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

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q For the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project by D avid Zarkin in Mr. Oertelt's home in the Twin Cities on June 2, 1983. Please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name if it is different

A: Well, my complete name is Henry Arthur Oertelt. My Jewish name is Zvee Ben Avraham. That's actually the Hebrew name, really, so I have no other name.

Q: When were you born?

A: I was born on January 13, 1921, in Berlin, Germany.

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

A: Oh, (sigh) my mother's name was Elsie Oertelt. My father's name -- really there was a mix-up in names -- my father died very, very early, so he is actually not part of the picture as it is, so that is not important, really; but my mother, her maiden name was Messerschmidt with a 'dt' on the end, not like the 'tt' like the airplanes. And her parents' name was Brunn. And that's about as far as I can go.

Q: That's okay. Where were they born?

A: They were born in Germany.

Q: What were your parents' occupations?

A: My mother was a seamstress, and my father, I really don't know. As I say, my parents were divorced early in life, so I have no idea about my father.

Q: What language was spoken at home?

A: German.

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

A: Religious -- not overly religious.

Q: Were they Zionist or Hasidic?

A: No. They at those days did not get too much into the picture in our family. Definitely Jewish, of course, and we were going to synagogue once in a while.

Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?

A: Oh, yeah. We had formal Jewish education. It was in Berlin at those days. We went two times a week to religious school, which I, so to speak, religiously attended -- towards the Bar Mitzvah.

Q: What events, either local, national, international, were you aware of from the mid-'30s to 1941?

A: Well, of course, when Hitler came to power, I was twelve years old, and I was fully aware, because everybody talked about it, was frightened of it. Some people would pooh-pooh it, so to speak, and say, " Ah, it's nothing big deal, nothing to worry about."

Q: When you're talking about "people" you're talking about people in the Jewish community?

A: Family, specifically, and people in the Jewish community, yes. That's right. So everybody was afraid at the time when Hitler came to power, naturally. It was not a sudden thing. It was growing ever since 1921, really, in Germany.

Q: Did you see articles in newspapers? Or hear about things on radio? Or how'd you learn about things?

A: Radio, and constant visual demonstrations -- the brown-shirted SA troops were marching up and down the streets. As a small child, even before I was twelve years old, before Hitler came into power, I had to listen to songs which, in transliteration words, is one of the so-called "marching songs' that they sang marching up and down the street. In translation it would be:

Once the blood of the Jews squirts off our knives,
Everything will go twice as well.

It was a common song which was a very, very peculiar thing, as a small Jewish child, to listen to.

Q: Were there any other anti-Semitic events going around that you were…

A: Oh, steadily, of course. Particularly the moment Hitler came to power in '33. I witnessed and heard an acquaintance or family member was beaten up by Nazis.

They broke into homes to literally pull out Jewish people, beat them up, and demolish businesses here and there. It wasn't organized. It was here and there, sporadic, but already happening. That's the point.

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

A: Well, I grew up in a neighborhood which was predominately gentile. And of course I went to a general school. In that particular class in school that I went to, I was one of three or four Jewish kids. I was a member of the soccer team where I was the only Jew on it, and soon I was made to be known that I'm not welcome there any more, even after playing for years.

Q: Did you have relatives living outside of your community? Outside of Berlin?

A: No. I only had a very small family, and they all lived in Berlin.

Q: I see. And to your knowledge, what happened to your family?

A: They all have been destroyed by the Nazis with the exception of my brother, who lives here in the States in the state of Maine.

Q: And how many relatives did you have?

A: Well, I had my mother and I had only one uncle, one aunt, one cousin. They had all been destroyed. It was a very small family that I was a member of.

Q: I know we've discussed this a bit, but could you talk to me about what you recall about the rise of Nazism in the '30s?

A: Well, of course, when Hitler's rise started, like I say, it's back in 1921. I was just born, of course. After the Treaty of Versailles, as it was known, the economy in Germany was absolutely catastrophic. By the time Hitler came into power, unemployment raged about 40 per cent. And of course he started to feed people, literally, the moment he came into power. That has something to do with the fact that many people, therefore, went along. You know, it's just like feeding a hungry animal that strays by your door. You feed it and it stays with you for the rest of its life. That's an analogy which is pretty close to the fact.

But of course, also I remember -- very vividly -- during my early childhood, before Hitler came to power, the mighty party system in Germany -- there was somewhere like about 30 parties -- and everybody, every party was demonstrating on the streets in a noisy way, and every few months were new elections, because every once in a while the government faltered, folded up. I remember that very vividly -- the demonstrations of these various parties. And of course, the Nazi Party was always in the picture, growing. The brown-shirted thugs were more and more prominent, singing those songs that I still remember very well. And

they grew and grew. And really, by the time Hitler was voted into power in '33, the Nazi party was just pretty much the only one left. And when Hitler came into power, he promised that he would create work, and he did! He immediately opened the war manufacturing again that was prohibited under the Treaty of Versailles, but he didn't give a darn, and so therefore people started to eat, had money, and couldn't care less what Hitler was doing in other departments.

Q: How did the passage of the Nuremberg Laws affect your family at the time?

A: Well, it affected people in their jobs. My mother, particularly, was not too much affected because she was doing private work, being a seamstress. Of course, more and more, the Christian people stayed away, because it was made to be known that nobody was allowed to have any contact -- business or privately -- with any Jewish person. And so, therefore, of course, her work would diminish more and more, and it became quite a bad situation financially. In 1935 I was 14. I was not allowed to go to school any further. In my particular case, I was lucky. I became an apprentice to make furniture -- design furniture. Businesses were closed. Any Jewish person that was in any government position was at that time, because of the Nuremberg Laws, immediately dismissed from their jobs and naturally had difficulty in finding any other positions. So in Germany, for German Jews, that started pretty early -- the financial difficulties.

Q: Did you family escape from Germany before the outbreak of the war?

A: No, no. We did not have a chance to escape. First of all, we were one of the so-called "poor" families. People with money <u>had</u> a chance to use their money to buy passage and so on. Regretfully in our particular case, we had a second or third degree cousin in New York who was willing to put up an affidavit -- and did put up an affidavit -- which was not accepted by the American government as being satisfactory in the amount. So this cousin in New York, he said that he would try to get a larger affidavit with the help of some friends, which he eventually did, but by that time -- that was somewhere in 1939 -- Hitler then did not allow anybody to get out any more. So we were caught.

Q: I see. So tell me what happened then. You were in school. How did things start to change?

A: Well, first of all, during that time, I was excluded, being a Jew, from any sport activities or any other school activities. And so, therefore, of course, we had all-Jewish youth organizations that I belonged to, so that I didn't miss too much there. But then I was an apprentice, and besides working at the apprenticeship, I went to a trade school which, after two years, I also wasn't allowed to visit any further. As 1938 came around, no Jew -- by that time I was 17 years old, a teenager -- no Jew was allowed any more to visit any theaters or restaurants, or public entertainment facilities. We were not allowed to use those anymore already since 1936. We were not allowed to go to anything. Of course then the

Jewish organizations started to get their own theaters, their own entertainment facilities, concerts and so on and so forth, which then of course, we would facilitate. But to any other thing, we were not allowed to go any more.

And starting in 1938, we were not allowed to use any public conveyances anymore. You've got to understand that in those days, not many people had cars. The majority of people were depending on the public conveyances in Berlin, a big city -- like in those days four and a half million people -- so to get around there was not that easy. So you were only allowed, starting in 1938, to go to and from work. You had special cards for that that you had to show.

