HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

BERNICE FISHMAN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Natalie Packel
Date: May 29, 1991

This page left intentionally blank.

BF - Bernice Fishman[1] [interviewee]
NP - Natalie Packel [interviewer]
Dates: May 21, 1991
May 29, 1991

Tape one, side one:

NP: It is Tuesday, May 14 [interviewer misspoke the date], and this is Natalie Packel interviewing Bernice Fishman for the Gratz Holocaust Archives. Bernice, can you tell me where you were born and when and a little bit about your family?

BF: I was born in Vronki, Poland, in 1934. My family, my grandfather—my father's father—was a cantor in this small town, this small Jewish community, mostly German Jews. It was in Poland, but the area kept getting to be either German or Polish, so most of the Ger-, the Jews spoke German, German and Polish. Not as much Yiddish as in Poland proper. My, let's see what I can tell you. My father had a clothing store, and both my parents worked in the store. And I didn't go to school because I was too young. Oh, I did go to school, that's right. I remember. I went to nursery school, a Catholic nursery school, because there was no other nursery school in town. And, let's see. That's all I can really...

NP: What was the year that you were born?

BF: 1934.

NP: 1934. What was the, do you remember what your life was like before the war?

BF: Well, my grandparents lived a block away, and I know that I could run to their house. It was close by. I had, my father's brother had four daughters who were teenagers at the time, and I was only about four, and I remember them. That was very pleasant. My parents and I used to go bicycle riding in the countryside. I guess it was on weekends, on Shabbat it was, Shabbat was Shabbat. I mean, we did not, um, we observed the holidays. We happened to live next door to the synagogue. That's my fondest memory. Our dining room window looked out on the synagogue yard. And I would climb through the window, because we were on the ground floor, and play in the synagogue yard. So I had access, where the yard had a fence around it and other people couldn't go in. I remember my grandfather in the synagogue praying [pause, weeping]. I remember before Pesach my grandfather taking me to a matzah factory that he had to put a stamp on that it was kosher. And people making the matzahs by hand. [Weeping] It's a pleasant memory.

NP: That's okay, Bernice. Would you like me to stop? [tape off then on]

BF: My father had a sister who lived in the next town and she had two boys that were my friends [pause]. And they all died. Nobody left. I used to take the train to visit

[1]née Bronia Graudens

my grandmother also in a town distant from us, Ke-, no, I really don't really remember the town right now. And I remember that. And that was very pleasant. My father was away a lot. He traveled, for the business, and my mother was in the store.

NP: Did your family experience any antisemitism, do you remember, any open antisemitism before the Hitler period? I know you were so very young.

BF: Not before the Hitler period. It seems that my father was born and raised in this small town, and he went to school with all the Polish kids. Well, he really went to school and didn't go to school. What happened was he went to school, and he had to wear a *kippah*, because his father was a cantor. So his father would already let him go without a *kippah*, but because he was a cantor, his children had to wear *kippot*. But it wasn't allowed in school. So after a very short time my father did not go to school. My fath-, so my grandfather hired a tutor for his two boys. My father had a brother who was quite a few years older, maybe eight years older, and that's how they learned. My father didn't really like to study, and his brother would be the scholar. His brother became a rabbi. He never practiced, but he was, had a, he was ordained. But my father would be in the house while his brother was listening to the teacher or studying, and it turned out that when you would, you would open any page of the Torah, and read the first sentence, and my father would finish it by heart. Any page, and I've tried it with him.

NP: What a fine mind he had.

BF: And he spoke five languages, and he could read and write in these languages, and he had a mind, as far as math was concerned, I mean, you gave him any number of, numbers, and he would tell you the interest of it, and, the amounts, and, you know, almost like a computer. He did have a fine mind.

NP: Do you remember any organization, other than the synagogue, before the Hitler period, that your family belonged to? Were there any groups? Any social groups?

BF: Well, I think my mother, my mother when she was a girl, her brothers belonged to a Zionist organization, *Ha-Shomer Ha-tsa'ir*. And she, she remembered, she was young then too, I mean, then she got married. But anyway, she, she did go to some meetings with her brothers. But, no, I didn't belong to any organizations.

NP: Of course, you were young. You were a little one at that time.

BF: Right. Right. I was not even five.

NP: Did any men in your family serve in the national army, or any national army?

BF: Well, my mother's brother served in the Russian, well, no, let's see, it was the Russian army, that's right. Yes.

NP: It was the Russian army.

BF: No, he served in the Polish army, then he we-, he was, he went to Russia, and the Polish army was dissolved in Russia.

NP: Right.

BF: They were captured, dissolved, and then he was a prisoner in Siberia for a while, and then he fought with the Russian army against the Germans. And we met him after the war, in the Russian army.

NP: Do you know how many people, how many Jewish people lived in your town?

BF: No, I really don't know.

NP: I was going to then ask you, was there, was it a highly organized Jewish community? You had mentioned that there certainly was a synagogue.

BF: Yes, it was an organized Jewish community. It, uh, I mean, they baked *matzahs* on Passover. They baked *matzahs*. I think it was for themselves, and maybe they did some exporting. And also my grandfather used to visit the prisons. The prison, I guess there was one prison in town. There were, at one time there were as many as four Jewish prisoners in the prison, and my grandfather would be the one to visit them. I never, I don't remember the rabbi at all. I just remember my grandfather. There must have been a rabbi, too.

NP: If there was a *kehillah* in your town—and I know, again, you were very young—how did you or your family view it? Or did it represent the people in the city?

BF: Yes, the, I mean, there only was one synagogue, and it was an Orthodox synagogue and whatever organization the people had, whatever, I know there was a home for the aged they had. I remember, very vaguely. And there was always money being collected for different Jewish causes, and we always had a blue box in our house, *Keren Kayemet l'Yisrael*. So, I mean that definitely was an active Jewish community.

NP: Was there a *mikveh* next to it? Usually...

BF: Yes, there was a *mikveh*.

NP: A *mikveh* in the old age home...

BF: I don't remember going to them. I do remember going to the river. I don't know why I don't remember. I guess it's, people could go to the river, too, to immerse yourself in the river—a flowing body of water.

NP: Sure.

BF: I remember that.

NP: What happened to you and your family during the weeks following the German invasion? What is your recollection? What is your first recollection?

BF: Well, the first recollection really I had was *before* the German invasion; some weeks prior to the German invasion, the Polish people would hold marches and assemblies and try to extol the people to fight the Germans. But also right before the war, there was, the antisemitism, they would, there were signs, and there were, people walked in front of my parents' store, "Do not buy from the Jew." Some weeks before the war that happened. And my father had just as many customers as before, because they all went through the back door and shopped in my parents' store. So it didn't hurt them in that way, but there were people in front of the store telling not to buy from the Jews. And

immediately, immediately before the war started, maybe a week before, many Jews did leave town and went further into Poland, because they figured that Germany will not invade that part of Poland. So my mother and I went, left Vronki and traveled to Staszow, which is a town where mother had relatives, an aunt. In fact her whole family went to Staszow, because, we figured there the Poles, I mean the Germans, will not get to us. And my father stayed with the store and my mother and I traveled to Staszow. We traveled for two days by train and bus, and the Ger-, the German overtook us I think the first day. I mean, they were faster than the train. And they defeated the Polish army within a number of hours. It took us a few weeks to reach Staszow, which should have taken a day-and-a-half, because they were bombing on the way, and we were captured by the Germans. They told us to go to Palestine. Of course, you know, like, they kept telling you, "Go to Palestine." There was no way of getting to Palestine! My mother, at that time my mother was pregnant with my brother, but anyway. That was part of the story.

