

ID Project Interview with George Brieger  
March 25, 1992  
New York, New York

Q: Today is March 25, 1992. I am Anthony Di Iorio of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I am in the home of Mr. George Brieger, New York City and I'm here on behalf of the US Holocaust Museum to interview George about the experience of his father and uncle during the Holocaust in Hungary. Good evening George.

A: Hi, how are you. My father Anno Brieger was born in Nyathalas near Hungary on 1925. He lived most of his childhood in Nyireghaza which was the city of the region, the bigger city. Although his grandmother, that's his father's mother lived, continued to live there, in Nyathalas. They would sometimes take vacations there. And the distance between the two cities was about, I don't know, a couple of miles but to get from Nyireghaza to Nyathalas is a big trip and it took half a day on horse and buggy. And it would be a big deal when all the kids would get to go on the carriages.

Q: And that's how everybody traveled in those days, horse and buggy?

A: Right. And my father's grandmother was a renown baker in Nyathalas and everyone called her Toni, Jews and gentiles alike

Q: What was her name?

A: Toni.

Q: Toni. You know what her last name was? This would be your father's mother's mother. Father's mother.

A: So I don't -- let's see. It may have been -- I know that she was a descendent of a great Rabbi thirteen generations before, whose name was Aschach Rabbi's name thirteen generations back and they were Cohanites.

Q: This is a very religious family.

A: Yes, quite religious.

Q: And your father's family, your father's mother and family?

A: They were quite orthodox. In fact my father's father, my grandfather, was very instrumental in the synagogues there, orthodox synagogues, there were three synagogues, two synagogues in Nyireghaza, the orthodox and the -- something called status quo, sort of like conservative, this conservative synagogue was the

bigger one in terms of numbers of people. And my father attended the school attached to the orthodox synagogue when he was young, then later, when he was I guess elementary, middle school he attended the larger Jewish school there in the morning. And in the afternoon he attended Yeshiva in the or attached to the orthodox synagogue in Nyireghaza. And he would tell me that they used to -- they would get into fights with the gentile children on the way home. There would be a whole thing where they would --

Q: Your father and...

A: My father and his classmates from Jewish school would be attacked by the gentile children on their way home and it would be a big deal how to get home without getting into a fight.

Q: These fights were quite common?

A: It seemed that it happened from time to time.

Q: Did anyone ever get hurt?

A: I don't think, not that my father told me so I guess they couldn't have been too serious at least for my father and his immediate friends. And he was, my father was actually a very good student in, especially in the Yeshiva and he was, he gave a big speech on his barmirzvah in the synagogue and he went to the Yeshiva in Munkatch which is now part of Russia. It's part of that ---

Q: Right, the Ukraine.

A: Right, the Ukraine, sorry.

Q: So he actually left home --

A: Left home when he was thirteen at the barmitzvah and he went and attended Yeshiva in Munkatch and he excelled, he was one of the top guys in the ---, according to the Rabbi. He sat next to the Rabbi in the Sabbath for the meals and that was like the big deal and he'd tell me the stories about the \_\_\_\_\_. The Yeshiva didn't have dormitories. They would have private Jewish families they would put them up with and the people who could afford it were supposed to give some money, some money to these families because you know to support them, cause they would give them two meals a day, these families would. And his family was pretty well off. My grandfather was pretty well off. They had an iron store, a hardware store.

Q: So your father's father had an iron...

A: A hardware, hardware store.

- Q: Hardware store.
- A: And it was pretty lucrative. He was one of the better off people in the Jewish community.
- Q: What was your grandfather's name?
- A: Brieger.
- Q: No, the first name.
- A: Adolph, believe it or not.
- Q: Adolph. And his wife would be Toni or would that have been ---?
- A: No that would be, his mother, his mother.
- Q: So Adolph's mother was Toni?
- A: Right, right. Adolph's wife, my father's mother died in childbirth, on her third child.
- Q: So your father's mother died ...
- A: My father's mother died during childbirth on her -- I'm not sure which child it was -- it may have been the third or the fifth. There were six siblings altogether including my father eventually but the last one was from the second wife.
- Q: So Adolph remarried and had one more...
- A: One more child, yes.
- Q: That would be the sixth.
- A: The sixth, yeah.
- Q: So your father had four brothers and sisters and one half-brother?
- A: Yes, I believe so. One of them was a sister, all the other ones were brothers. I'm not sure if the sister was the one that was half or not.
- Q: So a total of six -- one girl, five boys.
- A: Yeah, my father being the oldest. My father's mother, natural mother's maiden name was Deutsch.

- Q: Adolph's first wife's maiden name was Deutsch. But you don't remember her first name?
- A: No. They were also from the Munkatch area, maybe not Munkatch proper but that area.
- Q: Near Matermush?
- A: No, I think that's south. Munkatch is toward the east.
- Q: Okay, as I remember looking at one of the photos, Grandfather Deutsch lived in Transylvania.
- A: Right, that's my mother's. That's my mother's family. I think it's a coincidence.
- Q: So there's two Deutsch's in your family?
- A: Right.
- Q: Okay. Now I'm beginning to follow. Your father's father's first wife was named Deutsch and there's also a Deutsch on your mother's side of the family.
- A: Right. My mother is Deutsch, maiden name.
- Q: Okay. So your father's family was relatively well off and could afford to send him to Munkatch and help pay...
- A: Right and he got packages from time to time with preserves or what have you. I don't know stuff like that, that was the big deal and he would sometimes give to the more needy children, you know give them a sandwich or whatever cause some of them, the ones that were poor were really poor. Like my father in his youth had two shoes, one for weekday and one for the Sabbath. That was a big deal because the poor children had just one pair of shoes for the Sabbath and during the weekday they would just go barefoot. You know we're talking poverty here.
- Q: Yeah, how long was your father in Munkatch?
- A: He was there until he was about seventeen or eighteen although I think there may have been some other Yeshiva in there as well, some other towns but I think he was away for a total of four or five years.
- Q: Now the time that he was going there this territory passed from Czechoslovakia to Hungary. Did he tell any stories about the Hungarians taking over? Now he was, of course. A Hungarian citizen.