Of course, 1939, also, we were forced to wear the star, the so-called Jewish Star with the word "Jude" written across. You know, these big yellow stars. And of course, these, as the law prescribed, had to be sewn onto any outer garment that anybody wore, in tight stitches. In other words, that was the rule, the law. Once in a while, if you were stopped with that star, and whoever examined you was an SS man or one of the brown-shirted SA, or just plain police, they would stop you, they would take a pencil out of their pocket and would try to get, with the pencil, under and between any of the stitches. If they could get in with the pencil point between any of the stitches -- a little bit in there -- that was it. You were doing something against the law, and you were taken right along to the Gestapo, and in many cases, people that that happened to, they were just never seen again. So people were very, very careful to sew these things on very, very tightly. I -- being a young fellow and a teenager -- was objecting to that, so I did something very foolish. Of course, being a young person, you know, you don't watch those things. My poor mother was always hollering and crying about this. I made a star with this material glued over it. Out of tin, like a tin can, I cut the form of a star, glued that material over it, soldered a pin in the back, and when I left the house, stuck it in, hoping that I don't run into anybody that stops me and checks that out. If that would have happened to me, I would have been naturally a dead duck, so to speak. So I went away from the house with this, in case somebody saw me that knew me, and then when I was away a stretch, in the big city, I just took it off and went into the public conveyances, and so on.

And of course at the same time, there was a curfew for Jews in Berlin. In the summer time you were not allowed to be on the street, as a Jew, after nine. And in the winter, after eight. And of course I didn't obey that law too much, although I must say, I was one of the very few. I'm not trying to be showing that I was brave. I was pretty stupid, if it goes actually by the chances. Some people that did it were caught, and I knew of that, but just to take your chances as a young fellow, I guess, as a young person. So, just one of these little things that we did. There was more to that, but of course, if you're not going to have enough time or tape if I go through every detail, I don't mind. You tell me.

Q: Well, whatever you think is relevant here.

A: So, again, on your question, what we did a lot as young people -- and because of the curfews, we tried to keep it to a minimum, naturally -- but particularly when the weekends came, we also wanted our fun and entertainment. The group that I belonged to -- I'm out of a musician's family, really, so the group that I belonged to were also musicians, music students and so on -- we would get together at one of our houses every once in a while, over the weekend. We would probably get there like Saturday afternoon, then have our fun, and we'd make music, and do all kinds of things that young people, young groups, did, in these houses where they or their parents lived. One in my place, one in their place, one in their place. And we would stay overnight, and not go home, not to have to quit already at eight o'clock in the evening in the winter, or nine o'clock in the summer. So this is the way the youth groups would then have their own entertainment, because, again, remember, we were not allowed to go anywhere public anymore, and into any public places, movies or anything like that -- except the Jewish movie houses. But again, they had to make their programs in such a way that every Jewish person would be home before curfew.

Q: Were there any other changes in your life that were brought by the war?

A: Well, of course, by that time, something very important; Jews were put on ration cards before anybody else was, and when the population was put on any kind of rations -- I'm talking about groceries -- when the rest of the population was put on, the Jewish ration cards were cut lower than the others.

1939 was the year when Hitler marched into Poland and the war started. Almost all the Jews were taken out of their professions, no matter what they were, businessmen, lawyers, doctors -- in my case furniture maker -- and we were put on street work, roadwork. By that time, by the way, a lot of Jewish people had lost their jobs that were government employees and Jews usually didn't find any jobs. So we were put on street work. The war was on, Hitler had put everybody into the military, and so the employers, particularly construction companies, were looking for Jewish groups, Jewish people, or people generally, to help build their roads and streets that they had to build. So they were lucky when they got a group of Jewish people working for them. The situation was such that the employer had to pay the full wage, but half of that wage went into Hitler's treasury and the other half went to the Jewish laborer. And out of that half that the Jewish laborer received, the whole load of taxes had to be paid. So, on the whole, out of the half that the Jewish person received, 100 per cent of the taxes had to be paid, and taxes were very, very high in war times in Germany. And so, as you can imagine, there wasn't really very much left to live on. Of course, on the other hand, you couldn't really do much, because with ration cards, you could only buy the very minimum, and other things were not very much available to Jews, anyway, so really, as far as that's concerned, you didn't really need much money to live on.

And of course, starting in 1938, they called it "actions," were put into motion, meaning that Jews were picked up, usually at night, by vans, trucks, SS trucks. And so by that time it started already that all of a sudden, here and there, this Jewish family disappeared, that Jewish family disappeared. It just started little by little, and every year, it started to get increasingly more.

Now, 1939, again, I started to work on the street. I was 18 years old. When I'm talking in my lectures, I'm making a big point of dehumanization, and I'd like to put a little example of it in here. As I mentioned earlier, we worked on street work. Shoveling dirt, and rolling rocks and carrying rocks. Number one, there was no mechanical help available, like trucks, or steam shovels. Where the Jewish groups worked, there was no mechanical. All we had was our hand shovels and four-wheeled wagons that we shoveled the dirt into, or rolled rocks or threw rocks onto. And then when this wagon was loaded up, then we had to go to the front of the wagon ourselves, with rope or leather straps if there were any, and pull the wagon to the side where it had to be unloaded -- completely all hand work. Now. Please try to picture that. It was a very, very odd-looking group of people. There were lawyers, there were doctors, there were businessmen, there were tall people, small people, young people, older people. And most people that live in a big city don't have a chance to even dig around the yard or garden, so they were very, very, very unhandy with these tools. And it was a very odd looking group. For instance, next to me worked a man who was smaller than I, I'm a short fellow, only 5'6,' and this guy was at least three or four inches shorter than I am. A very tiny man and not so young anymore. He was one of the very well known surgeons in Berlin -- out of the Berliner Charitee, they called it. It was a medical facility for students and so on. He was a very famous man at that time. He was taken out of his job to shovel dirt with his tiny hands. And he came to work -- now remember, this is street work, and you probably picture hard-hats and jeans and all this stuff -- he came to work in a double-breasted, blue-striped suit, and shoveling dirt, rolling rocks, as much as he could in his weak frame, it was a most comical, comical sight -- if it wasn't so sad. And I asked him one time, I said, " My gosh, don't you have any work clothes? Any old clothes?" He says, " Well, this is it." Now you may think, why didn't the guy-doctor, famous, and he must have had a little money by that time -- why didn't he go and buy himself a pair of jeans or something like that. Well, Jews couldn't buy it. By that time, it was all rationed. You had to buy clothes on rations. It was a point system, so many points for a pair of jeans; so many points for a pair of socks. It nearly took all year's ration points to buy a pair of socks. So he had to wear this kind of stuff. And naturally that suit started to look very ragged and torn, and of course, the sight would be more and more comical to an outsider. I make this point, I'm using this point as comical, because remember, I started to talk a moment ago about the dehumanization process that Hitler started. He wanted to prove to the German population that the Jews are actually the "untermenschen' -- the under-humans, the sub-humans, as he described them all the time.

A lot of people didn't know what Jews looked like. For instance, I noticed working in this group once, a group of kids are coming by with what was obviously a teacher. The teacher stops and points and talks to the kids, and they're laughing and giggling and jumping up and down. You figured, well, listen, on a field trip or something like that, they happened to come by. And then this happened in repetition. And suddenly there was a teacher there that I remembered from my school days. I knew in the beginning of the Nazi time he was not a Nazi, so I took my chances and called him. I said, " Hey, what's this? I noticed you were there with a class of kids." And he said, " Henry, you were there?' And I said, " Yes." He said, " well, I'm very embarrassed, but since you asked me, I might just as well tell you what the story is." He says, ' It goes like this. Sometime on a Friday afternoon, or any day the speaker system in the school goes, 'Now such and such grades -- usually the lower grades --' we will meet on Monday morning at eight o'clock. There will be a school bus. And we will show you what a bunch of Jews look like." Again dehumanization. Many of those kids had never known what a Jew looks like, had never seen one face to face. Now they are being taken in a group that looks "linkisch," as the word is, like working with two left hands, some of them. Like this doctor and other people, working on street-working sites where you normally see a crew of tough hard hats, and you see a bunch of really comical looking people without mechanical help, dragging the wagons themselves, and so forth. This had something to do with the later times, when these kids grew up and were doing the killing without any orders. They were educated to kill something that is of no value.

