

BENNO STRUMMER

AUSTRIA/GERMANY/UNITED STATES/CANADA

WORLD WAR II

Interviewed by

Erwin Goldman

(September 1990)

Original Text Transcribed from Tapes

for

THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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SURVIVOR-FAMILIES & FRIENDS

1995

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Interviewee: Benno Strummer (S)

Date of Recording: September 1990

Ident. Number: 08-1

Track Number: T1-S1

Interviewer: Erwin Goldman (G)

Observer: Ilana Strummer (I)

S: And I was born in [on the] 10th of April, 1922. When Hitler came to power...in 1933, and he came [annexed] to Austria in 1938, as far as I remember. Ah...two of my sisters, my younger sister and my older sister went to England. I have a sister what [who] stays in Vienna, she is the middle one, and she was protected by an Aryan [non-Jewish] husband. So, somehow, she didn't have [to go to] the concentration camps, and her son had to wear the 'Star of David'. I had, in that time, used to belong to the 'Gordonia' [a pioneering Zionist youth movement] and went on 'Hakhsharah' [Hebrew, "preparation"] to be ready to go to Israel and work the land.¹ In that time, after Hitler invaded Austria, it means, not invaded they [the local population] were very happy to have him, ah...and ah...

G: [laughter]

S: That's a fact, you know...

G: That's right.

¹ Since the age of 13. I belonged to Gordonia, a Zionist organization with aims to settle in Israel. I was scheduled to leave Vienna in 1938.

S: And, ah, he came in to the city of Graz I remember, and, in this town, in the big square they hailed him as the 'new Messiah', whatever there was. Anyway. to go back to that, that um...I went to 'Hakhsharah' to get ready to go to Israel to work the land there and, ah...our movement, what was connected with Theodor Herzl, ah...

G: Did you learn ah...farming skills and everything?

S: The whole thing, yes. I learned how to milk a cow, I learned how to plow, I learned how to seed, I learned how to harvest...

G: Really?

S: I learned everything there...

G: Where did they do that?

S: I worked for sixteen months in one of the big estates, very close to Vienna in that time, and um...my 'Mazkir' [Hebrew "recorder; secretary"] had to reassure my parents that I was going to Israel. In that time that was [there were] illegal transport[s] that went through Yugoslavia and down the Danube all the way out there to the ocean and then a ship was waiting there to take transport to Israel. Ah...my Mazkir showed my parents that I was the third on the list to go. My two sisters were already in England and my parents had a visa to go to China, because...

G: To China?

S: Ya, to Shanghai. They had [obtained] the visa quiet[ly] because it was the only one [the only country that] was left, China, what [which] took in Jewish people at that time.

Ah...I have to mention that on the 10th of November 1938, when the [third secretary of the German Embassy in France] [Ernst] vom Rath was assassinated in Paris, you know, then when they destroyed forty-eight synagogues in Vienna in that time and arrested a lot of people.

G: Is this Kristallnacht? [German, "Night of Broken Glass," November 9-10, 1938.]

S: On the 10th of November 1938, the Nazis destroyed, bombed all the forty-eight beautiful synagogues what [that] we had in Vienna, because in Vienna, ah...it's a background story what I am telling you now...

G: Okay.

S: We had a population of 380,000 Jews [approx. 180,000].

G: 380,000 [180,000].

S: 380,000 [180,000] Jews. Was there [in Vienna] forty-eight of the most beautiful synagogues served this congregation [population], you know, and in my, in my synagogue which was to be the Glücketempel, it was as big as a whole block, a city block, there were 5,000 people, and the head rabbi from Vienna used to hold the services there and this is where I had my Bar Mitzvah at that time. There's not a stone left of the Temple, there is only one synagogue left what is built in what used to be the municipal synagogue, in one of the...in the centre of the city, you know, and that one is left because the Gestapo took it over. However, to go back to my original story, my Mazkir had to go to my parents and show them that I was the third on the list to leave, otherwise

they would have never left Austria and would have been killed in the gas chambers. So, 1938 was the deadline for them, December 1938, they had to leave. So they left and I was, had to go up to the Gestapo with...I had a passport, and to get the stamp in there, an exit visa, to go up there and [I] had to stand in line, I remember very well, and it was in the Prinzeugenstrasse, where Rothschild had a palace, and this is where the Gestapo was, was the headquarters [in Vienna].

G: Really. Who took over his palace?

S: Of course, they took over everything.

G: I mean, early on, before 1938.

