Interview with Ben Muler (BEN) by Julie Orenstein (JO) for the Dayton-Wright State University & Jewish Federation of Greater Dayton - Sponsored Oral History Project.

JO: This is an interview with Ben Muler by Julie Orenstein. It is August 21, 1984. We are in the kitchen of his house.

What is your full name?

BEN: My name is Benjamin Muler.

JO: What is your age?

BEN: My age is 62.

JO: What city were you born in?

BEN: I was born in Vilna, Poland (it is possible that there is a lack of understanding there since Vilna or Wilno, as it was known pre WWII, is today known as Vilnius, and is a city of 196,000 inhabitants, and is the capital of Lithuanian SSR, i.e., a part of Russia. Vilna or Wilno was a part of Poland between 1919 and 1939...no other city of this size seems to fill the bill. It is located at 54.41N,25.19E).

JO: Did you grow up there?

BEN: Yes!

JO: What kind of a town was it? Was it a small town or large town?

BEN: It was quite a large city. The population was about 180,000. About half of that population was Jewish.

JO: Was it a manufacturing town?

BEN: It was similar to Dayton, manufacturing and business. Middle class type.

JO: Do you know why and how your family came to be in Vilna?

BEN: I believe that they lived there all their lives. As far as I can remember, my grandfather and grandmother were from Vilna and my mother, if I am not mistaken, her parents lived closeby in a suburb.

JO: So they pretty much have been there for generations?

BEN: Yes, for generations. That is right.

JO: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

BEN: I have one sister, who is in Israel.

JO: Is she younger or older?

BEN: One year older than I am.

JO: What did your grandparents do for a living?

BEN: I never knew my grandparents from my mother's side. However, as far as I can remember, my grandmother always stayed with us because her husband, my grandfather, passed away before I was born. I don't know much about how they earned their living.

JO: What did your parents do for a living?

BEN: My father was a printer. He and some other friends of his were in a club and published a newspaper in Vilna. Before the newspaper, they worked in a printing shop where they published religious books, that is, Jewish religious books.

JO: Did your mother ever work?

BEN: She had a store of office supplies. She started that before she even got married. She had that store until the war broke out, until the 1st day of the war.

JO: Was it common for a woman to have her own business?

BEN: Not as far as I can remember, not too often, however, a few women on our street had them. I don't know if one limited the other, or what happened, but there were a few women who conducted businesses.

JO: What kind of education did they have?

BEN: I would say that they probably only had public education, which amounted to 6th or 7th grades.

JO: So, they didn't go out and get any specialized education?

BEN: No, I don't think so.

JO: Were they very religious?

BEN: Not very much so. They just observed the Holy days, then they went to the synagogue. But they didn't go that often through the year.

JO: Did they keep kosher?

BEN: Oh, yes!

JO: Were you Bar Mitzvahed?

BEN: Oh yes! I had a beautiful Bar Mitzvah.

JO: What was the language spoken in your home?

BEN: Our parents spoke Yiddish to us. However, once in a while, when people came into our home, they used to speak Polish or Russian. It depended who the people were. There were Polish neighbors. When they came into the house, we spoke Polish. If people...sophisticated people came in, they spoke Russian, because my hometown of Vilna went many times back and forth often between Poland, Russia and Lithuania
The town, originally was the capital of Lithuania.

JO: So, were your parents part of the “intelligentsia” (that is the word used in lieu of sophisticated people)?

BEN: I would not say that they were “intelligentsia,” but they were quite intelligent people, and they had friends who were well educated. Since my father was a printer, and this was considered quite an accomplishment, quite a nice profession.

JO: Did you understand all of these languages? Do you also speak Polish and Russian?

BEN: Yes. I did not speak Russian, but I could understand it. However, we learned Polish in school. We went to a government school, so the main language was Polish.

JO: Did you live pretty much in a Jewish neighborhood?

BEN: Our neighborhood was not strictly Jewish. It contained all kinds of people.

JO: Did your father make a pretty good living as a printer? Would you say that he was wealthy, or belonged to the middle class?

BEN: I wouldn’t say that they were wealthy, but they were good middle class. Between what both of my parents earned, we were able to live quite nicely, compared to other people.

JO: Did your parents have mostly Jewish friends?

BEN: No, my mother had all kinds of friends. Polish people, especially neighbors from the building where we lived. It was a big building with 24 tenants, and she grew up in that building. So she had a lot of Polish (meaning Polish Christian) friends. They were quite nice to us.

JO: Did they socialize at the synagogue? Was the synagogue the social center?

BEN: No. Perhaps for some people, but not for my parents.

JO: Were there any other associations in which your parents were involved?

BEN: My father was a member of a union, the printer's union. My mother belonged to the small business association, similar to the Chamber of Commerce here.

JO: Do you remember anything about their political activities?

BEN: As far as I can remember, they were both quite democratic. They always tried to help people. I think being democratic is the word for them. (In May, 1926, Marshal Pilsudski seized power in Poland after a 2 day military revolt. He made himself dictator. A new constitution was adopted in 1935, shortly before Pilsudski's death to preserve the dictatorship. Marshal Smigly-Rydz, Josef Beck, and some of Pilsudski's colonels retained absolute rule.)

JO: What kind of things did they do to help people?

BEN: We had a big family. On my mother's side, there were a lot of sisters, my aunts, also nieces and nephews and there were also relatives on my father's side. They were not, so to say, as successful as my parents were. My mother was like a mother to all of them. She tried to help everybody.

JO: Did any of them live in your home with you?

BEN: Just my grandmother.

JO: Did your parents enjoy going to the theatre? To the Opera? Or that sort of thing?

BEN: Yes, that was the main enjoyment they had - the theatre and the opera.

JO: Did they take you and your sister along?

BEN: Oh yes! Yes!

JO: How would you describe your childhood? Let's say, do you have any memory prior to going to school? Of what it was like?

BEN: As I said earlier, we were middle class. Still, I had more opportunities than other kids my age, since my mother tried to give me everything which it was in her power to give, in order to make me happy. I enjoyed participating in sports. If I wanted an ice cream or to go somewhere, I was always able to get the necessary pennies to enjoy myself.

JO: Do you remember any special events from your childhood?

BEN: Once, when I got a beating from my father. But, seriously, when I was younger, we stuck together and those were pleasant memories. We did things such as going for hikes or bike rides or canoeing. Instead of the 3 musketeers, who were actually four, we were five. We always did things together. I also was very sports-oriented. Furthermore, ever since I was young, I was always interested in world politics. I always listened to the radio including foreign stations which I could get on my short-wave radio. I always liked to know what was going on in the world.

JO: You said that you went to public school?

BEN: Yes.

JO: How many years did you attend?

BEN: I finished public school, which took 7 years.

JO: What percent of your class was Jewish?

BEN: 100% This was a public school set up by the Polish government especially for Jewish kids; however, the main language used was Polish.

JO: Were you separated for reasons of anti-semitism? Or did you feel that that was the case?

BEN: At that time, none of the parents would send small kids to an integrated school. That would have caused a lot of trouble, just a lot of trouble. This was the reason why they made “separate” schools

JO: You keep saying Polish and Jewish, still your family was from Vilna. Was there a feeling that you were not really Polish? Since you were Jewish?

