

Interview with Mr. Berek Latarus
By Don Bernstein
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is an interview with Berek Latarus for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project by Don Bernstein on October 27, 1982. Berek, where were you born?

A: Lodz, Poland.

Q: Could you tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name, if it's different?

A: Berek Latarus.

Q: In what town or country were you born?

A: Poland, Lodz.

Q: And what year?

A: The year 1911. June 24.

Q: What were your parents' names and your grandparents' or great-grandparents'?

A: My parent's name was Mendel Latarus and Litarus.

Q: And where were they born?

A: My mother was born in Czechoslovakia and my father was born in Minsk.

Q: And grandparents?

A: The grandparents were born in Minsk too, from my father's side. From my mother's side were born in Czestochowa.

Q: how about your great-grandparents? Do you remember way back?

A: No. I don't remember.

Q: What were your parents' occupations?

A: They were in the lumber business.

Q: Both of them?

A: No, my father was in the lumber business and my mother's father was a tailor, I think.

Q: What languages were spoken at home, do you remember?

A: Jewish and Polish.

Q: Yiddish?

A: Yeah. Yiddish, Jewish. Yiddish and Polish.

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

A: Religious.

Q: How religious?

A: Orthodox religious.

Q: Did you yourself receive any formal Jewish education?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you describe it at all?

A: Well, in the days like a cheder, and school – in Polish school.

Q: And how far did you go in school?

A: High school.

Q: What events were you aware of from the mid-1930s through 1941? Local, national, international...

A: Well from 1939 'til 1941 I was in the Lodz ghetto. In 1944 I went to Auschwitz and a number of other camps.

- Q: What they'd like to know is, were you aware of news of local, national, international about what was happening in the world?
- A: We were aware of news by reading the local paper -- and we went to the ghetto. I know what happened within the ghetto -- when they put in barbed wire, electric wire, around the ghetto, and what we didn't have to eat, and lots of people died from starvation. Every Jewish holiday, there was transportation what the Germans sent out people to the concentration camps. I was living across the street from a hospital. In 1940 and '41, the Germans went to this particular hospital -- I saw it myself. They threw out children on the trucks from the window. And then, it went by each few weeks, every few months -- I know it in a different language -- the first that went out, they picked intelligent people -- doctors, lawyers. Then they went out the older, elder people -- what they feel they are not able to work. They have some factories in the ghetto, where they were working in the factories. And then lots of things weren't done in the ghetto.
- Q: What did you hear about the Nazi party, about Hitler, before the war?
- A: We didn't. We didn't hear anything. There was a rumor that a war is coming up. For instance, our parents did feel in that time that the Germans are not so bad. They remembered the First World War when the Germans come in and they were really not bad for the population. People mixed with them and everything. So even the people were not so concerned. Most of them, I would say, were not concerned that Germans were coming in, because we didn't hear actually. The later years, they hear what's happening in Berlin, or there's something, but it was already by the end of when they took us out from the ghetto.
- Q: And you said your primary source of information was the newspaper?
- A: Mostly, yes. From the local newspaper it was. There really wasn't much.
- Q: What about radio or word of mouth?
- A: Yeah. We had some radios. In that time, they didn't really tell a lot. Later, when they closed up the ghetto, you couldn't hear too much anyway on the radio. With everything controlled, probably to the Germans, so far.
- Q: In what type of settings, if any, did you have any contacts with gentiles?
- A: In the beginning, before they closed up the ghetto, they had some contact with gentiles. My father was in the lumber business and he used to do business with gentiles. So right in the beginning, in some way, they used to smuggle in food. That's all they could do, just for a short time till the Germans took more control around the ghetto and the wires and everything so it was impossible to do anything.

Q: Did your family have any gentiles in your home at all?

A: No.

Q: Never anything socially to do with them?

A: No.

Q: Did you have any personal encounters with anti-Semitism prior to the outbreak of the war?

A: There was anti-Semitism in Poland. Of course there was. There were certain parties -- like they hate -- they didn't hate the Jewish people. It happened I lived more in a gentile neighborhood. And sometime, we were afraid to come in the night late. Hooligans used to stay in the streets and chase the Jewish boys.

Q: Is there anything specific you remember in terms of the things that happened? Did anything happen to you, personally?

A: No. It didn't happen to me personally, but specific what I remember, we used to come home, at night with friends, we used to live in the same neighborhood, and there used to stay with a group with the gentiles, and they used to yell, "Here's the Jews coming," and they used to chase us around. But as young people, you are not too much afraid. It was before the war --quite a few years before. Take another few years and forget everything!)Laughs)

Q: What about your family -- your parents? Did you know any anti-Semitic incidents that happened to them or any of your friends or anything that you can remember?

A: Yes. I do remember. Before the war, the anti-Semitism troubled my father, because he was in the lumber business. In the lumber business, I would say, 70% was in gentiles' business. They used to hate the Jew, if he's in the same business or something like this, but they didn't happen anything drastically. Just Jewish competition. (Laughs)

Q: Did you have any relatives living outside your community?

A: Outside Poland there was mine mother's -- my grandfather from my mother's side, aunties and -- out of town. Then mine mother had two brothers in the United States where I could never find them. When I came back, I tried to look for it in papers, I did lots of things, but it didn't happen nothing. From my father's side, the whole family was a large family and they lived in Lodz, in the same town.

Q: Do you know what happened to them?