NP: Did you receive any help of any kind during this time from non-Jews?

BF: I remember this trip very vaguely, but, yes, I'm sure we did. But, in any case, these people didn't know we were Jewish either. We were just people that were stranded in the countryside, and a woman with a child. And we were treated well. They might not have known we were Jewish.

NP: And once you reached Staszow, what happened then?

BF: Well, then we had family, and all my mother's, my mother's parents and her brothers and sisters and their families gathered in that town, in Staszow. And we had an apartment. We lived with my grandparents. And my father was in some kind of business. He always managed to make a living. And at that time there was already an order, as soon as we came, we were not allowed to go to school. Because I did nothing. I never started school when we arrived in Staszow. Jewish children were not allowed to go to school. So the Jews organized, organized a teacher and some children and met in different, different people's houses. And one child would always be outside and guarding against the Germans. So the punishment was terrible. I mean, maybe they would even shoot you, you know? So, it was very scary. I remember being outside watching for the Germans, being very scared. And that was at the age of five or six. We knew what was going on. It wasn't, you know...

NP: Do you remember anything about a ghetto?

BF: Yes. Within about a year after we got to Staszow—I guess we got to Staszow in 1939, because that's when the war started. Probably in about 1940 the ghetto was organized. And all the Jews had to live on this certain street. It was at the end of town, and it was next to a river, in fact. And that was considered the ghetto, and we had an apartment. We lived with our grandparents. And we weren't allowed to leave the ghetto. Now, before we moved to the ghetto, we lived in, where the Poles lived, of course. And I remember, I was taking piano lessons. And when we moved to the ghetto, the ghetto was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and, but there were always holes in the barbed wire

fence. It wasn't enforced that carefully yet, even though the punishment was terrible if you'd left the ghetto. But I, once a week I used to go over the fence and take a piano lesson. I cannot believe this now. Because, after all, you had to take piano lessons.

NP: That's a beautiful part of it, if you can say beautiful. It shows where the emphasis was.

BF: Yes. The Jews always emphasized learning, yes.

NP: And music, and books, and...

BF: Right.

NP: Did mo-, so most of the community, Jewish community...

BF: Oh, all of the Jewish community was in the ghetto, yes. We had, I had some Polish friends outside of the ghetto that I even would visit after my piano lesson, and play with them, you know. But, their parents would give me some food. But then I went back to the ghetto, and that's where I lived.

NP: Do you remember refugees from other cities being in that ghetto as well?

BF: No, no, this, this was, at that time it was still very orderly, and we lived very peacefully in that ghetto—in the beginning.

NP: And then what happened? Was the ghetto closed, or were you ordered to move on?

BF: Well, first of, well, there were many things that happened. People were not, you really didn't have jobs. I mean, there was no way of making a living. [tape off then on]

NP: Would you continue?

BF: Yes. So, my father, my father was a very charming man. He could talk anybody into anything. And somehow he got a job sweeping the street outside the ghetto. But, at that time, most of the transportation was by horse and buggy. So a lot of horses, there was horse manure on the street. And my father was sweeping the streets. And that was a great honor. That was, I mean, wonderful. So he had a certain salary. And he would take me with him once in a while. I was very proud of my father having a job. I remember this Polish farmer passing by every day to the market with his goods. And he was alway-, always give vegetables to my father. Especially tomatoes. I mean, we ate tomatoes. It was such a treat, because you couldn't get any fresh things. He worked there for a while, then he worked in a horse hair factory, where they made brushes from the tails of the horses. They made brushes for the German officers to polish their shoes, and I suppose to comb their hair. Horse hair brushes. And that was good too, because that, at that time they started shipping people off to camps. And if you had a job you didn't get shipped off. And my father had a job. And then there was a rumor that the ghetto will be confiscated. And my parents found a Polish, some farmers a few miles away. I think it, either it was six kilometers or six miles. It was a little distance from where we lived, in the countryside. And these people agreed to take me and my brother. So, a few weeks before the ghetto was confiscated, my brother and I left to this Polish family. And, but I, but the story my

mother tell-, my mother and father had, made a, in their cellar, there was a trap door in the kitchen, and there was a, they would go down into the cellar, and they had a next door neighbor who would say that they left, if anybody came in, and they would be in that trap door. Anyway, the ghetto was evacuated. All the people were taken to the square and shot. Whoever escaped, escaped. Some people ran to the river and they drowned. That was the stories that my mother was told. My parents didn't see it. They could hear the shots. And my different relatives scattered to different places before it happened. Many people didn't scatter before it happened. I don't know, do you want, would you like to stop for a second? Because I have different things...[tape off then on] Oh, I'm sorry.

NP: That's all right.

BF: When the ghetto was evacuated, my parents were still living in that house in the, in the cellar, and that person, a next door neighbor named Maria, would bring them food. And she guarded them. What happened, I lived with this family in the woods, my brother and I. And I would visit my parents once in a while. And I remember something that, it was winter time, and I was walking through the woods to visit my parents, and I knew that nobody was allowed to see me. And, from a distance there was a hill, and a lake, and I could see children playing and sliding down on sleds. And I wanted to join them, [weeping] but I couldn't. And I *knew* that I wouldn't. I mean, that I absolutely could not join them. And I would visit my parents like this. I remember one particular time. I got to the ghetto, near, a few blocks from my parents' house. And from a distance I saw a policeman. And he saw me. It was dusk. Just getting dark. And, he started running toward me, ‘cause there was nobody in the ghetto. And if you saw somebody in the ghetto that means that person was Jewish. And I ran around the block, and ran and ran. And somehow I lost him. And I visited my parents, and I remember my mother telling me that they will be leaving the place, and I can't visit them any more. And I started crying, and I wanted to stay with them [crying]. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to be with my mother. I was only, I was only, maybe I was eight. I was seven or eight. And I remember my mother slapped me. And then I left. And I think, I guess her slap helped. She told me, "You will die. You have to leave. You cannot be with us." And she screamed. And that's it, then I didn't see them for a while after that. I went back to where I was with the people. These people were very nice to us. They were very poor, and they had a number of children, who lived with them for a while. It was a matter of months, really, maybe six months. My brother was four years younger than I was. So he must have been four or three. I don't think he was four. He was younger than that. And we lived in that town, excuse me, and then somehow my grandmother came and stayed with us. My mother's mother. The grandmother, and my grandfather was in a concentration camp already. My father was in the concentration camp. My mother was hidden.

NP: Do you know which concentration camp?

BF: Skarzysko.

NP: Okay. Well, that, all right, we'll put on the form.

BF: Okay.

NP: Yeah.

BF: And my mother was still hidden with that Maria, with that neighbor. And my grandmother was with us. At that time there was a, there was a, an edict came out. An order from the Germans, that they decided they will stop killing the Jews. They have a town where they'll let all the Jews come to that town, and they get free passage to that town. If they are caught they are not going be shot. And they can live in that town for the rest of their lives. They'll be fine. I don't remember the name of that town. Maybe I can find out. And, my grandmother and I left these people's houses because it wasn't good any more—I think people were, knew that we were Jewish—and decided to go to that town. On the way we were caught by the Polish police and put in prison. While we were, while we were in prison, that town was evac-, that town, all the people were killed in that town.

NP: Do you know the name of that prison there?

BF: No. No. I don't.