S: 1938, when Hitler came in, that's right, and they took everything over, wherever a Jewish...they destroyed all the Jewish businesses and bombed all the temples, you know, and in that time already, rounded up 90% of the Jewish people, population, from Vienna and tortured them and all kinds of things...

G: Where did they keep them?

S: And sent them already to the concentration camps in that time, in 1938.

G: In '38 they were taken?

S: Yes, yes, and that was when he [Herschel Grynsman] assassinated vom Rath in Paris [on November 7, 1938], and it's a very famous date, 10th of November 1938, when they really took most of the Jewish people and sent them into concentration camps.

G: Which camps did they send them to?

S: Well, in that time, there was Mauthausen, there was Dachau, there was Auschwitz, there were all these camps already working, you know, at that time. Anyway, in that time I had to go up there and get the exit visa, and there were Brunner one, and Brunner two were the people, the political S.S. what made the decisions at that time in Vienna. And Brunner one looked to [at] me and said, "Why do you want to go to Israel for?" and I said, "Well, I was trained to go and work there." He says, "No, you're going to go and work for Hitler." And that was the end of everything, they put me already in a concentration camp in Austria that was called, Dopfer in Oberösterreich [province "Upper Austria"], and I was there for sixteen months in that camp.

G: Did they just take you, like right there?

S: They took me right then and there and shipped me right to that, ah...concentration camp.

G: And your parents were already...

S: They were already gone.²

G: And so they assumed that you were going to be going to Israel.

² My parents left Austria in 1938 through the auspices of the Austrian Jewish Congress who obtained a visa for them to go to Shanghai, China, where they stayed in an immigrant compound for 10 years. Their departure took place before I was taken to the concentration camp. If they had known what was going to happen to me they would have never left without me. I did not go with them because I had been on a list to go to Israel on an "illegal" transport. My leader ("mazkir") told my parents that I was considered for departure. Except I needed a seal, an exit stamp from the Gestapo, in order to leave Austria.

S: Exactly, right.

G: And they didn't know that you were taken...

S: No, [they knew] nothing, nothing. So, to continue the story, I went there, and I was a very strong young lad, and I was a very hard worker always, you know, and ah...there I survived because I was a hard worker. So, in the end, after sixteen months, they brought me back to Vienna in the Kariangasse, but we were supposed to go to another camp in Czech...

G: Before you go on, tell me what did? What did you do there for sixteen months? You working doing physical, doing manual labour?

S: For sixteen months, I worked...we went, we went in the river and took, dug out big stones and made [them] into gravel...

G: Really.

S: That's what I worked there. Then that [there] was a paper mill there, we had to go and cut trees and make them...and peel off the bark to make them ready to make paper, you know, for that mill. That's what I worked there.

G: Cutting trees by hand.

S: Ya, ya, and ah...like I said, I knew all that work, it made no difference to me, so actually I was fore-trained before everybody else. And I was very young, I was only sixteen then and ah, ah...for me there were no difficulties in that respect, like you know, anyway after sixteen months they brought me back to, to Vienna in the Kariangasse where they again, ah...gathered together the left, the left [remaining] Jews in Vienna and wanted to send them out to various camps,

like Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Dachau and so on and so on. There was one S.S. man there, I had the 'Oberscharführer' [an S.S. rank] in Dopfer, Oberösterreich. He liked me very much because I knew my work, and somehow this was one thing what those guys respected like, you know, I was able to work with the sledge hammer, I was able to work with the, with the electric saw, with the motor saw to cut the trees and all that, and somehow he took a fancy to me that...that man was called Oberscharführer Weisel, and in the...when I went to the Kariangasse, there came another [S.S. guard] Oberscharführer Walcher and asked for me, and he took me to another camp, in Austria, it was called, Weidhoffen an der Ipps, and there I stayed for a long time because I had to milk the cows there, and the sheep, and I had to do the hay and everything, because he understood that I understood the agriculture.³ You understand? So, ah...

G: So you used those skills that you learned in the Zionist movement.

S: I used those skills what I learned in the Zionist movement...

G: The irony is incredible.

³ When the camp was dissolved Weisel brought all the surviving inmates back to Vienna, to a building on Kariangasse where they assembled all Jews who were destined to go to Terezin (Theresienstadt). There I was saved again by Oberscharführer Walcher, otherwise known as "butcher." This was circa Spring '42. He heard that I knew how to milk cows and he needed someone like me for a concentration camp for Jews in Weidhofen an der Ipps. I was only there a few months, so that by December 1942 I was taken back to Vienna to Kariangasse transition camp and from there to Theresienstadt. After the war I testified against Weisel and Walcher in a Vienna court, and my testimony helped to convict each of them for a 20 year prison sentence.

