

Unauthenticated

Interview with George Topas
April 7, 1992
Lakewood, New Jersey

Today is April 7, 1992. I am Anthony Di Iorio and I am at the home of Mr. George Topas in Lakewood, New Jersey. I am here on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to interview Mr. Topas about his recollections of the Holocaust and about the history of his family. Good afternoon.

A: Good afternoon.

Q: Could you first tell us something about yourself, where you grew up?

A: Well, I was born in Warsaw to a well- to- do family on November 3, 1924 and I was brought up at home. We had a villa in Shaborov which was about 20 minutes train ride from Warsaw in the country where I would spend the summers. Later on I went to a Hebrew academy in Warsaw and went through my grade school there, and had my Bar Mitzvah in Warsaw in the great synagogue and remember playing in the parks and doing the things that kids do. I had two brothers. My younger brother was named Syzmon. He was born in 1928, 27, excuse me, and was roughly three years younger than me and I had another brother Meir who was born when I was already nine years old, in 1934. I remember his birthday in particular because it just so happens that my grandmother's sister and her husband and their young daughter, about my age, came for a visit to Warsaw from America and it was a big event in our lives to see the Americans visiting us. So despite the language barrier between us kids; because they could speak Yiddish, you know, the grandparents could speak Yiddish and my parents could speak, it was something of a sensation in our home to see, you know we were not used yet to see kids that were not disciplined, sort of dominate the attention of the whole household. And after graduating what you would call elementary school in Warsaw, I was admitted to gymnasium, which is high school and went there for one year. But about that time, the clouds of war began to gather and my father thought of sending me to agricultural school. I guess the reasoning behind that decision was the fact, well there were several considerations. One, that I was not doing so greatly in gymnasium.

Q: You weren't the greatest student in the family.

A: Except for history which I took genuine interest. I didn't show great promise at that time. I don't know in what order of urgency these considerations came but there was the consideration that Poland, they came and _____ for the Jews and my father already at that time, I think Austria was already next to Germany, and Czechoslovakia was next in the frying pan and blackmailed by Hitler at the time, you know the whole incident with Sudetenland and so forth, that served as a pretext for German aggression there. At any rate, my father felt that immigration became imperative for us and he felt that someone with a farming background would have a greater chance of being admitted to a foreign country than a merchant or professional. I don't know just how true that was but farmers were always readily admitted to countries like South America and Canada. Canada was then considered unpopulated and my father mentioned Canada as one of the possibilities of our immigration. So the decision was

made that I should become a farmer or at least I should learn farming and I was sent to that school in a place called Wajenuswolinsky {ph 55} about 350 kilometers southeast of Warsaw and I began my education in farming there.

Q: All of 1938?

A: This was the summer of 1938 because I arrived there just in time for harvest which was the worst period from the standpoint of work, the fact that we had to work nothing like we consider work today, from sunrise to sunset. But once the harvest was over, then we began class work. As the season neared winter, work was progressively reduced and class work increased. And that's the way it went. But of course, I never graduated from school because the war broke out.

Q: Which work did you like or dislike the most, the schoolwork or the physical labor in the fields?

A: Well, I was not too much enamored by the work in the field but I did like work with the animals, with horses and cows and other animals we had there on the farm. I found it very interesting and I became a very good student there, too, so that school had from a standpoint of my upbringing and maturing, had a very favorable effect on my attitude towards learning and many other things. So much so far that I surprised my parents when they saw my school report.

Q: Were there other Jewish students at this school?

A: There were only Jewish students at this school. This school was under the auspices of an organization called Tarbot which I think is Hebrew name for culture and the principle objective there was to train Jews in agriculture so they can immigrate to Palestine and become farmers. This was also a consideration even though my father when he mentioned Canada as a possible place for our immigration, he considered Palestine as well but unfortunately, the British then had a policy of, a restricted policy of immigration to Palestine and it is a strange thing that when we mention today Palestine, today Palestine has a completely different connotation. In WW II. The Palestine brigade that fought with the British 8th Army, consisted of Jews alone from Palestine, from Israel as it became. Now the connotation conjures visions of intifada and mayhem and gang of cutthroats, you know that are

Q: Anti-Jewish in a word.

A: Anti-Jewish. Right.

Q: So this was a school that was affiliated with the Zionists?

A: Zionist orientated. It was, you might say it was soft on religion, aspect of it, but the religious life in the school was accented to a certain degree and all the holidays were observed and so forth. I remember that we did not work in the fields on a Sunday, besides Saturday, also not on Sunday in order not to offend the Christian peasants in the area, to respect because it was their day of rest. So we were only working internally on the grounds, on the grounds proper.

Q: Were there any Socialistic aspects in the school?

A: No.

Q: So it was more religious?

A: It was mainly Zionist oriented and graduate students went to Palestine after finishing this school. In fact, there was a reunion of survivors of that school in Israel in 1966, 1967 I think and I happened to be there for the Bar Mitzvah of my second son, Matthew and we found out that there were about half a dozen survivors, all of them living in Israel except me, so they made it. They joked around and they said "Topas remained the only Zionist among us". Because I was living in America and they were there and they served in the Israeli army, one of them achieved a very high rank in the army. And only one of the fellows that graduated the farming school remained a farmer.

Q: Did you dream of going to Palestine during that year you were at the school?

A: Yes. I had my sites set for Palestine. It was something very attractive to us, to be in a land that historically we take our roots from and for a couple of millennium there was a continuous history of the Jewish people and since we are persona non grata in Poland, in most of the countries of the world in general, then Palestine loomed very largely in our consideration.

Q: Were there any other reasons why you ended up going to this particular school, do you recall what it was like to be Jewish and to go to public schools for higher education at the time?

A: I have never been exposed to, I have been only once in public school for a very brief period, one year that my mother sent me to public school. I don't remember the circumstances. But other than that, I was always going, for instance, the primary school that I went to, the prep school so to speak was a Hebrew academy, one of the most modern of it's kind and had a religious orientation. Modern. Then I went to gymnasium henu which the Hebrew word denotes upbringing, you know. Then I went to this Tarbot School and I think the reason they sent me there was they wanted me to be in a traditionally Jewish environment.

Q: How would you describe the religious life with your family when you were growing up?

A: Well the religious life with the family is really interesting in itself. To that extent that my grandparents were assimilated on my father's side, not my mother's side. But since the grandparents on my mother's side lived in a distance away from us in Forst we didn't have much contact with them. But in Warsaw, we virtually lived with our grandparents. We were living in the same apartment building. My grandparents were assimilated; they did not observe the Jewish holidays according to the law, meaning our stores were open on Saturday; although holidays like Passover and others were observed, they were observed to the extent they didn't interfere with business. And my father was a very strong opponent of assimilation himself and he sort of fashioned himself or fancied himself as a Polish patriot. So in 1920 during the Bolshevik invasion, he joined the Polish militia at the age of 16, probably not telling exactly the truth about his age. He was so bent to have a part of it you know in defense of Warsaw. But as he matured, he was exposed to the anti-Semitism that the assimilation did not make a damn bit of difference to the anti-Semites. All the Jews are the same. So he was a thinking individual. One of his pastimes, his contemporaries told me was going to courts and listening to trials because he liked the idea of logic expressed and the questions of law, questions of morality, questions of right and wrong, very interested, good and evil. So eventually, eventually, he became aware that, or he came to the conclusion, that assimilation for the Jews as a means of

acceptance in a non-Jewish society was a failure and he felt it was a bankrupt. Although many people at the time majority disagreed with him and he was a maverick in his belief. So at time already when I had reached the age of 7, he became religious.

Q: So by the time you were seven he had concluded that assimilation was

A: He might have concluded earlier but this was when he had made the move. And our house became kosher and so forth. Because in my childhood we had a Christmas tree and we were well-to-do so it was fashionable at that time to hire German governesses because they were so clean and disciplined and so forth and I remember kneeling and clasping my hands to say a prayer in German. This was in Warsaw. But this radically has changed. For my father became religious and began to realize that the values that are contained in our tradition now, Torah and our bible, are the values that are enduring, they are tested and that society, it is to benefit not only to the Jews but to mankind to live by a law when morality is supreme, not other things.

Q: Did you notice this when you were seven? This must have come as a major change.

A: It was a major change. In fact, I remember exactly the time when my father made me aware that I am a Jew. Because I was sheltered you know in my life in Warsaw and in schools and I was not exposed to the, I never found myself in a situation where I was exposed to anti-Semitism nor did I understand what it really meant. We lived in Poland so I was Polish. That's the way I understood it. But one time when we were in our country in the summer, I might have been then seven, that I recall that towards evening my father called me to the bedroom and he told me to sit down. I want to talk to you and he told me very briefly that we are Jewish and that we were enslaved in Egypt because this is the core of our belief and of the historical, factual tenets of our belief and that we were taken out of Egypt to become a free people., to become a people to be a light to the nations. He said a few things that were just beyond me perhaps but then I came to learn this and I was taken out of the school I was going to and I was sent to a more religious oriented school. And we underwent a revolution and somewhere we were alienated from our larger family circle because of my father's change.

Q: Your youngest brother then, he would have grown up from day one in a very religious household.

A: You are very observant. That is exactly what happened. When I gave you the names, I told you that my name was Yusick because I was born in the era when my father was in the mood of giving Polish names and my brother's name was given originally in Stanislav although his Hebrew name that was given at his circumcision was Szymon just as mine was Benjamin Josef for Joseph Benjamin. But when my third brother was born, it was already in the era when my father's orientation was completely changed, the name that was given to him was Meir, after my grandfather's father. He was brought in completely different atmosphere from birth.

Q: Would you describe your father as a strict father?

A: I think that I would have to say yes, as a strict father. Although he could have been quite relaxed, you know, and forgiving on occasions, but he was strict. He believed that the key word we have to focus our attention is righteousness. To him, this is all and all -- to be right, to be moral, to be truthful. He felt that our civilization as we know it stands or falls with our ability to comprehend that. That this is significant. Of course, today, this is all turned upside down by

the new social science engineering which says everything goes and everybody can have his own style and so forth.

Q: How would you describe your mother?

A: My mother came from a religious home but she was somewhat of a rebel. Perhaps not consciously so but it was simply a question of economics. She was born as one of four sisters to a family where the head of the household, meaning her father, my grandfather, Hersh Aram, was a hat maker. And he was a working person and he was also Talmudist, studist. When he was not working he was spending his time in a house of study, in a religious house of study. Now, she did not see any, this is by conjecture, she didn't see future in following this tradition. Because they didn't have big dowries. At that time, dowries had to be given with daughters to anybody who was worth his weight in salt.

Q: And you had a grandfather with four daughters.

A: Yeah, four daughters and she was the second in lineage. Three of the four daughters went into the professions because they have seen they have to establish some economic independence. There was just no future for them in the town. Excuse me, in the town. It is still a town. It is now even more significant. I guess Poland calls it the capital of petro chemicals in Poland. And I revisited the town when I was there in 1989 and I found the apartment where my grandparents lived and possibly where they brought up these four daughters. Now, this, in the United States would be way below poverty level because the whole apartment consisted of one room and a kitchen and six people lived there. It is just hard to believe. And I remember visiting there on Passover and my father would take us there and they were always immaculately clean. Everything was so perfect -- they didn't have running water. They didn't have a bathroom, no plumbing there. It was just a bewilderment when we first came to visit. My father already became religious at that time because before, we didn't go there. And it was contrast of two worlds that were completely, you know, there was the cosmopolitan Warsaw with floors that were polished to a mirror shine with two maids in my grandma's home and plumbing and a bidet in the bathroom and all the conveniences and amenities of modern living. Whereas in Proust, it was backwards, only by contrast and they had to live there very frugally. So my mother must have realized early in her life that her future lie with her ability to support herself and to make something of herself, other than just being a woman and going through the biological process. Her older sister Franya, you'll find out in my book, they're in furniture, you'll find out that she had two boys and she was married to a painting contractor but she herself was a teacher. My mother was going for law but she married a wealthy husband, a well-to-do husband, a merchant, a businessman and Idacha the younger sister became a CPA, you know a public accountant. I don't know if she was certified, if such a thing.

Q: A notary?

A: She was definitely a notary and she was also a bookkeeper. And the youngest one was with the family. I don't think she went in to a profession; she remained at home and never married. They all perished in the Holocaust, except my grandfather who died a few years before the war. The youngest daughter's name was Razel. So this was the background. When my mother came to Warsaw, she _____ in the university in the school of law. In other words, you must realize that I believe that only 5 or 3% of the Jews could be admitted to any state institution. She had first to get through high school, an eight year course. As she said in her own

application here the document that I obtained from the archives, she says on her basis of her entry examination she was admitted to the state's gymnasium. She covered a course of 8+ course in 7 or 8 years, perhaps in 7 years. And then she was admitted to University of Warsaw. Before, they had this clause about bench clause and father restrictions but there were still restrictions about how many Jews could be admitted. And she had two handicaps -- being Jewish and being a woman.

Q: And being from a small town, by Warsaw standards.

A: By Warsaw standards. So in order to support herself, one of the jobs she had was a tutor to the Topas boys. So she was a tutor to my father and his brother Itzak and his youngest brother which was my uncle Ben. And this is how people fell in love with the tutor.

Q: Not everyone has such a beautiful tutor.

A: Well, the results were predictable.

Q: Your father was smitten.

A: He must have been. And he married very young. My mother at the time was 23 and he was 19 when they married.

Q: Did your grandparents have any say in this matter? It must have not been the planned marriage of their dreams.