- A: They all went to the concentration camp -- to Auschwitz in that time -- a very large family.
- Q: Did you ever have any contact with them after that? Or did they survive?
- A: They didn't survive. I have two sisters and a brother, and one sister was married. They had a little child. They didn't survive. We went to Auschwitz. My father wasn't alive anymore, he died in the ghetto, and my two sisters took my mother under the arm when we went into Auschwitz. They didn't want to leave her alone, and that's how they went to the crematorium. My brother-in-law of my sister was with me in a number of concentration camps, and he died on one of the transports on the way when we were going from one camp to the other.
- Q: Are you the only one that survived from your family?
- A: I am the only one, yes.
- Q: May I ask you what age you were at the outbreak of the war?
- A: We received the news of the war on the one day we saw the Germans coming in our town. That was the news. We knew that there's a war going around, but we didn't know that the Germans arrived outskirts of our town. The one day, when they come in, the first thing what they did -- it's good that you asked me about it - - they took a number of Jewish people -- and there was like a market place not far from us -- and they hanged them right in the market -- by the feet, with the head down, some woman, and men. That was like to show us that we would have to be scared.
- Q: That was the beginning of the war?
- A: The beginning of the war. Later we went out -- even my parents and others, younger children -- we used to see when the Germans coming in on their motor cycles with the dogs, with everything. We really didn't know much about it. We didn't know, because with us, it was kind of fun. An army comes in -- and even our parents, -- maybe they were old fashioned and they didn't know so much about it -- said. "Ah, the Germans coming in. We know the Germans. They're going to be the same like it was in our war." Average people really didn't know too much what was going on in the world.
- Q: So you really didn't have any idea what was going to happen?
- A: No. People in certain parts of Poland -- they really didn't know too much. They were also occupied with the children, with the work, with the food, with everything. They didn't know too much. It's a shame.
- Q: Do you have anything else you wanted to add to that?

A: (Sigh) Well, I can add how it was in the concentration camps when I was in Auschwitz. When I went in to Auschwitz, I went in with three uncles -- my father's brothers. And they, in some way, smuggled in my nephew, a small boy -- maybe ten years old. He was with us in the camp in Auschwitz, and from Auschwitz, when they sent us out -- they were kind of big guys, and they took him in with them, we were ten or whatever in a row -- to another camp. It was in Wustegiersdorf. When we went to work, the boy was hidden underneath the bed. One time we were at work, I and my uncle and the SS discovered that the boy walked out from the barrack. They discovered him through the window. We come back, the boy was not anymore over there.

Q: How old was this boy?

A: Ten years old.

Q: Let me ask you if you can remember the day the Germans came, again when you were in Lodz -- where were you at the time/ and do you know what you were doing at the exact time?

A: Well, in that time, I don't recall, but I think it was a Friday and a Saturday. I was at home with my brothers and sisters. People started talking, "The Germans are coming in, the Germans are coming in!" Everybody ran out in the main street -- it was maybe three blocks away from where we used to live -- and they saw them coming in with their motorcycles and with dogs, with hardware, who knows what.

Q: What did the neighbors say or do?

A: Well, like I said, we used to live in a more gentile neighborhood. There was mixed Jewish and non-Jewish people. Everybody, they didn't say nothing -- really, people were not afraid of it in beginning, because we didn't know what's going on in the world. A day, two days later, things start to happen.

Q: Were there any meetings held in the synagogues?

A: No. Not that I can recall at all, because right after, the Germans burned the synagogues. In Lodz was one of the most beautiful synagogues in the world.

Q: A large, large synagogue?

A: Minneapolis doesn't even have a synagogue like this. It was very beautiful. Very beautiful. It was built maybe fifty years ago. This was the first synagogue what they burned to the ground. And the other synagogue, in the "smaller" synagogue they call it, people were afraid to go in, because they burned it up, and there was a law not to go into that synagogue, not even to pray in our homes, so people used to pray in private homes as long as the Germans didn't know. I can tell you

another incident that may be important. When I was in the ghetto, there was a Kripo [this is an acronym for “Kriminal polizei” or “criminal police”], a German officer over there, and they used to know -- I don’t know how they used to know -- which Jewish family was very well off financially before the war. They used to call them in the office and said, “ You have money, do you have...?” What people used to save, gold rubles or the diamonds, that was their security in that time. And they ask you, “Either you give us whatever you got...” – they used to know, but I don’t know how! But they used to know what really you have. So I was three times in the Kripo. My father died in the ghetto already in 1942, and after that they called me in the Kripo, and it happened I come into the Kripo when one was in charge -- it was a Jewish fellow -- he used to be in the same business with my father, and he knew me, and he said, “Berek, we know, they know, that your father had some hidden stuff. Either you give, otherwise they are going to kill you.” So I said, “ I don’t know, I’ll have to ask my mother.’ And then they come again and they called me in, and they said, “ This is it.’ So eventually I took out everything what my father had hidden -- some gold rubles and diamonds and I give it to them. That’s how I really survived, otherwise they would kill me over them. Another one of the Germans --Suter was his name. He was a Volksdeutsch, they called it, a “Polish German.’ He used to live in a house where my father used to deliver lumber to a certain company. So he knew my father and he knew me because I used to be with my father together.

Q: This is a German.

A: Yes, a German. So one time I was going with the street car, and he saw me. He was pretending that he was Jewish. He used to speak perfect Jewish. The other people what they didn’t know him -- they were talking about the Germans, how bad they are, and this - and he just looked. Later they went down from the streetcar and he took them away. So he recognized me and he said, “Berek, your father was Mendel?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “ Do you remember me?” I said, “ Yeah, Mr. Suter. I remember you.” And that’s what really started when they called me in in the Kripo that I have to give away everything. That’s how it was.

Q: That’s how they knew you.

A: Yeah. I can tell you -- this is after the war, but it’s really important. I would like you to know. I used to live in Germany in a small town. They call it Laufen. It’s on the border, Germany and Austria.

Q: This is after the war?

A: After the war. Right after the war was over, I had a broken arm, what the German hit me -- about the last couple of days. I was walking with two friends in the concentration camp in the little street and I noticed one guy in a long leather coat - - he looked so familiar. And I looked in his face, and this guy was in charge in our ghetto. He was a German SS. He was in charge of sending out groups of

Jewish people to the concentration camps. His name was Alfred Stromberg. That was already an American government over there. They started to look up the papers and he was wanted in the Nuremberg Trial. So they hold him. We used to call witness from Germany, from our town, and everybody was telling who he is and so forth. So they sent him back to Poland -- or they sent him back to Nuremberg -- I really don't know. But his name was Alfred Stromberg. We caught him.

Q: Do you know how life might have changed economically or socially after the outbreak of the war? Different social changes, economic changes?

A: There was no economically because people was working for the Germans. The people what were capable to work, they called it hazod, was working. Somebody was working in the straw factories and shoe factories and clothing factories, and everything was produced for the Germans. The people didn't have any heads for socially, because everybody was hungry and worried, and in the evening you couldn't go out. Then, for work, you used to get stamps that you can go and they have some -- like groceries -- that each week or two weeks, you go in and you get your portion on your stamps for two weeks' food. Like the people here on poverty.