Also it was '39 or 1940, the decree came out that Jews are not allowed to have any radios, pets or bicycles -- of course cars had been taken away long before that -- but no radios, no record players. There was a time determined, like, let's say it was Saturday afternoon at 2:00, when people were milling around the streets, not working anymore. Everyone was there, so at that time the Jewish people had to go to the nearest police precinct -- and in a big city like Berlin, there was every few blocks a police precinct that had all the records of everybody that lived in that precinct. That was done already, before Hitler came to power; it was a system they all had. I was pushing my bicycle. You're not allowed to ride it over there. That was another law. You know, dehumanization. I had to <u>push</u> it to the police precinct. My mother or my brother would carry the radio under the arm. And you would see little old ladies -- remember, pets you were not allowed to have -- you would see little old ladies with their canaries in their cage, to carry that down to the police station. And it was even announced before, that people would know. You would see people on the streets really harassing us, making jokes, cracking jokes. There were also some of them that shook their heads, too -- but they didn't do it too publicly, because if there would be a Gestapo standing there, if they would see the people shaking their heads in disbelief, they would question them or take them away. It was a police state by that time. So much for the dehumanization.

Q: How long were you in Berlin, and then what happened?

A: ’39 I was put on street work. And I worked that way until 1941. In 1941, of course, the war was going more and more in full swing.

Q: How did you learn about the outbreak of the war?

A: Oh, that was known. Hitler would make it very palatable to the people. Of course, by that time, during those years, people were used to Hitler going into Czechoslovakia, Hitler taking over. Austria. As early as 1936, Hitler marched into the demilitarized Rhinehold zone, which was established by the Treaty of Versailles. He tested the world at all those steps, and the world, in the best case, saw something in a tiny three -row article in the paper in the back somewhere, Hitler did this and did that. Nobody would really challenge him.

So he would make it with a big fanfare, always twisting it, naturally. Like, for instance, starting with the Sudetenland, he claimed the German groups were persecuted there, so therefore he has to march in and liberate them. It was usually that kind of theme. And then, of course, marching into Poland. I don’t know off-hand any more, what his excuse was, but he had an excuse, you can be sure of that.

Q: Did the start of the war affect your life any?

A: Well, at the start of the war, of course, things got tighter in Germany for the general population, and of course much more so for the Jewish population then. Again, rations were cut every once in a while, more and more. And of course, by that time, in 1939, almost all Jewish businesses were by that time, demolished, you know, on the Kristallnacht-Crystal Night. And the pick-up actions for concentration camps were increasing constantly, more and more so, so that really when you came home, you went to bed at night, you almost anticipated that it’s possible that you’re not there in the morning any more. As it turns out, I was comparatively fortunate. I worked on the street until 1941, and then Hitler had to throw more and more people into the work of working for him. All of a sudden he found himself short of skilled help, like doctors and so on. He would then take doctors like this little surgeon I talked about, would put them back into practice, but only to be allowed to treat Jewish people. The Aryans were not allowed to go to them, of course; Jews were not allowed to have any so-called “Aryan” help maids in the house, and so forth. The Nuremberg Laws, the racial laws were a very, very, very big part of that, of course. So Hitler found himself short on skilled and also, professional help, and so he took these people, like me and the doctors, out of the street work, put doctors into practice, and I was put into a workshop. I had my own workshop, practically within a larger factory. That factory was making all kinds of war materials, but I was to make furniture for some big-wig Nazi. I never knew who it was. That started in 1941. And all around me, even in that factory, there were working, separately Jewish groups.

They were all, little by little, picked up and next morning, one or two of them didn't come. Or sometimes they came to the factories that they knew had Jewish groups working, would load them onto trucks and just haul them off, without getting the rest of the family. If you were a family man and you worked in a factory, you were bound not to come home some evening anymore. And so all these people around me were picked up. I was fortunate that apparently this big-shot that I worked for had enough power to say, "Hey, I need this little Jew that makes the furniture for me, and so therefore you leave him alone." That's apparently what happened, because I was never touched while all the others had been gone. But finally, in 1943, the inevitable happened.

Q: So you made furniture for how long then?

A: Two years. The inevitable happened in March of 1943. At about 2:00 in the morning, we hear heavy -- obviously gun butts -- banging on the door, and we opened the door and two SS men in their black uniforms with a dog between them and their guns over their shoulders start, and the one guy stays there, and the one guy looks at his watch and says, "Well, you've got 15 minutes and that's it." You know, we expected it, more or less, but when it really happens, you still don't believe it, so at 2:00 in the morning, you run around crazy, throwing things into the suitcases and certainly not "packing." Just throw it in, because you knew that when these guys say 15 minutes, you've got your 15 minutes and no more. And so finally when we were then packed, we were taken down to a waiting truck. We were then put into that waiting truck where there were some other Jewish families from the neighborhood, and we were hauled off to what would be a collection center. In this particular case, the collection center was a burnt-out synagogue, one of the synagogues that was burnt out from the Kristallnacht. When there were enough people to put a transport together, we were put back into the trucks and brought to the train station, and I was on my way with my brother and my mother to our first concentration camp, which in this particular case was Terezin, as the Czechs called it, or Theresienstadt, as the Germans called it. That was in Czechoslovakia.

It was a place actually, in those days, considered one of the milder camps. For instance, the Danish Jews were brought in there. All Czech Jews, almost all Czech Jews were there. I think that's a known story about the King of Denmark, how he tried to faze Hitler by first of all not allowing the Jews to wear the star. When Hitler came in and said, " The Jews have to be registered and wear the star," the King of Denmark -- a little tiny man in a little tiny country -- pointed out to Hitler that in his country there are no "Jews" or "other" citizens, there are only Danish citizens, and in his country nobody is being marked separately. Well, as we all know, Hitler had some persuasive powers, and so the King of Denmark decreed then, when he couldn't get away from it, that from the day that the Jews were supposed to wear their stars, everybody at the court also has to wear it, and he himself did. It didn't save any Jews or anything, but it is a very important fact, on the other hand, that they had the guts to show their disapproval of this thing.

Also, he was bugging, apparently Hitler enough or his henchmen, forcing or getting approval that all Danish Jews were sent to Theresienstadt, because he had heard that it was one of the milder camps. And of course, in those days, there were no gas chambers yet in Theresienstadt. Later on to the end they had gas chambers there, too.

Theresienstadt was shown during the recent Holocaust series. I approved in general what was shown, although it was not shown in all the bad aspects. For instance, they didn't show how the old people in Terezin or Theresienstadt would dig into the garbage bins to try to find a piece of rotten bread, or a piece of rotten vegetable that they, if they found it, really would just put it in their mouth and swallow it. In Theresienstadt they didn't need any gas chambers or anything like that, because people died of all kinds of sicknesses. This was an old, old city, from the middle ages, and when we were there -- and I mean it literally -- we did not know what we had more of on our bodies, lice, fleas or bedbugs. They were all having a feast on everybody. And there was no way that you could get rid of them. People would die constantly from the effects of this -- infections. Many people cannot resist to scratch. And so, what starvation didn't do, sicknesses took care of. And again, the few Jewish doctors that were allowed to practice there, were completely helpless, because medications were practically non-existent. So this was the situation.

After about a year in this place, my brother and I were called to get into line, and were ordered to go down to the train station, and we were told that we are scheduled to be sent to a work camp. We didn't know where, we didn't know what. We went down of course. And we saw then a big line of cattle wagons, a cattle train, with the big sliding door. There were hordes of people in front of us piled up already, and the guards -- the SS guards and their helpers -- were standing behind these hordes of people, and with their gun butts or fists or sticks would push and shove these people into these cattle wagons. They were not counted out. They were shoved and pushed in there until, really, nobody could get in anymore. People were hit and kicked in the back. They pushed and pushed, and by the time my brother and I were in one of those wagons, people were standing there like sardines. Squeezed. No room, really, to move around. And when these guards thought the wagon was full, well then they would shut the door, and that was that for that wagon, and the next one would be loaded.

