

Interview with Mr. David Jagoda
By David Zarkin
March 20, 1984

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

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

- Q: This is an interview by David Zarkin with David Jagoda at his home in Saint Paul on March 20, 1984. Mr. Jagoda, please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name, if it is different.
- A: David Jagoda. The same in Jewish and English. Just like you write.
- Q: And where were you born?
- A: I was born March 10, 1918, in Miechow, Poland, by Cracow.
- Q: Was this town known by any other name?
- A: No.
- Q: What were your parents' names?
- A: My father's name was Elias Jagoda. My mother's name was Hannah.
- Q: And where were they born?
- A: My mother was born in Miechow, too. My father was born in Naglowice. That is around 40 miles from Miechow.
- Q: And what kind of work did your parents do?
- A: My father was a tailor. And then we had a candy store.
- Q: And how about your grandparents? Were they born in the same town?
- A: I don't know too much about my grandparents. They were gone before I could know too much.
- Q: What languages were spoken at home?
- A: Yiddish.

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

A: Well we were religious, but not too fanatic religious.

Q: Were they Zionist?

A: Zionist, yeah.

Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?

A: Yeah. I went to the Mizrachi for quite a number of years.

Q: What was the Mizrachi?

A: Mizrachi was like a Hebrew school, not so much a religious school, just a Hebrew school, but they practiced religion there, too.

Q: What events were you aware of from the mid-1930s to 1941?

A: Well, 1930, I gotta go back a little. Our little town was not too much recreation. The only things that we had was the newspaper, the radio. When at home and between friends, we just talked a lot of politics. Between '31 and '41 we saw coming up, the Hitlerism, and we saw coming up the Communism.

Q: How'd you get your information?

A: Through the radio, through the newspaper. And then, in 1938, we saw the German Jews coming to Poland.

Q: Did you have any contact with gentiles during this time?

A: Not friendly contact.

Q: If it was unfriendly, can you describe what it was like? In what kind of settings did you come in contact with gentiles?

A: Well, I tell you, yesterday I talked with my daughter about it -- about those religious prayers in school. When I was six years old in Poland, if a gentile was dying, they want to see the priest, to bring him over to the house. So he rings the bell, and everybody would kneel down, on the streets. But I did not. The Jews did not. And this was by the school, when the priest went by. So since I didn't kneel down, my good friends, the gentiles, they caught me. And the priest, which taught religion in the school, took a scissors and made a cross on my head. This hurt me so much. As a Jew there, you was right away the enemy of them. You was not a friend of them. He went out there, he said, "Jews!" And he didn't bother if he doesn't know you at all, or he knows you, but right away he stamped

you, "You're a Jew." Whatever he could do, he done it. And such a thing happened. A lot of things. I went out with my wife. She was then my girlfriend. She was born in the same city. So this guy went by, and just kicked me a few times. You could do nothing, because other guys were watching you. I, for example, never went to a Christian house! Never went with them together. I just went to school, which was not friendly too.

Q: Were there any other encounters with anti-Semitism besides this incident with the priest?

A: Yeah. For example, one instance was in the war already. This was 1942, they took us down where the train was waiting, to take us to Auschwitz.

Q: Who was "they?"

A: The Germans. There was over there a girl with the name of Weinblatt. She was younger than me, she was my sister's age, probably 15 years old. She saw what's going on and she said to me, "David, what should I do?" She's got a brother and a sister in Israel. I said, "Only one thing. If you could, run away." There was a little -- not a mountain -- but just to cross it over, and they wouldn't see you. She escaped. Christian guys which were watching start yelling to the Germans that the Jewish girl ran away and they went after her. They shot her.

Q: Kind of shifting gears here, did you have any relatives that lived outside of your community?

A: Yeah. I had an uncle which lived in Berlin, Germany. I had a lot of relations which lived in Poland, but not in this city.

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

A: The same time when they start making those towns "Judenrein" they all were shipped away -- all of them. My father, my mother, my brothers and sisters, my uncles. All. Everybody.

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

A: Twenty-one years old.

Q: How did you receive news of the war?