NP: No. Okay.

BF: I really don't. My grandmother and my brother and I were put in prison. That was, now, that was a Polish prison. It was not a German prison. I mean, that was the Polish police. They had their prison.

NP: Yes.

BF: We were in the prison for, probably altogether we were imprisoned for a week, but while we were there, the Polish, about every night after the second night the, one of the policeman would come in and say, "Tonight you will be shot." So every night my grandmother, well, every day my grandmother would fast, because they would tell us, "The next day we will shoot you." So, I would, I asked her why she's fasting, and she told me that a Jew, before they die, they should fast, because of their sins. I remember wanting to fast, too, but she said I was too young, I didn't have to fast. Anyway, one night, one evening the police made, there was snow on the ground. A policeman came in and said, "We're going out now and we'll shoot you." And my grandmother started putting her coat on me, and he started laughing. He said, "Why are you putting a coat on her? We'll shoot her anyway. You don't have to worry about her catching a cold." I remember being completely calm, not scared at all, not worried at all. And my grandmother was completely calm. And my brother was too young. I don't think he knew. But the only thing I remember was, the only thought I had was that, we'll be standing next to that tree, and they'll shoot us, and the snow will turn red. That's the only thing that I was thinking about. And I was completely not upset or worried about it. Anyway, the policeman left. He didn't take us outside. And it seems that somebody told my parents where we were. Now, my father must have escaped again, because he was with my mother. And somebody told him where we were. They paid off somebody or, in a carriage, a horse and buggy, and a farmer came and picked us up from that prison. I think what the Polish police was doing, they wanted money. And they were threatening, and that sort of thing. My mother remembers, while we were in

prison, she received a letter from my grandmother. I guess maybe that's how my parents knew where we were. My grandmother sent a letter with somebody, paid somebody off. And how, and my mother said she kept the letter through the whole war. It was such a beautiful letter. It said, "Don't worry about it. You're young. [weeping] You'll have other children. If the tree is still there, it will grow new branches. It will grow new leaves." And my mother treasured that letter. She lost it, she told me.

NP: Your mother was a very brave woman.

BF: She was a very wise woman.

NP: Would you like to stop, Bernice?

BF: If I may regress again...

NP: Oh yes, absolutely.

BF: Is that all right?

NP: Anything that comes to your mind.

BF: I just want to tell you about celebration of holidays. Even in the ghetto we would have a Pesach *seder*, and, with, I remember opening the door for Elijah and the neighbor coming in. And it was a funny thing. I remember Succot, where we had a *succah* and all our neighbors and friends would come and eat in the *succah*. We ate every single meal in the *succah*. I remember my mother baking *shalach monot*[2] for our friends and neighbors, and I would walk through the whole town and deliver, deliver goodies for our friends and, at the time, and I would get things in return to take home. I remember eating half of it before I would even get home.

I remember my grandparents, my father's parents' death. They were in the Warsaw ghetto, and my father was notified some way that his parents were shot. And I remember him crying. [Weeping] It's very difficult to see your parents cry. And at that time my father said, "If my sainted parents were shot, there's no more God." And he was still a Jew after that. I mean, even in America, he was still a Jew. He went to synagogue. He gave to charity. But he changed when he saw, after his parents died [weeping, pause]. I, if you would like to ask me something...

NP: Sure.

BF: I don't remember what to say. Well, well, I think I can remember. So, after we were brought with this carriage to my parents, and they were hidden. Polish people were hiding them some place in the countryside again. And, so there was my brother, myself, my grandmother, and my parents, and my aunt and her son, my cousin, I guess. And my aunt's husband. And they decided, this whole group decided that we can't hide out together. There were too many of us, and especially there were three children. There were two boys that were about four years old, and I was about seven. No, the boys were not four. The boys were three, or less. And, so, they decided, they contacted some people in a small, very, small village called Ogrodzenie, in Poland. These people were from, my

[2]Sweets distributed during Purim.

grandparents town of Sosnowiec. These people worked for my grandparents' store. The man was the bookkeeper. Now, he was against the Germans, too. He was a Polish patriot against the Germans. And when the Germans invaded Poland, he left for a small village because he was an intellectual, and he was worried that they might shoot him or send him to a concentration camp. So he lived in this small village with his family. And somehow my grandmother contacted this man, Kuchatay, Carol Kuchatay [phonetic] was his name. And, he and his wife, and they had a child. And he said that he would take care of many of us, I mean, try to save as many of us as he possibly could. So it was decided that my uncle Nathan, my mother's brother, my aunt Manya, her son Jack, my brother Leon—"Leitel"—"Leonic" real-, "Leonic" in Polish—and myself would go to these people and live on Polish papers. I suppose somebody made Polish papers for us already, false papers. So we all got into a wagon, a wagon with hay in it, and we were told that if somebody comes from a distance, some of us would hide in that hay, and the others I guess that had papers would talk to whoever, and then say they were going to visit friends. It took us all day in the carriage to get to this little town of Ogrodzenie. I remember on the way, we stopped a few times on the way. It must have been springtime already, because flowers were growing on the roadside. And I remember picking up a little flower and thinking to myself, "As long as this flower is alive, that's all, I'll be alive, and probably get there." But again there was no fear.

Tape one, side two:

NP: And we continue the interview with Bernice Fishman.

BF: … to Ogrodzenie. Ogrodzenie means "surrounded" really. It was a little town of fifteen houses surrounded by a forest. These people lived in a two-room house. Everybody else had a one-room house. This really was a three-room house, I remember. That's right. One was, we had stored things in it. I don't know what they stored in it. But anyway, these people, they must have been in their early, late 20's, or maybe even younger than that. I remember the woman was so pretty. The man had some kind of infection in his leg, and it was always pussy, and he was always sick. He was lame. He was always sick and he couldn't work. And I suppose some money that we brought helped the whole family. And they had a two-year-old child, maybe younger than two. They were very kind. They were very nice people. My uncle, my uncle Nathan, who was at the time, maybe he wasn't quite 20, even 19 or 18. To me he seemed quite old. But he couldn't have been 20 yet. He joined the Polish partisans, and that was a good way of protecting us, to a degree, and also to bring in food for the family, because the partisans would raid farms, I guess, or they'd get donations from farmers because they were fighting the Germans. Of course it turned out that the partisans were also fighting, killing Jews, too, where they could. My uncle did not tell them he was a Jew. They did not know that. If they knew that, we would be dead. So my uncle would stay away for weeks at a time, and then he would come and bring food, and I guess that's how we lived. My aunt also, really, my aunt, I guess helped in the house. I remember we made soap in the house. I suppose maybe there was some money we made out of the soap. I remember one of the rooms was used as a slaughter house for animals. I guess maybe they rented out a room, and that was another way of making money. I remember one incident, my aunt was making soap in the front room, in the main room of the house. There was a front door and then just the room. And she was making soap in this large kettle and my cousin, who was maybe three at the time, came running into the room, full speed, fell into the kettle. His whole arm and his whole side of his body was with this hot soap. I don't know how he lived through it. They, they went to doctors and things. And he has terrible scars on his arm and his side of his body, but his head did not fall in. Otherwise he would have been dead.

