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Interview with Mr. Henry Harvey
By David Zarkin
May 11, 1983

Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is the JCRC -- ADL Holocaust History Project by David Zarkin at Mr. Harvey's office in St. Paul, on May 11, 1983. Mr. Harvey, could you please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name if it is different.

A: It's Henry G. Harvey. I was born Henry Gurman.

Q: When were you born?

A: June 6, 1924.

Q: In what town were you born?

A: Breslau, Germany.

Q: And what were your parents' names, and where were they born?

A: They are both from Warsaw, and my father happened to be on a business trip with my mother when I was born. The Jewish name was Moshe Ben Litman Gurman and my mother was Miriam Habergritz.

Q: And your grandparents? Their names and where were they born?

A: I never knew them. The grandmother's name was Kulik.

Q: So you changed your name then. And your great-grandparents?

A: Never knew them.

Q: Did you know where they were born? Have any idea?

A: I think they all came from Warsaw.

Q: What kind of work did your parents do?

A: My father was a merchant and a manufacturer.

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Q: And your mother worked in the home?

A: She was helping out my father.

Q: What kind of manufacturing work did he do?

A: Military embellishments. Embroidery supplies.

Q: That would go on uniforms?

A: Yes.

Q: What languages were spoken in your home?

A: Yiddish and Polish.

Q: Would you say your family was secular or religious in practice or orientation?

A: Secular.

Q: So they weren't Zionists, or Hasidics would you say?

A: Zionists, yes. Hasidic, no. and I would probably have to qualify the Zionist, too, in that they were passive Zionists. We never contemplated moving to Palestine, but our sympathies were with the -- as they were with the majority of Jews -- were strongly Zionist.

Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?

A: Yes. I was raised in Warsaw. I went to a private Jewish school within which, though the education was secular and the language was Polish, Hebrew was taught and Jewish religion was taught.

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

A: Well, most of them were in Warsaw or in nearby suburbs and small towns.

Q: From the mid-1930s to 1941, what events were you aware of, either local or national, political events, social events…

A: When the war broke out in 1939, I was 15. Locally I was aware that we lived in a country with strong anti-Semitic overtones. Internationally, I was aware of Hitler having come to power in 1933, and I grew up and went to high school in the shadow of Hitler first occupying the Rhineland and then occupying Austria and dismembering Czechoslovakia and then eventually marching into Poland.

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Q: How did you receive news of these events?

A: There was free press in Poland. Newspapers and radio.

Q: Were these events that were going on discussed among people in the Jewish community?

A: Yes.

Q: How did that occur? Was it formally, or did they have meetings?

A: I was too young. I have firsthand knowledge of the informal discussions. As far as meetings, it will be hearsay, what I think happened. We were not active in any Jewish organizations as such. We did belong to Temple, we attended the Warsaw synagogue. The Jews had a very active cultural life in Poland, and Warsaw was one-third Jewish. Warsaw, the capitol of Poland, which had 1,200,000 population, had 400,000 Jewish population. There were a great number of Jewish organizations, cultural activities, and there were Jewish political parties -- Zionists and Revisionists and the Bund. I am certain there was a great deal of awareness -- Germany being next door neighbor -- of what was going on, and there was some communal activity. When the Germans expelled Polish Jews who lived in Germany, there was a massive assistance program to help them out, both monetarily and also in a personal involvement manner, in that people took people into their homes.

Q: Did you family take people in?

A: No, we didn't take anyone into our home, but my father contributed substantially to Jewish causes, both to the Jewish so-called Gemeinde, which was the Kehilla. It was an unenforceable type of tax, in a way, something equivalent to United Jewish Fund here, but every Jew contributed to it. There was sort of a very strong compulsion, I might say, to do it, because the Jews, over the centuries, lived in a form of a state within a state. The actual power to enforce these contributions no longer existed in twentieth century Poland, but because of historical background, it continued. The organization was much strong and it was quasi-voluntary, but it was really like a tax. A Jew who did not contribute and pay his assessment to the Kehilla would be ostracized in some way.

Q: Regarding that period then from the mid-1930s to '41, you mentioned that your family was in the military insignia business, so maybe you want to talk about what, if any contacts your family had with gentiles or with the military.

A: We had a lot of contact with gentiles. Not military as such, though my father did have some contracts for the Polish military -- some government contracts. The contacts with the military would be on a customer basis in that an officer would

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come in to buy some of these, emblems, or a cavalry man -- Poland had horse cavalry -- they would come buy spurs. The same thing was true of policemen. But that wasn't the main class of customers. Most of the customers were really other fabricators who would buy some of the supplies from us and then they worked on them and made the finished products.

