was some remnants of anti-Semitism. But in Prague where I worked, and went to school, and lived from 1945 to December of '47, it was a very pleasant life that I enjoyed there. I had acclimated myself, and I was treated very well by the Czech government. And I have a very warm spot for them since they did that.

Q: What kind of school did you go to?

A: It was the business academy, which is equivalent to business colleges here. In 1938, when I was seventeen, I almost finished high school -- the equivalent of high school -- but I got credits. I was able to take exams. It was like a junior college, and there was an English school, like an English college of languages which had both academic as well as language, and when I came to the United States, I spoke as fluently English as I speak today. Except it was a different accent; it was an Oxford accent instead of a Yankee accent.

Q: How was it that you happened to leave Czechoslovakia in 1947?

A: First of all, I saw that the Communists were taking over the country. And I was very active in Masaryk's and Benes's part, which was in direct collision with the

Socialist and the Communist parties. And we saw the long reach -- of the Communist Party, the strong influence that the Communist Party was exercising in the Ministry as well as in the rest of the government. We saw they were getting stronger and stronger, and the rumors were around that if -- there were elections in December -- if they don't win the elections, normally, that there will be a coup. I knew that my life wouldn't be very safe there under those conditions, so I started preparing several ways. Number one, I had a brother here, and I applied for a visa the moment that I arrived to Prague. I found my brother -- this is a long story which I won't go in -- and he helped me get the necessary papers to apply for a visa under the Czech quota to come to the United States. The way things were going in the beginning, I really had no serious intentions of coming to the United States, because life was very pleasant in Prague. But as time went on and I saw the political winds -- how they were blowing --- I was very concerned, and I tried to make provisions under which I will have some other options in case I have to leave. So I arranged, number one, to get a visa -- to apply for permission to come to the United States. Secondly, I made arrangement with the Czech government to make me their representative to go to the United States and to Canada to represent the Czech nationalized textile industries in the United States to sell their products. We had very fine textile mills which were making tablecloths -- beautiful tablecloths -- and I was given an official appointment by the government to set up distribution in the Middle West of the United States and Canada.

And when I got my passport, I got a passport which would allow me to come, go, back and forth. It was an immigration passport, but a different kind which allowed me to come back to Czechoslovakia, because I was going in the official capacity as a representative of the Czech government. I didn't have the political "perks" but I was an "official" representative. I was going to get a salary from the government, but before I had a chance to get started in the United States and Canada, I received a telegram at the American Consulate in Toronto -- I was at that time there -- to stop all activities until further notice, which was two days or three days after they killed Jan Masaryk. And I never heard from them again. This was the last that I heard from the government. I wound up with some beautiful samples that I took along with me from the government, various tablecloths and stuff. I came to Minneapolis because my brother lived there.

Q: You never had any contact with them after that?

A: No.

Q: Then what plans did you make?

A: Well, I came here and I tried to get a job in international trade, what I was doing in Czechoslovakia. And I went to all the big companies who had an international department. I went to Minnesota Mining, to Cargill, General Mills. Pillsbury, Honeywell. Everybody was very nice. "Mr. Grosmann, it's wonderful. Wonderful experience. We'll call you." I went to an agency downtown and they

told me. "Ed, there isn't a single Jew working in these companies -- in these area. You'll never get a job there. You might as well forget it." That was the end of my looking for my current career in the United States. I was looking for work. I was hungry. We had nothing to live on. My brother wasn't doing too well, and he was just able to make ends meet for himself, and I had to earn some money. And I looked for a job high and low -- that was in 1948 and there was big unemployment in the United States -- and finally, I believe, the Jewish Family Service got me a job at a restaurant -- are you a local man?

Q: I've been here 15 years.

