HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

GABRIEL DRIMER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Sue Rosenthal
Date: April 21, 1985

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GD - Gabriel Drimer [interviewee]
SR - Sue Rosenthal [interviewer]
Date: April 21, 1985[1]

Tape one, side one:

SR: This is an interview with Gabriel Drimer, taped at the Philadelphia Gathering of Survivors, on April 21st, 1985, by Sue Rosenthal. Mr. Drimer...

GD: Yes.

SR: I wonder if you could tell me something about where you lived before the war started.

GD: Before the war started I lived in a town which was called Dubova. And I also lived and went to school to a--in a city which was called Pressburg, [German], Bratislava [Czech].

SR: Where is this?

GD: In Czechoslovakia.

SR: In Czechoslovakia.

GD: Yeah.

SR: And you went away from your home to go to the school?

GD: Yes.

SR: That's interesting. Was that usual? Was it a boarding school, or...

GD: No, no, it was like a *yeshivah*. It was a *yeshivah*.

SR: Oh, I see. So did you go to like the younger grades in your own...

GD: Right. The younger grades I went in my own, then when I was 14 years old I went away to Bratislava, and I went to school for a while. Then I became a singer in the choir of the biggest synagogue in Bratislava. So, I used to get paid like 60 Czechoslovakian Krone in a month. And I didn't like school so much, so I was looking for a trade. I was looking to do something. So I went in to learn a trade to become a barber, because I saw that the barbers, the people who come to the barbers give a lot of tips. And that made an impression on me, so I'll have plenty of pocket money.

SR: O.K.

GD: But, after two, three weeks, I didn't like that profession. And I was still singing in the choir in the synagogue. And my mother sent me money, because she was very happy that I'm still in the Jewish tradition, going to *shul* and singing in the choir. So she sent me money every month. And I was looking around to get some kind of a trade, to learn some kind of a trade. Then I went into fashion. I went into tailoring and designing. And I have learned that in the city of Bratislava.

SR: Oh, I see. I see. Did you live by yourself, or did you live with a group, or...

[1] Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

GD: No, I lived by myself. I took a small apartment, one room. And I lived by myself. And my mother helped me to support myself. And I ate by some of the people that they knew me. They gave me food. I had, like a few days a week I went to certain people where I ate, for the first year. Then, when I started to learn the trade, my boss liked me so much, he gave me food; he gave me board. He gave me everything. He also gave me pocket money. And I was doing very well, as a young man.

SR: Even though you were an--just an apprentice.

GD: Right.

SR: He--they gave you all this...

GD: Right, right...

SR: Even though...

GD: No, they didn't pay me for my work, but he gave me--he gave me food; he gave me living space; he gave me a room; and he also gave me every week pocket money.

SR: Can I ask you something...

GD: Yes.

SR: About--you say that you had other people who gave you food, and you would go to--dinner.

GD: Right.

SR: Dinner the year around.

GD: Right.

SR: How did you find those people? Was that something people did?

GD: Those people I--right.

SR: Oh.

GD: That city was the biggest city, like New York.[2]

SR: I see.

GD: That most of the Jewish people lived in that city Czechoslovakia. And some of those people were salesmen, where they used to come to my town. And they recognized me in the *shul*. And right away one of the salesmen knew who I am, knew that I'm not very poor from home.

SR: Right.

GD: And I want to do something for myself, because my father didn't live already. I was an orphan, and so this gentleman, he knew me as a salesman. We had a store next to our bakery. We at home have a bakery, had a bakery. My father was a baker. My brother was a baker.

SR: I see.

GD: We owned our bakery. So this gentleman used to come there and sell chocolate. He was from the Orient Chocolate Factory, a representative. And he recognized me. And he asked me what I want to do there. First he invited me to his house for a few days, and he found out what I want to do. He liked it. He liked that I want to learn a trade,

[2]Bratislava was biggest city in Slovakia; Prague was biggest city in Czechoslovakia.

and I was singing in the choir in that same *shul* that he was going to. So he liked me very much, and he went over to a few friends of his, and he made appointments to eat there every day, like three different places to eat a day or two during the week.

SR: I see.

GD: The first year.

SR: Can I back up a little bit...

GD: Yes.

SR: And ask you about you family at home?

GD: Right.

SR: Tell me, tell me about, tell me about--you say your father was a baker?

GD: Right.

SR: And your mother was there, and you had other brothers and sisters?