A: Right.

Q: This territory was separated from Hungary at the end of World War I and then taken back right around the time that your father went up there. Now you're not aware of any connection between his going to Munkatch (he would have been over thirteen years of age) that would be late 1938, early 1939 which is when the Hungarians march in.

A: Right.

Q: And he's there for how many years?

A: Four or five.

Q: Four or five years. So he's separated from the rest of the family for quite a while.

A: Well, he would visit obviously and stuff.

Q: Yeah, but I mean he's living apart.

A: Yeah, although he did tell me that the people in the area spoke many languages. My father didn't speak Czech, did not. But many of the, like for example, the typical Jew would speak Yiddish, Hungarian, because that was the dominant culture so to speak. And then either Ukrainian or Czech. And of course he would read Hebrew because that was the prayer language.

Q: So your father's family, going back home now, when they were growing up, were they speaking both Yiddish and Hungarian?

A: Yes but they would speak Hungarian in the house. That was their first language.

Q: Hungarian speaking but they all knew Yiddish.

A: They all knew Yiddish fluently, like a mother tongue. And they read Hebrew and they studied in Hebrew.

Q: Your father did.

A: Yes, and so did all the other children.

Q: But he especially in the Yeshiva training. Any other languages/

A: Well later on he studied German. What happened was, I'm not sure what year but I think he was around seventeen and eighteen he came back and they thought he should learn a trade because they thought that trouble was coming and they knew that the hardware store is going to be taken away or something, not by the

Germans because there weren't Germans yet, but just the rise of anti-Semitism and the Kolneilash.

Q: The Arrow Cross

A: The Arrow Cross, right.

Q: The Hungarian fascists. Hungarian Nazis.

A: So he learned to be a tailor and he also learned German because that was the lingua franca of the area.

Q: So he started to study German and tailoring.

A: Right, sort of like vocational school.

Q: Did he actually go to a formal school?

A: This is a school, a school he went to in Hungary

Q: You don't know which...?

A: I don't know where.

Q: This would have been when he was about eighteen you say.

A: Yeah. I know that he was very excelled in German, in language and the Hungarian German teacher never gave him (one was the best grade, sort of like the A. Grades from one to five, one being the highest, five being the lowest)...and he would never get a one, he would only got a two. And one time he asked her how come I don't get a one I did the best paper in the class? She said to Jews I don't give ones.

Q: Now originally did anyone plan on him becoming a Rabbi considering all the studying that he was...

A: He was sort of being groomed for some sort of professional role or maybe taking over the hardware store, I'm not sure but it was clear that he was going to be the studier of the family. But I don't think a Rabbi as such was considered.

Q: Now Adolph, did he lose the hardware store?

A: Well, yes, sure the Nazis took it away when they took power.

Q: The Hungarian Nazis.

- A: Hungarian Nazis. There were a series of laws passed. First there were quotas imposed on what Jews can and can't do in terms of university admissions or ownership of property and then there were sort of numerous closes which means they couldn't attend university at all; they couldn't have any property other than personal property. So they were taken away and there was a ghetto created in Nyireghaza and then...
- Q: But not in Najhalaas.
- A: I don't know about Najhalaas.
- Q: It would be too small probably but there's a ghetto in 1944 in Nyireghaza.
- A: I don't know if it's 1944 but it's some time in there.
- Q: Your father has returned by then?
- A: Oh, yeah, yeah, he was already back because when the trouble started he moved back home.
- Q: So he leaves Munkatch, he studies at a vocational school somewhere in Hungary and then he leaves that school to come back home.
- A: Well I think that school was home or near home already, the vocational school was.
- Q: Okay, so the family is together?
- A: The family is together, right.
- Q: Including your uncle Julah?
- A: Yes, yes. My grandfather was very big on the family being together in the time of crisis and you'll see that later on also.
- Q: What was your uncle Julah doing there in these years before we go ahead?
- A: I don't know.
- Q: You don't know whether he was going to school or planning on a trade?
- A: I don't know.
- Q: No, Okay, so back to the ghetto.