Q: Can you give me a physical description of the various camps you were in, about the sizes they were.

A: Well, Theresienstadt -- I couldn't really say off-hand. I think there were, at times, pretty close to 100,000. It was a small, old place, an old, old garrison. For a history professor, it would have been quite interesting to study this thing. I was just over there last October or Terezin, which now, of course, has changed its face completely. It's inhabited by people, it's actually a neat little town, now -- comparatively neat. But at that time, the streets were full, naturally, of people

milling around those narrow streets. There were houses, small houses, rows of houses. In a small, maybe 12'x12' room, there was something like ten people to live in there, some of them sleeping on the floors because there were not enough bunk beds or anything like that. So it was terribly over-crowded. As I say, for a history professor it would have been a very interesting thing. It was built by Marie Terese, somewhere, I think, in the 17th or 18th century. It was actually used before Hitler used it for a concentration camp, as a garrison by the Czech military, for people that were military delinquents, so you can imagine that it was not the Ritz or anything like that to begin with. Regretfully, when I was there, the places that I wanted to get to I was not able to get to, because they were all again taken over by the military, all renovated, and very neatly done. My son-in-law and I went over there, and it was a pretty sick experience. We noticed that we were followed constantly. I made a mistake; if I would do that again, I would let them know that I'm there, and maybe this way I could go into some of the places. But that's done, and done. That's not important now.

But what it was at the time, it was a sad place. It was a Satanic situation in many respects, but in one particular respect, I said already food, of course was scarce. People would die of starvation and the sicknesses that I mentioned before. The kitchen was pretty near in the middle of that little town -- a huge kitchen. And they would cook up some beautiful, beautiful meals. They would actually cook real meat meals and real white bakery stuff. When I go by, here in our city, past the Taystee Bakery -- if you've ever gone by there and you noticed that beautiful smell, fresh bread or whatever it was -- that was the smell that very often lingered over this town. Except when this food was dished out -- it was a piece of white bakery stuff, probably a square piece 3"x3" and maybe a couple of feet high, like a hamburger bun, except much nicer tasting, it had a sweet taste to it -- if you would take this thing and squeeze it in your hand, you would have just a little dough ball of maybe one inch in diameter. That was all there was to it! It was a blown up piece of bakery. And then they cooked a meat sauce with real meat in there, of which you got something like maybe half-an-ounce poured over that thing. So you were always hungry. You smelled the stuff, and then when you finally got it, it was just really a teaser. And sometimes you got a bowl of soup with that. That soup business was in most any other camp the same situation. The soup was dished out in huge barrels, like oil drums. They were wheeled out on a two-wheeler and then you stood in line. And it was good smelling soup. And you learned that the guys that would dish out the soup, they wouldn't bother to stir the stuff around much. Whatever little bit of solid stuff was in there was usually settling on the bottom, and these guys that would dish it out were very, very lackadaisical, just stand there half asleep, dip that ladle in, you had your bowl. They wouldn't dig deep into the thing. So you learned that if you were not one of the first ones by that barrel, you had a chance of getting a little bit more solid substance, because eventually they had to reach down a little more. It was a constant, trying to figure out the best line you would be in. Of course, there were always people that went first anyway, because they were so starved. And the other people that could control themselves a little bit more, they would wait out.

Regretfully, that's the way it was. I, most of the time, waited out. But very often, though, it happened, you waited out, and you had just about figured it out, and maybe two or three people before you, and the guy was pretty far down in the barrel already, and you already saw some people get a nice hunk of sludge there, not just water, and you just were there, just like when you stand in line in the back, you figure out the right line, and you are there and the guy closes the window. And so this happened. Not that they closed up shop, but then they took the barrel away -- with the heavy stuff in there -- they took it away and a new barrel was wheeled in, and so you were there now and you couldn't leave the line then any more, for somebody would catch you and not allow you to do that. So then you had started, and you were the one with the watery soup. Just a little system that you tried to conquer. Sometimes it worked, many times it did not.

Q: Who were in the barracks with you in these camps that you knew from your neighborhood? Or were they people from different countries?

A: Well, I don't recall that I was <u>together</u> with anybody from my hometown, Berlin. I met some people in Terezin that were from Berlin. For instance my wife's mother was there, whom I knew from Berlin, and parts of her family. And it was not my direct uncle, it was my mother's uncle, that I didn't mention before, was also there. He was an old man by that time, so he died there, also of starvation. By the way, an interesting thing. The pictures that we have from JCRC that show the Holocaust, they show a couple of pictures of Berlin. There's one department store shown, which I was flabbergasted to see, which happened to be the store that belonged to this uncle that I was talking about. It has the letters B-R-U-N-N on there, his name. They show where they had painted his windows with the word "Jew" and the big white painted star, and so forth. Just one of these coincidences. But, anyway, there were people from all other places. They were all mixed together. Most of the time women were separated from men. We could see my mother sometime in the evening after, or during the day when we didn't work.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

A: At first I was sent out, together with my brother, to dig ditches for drainage. This was outside of the camp. We were put in a marching column and we were marched away, maybe several miles. And if it was a few miles away, such and such miles to walk, you would get an extra little ration of something. And just for that, you would take that job. It was a miserable walk, and frankly I think you walked off more calories than that little extra ration was worth, but on the other hand, you had something to do.

Now, as I said, starvation was one of the big things. At one time were working near a tomato field, where the tomatoes were just ripened. And every once in a while, if the guards wouldn't look, somebody would sneak over quickly and grab tomatoes. So we could fill our stomachs with tomatoes once in a while there. And also, now, we were eager to take some home for our families, too. So we would

try to keep some tomatoes. Now you were not allowed to smuggle anything in. You had to take a chance that you were frisked when you came through the doors from work into the camp. Sometimes you were, sometimes you were not. Sometimes somebody else was. But you would always play that game. And anybody that was caught would be taken, in many cases, into the stockades, which was a specific, terrible thing. So we would take some tomatoes. We'd pick fairly small tomatoes and fairly firm yet, if we could. And we would wrap them in a rag, like a sausage -- one next to the other. And we would have a couple of safety pins, and we actually would pin them between our legs so, walk them in. Naturally you walked a little awkwardly, as you can imagine. But we took them in that way. And of course, again, forget, at this point, the hygienic situation. At that time, survival and eating was the uppermost thing, so you didn't worry too much about anything like that. Of course we didn't have our bath every day, but that was of no consequence at that time. You had no choice.

Q: What about behavior and actions of the German personnel when you were in these camps?

A: Well, in Theresienstadt or Terezin, there was really not much German personnel visible. The guards were picked from within. There was a German guard probably, in the distance somewhere, one or two, but they kept out of sight. It was very often controlled by the Czech gendarmerie. The Czech police was engaged to watch. And they were fairly mild. They tried to not have any contact, because they weren't allowed to. And if these people would have shown any movement publicly, if they were lucky, they only would have been relieved of their duty. They may even have been prosecuted, themselves, so they tried to stay their distance. But in Auschwitz, at least where I was -- and I understand in various areas it was different -- I came, actually, into Birkenau -- there were mainly SS guards guarding us and controlling us and checking us out and reading us out. I personally, have not encountered anybody that showed any humanity in any way.

Q: For instance, what went on between the people who ran the camps and the prisoners? And did you witness any incidents?