Q: Outside of the business, were there any other contacts with gentiles?

A: Social contacts? Limited. We really lived pretty much a segregated life. Most of our friends were Jewish, not Polish.

Q: You mentioned that you were aware of anti-Semitism. Maybe you'd want to discuss how that affected you, what went on regarding anti-Semitism in your country at this time?

A: For a couple of years I attended a Polish elementary school in a suburb of Warsaw. And it was a bitter awakening for me. The kids didn't call me by my first name, Henry, they called me "Jew." It was the Polish equivalent of "Jew-boy." I was the only one in the class, and I was constantly being pointed out as the "Jew-boy." I'm talking about third or fourth grade. Scholastically I was above average, and it was a sore spot with them, and they would tell me so. "Oh, the Jew-boy got a B or a B+ or an A-." And when they saw my report card and they spotted a "C" they were really like applauding, cheering, "The Jew-boy got a low grade." And I was constantly singled out for that. I would come home and tell my parents: "Why do they tell me, 'You're a Jew! You're a Jew!' I know I am a Jew. Why do they keep on telling me that?" In my naivete I didn't understand why, until I learned the facts of life a little later on. As a result I guess my parents did transfer me to a private Jewish school -- fully accredited.

Q: About when was that?

A: '34, '35.

Q: About how many were enrolled in this private Jewish…

A: It was a big school. There was a big private elementary school. In Poland, the equivalent of our elementary, junior high and high school was only in two schools. There was an elementary school from grade one to grade seven, and then there was a high school which was really more of a combination of our high school plus junior college. It was a six year school which was called gymnasium. So there were those two types of schools and in Warsaw, there were quite a few of them -- Jewish elementary schools and Jewish gymnasium. And the size of the school? Several hundred. Our classes were about 30, 35 persons. It was not co-educational. Both elementary school and high school that I attended were men's schools. And there were also girls' schools.

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Q: How did you receive news of the war?

A: On the radio. Warsaw was bombed on the morning of the war at 5 a.m. September 1, 1939.

Q: Where were you at the time?

A: Home.

Q: What was the reaction of the Jewish community there in Warsaw? Were there meetings held? Did the neighbors say anything?

A: It was a feeling of great emotional upset and fear. We knew that Hitler persecuted Jews. We knew from press accounts and radio accounts what was happening to Jews in Czechoslovakia. We knew of Kristallnacht in Germany. And we knew of the persecution, immediate persecutions, in Austria.

Q: How did you receive word of these?

A: The press reported them. The press in Poland, I don't know to what extent to call it free, but it was private press. And there were all kinds of newspapers with different political lines, different viewpoints. There was Polish Jewish press, and we were reading Jewish Polish newspapers. My father was also reading some Yiddish newspapers.

Q: That were published in Poland?

A: Yeah, they were all Polish.

Q; Did life change economically and socially after the outbreak of war for you and your family? Did it get better or worse?

A: It got bad immediately, because Warsaw was bombed every day. And immediately we heard news accounts of the Germans making tremendous strides, moving into Poland . We were in Warsaw only six days. We left either on the sixth or on the seventh day of the war.

Q: What was the discussion among your family that led up to your leaving?

A: We thought that the safest thing would be to go east, away from the front, because the front was approaching Warsaw. But we did not expect Poland to collapse as soon as it did, militarily. The Jewish community lived with memories of the type of war that was fought in 1914 through 1918, of a static war. In World War I, it took the Germans a whole year to come from what was then the German border into Warsaw, to occupy Warsaw. And we thought, even if the Germans are militarily successful, it would take them at least a year to come, to reach Warsaw.

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Nobody thought that it was going to be a blitzkrieg --that within a week the Germans would march into Warsaw, and within ten days Poland would collapse, except for Warsaw that fought, resisted for four weeks. So we thought: yes. The war is coming too close for comfort, and we better go for a few months and settle somewhere east of town, closer to the Russian border where the Germans are unlikely to come.

Q: So when you say "we,' who are you talking about?

A; "We" is my immediate family.

Q: How many were there?

A: There were only three of us, my father, my mother, myself. I had a married sister. They happened to have gone to the United States to visit the World Fair. And there was my sister-in-law…

Q: Let's talk about the married sister that went to the World Fair.

A: They went to New York to see the World's Fair. They were on their way back, and the war broke out. The ship was turned back to England. They never made it home. From England they came to the United States. They survived the Holocaust. They are alive today in New York.

Q: And then you were going to talk about another relative.

A: I have a sister-in-law. I had an older brother who died.