BEN: We felt as if we were citizens of Poland, I don’t believe that we did anything which warranted us being persecuted. However, there were all kinds of restrictions on us. We had to suffer through pogroms. There were incidents by students from the university who used to go into the predominantly Jewish sections and start riots, including breaking windows and beating people. For these reasons, we always had to live in some kind of fear that something might happen to us.

JO: Did these things happen often?

BEN: When the head of the state was Josef Pilsudski, today you would say that he was a dictator, he had been the chief of the army, that was until 1933 that he ruled, it was quiet in Poland. During his dictatorship, there were not too many excesses, such as pogroms or the like. He had a strong feeling about the Jews, since the Jews had helped him come to power. The Jews also helped him take the area of Vilna from Russia for Poland.

JO: When did he come to power?

BEN: He came to power in 1920 (actually the World Book Encyclopedia says 1926, that was probably when he formally took the power into his hands) after WWI.

JO: So, within your memory, there weren't many pogroms?

BEN: No, there were pogroms after he passed away, from 1934 to the war in 1939.

JO: What kind of anti-semitic activities were perpetrated against you personally? Were you bothered after school at all?

BEN: It was if I went to town with my friends and we met 3 or 4 Polish boys walking in the street, they started a fight. They would start beating us up. The outcome of course, depended on who was stronger. However, a fight started and they called us all kinds of names. We weren't going to go out to start a fight, but we didn't run away either.

JO: Were there restrictions imposed on Jews by the government itself?

BEN: Yes, they were mostly, imposed by the government. Let me explain what the restrictions were: if my father published the paper, he could not state in it if somebody got beaten up, because the government didn't want it known.

JO: So you had a censorship.

BEN: Yes, everyday before the paper could be put on the street, the paper had to be presented to the censor, and he reviewed everything.

JO: Did you have any non-Jewish friends?

BEN: No, very few. Neighbors from our street. While we are talking about excesses and pogroms. There was one big pogrom, in which many people (Jews) got hurt and I believe, several got killed. Talking about Polish neighbors, we had very good neighbors, including one man, who had a bakery next door to us. He was an older man, a very liberal, democratic man. I remember this today although I

was a young boy. My father had to go to work at 7 a.m. and when the pogrom started, I remember this as if it had happened today, we heard a knock on the door at 6:30 a.m. We got kind of scared "who could that be?" We opened the door and there is the neighbor with 2 men. H said: "Mr. Muler," to my father, "are you ready to go to work?" My father said "I will be ready in a few minutes." The neighbor said "We will take you to work. We will be your bodyguards, so that nothing happens to you." They took him to work and then at 3:30 p.m., they were at the door of the printing shop waiting to take him back home. This was most unusual. We certainly did appreciate something like that since at that time nobody when they left for work knew that they were coming back.

JO: How old were you in 1933?

BEN: 11 years old.

JO: That is when things began to get worse?

BEN: Yes, that is right!

JO: You said that, when you were a boy, you listened to international radio via short-wave? What did you know about the NAZI movement, before 1933? Anything?

BEN: The NAZI movement started in 1933 (that is not so...it assumed power in German in 1933. The attempted beer hall putsch had been in 1923). I didn't know much. However, in 1934, when I finished school, I went to work for my father in the printing shop. I was going to learn the trade. I remember that every time I went into the shop, the editor used to listen to short-wave radio from Germany, and listened to the speeches which Hitler made. They always announced, in advance, that Hitler was going to speak. When the editor used to listen to the speeches, I used to sit next to him and listen. Later on I bought a radio for my own use. Then I listened at home, mainly Germany or Russia or from Warsaw, Poland. I used to listen to the news about what was going on. In later years, I started listening to English broadcasting from BBC (British Broadcasting System).

JO: When did you first hear about Hitler?

BEN: After I got out of school and started going to work. This was the time when everybody was aggravated and worried. Then, the name Hitler came up more often.

JO: What kind of aggravations were there?

BEN: The very first year, when he came to power, and also just before that, we heard what was happening in Germany. I mean the Jews getting beaten up, stores being bombed, windows being broken, synagogues being burned. That kind of thing. We knew that things were happening there. We had been hoping that

Hitler would never get to power in Germany. I seemed impossible that Germany would let a man like this come to power. However, as soon as it happened, and he got elected (by the Bundestag, i.e., the German Congress, we knew that there would be problems. We didn't know exactly what kind of problems there would be, but we knew that there would be trouble.

JO: Did you think then that he would make trouble for Poland?

BEN: No, we really didn't know that he was going to make trouble for Poland or anywhere else, but we knew that there would be trouble for the Jews. He spoke openly about this as being his aim. It didn't come out all of a sudden. He had been promising this all his life, at least his political life. He always had said what he was going to do. A lot of people didn't take his word, but he always said it.

JO: So you started working for your father in the print shop when you were twelve?

BEN: I was actually 13, when I really worked, in 1934.

JO: Was printing something you had wanted to do? Had you thought about it?

BEN: I had not been a good student. Not good enough to go on to university, anyway. So my father said: "Well, since you don't want to go and learn something in school, you are going to be a printer." So I went into the shop and I picked it up really well.

JO: How long did you work for your father?

BEN: For about 2 years. This was a newspaper printing shop. My father did not want me to be just a newspaper printer. He also wanted me to learn the commercial side. So he found another printer who took me as an apprentice for the highest caliber of commercial work being done in that printing shop. He talked to the owner who took me on as an apprentice. So I served that apprenticeship for four years.

JO: Why did you leave that job.

BEN: Oh, I didn't leave that job. I stayed there until the end, until 1939. Then the war broke out.

JO: During that time, did you live with your parents?

BEN: Yes.

JO: What kind of a house did you have? Did you live in a house or an apartment?

BEN: An apartment. As I told you earlier, it was a 24 unit apartment building in which we lived.

JO: What was the 1st thing which happened when the war broke out? What was the first personal experience which you had with the war?

BEN: The first day of the war, we went on an outing into the forest out of town (that must have been Sept., 1939) with a boat. It was an outing in which quite a few people from the printers union participated. It was a picnic. We didn't know anything about the war breaking out, we hadn't even expected it. During that outing someone came from town and told us that Vilna had been bombed. Then everybody got panicky, and we tried to get back home. Home was about 15 Km (10 miles) away. So, we all started by foot or bicycle or whatever, to return to Vilna. When we got back to town, there were already some homes which had been destroyed, with some people having been killed. That is how we knew that the war had started. However, an announcement came out then that the Germans would not come into Vilna; that the Russians would come in instead. That was because they had a pact between Russia and Germany which divided Poland between the two. The Eastern part, including Vilna, was to go to the Russians and the Western part, including Warsaw, was to go to Germany. So we never saw the Germans.

JO: So what happened when the Russians took over?

BEN: When the Russians took over they nationalized all the businesses, so my mother closed her store right away. They nationalized all the printing shops because there are not private printing shops in Russia, and no private newspapers, and they combined all the printing shops of Vilna into a big publishing house. They took all the machinery from all the printers and they made one big plant.

JO: Is that where you worked?

BEN: That is where all the printers worked.