A: Indeed, it was not. As I understand it in retrospect, they were very much opposed to it, because in Europe it was not like in the United States where you have misalliances between rich and poor and between professional and non-professional. There was a class-consciousness, even among Jews so that it was unlikely that a person from a well-to-do family would marry someone from a very poor family by contrast. And my grandparents were opposing too on the ground that the fact that they wanted someone from a more prestigious family than some obscure town in Poland and they didn't like the idea that my mother was older than he. Four years older. They didn't like that. But apparently they were overruled.

Q: By your father?

A: Probably by my father. He wanted to have his way. My mother was never very happy living in such close proximity to my father's family because she realized the objection and she realized she was married over these objections.

Q: Interesting. How about your father's brothers?

A: My father's brothers were not affected by this religious revolution and my uncle Neteck which was the second in line was a very handsome bachelor as you can see from the existing photographs, who was a bachelor for a long time and didn't get married until probably maybe a year or two before the outbreak of WWII and his position in the company was that he had the job of administrator of the properties that my grandparents possessed, owned, and he was also the head bookkeeper in the company that fabricated shoes, Topaz Shoe Company. But I have very fond memories of my uncle the bachelor. Bachelors have money. Married people have

responsibilities and bills. And he lived with the grandparents. So my brother Szymon and I and my cousin Lela, which was the daughter of my father's sister Bella Necovyak who lived with them there, we would come on Sunday morning when my dear uncle Neteck was still sleeping in his room from the Saturday night outing trying to recover, we would be waiting for him to wake up sort of helping the process and then we would mooch from him movie money for the matinee to go and see the movie. And we would scan the daily paper to tell him what are the choices and he would open one eye and say are you here already. And he knew to buy his peace he had to give us some movie money and then we would ask him for transportation for the streetcars. Sometimes he would say, "It's such a beautiful day, why don't you go to the park?" "Why do you always have to go to the movie?" That is one of my fond memories that he was very generous that way. I also remember that he bought me my first two-wheeler. My parents probably couldn't afford it, even though they were well off but they had expenses.

Q: And kids.

A: And kids. That means the same.

Q: Now I remember that your brother, from your description, he had to have been a hell of a nice guy. I don't know whether he was a great student.

A: Who is that?

Q: Your uncle.

A: Neteck? I don't think that he distinguished himself particularly. He graduated high school. He might have taken a course in bookkeeping and administration, I don't know exactly. But the one who distinguished himself scholastically was the youngest son, Benack. He was distinguished in many sports too, that's why we remember him. The newspaper clippings would tell us about his prowess as a soccer player on a team called Hapoyal which was one of the first line teams in Warsaw. It was a Jewish team. Hapoyal means the worker. That didn't sit well with my grandparents who first of all were opposed to any socialist ideas and my grandmother thought it was a sheer waste of time to be engaged in sports of any kind and incur an injury or something like this and I understand he incurred an injury and he had blood infection. But I remember that when he graduated high school and I was still then very young, he didn't want to go or perhaps he couldn't get admission although he was a very good student, to the University of Warsaw and he wanted to go for chemical engineering. So he went to the Polytechnic in Prague in Czechoslovakia, and became an excellent chemist in his field. He survived the war and when he came to America he couldn't get any employment. But eventually he got a job with Dutch copper and later on with Merck Pharmaceuticals when he distinguished himself in silicone research and made some pittance for them and later on became a director of research and went to Marshall Rectify in Los Angeles and he told me one time that the rectifier that weighs about a ton made by General Electric was made by him that weighs as much as a book of matches.

Q: We were talking about your uncle Benack, the chemical engineer. You were saying that he went to Czechoslovakia to study.

A: In the German Polytechnic there.

Q: In the 1930's?

A: In the 1930's, yes.

Q: Just before the Nazis came to Czechoslovakia?

\A: He graduated before the Sudenland, before the occupation. He must have graduated around circa 1937.

Q: What was he planning to do? When he finished graduating, what would he have done in Poland?

A: Well, in fact he did graduate and he got a job with a sub clinical lab in Poland so he was gainfully employed as a chemical engineer.

Q: In Warsaw?

A: In Warsaw.

Q: And what were you hoping to become: I remember you were interested in history and also you had an inclination toward animal husbandry after that first experience at the college in southeastern Poland. What was on your mind to be?

A: Well, once I got my feet wet in this agricultural school that my parents sent me, I really became fired with enthusiasm for being a farmer. I thought it was a great life, I thought it was a meaningful life because being close to the soil, you are close to nature and it is a very healthy life and since there is some ideological being associated with it because of Jews, basically we are a nation of farmers and freeholders. If you study ancient history, you'll find out that in it's classical period, the kingdom of David and the kingdom of Solomon when the fortunes of the Jews were at it's highest peak, most people were farmers. There were some _____, but they didn't have a class of merchants. In fact in Israel, when they spoke of merchants, they spoke of Canaanites. The Canaanite merchants, they used to come to temple grounds and sell trinkets or whatever it was. I am told there was a slogan, a motto that was displayed at the main road leading to the school buildings as you would approach the field because we had a 50 acre farm there and the name was, said in Hebrew _____. That means for us to return to the plow as we have moved from the plow to the scale, meaning to merchants. Because the Jews were forced in medieval times and even in earlier times in exile, they forced out of so many avenues of life, they couldn't own land, so they wound up as businessmen. So the stereotype of a Jew as a businessman which emerged in Europe was not the true echoes of the Jewish people as it was then. At the time of Moses, that came not out of propensity of the people for that particular subject but because of necessity. So I felt that we are going to turn the clock of history and we will straighten this out and we will become farmers again. Idealistic I was fired with enthusiasm, not on a single argument, but on all these that I have mentioned by others but that I cannot think of now.

Q: So this reversal of medieval, social engineering so to speak.

A: Yeah, medieval, social engineering.

Q: I remember earlier you described the family reunion. The relatives from America and the differences in the way in which children behaved and also the language. What were the languages used in your family?

A: Well, my grandparents spoke to them in Yiddish because this was the language that was always used as a back up language. Also used so that we wouldn't understand it -- they wanted to say something to each other. My parents were also fluent in Yiddish so that I think this is the language they used. They might have reverted to Polish because, still, my grandmother's sister and her husband came from Poland. They emigrated only after World War I there. They still remembered the language so they could speak Polish but their daughter, Jean, was a very beautiful girl -- she was actually my brother's age. I remember they went for a walk in Warsaw. They got lost and finally we got a call from the police station that they found them in the park. They were lost and they came to the police station. Someone from the adults took a taxi and brought them back. She couldn't speak Polish but she knew a little Yiddish that she picked up from her parents and we just didn't know -- we communicated by body language.

Q: Which languages did you normally speak?

A: Polish.

Q: Polish. I imagine you studied Hebrew?

A: Hebrew, yes, yes.

Q: I remember a little bit of German earlier on. Did you study German too?

A: I took German as my -- there was a choice given in gymnasium, usually in Poland. It was either French or German. There was a choice. That's besides Hebrew and, of course, besides Polish. Sometimes they would give you an option of English. We didn't have this option. But I learned English anyway through a tutor.

Q: So your household, would you describe it as being a Polish- speaking household?

A: Basically it was a Polish- speaking household.

Q: That didn't change your father underwent his ____?

A: This didn't change.

Q: Now, your uncles that we mentioned. They did not experience the same religious conversion that your father did:

A: No.

Q: They continued to participate in the assimilated culture?

A: Right.

Q: We've mentioned the shoe store. Perhaps we should describe how the store was founded and by

whom? I know the name of the store was The I. Jacob Topas Store.

A: Right. But I think the founders of the whole Topas Enterprises were actually my grandfather, Jacob Topas and my grandmother Etta Sara Topas. It's hard for me to determine after such a long time something that I was not private to, just exactly who had greater share in the dynamics of the expansion of this. But it started from a very modest beginning. Because after marriage, my grandmother tried to develop the talent that my grandfather possessed. He was a person who modeled ladies' shoes. He had a flair for this so she exploited him to the extent that she wanted to set up a store that would manufacture handmade, custom-made shoes that would have his imprint on it, his model. I think this is the way it originated. First, I think that they had a place on Pyskas Street but by the time I was born they already had a flourishing store in Warsaw, in the same building where we had also an apartment. Later on they opened two more stores in Warsaw, one on Nowes _____ and one on Mar _____ which was the main thoroughfare of Warsaw. But eventually, towards the time close before the outbreak of war, only the main store remained functional. Because they found out that they don't need three stores in Warsaw, that people will come to this store. Because it was unique, because of the hand-made shoes. This shoe store catered to the intelligentsia and to the theater circles; people who could pay a good price for a good pair of shoes. They were not inexpensive. Then we also opened a store in Katovitz before the outbreak of the war. My father ran that for a while but the Polish government forced him out by saying that they are not going to allow anybody to set up a store who was not a citizen as of 1920 or something like this. Some restrictive measure that were calculated against Jews, So we had to liquidate that store also about six months before the outbreak of the war.

Q: That's interesting. So the anti-Semitism of the Polish government was --?

A: Was also economic.

Q: Economic, yes. And of course, there was no Polish state before 1918, 1919?

A: I really don't know what they used as a cutoff date as to who is allowed to have a store or not to have a store. Because initially we had representation there, someone that had stores of shoes already and was just buying our shoes because there was a demand for them. The demand was so great that we decided, I mean my parents and grandparents, decided that perhaps they should open a store there where they can also benefit from these sales to a greater extent than wholesaling it. So they went ahead and did it. But this didn't sit well probably with the merchants -- shoe merchants in the city and they put pressure on the officialdom to out stop us.

Q: Were there any other changes regarding your father's companies' business situation? I know there were other laws being introduced in the late thirties at this time regarding Jews. Did you know of any ---?

A: There is one event in the history of our business that I only know second hand from my uncle. He was closer to the center of action there than to know it. He claimed that the Polish government had a war debt. I think probably 1920—1919, 1920, war with Russian Soviet Union. That the Jews were disproportionately, very heavily assessed to pay this. He told me that my grandfather, in the course of several years, had to pay something which would be in American pre-dollar value, a quarter of a million dollars but in Polish currency was close to a million zlotys which was a unit of Polish currency was defined. The ratio between one was like

five zloty to a dollar.

Q: Was there any chance that perhaps one of the stores was liquidated in order to help to pay this off?

A: This is quite conceivable. It might have been because I know that some real estate was sold in order to meet that --- those demands. Because my grandparents owned land in the country where we had our villa. (End of Side A, Tape 1)
I was mentioning the properties which my grandparents owned. They also, as I understand, had a building in Berlin. This dates to the time that Poland was occupied; the occupation of Poland. They also had an apartment house in Danzig. But by the time I was born, all these properties were liquidated or sold, possibly to meet the demands of the Polish government. You know, the assessment as to how much of the debt is taxable to us. Poland had a peculiar labor law. It permitted occupation strike which meant -- in actual experience this is what happened. Our shoes were hand made. Most of the shoemakers which were employees were kind of the cottage-industry type meaning one who was the master craftsman employed journeymen and helpers, apprentices in his own household. He would come to our office and get the materials and the models and so forth and he would bring the ready-made products and was paid for it. He was paid in advance and he was paid when he finished it. If there were some corrections to be made, he would have to do that too. So they were individual shoemakers, perhaps a hundred or so that were making the shoes for our company. Now they became members of a union. I remember distinctly that a few years before the war, there was a strike but they called it in Poland an occupation strike, which meant that they were permitted to come into the stores and occupy the seats that normally are reserved for the customers. But the strike provided that they had to leave enough seats so that business can continue. Because I cannot conceive of a customer feeling comfortable in a store where there is a hostile strike.

Q: A labor conflict?

A: Conflict, right. So I recall that strike and I remember an incident there that was largely discussed and talked about later. That one of the strikers, a heavy big guy, not only did he sit on the chairs but he stretched himself across several chairs to occupy. My father took him and forcibly threw him out the store. But the thing that struck me later is that I don't recall that any of the non-Jewish firms were ever affected by such a strike. This strike was eventually resolved and everything then returned to normal, but it was one of those things that the Jews were not the first-class citizens in Poland.

Q: Even if they were well off?

A: Even if they were well off, I would imagine. Because a Jew always has to prove himself as a citizen. For instance, when the threat of war loomed against Poland and the Jews wanted to show their loyalty, especially against Germany so there is in a book called Image Before My Eyes by Lucien Dobritsky, there is a photograph of a Jew donating actually a military aircraft to the Polish air force as a show of patriotism. But it didn't help.

Q: As if anyone could have suspected or expected Jews to be in favor of Germany in such a war.

A: But they said -- the Polish parliament, which was only debating since the death of Puchentsky, was only debating I should say since 1935, was only debating the Jewish problem and attributed

all the economic reverses or problems to the Jewish question of being a large majority there. Although the largest majority were really Ukrainians, minority I mean.

Q: Minorities, yes.

A: Were Ukrainians. But this was most of -- the Jews disturbed them.

Q: So the Jewish problem was the greater one than the German problem?

A: Because they made it so. This was what was debated. When a Jewish member of their parliament, their Same as they called it, came out and he said that we should confront; we should unite and should confront a common enemy; so the response was that these are two separate questions. That the Jewish question and the German question have nothing to do with the Jewish problem. That's the way -- that was the answer

Q: The workers, the people who made the shoes, were they non-Jewish or Jewish?