A: We heard already on the radio, I think, the last speech from Hitler. Then we heard that Ribbentrop went to Russia and made that peace, so we expected it, but we didn't know nothing. In the morning, Friday the first of September, I think it was, the second war, in Poland.

Q: Where were you at that time, do you remember?

A: At home. And then they started bombing. They said that the Polish army is practicing, is making maneuvers, but after a little time, we saw it. They came bombing, and we saw them.

Q: What was the reaction of the Jewish community in which you lived at this time? What did the neighbors say?

A: Fear. They were scared.

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

A: Socially we were better off. Everybody started grouping together, everybody started helping each other. Economically it was not too good, because we didn't have no work, no nothing. Economically we were bad off. But socially we were pretty good off.

Q: Were there discussions about staying or fleeing your home?

A: Yeah. My mother wants us to flee, to go to Russia. People are going there, and they are living there. It's all right. But that's the thing, the family was together. I didn't want to go away without the parents, without the kids maybe. Maybe we're going to be together, and maybe five will be gone, we won't find each other, those things. A few hours we were discussing this.

Q: When did the Nazi occupation occur?

A: In our town, September 4th they came in.

Q: What actions did the German forces take in the early months or years of occupation?

A: They start scaring us. Soon as they came in, the first day they came in, they took a whole bunch of people to the church. Then they sorted out who was not Jewish. Non-Jews they let go home, and then they shot 35 Jews. There, right away, a scare. You know this is no play.

Q: Other than that, do you remember any other anti-Jewish measures or legislation by the occupation?

A: That's a good question. They shot those people. And then after a few days --I had an uncle, his name was Danzinger. He was a barber. He was a man, he minded his own business. He didn't tell about politics, about nothing. He just had his own business, and he didn't have no kids. One morning they came in, took him and another guy, and that night they shot him. So I said, "Why? What

was the reason?' One guy said to me, "David, you are asking again 'Why?' You should know already. There's no 'why.' Because he was Jewish, that's all." It is the same thing. They didn't have to make any specific things against the Jews. They told us not to go on the sidewalk, we walked on the street. They made a ghetto. We didn't went out. But was nothing. They're going to have to legislate something, what you got a right or you haven't got a right. We were just like nothing!

Q: Were you contained in a ghetto?

A: In Miechow I was.

Q: And you were there for a year, is that right?

A: A year, a year and a half.

Q: And what was your knowledge of the outside world, other ghettos, mass killings, or concentration camps?

A: We got all the news. We knew everything what's going on. Everything, we knew it.

Q: So you were transported to a ghetto?

A: No, from this ghetto they took me to the Arbeitslager -- to a working place. They took us to Cracow in the airport. They took just the skilled people. So I went there and I worked in the "maintaining" over there, the car mechanics, and things like this. I worked over there maybe for six months.

Q: And then you lived at night in the ghetto? Is that right?

A: No. They took us out there, and we were right there. We lived there.

Q: You lived there at the airport?

A: Then they took us from this place to the Arbeitslager in Plaschau. Did you hear about Plaschau? In Cracow there, on Jerusalemska Street. It was a big concentration camp. From Plaschau I went to Mauthausen. Mauthausen was in Austria.

Q: Let's go back to the Cracow airport. About how many people were there with you, and were they all Jewish, or what?

A: All Jewish. 300 people were there.

Q: And what were conditions like there?

A: Not bad.

Q: Food? Or housing?

A: Poor food, poor housing, but we did not work under the Polacks.

Q: And about what day and month of the year did you arrive there in Cracow at the airport?

A: I arrived over there in August, '41, I think.

Q: Okay, same thing for Plaschau. How many people were there, and were they all Jewish?

A: In Plaschau there were a few thousand, all Jews.

Q: And about what month and day of the year did you arrive?

A: At Christmas time they took us over there. Christmas '42.

Q: And what did you do there? Did you work there?

A: Over there was awful work, awful conditions. It was so big, not organized. It was very bad over there. I worked in a rock mine, digging rocks and carrying 'em from one place to the other place. Conditions were very bad there. Very bad.

Q: How about the sleeping conditions and the food there?