He lived through that. Then one day there was a story, our, the man we stayed with, Carol, had a brother who came to visit him. And it seems that the brother got drunk in the village, and he started telling everybody that his brother is keeping Jews. And from then on things became uncomfortable, and we thought that the Polaks knew that we were Jewish, that some people knew, or some people suspected. The story was that my aunt was, that, that, I mean, the story was that she was my aunt, and my parents were in Germany on forced labor. And my brother and I were her niece and nephew, and we were staying with these people, the Kuchatays, who were friends of ours. And of course we were all good Catholics and we went to church every Sunday. And, anyway, one time there was

this scare that the Germans were coming into that village and we all ran into the woods. We stayed, there was a little house in the woods where people we knew lived in, and they took us in. We stayed there for a while. At that time, the Kuchatays got worried, and they moved into town. They moved into Kielce. They moved out of the Ogrodzenie, and we were there alone without them. And, we felt very insecure. It seems they would not have helped us any if the Germans came to get us, but it was, it seemed to be secure if they were there.

But, to regress another, to tell another story, it's just a nice story, how nice these people were. First of all, they risked their lives to save our lives, but another thing, my uncle brought an orange once from, somehow they got an orange. Poland doesn't have oranges. But somehow the partisans had oranges. My uncle had one orange. He brought it and he gave it to Carol Kuchatay, to the man, who was such a sick man anyway. And I remember him peeling that orange, and calling us all in to his room, and we were around his bed, and gave us each a piece of orange. [Weeping] I'll never forget that. He took, the orange looked like the sun. It was so beautiful, and it tasted so good, and even then, when I was just a little child, I thought it was such a noble thing for that man to do. I remember another thing. I was always hungry. We never had enough food to eat. So one time the partisans brought barrels and barrels of cream, and they stored it in the barn right next to our house. And they had a guard outside of the barn, guarding this, the cream. Anyway, I remember sneaking in through the back, through a loose board in the barn. And I drank two cups of cream. I remember another time, they had, the people we stayed with somehow had a can of condensed milk. And they opened the can and used a little bit of it, and they put it on the window sill, no? And when I got to it, it had worms swimming in it, and I pushed away the worms and I drank some of the milk.

I remember working very hard. My aunt must have been doing some work to make money. She used to go to the market, and I remember carrying the water from the well, with a, I don't, a yoke, I guess it's called, across the shoulders with two… That did not worry me. In fact, it was fun going to the well. I remember walking barefoot in the snow, because I didn't have any shoes. That wasn't fun. Anyway, my brother became sick. He was sick. I don't know what, how sick he was, or what it was, but my aunt was afraid to take him to the doctor, because of the circumstances. So she didn't take him to the doctor. And I remember, he was sick. [Crying] And I was standing next to him, and he died. He was maybe four. [tape off then on] In fact, in fact while he was dying, I ran to get this priest. I don't know why. I guess I felt it looked good. He put a candle in his hand, and he was pushing it away. Oh, God. My father was right. There was no God. [Weeping] Anyway, we had a funeral. We walked all the way. We walked following the coffin to the ceme-, Polish cemetery. And I didn't cry. I did not cry when he died. I didn't cry at the funeral. I didn't cry at the cemetery. [phone rings] I don't know, she, well, it will just keep ringing I guess.

NP: Whatever you want. [tape off then on]

BF: Anyway, I remember not crying. I remember specifically having this heavy stone on my chest. I remember this great heaviness, but never crying. Anyway, within days of this funeral I became very sick. I was very, very sick, and everybody start-, and they had a conference. But I guess, I don't know, I guess the people must have come to the funeral, our friends. Because they had a conference with my aunt and my uncle. And they were worried about losing another child. Of course I wasn't a boy, so they put me in a wagon, and they drove to the hospital. And it was a risk even putting me in a hospital. What if I say something that I was Jewish, and then everybody gets killed? Maybe that's why they had a conference first. Well, they did not want to, I remember them not wanting to lose another child. And I went to the hospital, it was a Catholic hospital with nuns, Seminary hospital. And I remember being treated very well. They were very nice to me. The story was again that my parents were away and I was, and I was living with an aunt. I remember one nun especially calling me her little orphan. And I used to think to myself, "Why is she calling me a little orphan?" My par-, the story is that my parents are in Germany working. So she must know I'm Jewish. The whole time I was under that impression, but I might have been wrong. I had whooping cough, scarlet fever, and diphtheria. I had everything. I was in the hospital for months. Because at that time you stayed in the hospital longer. I remember them coming in, I remember a nun kneeling at my bed and praying. I had a growth on the side of my neck that they lanced. I remember it was giant. It was bigger than a grapefruit. And I remember holding the receptacle while they cut it and lanced it. But no, it did not hurt. I guess I was anesthetized. It was I guess local anesthesia. My aunt would come to visit me, I remember, and bring food. She was not allowed in the room, because I was in the contagious ward. But I remember her coming. And then I came back to the village. I remember one instance—and I guess my brother was dead already—you know, when my brother was alive, it was a big burden on me. I had to take care of him. It was a lesser burden when he was dead.

NP: A child taking care of a child.

BF: [Weeping]

NP: Indeed it was a burden.

BF: I remember Gypsies came into town one day, a whole group of Gypsies. They would go from village to village and tell fortunes, and that's how they made their money, I guess. People said they also stole, but. Anyway, the Germans didn't hate them as much as they hated the Jews. They would send the Gypsies to camps. They would imprison them. But they wouldn't shoot them outright like they did the Jews. So the Gypsies came to town, and the Polaks would never tell the Germans that Gypsies were hiding here or there. They would tell where the Jews were hiding, not, even though they hated the Gypsies, cause the Gypsies stole, the Jews never stole. But they hated the Jews worse. Anyways, the Gypsies came to town and the whole village gathered around them. And the Gypsies told fortunes. Anyway, all of a sudden the Gypsies stopped telling fortunes, pointed at me, and said, "This is, she is Jewish." And then continued telling their

fortune. And from then on we were worried even more that everybody knew we were Jewish. Now, I don't know how, you know, I always thought, "How did the Gypsy know I was Jewish?" You know? Now that I'm talking about it, I think somebody probably told it, and it was a good way of some of the Poles advertising that we were Jewish. I'm just thinking of it now.

Anyway, the war was coming to an end. The Russians were coming. We heard all kinds of reports that the Russians were coming, and that was good. So, all of a sudden there was a war *in our village*. I mean, there, I remember the Germans coming into the village, and there was bombs flying, or bullets flying across the village. It was a tiny village. So you could actually see the bullets flying across the village. And different times there would be a, I guess a, people would know that the war, that the shooting started and we would run into bunkers. So, I suppose I probably wasn't washed for a long time, wasn't cared, no one cared for me, and I, no one took care of me. Of course everybody was in terrible straights. And I developed sores on my head. And the sores got so bad that I couldn't comb my hair any more, because there was pus. My hair was completely covered with pus, and it almost was like one cap, like one, like I had a hat on, complete pus and sores. So I don't know who told, I don't think anyone told me, I think I myself decided that I have to go to the hospital. Now this was forty-, nineteen-, middle of 1944, so I was ten. So I walked to the hospital. It was about ten kilometers, eight kilometers. All right, I already knew where the hospital was, and they took me in. I told them I was an orphan. This time I told them I was an orphan. And I remember the nurse putting me into a bathtub. And first she cut my hair with scissors, and then they, they actually scalped me. They took everything off my head. If I, to regress a little bit, I remember walking to the hospital, and I wore a scarf on my head. You could not take the scarf off, because it was glued to my head with the pus. And they put ointment on it, and I was in the hospital again for a long time, and while I was in the hospital, the Russians took over. And the Germans left. And the war, I guess, was over. I remember, it was so bad, even in the hospital as far as food was concerned, we would get black bread. And I remember, there were white worms in the black bread. And we would just push away the worms and eat the bread. I remember the bedding being gray on the beds, but somehow, my parents found out, my parents knew what town I was in. And they went to see the Polish people, to find out where the ch-, where *I* was. My parents already knew that my brother was dead. My uncle had sent a messenger to them some time before, and somehow they knew that my brother was dead. So they wanted to see about their only child. My parents were some hundred kilometers away, in another town, with the Russians. And my father stole a bicycle and he bicycled I guess 50 miles to Kielce, to, not, the, we were in Ogrodzenie, which was the little town...