A: Incidents as far as punishment and stuff like that's concerned? Oh, of course. For instance -- this was in Birkenau, and later in the other camp, a branch camp just a few miles away, it was part of Auschwitz, a thousand-man camp -- there for instance, Sunday afternoon entertainment was very often watching the execution of people that had tried to escape and were caught. We had to stand and watch that. Now when we came into Auschwitz, of course we were tattooed. My tattoo is comparatively neat and small. Some others were slapped in big letters, funny looking letters all over their arm, but the guy that did us in our line was a little neater. But it was then announced that, from now on, there will be no more names used. If you would be asked what your name is, you have to answer your number. You have to know your number. They said that you will not have any

I.D. cards and you will not have any pockets to keep anything, so therefore you will have your numbers, your identification tattooed on your arm.

And so, particularly in the beginning, when you stood sometimes for hours in head-counts, if a guard comes towards you, it is always a foreboding thing. You're getting kind of nervous, because sometimes they would come towards you, take you by the shirt and say, " Out!" which very often meant, "Go over to the other side," because transports came in, and space was crowded, and so they would weed out people without any particular reason to go to gas chambers. It was as simple as that. So you were kind of nervous, anyway. So now a guard comes towards you, you're standing in line, and he taps you on the shoulder and he calls you, he says to you, "What is your name?' And in your nervousness, particularly in the beginning, you blurt out your name. Well, by the time you get yourself off the ground, because you had his foot in your belly or groin or anywhere, then you remembered, "Yeah, God, that's right, we're not supposed to use our names anymore. Even if they ask you that, you've gotta blurt out your number." So in that excitement, and pain, you look at your arm, because you forgot your number, and that's when you got another kick, because you were supposed to remember your number.

So, just some of the examples how these guys would entertain themselves. Another very favorite game of theirs -- my brother worked in the stone quarries and these guards were standing around there guarding these guys, and had nothing else to do -- it was certainly not a very entertaining job – and so they would start their games once in a while. They would, for instance, go to one of the prisoners, grab their cap, and throw it out of the guard lines and would order the prisoner to retrieve it. Now every prisoner knew that they would step out of the guard lines, they would be considered trying to flee, and if that ever happened -- which happened on some occasions -- they were just plain shot. They don't even holler "Stop" or anything like that. They shoot. So now, imagine, you're that kind of prisoner. Knowing that, and also on the other hand you knew if you don't obey orders, they will say, "Now get that cap." They will probably repeat that one more time, and then they start beating you, and they beat you to a pulp, if you don't move. So now what choice do you have? You know that if you don't obey the order to retrieve that cap, you know you're being beaten to a pulp. And if you were not able to work anymore, you had no chance of survival at all. Your only chance of survival was to be in condition to be able to work. So anyway, just imagine yourself being a prisoner. What are you going to do? What are you going to do? You know the eternal belief of a human being comes through, that always thinks there may be some glimmer of humanity in somebody's heart. When that happened, these guys, after being threatened to be beaten, would then step out of line and would try to obey the order to retrieve the cap. And there is not one survivor of that incident. People that I've talked to, that have been witnessing that, have known. They always were shot. When the head count came, so there's one less, that's fine. Then when a new transport came in, they had to kick out one guy less to make room for the next transport.

Q: Based on some of what you've told me, and after your experience during the Holocaust, would you describe to me your general feeling about human nature and non-Jews and Germans?

A: Well, I would very strongly differentiate the Germans at that era from the Germans of now-a-days. Yes, I feel hatred towards these people. I was in Germany not too long ago, and also when I was in Czechoslovakia, as I said earlier, I can't get myself free from the thoughts when I see people of my age group or even older. I always have in mind, "Well, how many Jews did they kill. What did they do to help the Jews being killed?" So my mistrust is absolutely at a high level there. On the other hand, though, let me point out to you something that is not very much brought out, that there were a good number of Germans that were helping Jews by risking their own lives -- not enough, mind you -- but that's not the point. There were some. For instance, when I was over there, a young fellow asked me what he can do -- a German -- what he can do. He has been in America and has been introduced as a German, and he was approached by, "Oh, you're one of the Jew-killers, aren't you?" Well it happened to be that he is the son of a very, very ardent anti-Nazi who risked his life, and his family, to help Jews. You see, there's a very, very important fact. Sure, we have the trees for the Righteous People at Yad Vashem, but it stands there. Nothing's being done. So now the Germans of now-a-days, in general, and the government, have tried to heal some of the wounds.

As far as neo-Nazism in Germany is concerned, I have looked around and I think we have more of it even in America. The German government has recently complained -- it was in none of the papers -- to the American government that Nazi literature is being printed and shipped to Germany from America, and has asked the American government to do something about it. Nothing has been done about it. What I mean to say is, the Germany of that time was absolutely at fault. There's no excuse for it, and I have my full disgust and hatred for that time. Also, if there would be Nazi Germany now-a-days, there's no question about my position. But also I am convinced that we cannot forget, but we have to try also to live with the rest of the world and give Germany of today the chance to show that thy mean otherwise, as they do.

When I went the first time back to Germany in 1978 -- I originally wanted never to go back to Germany -- but I went, and one of my main reasons was to visit a friend -- a Christian friend -- who was one of these anti-Nazis, risking his life. Remember earlier I talked about that Jews didn't have enough to eat any more, even while in Berlin yet, while under the slavery work? When it came time that we had to deliver our radios and our record players -- I was always a very enthusiastic movie buff, and one of the things that hurt me most was that I had to give up my record player and some special records that I had -- and so this man, at midnight, came from the other end of the city, sneaking into our house, risking his life if he would have been caught. Now these were war times -- there were M.P.s

on the street, constantly you were stopped, any younger person -- and they would ask for identification. This man snuck into the house, under one arm carrying the record player with records and in the other hand a bag of food, first of all to help us with food, and secondly so I have some music. He would stay for an hour or two, we would play the music with blankets over our heads so the neighbors wouldn't hear us, and then he would pack up and sneak out again. And he would do this repeatedly. And when it came time that I suspected it's about time that we are getting picked now, too, to be sent to the concentration camps, he offered to hide us. And he only had one-and-a-half room apartment at the time. You see, these are the stories that are not much talked about. It's a very important thing. And people like this are frustrated to only hear about the bad Germans. Again, the bad ones were in the vast, vast majority. People like he were too few numbers. There's no question about it. In Berlin itself about 500 Jews were kept underground by Christians, and many Christians that were caught doing so were killed -- and some of them on the spot -- some of them were even sent to concentration camps, too.

Q: Do you remember any specific names of people, the commandant, or the commander of any of the camps you were in?

A: Not any more, no. There was one of the doctors whom I witnessed really murdering and beating sick people, but I think he was executed -- a Dr. Schmittz. That was a long time ago that it happened, maybe 1950, '51, and we were already in America. I don't remember any specific names any more, because I was only muddling in my own little way, trying to survive.

Q: You were in the hospital unit then?

A: No, no. I was fortunate in that respect, again. Already in the later part in Theresienstadt, I was working making furniture. And when I came to Auschwitz, I let it be known that I have such skill, and sure enough, lo-and-behold, there was somewhere some Nazi that put up a workshop for me, I never knew who it was. Put up a workshop for me outside the camp too, and I made furniture. And that actually saved my life.

Q: This Dr. Schmittz was in which place?

A: Flossenburg. It was the one that I was liberated from.

Q: And you witnessed his….?

A: Oh, yeah. It's an odd thing, actually. Again, that's why you can't figure out human beings. In a way he saved my life by performing an operation on me, but then again I have seen him…

Q: What kind of operation?

