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Interview with Chaim Liss

My name is Chaim Liss. I was born 25 3 1939 in Lodz. Ester and Hershal were my parents and we belonged to the lower middle class. My parents owned a confectionary store named Bonita. These were the happiest times in my life. I went to school , szkola Sz wajcara, on Pomorska street in Lodz. On September 1st, 1939, I was sent by my school to summer camp, where we learned that war broke out and everyone was trying to return to Lodz; we packed and went to the train station.

I had too much luggage with me, was not able to get on the train and was left behind. It took a few hours before my parents could come to get me. In the train station, I had an unpleasant experience with a Polish gentleman who after learning that I was a Jewish boy, refused to help me, saying that he will not help Jews. He told me “Zydkiem jestes, zydkiem nie pomagam”, “you are a Jew, I don’t help Jews.” I was very upset and was happy when my parents finally came to get me. We were put in the ghetto, but because my father was a baker, we were better off; anyone who had anything to do with food was a king.

In late August, 1944, we were sent to Auschwitz and Birkenau. We were separated, but my mother was not sent to the gas chamber. She was sent to work. My father and I were sent to Birkenau and after the selection were sent to Hanover. When we entered the Birkenau camp, I was separated again from my father and was sent to the kinderjungerlichter block. Then I saw that there was something going on my father’s side. I was an enterprising young man and went to see what was going on. People were getting ready and forming in rows of three and I was told they were being sent to work in Germany. I didn’t think twice and joined them, which was my luck because all the children from the kinderjungerlicht block were sent later to the gas chamber.

We went from Birkenau to Hanover. In Hanover there was a new labor camp and we were sent to work at the German “Continental Tire Factory,” but this was too good for the Jews and after three months...but I must recount something that happened there which was a miracle. Each day we were dropped off at the factory and before we were dropped off at our stations, a young woman came and forced sandwiches into my hand. I had

one and shared the other with my father and this was what helped us survive. But this work was too good for the Jews and we were sent to Stenigraten. The Germans wanted to build a factory there, inside the cliffs in the caves, . The German workers excavated the stones and the Jews were taking the stones away in the little wagonettes to the top of the quarry. This labor was very hard and many people had died; they died like flies. I was already very exhausted but my father didn't survive. He died of malnutrition just a few days before the liberation of the camp. We were put in lazarets. As the American forces were approaching, the Germans decided to evacuate the camp and take all able bodies to Bergen-Belsen. I was left for dead; the camp was left without the supervision for about two days until Americans came.

The first thing they did was to send us to the hospital. I was undressed by the nurse, took a warm bath, put in a nice clean bed and I passed out. For about two weeks I remained unconscious. When I regained consciousness, I was lying on the veranda of the hospital. It was a spring day, the sun was shining and I felt I was in paradise. It was forty years ago, but I remember this very well and there I saw the same girl who helped me in the camp again and we continued our acquaintance. She found me by asking around to find out what happened to the Jews from the factory. In early summer, I decided to go to Bergen-Belsen. There were books and documents of people who survived and I wanted to find my relatives. I walked on foot with a friend from Hanover to Tzeler. After Tzeler, I was picked up by a German on a truck and he took us to Bergen and from there I walked to Bergen-Belsen.

I looked through the books and I walked around and came to Kinderheim. There was a large group of children that was being sent to Sweden; they were all lying in beds outside. There were about 6000 convalescents, TB cases among them. The Swedish Red Cross took the children. This girl told me that I should join the children, and that is how my stay with Kinderheim begin. I wanted to go to England but the unit of the Jewish Brigade opposed the children to be sent to England.

[He is interrupted by the camera-and-audio person and asked to start his story over from the time when he left the camp] The interviewer asks over-when did you come to Belsen, do you remember? Yes, I was in Hanover. After this hospital, we were sent to Wincrest, a recreation house, and from there I decided to go to Bergen-Belsen where records of survivors were kept.

We with my friend walked there. We reached the medieval town of Tzeler, we repeated the famous march of the prisoners from Hanover to Bergen-Belsen. In Bergen-Belsen I found a place to stay with grown ups and one day I passed by the Kinderheim. I found out these children were going to Sweden, about 6000 convalescents. Among them, the TB cases were being sent to Sweden by the Swedish Red Cross to convalesce. This girl asked me to come and stay with them. I applied and was admitted and stayed there for a while. Later we were approached by the Jewish Relief Unit from England, part of the Committee for the Care of Children from the Camps. They decided to bring us to England where there was a Jewish Agency, a Jewish Brigade, that put every possible obstacle in our way so that we shouldn't go to England but Israel. But we were stubborn and I thought it would be easier to go to Israel from England; about eight of us staged strike. In October of 1945 we were taken to Tzeler, and from there to England by the Canadian Air Force.

I remember many names from the Kinderheim. I remember Hela and her mother. What did you do in England? When we arrived in England we were fed and housed in special hostels. We were a small group of about 700. Most stayed in England and some went to the USA. Because I had contracted TB, I was sent to a sanatorium in Ashford in Kent. For me, this was a dreamland. In the camps, we always dreamed about food. To get enough food. And here there was plenty of food. It wasn't always kosher, but it was abundant. During this six month stay in Ashford, I also went to school. I was taught English and other subjects, and later I went to London, where you had a choice to stay in a hostel or be put up with a private family.

The Jewish Relief Unit partly covered a student's lodging as long as you went to school. Many people took advantage of that. I felt no necessity for learning; some of us just plodded along. I wanted to learn a trade and went to the so-called Augsburg. It was called that because it was set up for us. There were about 40 pupils. I studied electrical engineering. When the state of Israel was formed, I took the first opportunity to go. I was one of the Mohel Volunteers. In October, 1948, sixth months after Israel was formed, I came here.

You were asking about the children I met in England? I was talking about David Kestenber, Yanke Kelebart and Yose Himushtine, who now calls himself Joe Stone and lives on Long Island. Yan Kelebart went to Australia

and other names, children, you know Tosia, Dorka Ninam and Yoseler Routhbaum...

After I was discharged by the Army, I was sent to a vocational school by the Ministry of Defense to become an auto mechanic. Apparently I was better with the papers and became part of production control. Later I went to work for Israeli Aircraft Industries from where I retired three years ago. I retired early; 48 years was long enough, so I took early retirement.

Now I am married to Rachael and have two sons; one is a physician, the other is studying accounting and economics at the Tel Aviv University. I have three grandchildren by my oldest son and another on the way by my younger one. My wife is a nurse. And that is my story. My story is not so bad as are some others. I was sheltered in the ghetto because my father was a baker and there was always food. I have a picture of my parents one year before I was born and another where I am about three years old. I "stole" these pictures from my relatives. I just took anything that was of my family. When I arrived in England, I knew that I had some family. My father was from Wielun. I wrote letters and after three months I got an answer from my uncle and Aunt. I don't have any other relatives.

(The interviewer talks about the importance of preserving the stories of the survivors for future generations and as a warning, so the Holocaust will never happen again. She talks about the importance of Holocaust studies and praises its application in the American school system.

"People are very much aware of what happened, but they will never know; no one will ever know what we went through and felt."

(The two photos of his family are shown again consecutively)