NP: In the hospital?

BF: Right, in the hospital. And Kielce was the big city where the hospital was. And that's where I was. So my father got to Kielce, and found where these people lived, and went to see them. And he says when he went to see Mr. Kuchatay, Mr. Kuchatay cried

when he told them about my brother dying. And he told him where I was. So my father visited me in the hospital. And I can't describe how beautiful it was to see my father. I did not know who he was.

NP: Had he changed?

BF: No, it was just so beautiful. [Weeping] I, it was, it was somebody smiling, and somebody that I could be safe with. And he told me stories. He always told me stories. He stood there by my hospital bed telling me stories. [Weeping] And how warm, and how bright, and nice everything will be. And, and he told me he was my father. I, I knew he was somebody, but I didn't know he was my father. And I, I didn't have any hair when he came to see me—at all. I was completely bald. And it was amazing, I'm told, that my hair grew back at all. And,… Excuse me. And so, somehow, I don't know how my mother got there, too. And she was, she was already pregnant with my sister. She was wearing a Russian arm-, a green Russian army coat, a quilted army coat, and Russian boots, and she was *so* beautiful. She had to tell me she was my mother, too. She looked familiar.

NP: How long was it, had it actually been since you'd...

BF: I guess it was 1942 to 1945. And in '42 I was eight. And in '45 I was, I guess almost 11. And I guess the way she was dressed, and, so, I guess I stayed in the hospital for another while, because I wasn't well enough to leave yet. But then I left the hospital, and my parents rented an apartment in Kielce. Now the war officially was over. I remember they rented a five, I mean, the apartment had five rooms. And there was some kind of kitchen and bathroom. Five Jewish families lived in the apartment with the five rooms. So it was four Jewish families and my parents, and myself. And to us that was a great luxury. I mean, having a *room* for the family. And I remember it was on a high floor, maybe it was the fourth floor. I mean there was no elevator, so a fourth floor would be a high floor. And at that time my sister was about to be born, and there was a Polish doctor that befriended my parents, and he offered to, he offered to deliver the baby that was going to come, in his hospital. And, for no charge. And my mother refused, because she said, "I'll have the baby and they'll kill the baby." So, we arranged for a midwife, and, but the problem was, in case she goes into labor at night, there was a curfew. The Russians were guarding the streets, and they shoot first and then they ask the questions, so, it was decided that I will get the midwife. I was, I guess I was ten, '45, or eleven. And I remember, my mother went into labor at night, and I went to get the midwife. I was stopped a few times at gunpoint, but they wouldn't shoot a child. So, so I brought the midwife. I remember not being afraid of the guns or the Russians. I was afraid of the boogie man in the little park I had to go through, the *shadows* I was afraid of. That's what happens when you're a child.

NP: You were back to being a child and then...

BF: And not afraid of those guns. Excuse me. I remember all the screams while I was waiting for my mother to deliver that baby. I was in the hallway. Terrible. Terrible. I'll never forget that. And then my mother was in bed for a *long* time. And my father had to make a living again. And I took care, I remember washing the diapers by hand, taking

care of my mother, cooking, taking care of the baby. And my father, the way he made a living… I remember when I first, when my parents first picked me up. The only thing, possession they had was a black dress. A black lady's dress. I don't know where they got that black lady's dress. And I remember there was a long discussion, should my mother have the dress, or should my father start a business with that dress. So they decided that they should, he should start a business with the dress. Now, this is a child hearing what parents are talking about. That's what it sounded like to me. And my father, somehow my father got a bottle of liquor, sold the dress, and bought a bottle of whiskey. And he would water the whiskey down, and sell it to the Russian soldiers, and then somehow he got a watch, and he sold the watch, and he got some money. And that's how he supported us, from the black dress.

NP: Did you have any education at that time? Was there any schooling?

BF: Myself, oh no, no. We were in that, in Kiel-, in, while we were in Ogrodzenie, during the war...

NP: Yes.

BF: I did not go to school, because, we always found excuses why I did not go to school. I was sick. I was too young. It was too far. But some of the children went to school. There was a school in a nearby village that the children went to. I did not go, because it was dangerous. You know, there was a danger in it, the more people would know me, the worse it would be. They would ask questions. Don't forget, these, all the people in the village, they lived there for centuries. Everybody knew everybody, and we were newcomers. So even, and everybody was suspicious, you know, somebody's Jewish, you know? So it was open, you know, open, an open, season for Jews.

NP: Excuse me for a minute, was there any contact at this time with your, from your original town, with your family, the friends, from your original town?

BF: No.

NP: No.

BF: No.

NP: All right, did you have any communication with the outside world, with your parents? Do you remember thinking about a radio, or newspapers...

BF: I myself don't remember radio or newspapers. I remember my parents' stories about the farmer that hid them came in and said to them that he heard on, on, on, on the English radio, of the British Broadcasting Company, I guess, the Polish hour, that he would listen to, saying, "Kill the Jews wherever you can find them." He wou-, he showed my parents leaflets that he got from the Polish underground, to, "Kill the Jews wherever you can find them. We want a Poland clean of Jews, when the Poland, when Poland is a country again." He came to my parents and he cried. "Why am I risking my life and saving you? You will be killed anyway after the war." And the only thing that really saved my parents, first of all, because he was a wonderful man, and second of all, he went to his priest and he finally told the priest that he has Jews, and, "What should I do with them?

Should I kill them?" And the priest told him, "Keep them." And the terrible thing about this Jews being killed, is the fact that, if the priests, if all the priests would have told their people to keep Jews, every Jew would have been saved, because the Polish people were so religious, that anything the priest told them, they would have done. Their greeting, the Pol-, the greeting in the, especially in the small towns and villages in Poland, is, "May the Name of Christ be Blessed Forever." And then the answer is, "Forever and Ever, Amen." So, they lived and breathed Jesus. If somebody told them that Jesus wants the Jews to live, the Jews would have lived. That's the irony of it.

NP: We know about the Vatican, and, you know...

BF: Now, if the Pope would have said, "Save the Jews," the Jews would have been saved. It only took one sentence it would have taken. It wouldn't have taken much.

NP: It's incredible. You know, some of these questions don't pertain to you, because you were too young. Selections at death camps, camp medical clinic, anything about the guards and their treatment to the prisoners and the *kapos*, and the daily rations, children in the camp, and, did you have services in the camp, prayers?

BF: You know, I remember before my holy communion, so that's regressing again...

NP: That's good. That's okay.

BF: I, ...

NP: Anything you want.