JO: You said that was done in 1940?

BEN: Yes, in 1940.

JO: Your father worked there also?

BEN: Yes!

JO: However, your mother lost her business completely?

BEN: Yes. She closed it up and that was the end of it.

JO: What was the Russian's attitude toward Jews?

BEN: By that time they were receptive to Jews. They didn't bother anybody. They acclaimed freedom for all the nationalities. They proclaimed that everybody is the same; that there was no difference between Russians (meaning inhabitants of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic whose capital as well as that of Russia proper, is Moscow) or Jews, or Cossacks, or any of the other nationalities. That was at least what they claimed. We didn't have any problems when they came in. However, then after they were well established, they decided to play politics. Then they took Vilna, Vilnius, which had formerly been the capital of Lithuania and gave it to the Lithuanians. When the Lithuanians came into Vilnius, they made it their capital again.

JO: So the Russians pulled out?

BEN: No, they didn't pull out but they no longer participated in running the city. They just kept their army, and other military units in the area. The city administration was left to the Lithuanians.

JO: What year was that?

BEN: That occurred as early as 1940. That was quickly done, but right after that they decided to take Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, and incorporate them into the Soviet Union. It was like giving a child a piece of candy, but taking away the whole thing. They gave them the city, but took the whole country.

JO: How did that change things for you?

BEN: The Lithuanians, they were quite anti-Semitic. We had problems with them. They started a big pogrom, still in 1940. It got so bad that the Jewish population had to turn to the Russians for help to stop it. It took intervention from the U.S. to put pressure on Russia to stop the riots in Vilna.

JO: So there was rioting. Was that on numerous occasions?

BEN: It lasted for several days. For several days there were big riots, Jewish people were beaten up, windows in stores were broken, stores were looted and all that.

JO: Do you know how the intervention of the U.S. was arranged?

BEN: I believe that it was made through the Joint (Joint is short for Joint Distribution Committee, which is a division of the Jewish organization connected with resettling organization) and through the HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). They made an appeal to the Jewish community in the U.S. They applied pressure to stop the pogrom. That was in 1940.

JO: So the Russians finally stopped the riots?

BEN: They intervened with soldiers and stopped the whole thing. Then they took over the whole country of Lithuania, including Vilna.

JO: At this point your family was still all together?

BEN: Yes, we were still together.

JO: You still lived in the same apartment?

BEN: Yes, that was so.

JO: Were there any acts of violence committed against you personally, or someone in your family?

BEN: No!

JO: Your family left Vilna after a while. What caused that?

BEN: When the war broke out between Germany and Russia in 1941, my sister and her husband had been taken to Russia in 1940, to Minsk. One of the largest industrial complexes in Vilna was a radio factory. When the Russians came into Vilna in 1940, the entire factory complex and all the workers who did work for that factory were moved to Minsk. Even today this factory in Minsk is one of the biggest radio factories in Russia. My sister didn't want to go but the Russian Secret Service came to our house and they said plainly: "They have to go and if they won't leave the house, we will come to get them." So, they went to Russia, and the fact that they did go is a reason why my sister is alive. Her husband was taken into the Russian army, in the early days of the war, and he got killed.

JO: Was she the one working in the factory, or did both of them work there?

BEN: He did! He worked, however, I believe that after a short period of time, she did also because, in Russia, if you don't work, you don't eat, no matter who it is, woman or man.

JO: Now were they taken at gunpoint? Or did they go voluntarily:

BEN: No, they were so to say, taken at gunpoint because they had to appear. You see, they didn't want to go, but they made them go. Also at the same time, that was lucky for a lot of rich people in Vilna, that was the reason that some of them are alive, because, one night, it actually happened once or twice, in the middle of the night, they rounded up all the people who had businesses, including industrialists, and they took them deep into Russia as undesirables. These people, and they were mainly Jewish people, obviously there were also Poles,

but the majority were Jews, first thought that it is a disaster, but it turned out to be great luck - it saved their lives, unwittingly, but still, it did.

JO: When did you leave Vilna?

BEN: I left Vilna on the 2nd day of the war between Germany and Russia. I felt at that time that there is too much trouble; that there was going to be too much trouble for young people. I was young and strong and I thought that, for me, it would be risky to be there.

JO: What kind of trouble did you expect?

BEN: As a young man and as a Jew, I thought that they would take me to hard labor or such a thing. I didn't know exactly, but the least I could expect was hard labor.

JO: From the Russians?

BEN: No, from the Germans! The Russians were there. I knew that the Russians could not withstand the war, at least the beginning of the war, because I had seen how they came in. They just simply weren't prepared for it. (Between 1939 and 1941, the entire Russian army had been brought to a standstill by the very much LESS POWERFUL army of Finland. Russia had even had the element of surprise when they invaded Finland without declaration of war). I knew that there would be trouble. As a matter of fact, 10 young men and 1 girl from our street came to me early in the morning, 6 a.m. on that 2nd day of the war. They said: "Ben, we are leaving. If you are willing to go with us, we all will go together." On the spur of the moment, they gave me one hour or so to pack all my belongings, clothes, underwear, etc., and my mother and father told me "You better go!" - I had to decide. I told them "I want you to come with me!" I could sense that it would be bad for all of the Jews. "Come with me. I will help you. I will do anything I can on the road." You know that we had to walk. My mother said: "I am willing to go!" But my father was a short man and heavy set and he said: "How far can I go? I will stay!" So my mother said: "No, I won't leave without him. However, you go. You go to your sister and in 3 or 4 days or a week, you can come back." I said "It will take longer than that, and before I can come back, there will be a lot of trouble. You better come with me." They both decided that they wouldn't. They winked and said: "We remember the Germans from WWI and we were able to do business with the Germans, and they weren't that bad." I told them that these were not the same Germans now, however, making a long story short, they didn't go and I left with my friends. We walked from Vilna approximately 100 Km (60 miles) over the Russian border. On the way we already saw some Jewish men and women who had been ambushed on the way by the Lithuanians. They had been killed by the Lithuanians. They were ambushing people on the road out of Vilna, but because we were a larger group, we got through without problems. We arrived into Russia proper.

JO: So, you had to go through the threat of ambush. Did you have any confrontations with anyone?

BEN: I won't believe that you would call it confrontation, but we saw friends of ours dead on the highway, as a result of ambushes, on the sides of the road. I came to Minsk where my sister was supposed to be. However, when we arrived there, Minsk was burning. The Germans had been bombing very heavily. We saw the German planes bombing. They had set Minsk on fire by that time. Minsk had been a city of over 500,000 people; the largest city on the direct road from Warsaw to Moscow. I tried to reach people who were leaving Minsk and ask them if they knew anything of the whereabouts of my sister, or if they knew her. You know, I talked to some people and they told me that she has to be on one of the trucks which they used to evacuate the factory. Someone had seen her get aboard a truck. So I jumped from one truck to the other, and tried to reach her, however, I never could locate her. Then I went through close to the water, and I worked for a couple of months in a Koposk - that is a Russian communal farm community.

JO: What kind of facilities did you have there?

BEN: From the minute we crossed over into the Russia proper, we were always directed where to go. They sent all the people from the train, and they had put us on a train, and they sent us to that Koposk.