A: Oh, they were bad, too. And from there, they sent me to a small camp which was very good. Maybe did you hear about Schindler? I'm reading a book about Schindler. He was a Czechoslovakian guy, an SS man, but he was very nice to the Jews, I got to give it to him. He had a place where made pots and pans. The camp name was N.K.F.

Q: The initials for the name of the camp were N.K.F?

A: Yeah.

Q: That was what it was known by, and which stand for something else. And this was in Poland?

A: Cracow, Poland. Like Plaschau was a camp, and outside Plaschau they had little camps, like the airport and Schindler, the N.K. F. place, or the salt mine. Everything did belong to Plaschau. I was there, maybe, for a year.

- Q: Tell me then about the N.K.F. You said you made pots and pans?
- Q: Yeah. Over there it was nice. We had enough food. This Schindler, he took care of this. He's going to have enough food for us.
- Q: And about when did you arrive there?
- A: I arrived there Christmas. In February, I went to the N.K.F. '42
- Q: And then how long were you there?
- A: Till the summer of '43, I was there.
- Q: And about how many people were there while you were there in N.K.F.?
- A: Around 600, 700.
- Q: Were they all Jewish, would you say?
- A: All Jewish, all Jewish.
- Q: So what happened after N.K.F. then?
- A: This was already when they sent me to Mauthausen.
- Q: About when did you arrive there?
- A: '43.
- Q: About what month, do you remember?
- A: Probably in July, '43. It was very hot.
- Q: How long were you there?
- A: Till I was liberated.
- Q: And what was that like, at Mauthausen?
- A: This was an awful camp. This was already such an organized camp, which they kept a close eye on it. In other camps you just saw the commander and the rest of the SS, but Himmler used to come here.
- Q: Himmler? You saw him?

A: I saw him. All those big wheels, they came there and they kept us very efficient. It was bad.

Q: Do you remember any other names of any German officials or officers in any of these camps? Commandants or visitors or whatever?

A: In which camp?

Q: Any of them.

A: Yeah, in Plaschau I remember a Goett. Till now, I'm afraid of a dog. The worst thing was when they start counting people, to make sure nobody run away and things like this. One guy from our city was Cholmo. Was a big, big guy. And Goett came with two dogs, big dogs, and he told him to undress himself. Everybody was watching. And he gave the orders to the two dogs -- they tore him apart! They just tore him apart!

Q: You saw this happen?

A: I saw it! I was standing here. So this happened over there. Since then, I'm afraid of a dog. Even now, a poodle going to go by, I'm afraid. This guy was awful! As a matter of fact, they caught him, they sent him back to Poland, and they hanged him in this same camp. Goett. He was awful. And just like he was bad, this other Schindler, he was alright. He was a nice guy.

Q: Do you remember any other incidents that you witnessed with systematic killing and fatalities?

A: Yeah. We had a dentist in our city. I can't think of his name. This Goett wanted from him the gold. As a dentist you have to have gold. And he didn't have. So everybody present came out, and they hanged him.

Q: Was he Jewish?

A: Yeah. Everybody had to watch while they hanged him. I'm going back. I hope I won't mix you up. Like in our ghetto, one day, there came two SS guys. They told everybody to come out. We knew it was no good. They took a good friend of mine, a woman, in the ninth month pregnant, and two old guys, and everybody else had to stay around just in a closed circle. They had to kneel down, and they shot them, so slow, one by one. You should see those faces. Waiting for her to be shot. I have seen hundreds of those incidents.

Q: Now we're going to talk about the conditions in this last camp you were at.

A: Yeah. Like when we came there, everybody got clothes. They gave you a shirt and a pair of shoes, and then a few days later they gave us a pair of pants. They

gave me a pair of lady's shoes with high heels, and I couldn't say nothing. They were small. I couldn't wear this. What could I do? I was wearing these clothes for a year, a whole year. Never washed, never changed. One day they came, this was after New Year's, cold, raining and snowing there. They took away all the clothes. They're gonna disinfect us! In the meantime, I fell asleep, and they gave everybody, and I didn't have nothing! When I woke up, I went over there to get the clothes. Did they beat me up! They beat me up so I couldn't sit on my butt for weeks! For many weeks!