A: Non-Jewish. In that -- shoemakers were all non-Jews. Now there are people which are doing the tops and they were mostly Jewish because this is something that trade that falls within the sphere of Jewish interest for some reason or another.

Q: The customers would be of all faiths?

A: Yes, very heavily Christian. Because the product was known and you still can find people today that are of my age who live in Warsaw; they all remember the shoe store in Warsaw. Because it was a known firm, it was a known name.

Q: Now, 1938, which was the last year you were in Warsaw before the war; that was also the year when the Germans were expelling Polish Jews back to Poland. Do you have any recollection of any of that? Did you witness any?

A: Yes, we seen people with bundles that were sometimes seen on the street. My father would point out to me and say these are refugees from Germany. Also we seen photographs in the newspaper, pictures in the newspaper of the rioting. The stories that were behind them; where they were stripped of German citizenship and the Polish government declared quickly that they stripped them also of the Polish citizenship. So they were people without citizenship; it was very sad; it was a foretaste of things to come to an unimaginable proportion and degree.

Q: Earlier we were talking about patriotism, the Polish patriotism of your father. I recall when we were looking at the photographs, that you mentioned other family members who were involved in various patriotic efforts; either when Poland was just becoming independent. I'm referring to the war against the Soviet Union in 1920. Then I remember too, there is someone who is in the Russian army at the time of the Russo-Japanese War?

A: Yes. Poland, as you know, was occupied and didn't regain its independence until 1918 and prior to this, it was partitioned and occupied by three major powers which was Germany, Austrian-Hungarian empire and Russia. Warsaw was mainly under the Russian influence and Russian zone, so to speak. The Russian government tried to -- they had a very strong intensive program of reciprocation, so the language in high schools was Russian and Russian was the

language that you had to do business in Poland, in official Poland. Also when people were drafted into the army, they went to the Imperial Russian army. Now my grandfather, probably still a bachelor, was drafted into the Czar's army and was sent to Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese war. I remember him telling me stories of how cheap life was, of how many times they executed Chinese. The Russians were executing Chinese and they were frightened of the Russians. The Russians might have cast the fear among the Chinese; they didn't do so well with the Japanese because we know that the outcome of the war was not favorable to Russia. But he served with them. I don't know, I couldn't tell you just how long. I know he was with his friend who became his brother-in-law later because they married two sisters when they came back from the war, back to Warsaw. My future grandfather, Jacob Topas married my grandmother Esther Topas. So this was one experience of the military. I don't think my grandfather volunteered but my father did volunteer to the militia as I mentioned before, during the Bolshevik invasion and was very patriotic that way. In fact my father served in the Polish army later on already because there was a conscription, also Metek served in the Polish army for a short period of time. My father was a non-commissioned officer in the Polish army and after serving it, probably at a time when I was born, he also had to go periodically. He was recalled for maneuvers and for a few weeks of what they called exercises, military exercises. My father believed that we, the Jewish people, should be loyal regardless of anti-Semitism regardless of the inequities that existed in the social sphere of life, the economic discrimination --that we still owe allegiance to the country that we live in. In that respect, there was no question about it. He was also a realist and he knew that we have to get out of Poland because we are an endangered species there.

Q: My recollection is that even your mother was involved -- in describing her experiences at the University of Warsaw and then the tutoring work that she did. There was a document that you showed me earlier ---.

A: Yes. That document showed that after graduating high school in 1918, 1919, she, during vacation time, did volunteer work in what they called Polish soldier home, which is apparently, I would imagine it's a convalescent home for soldiers that were injured in that 1919-1920 war. So she was briefly employed there or volunteered her services. She introduced that certificate and other certificates similar where she worked as a teacher in a school sort of to support her application for law school in the Warsaw University.

Q: This was in 1920 when she was helping, helping to care for the Polish soldiers?

A: Soldiers, I think so.

Q: Which would have been the middle of that war?

A: Right.

Q: Yet, one of your family members was considered not to be a citizen of Poland? Or not a citizen of Poland early enough? I remember when you were talking about your store and --.

A: All right. This was not a citizen of Poland but a citizen of the city. This is kind of a discrimination, sort of compartment -- put in different compartments. You can be in this compartment but you cannot be in the other compartment. What it meant is that our family opened a branch of our store -- I think they opened it probably in 1938 ---. After six months of

existence, the Polish government of the city of Kapolt _____ ordered them out because they claimed that they were not citizens of the city, or dwellers or residents of the city at some undetermined time which would otherwise by implication permit it. Justify them being there, prusterick.

Q: Of course, Katavista was near the German frontier and I imagine they were more paranoid than usual of all the border area.

A: I think that basically they couldn't possibly -- they couldn't question my father's credentials since he was a reserve non-commissioned officer, volunteer in a war against Russia. It was simply a question of economic discrimination.

Q: Economic anti-Semitism regardless of patriotism?

A: Right.

Q: Now meanwhile you were off to the east, studying to be a farmer. I imagine you had mixed feelings. You obviously liked being near animals. You wanted to be a farmer and yet you were far away from home. You had left the big city and now you're in the sticks. I suppose. For Poland that was the sticks.

A: You're going to make me say things which are in my book, really. I am firm about that but you are very perceptive in understanding that someone who came from a big city suddenly changes his environment to a very raw surroundings in a sense -- that we had to haul our own water, even in our dormitory and we were always exposed to the elements. The creature comforts that our home provided were very remote there. It was not easy to get assimilated there. I remember from the first class -- there were maybe thirty students that started the course. By the time of the fall harvest, of the potato harvest, it was reduced to about twenty. Because the others quit, just packed up and went home because it was just too tough for them. But with me, it was very tough and I was always on the verge of quitting during the harvest. But I said -- I felt that it was an embarrassment to come home and say that I failed. So I said, let me see if I can hold out at least another week because it doesn't look good to come after the first week. So by several such resolutions, I extended my stay beyond the harvest time. Eventually I got to like the school and I took pride in being able to work there and being knowledgeable about crops and about animals and animal life. Anything that relates to this type of life interested me. I had a genuine interest in it that was developed by a very dynamic teacher and director of the school, a fellow named Yachim Scholinsky who still lives in Israel. A very dynamic person who made study an excitement. He put excitement in it which you don't normally find in classrooms.

Q: Where were you when the war broke out?

A: When the war broke out, I was in that school.

Q: Almost harvest time again?

A: Well, it was past the harvest time because the war broke out on September 1, as you know, and the harvest usually starts in the middle of June and continues up to this point. Hitler did very well by waiting for the Poles to gather for him, all the harvest and put them in barns where they

can easily have it picked up for their own use and for the army's use, there was feeding off Poland,

Q: Were you surprised by the outbreak of war?

A: Yes, I was surprised by the reality of it not about what you read in the papers. Because the movies and the papers, they create a different image and illusion of what things really are until you are really directly affected by them. The outbreak of the war was excitement and sort of loss of interest for school subjects. The school authorities suspended classes and they had dismissed all the students to go to their respective hometowns except for the contingent from Warsaw. Because they said Warsaw is under bombardment and for our own safety, we will remain in school. Because our school, I think the war broke out on Friday morning, I think on Sunday our buildings were already occupied by the Polish army because they were quartered there.

Q: In what other ways does the war affect you? School is closed, Polish army takes over the school, your home is besieged by German forces --?

A: Not yet, at the very beginning, but it was under heavy pressure and bombardment because Warsaw -- there was a mass bombing raid on Warsaw before the war was declared. This was done on September 1st

Q: And those continued, the bombing attacks?

A: Yes. Sometimes I think, I don't know if the war was declared, maybe at night or at 10 a.m. but it was already much later, hours already into the race where most of the Polish air force already was wiped out on the airfields before they got up in the air. So they definitely were taken by surprise -- those that shouldn't have been taken by surprise. We heard on the radio Friday morning at breakfast time, we heard about the attack on Warsaw and about the war. Of course, there were mixed emotions. There was a lot of excitement but there was also great concern. What does it mean? What does it portend? But the authorities were very reassuring. They said the war will soon be over and everybody will go home. I don't know whether by this they meant that Poland will win the war or there would be an armistice and the newscasters were very bombastic and enthusiastic in their reports. Of course, we didn't know, we didn't have the idea, the ability to be critical. We had no critical ability to be able to sort of digest the essence and what truth is in it. You would hear -- a broadcaster would say like this : The Polish cavalry is fighting in East Prussia like wild lions.

Q: You had never seen a wild lion before?

A: But that was a kind of metaphor meaning that they are fierce fighters and also that they are -- the Polish army is advancing on Berlin. I mean this was like on the first or second day of the war. When England and France joined the war on the third day and we could hear the English national anthem and the Marseilles played over the radio, there was literally -- the newspapers were hysterical. They felt that the war is going to be finished in a matter of -- in a short time. Nobody really predicted any specific time but the feeling was that it was just a question of time.

Q: That Poland would win?

- A: That Poland, together with England and France would win.
- Q: When did you realize that Germany would win this one?
- A: When they told me that -- and I was in the city of Lublin -- that the Germans would be here in one hour. In a city and Lublin was under bombardment.
- Q: It's way to the east.
- A: It's past Warsaw, right.
- Q: What about the Russian invasion? Did that come as a surprise?
- A: It was anti-climatic but it came also as a surprise. Perhaps to many people it was a welcome surprise because out of the two evils, many people thought that if they went to the Russian zone -- in the beginning it was very easy when they divide because the border was not firm -- there was an influx of people both ways and they were not yet -- they didn't have yet a strict instruction, how to handle the border movement across the border. So that anybody that thought, believed that he was better off being on the Russian occupation than German -- a lot of people made that choice and then they went. They made a wise choice because they had a greater chance of survival in Russia even those who were sent to Siberia. They were displaced, they still had a better chance of survival because there was no deliberate effort by Stalin to destroy the people, no matter what nationality.
- Q: Unless they were Kolaks or _____ or bourgeois or _____ of production.
- A: Or Polish officers in Katin. That's an interesting aspect of the Polish officers in Katin that many people don't know about it. A lot of Jewish officers were among these Polish officers and they were killed including the chief chaplain of the Polish army. The Jewish chaplain of the Polish army.
- Q: What was your greatest priority in September 1939 as your world is falling around you? What is your --?
- Q: To be reunited with my family.
- Q: Reunited with your family in Warsaw?
- A: Right.
- Q: What is happening to your family in Warsaw?
- A: I didn't really know what was happening to my family. I could not establish contact. I don't know whether the telephone lines were still functioning in the few days of the war but I know that I managed to send a telegram to my mother asking her to send me money for a ticket to go back to Warsaw. I don't know whether she send me the money in time or whether the authorities gave us the money to buy the tickets because eventually they relented and they told us that we can return to Warsaw. I think there were about five or six of us that immediately began to pack and go. I remember a very interesting incident. When I was in the post office

standing in line to send a telegram, there was a line -- the post office also had the national savings bank of Poland which was called PKO, _____ -- that means Polish Fund of, Saving Fund, which was government fund and people were using savings books. So there were two Polish women standing in line talking to each other and very patriotically that they still have confidence in the Polish government and that they are depositing. They were depositing,

Q: Eventually you do return to Warsaw?

A: I didn't make it to Warsaw. I never made it to Warsaw. The irony of it is and you can find it in my book that when I came to the cashier's window in _____ with other students, I said Warsaw. So she said the eastern railroad station or the main? The eastern being on the east bank of the river, the main being in the center of the city of Warsaw. I said, main. She said that will be 50 cents more or something like that.

Q: They charged you for it?

A: I gladly paid for it because I had sufficient funds to pay for it. The irony of it was that we never got near Warsaw.

Q: Well, you didn't know it was surrounded, right?

A: Of course. Not only was it surrounded because the train traveled for about 40 or 50 kilometers and the railroad tracks were going skyward.

Q: The aerial bombardment?

A: Right. There was no further railroad transportation --from there on, we were on foot. We never got any further than Lublin, the city of Lublin.

Q: In retrospect, retrospective knowledge, what were your family experiencing in Warsaw during these months?

A: You mean, actually weeks of the war?

Q: Yes.

A: What was not known to me and I found out later by miraculously meeting with my father in Lublin is that the Polish government -- there is a controversy about it by historians. Some claim that the Germans, on Polish language gave the order in Polish to the Warsaw population that all able bodied men of military age should march east for mobilization where they going to make a defense deeper in Poland, in the country. This was given on the night, I think, of the sixth or seventh of September. Then my father and his two brothers were of military age and the followed these orders. They marched east of the Vistula River and they marched east without any specific destination but they continued to march east where they were being strafed by the Stuka planes. But this order, a few hours later was countermanded. I think the name of the officer that gave the order, countermanded it, was Romanowski. By that time, it was already too late. Because I think the afterthought was they wanted to defend Warsaw and all the manpower that would have done the defense left Warsaw. So my father and his two brothers

were actually on the road with thousands upon thousands of men and easy targets for the German Luftwaffe to strafe and to kill. The casualties were tremendous. Eventually my father lost contact with his two brothers in the confusion that ensued and he got as far as Lublin. I found him on the evening of Rosh Hashanah, New Year's, in the synagogue where I went to pray. I lived there too and I seen my father there.

Q: So it was a chance encounter?

A: Yes, it was unbelievable because there were thousands upon thousands of refugees that converged on Lublin and flooded the town way beyond its normal population.

Q: Were the rest of the family back in Warsaw, were they affected at all by the bombardment? Were there any ---?