Q: How did he die?

A: He died of natural causes, either T.B. or pneumonia, I'm not sure which. The 30's were the pre-antibiotics era, and pneumonia was a very risky illness. There were many casualties.

Q: And the sister-in-law?

A: She also left, but she left separately with some other friends.

Q: Do you know what became of her?

A: Yes, she's in Canada today. She survived the Holocaust. She was also in Russia, as we were. We ran into her in Russia, in the Soviet Union.

Q: And how about your grandparents?

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A: They were dead. I was a late child. When I was born, one of my grandmothers was alive, and she died when I was eight.

Q: What was the town you went to when you left Warsaw, do you remember that?

A: Yes. We just traveled east toward the Russian border. First we traveled on the main highway towards Pinsk. Then we went slightly south.

Q: How'd you travel?

A: By car. We had a car. It wasn't our car. My father's partner had a car. And only because we had a military contract, we got an allotment of gasoline. This is what enabled us to leave Warsaw; because otherwise one couldn't get gasoline after the war broke out. We got an allotment of gas -- something like 20 gallons, 20 liters. And it got us three-quarters down the way to Pinsk. Pinsk was about 300 kilometers east of Warsaw, and about 100 kilometers from the Russian border. Somewhere before we got to Pinsk, we ran out of gas. We bought a horse and a cart, and we traveled southeast to avoid the main highway toward Pinsk which was being bombed by German planes. And this is where we learned -- by radio -- that the Russians moved into Poland.

Q: But you were on the cart, so you must have stopped somewhere.

A: Oh, we were staying overnight at various peasants' homes. We didn't travel through the night.

Q: They were hospitable? How did that work? Did you have to pay them for lodging?

A: Yes, we paid for lodging.

Q: So, you traveled how many days? Did you finally stop at one place?

A: Once we stayed in a small town one night. We stayed in some small village about two or three nights. We stayed with a Jewish family in a small Polish village for three nights. Then we stayed in another peasant's home for about another week. There we learned that the Russians were in eastern Poland, though we hadn't seen them in that village, because they just moved into the main towns. We went into Pinsk. That's where we first saw the Russian troops.

Q: Pinsk was in Russia?

A: Pinsk was in Poland until World War II. Now it is part of what the Russians call Western Byelorussia, part of the Soviet Union. It's eastern Poland, incorporated into the Soviet Union, 1939.

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Q: So how long were you in Pinsk, then?

A: About three months, until December.

Q: What did you do?

A: I went to high school.

Q: And what did your Parents do?

A: Nothing. We were waiting. We didn't know what to do. We knew that the Germans were in Poland. From Pinsk we went to Lvov. Many just refer to it as Lemberg, its German name. It's the principal city of Galicia.

Q: Which is a province or a state?

A: Galicia is an Austrian term used in the Austria- Hungary Empire until World War I. Today it's not a term that is used. Geographically, politically, it's western Ukraine now. It's the largest city in the western Ukraine. It was the third largest city in Poland.

Q: And why did you go there?

A: We wanted to live in a larger city than Pinsk and find our bearings. We didn't know what to do. We were far from home. There was a substantial Jewish community in Lvov.

Q: How long were you there and what did you do there?

A: We were in Lvov from approximately December or January of 1940 to June of 1940. We were so naïve. Jews unfortunately indulge in wishful thinking and denials of trouble. Believe it or not, we registered to return to Poland -- to Warsaw -- under German occupation.

Q: What do you mean you were registered? Who were you registered with?

A: We registered with Russian authorities, because we are refugees. We were homeless. We were in eastern Poland, which was incorporated into the Soviet Union. Our home was Warsaw -- the German occupation. And they asked, "Do you want to become a Soviet citizen, or do you want to go home?" And my father and mother said they want to go home. "We don't want to become Polish, Soviet citizens." I don't remember now whether it was even offered to us. The local inhabitants -- people who lived there --were offered, and most of them -- I guess all of them -- accepted soviet citizenship. We did not.

Q: What happened to those Jewish people that accepted Soviet citizenship?

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A: Nothing happened to them. They lived as they did before. Many of them were deported, but they were deported -- not as Jews -- in the same way that the Russians deported other people. They deported a lot of people, what they considered undesirables or unreliable elements. They would transplant people forcibly from one place to another place to live.

Q: So what happened there?