BF: Well, I was a certain age. I guess I was eight or nine, and I had, I didn't have to go to school, but I would *have* to go to catechism class. And I would have to be, have my first communion, otherwise they would really get suspicious. So I remember before that was decided, Emelia Kuchatay—that's the lady—she took me into a room and she sprinkled some water on me, and said a, conf-, christened me. That's the word I was looking for. Because she said, I said, "Why are you doing it?" She says, "Because I don't want, I'm afraid of committing a sin to bring an unchristened child to church to, for communion and for catechism." So, she was absolved from sin in doing that. And, so I went to catechism for a year, and I was one of the good students. We walked every, twice a week, I and a group of my friends from the village, walked to church, and we would have classes, catechism classes. It's really a small booklet that one tells, it has questions and answers. "What is the Church?" "This Church is the mother of religion." And, a number of, many questions, maybe more than 100 questions probably. And you just learn all that by heart. That's it. By rote [she says "route" like "gout"].

NP: And there were other Jewish children with you?

BF: Mmm, Jews did not exist at that time.

NP: All right.

BF: They would, the people that went with me were the children of the people that lived in that village for hundreds of years. Now, so, then when I, I did not know of any Jews anyplace, especially in that village. There were only 15 houses. So, we had a

test. I passed the test, and then it was time for the first communion. And my aunt had to scramble to get me a dress and flowers, and it was, and there was this, a small party. And she walked with me into town to take a picture. Because you ha-, that was what you had to do. You had to go into town to the photographer to get a picture taken. And we did that. I remember going to confession once a week. Probably it was a Saturday, because you had to confess the day before you had communion. And, so you wouldn't have time to sin, because you're not allowed to have communion if you had any sin, if you sinned. I remember kneeling in church and thinking to myself, "Will God forgive me because I'm Jewish?" I mean, that was really a lot of presence of mind for a kid.

NP: Indeed. Indeed it was.

BF: And every step, I knew I was Jewish, and I, I even, at different times I would think to myself, "Somebody commits a crime and is sentenced to death. He committed a crime, but I didn't do anything! The only reason they are going to kill me is because I am Jewish!" And that I had in my mind the whole time. I knew that. There's another story. I missed my mother. I missed my mother so much. [Weeping] I remember I had a button from her dress. I don't know how I had that button. And I kept it with me all through the war. Every time I looked at the button I thought of my mother. [Pause, tape off then on]

NP: Do you remember anything much about the Russian treatment?

BF: When the Russians...

NP: When you were in town, you were now in this apartment, and...

BF: Oh, I even remember in, before I came into town. I suppose the Russians already came in into that village before I even went to the hospital with this cradle, with this cradle cap disease. But they, it wasn't sure. They would come in and then the Germans would come in the next day. The village changed hands a few times. I remember the Russians coming in to our house and begged for bread, because the Russian army was so badly supplied that the soldiers were hungry. And I remember them not taking bread. I remember them *asking*. And I was, and they were so nice. It was, they were also so beautiful [weeping] when they came in, because we knew they weren't the Germans.

Tape two, side one:

NP: May the 29th, and this is the second tape, side one, and the interview is with Bernice Fishman. This is Natalie Packel.

BF: I'll bring back to Kielce again.

NP: All right.

BF: We lived in this five-family apartment and I remember how happy we were, and my sister was born. And, well, my sister was born because my mother knew already that my brother was dead, and she wanted another child. The courage of people to get pregnant during the war because they wanted another child because the child was dead. But anyway, we lived in this vil-, in this town, and my father again had to make a living. So he would travel into another town to buy and sell whatever. And I remember a few times a week he would take the train to this other town. And this train station was just a block away from our house. And I always walked him to the train. And this one day I walked him to the train. We were at the train station, and the train is, we still a little early. And all of a sudden I say to my father, "You're not, please don't take this train." And my father says, "I have an appointment. I'm going into town. I take this train all the time. I'm taking it." I started crying and begging and crying, "Don't take this train." He did not take the train. He took a train a few hours later. We went back back home and he took. I don't know why he listened to me. Why would he listen to an eleven-year-old? Ten Jews were killed on the train.

NP: Ohhh.

BF: That day. That train. The Polaks went from car to car, and whenever they saw a Jew, they threw him, either they killed him outright or threw him off the train while the train was moving. I don't know why I didn't let my father get on the train. I remember it. Very clearly. Crying, and falling onto him, not letting him get on the train. So, any way, while we lived in that apartment, my father—you know, he was my father, and I thought of him as an adult, an old person. I guess he wasn't more than in his 30's at the time, early 30's. And may-, no, maybe he was already 40. He might have been around 40. Well anyway, one of the peo-, everybody in the building except for that one apart ment, everybody in the building was not Jewish, was all Polish people. And he made friends with one of the men on that floor below us, and he was best friends with him. They went to the movies. They called each other "comrade." They were so, my father was so happy he had a friend. My father was a very social person, and all his war, all his time during the war he didn't have anybody. So here he had a friend. And I remember how happy he was. And the man would come to our room every night, and they played cards, my father and this man played cards. And my mother would serve tea. I remember my father had a funny habit. He would tell him, "You're eyes are getting smaller," because he wanted him to leave already. It was getting, it was getting...

NP: He was getting tired.

BF: He was getting tired, it was getting late. Anyway, at that time, my uncle, Isaac, my mother's brother, came in. He was the one that freed Warsaw from the Ger mans. And he was in the Russian army. And somehow he found us. And he, one day he showed up in our apartment, which was absolutely a miracle. And that's my mo-, a few years younger than my mother. And he came, and he came and went and I was so impressed by this uniform. And he carried a gun. Anyway, I guess, again, to tell a little bit of a different story, the people that saved us, the Kuchatays, *Mrs.* Kuchatay. Mr. Kuchatay had died, right at the end of the war. Finally, the disease, whatever he had, that infection, just, I guess he had a deep-seated infection that it finally killed him. That's all, just continued and it killed him. She came to see us in that apartment. And she wanted me to convert legally, because she said that otherwise she'll go to her grave with that terrible sin that I was not converted properly, I should convert properly. And my parents absolutely didn't want to. My mother, somehow there must have been a rabbi some place, and he told her that it really doesn't matter what a Jewish child is, I mean, whether you convert to save a life, but it wasn't necessary to convert any more, because the war was over. But she wanted to take us to court.

So, my parents were worried, because, you know, you don't trust the Polaks. You didn't trust anybody anymore. So, my uncle Isaac had an idea. He got a truck, because he was a soldier. Somehow he got a truck. He says, "I'll come, be here tomorrow morning. We'll get on the truck and we'll leave town." We, early, I remember it was dark. We left. We left. I mean, it was so early in the morning it was dark. And we put the baby, and my mother, the baby in our arms, in her arms, and we got on the truck, and we left that apartment and traveled to Boyton [phonetic]. Boyton? I guess this was, it's Boyton in German, Bytom in Poland. But it was still, it was Poland at that time, so it was Bytom. I guess it must have been a day's travel by truck. I'm not sure. But, I remember how much fun it was on the truck. My uncle was shooting his gun into the air, and we were riding in a truck. It was wonderful. Anyway, we got to this town of Bytom, and somehow my parents got an apartment. And it was *our* apartment. I think it was two or three rooms. It was on the first floor, high first floor. And within days of leaving Kielce, there was the Kielce pogrom. Everybody in our apartment was killed. [Weeping] All four families were killed. And they lived through the war. I remember, there was a boy and girl that lived in one of the rooms. She was 16 and he was 17. They got married right after the war, in that room they got married. In our apartment they got married. Because they didn't have anybody. They were just the two of them. [Crying, tape off then on] But I do know something. It, after the pogrom, well, the Russians did their best to stop the pogrom, and they did stop it. Of course, after some, at least 60 or 70 people were killed, they caught the ringleaders of the pogrom. And one of the ringleaders, if not the main ringleader, was the man that drank tea in our apartment every night, my father's comrade, my father's best friend. And he was hung. The Russians hung a number of these people that they caught. Now, I have a lot of, a lot of warm feelings towards the Russians, because they only showed

us kindness. I mean, every contact I've had with Russians was with kindness. The Russians did not have this natural feeling to kill Jews. I mean, if they hated a Jew they would kill him, but not because he was a Jew. So, all these people were killed, I mean, that was, yeah.