A: Yes, the building that we lived in, the artillery destroyed part of the roof of the building. One of the bombs struck the courtyard and killed a couple of people who were in a doorway, didn't go to the shelter. I was also told that there was a maid in our building, in one of the store that were in the building -- there was a drugstore by the name of Prusak. Prusak was a very nice man. I think it was a family store. He was the son of the owners and used to give candles and other things to kids when they came in with parents. He, somehow, got set on fire by a firebomb and became like a human torch and was burned alive during the bombardment. They had no water because all the facilities were disrupted so people literally had to travel to the Vistula River with buckets to bring water. The utilities were not restored until the Germans took the city at the end of September.

Q: So your brothers, your mother, your grandparents --?

A: My grandfather, not grandparents because grandma left for United States on the last ship before the outbreak of the war.

Q: That's right. So grandpa is there and what was the plan? When your grandmother left to go to America, what was the plan?

A: The plan was that she is able to help us in some way. Possibly to see if she can send us affidavits so we all can go. Because she went on a tourist visa and ostensibly to see the World's Fair. But in reality, she had a sister living there that visited us a few years earlier. They were bakers here. So she went to see this sister. My father and the family here hoped that she would be able to help because by that time it was already too late. My grandmother was granted a visa and, of course, after obtaining the visa, she had to buy the ticket. The name of the shipping company in Poland is called Orbees to this day.

Q: The same company?

A: My father later told me that there was such a melee in the office of wives of important Polish diplomats and government officials, they were asking to get a ticket. They had no problems with visas and so forth but they were sold out. They would say that they would sleep on the deck of a ship if there were no more cabins. You know, they couldn't get it; they knew already what was coming.

Q: This was on the Puzutski the ship?

A: Yes, Puzutski.

Q: Interesting that some of these people had less confidence in Poland's ability to withstand the German attack. You mentioned a family of diplomats and so forth.

A: Right.

Q: So your grandmother was able to help you from America?

A: Yes, well this happened sometimes later. It was not-- after the order was restored in the occupied Poland and they allowed return to Warsaw; we left probably already in October sometime, in later part of October; by horse and wagon rather than by train to come back to occupied Warsaw. My father immediately proceeded, engaged people to repair the building, the roof in the building and to restore it because otherwise we wouldn't have shelter. And it was actually in the later fall, perhaps in November of that year, we didn't get packages. We got affidavits for the whole family to go to the United States. My father studied these affidavits and debated whether he should go to German authorities to obtain permission to leave. I don't know what specific reasons were given but he never made use of these affidavits because the fear was that there were already some other people that have American relatives reported and they were imprisoned. This was very strange because American was not at war with Germany at the time. So we never made use ---there was great excitement and expectation, the great expectation -- but it sort of was left in abeyance. Bur later on, of course, we didn't feel it so badly at that time but soon famine came and Russian and all this. And things got progressively well. Then the packages began to come from America, from my grandmother. She used to send an average of six packages a day. In the course of two days every member of the family would get a package.

Q: And you would be able to correspond with her?

A: We could correspond with her. The mail was going, it was censored, we had to be careful what we are saying. We couldn't make any complaints. We understood this, that we have to be brief in expressing. We had to sort of let her read between the lines.

Q: How long did these packages continue to come?

A: The packages came until the breakdown of the postal system in the Warsaw Ghetto, meaning until the Germans put an end to it which was a few months before the deportation to Treblinka, the big action as they call it, the Grossactuen which would put it in May of 1942. The packages became sporadic, eventually there was a cut off point but they were our lifesavers because the famine in 1941 became very severe. If you read the notes, the Ringlem notes of the Warsaw Ghetto, you'll find out that people were dying at the rate of 400, 500 a day. It was twice as much already in '42. These packages were a thing that made a difference between us living or dying of hunger. Because we had no other resources that I knew of at the time. We had some hidden shoes but it was very dangerous to sell them even in a clandestine fashion. The rations were not enough to sustain life. I remember during the time of famine in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941 that the children would just go in groups on the streets, after the curfew; I think the curfew was 8 p.m. But it was not dark yet during the summer months so they would walk on the streets

barefoot with the swollen legs and beg for alms and beg for food. One of the standard lines they would say, Yan_____ which means I don't want to surrender my ration card. Surrender meaning dying, so they were begging for bread. My parents would always do something, however inconsequential this would have been to withstand this.

Q: What did your grandmother send?

A: The packages that we would get, I have a feeling, were not something that she, herself, prepared. There must have been an agency that handled and she just paid them for it. But it had canned goods like sardines, it had coconut butter, a can of coconut butter which was very useful because my brother, my youngest brother Meir, had a touch of tuberculosis and he was spitting with blood so he needed that. They would send us Salem Lipton Tea, I remember. Lipton Tea was worth its weight in gold because you could get -- coffee and tea was at a premium, above other commodities except maybe for bread. So some of these things we used and some of them were sold in order to buy bread.

Q: So she helped feed you and she essentially gave you the wherewithal to supplement?

A: She gave us a lease on life.

Q: Yes. And everyone received a package?

A: Well, everyone received a package by families.

Q: Who would she address it to? To your -----?

A: Different names of our family members. But we understood who was -- it was for Shimatopas, it meant it was for our family.

Q: For everyone, yeah. What happened to the shoe store under the occupation?

A: Well, in 1939 I believe, in November, late October or November, the Germans had arrived and confiscated all the shoes. It was quite -- the shoe store was closed already and they came in. I remember when they were standing; they rang the bell in my grandfather's apartment which was one flight above the shoe store in the same apartment building. It was a four-story apartment building with a courtyard in the center and apartments surrounding it. I remember the chief gendarme said, Is das de grochen _____? _____, Isaac Yacob Topas? So when it was answered in the affirmative, then they graciously told him that he could keep something like 20 or 30 pair of shoes, or whatever. They gave him a receipt for it and they said the rest will be confiscated and he will have to help to load up the trucks, himself. He and my father and people that were caught on the street to help out with this, so there was kind of a, like a bucket brigade carrying the shoes to those trucks that were being loaded.

Q: Do you remember when this was?

A: I would have to look in my book for exact date but it was either in -- the closest I can think, November, more likely November 1939.

Q: So the Germans knew who your grandfather was?

- A: Well, they had information about shoe stores and businesses and so forth.
- Q: I was trying to imagine when we were talking about the affidavits earlier, the reasons why he wouldn't pursue that and I thought to myself, well perhaps he didn't want to call attention to himself, especially since other people were being arrested. ---presenting yourselves to the Germans?
- A: Well, I have a feeling, because this happened later, even more so. That anyone, this was probably among the Jews more prevailing this, that reported to the German authorities and showed they had affidavits and wanted to leave for America, the Germans could let them go, they could tell them to go home, or they could put them in prison. We knew in Poviac which was the most wholesome prison in Warsaw that they had some Jewish families that had American --. We didn't even want to let them know that we had American relationships although the packages would have indicated this. But they didn't care. Food packages is this kind of thing, that it doesn't have any political significance.
- Q: But it's curious that the Germans were consciously trying to starve the ghetto of Warsaw and yet they allowed the food packages to come.
- A: Absolutely. Because it was a drop in the bucket. Maybe they would feel differently if it was a real organized Jewish effort in America to send packages by the thousands to cover most of the people in the city. Then they would say that it would be counter to their policy of starvation. In fact, my grandmother's sister with whom she lodged at the beginning after she arrived in America, there was a limit on what she could take. She couldn't take currency, just a few hundred dollars, from Poland when she came over to visit. But she had some jewelry and she was using that to cash in the jewelry to send us these packages. But that was not enough and she had to go and sought a job and found -- became a nurse, kind of a live-in nurse with a paralyzed woman so the income from this, from working as a nurse, she would use to send us these packages. She is a big heroine in our family. She did this and her sister, I found out when I came to the United States, was trying to dissuade her and would say, Itala, that was her name she was called by. What are you doing? What are you knocking yourself out? They are not going to get these packages. The Germans are going to confiscate all these packages. Therefore you are doing it in vain. My grandmother, and this was a very persuasive argument because it is always easier not to do something than to do something, kind of a law of gravity, if she listened to her, we would have perished sooner. I probably wouldn't get the point where I can start my concentration camp career.
- Q: That's right.
- A: I wouldn't get that far.
- Q: You may not have survived the ghetto either. I mean there were all kinds of ways of not surviving.
- A: Absolutely.
- Q: Do you recall any other -- I can remember you had an introduction to farming and no doubt you were able to put some of that training to use in the ghetto?

A: Well, the training of the farming stood me well in several ways. First of all in that school, it was a bodybuilding process. The hard work. I became, I was what you call a strong fellow, a young man. Secondly, it gave me the knowledge of agriculture and ability to work on a farm. In the Warsaw Ghetto there was an organization called Toporol, T-o-p-o-r-o-l, which stood for _____, means a society supporting agricultural work. That opened courses in the Warsaw Ghetto for people interested in this and I took those courses. This way I became affiliated with this organization.
(End of Tape 1.)

In the summer of 1941, perhaps even in the late spring of 1941, the Toporol organization, that organization that was dedicated to the agricultural work, sees an opportunity of utilizing all empty and vacant lots of buildings or just squares -- to utilize them in growing vegetables for the starving ghetto. Of course, it was a puny effort in comparison to the need where you have half a million people, nearly half a million people, starving in the walls of the ghetto. But nevertheless, the effort was necessary even if the produce that came from all this work was distributed to the students that were working on it. Because it was not that much that they could -- it would be very difficult for them anyhow to get it past that point. I was at a time, already sixteen years old and I was made, appointed, one of the instructors. I remember there was a large plot, yard in the street, Leshner Street, not far from where we lived where I had two groups of students that were coming. One for two hours and then the next one for two hours and I was showing them how -- we were working those lots and I was showing them how to do it. They were very eager kids, even some of them were, of course, undernourished. They were very enthusiastically interested in the work and doing this work. In fact, one of the girls that was in the group, not in my group but in the group of another instructor who was sick and I was sent there as a replacement one time to fill in, remembered me long after the war and sent me a letter to this effect, which became an appendix to my book. She is trying to find out whether I am the same person who acted as an instructor at the time. These kids were very eager and we were planting lettuce, radishes, tomatoes, I remember, cabbage, very basic things in a kind of garden farming or tract farming as they call it. I was also assigned on a Gensha Street prison and I also remember working at a cemetery on Gensha Street and there was a very stark contrast between what we were doing. We were pruning tomato plants for the living, while perhaps a 100 feet from us or less, there were people being buried in mass graves. Usually the method that was used, they were using a chute from the back of a wagon into those graves. The work was going on all day. Those people were being -- the dead were being collected. By that time the famine was very severe. I was occupied with this job, which sometimes the reward was to the students and the instructors that they could pick up some of the crops of their own handiwork, own labor and I think that the instructors were also getting, weekly, a loaf of bread.

Q: Were you an instructor as well?

A: Yeah, I was an instructor. That was what we were getting above the students, the people that were coming in these groups. In the end of June of the same summer, a call went out from this organization for able bodied men, whom they have on their roster already, to report for volunteer work in the states around the Lublin district to help with the harvest. My parents very quickly consented to me to go. They would have one less mouth to feed and the conditions in ghettos were very bad. By that time, my brother Szymon also already had a touch of tuberculosis. He was spitting blood. This is even with the help of the packages we were getting from America. It was just not enough. We were shipped to the district of Lublin and we worked there. We were quartered there and worked there. Even after the harvest I managed to

stay there until February of the following year. This was a very significant factor in my own personal survival from the standpoint that I was able to eat normally during that period of time and live in a healthy environment of the country, quite a contrast. In fact after I had been a month on those estates, I thought to bring my brother Szymon there, somehow. There was a small post office and I managed to make a phone call to a store that was opposite to our apartment building. My father came to the phone and I told him about this. He said that my brother Szymon didn't look like a Jew and he could pass for an Aryan easily -- that he should come and join me, that he should send him out of Warsaw. He came and he stayed for a few months. Of course there was a problem there. He got homesick and eventually he left and went back home to the ghetto.

Q: Because he was homesick?

A: Yes, because he was homesick. But I did not go until it was absolutely -- I found out that it was dangerous to live there because we no longer, we were no longer needed there for the harvest in February, right? So in February, I returned. We were almost shot in Denblin en route by the German authorities who did not recognize our pass or came within seconds of not telling you this whole story. There were many such incidents because I was also involved in smuggling and I cannot go into this. There was just too many schemes and escapes and whatnot. I returned to the ghetto in February, found out that my grandfather, Jacob Topas, the founder died a few months earlier.

Q: In January?