- A: Right. The ghetto was in the area that my father lived in because my father lived in the Jewish community area where all the other Jews lived so I don't think they had to move but they did have other people moving in with them. The people from not just Nyireghaza but the whole area because Nyireghaza was sort of the local capital there.
- Q: Even Nadjhalaas perhaps?
- A: Perhaps -- from the villages were brought in and they were shoved into the ghetto including my father's house. My father's house was relatively comfortable because again they were pretty well off. And they were moved in there and it was pretty uncomfortable because there were many people per room. There were several families living in one room. And then I think the last year 1944 is when the deportation started so all the Jews began to be rounded up and they were put on the cattle cars. They weren't told where they're going.
- Q: By Hungarians or by Germans?
- A: I think it was mostly Hungarians. The Germans didn't have the manpower to do all this stuff. What they had to do was: first they had to take all their personal belongings and mail it to this address that was given to them. They were told that that's where they're going to this camp. It's a Hungarian address. So they had to package everything and mailed everything to this camp.
- Q: To a Hungarian address to an assumed destination. This was their assumed destination.
- A: Assumed destination. My father said that the address was a phony address. They never really read the address. It was just put on a thing and it was all taken and used by the Nazis or whatever.
- Q: Did he know that at the time?
- A: No, of course not.
- Q: So they actually mailed -- the entire family, your father, his father, everyone sent...
- A: Whatever possessions they had -- clothing or whatever had to be sent to this stuff. They also buried, illegally of course, buried some stuff. One of the things that were buried was my father's sort of tools of the trade, his sewing kit, his threads, because threads were ---apparently threads were very hard to come by because the economy, everything was geared toward the war so civilians couldn't come by thread -- you know spools of thread I'm talking about -- so my father took like a box of thread, different colors, needles and what have you and buried it under the chicken coop.

- Q: Did he actually have a sewing machine?
- A: I don't think do.
- Q: So they had some notice. When they were told before they're actually deported they were given what? A couple of days or more?
- A: I don't know how long it was.
- Q: Did all this happen, mail and everything?
- A: No, it had to be more than one day. It must have been a couple of weeks, I guess. They were told they were being relocated. They weren't told they were being shipped off to north. They were just told they're going to a different area.
- Q: So they were burying things because they didn't want to give them up, so they couldn't carry them and they were hoping to return some day?
- A: Right, right, right. And of course I guess they believed the story that they were being fed but they all had doubts also. They certainly didn't trust the Hungarian Nazis. And so right, like you said they had hopes of coming back one day and digging up stuff.
- A: Did your family ever tell you what his father and mother and other family members were thinking or saying during these days? Anybody doing anything that stands out in your mind besides burying things? Did anyone try to hide, anyone try to get away?
- A: Actually I think that there was some sort of paper that my father acquired. I think it was my father who acquired it. Somebody in the family acquired it, some sort of forged paper that said that he was Hungarian, not Jewish which would have allowed him to leave the ghetto and move away. But my grandfather wanted the family to stick together. He felt the best chance of getting through this was just to stick together. So they gave the paper to I think a cousin. Actually it was a passport, a Hungarian passport. They gave it to my cousin. Actually this cousin is still alive today. I'll get back to him after the war.
- Q: Okay. That's not Frank, is it?
- A: No, no.
- Q: So your father actually had a passport which he could have used but his father Adolph persuaded him to give it to his cousin?
- A: Right.

- Q: The person who survived, did he survive because of the passport?
- A: I guess partly. He wasn't deported so to that extent he was spared a whole -- he sort of increased his chances of survival. We know it's just a question of increasing your chances. You couldn't be really certain that you would survive one way or the other.
- Q: Did your father and his family realize at this point that their lives were in fact in danger?
- A: I don't think they understood the magnitude of the danger.
- Q: They were thinking of their property being stolen, being relocated and so forth but did anyone suspect that whole villages, whole communities would in fact be killed?
- A: I don't think so. The whole death camp was certainly nothing that was known to them.
- Q: Did anyone hear anything about massacres that had taken place before either in Russia or in Poland by word of mouth, did anyone hear of Hungarian soldiers in Russia returning?
- A: I don't think so. I think that there were some sort of prophets of doom that would come by, Jawotinski I think
- Q: He had died
- A: He had died but earlier had come and warned people but he didn't have first-hand information.
- Q: No, I'm talking about '42, '43, '44. You know people are being killed by the millions in Russia, in Poland. They're Hungarian soldiers in Russia. There are Hungarian Jews who were being sent to work forced labor in Russia. No one was coming back and telling stories?
- A: I don't think so, not that my father knew.
- Q: So we got your father's family getting ready for resettlement.
- A: Resettlement, right. So finally they were getting on the train and the one story he told me that there was this old couple who had this jar of honey with them. Honey was something valuable because it lasted, it didn't spoil and so that was something that they could take with them. On the process of getting on the train they dropped the jar and the jar spilled and all the honey was spilling on the floor

and so my father described how eager they were just to scoop it up, what was there to scoop it up with their hands and just put it back and put the honey back in the jar and how futile the attempt was because the honey would be taken away only a few hours later.

Q: But nobody knew.

A: But nobody knew that.

Q: Did they have any food? First of all the whole family got on the train together still?

A: I know my mother who wife was -- certainly the three of them, my father, my father's brother Jussi by his father.

Q: So Adolph, Yena and Jussi.

A: Right, and also my grandmother, that's Adolph's wife and also her baby, the youngest kid because she was just a baby then.

Q: Did they have any food with them? Did he ever tell you what it was like getting into this train? First of all did they know it was going to be a cattle car until they actually saw it?

A: I don't think they knew anything. They were just given orders. The cattle car -- there's barely enough room to stand in the cattle car. You didn't have enough room for packages.

Q: You had said they mailed their belongings already

A: Right. They had already mailed.

Q: So did they have anything with them? Food?

A: I don't think they had any food with them, no.

Q: Just get into this car, no food, no belongings. What was it like being in there? Had he ever described the inside of this?

A: I'm not sure about this particular journey but late on in cattle cars in general it was very crowded. One particular time, I'm skipping ahead a few months, but they were being shipped from one place to the other in cattle cars after they were in.....

Q: To Auschwitz.