S: Yes, yes, but here is the whole thing, that transport what went to Israel was torpedoed in the Red Sea, so all my khaverim [Hebrew "friends"] what were on that transport, they all got killed. This I heard after the war.

G: So those people then...

S: Those people what [with whom] I was together in Hakhsharah, yes, yes....

I: Maybe you want to mention as well in the concentration camp that you knew all the German operas?

S: Well, This comes later...

I: And you used to sing the Viennese opera that the Germans really liked and this was entertainment for them.

S: That comes later, Ilana.

I: Comes later, ya, but...

S: I'm talking about a camp where I survived because I knew the agricultural work, I knew how to plow the field, I knew how to cut the grass, not with the, with the, with the mower what we have today, [but] with the, with the scythe, with the big scythe...

G: By hand.

S: By hand, like you know, and this is mountain there, this was up and down. So, I know how to do those things and I know how to milk a cow, and I know how to feed them, I know how to look after them and there were a bunch of sheep what [which] I have to milk too. Anyway, I survived that camp and I went back to Kariangasse, in the end, and from there they sent me to Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt was an old army town from,

from...way back from the Habsburgs and, for about 5,000 people. They put 90,000 people in there, from the bottom to the top of the houses there. And we stayed there for...until, until September 1944, then Himmler decided that we should all get killed, and about sixty kilometres from Prague there was called the Bauschewitze Kessel, he put all the 90,000 Jews in there with a, with a...surrounded us with machine guns and wanted to kill us right then and there. But in that time they assassinated [in the summer of 1942], one of the Gauleiters, it's [he's] called [Reinhard] Heydrich, you know, and the Czechs did that, they assassinated him. And Himmler was afraid that if he killed all 90,000 Jews in that Bauschewitze Kessel, there's going to be a revolt from the Czechs. They were very aggressive at that time. They didn't like the [German] occupation, they didn't like anything, they wanted to kill all the S.S. and all the Germans. That's a fact, even today.

G: Really.

S: Ya, ah...very aggressive, you know, and so we, we were three nights and three days we were standing there waiting to be killed. Then Himmler changed his mind. He said, we had to march back to Theresienstadt and from there all the trains and the box cars were going, some were going to Auschwitz, some were going to, ah...the various camps in Germany. There were thousands of them, as everybody knows, you know. Now we were destined to go to, to go to Auschwitz. That was in September...

G: 1944.

S: And that was Yom Kippur, Yom Kippur '44. I already survived until then because I was always in good shape. Now, we were three khaverim from Vienna that went: [Yitzhak] Adler and Barry Kandelman and me. And we always stuck together.

G: Were they strong like you?

S: Yes.

G: And you all worked together?

S: We all worked together, and we three always survived everything, because we knew how to work and we were just good for them [the Germans] in that respect. That's one thing those bastards respected, when you were a good worker, like, you know. Our rations were what you have today, ah...like a slice of butter, what you get in the restaurant...

G: Yes.

S: There was some margarine. Then in the morning you got some substitute coffee what was made from some grain or whatever, you know, and then one slice of bread, and in the evening you got the soup and a slice of bread. The soup was made from some dried vegetable...

G: And that's it?

S: We called it "barbed wire" soup, in that time, you know? But I guess...

G: Okay, no, okay, okay you'll come back later...

S: Ya, I just want to say that we were put in the, in the, in the boxcars, we were a transport of 2,500 people and destined to go to Auschwitz. And it was one of the most horrible rides

because we were in there, we had no way of getting to the bathroom except making a hole in the, in the, in the bottom of the boxcar and did our thing that way. We had no food, we had no water, you know, and...

G: How long of a...how long did it take?

S: I can't remember. I think it was about three days...

G: Three days?

S: Ya, three days and nights before we arrived to [Auschwitz].

G: Were people...people were dying on the way?

S: I, I suspect, not in my boxcar, but I mean, there were elderly people too, you know, whoever. Anyway, but the most horrible thing I ever in my life saw and when I was really afraid, was when we came to Auschwitz. You have to imagine, Auschwitz was a, a, a...horrible city, a barbed wire city for a half a million people were constantly there. They exterminated in that time about 3,000 people a day. You know, they worked night and day, the ovens [the crematoria] there. So, as we stopped there, and it was about two o'clock in the morning and it was very cold, we had no possessions whatever, they took everything from us anyway, and ah...so [the guards ordered] "Out of the boxcar! March, march! March out of the boxcar!" Who didn't move fast enough, they took them and there is that hard gravel from the, between the...