A: From typhus epidemic that was raging in the Warsaw Ghetto from famine because the sanitary conditions were very poor at the time and the overcrowding brought in lice and lice begot typhus. So you had everything together. But apparently all these things that the Germans put in operation to strangulate the economic life of the Warsaw Ghetto and to bring the demise of the Jews, didn't happen for them fast enough. So the inevitable thing is that they had to resort to a more drastic method of bringing about the end of the Jewish community in Warsaw and in Poland. In April of 1942, a reign of terror started in the Warsaw Ghetto. We began to talk about building shelters; something was impending, we didn't know exactly what. The packages from America stopped coming. I forgot to mention that when America entered the war, my grandmother resorted to ---. She was very resourceful, she contacted someone in the Portuguese embassy or consulate and the packages were coming -- the point of origin was Portugal. Portugal was neutral so we were getting packages probably until spring of 1942. Then the whole postal system, the whole ghetto system began to break down. The Germans, as I mentioned to you, launched a reign of terror in April of 1942. They kept it up. Later on I learned that this reign of terror was to paralyze the will of the people to resist for what was coming, for what they had in store for them. That was the "resettlement" action. Resettlement meant shipment to Treblinka. It started by them posting the declarations or the ordinance that the Jews should report voluntarily to the umschlagplatz, the umschlagplatz being the depot from which the trains were leaving for Treblinka.. They would go east, they would obtain shelter. Those who report voluntarily would receive jam and bread and surprisingly enough, the first day, which was July 22nd and this happened to be Tish a'Bov, the day of mourning for the Jews for the two destructions of the First and Second Temple in 586 B.C. and 70 A.D. by Babylonians and Romans, respectively; so the Germans launched this action. The key ingredient in carrying it out was deception. Deception being that the Jews were promised to go to the east where there's work, shelter for them and they imagined that nothing could be worse

than the ghetto so the poorest of the poor began to report to the umschlagplatz with their luggage,. The Germans tolerated it. The first shipment, the people received the bread, they received the jam, they were able to take their luggage and they were put in the box cars and shipped away. But within 24 hours, rumors spread as a wildfire, that someone escaped from this transport and that Treblinka is really an extermination camp. I remember that evening when we heard it in our homes ---.

Q: So already in July of '42 ---?

A: Yes, I think within a day or two we already knew what Treblinka meant. Many people didn't want to believe it, we believed it. In these circumstances-- by that time my brother and I were already in a Luftwaffe camp, my brother Szymon. In other words, he -- we both report as volunteers to go to Luftwaffe camp yet before this action was launched. This was kind of a transition from the agricultural work into the Luftwaffe camp and this was a forced labor column. We were not quartered there; we were still living with our family and were just coming to a point at the Warsaw Ghetto gate where two Luftwaffe guards would take us to our job. Sometimes they used streetcars for part of the trip. There was a place called Bilanie; there was a big storage of Luftwaffe equipment, paints, and maintenance things for aircraft when we were supposed to work. But initially they got us cleaning bricks in bombed-out houses. I don't know why but I said to myself, we are back in the brickfields, we are back in the brickfields. Symbolically we were reduced to the status of our ancestors in Egypt. But this still was, comparatively, benign to what was in store for us in this forced labor column. When the action was launched, as I mentioned before, on the second and third day, there were no volunteers to go to the umschlagplatz. So the Germans began isolating and putting a dragnet on certain sections of -- block by block of the city and emptied the houses. They also would come in, when the Germans came to conduct this with their trucks and wagons, sometimes, they usually marched people, those that could march. Those who were already immobile, they were handicapped or they were so starved that they couldn't walk, they threw them in the wagons and they took them that way. They could come in and announce that they would respect all the passes because the people were working for German industry; they were working maybe for the ghetto government, like the Judenrat; they were working for the city or sundries which was the police; maybe they were working for the hospital; they would be all exempt. So they were ---.

Q: They would respect these passes in the east after resettlement?

A: They had an assorted degree of authority that in the beginning, they respected them all. As the time went on, they were less and less respected. I didn't have any pass so that if I was caught, I probably would have been shipped out to Treblinka too because we were simply assembling every morning before the action started, however, early in the morning to go out and were brought at the end of the day, to the point, to the gate and then we were on our own to get home.. But after this action went into effect and was already in effect for a week or two, once we came to work, the captain said when you come tomorrow to work, bring your things with you because you're going to be here, interned for your own protection. Then he looked at the faces; he passed all of us in review. The whole group of about two hundred people. He looked at my brother and he said he cannot come tomorrow, he's too young. He also, maybe, exempted another kid and that was the end of it. When we came home, the ghetto was in such a state of terror besides this, that the German SS men were riding in rickshaws. You know what the rickshaws were? They were those bicycle-pedaled three-wheelers where the passengers are sitting in the front and the bicycle-peddler in the back. They would ride in the bicycle-pedaled

rickshaw and they would be firing at the windows at the people and the crowds wherever they see them.. So we were literally dodging bullets when we were coming back from our work. Of course, after that incident, after we were told that we're going to be interned there, I realized that I'm going to have to part from my family. The morning after this, when I got up in the morning, my father was still praying. I said goodbye to my mother and she was packing some of my things that I was going to take with me. I said goodbye to my sweet brother Meir, my youngest brother, Meir, and to Szymon. Then my father gave me a blessing; it was the first time I'd seen him cry in my life because he was a very steady influence. He was a very self-possessed individual and confident that somehow we're going to get through this whole ordeal and so forth. I don't know what was going on in his mind but if I did not realize it, he must have realized that we are parting for good.

Q: You didn't realize it?

A: No. I was too much of an optimist. I was too young. I'm sort of a romantic in a sense that I think that hope can overcome reason.

Q: And you had managed to come back before. I imagine that you had a feeling that somehow you could manage. From Lublin the first time, and then coming -- I imagine each time you walked back from work, there was sort of a feeling of survival, giving the random violence that was going on?

A: Correct. I also had faith that evil cannot vanquish good. So in the long run, I don't think that there was any doubt even by those who perished that Germany will be defeated and that they're going to win the war. The question is when. But there was no doubt that Hitler will lose that war and that the Allies will prevail and win. But meanwhile, we were in their grasp so such optimism has a limited value and effect on your well-being. Of course when I took my last glance at my father, that was it. I haven't seen him again nor my parents. I went to this camp. We learned that in October, Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment, was the last day of the shipments to Treblinka. In fact, the Jewish police had the honor of being put in the last transport to Treblinka because they were promised that if they cooperate in the round-up of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, that they and their families would be spared. So they and their families on the Judgment Day were spared until that point but then they were also shipped. I guess there was some poetic justice in that.

Q: Symbolism at least.

A: Right. I began to realize that if I wanted to know what happened to my parents and to my family, I would have to return to the ghetto. But you just simply cannot say I am leaving. We were by that time already interned, we were prisoners, we were not free people. Although there was such a nebulous air about it as to exactly what is our status there. We worked there; they intern us for our own protection. That means if we leave, we are just taking risk with the protection. But, in reality, you could be shot for leaving without permission. I began to plan an escape. The way I went about it, I reported that I am a shoemaker by trade and that we have people here whose shoes need repair. If they are going to continue to work, someone has to repair their shoes, that I should be given the opportunity to do this. In order to do this, I need tools and equipment and I can get these in the ghetto. So they send me with a guard to the ghetto. On the second such trip, I escaped. I left the cart waiting. Then I began to -- I had to go where our home was. By that time, the ghetto was reduced in size. There was what they call

Niemand's Land that means Nobody's Land and it was not permitted to be there but there was a group that the SS employed in the Warsaw Ghetto of Jews which was called Vertafastak. Vertafastak was sort of a clean up group that was confiscating all the -- collecting all the goods of the people that were no longer there. Furniture, books, belongings, clothes, whatever else those that were deported to Treblinka left behind. It was a big operation and a large contingent of these who were working. They would be doing it by streets.. I reported to work with such a group and when they went there, I separated myself from them by just ---. There were so many people walking upstairs and downstairs and there were only a couple of guards usually at the gate. I went on the roof and through the roof I walked to the roof of the adjacent building, came down and eventually got to the area of my own building which, of course was deserted. But I found out that behind iron doors, back doors of one of the delicatessen stores, which really delicatessen in Poland means something else, means like a grocery store. I found out that the survivors there who knew me and who were tenants in our building, that my mother perished, that she was one of the first -- in one of the early raids -- and they told me that my father might still be around but they don't know. Eventually I met in this Niemand's Land another person who had a store also in the building. His name was Bart and he told me to look; he told me that there is reason my father and my brother survived in there someplace, perhaps in the camp. Without going into much detail, I never found out anything more beyond that except returning once with the group I found that my Uncle Melek survived and he's now in the small ghetto. I went to him. He, in turn, told me that my grandmother, my maternal grandmother survived by hiding herself in a clothes chest and her sisters, three sisters.

Q: These are your mother's sisters from Plutz who were moved to the Warsaw Ghetto?

A: Right. They survived and they were on U_____Sreet, not exactly where my uncle was. I went and found them and I lived there because there were also two kids in there, while I was working for this Vertafastak operation. This I did this until January, In January, I heard a rumor about cleaning up the umschlagplatz again so I went to the arbeizen which is the work office. I was sort of casing the joint as the word goes and I found out that another Luftwaffe guard came in with a Jewish foreman or leader and they were looking for volunteers. When I ascertained that they are not from Bilanie but from another place, from Orcencia which was the airport, the largest airfield to this day in Warsaw, I volunteered for this group. Also forced labor column and I was able to stay with my aunts and just go every morning to work. But when the action started and the Germans surrounded the ghetto on January 18th or 19th, 1943, I found myself in a dilemma-- -- how to get -- the problem how to get out and rejoin the group and not get caught in the net, in the dragnet. Eventually through Visu_____ who is a friend of Mead who was an artist in the process of painting the picture of the commanding officer of the airport, he and his brother, and a few other fellows gathered that morning and a call was made to the Luftwaffe camp from the Polish precinct. Polish police and they sent guards and brought us there. There we were for a while until the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. In the interim, I made another foray to the Warsaw Ghetto with another guard to obtain some things from my uncle, some clothes he gave me.

Q: Uncle Melek?

A: Uncle Melek. The book tells you about the details because I had a fight with him there. But this I felt that he was hoarding some stuff that he got from the shoe store and that he was not sharing it with me. Anyway, by that time, the Warsaw Ghetto was already in its residual stage, was in the final days of its existence. By that time, we didn't know about it, but the resistance

organization already was functioning. One of the things was when I visited my uncle under guard, from this Orcencia Luftwaffe camp, there was a shot fired. We run to the window and we found out that there were just two Jewish civilians that fired and killed one of the informers, Gestapo Jewish informer. You could see that the Germans didn't interfere with it, they didn't care. In April 18th or 19th, I think, the Passover marked the Warsaw Ghetto revolt which was a reaction to the German entry to the ghetto to start to "resettle", to liquidate the ghetto. Also from Orcencia, some weapons were smuggled to the fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto. I didn't know it, exactly how they did it and who was ---. I was not among the insiders. From our airfield, planes took off to bomb, firebomb the Warsaw Ghetto by the Luftwaffe and we knew about it. As the Warsaw Ghetto was going up in flames, rumors spread that they're going to liquidate all the camps around Warsaw including the one where I was interned. It was a small camp, a little over 100 prisoners.

Q: It was run by the Luftwaffe?

A: By the Luftwaffe. We were working at the airfield. There was a Yunkirst enterprise, a dismantling division of aircraft, shot down fighter planes over Germany that was brought in there. This is how the weapons got sometimes in the hands of the fighters. They were found in these planes. I think on May 12th, we were being, we were sent to the Warsaw Ghetto under guard. At that time, the Warsaw Ghetto was already in ruins but the fight was still going on. We were taken to the umschlagplatz and shipped to Majdanek. I didn't know about it but we found out we were shipped to Majdanek, we decided not to jump the train, not to make any efforts, because we knew we were on a line that was not going to Treblinka; we established that point. But it turned out to be that we were slated to go to gas chambers anyway. In Majdanek, also there were gas chambers.

Q: But you didn't know that?

A: We didn't know that then. My father perished in Majdanek; I didn't know that then either. Because this was posthumously and after the war. Anyway I cannot tell you all the details because I would be getting too emotional as to what has happened on this trip but we were lucky that we were only -- by that time -- since what was coming was anticipated, about fourteen guys escaped from our camp. What was left was about 88 men because I remember when the Luftwaffe turned us over to the SS at the umschlagplatz, they said, _____ they yelled. So they said _____. There was 88, this is how I remember there were 88. We lost one guy in the melee in Majdanek but we saved some other people that were behind us and were sent to a camp named Budzyn. There was a miraculous saving, something happened in there that was just unbelievable. I describe it in detail in my book and we were sent to Budzyn where there was an aircraft Heinkel Aircraft plant, probably the worst camp in the penal system as far as treatment went by one named Fikes. Reinhold Fikes was the commanding officer in the rank of a sergeant and he was an incarnation of cruelty and bestiality in what he did. In that camp, I stayed about eleven months. This camp eventually became -- was an SS labor camp -- became a concentration camp. The difference being that they put us in striped uniforms. Before we were wearing our civilian clothes. This was a time where I registered as a chemist, as an inventor and later on this resulted me working on this super-weapon development which didn't turn out anything but it was a good vehicle to ride out the remaining months of the war. From that camp, we were sent to a camp called Plaszow near Cracow. From Plaszow, we were shipped to Flossenburg. In Flossenburg, this group was really commissioned so to speak, really put to work in what was reputed to be a super weapon.

Q: Is this the same group of 88.

A: No, no. The 88 had nothing to do with it. There was a registry because we were sent to Budzyn ---.

Q: This is when you became a chemist? You were in another group?

A: There was another group because the camp had over 2,000 people in Budzyn. This group was only maybe 50, 60 people large and it was an aggregate of people from different camps. Budzyn had a contingent in it; Plaszow picked up a few people. But eventually we were being set up in a sort of lab to work in, in Flossenburg. That's where the real work went in. It was an unbelievable experience because I learned English working in this lab. There was nothing really for me to do. I found an English textbook and David Copperfield and I learned English, found a tutor as well, among the prisoners.

Q: A Jewish inmate?