JO: Were they Russian government officials who were directing you?

BEN: Yes! Everything was organized. From then on there were always Russian officials who directed us where to go. We were not allowed to move by ourselves.

JO: Did you live in barracks at this farm?

BEN: Yes. We didn't have any clothes other than what we had on our backs. Whatever we had brought from home, we wore until it fell apart. When our shoes fell apart and became torn on the Koposk, they had no other shoes to give us. They said: Well, that is enough for that kind of work for you." Also the Germans were coming closer, so they told us: "You better keep going further into Russia! To the Volga. Over there there are bigger cities, you are people from cities, you are not really farm people." So they gave us a pass to move on. We came to the Volga. From there we boarded a boat. The boat took us upstream and we got to the Ural Mountains. That is where I wound up, near Sverdlovsk (that is a city of about 11/4 million people, located 56.51N,60.36E). I had a friend from Vilna who told me that at one time his sister lived in Sverdlovsk. This is a story by itself. People in Poland in 1932 thought that Russia is a paradise. For that reason a group of Jewish people, husbands and wives, crossed the border into Russia. We are talking about 35 families. When they crossed the border they got

arrested. They said: “We don’t need more Communists here, we need more Communists outside of our borders!” They arrested them all and shipped them to the Ural Mountains. After they were there for about 1 month, they took the husbands away and they let the women stay by themselves.

JO: That was done by the Russian government?

BEN: Yes, I was there for 4 years and that had happened nearly 10 years earlier. We never could find out what happened to the husbands.

JO: So the women were there all by themselves!

BEN: Yes. That is right. However, they all had jobs, clothes and food. They just didn’t have their husbands, but otherwise they didn’t bother them.

JO: What kind of a community was this?

BEN: It was an industrial community. Heavy industry.

JO: Was it a large community?

BEN: No, this was a small town. I would say that it had about 15 thousand to 20 thousand people.

JO: Had these women been living together pretty much?

BEN: No. Each one had an apartment, or at least a room for herself. Over there they really don’t have apartments like here. You generally had one room and one kitchen for 2 - 3 families, and a bathroom for 20 families. That is the standard over there.

JO: So you came there on a boat in 1941?

BEN: In 1941, yes. That was at the end, taking the boat and all that and then train and truck. It wasn’t all done by boat, since the boat does not go up the Ural Mountains.

JO: Why did you decide to stop there?

BEN: The reason I went there is that my friend had told me years earlier that he had a sister there. So I figured that I go there and see what is happening. As a matter of fact, when I got there I found my friend there at his sister’s. We went together to work in the same factory and we lived together with a Russian family, because it was very hard to get an apartment, even apartments as I described earlier. So we found a Russian family which was willing to take us in. We paid them some money from our wages. These wages were meager, but it helped them out.

JO: What kind of work did you do?

BEN: I worked in a steel mill! We were making steel pipes. I worked there for about one month. I had a bad experience there.

JO: What happened?

BEN: On the 1st day I worked there and on the 2nd day when I came to work, another fellow and myself were supposed to take red hot steel pipes away from the furnaces with tongs. Each pipe weighed about 200 kg., which is about 440 lbs. We were to take them up and set them on the side. The fellow who was working with me on that was a Ukrainian. One time, while we were working, and we picked up with the tongs, he let go of his side of the pipe while calling out to me: "Here Jew, you will break your legs!" He figured that the pipe would get on my legs, and they would be smashed. Naturally, I let my end of the pipe go, and I just picked up the tongs which I had in my hands and hit him right over the head. Then the Russians came, the people came, and they asked what had happened. I told them exactly what had happened. They took him away and I never heard any more from him, or about him. I worked there for about one month and then they drafted me into the Russian labor force. It is like an army, as far as draft goes, but it was only to work, it was not to go to the front lines. They sent us to another small town about 40 km (25 miles) from there. That was in a forest where we cut down timber for the copper mines. Right next to the forest were the copper mines. These mines needed the timber so that they would not cave in. We had to cut the trees. They were so big that if 3 people would hold hands, they could not encircle one tree. These trees must have been hundreds of years old. We worked there for a little while.

JO: What was your living arrangement there?

BEN: We lived in barracks, regular army barracks.

JO: How many people were there at that time?

BEN: We were 6 - 7 to a room. There were maybe 1000 people or so working in the forest.

JO: That was a big group.

BEN: Yes, it was a large group of people over there. There were army officers in charge. We worked in the forest and, after that, they took us away from there and got us to build a copper mill, in which copper was to be melted. They picked me to work on one of the furnaces.

JO: Was that in another place?

BEN: It was close by.

JO: What was the living arrangement there? Were they also barracks?

BEN: Yes, that is right!

JO: Were there only men?

BEN: Yes, men. Only men. Then they transferred us to a small town, which was closest to the factory - the copper mill. The living arrangements were a little different. They were not barracks as it had been in the woods. These were apartments where 2 fellows lived together, or maybe 3 fellows, depending on the rooms.

JO: How long were you there?

BEN: From 1941 until 1946, in the same place. We were there permanently. They did not take us in the army because we were needed to work on the copper mill. Our jobs were such that they had no replacement for us. After a little while we all got specialized in our particular jobs. It got to be routine work.

JO: While you were there did you have any kind of social life?

BEN: Yes. We were together with people from Poland, or people from Germany. Or Czechoslovakia. All the foreigners were in that little town. They all kept together. We used to go out together to see a movie or to a concert. Russian bands used to come and play dance music. So we used to go out and have a good time.

JO: Were you mostly Jews in that small town?

BEn: Yes. There were a few Poles, in our place. It was different in other places.

JO: Do you think that the fact that you were Jewish had anything to do with your being chosen for the kind of work you did, instead of for the army?

BEN: No, we were people who were resettled...therefore not native Russians, and not trusted to go into the army. As foreigners we were not trusted for army duty.

JO: This is the 2nd interview with Ben Muler. It is Sept. 19, 1984. The last time we talked you were telling me that you were working in a copper mill or a smelting plant, specifically that you were working on one of the furnaces. The last thing you told me is that you had moved to a place nearer to the mill where you lived in apartments, rather than in barracks. The friend whom you found along the way - was he still with you? Or, did he go elsewhere?

BEN: No, he was in the apartment near the mill and when they dispersed us from the barracks, they gave us living quarters and they put us together. The government of the little town gave us the place in which we were to live. In Russia you cannot find anything on your own. Everything is given to you and they tell you where you have to live and that is that.

JO: So you were living together?

BEN: Yes.

JO: I was curious about the town. Was that something which had sprung up around the mill or was it a regular little town, which had been there for a while?

BEN: This little town must have been there for quite a while. However, when the war broke out in 1941, the Russian government built the factory there, since there were a lot of people. People who did not live there before were sent there to build the factory. They also built new living quarters and they built the mill from scratch. There had been nothing like that there before. They built a huge complex. That is where we lived until 1946. (The German surrender took place in April, 1945).

JO: Were you in this apartment with your friend the entire time?

BEN: Yes. That is where we were from the day we moved in in 1942 until we were repatriated.

JO: Now, when you were repatriated, did you go somewhere to check on that or did someone come to you?