- A: All the prisoners had a little sort of like a cup, like a metal cup and this cup was used for everything from getting the soup rations to getting any water if you could find some and also in the cattle cars on this particular journey they were on for several days at a time there was no room to go to the bathroom. So what the prisoners would do is they would -- the ones that weren't standing near the side -- they would sort of use this cup and then just get rid of it.
- Q: Use it as a portable toilet.
- A: Portable toilet, right.
- Q: And then throw it out of the cattle car?
- A: Throw it out or even in the cattle car, just get rid of it somehow.
- Q: The first trip from Hungary to Auschwitz comes as a shock. No one could imagine this condition. You have no toilet, no food, no belongings. How long did that trip take?
- A: I don't know. I don't know how long the trip was.
- Q: He never did tell you what it is like being in that -- tell you what people were saying? Here he is with his mother, his father, couple of brothers not knowing where they're going to end up -- any stories about what they were thinking, what they were saying?
- A: No, not that I can remember. The anticipation -- I don't have any information about that.
- Q: And with nothing to drink, nothing to eat.
- A: Nothing to drink. So they finally got to Auschwitz or the first camp. I think it was Auschwitz, sort of like the big camp that everyone sort of checked in through. And they got off the cattle cars and they saw these Polish Jews who were inmates or prisoners, I don't know what to call them with the uniforms, with the stripes. These guys would sort of have a few whispers as they walked by because they weren't allowed to talk to each other but the Polish prisoners who were there for years because the Poles had to go to the camps before -- would tell them about -- they would say things like, make believe you're healthy because that way you would be steered toward, what was it, the right as opposed to the left or whatever it was, whatever their options were. The other reason that if they made believe that they're sick then they wouldn't have to work hard or something. They would go to the hospital or something. That was counter-intuitive to make the....
- Q: That's right, you don't assume that because you're sick you're going to be killed. Any other suggestions they were getting? Make believe you're healthy and of

course how healthy can you be after the train ride like the one you just described. Any others? How about age? Did they talk about age?

A: They didn't have a lot of time to talk obviously.

Q: What about children?

A: There's nothing to do about children I suppose. But the Hungarian Jews, they communicated in Yiddish, thought that the ??? was arranged, that these people in the camps because there are some mental problems because after years in the camp they were so dehumanized and the remarks were so outlandish that they thought there was something wrong here.

Q: There was. That's an interesting observation. Here they're getting tips, what we would call tips, right? Helpful hints -- and yet as they hear this it's so difficult to believe that they actually suspect that the messengers are deranged, crazy. And yet what else did they see when they got there? Were these people deranged? What did your father see when he got out of that car?

A: He saw the sign that "Work Makes You Free" and he saw there was a building that you went into to strip and get rid of all the clothing. They gave you the prison clothing.

Q: He didn't see any dead people?

A: No, this is up front. The cattle cars come in. It looks like a factory or something.

Q: Well it was. How about -- I mean those who've been there recall the smell. Was there anything about the smell?

A: I think the smell started later because at this point they weren't burning the bodies yet. That only started when they were running out of time, the Germans thought they were running out of time. This point they still had time to bury the bodies after the gas chambers. Or at least there weren't as many crematoria or they weren't going at full speed.

Q: So your father, is he separated from the rest of the family?

A: He was separated from all but the three. That is, my father's father, my father and his brother -- next to the youngest brother -- stayed together the whole time until much later. I'll get to that later.

Q: So Adolph, Yeno are separated...

A: ...are together, separated from the rest.

- Q: Yeah, are separated, -- the rest meaning the mother and the child.
- A: I think the rest of the children were there, too. And of course they found out a few days later that they were all killed because the children and the mother went straight to the gas chamber.
- Q: They didn't know that until....?
- A: Until much later when they got a feel for the rhythm of the camp.
- Q: Okay so together they get stripped?
- A: They get stripped, they get showered. Believe it or not they get showered, they get their haircuts and they have to give up their shoes and they get their uniforms. They're tattooed I think. Actually I have a very interesting story about that. My father's number was A3166 and his brother's must have been A3066 were very close by but what I am saying is my birthday is April 30, 1966 so there's something very eerie about that. I know it's just coincidence to you but to me there's something -- well anyway...
- Q: They're still together.
- A: They're still together and so they go into the camp. They were given these -- the first meal that they got was the soup that was very thick, liquidy -- very thick greenish -- it was thick greenish soup that nobody knew what it was made of or what it was. My father's father, my grandfather and my father's brother didn't want to eat it because it tasted horrible. It didn't taste like food at all, it tasted like cooked tree leaves or something. But my father said to them that we better eat them now because if we get this today we get the same thing tomorrow, it's not going to be better. If we don't survive we have to eat it. That was the theme throughout. My father was into survival. My father said take what we get and you can't be picky because you're not going to survive. And so I guess they ate it or they forced themselves to eat it. And that was it. Every day they got a bowl of soup, this thick greenish soup and not much else. Once in a while in the beginning -- things got progressively worse as it went on -- in the beginning they also got bread in the beginning, sometimes.
- Q: When did they arrive in Auschwitz, did he ever tell you?
- A: I guess it was sometime in '44. It was the fall of '44, I think.
- Q: Or spring.
- A: The spring, that could have been it. He was there for a year, all the camps.