Q: How many stamps did you get, do you know?

A: I don't know. We used to get for a family maybe two, three pounds of potatoes for a week. Or a loaf of bread for a family for two weeks. And that's all. Then they give you some horsemeat. (Laughs) you couldn't live on it and you couldn't starve on it. It was real bad.

Q: When the Germans came, what type of work did you do?

A: I was with my father.

Q: He was still alive then.

A: Yeah. He died in '42 or '43. He got sick in the ghetto and he died.

Q: What type of work in the lumber company did you actually do?

A: Well, in the lumber, let's say my father used to receive by carloads lumber. We used to sell to bakeries, to factories, to lots of companies, what they did use in that time. They were bleaching clothes and they need lumber for heating up the furnaces.

Q: When the Germans came, were there any discussions about staying or fleeing from your home?

A: Yes. There was discussions about staying or the fleeing. For instance, I have a brother and two sisters. And they were much younger from me. So my brother, really, took a chance. He said, "You're the oldest. You stay with your parents." And he went to Warsaw. He ran away to Warsaw. He disappeared over there, too. Then I have mine sisters, and one of my sisters was already married and we lived together and she had a little child -- maybe four years old. There was already rumors in the ghetto that this part of the ghetto would be shipped out in a couple days. So I used to take my sisters and my mother and we used to go across the big bridge on the other end of the ghetto. We used to go by rumors what's going on. We really didn't know too much.

Q: So that was all the discussion you had about staying?

A: Yes. There was more discussion on what to get to eat. But you were strangled around with wires. Really there wasn't too much chances to escape from the ghetto. And the Jewish people -- in a certain part -- they were really afraid. They didn't have the guys to escape. Where would you go? You would go out from the ghetto, you would go right in the heart of the Germans.

Q: Do you know the dates, when did the Nazi occupation occur? Do you remember that?

A: In 1939. When they liquidated the ghetto, was in 1944, August.

Q: And when you were in the ghetto, what knowledge of the outside world or other ghettos or mass killings or concentration camps were you aware of?

A: Well in our ghetto, in the Lodz ghetto, they used to send in lots of Jewish people from smaller towns. Lodz is a big town, second from Warsaw.

Q: What was the population?

A: Very, very large. There was a large Jewish population. And then the Jewish people from the surrounding counties -- from the small towns -- they assembled in the Lodz ghetto for a month or so and then they shipped them out to concentration camps. Then people -- like from Berlin -- there was like a station what people used to come in. I used to see, they used to come in with a transport -- with train - - and one of the Germans looked up, he saw somebody calling down, and he killed him right away. He knew him from Berlin or who knows from where.

Q: Can you recall any specific anti-Jewish measures or legislation by the occupation? Any rules, any laws that they made after they took over?

A: You mean the Germans?

Q: The Germans.

- A: Well, there were a number of rules. For instance, there was a curfew. You couldn't go out after a certain hour in the evening. And then there were rules where you could not assemble in any temples and synagogues. Was rules like you have to live by what you're getting from your stamps – to live on it. There were a lot of sharp measures in the ghetto. Used to see the ghetto, people used to walk on the sidewalk, and you could see the people are swollen from not eating. You walked behind them, and you can see, tipped over and died on the sidewalks. Every day! There used to be mass funerals every day from people who had just fallen over because there was not any food. And when somebody got sick, then you have to know he's going to die because there was not any doctors. Who knew about doctors? People were very depressed.
- Q: Did you have many friends that died in the ghetto like that?
- A: Oh, lots of friends. Lots of friends. Some of our neighbors where we used to live. There was a ghetto. A ghetto means you knew everybody! You knew each other. Was like a small town, a little ghetto.
- Q: Do you remember the name of the street that you lived on?
- A: Oh, yeah, sure. I'll never forget. The street was Lagervinitzka 33. I'll never forget. I was born over there. (Chuckles)
- Q: What was it like? The place you lived?
- A: Let's say there was I and my father, two brothers and two sisters -- six people. We used to live in two rooms -- a kitchen and another room with a number of beds and that's how the living was in Poland. It was real primitive, comparing to the United States. And at that time, they called that "good," because we were financially pretty well off. Now, when you have to look back at how other people lived, it was much worse.
- Q: Do you remember the dates and circumstances of your deportation?
- A: Yes. It was 1944, in August, on August 25th.
- Q: So you were in the ghetto until 1944.
- A: Till 1944, yeah.
- Q: Do you remember who ordered it?
- A: The Gestapo. When you're talking about who ordered it, I didn't mention that I was working in the ghetto. What I was delivering from the Germans, food -- or the clothing to the factories -- they used to come in trucks and by horse and

buggy. They used to come to a certain place, and we, as drivers, used to take to the trucks, the horse and buggy we used to deliver to the factory for the people working, like straw, fabrics, lots of things what was sent for the Germans. And this guy what he was in charge -- the German on the transportation community -- and before they liquidated the ghetto, he knew me, and they told the remaining Jews -- we were one of the remaining Jews -- but this was the last day when they liquidated the ghetto -- so I was with my mother and with my two sisters. Just my brother and my two sisters and my brother-in-law. We went to a big market, and they did make a selection who can stay in the ghetto still working for the Germans and who have to shipped out. By them, "shipped out" means they go to some other place to work. So he wanted that I stay in the ghetto. I was a young strong guy. So I begged him, why don't you leave my mother, too? So he picked one of my sisters -- the younger one -- that I and my sister, we can stay. So of course, I didn't want it. That's how I went to Auschwitz with my mother and with my two sisters and my brother Loren, the little child. Otherwise, I could stay in the ghetto, still working for the Germans -- I and my younger sister, 'cause they still had some factories. After they liquidated the ghetto, still was remaining about 1,000 or 1,500 Jews but they left them over there. And I could be among them, but my decision was not to leave my mother with my sister and the little child go themselves. I didn't know that they go to Auschwitz, but I wanted to be with them, together.

Q: What were you or your family's expectations about the meaning of deportation? Did you have an idea what to expect?