A: We were registered with the Russian authorities. There was also a German consular office of some sort that accepted registrations, and we were registered with that office. "Ubersiedlung Lemburg," which means "Repatriation_ -- to go back. My parents -- my mother especially -- indulged in self denial of all the problems. We would discuss it at home and say, "Gosh, the Germans are going to persecute us and make it very tough on us." And she said, "Ah, we survived with World War I. They weren't so bad. All these stories are exaggerated." Of course it was before the Final Solution. Nobody knew what was coming, not at that time. Not in 1940.

Q: So did you go back to Warsaw?

A: No, because the Russians, inadvertently, saved us from the Holocaust. I say "inadvertently," because on June 28, 1940 an officer and a soldier came to our apartment with an official document, asked us our names, and told us we have ten minutes to pack and get going. And they took us to a railroad siding from which we were deported in cattle cars deep into Russia.

Q: Did you have any idea where you were going when they came?

A: No.

Q: What time of day was this?

A: About 8 in the morning.

Q: Did you have any idea that this was going to be happening? Or was this a total surprise?

A: It wasn't a total surprise, because ours was not the first wave of deportations. Sometime in March people started disappearing.

Q: When you said "people?" what kind of people? Were they Jewish people? Or were they all kinds of people?

A: All kinds of people. Former policemen in the Polish state would be deported. Community leaders or prominent people, people who were prominent in some

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way in the Polish state, would be deported. So we knew that the Russians are in the practice of deporting people, without judicial proceedings. But we did not expect it. It came as a surprise.

Q: But you knew that they were in the practice of deporting people. So did they tell you where you were going?

A: No.

Q: What was the trip like?

A: It was physically and emotionally a very difficult trip, because we were in a state of shock. Just try to think. It's unimaginable in the United States, in the political system that we live under, but just try to picture that tomorrow morning, you are home, and at 8 o'clock, two armed people walk into your house and tell you, you have ten minutes to pack. "Pack your belongings, you and your wife and your children, and come with us!" And that's it. Can you imagine how you would feel? Well, we felt something like that. The first reaction really is shock. My mother started crying. She got a little hysterical, and we sort of supported each other. You've got to go, you've got to go. You don't argue with a gun. Not with a gun that represents official authority of the state. These were not hold-up people, they were uniformed officers of the state with a list of names, and they had our names on the list. They read off my father's name, my mother's name and my name.

Q: Were these Polish officers?

A: No, Russians. There were no Polish officers any more. We were in the part of Poland that was incorporated into the Soviet Union. They did not have any Polish police, unlike the Germans. They formed their own, very few of them from the local population, mostly transferees from the Soviet Union.

Q: So how long were you on the train then?

A: About two weeks.

Q: And then where did you wind up?

A: The trip took us east of the Ural mountains, through southern Russia, traveling northeast, east of Sverdlovsk. After Sverdlovsk, the train turned back, and we surmised that we are destined to go to one camp, and while we were on the way, there was a change of orders. The other camp was overfilled, or something. They sent us due west, and we went west towards the city of Gorky. The main railroad line runs from Moscow to Sverdlovsk -- it's really the trans-Siberian railroad line --and we ended up somewhere mid-way on that line between Moscow and the city of Sverdlovsk, about 150 kilometers north -- on a railroad spur --in a labor camp,

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which was approximately 30 kilometers from the nearest town. The name of the town was Yoshkar-Ola. It had a population of approximately 30,000 people, and it was the regional political administrative center of the so-called Maryskaja A.S.S.R., the Maryyskaja Autonomous Region.

Q: What do they mean by Autonomous Region?

A: The Soviet Union consists of sixteen Soviet Republics. Some of the republics have, within them, certain nationalities that are unique. They have their own language, yet they are not big enough or not cohesive enough to form a separate republic. So they would form autonomous regions. The closest I can think of is now-a-days in India. There are various autonomous regions within different states, because there is a multitude of small ethnic groups. The Soviet Union has about 50 of those small national ethnic groups. There are probably one million of those people -- Maris -- that inhabit that part of the Russian Republic. Like Birobidjan. Birobidjan was a Jewish autonomous region. That was the Soviet answer to Israel -- to Zionist aspirations -- forming a Jewish autonomous region in eastern Siberia.

Q: Getting back to this deportation camp. What was the name of it, and what was it like?

A: The name of it was Oshla. It was a group of approximately 300 barracks. They just dumped us there, off the railroad siding, and assigned us to go into those barracks. They were pretty bad, but when I say “bad,” it’s a relative term. They are bad in comparison to our present living day standards, and to our living standards before the war in Warsaw. I am sure that our Board of Health in any city of the United States would find them unfit for human habitation. But it was nothing like a German concentration camp. They were wooden barracks with metal stoves in them that we had to feed wood constantly. The minute you stopped feeding logs, it would get cold.