BEN: We had an organization of Polish citizens in that little town, and there were organizations like this all over Russia. All the Polish citizens were registered. Any news pertaining to Polish citizens came to these organizations. Then we were notified that on a certain day we would quit our jobs and that we would have to be at the railroad station. They specified how much time we had for this. They stated that we could take anything we had as far as our belongings were concerned for the return to Poland.

JO: What was the name of the organization?

BEN: This was the organization of Polish Citizens! That is what it was called.

JO: I believe that Dr. Berry told me that you met Bernice while you were in Russia.

BEN: Yes. In 1943, I was working in the Mill with Bernice's brother. I met him. We were not close friends, but we knew each other. He had two sisters and his parents. That was his family. They lived in another town. This fellow, Bernice's

brother, was drafted into the labor force and sent to work in this factory. We met there. Then, in 1944, his father passed away, and he brought his mother and two sisters to our little town. Both sisters went to work in the factory where I worked. On New Year's Eve the organization of Polish citizens had a dance and get together. So the two sisters came to the dance and we started talking comparing experiences, etc. So I asked one of the sisters to dance and then we made another date. One time when we were going by train out of town; I had to go to see a doctor. I don't remember why, but she went along. So, out of nowhere I popped out: "If you will marry me, I will take you to the U.S." It was very cold, so she thought that I was crazy or hallucinating. How did I, in Siberia, in the Ural mountains, get off talking about taking someone to the U.S.? I believe that I mentioned, during our previous taping session that I had papers prior to the war that my relatives wanted me to come over to this country. However, the war had broken out before anything could happen. I knew that, one of these days, once I would get out of Russia, I would come to the U.S. So, after we got married, I didn't promise anything else, just to bring her here. I did!

JO: So, you have no plans to go back to Poland at this time?

BEN: Right now?

JO: No, then.

BEN: Then, yes! We went back to Poland. You know that all the Polish citizens were repatriated. We had been going together, just like friends, nothing like an engagement. However, when the Polish citizens were repatriated, I went with them formally, as with my fiancee's family. I went together with them since I didn't have any family. My sister, she was deep in Russia, and I didn't know exactly where they were living. So I went with Bernice's family and we traveled together to Poland. We had a very bad experience during that journey. While we were traveling, we were on the train and were coming closer to the Polish border. A lot of the Russian soldiers were coming back from Germany and Poland. They were warning us: "Don't go back to Poland! It is pretty bad over there." Even today, after the war, the Poles are still killing Jews. Notice that that was after the war. They were telling us, "Don't go! Don't go over there! It is a bad place to go." We went anyway. Right after we crossed the border from Russia to Poland, from Communist dictatorship to Poland, which was supposed to be a free society, all of a sudden, we were stunned because they were throwing stones and rocks at the train and screaming: "Jews go back to Russia!" We were afraid for our lives.

JO: Was this the general population?

BEN: Yes, the general population. They were screaming such things as: "We are giving Russia coal and they are giving us back the Jews!" That was a very sad experience for us. None of the people who had lived in that vicinity, in one of the

small towns, even stopped to see if anyone of their relatives were alive. Everybody went with the train until it stopped in Lodz, Poland (That is already southwest of Warsaw). There we disembarked from the train. There we already found representatives of the Joint, the same U.S. organization which had alerted the U.S. about the Lithuanian pogrom, and other Jewish organizations which sprang up right after the war. They started taking care of the people who returned from Russia.

JO: Did you go back to Bernice's hometown at all?

BEN: No! I didn't go to my hometown then. I had gone to my hometown while I was in Russia (Vilan, at the end of WWII was no longer Polish). When I came out of Russia, I never went back. Actually I couldn't go back because they wouldn't let me back in. We were in Lodz for approximately 3 weeks or 4 weeks. There were so many things going on, anti-semitic things, that I told my fiancee and her mother and brother that I was not going to stay there. I wanted to leave as soon as I could.

JO: Where did you stay during these weeks?

BEN: We stayed together.

JO: Did you live in temporary housing?

BEN: It was a small apartment which we rented.

JO: What specific kind of anti-semitism did you experience?

BEN: You could read in the paper, daily, the the AK (Army Karavioka or army of the fatherland) who were strong anti-communists and also anti-Jewish was taking young Polish soldiers, who were not with them, and Jews, off trains and shot right on the side of the railroad right of way. That was going on all the time, right after the war.

JO: Who were these people of the AK? Did they have any connections with the Polish government?

BEN: No. They were just bands of vigilantes. To the contrary of having things to do with the Polish government, they fought the Polish government. They were even shooting Polish officers from the government army. They did not want these officers to be in the army and support the government because the government at that time cooperated with the Russians. The Russian government said that these people wanted to discredit the government, which was exactly what they were trying to do. There was never a day where there was not an article in the paper that a soldier or a policeman was shot in cold blood. One of my teachers

had a brother who was an army officer in Lodz. These people just came into his house and shot him in cold blood, in his own bathroom.

JO: Was this well organized? Or were there just bands of vigilantes?

BEN: I presume that they were well organized because they sabotaged a lot of the government's work.

JO: So this was not just random violence?

BEN: Oh, no!

JO: When you left Lodz, where did you go?

BEN: When I finally decided to leave, I told my fiancee that I was going and that if she wanted to she could come with me. That we would go to Czechoslovakia and then that we could see where we would finally land. There were Jewish organizations which helped people cross the border illegally. The border crossings had to be illegal, that was the only way in which we could leave Poland. They found roads where it was possible to cross with the help of Polish soldiers who were paid off, so that they would take people over the border.

JO: So you had to pay money to get out of Poland.

BEN: I did not have to pay anything. This border crossing was organized by the Jewish organizations. The individual involved did not have to pay. If you wanted to go, they willingly took you. You had the choice to go to Austria, or Germany and from there, further. That was in 1946, so Israel did not yet exist, but the Jewish organizations had the vision of a Jewish State, so they wanted to have a large Jewish immigration to Israel, although that was illegal. Such possible immigration to Palestine, as it still was known, was the reason why so many people left Poland.

JO: Did you ever think about going to Israel?

BEN: I truly always wanted to be in Israel, but as already said, my dream was the U.S. After the losses to my family during the war, this was the only place where I had relatives. I had 2 aunts in t he U.S., one in New York and one in Mississippi.

JO: Did you stop anywhere for any length of time, on your way to the U.S.:?

BEN: Yes. We stopped for a short period of time in Austria, actually in Salzburg. Then we crossed the border to Germany where we went to a camp for Displaced Persons (Such camps were set up by the Western allies of WWII to allow people to stay until someplace could be found for them to move to. Displaced Persons [DP], included people who had been prisoners of the NAZIS or forcibly rounded

up for forced labor work in Germany, Austria, etc., to help the German war effort. It also included people who did not consider that it was economically viable, politically safe or otherwise felt they couldn't stand their original environment as an alternative to returning the the places of their birth. Note should be taken that often, right after the fighting of WWII stopped, political boundaries were arbitrarily modified and populations were forcibly relocated. DP camps were presumably only for the victims of NAZI persecutions and were later extended to victims of communism). The DP camp where we were was in Hof on the Saale River (50.19N,11.55E) in Upper Bavaria near the Czechoslovak border. We arrived there. That DP had been organized by the U.S. Army. They took us from Salzburg to Hof by train. Army trucks were waiting at the railroad station to take us to camps.