A: Deportation was -- nobody knew in the ghetto -- maybe except a few on higher places in the ghetto -- that really, they were shipped out. Nobody knew where they were. They thought they ship them out to a certain part of Germany or in Poland -- for some kind of work, hard labor, whatever. But nobody knew Auschwitz, or there's any concentration camps, or the ovens. Nobody knew about it in that time. Maybe some of the leaders from the ghetto. Maybe they knew. I was shipped out in the same day when the leader of the Lodz ghetto was shipped out -- Rumkowski. You probably heard of him. He was shipped out in the same transport what I went -- I'm sure he knew that there's Auschwitz, but they forced him. He couldn't get away anyway. He was an old man then -- went straight to Auschwitz. I saw him when they put him in the crematorium. There was that chief of the Jewish police in the Lodz ghetto, Rosenblat. He went with us too, in the transport. They went, took both of them, into the crematorium -- they were the first, the leaders -- first they took away the leaders. I came into Auschwitz with my mother and the two sisters and my brother-in-law. There was some Jewish people on the receiving line, where they took the people out from the boxcars. And they told me, "You leave your mother alone, because your mother don't going to survive. You maybe have a chance. You're young and strong." So my two sisters didn't want to leave my mother. They told my sisters to go away from my mother, to give the little child to my mother. So my two sisters didn't want to go away from my mother. One took from this side the arm and the

other from this side, and they walked away. They walked right to the crematorium. My brother-in-law, he went with me -- a young guy, but he was killed on the way. He couldn't walk anymore after when they sent us from Auschwitz to another camp. He couldn't walk anymore and they shoot him.

Q: Can you tell me, as detailed as you can, the transportation process from the ghetto to Auschwitz?

A: Yeah. The transportation from the ghetto, they come a number of boxcars into the ghetto. And they told us -- not an order -- they told us to take whatever we can carry with us from home. So we carried lots of things. And when we come to the boxcars, they didn't let us take nothing. They just chased us in the boxcars, and everything was right on the ground next to the boxcars. They just chased everybody in. And then they closed the doors, and we were going. But I can add a few things. One time, this was in the beginning of 1945, was then shipments again from one camp to another, and there was lots of sick people in the boxcars. And the people was real hungry. I used to see where people eating the flesh of other people who were already dead -- laying in the boxcars. And the other what was so hungry, and they used to eat the flesh -- bite the flesh out from dead people -- of those dead bodies.

Q: This is on the way to the...

A: Not from the ghetto. That was from another camp. That was in Ravensbruck. I never was in one camp too long. They used to ship us from one camp to the other. And the one time, I was pushing a cart, what the soldiers have to eat -- an army cart with food. And of course I stole a bread, and they took me away from the cart, on the back. That means, when they take you to the back, then you're dead. They shoot you. So there was one Polish guy from Cracow. Somebody told him we used to be together all the time, and we used to like each other. So one guy told him -- Bishak his name was -- "You know, they took Berek in the end over there. They're probably going to shoot him." And he, again, was on good terms with the SS. He used to smuggle for them cigarettes, or whatever, so he run in the back. In some way, he took me away from the Germans, that Polish guy. (Chuckles) he said himself he was before the war -- that Polish guy --- a crook and everything. Before the war. They used to call him "Jewish father." He was sticking up really for our people. Really was sticking up.

Q: He wasn't Jewish?

A: No, he wasn't Jewish.

Q: You started telling me about the conditions of traveling to Auschwitz from the ghetto. Can you continue? How long did it take? What were the conditions like? Any experiences you can remember?

A: Yes, I do remember. The conditions, like I said, we were riding in a boxcar with no food. and one of the stations we stopped, they opened the door like for fresh air. I don't know where it was, and some of the people, Polish people, tried to give us water. And they just didn't let anything get in. No water and no food. I don't know what part of Poland it was or in Germany or whatever. Probably in Poland. Then when we stepped out from the cars, we saw that we are in Auschwitz. It was the sign and everything. The music was playing, what was probably familiar to everybody, and then we used to go for the selection, they call it. Mengele, he used to separate the people right and left, and so forth. And I went at that time with three of my uncles, with my nephew, the little boy ten years old, and I don't recall, but for a few weeks we were in Auschwitz. Then they sent us -- they called that camp Wygietrzow -- and Ravensbruck, and other camps. I was liberated in 1945. In May we were liberated in Germany.

Q: The first camp was Auschwitz that you were in?

A: The first was Auschwitz.

Q: How many days did it take you to get there from your ghetto?

A: I would say two or three days, but that's all.

Q: Were these open boxcars?

A: No. Closed-up boxcars.

Q: And they gave you blankets and food.

A: No. We come in -- we went into the shower over there.

Q: So for two days there was no food at all?

A: No. Was nothing. They didn't care so much whether you eat or not.

Q: Can you describe the conditions of the boxcar? Was it crowded?

A: It was very crowded! There was, I think, a steel floor. It's like a cattle boxcar, I would say, because there was some straw scattered around in the car. And later, we ourselves opened a little window on top next to the roof. We opened a window over there and there was some bars, but that's all.

Q: Do you remember the approximate day and time and the year of your arrival in Auschwitz?

A: Well, we left in August in 1944. I would say by the end of August we were in Auschwitz. I don't remember the day arriving -- who knew at the time what date

it is? You knew when you left. When they liquidated the ghetto, then I left. I think that was the 25th or something like that.

Q: Can you describe, as detailed as you can remember, the process and the registration into the camp?

A: When we walked out from the train cars, what the process was, the first thing, they separate women from men. Right by coming out from the boxcar. And then we went through the segregation. I would call it, when Mengele segregated which one go right and which one go left. After you went through the segregation, you were supposed to take a shower -- took you to the shower where you took off all your clothes, your shoes, and you went through the shower, and then you walked out the shower, they gave you a pair of wooden shoes and their uniform -- what you were wearing with the stripes in Auschwitz at that time. And then they took you to one of the barracks over there. In the barracks, they used to come in -- they call it the kapos -- and they used to beat you and lots of things. Over there to survive, you have to be lucky, to hide in a corner, nobody see you. And they give you orders who will go to work and who stays in barrack. But most the time we went to work. They took us out.

Q: Were you tattooed? Did you get a number?

A: You're talking about tattoo here? Yeah. (Looks at arm) 181,000; 180,000 or something. I have papers what it's written over there.