Q: How many people in the barracks?

A: We happened to be lucky. We got one room by ourselves. Our barrack had two large rooms and one small one. We were assigned to the small one. In the two sections of the barrack in which we were, there must have been about 15 people -- five in one other room, and ten single people who were not with families in the other area.

Q: What kind of people were in the camp?

A: We were all the same. That particular wave of deportation consisted all of single people and families from western Poland -- from the part of Poland that was occupied by the Germans. They were both Polish and they were Jewish, so it was not based on religion.

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Q: You mean there were gentiles and Jewish people?

A: Yes.

Q: I know we've discussed this before, but I'm trying to get a better handle on it, why people were deported from western Poland.

A: David, it was never explained to us. I can make at best an educated guess. We heard the term -- an acronym, the first letters of three words: "socially dangerous element." We were deemed to be a socially dangerous element, and they would call us by the Russian equivalent of those letters, S-D-E. Socially Dangerous Element. We learned about it when we were already in the Soviet Union. One of the N.K.V.D. agents, when he got a little high under the influence of alcohol, spilled out that term, and this is what we were.

Q: How many people were in the camp, would you say?

A: About 350. I was in a satellite camp where there were only 50 of us. The main part of that camp was about five miles up the road, and there, there were 300. The majority of them were Jewish. Why? Because it is mostly the Jews who ran away, who didn't want to fall into German hands, 80 or 90 would have been Jews. Most Poles did not leave. It's the Jews that left, because they had an inkling that things aren't going to be good under German occupation. So this is why, in our camp, the breakdown was typical, in that approximately 80 per cent were Jewish, 20 per cent were Polish.

Q: What was daily life like in the camp?

A: Very low standard of living. Bad food, hard work. We all became lumberjacks. They had us work in the forest felling trees, cutting them into logs. And the food -- all you could get is dark Russian bread of very poor quality. The main staple was bread, potatoes, some milk, what we could buy privately from peasants who would bring goods for sale. There was only one government store, which usually was out of pretty much everything.

Q: Was your schooling interrupted then/

A: Oh, yes. I finished the last grade of high school but I never got my diploma. I was scheduled to receive my diploma on June 30th -- my high school diploma -- and we were deported on June 28th. I graduated college in the United States, but I'm not a high school graduate. (Laughs)

Q: Was there any kind of Jewish life in the camp?

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A: Yes. We observed not Saturdays, but we did observe High Holy Days. We knew when they were coming. I don't know how, because there were no Jewish calendars, but somehow the Jews knew. They figured out when was Rosh Hashanah, when was Yom Kippur and when was Passover. And we did have services. We did have a minyan.

Q: Was there a community area where they had services?

A: No. we knew that the Soviet Union frowned on any communal activity, and certainly prayers, so these were held in private rooms. I'm trying to remember now how we got out of work, and I just don't remember, because it's close to 40 years ago -- but I know that we did hold services.

Q: So everyone was expected to work, the men, the women and the children?

A: Men and women were expected to work. Children not, I don't think, under sixteen. I know that I started working.

Q: Who administered the camp?

A: A commandant -- NKVD commandant.

Q: What's the NKVD?

A: NKVD stood for Nazkarmaraderie Commissariat N (Russia.) Literal translation into English would be: National Committee of Internal Affairs. It's an organization for which there is no equivalent in the United States. It's a national internal police. The MVD of which we hear now is a successor to the NKVD.

Q: And did you or your family or any of the people you knew have any contact with the people who ran the camp?

A: We had limited contact with them. There were three of them. There was a commandant and two assistants who administered the camp of 350 people. It was an open camp. It was not a prison. But it was a prison for all practical purposes, in the sense that we did not have internal passports. And when they take away an internal passport from you in the Soviet Union, you cannot move, because anywhere you go, you're subject to arrest if you cannot produce your internal passport. People are required in the Soviet Union to have their internal passport on their person at all times. You go into a hotel overnight when you travel, you surrender your internal passport . And if you don't have one, you cannot stay, but two, the next step is almost automatic, in that the hotel clerk will call the local office of militia and say, "Hey, I have a guy here without an internal passport.' And you'll be picked up shortly and you better have a good explanation why you don't have it.

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Q: During this time that you were in the camp, were you receiving any news about what was going on in the rest of the world, and if so, how?

A: We knew what was going on in the rest of the world only through the Soviet press. There was a local newspaper which was very uninformative in that 90 percent of the newspaper space was devoted to achievements of local collective farms and of various enterprises, and then there was a small, small part of the paper, on the last page, about international events.