A: So you wouldn't know. The name of it was a restaurant by the name Hasty Tasty and I got the grave-shift to make sandwiches. They asked me if I am a cook. I says, yes. In fact, the only thing I knew how to cook is hot water. But I was making sandwiches and hamburgers and they promoted me the third night to make waffles and that was my downfall. Was a very busy Friday night, and I forgot to take the waffle out, smoked out the place, lost their customers. They picked me up and they kicked me out so fast. They says I should never comeback. So I lost my career in being a waffle maker. And from there I had a menial job at a company that was making shirts. And from there I went to another company where I stayed, being a receiving clerk, doing manual work, while I was going to school. Immediately, the first thing I had done when I came here, I enrolled to be in the University in evening school. And I was going to school at night, and whenever I had time, and then by good fortune, I met the president of the company whom I am still with today, 35 years now since I started. And there he gave me an opportunity to do what I was doing. And I started an export department for them, and I am, today, the head of the export department, and I am a senior vice president of Napco, and I am a member of the board. So America has been very good to me

Q: I just have a couple more questions here. Do you maintain contact with the Jewish community here?

A: I would say very much so. I am on the Board of Trustees for the Federation. I am on the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Family Service, I served for many years on the Board of Trustees of the Adath Jeshurun Synagogue. I served in various capacities, in the synagogue; I was the Chairman of the Ritual Committee in the Adath. I was the Chairman of the I.S. Joseph Scholarship Committee of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation. I served for many years on the Central Budget Committee of the Federation. I serve on the Committee for the Resettlement of the New Americans, the Russians. So I'm a little busy, as you can see. I was also on the Board of the Jewish Community Center. I keep my fingers in.

Q: Do you maintain contact with other survivors or any survivors' organizations?

- A: I maintain contact. Quite a few of my very close friends -- very close friends -- are survivors. Some of them you know. Freddie -- I met Freddie when I came to this country, he was already here -- Fred Baron. I don't know if you know him. In fact, he is the president of the JCRC right now. And I am also on the committee for the Ida Grossman Holocaust Committee. I serve there. And Dora Zaidenweber, you heard of Dora Zaidenweber? I would say many of our good friends --very close friends -- are survivors.
- Q: How did you meet your wife? Is she a survivor?
- A: My wife? It was beshert, I must say. I was at the University, and during vacation time, we went on an outing to Duluth, and I met her there, and that's how we are here today.
- Q: Can you tell me what it has meant to you to be a survivor?
- A: Yes, very much so. Number one is I didn't realize how precious life is until I saw what could happen to people. But the most important thing to me --as a survivor - - is that I have a very big investment in the Jewish people. The price that I have paid is so great, that I felt that I want to be able to see, "L'kol mikvat avohda." I wanted to see the end of the Nazi Regime. In fact, that strength, that spirit, of the wish to see the downfall of that regime, I believe, really kept me going in the last moments of the war when I weighed only 80 pounds and was very ill. And I am very anxious to see that the Jewish people survive, because the price that we have paid deserves and necessitates our wish and effort that this is carried on to posterity.
- Q: Well, this is somewhat related to that, but could you describe to me your general feeling about human nature, non-Jews and Germans?
- A: Basically, people are good. But unfortunately, I saw what happened in Auschwitz, that in many people, customs, habits and behavior is just like a veneer that peels off very quickly when the conditions under which they were brought up are changed. But I would say, during the war, when I had so many non-Jews risking their lives, helping us out, I feel that there are good people in this world -- basically, people are good and they would stay good unless something comes about that brings out the bad in them. But they are basically good people. Because of this, I feel, the world and mankind has survived up to date. Otherwise, I think there wouldn't have been mankind today if there wouldn't have been some good people in this world, regardless, Jews or non-Jews.
- Q: Has your belief or practice in Judaism or a Supreme Being changed?
- A: (Laughs) I'll make it very brief. I was brought up in a very religious home in a very religious community. I was a rebel at the age of eight or nine. I could see many things going wrong which I couldn't figure out. And I felt that changes