Q: Can you describe that process? How they did that? Was that on the first day?

A: No. It wasn't on the first day. I think it was on the second. It was like with a needle or something. I don't recall it, but with a needle they did it.

Q: Painful?

A: Eh, could survive. (Laughs) I have some papers. 180,400 something.

Q: Can you provide a physical description of the camp? I'll give you an example. The size of the camp, the buildings, how many people?

A: The size of the camp -- they called it a barrack. Like a soldiers' barrack. Was very long. And I would say there was a few hundred people over there. And there weren't regular beds, there was bunk beds. And that was all. In the morning they're supposed to give you some coffee -- some kind of liquid. You used to stay in the line in order to get something. And sometimes, the kapos, they looked at you and either he liked you or he dumped it on the floor and didn't give you to drink. And sometime you were even afraid to go into the line.

Q: Did that happen to you?

A: Sure it happened to me -- more than one time.

Q: What else can you tell me about the camp? What were the buildings like?

A: It's like barracks. Was wooden or there's some steel buildings -- that was in Auschwitz. And we were not long in Auschwitz, and then we went to another camp. And the other camps --there was all over, the same thing. Talking about the camps, there wasn't one better than the other one.

Q: So in the barracks themselves -- besides the bunk beds -- was there anything else at all?

A: No, there was nothing.

Q: How many bunk beds were there?

A: I would say 50. You know, you were so depressed, and so beaten up that you didn't really look around.

Q: What were the living conditions like? Can you describe the routine of the day, the work, the food, sleeping, clothing, your health, medical conditions -- whatever you want to talk about.

A: Well, depends on what camps. Let's say for instance, in Auschwitz, the routine was, in morning, you have to go out, like an "appell." They count you whether you're here. And then they send you out to do some work.

Q: Like what?

A: I don't know what you call it. They took a group of people, we used to go out. That was in one camp. And then I went to another camp. We were not too long in Auschwitz. Went to another camp. In fact, it was a different system they have over there. They used to give you some piece of bread or something. And happened our barrack was next to the crematorium. Used to see a mountain of bodies laying, prepared, to burn 'em up.

Q: This was at Auschwitz?

A: No. This was in another camp. This was some part of Germany. It was not Regensburg, but the third one -- Wustegiersdorf they used to call it. And the crematorium was right next to our barracks. We used to see how the flames and everything goes up. And over there they sent us to Regensburg. There was already by the end of the war that they were afraid of something. We used to work on the railroad. There was a hotel. They took over the hotel and all the prisoners, they were staying in the hotel. In morning we used to go out on the

railroad. We used to clean up the railroad because the allies -- like United States and England -- used to bomb already the railroad. So one day, I recall that we were working on the railroad and I saw the planes coming up. I don't know whether they were American or they were English. And our guards, the SS men, they ran away from us. They left us alone. There was a big hole in the ground, and they told us to go in over there. You know, they thought maybe we will get killed. But they did run away. They run away someplace else. So what's happened? The same bombs fell on the place where all the SS men were hidden. They got killed and we were free to go! But really, nobody knew where to go. So I and a few friends, we run away. We were hiding in a cemetery. There was an older German woman, and she give us some food. You want clothes, I give you clothes. And go away. So we took some clothes and we start to wander around in Regensburg. That was a river -- the Donau River we called it. We used to walk around, about three, four guys, and we really didn't know what to do with ourselves till other Germans coming up and they surrounded us and took us back. That was civilian Germans what they took us out, because they were afraid that we would do something. We're wandering around in town, because the SS was already killed on the railroad. So they took us over there to the hotel. We didn't know really what to do. Kind of dumb. (Laughs)

Q: That was the end of the war.

A: No. That was during the war. And over there, later, they took us from Regensburg. We were going to another part of Germany -- walking for weeks, we were walking. In the night we were staying in a barn by farmers. Sometimes the night and sometimes in daytime. And they just took us. We were walking and walking. That was in May, 1945. And some of the farmers start running out on the highway, and used to say, "The war is over!" in German. "Der Krieg ist vorbei!" "The war is over!" So the Germans -- the SS -- they run away from us. They left us. But the war was really over. And that's how we settled in this small town -- most of us. We settled. That was a small town. It was right on the border between Germany and Austria. That's how we settled over there.

Q: You were starting to tell me a typical day in the camp. Can you describe the food and the sleeping conditions?

A: The sleeping conditions. You sleep in a bunk, yeah? A hard bunk. And you have it -- it wasn't a mattress. I don't know what you call it. It was with straw inside. A kind of burlap sack with something with straw. On this we were sleeping. In morning, I don't know, four o'clock or five o'clock in the morning, they woke you up and you went out -- like soldiers for army. They count you. And then they select you for work. Select how many people. And we went back to the barracks and they were supposed to give you like a coffee -- some kind of liquid. Who knows. So, they give you. Some did get and some didn't get. That was the guys, they call the kapos, in the camp themselves. And they just pour it on the

floor and they tell you to wipe it off. And then, once a day, not every day, they give you a piece of bread and that's supposed to last you two or three days.

Q: That's all they gave you?

A: That's all. What else? When you eat it up, the other two days you starve for it. And when you didn't eat it up, the next one stole it away from you.

Q: Did you have to steal food yourself at times?

A: There wasn't from anybody to steal. I'll tell you the truth. In one of the camps - in Auschwitz not -- but in one of the camps, I was staying to go to work and one of the guys went out from the kitchen -- he was working in the kitchen, he was a Jewish guy from my town -- it just happened he knew my father and he remembered me too. So he said, "Berek, I'm here so long. Did you just come from the ghetto?" I said, "yeah." So he said, "I take you in the kitchen. You will work here in the kitchen. You will have enough food." So I was working in the kitchen. Maybe for three or four weeks, until they sent us someplace else. So in that time I had enough food. really, to eat. But in the other, I was the same like anybody else.

Q: And the clothing? What was the clothing like?

A: The clothing was the stripes uniform what we have. Pair of pants and a little jacket. That's all.

Q: Just one uniform?

A: Just the one. (Laughs)

Q: Was it ever cleaned at all?