Q: Did you and your family speak, read Russian?

A: I learned Russian. My parents knew it, because they lived in Russia before World War I. So my father spoke good Russian, my mother not so good, but she also picked it up. And I learned it. We were reading the Russian press, but we were only reading what they wanted us to know. I don't remember now whether we had a radio or not. I don't think we had a radio, but there was a radio -- not in the barracks – but in the settlement near where we were. It was not even a village, it was another settlement where there were Russian workers living, and they had radios. In every town and village in the Soviet Union, there is some sort of a public square where there is a loudspeaker, and the radio blares all the time.

Q: Could you go there?

A: Oh, we were allowed to go to that particular place, yes, because that was within walking distance, two miles or so. There you could go without a pass, because they knew that we are the Polacks from this camp two miles up the road.

Q: What did you learn through the Russian newspapers about what was going on in Germany, in Poland, with the Jews?

A: We didn't know about that. There was a period where Hitler and Stalin were allies. We knew when Hitler marched into Yugoslavia and then into Greece. And until May of 1941, the press reports were very pro-German. It was only when things had started getting hot.

Q: By "hot" you mean when they started to come into Russia?

A: The friendship with Germany cooled when Germans marched into Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavs revolted against their pro-German king -- expelled him -- and put on the throne his son, who concluded, as one of his first official acts, a pact of friendship with the Soviet Union. And immediately, two days later, Germany attacked both Yugoslavia and Greece. When they did that, in April or May of 1941, the Russian German friendship cooled. It was leading up to the invasion of Russia, although the Russians still didn't believe it. Maybe they knew it, but they didn't want to believe it. There are historical reports that even after the war broke out, when the Germans did march into Russia on June 22, 1941, that there were

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no clear orders to resist -- or at least to limit counter-attacks to repel the invader, but not to cross into the German-held territory. Which was really academic, because the Germans made such progress. They were marching 100 miles a day or so in the initial stages of the war, and within two, three weeks, they occupied, probably, an area of 500 miles deep into the Soviet Union. There was very little organized resistance in the first weeks of the war, and they took millions of prisoners of war and tremendous territories.

Q: Were people in your camp worried about this? What was going to happen with the Germans?

A: Well the first reaction was favorable. We were all happy that the Russians are no longer allies of the Germans. Their attitude towards us changed. They freed us from those camps, because now we became allies. We were, in some way, enemy aliens until that time, but we were ex-Polish citizens, with whom the Germany fought a war, and from whom they took one-half of Poland, and incorporated it into their own land. So when the former allies had a falling out, the enemy of Germany became their ally. The whole attitude, political orientation, of the Soviet Union, changed. Overnight the British became good guys and the Americans became good guys, and the French became good guys, and the Germans became bad guys. And we, as ex-Polish citizens with a Polish government-in-exile in London, became semi- good guys, not quite good guys yet, but better guys than we were before. So the initial feeling among inhabitants of the camp was one of exaltation. And we were also hoping that the Russians would defeat the Germans, and that we would somehow, through some miracle, be able to go home.

Q: So they freed you from the camp when they went to war?

A: They freed us from the camp about a month later.

Q: So where'd you go?

A: We went to that town, Yoshkar-Ola, about 30 kilometers from where we were, Some people went further southeast. The area where we lived was like Minnesota -- the climate was somewhat similar -- so the first impulse of all the Jews (laughter) in that part of Russia was, "Let's go south. Let's go where the climate is warm." And many of them actually went to central Asia -- to the Tashkent area, to Kazakhstan, to the Soviet Central Asian Republics. We chose to stay, and we stayed there for a couple of years.

Q: What did you do there for two years?

A: My father got a job and I got some sort of a job.

Q: Doing what kind of work?

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A: I was working in a company, a commercial cooperative that manufactured some strange things, metal sheets, sheet metal work, metal fabricating, and parts for skis.

Q: Skis?

A: Just parts for skis. On a ski stick, on the bottom, the ski sticks have round pieces like a circle with leather straps, or imitation leather straps. We were making those circles.

Q: Well if I may interject an editorial comment, certainly with this war going on, the Russians weren't gearing up for the tourist industry. This must have been skis for the military.

A: Yes.

Q: So you were there two years and you were working there.

A: I was there for two years, from '41 through '43. In '43 I volunteered. I joined the Polish Army.

Q: The Polish Army! Tell me about the Polish Army, because in '43 Poland was under control of the Nazis wasn't it?

A: Yes, but they deported so many people that there were enough of us to form a Polish army.

Q: In the Soviet Union.