A: Yes, named Goldfarb who was teaching me grammar. But there was a group of prisoners who was actually working on plans for this device, as the Germans called apparatus. There were some rumors as to what it could do if it were successful in doing it. It fell into the realm of the semi-fantastic. I spoke once to my uncle who was a chemist, about it, and he says that what they propose to do could not be achieved. It was unobtainable but they thought it was. The Germans were not fools; they apparently were convinced that something could be done. This project was not such a local thing. We didn't know about it at the time but it claimed the interest of the highest echelon of Nazi power. I have a telegram that came after my book went to print, which is addressed to Himmler to grant permission to move this group, which is essential to the war effort, this is German's writing, a Jewish group essential to the war effort . Do you see the paradox in this? If we help them win the war, they're going to exterminate all the Jews. To the war effort and I have a reply from Himmler's office, from Himmler's headquarters, that he grants permission and that the matter should be taken up with so-and-so to transfer the Jews, the scientists. So we're working there. Eventually, when this project did not produce a mousetrap, it was disbanded and it was just a few weeks later that the Allies armies were already close to Flossenburg. I don't know how close they were because I was on a death march for about three, close to four days. We were liberated in April by the 11th Armored Division and of course, then I realized what happened to the other members of my family. I knew already in the Warsaw Ghetto, from my Uncle Melek, whom I found after I came from The Orcencia; I met him after the Orcencia place, I was in his apartment. He told me that Uncle Ben is hiding on the Aryan side of the Warsaw Ghetto and that Rose, his wife, has Aryan papers, works for German industry. She hides him in her apartment. I found out that possibly that my Uncle Sevek, the orphan --cousin who lived -- one of the three orphans brought up in my grandparents' home, is also some place in hiding but he didn't know where. He didn't know whether he is still in hiding or whether he perished. But beyond that all contact was lost and I have not learned of any details of any of my relatives except that I found out that my father, through _____ Tracing Bureau, they send me this document that I showed you just when you first came in -- that attested to the fact that my father lost his life in Majdanek on September 23, 1942. So my mother died in Treblinka in the first action, 1942, probably in August with my brother Meir. Now the only person that I don't have a definite proof that was killed is my brother Szymon, to this day. Because all other perished. My grandmother, who saved herself

from the first round-up in 1942, was probably shipped out in 1943 if she didn't perish sooner, with her daughters, my aunts and with these two boys of the eldest daughter, Frania.

Q: So your brother Szymon, the last we saw of him, he went back to the ghetto because he was homesick?

A: Right.

Q: And he was staying with your mother?

A: With the family, at home. Now --.

Q: But he didn't go with your mother and the other brother?

A: No, he didn't go with my mother. This much I have learned. Also I have learned -- of course after liberation I have received, I have overheard conversation between liberated prisoners like myself, that there was a Topas in Prague, in Czechoslovakia, in Roxy Hotel where refugees converged. I immediately -- I was at that time with the United States Army; I was in the CIC corp, Counter intelligence Corp. I was one of the most fortunate of prisoners that I was allowed still to fight. I was with the 104th regiment of the 26th division with the Third Army. After the war, I was attached to a CIC unit in Nuremberg, in the town that you mentioned before, stationed in Nuremberg. I found out that my uncle survived; Uncle Ben survived and I also later on found out that he fought in the Polish uprising of 1944. But Andros was shipped with the Polish people to Germany because all Warsaw was emptied out of people. They were sent either to concentration camps or forced labor. He was sent to farm work. He remained on the ruins of Warsaw and lived from what he -- like a scavenger. I sent somebody, a friend of mine who also figures prominently in my book, to bring him. He brought him -- he went to the Russian zone and brought my Uncle Ben and we had a reunion and we met. Then I sent another prisoner to bring his wife from the British zone. I found out that she was in Castle because my grandmother's letter told me this after I resumed contact with her. She sent me food packages and money and so forth

Q: So your Uncle managed to survive midst the ruins of Warsaw until January '45 and then he was liberated by the Russians and then at the end of the war --?

A: He went to Czechoslovakia.

Q: He went to Czechoslovakia and you saw him again?

A: Right. He was searching relatives. He wanted to get possible --. I don't know what he intended to do but he found out ---. Then he told me about Sevek, that he also survived and that he went to Israel, he and his wife, Rita. They were childless and he was already by that time, in his forties. Sevek, the cousin.

Q: He survived in the ghetto, in Warsaw?

A: No. He went into hiding. There's an interesting story. He used to work for our company. All the orphans, the three orphans worked for our company but he married one of the pretty salesgirls from our company. He separated himself from us and he opened his own store of

custom made shoes, a smaller --.

Q: This was a non-Jewish wife?

A: No, no, a Jewish wife, a salesgirl, right. Her name was Rita, a very attractive girl. They established themselves a few streets away from us, with a shoe store. When the war broke out, he gave all of the goods to one of the Polish-- his Polish salesgirls. That Polish salesgirl took it to her own home and she would be selling, periodically, some of the leather or leather goods and bringing them money to live on, to the ghetto. She would be going back and forth. But later on, established through her contact, they established a liaison with one of the Polish underground operators from the Socialist Party who were more friendly towards -- well-- disposed to the Jews --.

Q: The People's Guard?

A: Whatever. But it was not so altruistic. What happened is this; that he had in a place called Ramburtoof, I believe. I'm not absolutely certain because it had two names in Polish names of the town that sound the same. When I went to visit Poland I was searching for the people that hid him in the wrong town because of the similarity of names. He had his wife living there -- it was like a suburban town of Warsaw and a daughter and son which were already in their late teens. But he also had a lover in Warsaw where he worked so he couldn't support two of them. By getting my uncle Sevek, my cousin Sevek and his wife to hide, he got income for them so they didn't have to depend on my pay. He could live with his lover and they supplied the income for his wife and kids, for the two children. He was in hiding there until liberated by the Russians. He was there for seventeen months living mainly under the floorboards of their bedroom or whatever.

Q: So his liberation also was in January of '45 or earlier?

A: Even earlier.

Q: Because he's on the other side of the river?

A: Right, he was on the east side of the river.

Q: So we know that much about the town. It was to the east?

A: Right. And something about Sevek. He was a very friendly guy. When I was growing up, I was a kid., he was already almost 20 years old. He had a way with the kids, always a smile on his face. You were never told that he had a hard life, that he was an orphan; he was not embittered by it and he didn't have any chip on his shoulder. He would spend a lot of time with the kids and play around, clown to entertain us, and so forth. I was very happy to hear that he survived. Then, of course, I visited him to find out how he survived. That's why I'm able to tell you that. He went to Israel; now he's in Germany, really. Because his wife couldn't find work in Israel and there were hardships at the beginning. They went to Israel when it was still Palestine, before Independence.

Q: So he settled in Israel?

A: He was settled there; he was there maybe for two or three years. Then his wife wanted to go to France to find a job for him and for her and she couldn't. She couldn't get permission to reside there so she went to Germany, unfortunate. This is where he is today. He is already 83 years old. Now about my brother Szymon. In 1989, my wife, in company of my wife, my friend Mark, his wife, Bea, and their two sons, we embark on a trip of memory lane. To go back to Poland after 50 years absence and to Israel on our way back and Germany. I also stop in Germany.

Q: To see --?

A: To see Flossenburg -- and Sevek. We went together to visit Flossenburg. Now when we visit Poland, we realize that we are going to be there only six days or seven days. Our time was of essence there, so we preplanned exactly what we are going to ---.

(End of Side A, Tape 11)

We arranged for two chauffeurs and two limos, two cars to take us around so we don't depend on the regular tourist conveyance to see the places. Because there were specific places that the itinerary for our visit to Poland was planned in advance and it was very compact. We had to crowd many things into a very short space -- so that when we arrived in Warsaw, we had two limos already when we arrived at the airport to pick us up, to take us to the hotel and the following morning, we started our visit. Of course my visit included first of all the city of Warsaw itself, the ghetto monument, the site of our apartment building in the Warsaw Ghetto, which building had been erased, had been destroyed during the uprising or possibly after the uprising, perhaps in the Polish revolt which was in 1944. It included visits to my childhood place of Shaboruf where I -- to remember the villa that belonged to my grandparents, perhaps still does, where we spent summers in my childhood days. Then we went to Majdanek, we visit in the Lublin district. I see also the city of Lublin which I had memory because I knew a family there and a girl that perished in Poland. Then we went to places of _____ that was of interest to my friend Mark. We went, I think that this is what we did in the course of time. We still had Warsaw, increments of Warsaw that were to be seen, for instance, the Warsaw cemetery that we didn't have time. I don't know on which day but I think on one day, perhaps it was Sunday, the following Sunday of our arrival, that we decided to split because Mark had his own itinerary with his car to see Radom and I wanted to see my mother's hometown of Plutz. We went to Plutz and we have seen what there was to see. The synagogue was destroyed but the buildings were still there. I seen my grandparents' home, apartment, which was very, very small and --.

Q: The opposite of luxurious?

A: Of what we were used to in Warsaw. After seeing all these places and the Vistula River and whatever I could associate with the past, we went to see.. Then we had a very intelligent driver and driving back to Warsaw I realized that in spite of our frugality in using time economically, in disposing of time, we were coming early. I said to myself, I looked at my watch and I think it was something like 4:30 p.m. and the days in late August were very long. I said to the driver, I said, do we have time to see another place in the vicinity of Warsaw? Which really was not on schedule. But it suddenly occurred to me that the last three summers, we did not go to our villa in Shorboruf, but we went to Oralie a village called Oralie which was kind of a summer resort and also a farming community. I was there in the summer of '37 and '38 and my family was there also in the summer of '39. Because in '38 in the middle of the summer, I was sent to the agricultural school as you recall. I said, it would be interesting to see because I would be able

to see the very cottage where we stayed in. I asked my wife and she consented and the driver said, by all means, he was gung-ho. We directed because it was in the vicinity of Warsaw, it would not take us more than maybe half an hour out of the way, counting both ways. We had some difficulty finding our way to the place, to recognize and so forth. Finally, some people told me which building it is that I probably was in that summer. I came by that building with the car and I look at that building and I say, no this is not the building, it doesn't have veranda. We turn around and went back to the beginning of the street of the village when one of the properties -- a woman, elderly lady told us that this is the building. I say this is not the building. She says this is the building. I spoke to her in Polish. She says this is the building, she insisted, persisted rather. I said, where's the veranda? She says it was removed. That can confuse you.

Q: So you were both right?

A: I asked her and she took us there. It turned out to be she was a sister-in-law of the landlady of the building named Levandofska. Mr. Levandofsky was, of course, the landlord. When I was there, she was a woman in her twenties. Now she was nearly 80 years old. She was sitting there; it looked like a rocking chair in the house. The lady that brought us in said you have guests in here. The guests being my wife, the driver and myself. We came in, we looked at her, and I began to orient myself there that this is the building in which we stayed. This was a building that -- there were three families in the summer that shared that building. I'm repeating something that you can find in my book but I can probably tell you this in a greater detail than you will find in my book. I say Mrs. Levandofska; she didn't know who I was but they knew that we are tourists and that we were probably from America and I spoke Polish. Many Poles returned back to Poland. I said to her, do you remember who lived in this -- who was vacationing here in the summer, who occupied this building in the summer of 1938, '39? She looked and just stared at me without saying anything like gathering her thoughts. Of course, I couldn't figure what were her thoughts. I went one step further and I said, do you remember who was in this apartment? Pointing to one of the doors. She said Lasolta. I said it was a Polish pilot, the family who lived there. So she says Lasolta. She remembered that name. I pointed to another door and she mentioned the other family. Then I didn't say anything for a moment. Then I said, wasn't a Jewish family here also in this apartment here? Pointing to the last one. She says, yes, Topas. She said, Mr. Topas, very sympathetic man, and Mrs. Topas, very nice lady. And they had two children. The oldest was Yurik and the younger was Szymon, another baby too? Oh yeah, Meirick. That's Meir. She told them that my father was very good to them. He brought gifts, shoes for the family in addition to whatever they paid for the rent. She volunteered a few things. I said to her I was very pleased. We took some photographs. I thought the audience was over and I already exchanged some dollars for Polish money which power of dollars was tremendous. I was going to give her a few thousand of the Polish zloty which were not very much in American money but I felt that I took her time and so forth. I felt that I would do it just as a friendly gesture. But just about when I thought that the whole interview was over, she began to shake in her chair. She says, Szymonik, such a well-built boy, a pleasant boy, didn't look Jewish. He came here from the Warsaw Ghetto in the summer of 1942, I think. He asked me to save him, to shelter him, to hide him. I wanted to do it, I really wanted to do it. But we were afraid because the trains were going from Warsaw to Treblinka on the track that was stopping in our Ourland during the normal rides and the Jews were jumping off the trains. There was a gendarme named Stein who was looking for them here. I was afraid that if I'm going to hide him, the neighbors will snitch on me and then we're all going to be killed. So I said to Szymonik, let my husband take you to the next village. Maybe you can be a shepherd there to cows, that sort of thing. Szymon, my brother, at that time was about fourteen

years old. But he didn't want to go. He says he doesn't know there anybody. But, and she repeated it again. He told me that his grandmother lives in America, is in America. I immediately presumed that he said that to make her understand that if she does this, if she takes the risk, that she would be rewarded for it, after the war. I ask her, Mrs. Levandoska, then what happened? Did he leave? She said, well maybe he stayed here a day or two, a few days and then he left. I said did you hear anything about him? She said no. I had right away a premonition that he must have perished not far from this point because he came in and although he didn't look Jewish, but he was a kid and he was scared. You realize that every Jew just by virtue of being Jewish, had a price tag on his life.

Q: And he was in an area where they were hunting for Jews?