have to take place. I was among the few rebels who did not conform to the local standards, and belonged to a Zionist movement which was in “cherem.” You know what “cherem” is? That’s a place outside the community. But I felt this was right. I believed very strongly in God, but I felt that I had to help God in order to accomplish some things -- and this was with regard to the creation of a State, of our own homeland. But basically, I was a very religious Jew, and I went along with the general feeling of our community. During World War II, when I was in the Army, when I had a choice to be in a battalion where we wouldn’t have to eat kosher, I chose to be in a battalion which was called the kosher battalion, which had religious inclination, because I believed very strongly in my Jewish upbringing, I laid t’fillin -- and I had t’fillin --every day in labor camp, and studied Talmud and all --and had the prayers of mincha and maariv recited every day until I came to Auschwitz. Since then I have never put t’fillin on. In Auschwitz, I lost total belief in any Supreme Being, for the same reason as many of my colleagues. I won’t go into the philosophy of that, because that philosophy has been thoroughly expounded, in a much better way than I can expound on it. And after the War, after I was liberated, I didn’t want to have anything to do with the God of Israel. All I wanted to see is that the world becomes a better world than it was, that the things that happened under Nazi Germany don’t repeat itself. And I didn’t care if it happened under what regime, under what philosophy. And I sure felt it cannot happen under the philosophy of Judaism, because the all-merciful God who was supposed to practice mercy and justice, couldn’t have been so merciful when he took my little nephew, when I was still in the labor camp in Slovakia. When I saw several thousand Hungarian Jewish children from the ages of five to ten going to Auschwitz, and I found out their fate, what befell them in Auschwitz, I couldn’t believe in such a God. And during the entire time when I was in Prague, I had nothing to do with my God. I told my God, he should mind his own business, and I was living my own life. And I came like this to the United States.

When I met my wife, I told her that I am not a religious Jew and I would like to get married by a Justice of the Peace. I said I don’t want any part of a synagogue. I didn’t want any part of anything that has to do with the Jewish religion. With the Jews, yes, but not with their religion. She says, ‘No synagogue, no wedding. No rabbi, no wedding.’ So I got married, but I still didn’t go to any synagogue. Finally, my wife insisted, why don’t we go to the synagogue, so she brought me back to the synagogue. We had our first baby, we had to name the baby, and before I knew it, I was asked by the president of the Adath Jeshurun if I wouldn’t take on some positions in the synagogue. Before I knew it, I was so tangled up, I became an officer. We created the organization in the synagogue for the purpose of bringing young people together, which was called the Married Couples League. I didn’t have any interest in the religious aspects of the synagogue, but I was very interested in the social aspects, and as a result of the social aspects, I was slowly woven into the fabric of religious life. I’m pretty deeply involved. You know, there’s the old saying; The apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree. And I don’t regret it,

Q: Would you be willing to share with us any photos, mementos or other things for the purpose of exhibition or research?

A: Yes. I would be prepared. You want 'em now?

A: I think they'll contact you.

A: I haven't got too many. But I have the pictures of my parents, and I have some pictures from the labor camp that some of my friends have given me after the War. And I have a picture of how I looked in the Slovak Army, in the uniform.

Q: Do you believe that films and books about the Holocaust accurately depict it?

A: They do as well as they can. It could never be depicted, there is nothing in the world that I feel could do the total job -- could do the true job, what really we experienced in the Holocaust.

Q: Have you read any of the books or seen movies?

A: I have read many of the books, yes. I read them all. I read The Wall. I read Mila 16. I read Exodus, and I believe I've read most of the books that have been written on the Holocaust. In fact, I was very instrumental to set up a memorial for the Holocaust in the Minneapolis Public Library with a few of my other colleagues. And I was able to get some very interesting books from the Czech government -- from the Jewish Museum in Prague -- which are now part of the Minneapolis Public Library, in the Holocaust Memorial section.

Q: This concludes the interview with Edward Grossmann at his home in St. Louis Park on June 23, 1984.