Q: Why did they beat you up?

A: Because I wasn't there. I was sleeping. I fell asleep when they gave the clothes. Then I woke up and took a look that everybody got clothes, so I went to them. So I got a licking for it. In Mauthausen, we worked and we worked. We were living in the concentration camp, maybe 20 miles away. There was a train took us to the place where we would work. We were making airplanes. When we went there they were counting us, and when we came back they were counting us. And everybody had a number on the chest and on the pants. This was a metal number on the pants. So something happened, I lost it. When we came in, they checked and they saw I hadn't got a number. So if I haven't got a number, they thought right away that this fluggeflucht -- I was planning to escape. So what could I do? They called my number to come into the schreibshuber, the headquarters. So I came in, and the SS man was sitting on a chair, and he said to me, "Please sit down." So I sat down. And then he starts talking nice. "You know, you shouldn't lose this, because..." and so on and so on. He talked so gentle. If it was in another way, I am alert. He stood up and started walking back and forth. On the wall was a lot of whips, six, seven whips. And I was sitting, not thinking about it, and he took off the whip, when he was talking so nice. He took it off the wall and with the handle -- you know the handles are the hard part, right? -- with the handle he started hitting me over my head. It was such a surprise that I couldn't put my hands on it. When I went out, you had those caps, I had to cut it open to fit on my head, so swollen was my head. In other ways, I was always on the alert. If something happened, I hid my head. But he talked so nice and friendly and then he started hitting me.

Q: Were there any other incidents?

A: I don't like the Hungarian Jews, you know why? Because they didn't listen. When they came there, I begged them, "If you would see an SS man start hitting you, run! He could kill you." But they didn't listen. And they killed them all. I begged them. One SS man came and he started kicking, like a soccer game, this one Hungarian Jew. And I said to the other ones, "Run!" They were standing. They killed five guys, just kicking them in the stomach. Those are the things you saw every day, day in, day out. Those Hungarians, I had such a rough time just to explain to them, "Listen, you see the Ss men goes here, you go over there. Try to

- avoid them. Be more on the alert. Don't walk straight." And you just couldn't get them through.
- Q: Who were your barracks-mates and where did they come from?
- A: Barracks-mates? Well, we came with, let's say, 1,000 people from Plaschau to Mauthausen. So we all knew each other, more or less. And they put us all together. But you had in the next barrack from Spain, from France, and you had to watch even our people, too. Food was very little. But we wanted to know what's going on, so my brother took a piece of bread, and he says, "I'm going to buy a newspaper." How you going to buy it? The guys which did cleaning by the Germans, they stole a newspaper and came in the camp and sold it for a piece of bread. So my brother gave him a piece of bread and he gave him a paper. Then, when we came in the camp, we took a look in the paper -- it's a French paper -- and we can't read it anyway. This was a disaster. You give away a piece of bread, which you got once a week. So my brother went to the French guys and asked them if they want to buy a French paper. So one French guy, he went and told the SS man, and they start looking for my brother, but we all looked the same, he couldn't find him. After we were liberated, I found this guy. I didn't do nothing. I just told him it's not nice to do things like this. He apologized. It was such a daily thing that we didn't thought too much of those things.
- Q: What kind of people were in camp? Were they all Jewish people?
- A: No, in Mauthausen, we had all the nations. Even in our barracks, we had the Yugoslavs, Czechs, Spain, French, everything.
- Q: What kind of religions were they? Were there gypsies in there?
- A: We had gypsies too.
- Q: How about Jehovah Witnesses?
- A: No, I didn't know that such a religious exist.
- Q: How about baptized Jews, Jews who had been baptized in Christianity?
- A: One guy. One guy I saw.
- Q: How about Soviet prisoners of war?
- A: We had Russians, not prisoners of war. I was not with the prisoners, but I was with the Russians which they took to the camps.
- Q: How about Homosexuals? Were there any?

A: No, I didn't notice over there.

Q: Did you have any contact with relatives or friends while you were in the camp?

A: With friends, but no relatives.

Q: Was there a means of communicating throughout the camp?