A: And a Polish peasant who turned in a Jew could get a bottle of vodka and two pounds of sugar and maybe a hundred zlotys. So there was a reward, just as there was punishment for hiding the Jews, there was a reward for turning them in. He might have been turned in by Polish people; he might have made it back to the ghetto. I really don't know. When she came to the end, she was very sad. She realized that I'm a relative but she didn't know who I was.

Q: She still didn't know who you are?

A: I told her that I'm Yurik, that I survived the war. I joined the American army, fought to the war's end, and came to America. My grandmother lived in America at the time, until 1969, when she died here in Lakewood. She's buried in Lakewood. But I still gave her the money. She didn't want to accept the money. Why are you giving money? I didn't save your brother, she said. Oh well, you wanted to save him. Then it seemed like there was nothing more. I was pretty -- right now I can speak about it without being as shaken up as I was at the time when it happened and when I repeated it the first time or two, but now it's in the book. Then I said -- I just thought for a moment -- I said do you have any photographs of before the war? So they brought in an album of photographs before the war. I scanned through the photographs and seen the building, I seen Mr. Landofsky who, incidentally, was laying paralyzed from the waist down in bed next door in the room where we were talking. I didn't see anything. I was hoping that maybe they photographed our family, which for me, would have been priceless but they didn't have any. There were some loose photographs that were just bunched up in the bottom of -- the end of the album. I went through these photographs. I found a photograph of Adolph Hitler..

Q: That tells you something?

A: It was really confusing.

Q: Was there any writing on it?

A: No writing. It was just like a post card, a picture of Adolph Hitler. The driver had seen this with me and I just didn't say anything about it. I just shut and closed the album and we left. When we get in the car, I was confused but I realized that her husband must have been a Hitler sympathizer. That she might have, I feel that she was an earnest person, an earnest woman because she didn't have to tell me anything. She didn't have to tell me that he came back there to save her, that he came from the Warsaw Ghetto, had to risk his life and get out. Came to her and asked her to be kept in there. She didn't have to volunteer any of that; I didn't ask her. She

did tell me this so she -- maybe she had good intentions. She wanted to save him but maybe her husband was opposed to it. He might have been an admirer of Hitler.

Q: Or even if he weren't, he could have opposed it for other reasons.

A: They had reasons but what shall I say?

Q: It's hard to imagine a real Pole being an admirer of Hitler.

A: Well there was admiration for ---. Until Hitler turning on to Poland. There was a tremendous admiration for Germany because of their policy towards the Jews.

Q: Considering what they were doing to Poland, that would not have been very patriotic.

A: Yes, it would not be patriotic and perhaps it is to their credit, of the Poles, that they didn't have many collaborators against their own people that we know of. They didn't have many collaborators towards their own people. But many among them were very vicious anti-Semites and we were talking about all these people. I didn't mention to you, the Rosenbaums who are in my book, a beautiful girl -- and her mother were hidden. They were in Lublin. I met them -- I got to know them during the war in Lublin when I was staying there. My father was there. You remember when I told you we met. Later on I got a post card that she is hiding. I told you I was still in Warsaw Ghetto when they went into hiding on a farm by a fellow named Sty _____ in Sm _____, Ko _____ in Poland. It was not until maybe five years ago that a widow of the son of the owner, who told me that both women were killed by people other than the Germans. She didn't say so but she says they were killed because of their possessions. They went out in the middle of the night with valises having their valuables with them, no doubt, and he says, you know that there was no shortage of vile people during the war and they were shot and buried in the woods nearby. This is something I have to return to because I didn't have a chance to visit Sm _____ where possibly the burial ground is. I don't think that the grave was marked. But this is where they were shot and they were shot by Poles. My brother Szymon, is still an enigma even in spite of any premonition I have. There was an interesting development that is almost anti-climatic to everything we are talking about. My wife, first, and then my son visiting Israel went to a cavern which is on the border of Lebanon and Israel. The cavern is a tourist attraction and they seen on the wall, the name of Simon Topas. It's a Simon Topas spelled exactly, not with a "z" but with an "s", Topas. Silemonca Spain, familia Topas, familia Simon Topas Silemonca Spain. I have -- just as I talk to you I just thought -- why I'm not able to find anything about this family. Because I'm asking for the telephone number of Simon Topas at the Silemonca operator in Spain. I wrote to the Red Cross and to the post office. He said the family of Simon Topas which means, if it were my brother, in the unlikely event, it is not he who wrote this -- scribbled that name-- but maybe his son or his daughter who marked this in order to look for someone. The name could be -- the first name could be different. And if it was a daughter who was married and took another family name. I think, in Spain, it works in reverse, the men assume the wife's -- the family assumes the wife's last name

Q: Yes, they use both.

A: They use both. So this is still an unresolved kink but it's very unlikely. Once I got excited, I found in Israel, Szymon Topas, in a missing persons bureau in Jerusalem. I immediately sent a

telegram there and the guy was nice enough to send me a telegram back that he assumed the name Topas after coming from Russia to Israel.

Q: Plus it would be inconceivable that he wouldn't be looking for you, for others?

A: That id true. I am still going to check out the Silemonca, Spain –

Q: You have to ?

A: Yeah, I have to. This is because we are -- we have so little and we are hanging on to a straw. This is very, very weak indication but I'm saying to myself, who would come, who would be interested in coming to Israel? Although non-Jews come to Israel and all the tourists, Jewish and non-Jewish like to see all the tourist attractions. Besides the religious aspect, there are non-sectarians so to speak. Certainly a cavern is something that interests everybody. Could be a Morano

Q: No, I wouldn't have expected you to be descendants of Sephardim from ---.

A: But we are.

Q: You are? From 1492?

A: Yes. According to a distant relative who married my grandmother and comes from Warsaw, a fellow named Max Muskowitz, told me that our family originates in Spain.

Q: Were they expelled in 1492 or?

A: Right. There was a choice then, to convert or be expelled.

Q: In fact the anniversary was just celebrated.

A: Yes, 500th anniversary. I was in Spain but this was before I knew about the ---. I was with my wife in Spain but this was before I know about the sign in the cavern. I have a photograph.

Q: How did the family get to Poland from Spain?

A: I think that the Spanish Jews, when they moved out of Spain, there was such a tremendous flood, that it was exile, that they were moving westward. Some of them wound up in France, some went as far as Germany, Italy. Italy already had some Jews from before that existed from the destruction of, even before the destruction of the Temple, was a very old community there. Then in the 1500's, the Polish king, Kazmir the Great, thought that the Jews would be good for the development of the country which was backward and invited the Jews to come. Gave them their – they became King's subjects living under his protection. So the beginning was very, you might say, idyllic but it didn't continue very long.

Q: We have any further reflections on this experience? Your family was in the middle of the worst part of the Holocaust, Warsaw in Poland. Some survived, beginning with your grandmother, others --?

A: She was lucky that she was sent -- in that sense she was lucky that she was sent to America. My uncle owes his survival in a very plain sense to my aunt, to his wife Rose, who hid him.

Q: All of you who survived, to some extent, were helped by your grandmother?

A: Yes, to a very great extent, because we couldn't get as far as we did if it were not for her help.

Q: You had the foresight, for whatever reasons, to send to your new career, temporary career to be sure, as a farmer?

A: Yes.

Q: I also noticed in your story, that it seemed that at several junctures your path took you to Lublin? Not voluntarily every time but ---?

A: Yes. Lublin figures very prominently in my memory, First of all, if this is not apparent in my book, I want you to know that Lublin Jewry was one of the most hospitable communities I have known. They took such great care of the refugees and they were inundated with people during the blitz of 1939. When we came there from this agricultural school, we went to the synagogue and we were living there. People were bringing us meals like regular meals. They took it as a responsibility on themselves. They did it with a very pleasant demeanor and very graciously. My father, when I met with my father, one of the family offered us a place to stay. So I didn't have to sleep in the synagogue anymore on the hard bench. I went and stayed with my father. Of course, the Rosenbaum family became like a family away from the family. I did have a romantic notion about the girl that figures in the book, Gina, although prematurely probably, but definitely ---. I idealized her because she was such a pretty and smart girl and talented too. She could play piano. I taught her how to play chess and she right away, beat me. We were there during the war. I was there probably from -- I knew her from September 12th, I think, the day that I came to Lublin until we left for Warsaw. Then, of course, I was drawn back there under the pretext that I want to go to the Russian zone and my parents didn't object. I came back to Lublin already under German occupation and I was again welcomed and hospitality was extended to me by the Rosenbaums. Then, the next time was when I was being taken to this farm work. You remember, when I was a volunteer, for the harvest, I also got to see Gina. Later on when I got fever, I got sick, and came back to Lublin, I was shown again hospitality. They brought me, they really cared for me and nursed me there when I was very sick. I got measles at seventeen, is no fun. It's not fun at any time but not then. But being a contagious sickness, they were very kind that they wanted to do this. At one time, my brother, when he came out to see me in those estates, he also stopped over there in Lublin and was shown hospitality there. Very kind people and they all perished. The father died during the Lublin occupation days, probably from ill health but the mother and daughter, Gina, the girl that I knew, they were shot in cold blood.

Q: An aisle of beauty in a harsh world.

A: She was very remarkable. I had to really condense in the book, I couldn't express all my sentiment and the feeling for them that was much greater. I felt that sometimes you say more by understating it than if you were to try and pour it all out.

Q: Believe me, it shows.

- A: It shows. Because I felt that the intelligent reader will see; this will be like a soldier who goes into battle_____ what great things he did there. It is not so much that it would reflect on me but it is not necessary to emphasize the qualities because they are -- you can easily conclude that these were fine people and very dear to me. As a matter of fact, I had a photograph of Gina and I think I had a photograph of her mother too, that I carried with me all through my internment in Pilani and Ocencia and Budzyn. But when we came to Majdanek, they took everything away from me. They took every vestige of your personal life so that when they dress you up in those striped uniforms and the wooden shoes, you didn't have anything tangible which would connect you with the past except your memory.
- Q: I knew you didn't have a photo of her because I knew that if you did, she would be in the ID project.
- A: She would be a very good candidate. I think that perhaps this is just my suspicious mind perhaps but I think that her beauty had something to do with her undoing. Because I know something of the man who was the son of the owner who was already a married man only he stayed there; that something like this, especially a vulgar individual, that this would not escape his attention, that this might have been the reason they were forced to run away from the farm. Whoever killed them were either the people that had something to do with the farm or someone tipped them off.
- Q: Poles in any case?
- A: Yes, in that case, Poles. You know Poles were capable of many admirable things on individual basis. There were some exceptional cases like this salesgirl in Sevek's store, this Loja. Her name is Loja and she did a remarkable service to them because she, when they were already in hiding in this place called Tr_____ and I hope I got that right, she had to bring, every month money for ---. They couldn't pay in advance because then they would take the money and their life would not be -- the life would not be safe. I mean you cannot say in every case, but it happened many times when the Jews came in and gave everything to the owners and then the owners gave them away anyway after they kept the money. So here she was coming in every month to bring the money. She was also going and buying produce for the family, for the whole family, vegetables because they did not want to arouse suspicion in the local store. They suddenly buy so much when they were buying much less without these people. So they had to go some distance away to another town, to a big town to buy the produce and food for the household. Hi story is a book in itself. How they made the hiding place; he told me, for instance, that they had to saw the boards off the floor. They were on the ground floor and there was just a dugout beneath. It was not deep enough to really live there so they had to do two things. They had to saw and sawing makes noise. There were people living directly above them. How would they do it? The daughter of this woman where they stayed played piano, perhaps the mother. She played piano very loud piece while he was sawing the boards, loud piece. Then they had to find out how they were going to get rid of the sand that they dig up. This is always shown in those escape pictures when they fantasize about it or they take it in their pants. It had to go out with the garbage pail, had to go to the garbage. I think they also -- he told me something about coal being there where they used some of that sand. They had a coal bin someplace that was accessible to them. At one time, the Germans came in to this apartment, officers and they requisitioned one room. The room was next room where they were down in the bottom. They, my cousin Sevek, he regarded this as an insurance that the Germans

lived there. No other German detachment will come and search the place.

Q: They would be above suspicion?

A: They would be above suspicion and they stayed there. But it put great restraint on them because usually --. He told me that during the wintertime, they would be sitting in a dugout but at night, they went to bed. In other words, there was like one spare bed. The only people that knew that they existed there was the mother, the wife of the guy that arranged this, this is the fellow that was from the Polish underground with the Socialist party and he was working in a transportation department in Warsaw. His wife, the housekeeper and the daughter and the son. The son worked for the Germans in one of the warehouses and he was stealing. At one time they came and arrested him and he disappeared without a trace, took him to Auschwitz, maybe they killed him.

Q: If they knew he was stealing certainly they would ---?

A: It was very stupid of him especially if since they had someone there. What if they started searching the house for stolen goods and they would find the place? Because they had it cut out and it was covered with a little carpet rug and this is how they lived. Very interesting the way they had to arrange; everything had to be thought out. All the time, during the daytime, he would standing by the window and looking out who is coming through the gate. Whenever he seen -- because this was not a single family dwelling, it was like a quadruplex and there were others living on the second floor, but he had to see who comes to the main entrance of the apartment. Always watching, if it was a stranger right away he and his wife had to go, get the underneath. My uncle lived the same way because he was in my aunt's apartment but she had a dormer apartment so there was a false, there was a wall, and between the wall and a pitched roof. There was airspace. What they do, they cut out an opening and there was a mirror that had four special attachment points. Every time that he suspected, heard steps on the stairway or something, he had to jump into that -- behind that mirror where they had a chair to sit on and just secure the mirror and hope that nobody gets wise to it.