Anyway, we lived, we lived in Bytom in that apartment and my father was doing business again. And from then on we were very afraid. At night we locked doors. We were never outside after dark. We lived in fear of a pogrom. And our, and the reason, well, the reason I guess we went to Bytom was because it was near the Polish border, near the German border. The idea was to get to Germany, because in Germany, to get to the American zone in Germany to be able to come to America. And, but, you couldn't get to Germany from Poland. I guess the borders were closed. So the only way to get out of Bytom was to go to Czechoslovakia, and that would be illegally. And then from Czechoslovakia one could take a train legally to Germany. So, my uncle Nathan was smuggling people across the border from Poland to Germany. And, it was decided that he'll smuggle us across the border. And, let's see, what happened. Well, in Bytom, in Bytom my aunt also, my aunt, and my cousin worked with us. That's the aunt that I lived through the war with. That's my aunt Manya. My aunt also traveled to different places doing business, and she would leave her little boy with us. And...

NP: She was a liberated woman early on.

BF: Yeah, well she was always a liberated, my mother's whole family, all the women worked in the store, and they all traveled. They were like that from the beginning. My aunt, my cousin, I mean during the war, I mean my cousin lived with me and my brother, and when we were afraid to take my brother to the doctor, my cousin was also sick. Not as sick as my brother, and I think there was, they found a doctor. They did take him to the doctor. But he was not as sick. They thought he would die, but he did recover. That story I don't know as well. Let me see, do you have any questions?

NP: Where you were at this time? This was right before you came to the United States?

BF: No, that was right, well, we were in Bytom for a while, maybe it was even six months. There was some kind of Jewish con-, there were, there was Jewish contact, because I remember a cousin, my mother's first cousin escaped to Russia. Stam Sklar [phonetic] is his name. He's very well-known in Yad Vashem. He is, he lives in New York. He escaped to Russia, and he was taken in by a Jewish Russian family—he must have been a teenager at the time—by *Russian* Jews. And he lived with them for, through the whole war and they asked him that when he lived through the, when the war is over and he goes back to Poland, he should take their daughter with him. Because, you knew, once you were a Russian Jew, you could never leave Russia. So he married the girl, and they left Russia. And they visited us after the war, I mean, in Bytom. So there was a pleasant memory. They stayed with us for a while too.

NP: Were there DP camps? Were you ever involved in Displaced Person area?

BF: Yes, but that was in Germany. Not, not in, in Bytom we were still on our own.

NP: All right. So you'll have to lead me on to the next...

BF: Right. So we, at that same time, my uncle Isaac was I guess left the army already. And he was allowed to leave Russia because he was a Polish Jew. He was in Siberia for two years, because he would not sign a, he would not renounce his Polish citizenship. Had he renounced his Polish citizenship he would never have been able to leave Russia, and he knew that. That's why he went to Siberia. But he wouldn't renounce his citizenship. Well, anyway, we lived in Bytom for not a long time. Maybe it was six months or eight months. And my uncle smuggled my mother and me and my sister and my father across the Polish-Czech border. I remember going through at night. It was like, a river, we went through a river, and we went through mud, and lots of vegetation. And we had to be very quiet, because we were afraid that they will shoot us, because we were crossing a border illegally. And I know it was at night. And the Czech people were *wonderful*. There was a safe house that we came to. And they fed us, and they kept us, and the Czech people, if you spoke Yiddish or, we were told not to speak Yiddish on the streets of Czechoslovakia—we were in Bratislava—because, they thought it was German. And they hated the Germans so much that they would attack you. But, they were very good to the Jews, the Czechs. They were a completely, right across the border, a people that are completely different than the Poles. No comparison. I remember I had knee socks. They started pointing at me, because the Germans wore that kind of knee socks. I mean, that's how people hated the Germans. Anyway, we stayed in Czechoslovakia maybe a week, maybe two, may-, probably it was two weeks. And then we took a train, I guess, you had to get some kind of permit. And I suppose it was already the Jewish agency that got us the permit. Some kind of Jewish agency. And we came to Germany. And I don't remember the name of the town. I will have to look this up. Can you turn it off for a second?

NP: Maybe I have it on your mother's...

BF: You might have it on my mother's.

NP: Personal history form. We probably do.

BF: Yeah, turn it off for a second. Let me just think. [tape off then on]

NP: Do you want to say where this is?

BF: We took a train and we arrived near Stuttgart, and that was well-organized already. There was a former army camp that was transferred into a Displaced Persons Camp. And I remember we had a room, but we shared it with another family. And we hung a blanket between this, divided the room in half. And that family had two sons. So there were four of them and four of us, and we each had half a room, and we were *so* happy! It was so wonderful. My parents had bunk beds. I guess we had two sets of bunk beds. No, it was two bunk beds. My parents slept in one bunk bed, and Jeannie and I slept in another bunk bed. There was a kitchen already organized by the HIAS, and I would go to

the kitchen and pick up food. We were already, we were fat. And there was a doctor. And this still wasn't right. There were schools. Jewish schools were organized in the Displaced Persons Camp, and I went to school. There were German schools, right, but the Jewish children wouldn't go to German schools. That's why Jewish schools were organized. The Jewish children would be afraid to go to the German schools. We learned, after just a very little while every subject in that school was taught in Hebrew—math and English, everything was taught in Hebrew.

NP: By whom was it taught in Hebrew?

BF: There were, we had some brilliant people that were saved, that left after the war.

NP: From Poland.

BF: From Poland. I remember my teachers. I don't remember their names, but, I remember the first half—it seemed like a half year, maybe it was the first semester—I sat in class. Of course the classes were not divided into classes. It was, you know, from the age of eight to the age of fifteen you were in the same class. But it was already a fair sized school. And I remember the first few months I didn't do anything. And the teacher just left me alone. She didn't do anything. And then we happened to get a new teacher. I remember, a great, big woman—very pleasant, but she was a big lady. And she came in, and she gave us a homework assignment. And of course it was in Hebrew. And the next day I didn't do my assignment, because I never did my assignments. I mean, everybody knew [laughs] I never did my assignments! And she asked me to answer these questions, and I said, "I didn't do it." She said, "Why didn't you do it?" I said, "I never do it." She says, "Well, tomorrow you will have it done!" I had it done. From then on I spoke Hebrew. I must have absorbed something—for six months.

NP: You were like your father, very...

BF: Right. I just said that he lives in—right, I never thought of that. That's very good. And, I went to school for quite a while. In fact, it was amazing. We learned English, too. It was— our first story was *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

NP: [laughs] In Hebrew!

BF: In, right, in Hebrew. I mean, it was like unbelievable, because they didn't, we spoke, we would take the bus—my friends and I did, were Jewish friends already—from school home, and speak Hebrew on the bus. It was never, because in the school you were not allowed to speak a different language. You were stopped if you spoke anything else except Hebrew. Even if you couldn't speak Hebrew you spoke Hebrew. So, but then, it was fine, school was fine. I remember we had a carnival. I remember, it was almost a normal type thing.