- Q: Altogether a year because the war ends in the spring of '45 so the spring of '44 one year.
- A: Right, right.
- Q: How long was he in Auschwitz?
- A: I don't know -- a couple of months, maybe several months. I don't know exactly how long. I can't name the camps that he was in. I know he was in Auschwitz; I know he was in Bergen-Belsen. I don't have all the camps off-hand or how long he was in each. Jussi, my father's youngest brother was very good at getting things. My father described that one time they would -- the truck with the bread would come by and they would load the bread into the kitchen and the way it would work is that the guy on the truck would throw the bread -- like big 3 kilo loaves of bread -- to the guy by the kitchen. He would catch it and he would just....And so my father's brother Jussi was very quick. He snuck up underneath the truck -- again this was all the beginning when there was still so much food -- he snuck up underneath the truck and between like sort of the truck and the place where the other guy stood and as the guy picked up the bread to throw it. The guy threw it; immediately turned back to pick up the next piece and the other guy was still sort of still bending up from the previous throw and so he jumped up and caught it and he went back underneath the truck and he ran like hell because if you get caught for that that's shot on sight.
- Q: Or hanged.
- A: Or hanged.
- Q: So he could steal bread.
- A: He could steal bread. This is very risky. It's the sort of thing you risk it...
- Q: I know and it's very hard to hide a 3 kilo loaf of bread.
- A: What they do was they went to the bathroom and they ate two thirds of it right away and they saved one third of it for my grandfather. The idea was to hide the evidence and eating quickly. There are two reasons why you have to eat it quickly. Number one you have to hide the evidence. Number two things always get either stolen or lost or if you work hard it gets damaged or stolen. Prisoners would steal whatever they can get their hands on. So my father's father said always whatever you get in rations eat it right away. Don't try to save it or ration whatever for yourself.
- Q: It sounds like your father and your uncle found it difficult to trust other prisoners.

- A: Yeah, there's another little story that bears on that point. It's a very dehumanizing experience and you got to the point where you care about your own personal survival and nothing else.
- Q: Not someone else's survival?
- A: Not someone else's survival. The three of them were together. That was an exception but other than that...
- Q: So it's the three musketeers.....
- A: Against the world.
- Q: Against the world and other prisoners are part of the world.
- A: Right, right.
- Q: Were there other people from your father's town with him?
- A: Occasionally they would have people from that town but as the time went by people would either drop dead or they would be dispersed so there were less and less people that he knew personally. Occasionally he would bump into people he thought he knew. One time he was walking by near the perimeter of the camp and there were these guard towers. And the guard yelled down at him in Hungarian because a Hungarian Nazi and he looked up, you know pleasantly surprised and he threw down, the guard threw down a piece of bread. So he figured wow, Hungarian, there's some people love me up there. He tore the piece of bread apart and the bread was full of little needles, little you know the kind of needles you have in your shirt when it's new.
- Q: Pins.
- A: Little pins. So if he would have bit into it he could have damaged his mouth. So much for the Hungarian Nazis. Another story was that my father, Jussi again stole beets. And that was another hot commodity.
- Q: He's developing a pattern here. Stole beets. Where did he find beets?
- A: Near the kitchen. They would sneak into the kitchen. Again these were all capital crimes. The three of them ate so many beets that for days their stool was red. That's all they ate was beets. Another story about my uncle Jussi -- this I think is later. One of the camps -- they were building something. I think it was a glass factory that was being built. This was toward the end of the thing so I'm skipping ahead a few months because the allies would bomb it. They had the three shifts -- the Americans during the day and the Russians at night.

- Q: The British at night.
- A: The British at night, right. So the factory was being built; they never finished because whatever they built is knocked down by the bombers. They kept bombing this thing
- Q: This was you say near Bergen-Belsen?
- A: I don't know.
- Q: Or Dora?
- A: Dora is one of the things, one of the camps. It may have been Dora. I know Dora was one of the camps my father was in. and so there was a little wheelbarrow that the prisoner has to push up on this little wooden plank at an angle. So they had to sort of run up to get enough momentum to get the wheelbarrow full of cement up on the plank and they would only fill the wheelbarrow half way up because you couldn't get enough momentum to push it all the way up the steep little plank. And so the Kapo who was a prisoner who turned, became one of them, especially picked out bully types, came by and he said how come you're only filling the wheelbarrow half way because you get more productive if you fill it fully so one of the prisoners explained that we can't because we can't push it up the plank that way. So he said let me try. So he had the thing filled up.
- Q: The Kapo?
- A: He personally had his own wheelbarrow filled up and he...
- Q: You're talking about the Kapo?
- A: The Kapo, right and he tried to push it up. He couldn't because it was too heavy. And bear in mind that the Kapo was in better shape than the other prisoners because he got more rations. And so he got steaming mad. He was very upset because not only was he shown wrong but he was also...
- Q: Shown weak.
- A: Shown weak, right. And so Jussi loaded the thing completely, the wheelbarrow completely and he went up -- just then he went up and he succeeded in going up the plank.
- Q: Jussi?
- A: Yes.
- Q: The same one that the Kapo couldn't push?