Q: But in Warsaw, this was not possible. Warsaw was infinitely more dangerous. Apparently the only time it was possible to hide was after the destruction of the ghetto and after the defeat of the Polish rebellion, talking about your uncle.

A: Yes, he was involved in the revolution. He came out of hiding and he fought with them. But after it was crushed and all the Polish people were shipped to concentration camps or labor camps, Warsaw was virtually emptied of people, there were people like my uncle who lived like scavengers on the ruins of the --. Because after emptying Warsaw, Hitler gave orders to destroy Warsaw.

Q: Raze the quarter?

A: Right. So Warsaw was a --they claimed it was something like 65%, all the buildings were then destroyed, or 60%.

Q: No matter how resourceful a person had been, they had hidden, they still would not have survived, given that type of ---?

A: As long as they were deep underground, literally underground.

Q: There would be a food problem?

A: A food problem. This is why -- he had to out --they were going usually at night because the place was completely abandoned. Occasionally a patrol would pass by, then they would hide. But he lived there from the end of the uprising which was probably, the uprising was in August --.

Q: Beginning of October, it was over.

A: It was over so from the beginning of October until January when the Russians crossed the Vistula River onto the west bank to Warsaw, he led this kind of existence. This apparently caused his premature death because he died being about 65 in California and he died of some kind of liver ailment which might have been caused by the garbage that he had to eat at one time.

Q: If you had to tell of the worst memory that you have, the worst experience that you had, what would it be? In Warsaw, in camps and so forth?

A: My God, there were so many. Of course, I was flogged but this was not the worst. The worst experience happened in Majdanek, I think. When we arrived there, we were shipped from the Luftwaffe camp, Canjan were taken to Majdanek and on this train ride we were debating what to do. Most of us were young men; there were a few fathers among the young men that were with their sons in that group. We were fortunate that we were only 88 to a boxcar, where else there were about twice that number that they packed in others. Many people perished just from suffocation when they --. We were debating what we should do, whether we should break out. The train left about, with our contingent, about noontime, perhaps shortly before noon and was just meandering through the various places as it was going. We said like this, that if it is going to go in Treblinka, we have nothing to lose. We are just going to have to escape. I know that there were people there already working on the floorboards, trying to see if we could -- a novel way of escape trying to get out from the floor boards rather than the windows that were normally used. They worked at it. I don't think that they did get very far with this operation because within 15 or 20 minutes we found out that we are on a line to Lublin, not Treblinka. We felt that perhaps we are being taken to another labor camp. We didn't know that besides Auschwitz and Treblinka that there are so many death camps, we didn't know. We didn't know, maybe we didn't want to know. We heard about the camps, like Sobibor. Once this was found out, so the attitude changed and the despair that dominated the mood in the boxcar subsided and they say maybe we are going to the camp. People sort of tried to slide down because we couldn't -- there was not enough room for everyone to sit or lie down but if everybody lean against everyone, somehow, the body sort of, like sardines, we were able to manage to be down where we could get some rest. Everybody got very thirsty because the boxcars, the sun beat on them and it was hot. There was a fellow there with a bottle of water, He took out the bottle of water that he had the presence of mind to take with him. We had bread that we took with us, our rations, but we didn't think of water, we did not think of that -- we didn't think of it, we didn't anticipate that it would be needed here, a big bottle of water. He was going to have some of the water with his son. But when he looked at the faces of us all, he says, no, no, my son, we'll have to share this water. Somehow a spoon was produced and everybody got a tablespoon of water. This is the way it went all around. But the moment, I think my moment of greater

despair came at the end of the journey because I could say when I stood in Lublin before a firing squad, was this the worst moment? No, because it happened so quickly and it came as a surprise. Before we got scared enough, become numb. It was all over. I was also, a gun was pointed at me in Lublin on a railroad station by a drunk, an SS officer. This ended up without me being shot. But here we're traveling on this train and there's time on our hands and we were able to think. Then it got dark and darker. Finally the train slowed down and it was already beyond, not quite so dark that you couldn't see but it was already further along than the dust, the hour of twilight when you can still see things relatively well. The train -- there was also another incident. During the ride on the train, a Polish peasant stood when the train was very slowly moving after many stops that it made to give priority to other trains. He seen our train and he crossed himself. So I said why would he do this unless we are a cargo assigned to extermination. I say after all, going to a labor camp still leaves -- there is room for hope. (End of Tape 11.)

The movement of the train, very slow movement, when the train is --when they are moving sections of the train on the final terminal; there's more literally, this is literally what terminal is the right word to use, the train was moving very slowly. You have the descending darkness, you see that we are being pushed through a tall masonry wall. It suddenly, it gave me the foreboding that we are being brought into the extermination point, because we were not given any rations for the trip; people were packed like sardines. If you want to get work out of slaves, you have to give them living room, you have to treat them with a modicum of satisfying the basic needs of subsistence to live on. No water, nothing given for us to urinate or to tend to all other needs that are basic needs and suddenly this descending darkness and the train slowly -- the train -- like we were going through the gates of hell.

Q: That's exactly what I was imagining.

A: And the train came to a stop. When the train was traveling, we couldn't hear nothing because you just hear the noise of the railroad tracks and the rails and the wind and so forth. But when the train stopped, you could hear the screams of the women and children in other boxcars where they had women and children, where they were packed very heavily. Because the heat was unbearable and they had no room to urinate, they had no room for anything. There was crying and lamenting and it all suggested a premonition of impending death by some means that we don't know yet; whether it will be gas chambers or they have something else in store for us. Then on the platforms, which on the right and a platform on the left which separated us from the other section of the train, there were big floodlights and there were guards that were standing on both sides. Were just maybe two or three guards. All of a sudden you hear the sound of a rolling door open and a man, stripped down to his trunks, runs out of this heat. He just runs and the Germans, the German guards, they begin to hunt him like a rabbit. He says, Ich_____, I have him! He says_____, halt. This and so forth, then you hear two shots and you see this guy collapsing underneath one of those floodlights. By that time the temperature must have dropped, this was in May, and you could see like a steam coming out from his mouth, the blood was running out of his neck. He was laying there, a human being. All he wanted was a little air and he was shot for that. When I seen this, this scene itself was a - -I seen people killed before by the Germans. I have seen them in the Warsaw Ghetto but I have never seen this, when you put all these elements together, under such circumstances. Then the immediate logical conclusion is that we are not coming into any labor camp. If you begin to add all these things and as the morning began to dawn, there was a rabbi in our boxcar. We have a prayer that is said before death; it is called confession before death, people say it. He began to say the confession and he had a younger brother, Hanok was his name. That guy

began to cry that he is only twenty years old. This crying and praying became very unnerving to us although a man has a right to say what he wants before he dies. We were still not convinced that this is the end of the line. Nevertheless somebody asked them that they should stop this sobbing business and all this, wait to see what happens in the morning. In the morning, when they open the boxcars, there came a Jewish crew that was working and the Germans and the dogs, the whole circus. They began to open the doors of the car and they begin to pile out the dead bodies from the boxcars. Ours was the only boxcar that didn't have any dead bodies but from all other cars, they were putting the bodies. The Jewish crew went in and they were putting the bodies by stacking them in pyres, one on top of the other in squares. I seen young women, young men, it was just a frightening sight when you see so much death around you. We were bewildered -- there were two hand grenades laying on the bottom of our floor. In other words, one of the -- some of our men had hand grenades and they were prepared to make a fight for it, if we escaped. If we escaped and went to the woods, we would have something; I mean that was the intention. I remember when we empty the car, the SS men take a look in the car; they seen the hand grenades and they ignored it. This was the final indication that we are slated for death because if we are not, they would certainly not allow something like this to go unpunished. They would want a guilty party and they would make an execution; they would try to show how they deal with something like this.

Q: You're all guilty already?

A: It doesn't matter because we---. Then we were put in a, those that survived the trip were put in a column five abreast. The column was standing there and forming. While they were forming and we seen that the crew---. Another thing is the cleaning crew that was working there, the Jews who were part of the crew of this camp, they wouldn't speak to us. If we ask them, where are we? What is awaiting us? They didn't say anything. So you got the impression like you were on an operating table; you are in a hospital and you see the nurses in white aprons looking at you as though you were dead already. We didn't know that they were not allowed to speak to us, we didn't know that. Then the column began to form and there were about a dozen of SS men on each side of the column, guards with rifles. They were going to escort us wherever we were going to go. We begin the procession, slowly. When I was walking, I was bewildered, what was happening there? My thoughts were very incoherent, in a situation like this. The SS man that was on my left, that was next to me, I record this in the book, he said to me, Veir al bist du?, how old are you? I said, Ich bin_____. I told him I was 18 years old. He answered me I_____, I'm nineteen.. He says_____, it's a pity that you have to die. He said it to me, he meant it; he had no---. That was -- this is the way he felt apparently. We were eventually separated from those that went to the gas chambers; but this moment, these moments in my life, including this question and answer and the pile-up of bodies in the morning and a beautiful morning to be surrounded by death, this arrival; this is probably the worst that I had to face. Because after that I became already immune to these -- not immune but I began to realize that sooner or later they're going to get us. That there's a very slim chance of survival. So I was not going to get again -- I would not panic anymore in a situation that was awaiting.

Q: You think the worst and then you survive, then it's almost a bonus?

A: Well, for some people who survived that particular moment was not the best thing because they perished later and they just suffered more. But this was such a terrifying thing, this whole thing, the arrival, the descending darkness, the crying of the women, the pitiful crying of the children, and then the killing of that man who just run for a breath of fresh air, the prayers of the

rabbi who survived, he lives in Pittsburgh. I met him in Israel one time unexpectedly, and his brother survived. All these things are just terrifying more than anything else that I have experienced before or since. Although I had many close calls after, I was with a flogged person; it didn't affect me as badly as this. I'm not going to tell you how we got out of this situation because then nobody's going to buy my book.

Q: We won't go into that. I was going to recall from another interview that I had, that there was an orchestra at Majdanek, perhaps not at this point. But it seems that was all that is lacking---

A: I thought Auschwitz had the orchestra.

Q: An orchestra was at Auschwitz but apparently there was one also at Majdanek, perhaps at the labor camp. But you're talking about 1942.

A: Forty-three.

Q: Forty-three but early---

A: May 12th or May 13th.

Q: But you don't recall any orchestra at the camp?

A: No.

Q: I don't think it would have been at this point in the camp. It would have been somewhere else, like a work area at the labor section.

A: Could be because we were not, unbeknown to us, we were not in the camp proper. We were in the entrance camp and the reason they had the guards because they had to march us yet through a street which I think is called Helmska B_____ because it leads to hell. That would take us to Majdanek and to the gas chambers. This was our fate. I studied the records of it from a book that was written of Majdanek, by a Polish writer. It's not translated into English yet. I bought it in Poland when I was there. It said in that period of time, there were no registrations, everybody was going -- especially from the Warsaw Ghetto -- everybody was going straight into the gas chambers. Actually I was twice in Majdanek. At this time when we were sent to Budzyn and when we were shipped to Budzyn en route to Plaszow, we detoured in Majdanek so I was their guest again. I omitted telling you -- it occurred to me that I omitted telling you -- something about my uncle Meynek. As you know, we came to Budzyn from this transport in second week of May. That would put it about May 13 or thereabout. When we arrived there, we found out that there was already one group of Warsaw survivors, Warsaw Ghetto uprising survivors who arrived there a week earlier. One of the survivors, I believe his name was Kaufmann, a young fellow my age, recognized me and he said I got something to tell you about your Uncle Meynek. He was in our transport with his wife, that would be Irka on the umschlagplatz after the crushing of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, they were herded on the umschlagplatz into boxcars. While he was in the boxcar with his wife, he was trying to bribe a Ukrainian guard, either to let him go which seems very unlikely; it seemed very unlikely that he would have asked him for it. Or he might have asked him for water because they were selling water for something like 500 zlotys a glass if they got the money. However, the Ukrainian guard after taking the money, shot my uncle and his wife, Irka, pulled off his riding boots from

his legs, feet, and this is how my uncle came to an end. I believe he was born 1907, he would have -- this was in May of 1943, he would have been 36 years old. This is the story of our family. We had very few survivors. That would be my Uncle Ben survived, my Aunt Rose survived because she was on Aryan papers and she was able to hide her identity and the only other survivor was myself and my grandmother who left Poland on the last ship that reached the United States. My father died in Majdanek, now we know, my mother and my youngest brother, Meir at Treblinka. Szymon still remains as enigma, as to what happened to him.

Q: Still waiting or hoping for a miracle?

A: Yes, it's hard to imagine that this late, we would not have been able to establish contact. Since even if he lived in Spain, he would know that most survivors went either to Israel or the United States or Canada and he would have tried to exhaust these things. There were no enquiries for me.

Q: And then there's your book, too.

A: Yes.

Q: He would have read a book about that story.

A: But you know what? All this brings me to this understanding --that we, the Jewish people, are very old people. We have survived rising and falling civilizations. The Germans were trying to put an end to the Jewish people in a most barbaric way in the annals of mankind. They didn't succeed and I don't think that any ruthless dictatorship would, in the future, succeed. But they never stop trying. Okay, I think that we had enough.

Q: Okay, thank you very much for sharing your story and your history. I hope that it will be of great value, not only for the present, but for the future generations who study and recollection of the Holocaust.

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