G: The railroad tracks.

S: Between the, you know, and they took them and they threw them with their head right in there. Some people died right in there who wasn't fast enough. Us young people, you know, we

were fast enough, we knew how to do those things, [stand at] attention and salute and whatever there was necessary to do and so they put us there and then came Dr. Mengele. Dr. Mengele, the "Angel of Death" from Auschwitz, you know, and he made the selections who died. Now you have to see a picture, a barbed wire city, with five incinerators, with five crematoriums, five stacks as far and flames going over the stack, burning five, six meter high and the smell of burnt flesh all over the place, you know, then you see people standing by the barbed wire. There was a women's camp and there was a men's camp in the striped things, and it was the most horrible thing I ever saw in my life, you know. So, he [Mengele] decided that 1,500 people from our transport, we were 2,500 people, [would] go right into the gas chamber, and the others we were said to be sent to other camps, like already destined, 'cause we had to put our pants down and stand there and he came and he said, "Left," was in the gas and "Right," was for life, like, you know.

G: He was choosing you on the basis...on how strong you were...

S: On the basis of how strong you were, if you were still able to work for Hitler, you know. Children and elderly people [were sent] right into the gas chamber, you know. We were very lucky that ah...Adler and Barry Kandelman and I we stayed together, you know, and ah...we used to be together in the same Gordonia organization, you know, the three of us.

G: So they knew agriculture, too.

S: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Particularly Kandelman, Barry

Kandelman was one, that was his life, agriculture. He really lived for that, you know. He was very knowledgeable and a very hard worker and so was Adler and I, you know. Ah...what can I say? It was the most horrible thing. There was one man who stole a piece of bread, he got killed. The mud was two feet high between the blocks there, you know. We had one blanket for six people to sleep in, you know, and before all that they sent us into a room where they shaved our heads completely, you know, took all our clothes and gave us the striped clothes with the...

G: Magen David?

S: Magen David, the 'Star of David' on it, you know, and ah, ah...it was, what can I say? Then showers. They put us in a shower, there were three drops of water, they gave us a piece of soap and I think, I already thought the gas was coming out. But no, not for us, you see? We were put back to the barracks there. Barracks, there were some wooden things there, you know...

G: And you were sleeping on...?

S: On, on, on, that was a flat thing with a board like, you know, and six people shared one blanket. Then we had no spoons we had nothing. They gave us this "barbed wire" soup, like, you know, and we had to drink it like ah...without any spoons. And I got all infected around my mouth in that time. But anyway, this is one of the things we survived, you know.

G: How, how, how...you were still, you know, you were strong?

S: I was still very strong...

G: Muscular but very thin but...

S: Yes, I mean, I was very young in that time, you know. Let's see, ah...1938 [I] was sixteen. In 1944, how old was I then?

G: You were twenty-two.

S: Ya, there you go. So ah...I was always very muscular, very strong, and, and, and ah...I was never afraid of anything, except in Auschwitz, I was afraid. I was really afraid that I am [was] going to die, you know.

G: And people around you were being killed?

S: They killed people, the block elders in that time, they killed people. There were, there were, ah...one unit was what shaved our heads, the other unit was for the gas chamber. They were selected from the Polish population of around there, and those guys had the job of putting the bodies, the dead bodies what come after the cyanide, in the oven, you know, and they lived for six months, after six months they were exterminated. But in that time you really lived, you had everything, you had food, you had women, you had everything in that time, you know. And ah...after three weeks seeing that horrible mess there, we were shipped to Dachau. Barry Kandelman, Adler and I were in the same group...

G: So, to work...

S: And I can't remember, I can't remember how many people we were and again it was a night and day ride to go to Dachau, you know, in those box cars.

G: Was it the idea that you would work there too?

S: Yes.

G: So they...