JO: How long were you there?

BEN: I was there for about 3 1/2 years. When we arrived in the camp, just as I got off the truck, a man came up to me and said "Do you want a job? Do you want to work?" I told him I wanted to work. He said: "O.K., then you are the billeting officer. You will be the one who will give out the apartments." I told him I didn't yet know what the camp looked like and he told me that I would know. Twenty minutes after that I was the one giving apartments to everyone in the camp. You know I was giving all the people who had arrived on the train with me a place where they could live.

JO: Were all these apartments new?

BEN: No, these had been army barracks, from the German army. They had small rooms, private rooms, no kitchens, no refrigeration or anything of the kind but they were nice rooms. The U.S. army provided us with folding cots and blankets. So you see, it wasn't so bad; when we came in we had a place to lay down.

JO: So you ate in mess halls?

BEN: Yes. We had a mess hall and for a short period probably a month, until things got organized, we ate there. Then everyone wa given rations and they cooked in their apartments and we ate there. By then everybody had a hot plate and we bought dishes and such things and we lived a normal life. There were, of course, only small quarters, but everybody kept clean. If people were there with a child or two, they got a little bigger room. So it was pretty good for the time we were there. We stayed there, in Hof, for about 2 1/2 years (this is a variance of my early statement); then the cold war with Berlin started. So they did not want the DP's to be right at the border with Czechoslovakia and the Iron Curtain. They got concerned that there could be some fighting. So, since I was the billeting officer, they called me in from the U.S. Army and told me to go and look for another place, for another camp where we could be resettled. So we found a camp in Begendorf.

JO: So this was about 1949 now?

BEN: This was 1948. I will never forget that either. That was quite an experience also to go around Germany to find a camp. I had orders from the High Commissioner for Germany. I had orders to look over the various places to make certain that it was suitable for our people. I arrived in Begendorf (was not able to locate this on the map; either it is too small place or the location was not understood). There were still Military Police (MP's) at the gate. The MP's were residing in the camp. I walked over to the MP post and I told them that I wanted to see the Provost Marshal (PM) who was in charge of the camp. They asked me why and I told them that I wanted to see him so I could look over the camp in order to prepare it for displaced persons. The soldier gave me a mouthful of words: "You Jews will not get this camp!" So I told him I didn't come to talk to him - I wanted to speak with the Marshal. I had papers from the High Commissioner to see him and I had nothing to do with this man. So he saw that I had authority and that the PM was expecting me and he took me over there.

JO: Now, this American, was he a young man? I am just curious about that.

BEN: He was in the army. He couldn't be more than 23 or 24, something like that. I figured that there was no use getting someone into trouble and to start something so I didn't even mention the incident to the PM. The PM called a few soldiers into his office and they took me through the camp. After I looked it over and saw what beautiful nice quarters they had in the large brick buildings, I came back and said, "Yes, we will take it!" After I was done, I went back to the gate and saw that the same soldier was there and I told him: "I am coming back! And, you will go out of here." That, of course, was the end of it. Then, 2 months later the entire camp moved there, that is, from Hof to Biedenkopf (this time this is what the camp's name sounded like. There is such a town located in the U.S. Zone at 50.55N,8.32E).

JO: Did you work for pay and buy things for money in the camp? Or, was it a barter economy?

BEN: In camp we were getting all our rations from IRO, the International Refugee Organization. We worked for them, and we got food rations and clothing. Every person worked at something in the camp. Some people took care of cleaning, carpentry work. I described what I was doing, that was a job which didn't stop because we had a constant turnover of people. People were coming over from Czechoslovakia or Austria and I had to find them a place to live.

JO: Was Bernice's family still with you?

BEN: No! There was just Bernice and I.

JO: Where did they stay?

BEN: They stayed back in Poland, in Lodz. They stayed there until 1954. In 1954 they emigrated to Israel.

JO: Since it was so bad there, was there a reason why they stayed?

BEN: My brother-in-law got into business there. He opened a tailor shop. Business went quite well, so they figured: "Oh, another year!," and then another year and then they would go on. Then things started getting really bad; it was 1954. So, they left.

JO: So they just put up with anti-semitism?

BEN: Oh yes! Anti-semitism and all other kinds of nuisances. When he went to buy clothes or other material, he had to pay money "under the table" to get it. He had to pay for his shop also. It was hard, but he made a living. He could take it. I couldn't have.

JO: Was there any violence ever done to them?

BEN: No.

JO: Where were you and Bernice married?

BEN: We were married in Hof, Germany. It was the 1st thing we did when we got there.

JO: Were you married by a Rabbi?

BEN: Yes, a Rabbi married us and we also had a civil ceremony.

JO: I guess that that is common in Europe?

BEN: Yes, it is. In Russia there are no Rabbis, there you go into the government office and you get married right there, on the spot. They write on a paper that you are married, and that is it. In Germany we went into the City Hall. They had a ceremony there and then they give you a marriage certificate.

JO: Were Bernice's family able to be there?

BEN: No!

JO: That is right, they could not travel. It was illegal to cross the borders.

BEN: That is so, they could not travel from Poland to Germany.

JO: How much longer were you there after the camp moved?

BEN: Until 1949. In 1949 I finally went through the American consul. Then I knew that I am going to the U.S. My papers were in order. That gave us a date when we could go. Our son was born 7 months prior to that, still in Germany, so when we came to the U.S., he was 8 months old.

JO: Were you pretty much in the DP camp, just waiting for your papers to come through?

BEN: Yes, that was our main purpose for being there. If you wanted to go to Israel, you could go any day, anytime you wanted to go. Until May 1948 you couldn't go there legally because the English wouldn't let you in, but you could go there illegally.

JO: I believe President Truman had D.P. laws passed. (Is that what allowed you to come in?)

BEN: Yes. That was in 1947, if I am not mistaken. That is when the law was passed and then the immigration started, to the U.S. and to Canada.

JO: Did you arrive in N.Y.?

BEN: No. We arrived in Boston. The first thing we saw when we arrived in Boston was a Polish store with a big sign: "We sell herrings!" That was kind of funny to see such a sign in Polish! The Joint (the Jewish organization I mentioned earlier) was waiting for us there. They were actually waiting for all the transports. We were on an army ship, the S.S. General Hershey. Instead of returning soldiers or sailors, there were like 2000 people. (When these General and Admiral size ships were used for troop transports, they carried about 4000 servicemen; but that did not include any families). It was like a cattle boat, however, everybody was happy that they were finally going somewhere, and were about to start a decent, new life.

JO: How long were you at sea?

BEN: 8 days. I was then 27 years old. Actually 8 or 9 days. It was not hard for me to take, but Bernice was sick from the time we crossed the English Channel until we were in the harbor of Boston. She was terribly seasick. In Boston, people from the Joint & HIAS were waiting. They knew all about me because they had two tickets for my wife and me to go to New York, by train since my aunt wanted to see me. They also had 2 more tickets for us to go from New York to Mississippi. That was going to be my final destination.