NP: Do you remember...

BF: But that was within the ghetto, well, not ghetto, within the Displaced, in the camp. But my father, again, my father, because he was a enterprising, he didn't want to

live in that camp. So, there were a limited number, Stuttgart was 80% bombed out. I mean, destroyed, completely, by the U.S. bombing...

NP: Allied.

BF: Allied bombing, right. So, there was very few, little housing. And there was no housing. But, a Jewish family could apply for housing, and a family, and a family that belonged to a Nazi party had to take them in. A family that didn't belong to a Nazi party didn't have to take them in. Only Nazis had to take them in. I mean, that was their punishment. And of course there was so little, how much was there, right? But my father got housing. My father spoke a beautiful German, and my father was charming, again. So, we lived in this beautiful house that was one house that wasn't destroyed—every, all around it was all destroyed—with a beautiful garden. Now, we, these people had the downstairs apartment, and there was another apartment upstairs. I guess it was a duplex. There were I guess four, five rooms and a kitchen and a bathroom, and we, they gave us two rooms. They had two rooms, and we had two rooms, and we shared a kitchen and a bathroom. And that was real luxury, with trees and flowers. And this man belonged to the Nazi party. He was an engineer. He belonged to the Nazi party, and he told us that's the only way he could practice his engineering was belonging to the Nazi party. They were all innocent. I mean, you cannot believe any one of them, but because there were lots of people that weren't, didn't belong to the Nazi party and lived very well in Germany, so that's no excuse that he had to belong to the Nazi party. But they had a grown son that lived away from home, and they had a daughter that still lived at home. They were very nice to us. The Germans are the kind of people that if you tell them, "Kill," they kill. If you tell them, "Stop killing and be nice," they're nice. So they were nice. I remember my sister jumping in their, running in the morning, running into the couple's bed and jumping in bed with them. That's how nice they were to us. I remember a small story. My uncle Isaac was already married, and he lived in a different place, and his wife was pregnant. My aunt Lena was pregnant. And he left for Poland, went back to Poland on business. My brother's, my mother's brothers and, the whole family had no fear of anything, ever. He was away for about four months, and she was about to, she was already quite pregnant, maybe seven months pregnant. So my mother took her into our two rooms because she shouldn't be alone. And somehow the Polish person didn't like the way my aunt cleaned up, not the Polish person, the German lady, didn't like the way my aunt cleaned up the bathroom after she washed her hair, and she found a black hair in the bathroom. My aunt had black hair. And she told my mother that. And I'll never forget how angry my mother got at her. She said, "You people killed her mother, her father. She doesn't have anybody. That's why she has to be here. That's why I have to take care of her." So, that was very, you know, interesting. Anyway, my aunt was about to give birth, and there were, the hospital was many miles away and there was no transportation. And again, my father arranged for transportation. He knew somebody who had a truck a few houses away, and when, anytime at night when my aunt goes into labor, he will come and drive my aunt to the hospital.

Now, the Germans, we were not afraid to go to the hospital, because once you told the Germans, "Stop killing," they would not kill.

NP: They were ordered to do so.

BF: They were ordered not to kill. That's it. You know, they're like automatons.

NP: Robots, yes.

BF: Robots. The Polaks are just hateful. The Germans are robots. Anyway, I remember my aunt getting in the middle of the night, her bag of water broke all over our floor and my father rushing her to the hospital. The next day my uncle came from Poland after four months. It was amazing [laughs].

NP: Isn't that incredible.

BF: Yeah, he brought her flowers! Ohhh. Yeah.

NP: So this was 194-...

BF: 1945, my sister was born in the mid-, in June, no, 1946.

NP: Did you have any contact with the American GI's there, do you remember?

BF: Yes. The one GI I really remember is my first cousin Herbie, my mother's brother's, my mother's brother left Germany before the war started, 1932, and went to Israel. Not 1932, in 1934, '36, I guess, before the war started. Went to Israel. He was the smart one. He knew the war, he knew there would be a war, and he knew that Hitler will kill the Jews, and he sent a messenger to his family to leave Poland, and nobody believed him. So he and his family left for Israel. Anyway, they lived in Israel many years. The children were raised there, and then they moved to the United States. And his son, Herbie, was six-, let's see he was 17, he wasn't 18, but he falsified his papers. He lied and he joined the army. He visited us in Stuttgart, in the, in the American GI uniform. And that was a beautiful sight.

NP: Ohh!

BF: Yeah, well Herbie was beautiful anyway, and he still is, but that was a beautiful sight. And I remember him staying with us overnight. And I remember walking him to the bus after, when he left, but, it gave us such respect and such love and such *koved* [Yiddish: respect]. It was just the most wonderful thing. And my mother wrote to her brother in America, and they started I guess the ball rolling to get us to America. But there was a very large quota. You see, the ironic thing is, Germans could come to America—German Germans. Jewish Ger-, German Jews could come to America. But Polish Jews couldn't come to America. There was a large quota, which means, at that time, if you figured it out right, it would take you ten years to get to America, the quota was so large. So, but, if you had a brother, you were...

NP: A sponsor.

BF: A sponsor, but if the sponsor was a brother, you would have first preference, and second was a, you know, or then, it was a cousin and so on.

NP: Then you wouldn't be a financial burden to the government.

BF: Right. Well, everybody is sponsored. You could not come to America, see, later it became easier. Later the HIAS could bring people over. In the beginning you absolutely needed a blood relative. So, we waited four years in Stuttgart till we were able to come. But we were not persecuted there. But, right, we were not persecuted in Stuttgart. And then finally we got papers and came to America. But my mother's brother, uncle Nathan, who when the war started—maybe he was 18, maybe he was 17—and he's the one that saved our lives. He's the one that found the Kuchatays, took us there, found that farmer, took us there, fed us during the war because he was in the partisans, stayed in the partisans during the whole war and then nobody knew he was Jewish. He was shot on the street of Poland. He might have been 22 at the time, just by a random shot. Maybe they knew he was Jewish, I don't know. Maybe I'll never really know. I remember my mother crying in America already, when she heard her brother died. He's buried in Poland. He smuggled all these people across the border and saved so many people. Then, my aunt came over later when she was able to cross the border. And, I guess that's it, unless you had some...

NP: Did any of your relatives that did survive, have they shared their story with any Archive?

BF: No, my, you know, my aunt might be able to tell you her story. I could ask her.

NP: Is she, does she live locally?

BF: Yes, she does. She has some story to tell.

NP: If she wants to, fine. If not, you know...

BF: Sure. Sure.

NP: We have testimony from your mother and from yourself. We thank you. We're really grateful. I know it's been *very* difficult thing to do.

BF: Yeah, terrible.

NP: But I think having done this you will feel better.

BF: Oh absolutely. I really wanted to tell this story.

NP: And perhaps to share it with your children, to really know firsthand...

BF: Do you have any questions that you want to ask me, maybe, I, you know, like if you ask me something I might remember something. Otherwise I don't. I don't remember anything else.

NP: A lot of what I would have, did not, as I said, apply to you, and you really covered things beautifully. You answered the questions as they came up.

BF: Okay.

NP: You really did. About partisans, about the underground, about the viewing of religious faith or lack of religious faith, mentioning that there was Zionist meetings in your hometown, and I, I really think we've covered everything really very beautifully, if you can use that word. And, you know, I'm very grateful, and thank you.

BF: Thank you.