A: In the camp? Yeah. We knew everything, everything what's going on.

Q: How about the war effort? You said you tried to get a newspaper. Did you know anything about the war effort?

A: We knowed it.

Q: How'd you find out?

A: We did it like I told you. These guys came in contact with the Germans, let's say they clean the house, so they stole a newspaper or they would read a little.

Q: You mentioned some of the major German personnel at the camps. Can you think of any other names of German personnel at the camps that we haven't mentioned?

A: It's a long time.

Q: Can you recall any specific units of the German army or Nazi police that you came in contact with while you were in the camps?

A: Not me. We didn't found nobody, just the SS. Once we saw the Russians, the Ukraine uniform. Ukrainia was just a volunteer to the German SS they were stationed over there too.

Q: They had volunteered for the Nazis?

A: Yeah.

Q: When you were in the camps, what thought did you give to your survival?

A: I had such a little time to think, and never came to my mind that I gonna die. Like I told you, I was together with my brother, we were dreaming, dreaming always, we're going to get liberated, we're gonna have a lot of food. My brother said, "David, you're gonna see. They're gonna be a lot of people which gonna see their freedom and won't be able to enjoy the freedom." And I says, "Well, don't talk those things." And he survived and he died a month after the war!

Q: What did he die from?

- A: When we came out, we were so hungry, we ate everything. I ate just bread and things like that, but he got a can of food, and he spoiled his stomach and he died.
- Q: Where were you liberated, and what was the date, as near as you can remember?
- A: I was liberated May 5, '45. April 15, they took us from Mauthausen to the woods, which surrounded us. We just walked, and they didn't give us any food, any water or nothing. No food or water, no place to sleep, no nothing. And we were there till May 5th. May 5th we were liberated in Wels. They took us from Mauthausen out in the woods, and when they liberated us from the woods, we came to the nearest city, and Wels was the nearest city. In Austria. In the woods, we went for a week.
- Q: So from Mauthausen you went to Gunskirchen. And from there you went to Wels. Did you have indication while you were going through the woods, and to these two villages, that the war was about over?
- A: Yeah, we know it already. We heard already the shelling. And the SS were talking to us, "Now we're going to kill all of you." 'Cause they were on edge and they were angry at us, so they said, "You just wait a few days, and you're all gonna be dead." When we arrived over there in the woods they surrounded us, and there we are. You could see piles, mountains of dead people. And we had to pile them up.
- Q: And who liberated you?
- A: The Americans.
- Q: What was that like? What do you recall about the liberation?
- A: It's pretty hard to describe now. Suddenly you see people talking to you. You walk, they gonna kick you? You start thinking, is it a dream or is it true? We couldn't believe it. Suddenly they are bringing food, as much as we wanted. This was the only one dream, just the only one dream what we had, is to have food, to be able to eat, to leave a little bit. (Laughs) Probably people would laugh if they heard this. When I was liberated, I was eating day and night. I mean it. Just took a whole bread, started eating. I was sore, already, from eating. I ate and I ate, and I didn't have no feeling when it's enough. I didn't have no taste, like is it salty or is it sweet, didn't have no taste at all. Just the knowledge that I am hungry, and you never know, maybe tomorrow I won't have, at least I want to eat up now. We ate and ate and ate. We didn't know how to stop. How long could you eat? I bet I ate for two, three days, constantly.
- Q: Where were you staying all this time?

- A: In Wels they had a warehouse and they make from this warehouse a camp. So everybody which was liberated and came over there, they have right away where to sleep, where to eat, and everything.
- Q: How long were you there in this warehouse?
- A: I was there for a few months. And then I thought looking, I'd find somebody.
- Q: Your family?
- A: Yes. Everybody died. Couldn't find nobody. Didn't have nobody.
- Q: So did you have any thoughts about returning to your pre-war home? Or what happened to your home?
- A: I didn't wanna go there.
- Q: So did you stay in a Displaced Persons camp?
- A: No, I didn't wanna stay in a camp. I had enough camp.
- Q: Did you want to look for work? What were you thinking about then?
- A: I started looking for my wife, she was my girlfriend then. And I found her.
- Q: Where did you find her?
- A: I found her in Germany, in Feldafing. Then I got married there.
- Q: And from there you went to...
- A: Munchberg.
- Q: What did you do in Munchberg?
- A: Over there we had such a community, a small community, which we lived together, very friendly. And we were waiting to come to the United States. I got married in '46. In '47 I had my son.
- Q: What kind of work were you doing in Munchberg?
- A: I didn't. My wife was a photographer. She worked there. My son was one year old, and then suddenly I come up with tuberculosis.
- Q: What year was that?