JO: So you were going to see both aunts?

BEN: No. My aunt from M ississippi had sent me the papers, to come there. However, my aunt from New York, when she heard that I was coming, she sent me tickets. She wanted to see me in N.Y. since going to N.Y. from Mississippi would be a long extra trip, an expensive trip.

JO: How long were you in Boston?

BEN: Maybe two hours in Boston, at the railroad station. Many years later, I went to Boston and found that it is a beautiful city.

JO: Then you went to N.Y.?

BEN: Yes, we went to New York and at the railroad station, my cousins, a few cousins and my aunt were there. They took us to my aunt's apartment. There, there were two cousins from Vilna, 2 young girls, who had survived the Holocaust. All their family was gone, everybody else had gone to the ovens. They had survived. They had gone through hell, including quite a few concentration camps. They were in N.Y. A cousin of ours from N.Y., he had been in the U.S. army, during WWII. He had happened to be in Belgium. He was talking to some people; survivors, and when they started talking - all of a sudden he found out that two of the girls he was talking to were his cousins. He had not known that they hd survived. They knew nothing about addresses or names of their aunt in N.Y. He called right away his mother and told her about the meeting. They sent the girls papers to bring them to the U.S. So, when we arrived in N.Y., they were there living with my aunt. That was quite a reunion.

JO: Yes, it must have been! How long did you stay in N.Y.?

BEN: We stayed in NYC for three days. A lot of people came to see us because every time somebody came, it was listed in the Jewish Press. So when they saw in the papers that we had arrived and where we were staying, they came and brought us flowers and all kinds of things. So my uncle said: "Who are they and what did you do for the people so that they bring you so much candy and flowers!" He just couldn't understand it. We had a nice reunion and stayed a few days and then we left for Mississippi. When we arrived in Mississippi, I could never imagine that my aunt and uncle would live in a small town like that. That was truly a little town, a really small place.

JO: What was it called?

BEN: Itta Bena (1980 population of 2904). I believe that I mentioned in the previous interview that I was sick, that I burned my leg in Russia, when I worked in the smelter. When I was in the hospital, it happened and I thought about my relatives. I couldn't remember the address exactly, but I always remembered that the name of the town was the first name of my sister and mine. So I just sent a

letter from the hospital to Mr. Jack Protrick, Itta Bena, no street, no nothing, and THEY GOT THE LETTER!

JO: How long did you stay there?

BEN: We stayed with my relatives for a short time because I could not find any work in my trade. I was a printer by trade. My uncle found me a job in a little larger town, 7 miles away, in Greenwood, as a printer, in a newspaper. I went to work at night since I worked the 2nd shift. There was a sports reporter who also lived in Itta Bena. He used to take me to work. He also took me home again. I worked at that job for about 2 weeks. After that he gave me an envelope and I was polite and didn't open it right away. So, when he left, I opened it up. He had paid me $17.00 for 2 weeks. I had worked 40 hours a week. I came home and I showed the check to my wife. So she started crying. She said "That is what we came to the U.S. for?" for that kind of pay?" I said: "Don't worry, I will find something better. Let me just look around. One night as we ere driving back to Itta Bena, he said "Ben, I have to ask you a question: how much is the boss paying you for work?" I said: "Why do you ask?" He said: "The reason I am asking is because the boss goes around all over town. He talks to the printers that he has a fantastic man, an excellent craftsman and that he doesn't have to pay him anything. So this is why I am asking how much you are earning for 2 weeks. I told him he gave me a check for $17.00 for 2 weeks. The reporter stopped the car and he said: "What, how could he do it to you, going around talking that you are doing the best work he ever had done and taking advantage because you are a newcomer! He surely is taking advantage of you." I couldn't argue with him and said I would have to look for something better. He said: "I look for something else for you. Will you go somewhere else if I find you another job?" I said: "I will have to. I cannot live on $8.50 a week!" A week or so went by and the reporter was taking me to work one day and asked if I could go to Jackson, Miss. that Sunday. "I talked to the foreman in the big newspaper there, the Courier-Ledger, and he said that he would like to see you," the reporter said, "he needs printers." I went down there on a Sunday and talked to the foreman. The foreman told me "Ben, I can see that you are a printer. I look at your hands and I can see that you are a printer. We pay $1.55 per hour. That was in 1950. I will start you with $1.50 and if you know the work well, I will give you the other nickel. When can you come to work?" I told him I didn't want to mess up the other man, but I would give two weeks' notice and be in Jackson in two weeks. So, when I came back I told Mr. Blake the owner "Mr. Blake, I am giving you 2 weeks' notice. Then I am leaving." He said: "Why, didn't I treat you right?" I told him I had a wife and a child and I could not live off my uncle's charity. I had to make a living for myself. So he said: "I will pay you anything you want! You just mention the price and I will pay it." I told him that it was too late and I had a job somewhere else. After I quit there I went to Jackson, Miss. and started working. After the 1st hour, the foreman walked by, looked at me working and said: "You are getting the other nickel, and you can work as much overtime as you want." So I worked 40 hours, regular pay, and 30 hours overtime, the first week. It was hard, but at least we

saw results. An incident which I have to mention was very gratifying to my wife and to me. When I worked on that job the first day a man whom I didn't know, watched me constantly working, to see what I was doing. At the end of the day, he came up to me and said: "Ben, I am quitting here. I am going to be a foreman in Tuscaloosa, Alabama for the newspaper. I like your work. If you come to work for me I will give you a quarter an hour more. Would you like to come to work for me?" I said: "No, I took the job here, and will stay here as long as they treat me right. If something happens, I will look you up." He went on: "Do you have an apartment?" I said, "No, I am staying at the Y. I will wait until I find an apartment, then I will bring my wife here with my child. He said: "I am going away, and am leaving. I live in a pretty nice complex. Can you go with me after work and I will talk to the people there. There is a big list, a waiting list for people to get apartments there, but I know the management quite well, so I will see if I can get you that apartment. Do you have a refrigerator and a stove?" I said: "No, not yet, but one day I will buy them, as soon as I get my paycheck." So he said: "Here is a brand new refrigerator and a brand new stove. Whenever you can afford to buy another one you go to this store where I bought it and buy one. They will crate it up and ship it to me. Use these as long as you need them." That was the first experience I had in the U.S. where people were really nice and went out of their way to make a refugee, a newcomer, feel right.

JO: Did you experience any anti-semitism when you arrived here?

BEN: In the shop in Jackson, Miss. it was not truly anti-semitism, however, I had an experience with an older man. The first day I started working there, he came up to me and said: "Mr. Ben, refugees are not supposed to work in printing shops; they are supposed to be on farms." I look at him and I did not know what to say so I sad: "Mr., I am a printer and I work in a printing shop; if you are a farmer, you can go to work on a farm!" That man did not talk to me for a year and one year later, when I quit this job in Jackson to move up to Dayton, he came up to me to apologize and he said "Mr. Ben, I am sorry that I spoke to you as I did. You are a printer and you should work in a printing shop!"

JO: That was the only prejudicial statement which was made to you?

BEN: That was the only one I can remember. I never had any problems. You know you hear all kinds of ethnic jokes, but they are never meant in malice, but that does not mean anti-semitism to me...it is just talk.