A: Well, it was about four weeks before I was liberated. It was in March of 1945. I had a heavy swelling under the arm -- an infection as big as a tennis ball. And I was in the barracks in Flossenburg. I already came over from Auschwitz -- I had stopped at other camps in between for short visits, and four weeks before that, my brother was mustered out to be taken to a thousand-man work camp -- they were trying to take out people that were in comparatively good shape, and by that time I was so helplessly sick, my brother went with me practically to the bathroom -- and when he was picked out, I was becoming desperate. Before that, I went to the commander of the barracks to get permission to go to the sick barrack, and he would never allow me to go. In fact, as an answer, either he hit me in the face with a fist, or kicked me with a boot. Because in order to go to the sick barracks you had to have a little slip of paper, like a little passport, I tried a couple of times, and then I had given up on it. And so, I got worse and worse. So when my brother was gone, I was desperate. I felt that I have no chance of survival anymore. I really took my account, very, very soberly, and said that I had no survival with this thing. It got worse every day. So then I decided, in the early morning, when this block commander was hopefully asleep yet, to sneak out of the barracks, without that paper. And you've gotta understand, whenever you did something against any rule in the concentration camp, if you're caught doing so, you're lucky if you just got a beating. Most of the time you got worse. Or the beating sometimes, most of the time, was so bad that you died of it. There was not just a little slapping or something like that. So I snuck out of the barracks. I figured, "Hey, I'm lasting only so long now, anyway. There's no other chance." It's funny; very, very sober thought. And so I got myself down to the barracks.

There were long lines of people standing. Already long lines. Everybody had a little slip in their hands, which I didn't. and at the entrance door was an SS guard with a helper -- one of the prisoners, usually. Those helpers were usually just as rough. If not even rougher sometimes, as the SS guards. And so, this SS guard took those slips from the people when they went by, one after the other. He wasn't too much in a hurry, and he would talk once in a while a little bit, and then would take another one, and another one. And I got, of course, more and more nervous, because what will I do without that thing? And you know, miracles are happening in those days too. The moment it was my turn, another SS man comes and taps the guy on the shoulder and he and his helper both turn around and talk to him, and I just snuck in. So now, I stand in a line and then there's some guy that divides people up. "What do you have? What do you have?" And so I had this thing, and so he sends me to a line of some other guys that had all kinds of swellings like that -- on their bellies, on their faces, huge growths like that. And I'm standing in line there, and I see how this Dr. Schmittz has just a wooden stool in front of him. Sometimes he had his foot on it himself, or if a guy had some growth on his leg -- which most of the guys had -- they would be asked to put their foot on that stool.

Now you've got to visualize, this was all towards the end of the war. These people were weak, starved. They were all skeletons already, and so they could hardly stand straight, could hardly hold themselves up. So this Dr. Schmittz -- he had a general's rank, an SS general, medical rank -- he would ask the guy, for instance, "Put your foot on the stool." And when the guy would falter or something, he would just take his fist and smash the guy in the face or in the belly or any place, and would say, "Stand still, you swine!" or something like that. Some guys would fall over, and they would just be carried out then, and of course never seen again. Now I had about three or four guys ahead of me, and I got more and more scared. He would cut everybody, would just take the knife and slit it open, and it was pus in there, it just spurted out. And that was it. If anybody hollered or yelled he would just hit 'em. Just hit 'em, kick 'em. I noticed that this guy got particularly mad if these people would whine and say, "Oh, please help me," or something like that, in their misery. That's when he got mad. I was scared, and I just pushed myself back to the end of the line. These other guys were all ahead of me; they all were handled just like that, and I was ready to get out, but I didn't dare to go back to the barracks anymore. So my turn came. I had noticed that these guys were whining and shaking and asking for help. Naturally I knew the German militaristic thing is always to be stiff and straight, and short speaking, like that. And I figured, maybe that's what I should try to do. I had my brains together, fortunately, in the whole thing; I was the last guy too, and that may have been something to do with it too. I come forward to him, and he asked, "Well, what's the matter with you?" And I started in very, very short, militaristic words -- I was in terrible pain and weak, too -- but I got myself together and stood straight and just told him, "Well, this here…" or whatever it was. I don't know anymore. So he looks at me, his eyes opened up, like, "What? This guy doesn't whine or complain." He tapped me on the shoulder and he says, " Well, we will give you anesthesia." Now I knew also that that could mean anything. I have heard these things before. You may not ever wake up out of it again. But he did give me an anesthesia. I awakened by getting slapped, to get me out of the anesthesia, and I was done, cut open. I have a big scar going down from the shoulder down to my breast here, all the way. A big, big cut. It was a big operation. Now my dilemma wasn't really over. You see now, if I would have to get back to my barracks, and this commander knew me, leaving against his wishes, I would have been no further ahead at all. And so, again, as fate is with you, this doctor said, " Well, I think we'll keep you in the sick barracks." Up there in the other barracks, they by that time didn't know any more who was there and who was missing. He maybe thought I had died in the meantime, because when the crews came to take out the dead bodies in the morning, out of the bunks, there was no count or anything like that, no control, who was what number, or what name. If they don't see you any more, they don't worry about it. So I stayed in the sick barracks. And this Dr. Schmittz came through and weeded out people. He would come and say, "Now, now, who is ready for the convalescent place?" They would take these very sick people and they were sent away to the gas chambers. And he would always pass me. I was the only one I know that he was nice to. All the others I saw, he had beaten and literally killed. So, you

know, it was quite a human dilemma for me at the time I was asked whether I want to be a witness. I had seen him doing a lot of dirty work, I would have to say it both ways. I would have to say the truth, that he helped me, probably saved my life. And on the other hand, killed other people. So I felt there was no sense for me to go over there. He deserved what he got, no matter what. It's a tough decision to make for a human being like me, when I look back to that.

Then there was Flossenburg, down in southern Germany, near the Czechoslovakian border. And from there we were put on a death march. I suppose by now you know what a death march is; I suppose other people have talked about it, so I don't need to go into the details on that. About two-and-a-half days on that march, I was liberated by a contingent of Patton's 3rd Armored Division. I weighed 82 pounds. Hardly able to carry myself. I'd had hallucinations already.

I got away from talking about Auschwitz before, particularly the selection in Auschwitz after we arrived there, where they separated the children and took them to the chambers immediately. Then separated the sick people, asked who's sick. And of course, what they did with the children, they announced that they have facilities for the children, because parents couldn't take care of them, because as they said, "you will have to work very hard from morning to evening, and you won't have time to take care of the children; therefore, we have facilities for the children." And they took the children away, and of course the children did not survive in Auschwitz. They were immediately killed, because children -- under twelve when I was there -- could not go to the factories, so therefore were not allowed to have their bowl of soup. In my opinion, this is the most terrible thing, the biggest crime of the whole affair. All the other things are nothing compared to that.

And the same thing, the same system, they weeded out the sick people. In fact, when my brother and I were standing there, we had a friend who was not any older than we were, a young fellow, and he was also in a comparatively -- I want to stress the word "comparatively" -- good shape. He said, " I'm gonna make like I'm sicker than I am because that way, maybe I can save my life for a few more days." My brother and I, we had talked to each other a lot, and probably that's one of the reasons that we were both there yet. We tried to keep ourselves sane, catching ourselves when we started to go off. And we had by that time recognized that our only chance of survival -- the only chance for survival -- is working. And various firms had established factories right next to the camps to squeeze out a little bit of strength yet, of the prisoners, for work. So, this friend of ours, who was not in any worse shape than we were, but he was convinced that he will have some help in the sick barracks, and probably therefore can extend his life a little bit. Well, it was the same thing like with the children. The trucks came, and the sick people were all hauled away into the gas chambers. I found out a few days later that my mother went the same route. My mother was very sick. She was a diabetic, and had cancer before, and she was gravely ill. She was

also in Theresienstadt, and there was no insulin available and so she suffered greatly. When they asked for sick people that could not do any heavy work, she very gullibly went over to that side too. And we have eye witnesses that told us later that she came a few days after we arrived and that she went that route.