- A: '48. So I went to a sanitarium. I was there for two years.
- Q: Do you think that this was a result of the camps?
- A: Yeah. After two years I got out and in '51 I came here to the States.
- Q: And were you aided by any organization coming to the United States?
- A: Yeah, by the HIAS.
- Q: Did you have any idea where you would go in the United States?
- A: Yes. They made not everybody together. If they would say, you wanna go to the United States, all what we know about was New York, everybody will stay in New York. So they made it like 100 people goes to St. Paul, and 100 people goes to Chicago. They said to me, "Your place is going to be St. Paul." And I didn't have no idea what St. Paul is, if it's a city or anything. I came here in the wintertime and it was cold.
- Q: What did you do here then?
- A: When I came here I went to a factory place, to Sears. They made frigidaires. I saw there's not too much future for it, so I went to school and I learned welding. Then I got a job at Braniff Airway. And then I got a job in Remley Engineering, a good job as a welder, and I worked over there till now. Last year I retired.
- Q: You became a member of the Jewish community here, then, in St. Paul?
- A: Yeah.
- Q: Do you maintain contact with other survivors or are you in any survivor organizations?
- A: I'm in the Holocaust organization. We still call ourselves "newcomers" after 30 years. We all stick together very much.
- Q: Can you tell me what it has meant to you to be a survivor of the Holocaust?
- A: I don't know. There are mixed feelings about it. It depends on how your mood is. Sometimes the mood is up, it's so nice. I'm happy I survived. Sometimes, if you're mood is down, you hate yourself why you survived. Feeling not a deserter away from home, but like I sneaked out. I didn't have nothing to do with it, but my whole family got killed and how come I am here? We didn't want to be apart, and suddenly you'd be apart. Sometimes I feel like I am really not a survivor. You know why? A lot of times came to my mind, like 100 Germans took 10,000 Jews, we could kill them all in no time at all. If every Jew would kill one

German, they would be in trouble. Such a thing comes to my mind. I sometimes feel guilty because I did not survive properly. I didn't do nothing.

Q: Have you ever talked to other survivors about this feeling? What did they say?

A: I talked with one guy in Los Angeles about it, and he had the same feeling. 3,000,000 people perished. If every one Jew would say I gonna kill one German, that's all. We know that we're gonna be dead anyway, but I don't know whether it was a fear, or like they say, the skin is closer than your shirt. You were afraid. Maybe I will survive. This way, maybe, I might survive. Then a thousand guys, you let 15 or 20 Germans take you there.

Q: Based on your experience in the Holocaust, do you think your feelings about human nature, non-Jews and Germans has changed?

A: A little bit has mellowed. A little bit.

Q: How about your belief and practice in Judaism or a Supreme Being? Has that changed?

A: Not much. I believe I am a Jew and I'm doing just what I want to do about it, not so much.

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

A: Yeah.

Q: Good, great. So we can contact you about that. Have you seen any movies or read any books about the Holocaust? And do you think that these tell the story the way it really happened?

A: Not enough. Very little.

Q: Do you remember anything recently you saw on the Holocaust that was on T.V. or in the movie theater?

A: About the Holocaust? We didn't have any movies.

Q: Well there have been things on T.V. within the last few years.

A: The most what shows this is the newsreel. The news right after the war when they liberated the camps, you could see that that is true. That's the truest thing. The other things show just very little.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add before we wrap this thing up?

A: I probably will remember when you're gone. (Laughter)

Q: This concludes the interview with David Jagoda at his home in Saint Paul on March 20, 1984. Thank you very much.