A: They organized two Polish armies. First they formed a Polish army, the one which Manachem Begin joined. That Polish Army moved out of the Soviet Union into Palestine at the time. In 1941, the Soviet Union had signed a pact of friendship with the Polish government-in-exile in London. As part of that friendship agreement, the Polish government organized several divisions of Polish troops from among deportees -- Polish deportees -- in the Soviet Union. Subsequently, the Polish government-in-exile and the Soviet government had a falling-out over the so-called massacre of Polish soldiers in the Katyn forest, and those Polish divisions, which were being trained for fighting the Germans on the German-Russian front, instead were evacuated into Iran, and from Iran to Iraq and to Palestine. Then the Russians still had so many Polish deportees left under their control that they formed a second Polish army, under the command of the so-called Lublin Committee, the forerunner of the Polish Communist government. So you had one Polish army organized by the Polish government-in-exile in London, then you had a second Polish army organized under the auspices of the Polish Communists who resided in Moscow and who formed, eventually the

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Polish Communist government. And I joined that army. I was too young for the first one, but I joined the second one, the Lublin.

Q: How long were you in that army?

A: Two-and-a-half years.

Q: And where'd you go?

A: I was in combat part of the time in eastern Ukraine. When the war moved forward, they sent me to an officer's school, and I was an officer in the city of Chelm, the famous city where supposedly the Jews were very 'dumb." But it's only a fable. Actually the inhabitants of Chelm were very shrewd. Then they sent us into combat, and we went through central Poland into Silesia. My outfit moved south of my home town of Warsaw. We went through southern Poland into eastern Germany. And in eastern Germany, we were close to the Allied lined, and they pulled us back. They didn't trust us. They didn't want us to join the American forces at the Elbe river.

Q: So where'd you go from there?

A: We ended up in the city of either Zorah or Zagan -- one of the two. I don't remember which one. I think we were in Zagan.

Q: Would this be in eastern Germany?

A: East Germany which is now a part of Poland.

Q: Meanwhile, what happened with your father and mother?

A: My parents stayed behind after I joined the Polish army, and they got permission to leave when the war was over. I ran into them by coincidence in the city of Lodz, which is the second largest city in Poland.

Q: So then what happened? You were in East Germany with the army.

A: I was discharged from the Polish army upon promising to attend the University of Warsaw, because they needed technocrats. They needed technicians, educated people to run the industry, and they were recruiting prospective managers. And one of the sources that they went to was the officer corps in the army. Otherwise I would have had to serve five years as an officer.

Q: So you went to the University of Warsaw?

A: I didn't go. I signed a commitment to attend. On the strength of that commitment, I was discharged from the service.

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Q: Did you intend to go to the University?

A: No, we were thinking of leaving. The plan was to cross into the Allied zone of Germany.

Q: So did you, in fact, do that? Cross over?

A: Yes, yes, we did.

Q: How was that arranged?

A: I hope I won't get anybody in trouble. From a friendly Soviet officer, I got a Soviet uniform, and I got some travel papers, which were falsified, to go to East Berlin. I traveled to East Berlin by train in Russian uniform. There was a Jewish home on Reichstrasse, in East Berlin. I went there. I dumped my uniform and I burned my papers. And I registered under a different name as a local refugee, as a German Jew from West Germany.

Q: But you were in East Germany.

A: I registered my home as having been in West Germany, with the thought of getting permission to cross into West Germany. My parents also came to the same home in East Berlin, we all registered under the same family name, and we gave as our home, a city in West Germany. I can't think of the name of that city right now. It was November of 1945. And it worked!

Q: At this point, had you had any idea what had been going on during the war? What had gone on during the Holocaust?

A: Oh, by that time we knew. Of course we knew. When I was in the Polish army we knew that there was an uprising in Warsaw, that the Warsaw ghetto was destroyed. I've seen Warsaw. I went through the area where used to be my home, after the war, and I saw the rubble! I saw the ruins of the ghetto in approximately June, July of 1946. I saw the remnants of the Warsaw synagogue, which just recently, I read, reopened.

Q: So you got to West Berlin?

A: I got to East Berlin. It was before the Berlin Wall was built. You could go to West Berlin by subway. One of the Jewish organizations, of which there were several in Berlin at the time, organized repatriation of Germans and Jews into West Germany. And I joined one of those convoys from East Germany to West Germany. We traveled through eastern zone of Germany, the American sector of West Berlin, through East German territory to the town closest to the British zone, the city of Nordhausen. It was an overnight trip. Nordhausen was approximately

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five miles from the Soviet-British border, dividing the British zone of Germany from the Russian zone of Germany. And we crossed the border by foot -- the next day -- and immediately went from the British zone to the American zone, to a D.P. camp.