A: Not that I recall. Never washed and never cleaned. That's why people had lice. There was lice on the bodies. But who was young, especially people who was young and healthy, you would wash with cold water or something. You keep yourself clean. But most the people were sick and hungry, and then you get so depressed, they didn't take care of themselves. I talk about myself, I can talk about some other people -- what other people did, too. There was people what they were smoking before they went to the camp. They used to take the soup -- we used to get our soup -- and they used to sell the soup for a cigarette. These people didn't survive. And then I run into people from Hungary and they were so religious, they used to have the tefillin with them. Just the tefillin, not a tallit. And they used to go, during the day, when a guard didn't see it, in a corner, and they used to pray, to put on the tefillin. I don't know how they got it into the camp in the first place. I really don't know. But some people, somehow, you

know. And they used to pray in the corners 'til somebody from the SS caught 'em. Then they was through, too. Very religious people.

Q: Can you tell me about the health and the medical conditions? Yours and whoever.

A: Well, my health was considered good. I lost lots of weight, but I considered very lucky. I wasn't sick. And there was some minor things -- like at that time I got on my body some certain wounds or something from uncleanness, but they did go away with the time. But some other people was real bad. And then in one camp I was, the doctors -- this may be important too -- they used to take specimens from the people.

Q: What kind of specimen?

A: I'd like to find the word for it. Not urine specimen. What they call it -- they'd take specimens of certain -- I've forgotten the name of it. (Laughs) So anyway, we went through lots of things, really.

Q: Was there any medical provisions at all? They want to know what the medical conditions were like in the camp.

A: There wasn't really medical conditions at all. Who did care, a hundred dies, or 200, or 250. There was no medical conditions in the camp. Let's see, not that I know of it, but I would say there was some hospitals and certain things. Maybe somebody got sick for some reason, but not that I know of it. Whether there was any hospitals, or there was sickness -- they didn't care about sick people!

Q: Can you tell me about your barrack-mates -- who they were?

A: Oh, I would say, in this particular barrack, I was with the most people from my town -- from the ghetto -- what they shipped out in that time, I would say, 80%.

Q: So you knew them all.

A: I went from one camp to the other. A few were separated to another camp, but 90% we went all the time till the end together, from our town.

Q: So some of your relatives were...

A: Oh, relatives, friends, people what I grew up with together. Sure.

Q: In the same barracks.

A: In the same barracks, yes.

- Q: Were there any differences in treatment of the Jews as opposed to other groups that were in the concentration camps?
- A: There wasn't many non-Jews at that time, but I would say there was no difference at all. From the ghetto there were no non-Jewish people. We went out with all Jewish people, but there was when we come into the camps, maybe a few remaining Poles and Russians -- there was lots of Russian people -- but they were all treated the same way. Except if you were in charge, like we call it kapos, or they were working in a Sonder over there. The rest was all equal, but the people that were in charge, kapos, you couldn't even go close to them.
- Q: You remember them.
- A: Oh, do I remember! When you saw one here, you went on the other end.
- Q: Did you have any encounters with gypsies, Jehovah Witnesses, homosexuals, baptized Jews...
- A: Not in the camps and not in the ghetto. They sent out the gypsies from Poland even before the Jewish people.
- Q: What about Soviet prisoners?
- A: Soviet? I don't know if these were prisoners, but one of the camps where I was there were lots of Soviets. But all these Soviets, they were working on positions. They were not the average prisoner -- Jewish prisoner -- but they were separated and in some positions there.
- Q: As detailed as you can get, what acts did you see or were aware of -- such as the systematic killings or the fatalities from other causes?
- A: (Sigh) From causes. Really the killing ,what I can tell you from other causes was when somebody got so weak -- when we were going from one camp to the other for days, or for nights, they got weak -- they took them away, and they shoot them. They shoot mine three uncles. They were very strong guys, but somehow they probably got sick and couldn't walk anymore. There wasn't any cause of it, really. They got sick or they couldn't walk anymore, they just took them and took out their gun and shoot them.
- Q: Did you see it?
- A: Yes. My uncle, yes, I saw it when they shoot him. We were walking, about eight or the six guys, like this. And he fell. They drag him out and there was no mercy. And then, another. I know that some people got sick in the camps. You didn't see them anymore. They took 'em out. Who knows whether they took them to

the hospital or whether they killed them. The next day you didn't see 'em anymore. The hunger was so big -- so great -- but I saw it with my own eyes that the son used to steal away the food from the father in order to eat it, and the father dying a few days later. The bread was hidden someplace or under the mattress or something, and they took it away. People maybe don't realize what hunger means. Like I said, I saw people eating flesh from dead bodies. They couldn't control themselves.

Q: Did they do that in the camps too? Eat the flesh?

A: Not in the camps. No. That was in the boxcars -- that we used to, for days, ride in the boxcars -- and the people died in the boxcars.

Q: What can you tell me of the systematic killings?

A: Systematic killing was the crematorium -- what I saw in Auschwitz. Our barrack, happened it was close to the crematorium. We could smell that smoke from the chimneys what they coming out. And that was the systematic killing. Or, you were working in certain positions on digging something, and some of the people what they couldn't work anymore, they kick you in a hole someplace and you could hear the machine guns go.

Q: Did you see people go into the crematoriums?

A: Oh, yeah. 'Course I saw 'em. I saw my mother with two sisters and child when they took 'em away.

Q: Can you describe the feeling?

A: My feeling? You cannot describe it anymore. It's so many years, really. Sometimes, my children and my grandchildren, they say to me, "Zayde, why don't you tell me?" I never really did tell them. I don't know, for one reason or another, we never talked too much about it. But now of course, they know what's happened. In beginning, when the children start to growing up, there was nights I couldn't sleep. I was still in Auschwitz and could still see everything! So I really couldn't talk about it. It was heartbreaking and everything. I used to cry day and night.

Q: Anything else about the gas chambers, killings, any other incidents that you remember?

A: Well we wasn't really by the gas chambers, you know, close to it. You got to know that our transport from the ghetto was one of the latest, from '44, and during from '44 outwards 'til May in 1945, I was maybe in three, four camps. So really, you didn't see too much of it.

Q: How long were you in Auschwitz?

A: How long? I would say two to three weeks in Auschwitz.