- A: The same one that the Kapo couldn't push. So the Kapo was very pleased. He gave him extra rations that day. So these were little tricks that kept them alive. There was one particularly long journey that they had to go on. They had to keep moving east because the British were coming.
- Q: This was east from Buchenwald? Remember we started in Auschwitz.
- A: We skipped a couple.
- Q: From Auschwitz we go west. Now do you have any knowledge of your father's leaving Auschwitz because that's the first step? We've got to get him out of Auschwitz before we get him to the other camps.
- A: Right. One of them was the cattle cars. In the beginning they still had cattle cars. Later on they begin to march on foot because again the German war effort required the trains.
- Q: And they were falling apart?
- A: Falling apart. So I guess I'm sure the first time or two they still had the cattle cars and they were stuck on the train for a couple of days. They didn't have any...
- Q: The three of them together still?
- A: I believe so, I believe so.
- Q: How is your Grandpa holding up? I mean he's got to be a good deal older to begin with.
- A: Yes. He was hanging in there at this point still. And the way they would get water they would stick those little cups I told you about and they would take-- I guess they had a string around the waist to keep their pants up -- and they tied that around the cup, one end of the cup, one string around the cup and they would hang it out the little holes in the cattle cars so they'd scoop some of the snow that was adjacent to the train as it went by so that was the refreshment.
- Q: So they were being moved around in the winter.
- A: Right. What happened to my grandfather was that they were being relocated at one point and they had to march on foot.

(End of Side One)

Q: So we were talking about your family is being marched from one camp to another and you were going to tell me something about your grandfather who is too weak or feeling weak.

A: His legs were giving out and he felt he couldn't take it. So the two boys, my father and Jussi gathered around him. They didn't want to leave without him so my grandfather told them to go and they still wouldn't go because they didn't want to abandon him so he commanded them, you know like invoked biblical thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother and he commanded them to go. And so they left. My father later learned that this camp -- the Germans of course were going to kill everybody, destroy the camp because they had to destroy evidence but this camp apparently was liberated by the Russians.

Q: The camp that they were leaving?

A: Right and my grandfather was liberated by the Russians it seemed, later my father learned because the Germans didn't have time to shoot the prisoners.

Q: But you don't know the name of the camp?

A: No.

Q: And you don't know when this happened, this separation?

A: No, I don't know.

Q: Time of the year? Nothing in your father's stories that reveal the season.

A: No, not that I can think of.

Q: But it wasn't Auschwitz?

A: I don't think it was Auschwitz, no.

Q: And it certainly wouldn't be Buchenwald.

A: I don't know.

Q: Okay, so your grandfather was liberated by the Russians?

A: Right, right and my father later learned that he was taken to Siberia but he never came back. The Russians treated the Jews as prisoners -- there were freezing conditions in Siberia and he apparently died in Siberia. I don't have any detailed knowledge on what happened to him because my father only heard through sort of people who came back from Siberia and it was sketchy.

- Q: So your father and your uncle are marching...
- A: But had they stayed in that camp they would have been liberated by the Russians and the Russian camp would probably be better than the death camp so it would have been a better deal.
- Q: Why was your father able to stay? I mean there's stories too of the Germans shooting people who couldn't march.
- A: Right, I guess they didn't have -- my grandfather -- I guess didn't have time to shoot him.
- Q: But your father and your uncle were forced literally at gunpoint?
- A: To march?
- Q: Yeah, I mean at one point it sounds like your grandfather commands them to march but at any point are they being forced marched by Germans/
- A: I don't think....
- Q: Would they have been free to stay if they had?
- A: I see what you're saying. If they had pretended that they were sick and couldn't march then they -- the Germans weren't going to go around sending around doctors checking everybody so I guess if they were pretending they were sick they could have stayed.
- Q: But did they realize that your grandfather would in fact survive that way? I mean very often the Germans would kill people who were too sick to move
- A: Right and I guess they sort of expected that because their attitude of not wanting to abandon him shows that, I think.
- Q: That's why I'm asking these questions.
- A: Right, I think they figured that he'd be killed but nothing was certain.
- Q: Nothing was logical.
- A: Nothing was logical, right.
- Q: So how about this march that your father and your uncle.....?
- A: Now here's the big march what happened. First everyone was give relatively big loaf of bread. Again my father's philosophy was not to save it but just to eat it

right away for fear of getting lost or stolen. And they'll be marched and it was a long march without food....you had to march I think like eight or four in a row and if you fell behind then you'll be shot because there was a German truck behind you. And see if you slow down --- but they didn't give you time to sleep so what happened was they would sleep, sort of sleep as they marched and so like lean on each other or something as they continued to walk.

Q: How long did this go on?

A: I think it was a three day trip.

Q: Three days without sleeping? No rest?

A: Without sleeping, yes. At one point they came across a marsh near the side of the road and they were so thirsty that the people started running for the water and the Germans started shooting because they didn't tolerate the lack of discipline. My father didn't run because he knew that despite like his natural urge, almost irresistible urge for water and for rest he kept going. And this is something else that happened. This sort of thing ? repeated later. At one point they were given a chance for a hot shower. There was a big room full of hot showers and the people would be there for a few minutes but then they had to come out, after about two minutes or so. And some people were so -- you know enjoyed the shower so much that they just wouldn't come out. The Germans would come in there with like with sticks and start beating them and they still -- you know people would just collapse under the shower rather than walk out because they were so deprived of any sort of physical comfort.

Q: And this felt good.

A: Right and this felt good. My father tells me that he wished that once more in his life he can get a full meal of baked potatoes and then he can die, you know like his last wish but to feel satisfied with a stomach full of baked potatoes.

Q: So where did they go?

A: They went to another camp.

Q: You don't know the name.

A: I don't know the name, some landmarks along the way. One time one of the prisoners took with him a pair of phylacterites (tfillin). He put it in his shoes. He snuck into the barracks at night. And so the people who were religious which I guess were most of them, I don't know, a lot of them stayed up all night putting on the phylacterites, just putting it on quickly and taking it off, just for a second because they weren't given an opportunity to pray.