So we were saved by Patton's 3rd, down in southern Germany, from a death march. The war was still going on. It happened to be April 23, by a strange coincidence my mother's birthday, also. The commander of the outfit, who had stopped while the armored vehicles moved by, because it was the fighting front -- they were actually shooting out of their turrets into the German lines -- the commander in very broken German advised to go in a certain direction. He says, " That's where we are expecting you. We knew that you were here. We finally got to you, and you go into that direction only. No other direction or else you're going back into the German hands. And you don't wanna do that." Well that was a moot question!

But anyway, a wonderful thing happened that was also regrettable at the same time. These armored vehicles that were shooting by, they opened their hatches and turrets and threw out food boxes, the ration boxes that the American soldiers used. And so of course we scrambled for them like crazy, and each one of us got one under the arm. Some of the guys would sit down right away and open them up, tear 'em open, and would just practically stuff themselves with both hands. Now in these rations were cans of meat, fat, they had butter in there, and I see it as if today, when they opened it, there was actually oil swimming on top of that butter. It was real greasy stuff. I'm thankful, don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to criticize the quality of the food, that's not the point. It was good quality anyway. My point is that I weighed 82 pounds! And I wasn't even the worst skeleton of them. There were some guys much, much less weight than I was. And these guys would sit down and start shoving the stuff into them, and regretfully, many of those people, because of that, died, later on. They started to have dysentery and it just couldn't be stopped. So many of them died from that food. Fortunately my brain was still working, even though I had hallucinations before. I had the feeling that it wouldn't be good, so all I did, really, is I opened something that looked pretty dry to me. I didn't know what it was at the time -- saltine crackers, which you didn't have in Germany -- and I took a few of those dry crackers. Actually, there was something else which I couldn't resist. There was chocolate in there, too. I only took a tiny piece of that chocolate, and that's all I did, and I then straggled myself back to this place that the American commander had advised us to go. There were American medical teams, which took over immediately. We were assigned in Germany a village, a farming village. And we were assigned, so many people, to certain farmers' houses. These farmers were ordered to take care of us, and the medical team came by several times during the day. Now I had to lay on my back right away. I was in bad shape of course. These farmers were ordered, whatever they had in livestock, slaughter it for us, which they did. And some of them were very eager to prove that they weren't Nazis, and were at least trying to help now. From that time on,

things were easy for us that were able to survive. And by the way, these food boxes that we had -- that I had under my arm -- were taken away from us. I almost started a fight about it! But then the name was put on, and the guy said, " Don't worry, it's padlocked and nobody's gonna touch it." At that point I probably was a little paranoid, I didn't want to lose the food, even in the face of the other food that I had.

Then on May 8, the war was over. The American commanders kept control over us. They didn't want to let us go until it was safe. It wasn't easy to go anyway, because you had to have your strength back, because there was no transportation. There were no airplanes that you could use, or trains. Everything was destroyed at that time in Germany. When I finally started, I started to walk to West Berlin. I think that from where I was, it was probably somewhere in the neighborhood of a 600 or 700 mile trek. I walked, as it turned out, most of it, not all of it, because sometimes I was picked up by a military vehicle and taken along.

When I came back to Berlin, our apartment that we had before had been taken by some "deserved Nazis" That was the system. When Jews were picked up, some "deserved Nazis" would get that apartment with the furniture and all. I had the authority to throw these people out immediately, which I didn't do. I told them to stay overnight and move out in the morning, because I arrived there in the evening, which was the wrong thing to do, because when I came in the morning, they had disappeared with practically every little bit that was left in the apartment. I didn't care that much at the time. I had my life back and my freedom back. I tried later to retrieve some things, but there was no trace of it any more.

Now my brother, as I mentioned earlier, was taken away from this Flossenburg camp four weeks before our liberation. At that time, the Nazis were already thrown back into Germany. The Russians had taken the East, and the Americans had been already in West Germany. So the Nazi Wehrmacht had lost pretty much all their airfields, but even four weeks before the end of the war, they were still crazy enough to think that they could win the war. They wanted to build a new airfield, replace one of the ones that they had lost. And they tried to pick out of the concentration camp some prisoners that were still able to walk in their feet and hold a shovel, and my brother was. I was mustered out for that, too, but I had, by that time, that swollen thing under my arm, and so they didn't take me. And my brother was taken, which at the time we thought was the worst thing that ever could happen to us. As it turns out, if I would have gone along with him, as I tried, we both wouldn't have survived, because my brother is the only survivor of that thousand-man commando that was taken out there.

And that, of course, is practically a story in itself. He was taken there -- a thousand men. This was about in March and it was a cold and wet March. All these prisoners -- the thousand men that were picked out -- all these men had with them was a blanket -- nothing else. They came to a field which was just to be cleared for an airfield. So they had to shovel and clear and clean, and at night, all

they did was lay down on the spot. There were no houses, no barracks, nothing. They lay down with their blankets to sleep. And it didn't take long that this thousand men -- I'm talking about a decimated group to begin with -- just died and died and died. And so after about three to four weeks, there were left like 350,400 men. The others had all died during that time. And there, too, the Americans came close, so they gave up on the airfield building, and put this little group on a death march. And at one time, the Americans came so close that the SS guards took off, already thinking they didn't want to get imprisoned, and left this group -- whatever there was left, and there weren't too many left by then -- left them alone. But unfortunately, the Americans either didn't know of that group or they were forced to turn another direction, so they turned away from there -- as close as they were -- they turned away, and the SS came back and recaptured most of these people. And some others were recaptured by another group, too. These people were just absolutely in terrible, terrible shape physically, and didn't get any more to eat, either. So they were recaptured, and after another day or so, there was a group of 52 or 53 left, among them my brother.

And my brother, at that time, knew already, like most anybody else, that he wouldn't last much longer. He would also collapse, and as the death marches were, anybody that collapsed got shot on the spot. And so he knew that it would come. And so they were put, during the night, into some kind of an empty sty of some sort, and the guards were sitting outside. And anybody that had to go to relieve themselves was supposed to ask the guards if they could do that. So he gets up and wants to approach the guards and ask them if he could go out to relieve himself. And he notices that these guards are asleep. And so he figured out that was his chance to step out, as weak as he was. So he stepped out -- this was in southern Germany -- and marched. The American gunshots were right close by, like a couple of hundred yards away, it sounded, and so he tried to get over to the American lines. In the morning -- the dawn just started a little bit on the horizon -- and he had his prisoner's uniform on, the hair was shorn, and all that stuff, and he found that he couldn't make it to the American line, so he knocked on a door of a farmer's house in his desperation. His calculation was, maybe by that time these guys knew that the end was near, and maybe would like to hide a prisoner to show, "Hey, look what we did." So he knocked on this farmer's door, and that was all he knew. Right in front of the door he collapsed. Just collapsed and didn't know what was going on any more. So maybe the next morning or a day afterwards, he wakes up and he was laying in a cellar, in a pile of straw really, just hidden in a dark cellar in a pile of straw. And the farmer comes down and starts to talk and feed him, and the farmer says, " Say, were you in that group of prisoners, some 50-some people or so?" My brother says, " Yes.' He said, " Well, you're lucky that you aren't there any more because just about a half mile away from our house, they were all machine-gunned down this morning." The SS didn't want to be bothered anymore with these few prisoners, because they were afraid to be taken prisoners by the Americans. So they wanted to relieve themselves of their duty to guard the Jews, and true to their training --

even to the last minute -- to destroy and exterminate the Jews, they just would take the machine gun and just nailed them all down. My brother, by the way, is a cantor by profession -- always been. Later on they erected a memorial there for these people, and so he was there to officiate. So, as you know, you can hear all kinds of different stories and fates.

Q: So you went back to Berlin. How did you come to this country?

A: Well, I went back to Berlin, because we had said, if we ever survived, we would all try to get back to Berlin. That was said beforehand. Now by that time I knew my mother wasn't alive anymore, and I didn't know about my uncle and aunt and cousins. And I hoped.