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

A: There was no means of communicating. You see the people was so knocked down, really, that one didn't talk to each other. There it was so depressing -- I can't describe it -- that everybody was like out of his mind. You know how bad it was in the ghetto -- real bad -- and here, we saw the death -- it's before our eyes -- whether it's going to be today, or tomorrow, or the next day, everybody knew that somebody got sick, they took 'em out, they didn't come back, we knew that he's already killed. We knew already that there was crematoriums in Auschwitz. You were over there, we smelled the smoke and everything, so you were waiting, that day would come, that they are going to take you.

Q: Were you aware at all of the ongoing war efforts outside of the camp?

A: Of course we knew it's a war between the Germans and the whole world. Of course you know. At that time you know already.

Q: But you didn't hear anything? Did you hear anything?

A: No. There was talking just among us. Everybody was more concerned how to steal a piece of bread (chuckle) to get something to eat.

Q: What were the names of the major German personnel at the camp -- the commander, the officers -- do you remember any at all?

A: They didn't come into the camp. There was a couple times they come in -- a high general, who knows who they were. But we knew about Mengele when he separated the people. And then they come in, some other officers -- high and everything -- but who knew the name of them.

Q: Can you remember any of the behavior or actions of the German personnel?

A: I don't remember. There was actions, sometimes, when they looked us up and we were staying in a line outside the camps. They picked some -- a number of people, not too many -- and they said to the guy what was in charge of it, to take these few people away. What they did with them, nobody knew. Nothing happened right in our presence, but they took them away.

Q: Did you have any personal encounters with any of the soldiers or officers yourself in the camp?

A: No.

Q: They didn't harm you in any way?

A: Sometime -- all the time. (Laughs)

Q: Tell me about your hiding.

A: Well what I mean by hiding, you don't try to push yourself. You didn't do nothing. Actually there wasn't much what you could do.

Q: What thoughts did you give to your survival, while you were in the camp?

A: I really didn't think about it. I think more that I going to be dead. There was no thought that you're going to survive, really. There was a daily struggle to survive from hunger, keep yourself clean -- that was the survival. But what's going to happen, whether you survive it or not, that wasn't in my mind. I didn't think about it. There was no time to think about it.

Q: So you didn't think you would.

A: No. I didn't think I would. And people who survived, like me, not because they were heroes or they were strong, it's just a "mazel" that something happened to them that they survived.

Q: You were transferred to other camps. Can you describe them and the circumstances that led to your transfer?

A: Well you talk about circumstances, for some reason or another, they send you to another camp. Who knows the reason why. And (sigh) you come to another camp. You do a different kind of work. And some camps they treat you better and some worse. By "better," let's say, the food what they give you, they didn't throw it out on the ground. In one of the camps was an old German. (Chuckles) He was a nice guy. He used to be in charge of the food. And when something used to be left over in the kitchen -- food -- he used to call somebody over there and give 'em a little bit soup too. And this same German, he survived with our group together. And everybody was speaking good about it. He was at that time, maybe about 65 years old or something, an old German.

Q: He wasn't Jewish?

A: No.

Q: You said you were at three camps altogether. Is that correct?

A: (Sigh) Three camps, yeah.

Q: Do you remember your going from Auschwitz to the next camp?

A: Oh, sure I remember it.

Q: Will you describe it?

A: Yeah. From Auschwitz they sent us again by boxcars. We went in the boxcars, because we went to far away. That was in Germany. We went by boxcar. And from Auschwitz we stopped in Czechoslovakia in the boxcars and there was lots of sick people from us. And the Czechoslovakian people was staying on the railroad, and tried to give us some food and water. The SS didn't let them do it. And then we come in one part of Germany and this was the camp I mentioned -- that Wustegiersdorf camp. And that was real bad because we was staying right next to the crematorium over there. And then we already walked to another camp -- to Regensburg over there. That was days and nights, days and nights, we were walking over there.

Q: Do you remember how many days?

A: Oh, I would say a week we walked. Most of them they killed because they couldn't walk so much, got sick on the way and everything. We used to stay, most of the time, in the barns by farmers. In the night we used to walk. They didn't want that the Germans see us in the street. I have one more camp I was at, but I cannot remember the name.

Q: Can you tell me about the liberation day? When and where were you liberated?

A: Yeah. I was liberated in May in 1944 and the little town was Laufen. That was in Bayern. That was, I would say, a few kilometers from the Austrian border. And there was a camp over there. We were staying in camp. And then when we walked out from the camp, the Germans start, like I said before, to run out -- the farmers -- this was a farm town -- and they start to yell, "The war is over!" and all sorts like that. And at that time the SS just left us in the street and they run away. So we were walking around and we settled over there. But the Germans, later on, two days after we settled down, they surrounded us, they wanted to take us to the SS but nobody was there. That's how we survived. We start to settle around in town and there was a camp not far from over there, Ferlausseng -- and most of them settled in the camp. The Germans run away and the camp was empty over there so they were living in camp for awhile.

Q: After you were liberated, you did live in the camp for awhile?

A: Yeah. And then later, we got already homes. We opened a Jewish center over there. In fact, I was president over there with a few boys. And we used to get some clothing from the UNRRA and we used to get some food. it was a very small town, and people started leaving to look for relatives. They used to go to

bigger towns, but a few did remain over there. I lived 'til 1950, when I left over there, in that little town. My daughter was born there.

Q: So you weren't in a D.P. camp?

A: Beginning, but later I and another couple -- four guys -- there was a German, he left a house, and we just moved in. Two Polish guys and I, with another Jewish boy.

Q: Did you try to look for family after the war?

A: Yes. I did try, but I didn't expect, from my nearest family, that somebody's going to be alive, like my mother, the sisters. I knew they went to the crematorium. And my brother-in-law, I knew he got killed on one of the transports. So I was looking for uncles and aunties, a relation, or something, but I really couldn't find anybody. So I survived by myself.

Q: Was there any question of choosing Palestine or the United States?

A: There was a question, yes. The reason why we decided to come to the United States was already my wife had a sister here. She was also in a concentration camp, with my wife's sister's husband. They emigrated to the United States maybe a year earlier from us. So the decision was my wife wanted to be with her sister together, That's why we went to the United States,

Q: Where in the United States?

A: In Minneapolis.