- Q: Where had they come from?
- A: One of the prisoners snuck it in his shoes.
- Q: All of this time they had -- or was this a new prisoner?
- A: This was a new prisoner who snuck it in and it disappeared or something after a while. It wasn't like an ongoing thing. Also later on toward the end he used to stay out of the barracks and stay outside because the barracks were too crowded. If you stayed outside and caught you'd be shot but it was still worth once in a while because I think there were about four people in the bed or something. So what he did was he'd hide under the dead bodies so he could have a -- stay out you know.
- Q: Yet you don't know which camp this was? Probably Bergen-Belsen from my guess.
- A: Okay.
- Q: And he was never caught sleeping outdoors?
- A: No, I guess he wasn't. After time went on toward the end all they had -- their sole task -- they didn't have to work any more ??? enter the factors -- their sole task was to pull the dead bodies and pull them into this big grave. So they would have this little stick with a little thing, hook, at the end and they would put the stick like underneath the dead bodies -- I mean they weren't necessarily dead, you didn't know, you thought they were dead but you didn't have time to check their pulse or anything -- you put it underneath their chin and you pull that stick with the thing at the end and you pull the bodies that way into this big grave. You [indistinct] hide the evidence because the Germans were running out of time.
- Q: So prisoners like your father were doing this?
- A: Right, for months he did this.
- Q: Your father and your uncle?
- A: Yes. My uncle was getting very weak by this point.
- Q: Anything else?
- A: A few more things. When they were liberated...
- Q: This was at Bergen-Belsen?
- A: You know the British liberated them.

Q: Bergen-Belsen. Do you know the time of the year?

A: The time of the year, I don't know.

Q: Spring, '45, April.

A: Okay. So they came around with loudspeakers and it was announced in several languages that here we are to come to liberate you. My father was semi-conscious at this point. He was laying on the floor and he didn't really understand what was going on. He really didn't understand what liberation meant. So they -- the British came around with these sort of paramedics who would check who was still alive and they thought my father was dead because he was in horrible shape, emaciate and what have you. And my father sort of unconscious let out a sigh. He wasn't conscious of what was going on but I guess deep inside he had to let other people know that he was still alive because they were about to pull him away with the other dead bodies. So that's how he was saved and he was put in the same -- they were put in beds. There were two people per bed at this point because the British didn't have enough rations. And all the British had was these cans of lard that they had -- given to the prisoners. It was awful. Imagine swallowing lard without any other food or anything. So you had to like just swallow it because again my father would just eat anything to survive. My father informed the people that he had a brother, Jussi and that they should bring him to him. So the next night they were together. They were in the same bed. They slept head to foot. And Jussi couldn't swallow the lard because he was too malnourished or he just couldn't do it physically but he just couldn't swallow the lard. Had he been able to swallow the lard or had there been proper medical attention at this point he still could have been saved because -- Jussi still could have been saved because the -- you --- he wasn't like -- he was still conscious and he was still relatively speaking okay. And so like the next night my father woke up, the next morning and Jussi didn't move and that's when my father -- I think he had a major, a major I won't call it a nervous breakdown but he had a major sort of you know a major depression for several days or several weeks because this was the last member of the family, the last connection with reality that was still there for him.

Q: When ---I'm still trying to follow the chronology described. How many days after liberation did he die? You have them liberated. The British come in and then...

A: Within two or three days.

Q: The second day your father asked the British if he could bunk with your uncle and then another day and your uncle dies?

A: Right, right so it would have to be the first three or four days or something.

Q: So you'd say two or three days later. The other thing I keep wondering about is the lard itself. I mean of all the things to be eating...

A: Well this is surplus.

Q: Yeah, I know. I'm saying their stomachs and their bodies weren't used to very rich food. If it hadn't been lard, if it had been something more modest like just bread or a turnip or something it might not have done as much damage. There were thousands of people who died after liberation because they couldn't handle the food that the British gave them.

A: Yeah, yeah, the British were clearly under prepared for this thing.

Q: Yeah, yeah, so your uncle Jussi dies in Bergen-Belsen. Your father recovers.

A: Right. Actually when they were liberated what happened was they went into these showers and this sort of chemical was dumped on them to sort of delouse them.

Q: DDT probably.

A: And because they just had lice and what -- all these different parasites. Then he gets taken to Sweden. He was there for two year.

Q: Your father went to Sweden.

A: Yes. This rich benefactor donated his personal yacht to be used for the transportation of the prisoners to Sweden and my father tells me that they, like they -- there was this fake like leather seats and stuff. The prisoners tore the leather seats. And they just went berserk I'm not sure if it was envy or anger or just not being able to deal with luxury and they just tore the leather seats -- or .....(indistinct) have something for themselves so they tore the thing. My father had TB from his experience and he was there for six months and he recovered. The doctors didn't think that he would but he recovered from the TB.

Q: Where was he for six months?

A: In Sweden, a Swedish clinic.

Q: But he's in Sweden for two years?

A: Yeah, but for six months he was...

Q: In a clinic for six months.