S: There we were supposed to build an underground tunnel for the first German jets what [that] were stationed there. Now, Dachau had twenty-eight camps. The main camp was in...the main office was in Munich and around Munich we were divided.⁴ Each camp had 5,000 inmates, okay. My camp what I was in we were sent there to build that tunnel, what was never finished. It was eighty metres deep and one kilometre long, and there were 300 of the German jets stationed there and we were supposed to be hidden in there. And the first time in my life I saw a German jet get up in the air and I said, "Well, this is it, he's [Hitler's] going to win the war, there's no question about it." Whoever saw something like this, you know, in 1944, a jet to get up there and, and, and, with 600, 700 kilometres an hour and really roared up there. What we didn't know was that that jet had a tremendous air pressure against it so the machine guns didn't work exactly and the fuel consumption was so strong, and so...that it could only stay fifteen minutes in the air. That's what we didn't know. We only saw that. Anyway, we worked in three shifts there, cement work like, you know, carrying cement and building the tunnel.

G: And you were working, ah...they worked twenty-four hours a day?

⁴My two friends and I were sent to a Dachau sub-camp near the village of Kaufering, called Lager One. I found out after the war that Lager One was one of 28 Dachau sub-camps, each with approximately five thousand inmates.

S: Twenty-four hours a day in three shifts.

G: And were you working with your friends at this time too, together?

S: Only with Adler, Barry Kandelman was in another unit.

G: This is the first time you've been separated from him?

S: Ya, but we were in the same camp...

G: Okay, but he was working...

S: In the same camp, in 'Lager One', you know, and that was [in the German village] Kaufering, the nearest city was called Kaufering, you know, what belonged to the Kreis Lansberg in that time, like ah...the whole circle like, was called the, the...municipality was Lansberg [am Lech], but that all belonged to Lansberg. So, when we came off the night shift he came in the morning on, and we saw him everyday. And one day he says, you know, Barry Kandelman, the guy...and he says, "You know, I don't feel so good, I have diarrhea," and we knew what that meant. So...

G: What did that mean?

S: That meant that he [was] going to die.

G: Why?

S: There were no, there were no antidotes for it, you know. Diarrhea, you couldn't stop it. We had no medication, we had, we had billions of lice, you know, I still have the scars here as you can see, here, can you see this?

G: What's that from?

S: And down here, from the lice.

G: Yeah, I see them right here.

S: And those were the ones that gave you typhoid fever and diarrhea and you name it, the whole sickness was brought through the lice, like, you know, we had no antidote for it and he says, "I don't feel so good, I don't think I'm going to make it." He did not make it. No, he died. [pause] Um...we saw him shortly before he died actually. What can I say? Anyway, we worked and worked and then the rumor got around that I can sing and one of the S.S. men said I have to come to the other side of the Lager. And I went there and there were a whole bunch of Jewish women what they used there, you know, and we were sitting around and I had to sing to them [SS guards and all those who were present] all the Viennese songs and the "Yiddische Mamme" and all this, you know, for the women there. He gave me an extra piece of bread, you know, and gave me something to eat, you know, whatever, and I shared it with my friend like...

G: What did you...how did you feel when you had to sing, I mean, singing was something that was in your family that was a nice memory and here you had to sing.

S: Well...

G: Did you feel...did it make you happy or not?

S: No, it didn't make me happy, I just sang because to survive, you know.

G: Survive.

S: And ah....anyway, after he died, Barry Kandelman, my friend Adler he developed some 'flegmonis', some, on his legs like, very badly, very badly.

I: Phlebitis.

S: Huh?

I: Phlebitis.

G: Phlebitis, yeah, okay. I understand.

S: You call it phlebitis. Ah...he was very, very sick with it and all that, and he barely, anyway... What happened is that then, in December 1944, 1944 into 1945, the war was coming closer and closer and closer, and we saw all those ah, ah...all those planes coming and the shooting and the bombing and all that and everytime...we had no medication. I already had typhoid fever in that time. I was very weak, you know, and only because I was singing for them I had an extra piece of bread in the...bunker what I was in there, there were all typhus cases, and there were, I remember, there was one father with two boys, with two sons. They waited until the father died so they can eat the bread what he had under his head, under his pillow there, no pillow, he put his thing together, with ah...what can I say? Anyway, he died and they took the bread and they [the sons] died too and I said [that] I couldn't stay there. I knew the guy who was in the office for the S.S. and I crawled on my hands and feet out of the bunker and I said to him, "Egon," he was a French guy, I said, "You have to get me to a work detail." He said to me, "You can't work anymore, look at you," you know.

G: You were sick with fever?

S: Yes, and he says...and I said, "You have to get me out of that bunker, get me to a work detail." And there was a little

handcar what we had to pull and bring the garbage out from the, from the, from the camp out to the outside [of] the camp to the dump there, you know, and in the dump there, there were bones from what the S.S. after they discarded there, you know, and there was, and I chewed on those bones and that kept me alive somehow, it gave me the strength to stand on my feet, you know and um...