Q: You said you were in a D.P. camp for a little while. Can you describe it? And how long?

A: Well, I was in this D.P. camp several months, I would say. Four months at the most. I can describe it that we had enough to eat. In the beginning the Americans did help us out a lot of food and with clothing and with soap and everything. We had good facilities to live in it. It was not bad.

Q: Where was the D.P. camp?

A: In Ferlassig. Next to Berchtesgaden.

Q: What country is that in?

A: Germany.

Q: Anything else about the D.P. camps?

A: Nothing special. I really cannot remember those details.

Q: Which organization aided you during this time? Was there any particular organization? After the war, was there any agency or organization that helped you?

A: Well, I would say the UNRRA did help a lot. Then there was the HIAS. And there were some other organizations, like from Munich. I don't recall the names, but they did help out with food, with clothing, too, until we got back on our feet.

Q: Can you describe in detail more about your life after the war? What type of work you did?

A: Well, right after the war, after I got on my feet, let's put it this way, I lived with my present brother-in-law. In that time, he was with me in camp together. So my present wife, in some way she did find out -- that was her uncle from before the war -- so she came looking for him. Somebody told her that he lives over there in Laufen. So, when she came looking for him, of course I met her over there. She was looking for her sister. She didn't know where her sister is. And her sister was in Austria -- Matthesen, someplace -- she used to live over there. Anyway she came back, and we got married in Germany. It was in 1947, we got married. In 1948 there was a daughter born to us, and we were happy. We came to the United States in 1950.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

A: I and my brother-in-law, we used to do business. We opened a store over there, and we were buying and selling.

Q: What did you sell?

A: We had a place what used to sell fabrics. A factory, and we used to buy the fabric and we used to sell, and people used to come -- from places that people used to travel from, like Germany to Austria. That was our trade.

Q: Do you maintain contact with the Jewish community? You're active in the Jewish community?

A: Oh yeah, sure. When you're talking about Jewish community, I belong to the Adath Jeshurun synagogue. I go quite often to the Jewish Community Center with my grandchildren, and my children. And buy some Israel bonds. (Laughter) and anything else that we do here.

Q: Do you maintain contact with other survivors?

- A: Well right in the beginning, yes. I know lots of people what were survivors from my town. We write each other and so forth.
- Q: But you still communicate a lot?
- A: Oh yeah. Sure.
- Q: From the ghetto?
- A: From the ghetto, yes. Survivors from the Lodz ghetto. We go always on winter vacation together and so forth.
- Q: Do some of them live here?
- A: Some live here, too. And some -- now they're in Canada, already, and some, New York. They're all scattered around. And some died already.
- Q: Berek, can you tell me what it has meant to you to be a survivor?
- A: For me what's meant to be a survivor is a number of things. Number one is, I raised a beautiful family. I have grandchildren. They're brought up in a real Jewish tradition. One is Orthodox tradition, and the other is Conservative. And that's what means a lot to me. And I'm happily married.
- Q: Can you describe after your experience during the Holocaust, your feelings about human nature? Non-Jewish, Germans?
- A: Well, about human nature, you see, I want to be frank about it. The time heals lots of things -- the time, you forget about lots of things. You try to forget. What I can say for the past is, it was very bad.
- Q: How do you feel about Germans?
- A: How I feel about Germans now and like before? In beginning, right after the war, I don't know. We received restitution from the German government, but there was maybe two, three years I didn't want to collect any money. I was real bitter about it. And one time, I was invited to a Bar Mitzvah to New York to my friend's, and we were talking about restitution, and I told him I don't want to take it. And everybody was laughing at me, bawling me out. So one of my friends called in the middle of the night, a lawyer over there in New York. And he told him the whole story. So, of course, I'm getting now the money, but that's what I want to say, how I was, right after that. I was real bitter about it. And now, the world is different. You really change, you know. You cannot be bitter anymore about it. Naturally you would like to know it's peace with everybody, but that's how it is.

Q: How about feelings about non-Jews in general?

A: I don't feel a difference about non-Jewish. They are all human. You have good people, you have bad people. Not all Jews are good and not all Non-Jewish is bad. You cannot go around and hate. Hate doesn't do any good.

Q: Has your belief in Judaism and God changed in any way?

A: Right after I survived, and I started thinking about everything, what the Jewish people in Europe went through, I really was decided not to believe anymore. I was very bitter about everything. How it really could have happened. But I did change. I believe in God. I highly believe in God! In the Jewish religion, and everything.

Q: I want to know if you'd be willing to share any photos or remembrances or other things for the purpose of the research?

A: I do have photos. I have now in my hand. But I really would like to bring copies of it. I wouldn't give away the originals. So sometime in the future I could probably prepare some of the photos what I have. I have a picture who was the leader in the ghetto -- the main German leader from the German side and from the Jewish side. I have some picture of it.

Q: I'll have someone get in touch with you about it.

A: And then I have some other papers -- photos -- right after the liberation. Some other very valuable papers and everything. Somebody can make a photocopy of it. A friend of mine.

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

A: Yes, I believe in it. I tell you the films and the books cannot even tell so much what it really happened. It happened more than what the books and the films are showing. People cannot tell so much about it.

Q: Are there any particular films or books that stand out in your mind that relate to it?

A: Let me tell you something. Not everybody the same. I personally, when some organizations talking about the Holocaust, or they're reading books about it, I cannot go to any meetings like this. I cannot read a book. For me it's too much painful. Certain people can go and see it. That's why all the years I didn't talk to my children about it.

- Q: There were a couple of recent movies on television in the last couple of years. Did you watch those?
- A: I did watch them, yeah. I feel they had truth. They're accurate, and maybe there should even be more about it. Lots of things what happened in ghettos, in concentration camps, but the books don't even write about it, or the films don't show about it. I feel there should be more talked about it -- for the younger generation, to libraries, or to books and even to films -- that the world should really know about it. We are calling ourselves the older generation, and most of our people feel they cannot talk so much about it. But the young generation should know about this -- the Jewish young generation and the non-Jewish young generation should know about what's happened.
- Q: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that I haven't already asked you that might be important?
- A: From now I think I feel I just don't recall so much about it. I think it's pretty closed.
- Q: I want to thank you very much for your time. This completes the interview with Berek Latarus.