- A: Yeah, right, and he couldn't, he couldn't --- he was very sick. For the first I don't know how many months he couldn't move, he couldn't get off the bed and he started learning Swedish. He sort of spoke -- he spoke German from before -- and he was able to get a German-Swedish dictionary and he got Swedish newspapers and he sort of taught himself Swedish. That was one of the other languages he spoke. He also spoke French.
- Q: Did he ever go back to his home- town after the war.
- A: Right, yeah, I'm getting to that. After two years or during his stay in Sweden he got in touch with his cousins who were in Nyireghaza and he opened up the hardware store again because again there was a period before communism after the Nazis.
- Q: Two years.
- A: Two years, okay so he wasn't sure because I think he -- this is sort of like apocryphal but I think one of the nurses he got really friendly with. I'm not sure what the love interest, whatever was. He rode around on a bicycle and he was very impressed by the socialist, or I'm not sure it was socialist but (indistinct) friendly ---- the outlook. One of the things --- that if they found a piece of clothing on the street that was lost the Swedish would like instead of keeping it for themselves they would take it and they put it on a tree or something or hang it someplace where it was visible so if these people returned, a person returned to look for it they would find it, that kind of thing. He was very impressed with that. And also just the generosity that there was a clinic for free. He wasn't a taxpayer or anything. And the general treatment by the Swedes. So then he -- but he decided to go back to his cousins in Nyireghaza. These cousins are now here in New York. They left Hungary later, before my father but after the war.
- Q: By any chance is one of these cousins the holder of your father's passport?
- A: Yes, yes. Mitsu was the...yeah.
- Q: So your father returns.....
- A: Father returns and then let's see and then they got the hardware store going and then the communists come. Hardware store goes again. Hardware store is taken away again. He goes to work in a hardware store as an employee. He marries my mother who's home is Budapest. She was vacationing near Nyireghaza. She's from Budapest.
- Q: She meets your father.
- A: Meets my father and then later they get a license to open a private wire fence making shop. In Hungary you're allowed little enterprises like that.

Q: Where was the Shop?

A: Nyireghaza.

Q: So your mother leaves Budapest to live there with your father?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: She must have really loved him.

A: Actually she'll tell you about this but her conditions were really bad. She was an orphan after the war living with a great-aunt that was very mean to the three children and her conditions were really -- compared to his....

Q: Okay, I understand. But I mean normally a person doesn't leave Budapest to go to this little town in the boonies. So when do they come to America?

A: 1977.

Q: So late? So they lived in Hungary until 1977.

A: Right. I was born there. I was born in Hungary. I was ten years old.

Q: 1977 so they saw a lot. They saw Maj they saw Kadar.

A: That's right and he went through communism, he went through fascism, he went through all these great twentieth century theories.

Q: And there was no looking back when they came here? They never returned.

A: They never returned, no. Actually they intended to go to Israel all the while but then my sister married an American and she moved here. That's why they came to America.

Q: When did they marry by the way? Did they marry in the -- it must have been the late forties.

A: Fifty-three I think. Uh, uh check that. Let me think. I don't know. My sister was born in '53, I think. Let me think. I was born in '66 and she's twelve years older than I am so she must have been born in '54 and I think that they were married three years when she was born so I think they got married in '51.

Q: '51. I'll put '50, '51. Your mother will know, I'm sure. She'll know the exact date.

- A: Yeah, she will. And then they came back. Oh, I have to go back. When they came back, before they came back he asked -- the Hungarians had moved into his house and so he wanted it back but they wouldn't give it back to him. There were certain pieces of furniture that he wanted back and I think there were a few things that he got back but there was a whole lengthy process. See the Hungarian courts at some point were very favorable to the Jewish claims because they knew that the fascists are out and...
- Q: And Jews could not be considered I imagine as being fascists or pro-fascist. They were safely anti-fascist. And you couldn't say the same about other Hungarians.
- A: Right and if you were perceived -- if the court or to the judge was being pro the people who took ?? the fascists you may be..
- Q: You may be accused of pro-fascism.
- A: Right. Again this was the time when the communists, wasn't communists but saw the communists were coming.
- Q: They were coming.
- A: Yeah and the communists weren't too fond of the fascists either. So that's why he was able to get some of his furniture. He found some of the stuff that was hidden like he found his box of thread and stuff
- Q: Did anyone from his family survive besides him?
- A: No. His five siblings and his parents died. He was the only survivor except for these cousins but they were not immediate family.
- Q: But in the immediate family everyone died.
- A: Right.
- Q: Grandparents, parents and siblings.
- A: Right. One little quick story my father told me that one particular Jew he came back and he, how was it, he demanded -- he demanded his property and he got into a fight with the Hungarian, the non-Jewish Hungarian owner. So he got into a fight and the Jewish guy slapped him so the Hungarian guy sued him for battery or something so they went to court. Again the court was sort of reluctant to award a lot of money so they fined him a relatively small fine, fined the Jew a relatively small fine so the Jew took out twice, twice the fine that was assessed, gave it to the judge and slapped the Hungarian again. He said it was worth it. Do you have any particular questions?

- Q: It seems that you've covered I mean everything that you would be able to remember. Obviously you weren't there. It would be nice to know the camps. Fortunately I do have your father's summary. That's why I was able to put camps in your mouth so to speak. I know that he was in Dora and he was at Bergen-Belsen and so forth.
- A: Where is this from? What are you reading here?
- Q: This is from the American gathering, the registry, the one (??) had all the photos on?
- A: Oh, Okay.
- Q: And I think after we've finished with the tapes if you would I would ask you to name your father's other brothers and sisters.
- A: I don't know their names. I just know Jussi.
- Q: Your mother might know.
- A: Actually there's a cousin that might know actually. We have a cousin who with his help....[indistinct]
- Q: That's it really. Thank you very much.
- A: Thank you.
- Q: And I look forward to talking to your mother.
- A: Okay, thank you.