G: Oh my...

S: That was going on for a long, long time [pause]...until, until April 1945. Augsburg was about thirty kilometres away from our camp was one of the biggest cities, Augsburg, you know? The camp was near Kaufering, it was a village, but the nearest city was Augsburg and Augsburg was bombed already and we were sitting on top of the bunker, we had nothing to eat and we ate the grass what was growing on the bunker just to fill the stomach, you know. The only, the only thing what we get enough of it was a milk soup on Friday and in that milk soup there was something in what gave you diarrhea and people died in the latrine there, you know, They went to the latrine and they never came out of it.

I: What camp are you in, Dachau? The last one?

S: Dachau, the last one, ya. I didn't want to go through all that, I just skim over the thing, ya, and, ah...

I: And how [did] you survive the last night?

S: And ah...so we know that something is going to happen, we saw the bombers come and so on. Then, all of sudden, Dr. Mengele came, and we had to go to be assembled, you know? Now, you

have to understand, a lot of people died in that camp and there were no incinerators there, you know, there were no ovens in that camp what I was in so they put all the dead bodies in one big lump there in one of the shacks there, you know, and I said to Adler I said, "You know what? I'm not going to be assembled," because he came to take all the able bodies in a train and deeper into Germany, Dr. Mengele. So, he came to make the selections again, you know, and I said, "I'm not going to go there, there is no way." So he says, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Let's go and hide there under those dead bodies." And that's what we did, for three nights, we hide under the dead bodies. And then, it was very still, and I said, "I am going to go up." I know that I went out on my stomach and I looked around. It was so still in that camp and then all of sudden I heard shooting, and that was at night, you know, I heard shooting. So what happened is, the ones what [who] couldn't walk anymore, they were hiding everywhere, and the S.S. went with the machine gun, they liquidated the camp and shoot everything in site, and put one side of the camp on fire. On the left side, there was still, it was dark on the left side. So, you have to understand, the camp was surrounded with two barbed wires, one was two metres high, the first one, then were two metres in between was another wire what was bent inwards and that one was the electric wire.

G: So it goes like this.

S: Yes, ya, that one was the electric wire, and, ah...I can't

remember what happened to Adler because I went on my own, you know, and I saw it was dark and there was shooting on the other side of the camp, there was shooting and screaming and all that. They shoot the people in the latrine and wherever they found them with the machine guns and put the camp on fire, and I went to that, to that fence. I crawled over the first fence and fell on the other side between the two fences, you know, I was very weak, I almost didn't make it. Then I attacked the other fence. I took my jacket and put it over my arm and lifted the electric wire but it wasn't necessary, there was no electricity in there anymore. I went over, I fell on the other side. First I couldn't even lift my right foot and that was the time when I learned how to pray. I really prayed, and I was able to lift my right foot over and I fell on the other side.

I: Pray to God, and with a prayer he could make it, otherwise he would have to stay there.

S: I fell on the other side...

I: At that time he believed in God.

S: And there was a potato field on the other side, and I heard right away an S.S. man saying there, "Wer da!" ["Who goes there?"] "Who's here?" you know. I didn't say a word, I was lying in the grooves there and ah...I saw on the main highway the German troops retreating, with the tanks, with the whole thing on the main highway. What was for me a way like, ah...like say about 500 metres, you know, and it's funny, April is my birthday, the 10th of April, I remember that very

well, when I escaped, ya, and I crawled in...and I crawled in the thing there...

I: The thing was a potato field.

S: In the potato field and I crawled in there, and I made it to a farm. And the dogs were barking and the farmer came out with a gun, you know, so I waited until it all subsided and then I went to another farm, and the other farm took me in. He took me in and there was Adler.

G: Oh.

S: He made it to...

G: That farm.

S: You know, ya. So, the two of us, they took us up in the, where the hay was, up...

G: What did you feel like when you saw him?

S: Well, I can't remember, really. It was just a relief, you know, we were still full of lice, we were starving and they took us up.

I: Where up?

S: Up in the hay...where the hay was...

G: Hay loft.