Q: And how long were you in the D.P. camp?

A: We were in the D.P. camp eight months. Because my sister and brother-in-law were in New York, they were able to bring us over with one of the first waves of immigrants. We landed in New York harbor on August 30, 1946.

Q: You went all the way from the Soviet Union through Germany, then West Germany to the British zone, and then to the United States. Was it a carefully laid out plan, or did things just happen by luck or circumstances?

A: It was luck and circumstances. There was no master plan. I still don't know why, of the 400,000 Jews in Warsaw, I survived.

Q: Do you have any idea what became of the other people that were in the Soviet camp? Did most of the Jewish people join the Polish army?

A: The able-bodied, many of then did. Many of then were eventually repatriated to Poland. And I would say that the majority of them stayed in Poland. When Poland turned anti-Semitic, about 1967, they started expelling the Jews again, or they took the jobs away from them after the Six Day War. Until then -- I'm guessing now -- I think many of them stayed in Poland. Many did the same thing that we did. They moved to West Germany, to camps, and some of them went to Israel, and some went to the United States. I probably would have gone to Israel if it weren't for my parents' age, and then we had the sister in New York.

Q: Do you think that the Holocaust altered your feelings about non-Jews, in Europe or anywhere?

A: Yes. I have a general feeling of distrust towards non-Jews. And the distrust is based on my belief that non-Jews are very prone towards anti-Semitism. It is easy to become an anti-Semite. And I somewhat will qualify it, in that it is necessary to draw a distinction between anti-Semitism and insensitivity, or lack of sensitivity. It is not the same thing, but frequently the results are the same. I think lack of sensitivity leads to a climate that may result in anti-Semitism. The Holocaust did not start as a Holocaust. It started with insensitivity of the German population at large toward scapegoatism. Hitler started by using the Jews as a scapegoat for both the economic ills of Germany in the '30s and for defeat of the German armies in World War I. The famous "stab in the back" theory was, "We didn't lose in battle, the Jews and the Communists stabbed us in the back." And while the average German did not really believe it, he was indifferent. And it is the lack of sensitivity -- or indifference -- that permits the kind of conditions to

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develop that leads to a Holocaust. It doesn't happen frequently, but it did happen in Turkey in World War I, something I wasn't aware of till maybe the past two, three years that I learned that the Turks did the same thing to the Armenians. Not quite the same, but it was the closest thing to genocide on a national basis, on an ethnic basis. I may be digressing, but there is a feeling in me that the non-Jews are prone, through lack of sensitivity or through indifference, to allow conditions to develop which, yes, may lead to another Holocaust. Not necessarily the Jews. It could be somebody else. It may be politically expedient in some part of the world to pick on a weak minority to persecute, to reap political advantage by diverting the attention or ill-feelings of other population groups, by trying to blame a minority for their troubles, because this is what's happened in Germany.

Q: Do you have any mementos, like photos, books, etcetera, from that period that you'd be willing to share with us?

A: Oh, I have some. My Polish army I.D. I have a few identity documents that we registered with the Berlin office of the Jewish Home.

Q: Do you think at some point you might be interested in contributing these to the JCRC-ADL Oral History Project?

A: Eventually. I'd like to hold on to them for a few more years.

Q: I understand that.

A: It has some sort of sentimental value, and when I am close to my departure from this world, I'd be willing to donate them.

Q: Have you seen any films or read any books about the Holocaust, and do you think they depict it accurately?

A: Yes, I read Nora Levin's monumental work. I think the title is The Holocaust. And I do attend the communal affair, the annual services in commemoration of the Holocaust. I have a high degree of awareness of what's happened. I watch every show on television that depicts the Nazi era. I did make a presentation in a local high school, because both of my daughters graduated from high schools in St. Paul. We live in the eastern suburb of Woodbury. My oldest daughter graduated from Park High in Cottage Grove, my younger one graduated from Woodbury High School. Their adult education committee was interested. And on a couple of other occasions, I was asked to come back to Woodbury High School, and I invited Felicia Weingarten, who made a presentation, and the other time there is an insurance agent who works for one of the insurance companies, I can't think of his name, but he is from Berlin, he is a Holocaust survivor. You may know him, but I can't think of his name right now. He went with me once to make a presentation. (Ed. note: He is talking about Henry Oertelt.)

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Q: This completes the interview with Henry Harvey by David Zarkin on May 11, 1983, in Mr. Harvey's office in St. Paul. Thank you very much.

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