JO: How did you wind up in Dayton?

BEN: When I worked for the Courier-Ledger in Jackson, I saw an advertisement in the paper that a printing house in Dayton "Dayton Typographic" is looking for printers. They circulated ads all over the country. In 1951 it was very hard to get printers, everybody was looking, so I wrote them letter. I asked them whether they had a position for me. I told them I was a newcomer to the U.S., that I had been here

for only 1 year; that I was a printer, and that I would like to get a job, if possible. I received a letter from them asking me to come up and talk to them. They have plenty of jobs available, but they would like to talk to me to see if I know enough English and if I understand what is what. They are commercial printers. They wanted to be sure that I knew the trade and since the didn't want to bring me up here just to send me back. So, on my vacation, I decided to come up to Dayton and talked to the people. The boss told me that I was fine; that he would like to have me in his shop, but that I would have to get a union card. The place where I was working in Jackson was nonunion. I went to the union here in Dayton and talked to the president. He told me that I would have to go back to my local in Jackson, Miss. There was a typographical union local in Jackson. That I had to apply in Jackson. He added: "If they want to give you a card, then come back here and we will see what we can do for you." So, I went back to Jackson, and got a union card right away. Two weeks later, I left for Dayton. Here, I worked for this man for about 3 months; the old timers in the shop were getting a 6th day per week as overtime, and 2 hours overtime daily. I, on the other hand, was only getting the 2 hours of daily overtime. So naturally, I was unhappy. I told the foreman that I was not happy with that arrangement, but he didn't do anything about it. At that time at the Dayton Daily News, you could work as much overtime as you wanted, because they had a lot of work, and not enough printers. So, I went over there. They told me: "Yes, you can come any day. We would like to have you." So I didn't decide anything. However, one day a printer passed by my press and said to me: "Ben you know what the foreman said about you?" I asked him what it was and he said: "That you stay here in the shop for life." I said "You go tell the foreman that I am quitting!" He said: "What did you say?" I repeated it and added: "That is exactly what I said: tell him that I am quitting." He went to the foreman and told him. The foreman came over and said: "What do you mean? You are quitting!" I said: "That is exactly what I said. I have asked you for the 6th day of work and you didn't give it to me. So I went to the Dayton Daily News and they have an opening and with as much overtime as I need. I came here without a penny to my name. I came to this country without anything and I have to work hard to make it." He said "O.K. I'll give you the 6th day. I told him it was too late and I was going to the News." So I went to the News. I worked there, my wages were higher, the overtime was as much as I wanted to work. I worked there until the end of the year. All of a sudden, after New Years, that is when the slow season started, they started laying off people in the Dayton Daily News. The foreman laid off 20 people who had come on board after me. I was the 21st to go. He came to me and said "Ben, if I lay you off for two weeks, I have to lay off two more people, besides you. I will hire you back." I said "Jim (Jim Mendenhall was the foreman), I have never been laid off in my life. If you lay me off, you will never see me again!" He said: "Forget it! You stay and the other two guys stay, on account of you. I don't want to lose you." I stayed with them for 14 years. Those were good years!

JO: Did you retire from there?

BEN: I didn't retire! I worked for the News for 14 years and then I saw that a check is a check and you cannot make more out of it. Another year, another $5.00 a week increase. So I started thinking about going into business. Some of my friends whom I had met here in Dayton were in the scrap metal business. They made a better living than I did on the job. So, I thought that I would try it out. I tried it out and it worked out pretty well for me. So, now I am in the scrap metal business. I gave up printing and went into junk. My daughter who was born in Dayton, one day came to me and said: "Dad, before this you worked for the Dayton Daily News. That was such a nice job, a printer. When the teacher asks what the fathers of the students are doing, I used to say that you worked for the Dayton Daily News, where he is a printer. Now, what will I say? That he is a junkie, that he works with junk?" I answered: "Don't worry, don't tell them that. If they ask you, tell them that your dad is an M.D." She said, "An M.D. is a doctor." I said: "No, you tell them that it is a metal dealer." As you see, we do have a little fun.

JO: Was that Mr. Appel who informed you about the scrap metal business?

BEN: No. I knew Mr. Appel. I knew other people here in town in the scrap metal business. There were quite a few other people in that business. I started on my own and it worked out. I deal mainly with printers, because I know their language and I know the material, so most of my dealings are with printers.

JO: I guess that I just have one last question: I believe that you told me last time that your family was orthodox. Is that so?

BEN: No. They were not orthodox. They were observing Jews, it was a Kosher home. The house was set up according to the rituals, the Jewish rituals, but I would not say that my father was orthodox. That he went every morning and every evening to pray, and every Saturday to the synagogue. No. That was not the case.

JO: Did you manage, during the time you were in Russia, and during the time you were in Europe, after the war, to attend services and otherwise to observe your religion? Was there religion in your life, besides your marriage?

BEN: Not in Russia. We worked hard in Russia, it was a hard life, and there was not much thinking about religion. After the war, when I came back and I saw what happened in Poland, and I saw what happened to my parents and relatives, I was mad. I was truly mad. I didn't believe in a God. I didn't believe in anything. I didn't believe that there is a God, so that something like this could have happened. However, when I arrived in the U.S. and mellowed a little, things changed and today I am on the Board of the Synagogue. I have been on that Board for the last 25 years. I also work with a lot of Jewish organizations in order to help other people.

JO: What Temple do you belong to?

BEN: Beth Jacob Synagogue. I have belonged there for the last 33 years.

JO: Have you and Bernice always kept Kosher?

BEN: Yes. We have kept Kosher most of the time. Our daughter is very observant. Our son is not so observant. Our daughter and her husband are very observant. To make them feel welcome in our house, we keep strictly Kosher; in this way, they are free to come and enjoy their mother and father.

JO: What kind of organizations do you work with?

BEN: Right here, in Dayton, I have worked with the UJA (United Jewish Appeal), ORT (Organization for Technical Retraining), for the Zionist organization. I also was a member of the Typographical Union, and worked for them. I am on the Board of the synagogue.

JO: Do you have anything to do with refugee organizations?

BEN: We helped when the Russian refugees started coming in the late '70's. I tried to help those who came to Dayton as much as I could. I am also on the Board of the Refugees from Poland, the displaced persons from Poland. I always have worked with them. We have Memorial Services here, which I started with two other people. In 1963 we started the memorial Service to the memory of the Holocaust. I have also worked with the Jewish Federation of Greater Dayton to build a memorial. I was one of the first people to start talking about that. We built the memorial on the grounds of the Jewish Federation, the Jesse philips Building of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Greater Dayton. That memorial was dedicated last year, in 1983.

JO: Do you feel that anything like the Holocaust can happen in this country.

BEN: It can happen anyplace, not only in this country, anyplace. If a strong person, who is a good speaker, and times are economically bad. If the financial, the economic situation of the country is bad, a person can always arouse other people to do things they never dreamed of doing; then you take normal people and turn them into beasts. This first Holocaust showed that people, who never had dreamed of being murderers, they were educated, cultured people, and got turned into animals, into beasts. IT CAN HAPPEN ANYPLACE, providing there is a leader and times are bad.