S: In one of the barns there, you know, and he was hiding us there. Now, there was still no liberation in [at] that time but the first troop what [that] came in was the De Gaulle troop and they came in and by that time the farmer said, "Okay, I think that you are able to come out," and he fed us in that time and he brought us down to the, to the...the car came from the Red Cross, you know, and they put us in a

hospital, in a German hospital, and they deloused us, and, ah...I had, ah...I had very high fever still, so they gave me something and there was a German doctor and I couldn't stand it. So I took a stick and I walked out of the hospital and I walked to the next village in that time, and I said to the mayor there, "I want some place to stay." So they put me in a...to a farmer there, you know, and I had diarrhea something very bad. And they had a chamber pot there. I filled it up to the brim. They gave me something to eat, I couldn't hold it, you know, I wasn't used to eating, and there was a shame of it, I left, I left and I went to the next village. I walked to the next village and I went again to the, to the mayor and he put me to two sisters, two sisters what really looked after me for eight months until I was able to stand on my feet. And then I went back to Austria and I stayed in front of my sister, my sister what [who] survived in Austria, in front of the door, I knocked on the door, and that's the way it was.⁵

G: How could you go back, did you think...?

S: Well, we went back on one of those trains what had millions of people hanging on there, you know, and that's how we did it, you know, I had a pair of army boots from the German Army

⁵Since I was already in Bavaria, where I was liberated from Lager One, Dachau concentration camp, near Kaufering, there two German sisters took me into their home from the hospital and nursed me back to health, so that I was well enough to travel. I stayed 8 months in the village. I traveled on a cargo train back to my home in Vienna where I had a sister, Elizabeth. My sister was sure I was dead, but there I was knocking on her door. You cannot imagine what a great joy it was at our reunion. They were very happy to see me and loved me very much.

and an army jacket and the pants, that's all I had, you know. And then my sister organized some cloth and she brought it to a tailor and I got a suit and she gave me shirts and all that, Lisa [my sister, Elizabeth], you know.

I: [not clear]

S: This is about, I skimmed over.

I: [not clear]

S: Well, this is, this is about, this is about my story from the seven years, I didn't go into various details, I wanted to tell the story the way it is and how I survived and how it really was, and that's the way it was, okay.⁶

G: I appreciate that. I mean, that's, now that's, that's...it gives me a feeling for the years and the experiences.

S: Well, I told you from the beginning actually, you know, how it really was, you know.

G: Let me ask you just a few more questions about your...your parents this whole time didn't know, I mean, they didn't hear from you...

S: My brother-in-law got in contact with my parents.

G: Oh, he did, okay.

S: My brother-in-law from Vienna, he was an Aryan, he was a Christian, you know, what saved my sister. He lost his job, he was in a very good job...

⁶I was incarcerated for 7 years, from the age of 16 to 23. After liberation, a new life was a matter of survival. I wanted to start anew after Hitler. I weighed only 60 lbs. Practically a skeleton. I was very ill with typhoid fever. I was full of lice and all sorts of misery. I still have scars to show from the lice around my neck and body.

G: Because he married a Jew.⁷

S: He lost his job, he had to go up every week to the Gestapo and they wanted him to divorce my sister. Well, he didn't divorce my sister and so she, they couldn't take her to the gas chamber, you know, so they stayed in Vienna and survived there, you know. And he was the one who got somehow in contact with my, with my parents and reassured them that ah...he knew that I was alive.

G: Did he know that you were alive?

S: No.

G: No.

S: No. My parents came back, after ten years they came back in 1945 or '46 to Vienna. [They] got back the apartment what one of the Nazis took from us, you know, and ah...stayed in Vienna...

G: Then you were reunited with your parents?

S: I was reunited with my parents, I [and Fini Scheindel] got married and we had, you know, a son.⁸ And ah...we decided then, after that, not to stay in Austria because I couldn't live with those [German] people, and we came to Canada, and that's what we did.

⁷The Gestapo pressured my brother-in-law, Emil Marsonn, who was Christian, to divorce my sister Elizabeth so that they could haul her, and their son Herbert, off to the gas chamber. But Emil didn't give in.

⁸I met Fini Scheindel, a Holocaust survivor like myself, at the Ha'Koakh sports club in Vienna in 1946. In 1947 we were married, and on September 8, 1948 our son Peter was born. During the war, Fini, together with her parents, had been taken to Auschwitz. She was 12 years old then. She suffered severe cruelty at this young age.

I: So how did you go to Canada, with a ship that transported...a ship, did it take you to Boston or New York?

S: No, the ship doesn't go to Boston, to New York, from Bremerhaven [German port], from Bremerhaven, we went to Bremerhaven by transport...

I: With all the people from the...

S: From the, from the camp, with the survivors like, you know, there were 3,000 of them on that ship. Can you imagine on a little ship there were 3,000? The captain said he never saw anything like it in his life.