Q: You learned about the uncle and aunt later?

A: Yes. I hoped that my brother would be around, and so I went back. And my brother did not come. I arrived in Berlin the end of June. By that time, people that were looking for each other, had all the Jewish organizations that were there, the walls were full with slips of paper: "I'm looking for so-and-so…" Things like that. I put on notes too, but nothing happened. And an acquaintance that was working for the Americans at that time, a Jewish person, comes and says, " You know that your brother is in Munich." I says, " My brother's in Munich? I don't know it." He says he met Kurt, and says, " Aren't you lucky that your brother's around?" and my brother Kurt says, " Don't kid me like that. My brother had no chance of surviving," -- knowing what physical shape I was in when we were separated. You remember, I told you that he had to help me go to the bathroom and put on my shoes and everything. I couldn't move. And so with that, the chance for survival was nil. There was no chance of survival, and I don't blame him for not even looking for me. He'd never look for me, and so he thought this man was cruel and must have seen somebody that just looks like me, and told him, he says, " That's impossible. It can't be."

Well, anyway, he was able to convince Kurt and me it was so. At that time telephone lines weren't installed yet. We had to write letters. And it happened to be that my brother was doing singing as a cantor over the radio, and I was doing cantorial things in Berlin too. I'm a layman cantor, and so I was doing things like that, too. So we could listen to each other's voices over the radio. (Laughs) That was our first contact, except for letter writing. And then we went to visit finally. He is now in Portland, Maine. He's a cantor there. My brother never came back to Berlin. He stayed in Munich and went from there to America.

In Berlin, the apartment that we had owned was in the French sector. Berlin was divided into various sectors: French, the American, the English, the Russian. And although the West Allies, French, English and American, normally worked together, in this particular instance, to apply to get out of Berlin, it was not possible. The French did not allow anybody to leave Berlin. The French would

have allowed me to go to France, but France wasn't far enough away from Germany to me, and I wanted to go to America. So I stayed there in the French sector, and the rumors came constantly. Another month the French will also allow to let us move out. That was one month, another month, and another month, and a year went by. Finally, in the beginning of 1949, I moved into the English sector, which was not that easy, because at those days, so many years after the war, there were still ration cards. The French, the American, and the English were very, very careful of not having to feed other people, so in order to move from one area to another area, you had to have what they called a "head exchange". We had to find somebody that would want to move into the French sector in order for us to move into the American or English sector -- which wasn't easy. We finally did it by actually buying false papers in order to get out. Actually, about a month after we had finally made that move into the English sector, then the French opened their doors, so we had spent money for nothing. But we don't have any regrets.

Q: And then you made plans to move to the United States?

A: Yeah, we had planned all along, and we came on the Displaced Persons quota. And of course they dispersed the people over various areas, and so we were scheduled to go to St. Paul, which made us not very happy at first, but as you can see that is now 33, 34 years ago, almost, and we are still in St. Paul, so we must find something that we like here. (Laughs)

Q: Where and how did you meet your wife?

A: Oh, my wife and I, we knew each other already from Berlin. She was the daughter of parents of a friend of mine. And she's four years younger. Remember when I talked about when I was 17, 18 years of age we met at these various families? The older folks, parents had no place to go, and so they would be there milling around and have a coffee klatch with the other folks, and we kids would be in another room and have our own fun, making music and things like that. She was one of those kids that came with the parents, but at that time she was not a member of the teen-age group, because she wasn't a teenager yet, as we were. So she was just a little girl which said, politely, "Hi" to us

Q: That was before the war.

A: During the war, before we got incarcerated.

Q: Can you tell me what it has meant to you to be a survivor?

A: There are several people who have asked me that question -- several times. Some people have asked if you feel "guilty" as a survivor. There's one fellow that wrote in a book that the cream of the crop is the one that did <u>not</u> survive. I don't completely agree with that. The survivor rate had, in my opinion, an entirely

different reason. For instance, the first people to die were not necessarily the intellectuals. The first people to die were the people that were of large body -- that needed more food to feed the "machinery," and didn't get it. So a smaller person could, I think, survive easier with that small amount of food. Number one. Number two, as I say, my mother was definitely considered a poor woman, financially poor, and so we ate very, very basically. If we were lucky, we saw some lunchmeat over the weekends, for Shabbos or something like that. Other than that, we just had basic food. I remember having more than once, just dry bread with a little margarine smeared on, or something like that. Probably a person that knows something about biology might have an opinion about that; I think it's like a tree. A tree that grows on dry ground grows harder wood. I'm talking now as the furniture maker that I am! A tree grows on wet, soft ground has a very, very soft pulp. I don't know if that's a valid analogy. But I have no hang-ups about having survived. I have no guilt feelings about it, that why do I survive and others don't. I don't know. I really have no feelings one way or the other. I'm happy that I did. I think therefore I appreciate life and look at life a little differently than other people do.

Q: I was going to say, has your belief or practice in Judaism or a supreme being changed?

A: I think I became a little bit more religiously observant, very simply because, being in a concentration camp, you finally turned to say a prayer once in a while, because there was nothing else that you could turn to for help. I am still not fanatically religious, but I'm definitely religious. As I told you before, I'm serving here and there as a cantor, and I have no questions about my Judaism whatsoever I really don't believe in any great reason that I survived, although at one time I was in a small group where a Hasidic rabbi was, and he knew about my past, and he actually started to say there was a reason that I am around, because I have to fulfill things yet that have not been fulfilled. I believe that could be possible.

Q: You do some work in education in the community. Maybe you could tell us briefly about that.

A: Yes. I'm quite busy with lecturing on the Holocaust. I have lectured at the University Human Relations department. I have lectured at high schools. I have lectured at churches. I have lectured at clubs, various organizations. And usually my procedure is that I'm talking from my experience as a child, because I describe in more details than I did here, most of the time, how I grew up as a child under the growing Nazi threat, and then somewhat explain the existence of, not excusing, like Communism thrives on the dilemma of people, so therefore any totalitarian system in my opinion does. And so I am busy talking to schools and all kinds of organizations, and I've got a whole stack of letters from kids and people which make me convinced that this is a worthwhile procedure that I'm trying to do, and to keep on doing that.

Q: I think so, right. I think you referred to this earlier -- the fact that one of the recent T.V. programs on the Holocaust did not do justice to the subject -- and I would like to get your views about some of the popular books and T.V. and movie efforts.

A: Well, if it came out that way, I'm glad I have a chance to correct that. I did not mean to say that it doesn't do justice. It doesn't do complete justice. I know I am in disagreement with some of my -- what do I call them? --"survivor colleagues." Some of 'em just criticize these movies down to the point of non-importance. I completely disagree with that. Even if there were some discrepancies or some things that could be done better -- for instance, the first one of the Holocaust series, which was widely criticized -- in my opinion, it did exactly what I had hoped something would sometime do, it woke up the country. Whether it showed everything correctly, or did not show anything, or omitted something, is really of secondary importance. I received phone calls from people that knew me from years ago. One guy, I worked with here in the beginning, I didn't think of his existence even any more, I haven't seen or talked to him for twenty years, he called me up crying on the phone, he says, "Henry, I thought of you when I saw the movie." No question, it has done that thing. So therefore I am not about to criticize it in a devastating way. In fact, I would say again, if it can't be done any better, I hope it will be done at least that much.

Q: Getting back to that point you made. You had some disagreement with your survivor friends. Do you maintain contact with survivors or any survivor organizations?

A: Not a survivor organization as such, no. Of course I know a lot of people, and we have contact here and there with several people that are survivors.

Q: Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we close here?

A: I don't think that I have anything else to say at this moment. I'm sure once we are done I will think, "My gosh, I should have talked about this, about that." You know how that goes. (Laughs)

Q: Yes. This completes the interview with Henry Oertelt by David Zarkin on June 2, 1983.

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