G: It was in wintertime in Boston and in New York a family took you in?

S: No, in Boston.⁹ We came, we landed in New York it was twenty-two below zero, and we stayed...

I: And you didn't have a coat, and you didn't have any clothes, you had nothing.

S: We had nothing, that's right, I had nothing. We weren't dressed for that kind of cold, like, you know, and ah... actually I was very seasick. For two weeks we were at sea and there was a very small ship. It was one of the troop transports what we had, it's called 'General Sturdys' was the name of the ship like, you know. We came to New York and

⁹ I worked in a hair-design salon until 1952 in Vienna. Then I applied to go to the U.S.A. through the American Jewish Joint Committee and was accepted together with my family (wife and son). I arrived in Ellis Island by boat from Bremerhaven in February 1952. From there we were placed with a Jewish family in Boston with a small allowance of \$30.00 per week, paid by the American Jewish Congress. It was a difficult life to be dependent on others for support of my family.

ah...we went to the customs there and finally we saw some beautiful ladies with Persian coats and beautiful little hats and very nice make-up and they gave us something funny, it was a thing with a hole in the middle and some coffee. So that was a doughnut, like.

G: [laughter]

S: And then we were...those people, everybody was destined to go some other place because originally I emigrated to America, you know. So we came, we came to Boston, we had an eight hour ride, a train ride in a beautiful mirror, silver liner to Boston, eight hours, and there they waited for us a family, ah...Jews...was their name, you know, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty and ah...what was his name? Saul, ya...[Kitty and Saul Solomon]. And they took us into a beautiful mansion there and looked after us, we had one room. I couldn't find a job there. I couldn't find an apartment there. I didn't want to live on welfare. My in-laws were already in Winnipeg, in Canada, and they phone every day and they wanted us to come because they wanted that little boy, you know...

I: Peter Strummer.

S: Peter Strummer, ya.

G: Peter...

S: He was only three-and-a-half years old in [at] that time, you know, and that grandmother went crazy because she wanted that boy, you know, and so she says, she phoned me and she said, "You know, I got a job for you and I got a house for you." [I said] "You got a house for me?"

G: [laughter]

S: Unbelievable.

I: So you moved to Winnipeg, ya?

S: Ya.¹⁰ So that is about the story what, ah...

I: And we can still come back someplace...

G: Okay, okay. I just, I just want to say thank you. For me it's very important that I know something that I can pass down too, and you are nice enough to...

S: Well, I think, I think, this is about, it's about the general thing, I mean, if I go into details that means that those two tapes won't be enough.

I: May I say something...

G: Sure.

I: As his wife?

G: Yes.

I: Although I heard his story many times, but each time he tells me it still [is as if] I'm surviving through the whole ordeal again, and it's quite shaking no matter what, [no matter] how many times he tells me, every time he lives through this

¹⁰My in-laws were already settled in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, and since they were in touch with us on a daily basis, they encouraged us to come to Canada. And we arrived in the frozen environment at the end of March 1952. It was still 40 below zero. Peter used to say to me: "Papa when will it be spring and warm?" Today, Peter Strummer is a famous international opera singer.

experience I live it with him and I am quite shocked, you know. It's like I see it, as imagine if I was a little girl and had to go through that and survive, I don't know if I'd be able to survive what Benno did, but maybe he's a strong breed and he had something in him, that zest for life, and that's what kept him going.

G: Well...

S: Run it [the tape] back, and I want to listen to a little bit.

I: But Benno can you...

[End of interview]

Soon I re-qualified as a hairdresser, got my license and started to earn a good living for our young family. Life was much better and I was now reaching the ripe age of 30. However, my marriage broke up in 1956 and shortly after I re-married to a wonderful woman, Hannelore. I was very successful in my hairdressing business in Canada. I stayed in Winnipeg till 1965 and then moved to Vancouver where I opened a hairdressing salon in West Vancouver, in the Dunderave Shopping Centre, and worked there till my retirement in 1991. My wife, Hannelore, died very suddenly February 19, 1971.

After a period of time, in 1974, through my sister Mary Edel who also lives in Vancouver, I met Ilana Netter and we were married on October 2, 1975; we are living happily ever since. At this time of my life, I am also a happy grandfather from my oldest stepdaughter Orit, in Philadelphia; a little girl named Lital (Hebrew, "morning dew"), born September 23, 1994.

I want to be remembered as a person who survived Hitler and in spite of all the difficulties I saw and experienced I made a new life in Canada. I am a very happy man.