GD: Right. I had four brothers and one sister. My sister was 12 years old when they took her away in the--in--to Auschwitz. My one brother was in a working camp, which they sent him on the Russian front. And he died on the Russian front. He stepped on a mine, and he was blown away. My younger brother--this was an older brother from me--my younger brother was in the guerilla movement. He was hiding in the hills, and two weeks before liberation they caught him.

SR: Oh my. Oh my.

GD: And they killed him.

SR: Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm. This all happened, though, some years after your going and beco--and learning...

GD: Well, this happened during the war.

SR: Yeah.

GD: This happened during the war.

SR: Right. When was it that you were learning the trade, the tailoring and...

GD: That was before the war, in 1936.

SR: I see.

GD: 1935.

SR: Right.

GD: '37, and '38.

SR: So you were three boys and a girl...

GD: Before the Nazis came in. No, we were four boys...

SR: Oh, four boys.

GD: And me, that's five boys.

SR: Five boys.

GD: And a girl.

SR: And a girl. I have three boys and a girl, so I know what...

GD: Yeah.

SR: Is the girl the youngest?

GD: Yes.

SR: My girl is the youngest also.

GD: Yes.

SR: And your--so they--did they all stay? While you were in the city, did they all work in the--in this other town, in your hometown?

GD: My whole family worked in the bakery.

SR: Ah.

GD: Everybody was helping my mother, because my father died before the war. And everybody, my older brother was in charge of the bakery. And my mother was a business lady. And she took care of the bakery, and she didn't want to get married. She was very young when my father died. She didn't want to get married, because she didn't want to have another man ever hit the kids or abuse the kids from her marriage. So, she sacrificed herself, and she didn't want to get married.

SR: How old were you when your father died?

GD: I was nine years old.

SR: You were nine. And then you went to the city when you were 14?

GD: Right.

SR: I see. I see. Did you, did you or your family belong to any synagogue in town?

GD: Yeah, oh sure.

SR: And you were...

GD: We were religious. We were Orthodox Jews.

SR: The reason that I ask is because you made the comment that your mother was so happy that you had stayed...

GD: Yes.

SR: Connected to the synagogue.

GD: Yes.

SR: That she was a...

GD: Yes.

SR: Was it, you--did it frequently happen, that people were coming to the city who would just kind of forget their Jewish roots, and...

GD: Oh yeah, there were some kids going to the city. They, I loosened up a little bit on religion too, but a lot of kids loosened up completely. They, they forgot about that they're Jewish, or they're going to synagogue, things like that. But I kept on going and kept on learning, and I never abandoned my Jewishness.

SR: Just as a matter of curiosity, before the war, in your village, was there talk about going to Palestine or being in Palestine or making...

GD: Yes.

SR: Palestine a homeland?

GD: Yes. There was talk about going to Palestine. There were some young boys that went to Palestine. Then I met them later on in Palestine after the war.

SR: Oh really?

GD: Yes.

SR: And they were from your hometown...

GD: Right. Yes.

SR: Did, how did people feel about trying to make Palestine a homeland?

GD: Well, there was a problem. You couldn't go to Palestine so easy. You have to get a permission from the English. And, that wasn't so easy. You didn't get just a few visas a year, and not everybody got their chance to go.

SR: Did anybody in your...

GD: I belonged to a...

SR: That's what I was gonna ask you. Did you belong to...

GD: I belonged to an organization, *B'nai Akiva*.

SR: *B'nai Akiva*.

GD: Yeah. *B'nai Akiva*. A Zionist organization. There was also, it was a Orthodox organization, and we used to get together Friday nights and Saturday, and we used to have a lot of fun.

SR: What did you use to do?

GD: Oh, we used to sing and dance, and teach us things that when we ever get to Israel, we should know what's all about.

SR: I see. The people in your community, in your hometown, who were not Jewish, what was the relationship between the Jews and the non-Jews?

GD: My father's relationship with the Catholics was very, very good. We didn't have that many antisemites. My father also dealt with fruits, wholesale. He would buy from the farms, the whole produce that they had. He would buy the fa-, the whole farm of fruit before they even bloomed.

SR: Oh, O.K.

GD: And then, after the farm was producing, then he'd hire people and they would pick the apples, the pears. He concentrated them in places, then he'd sell them to wholesalers, to Prague, and to Bratislava. This was a business besides the bakery.

SR: It sounds like it was a good-sized kind of operation...

GD: Yes, yes.

SR: That he ran there.

GD: Yes.

SR: Yeah. He was kind of a middle man between the farmer and the...

GD: He was not a middle man. He was the buyer, from the farmer, straight. These Catholics and non-Jews, they would deal with him year by year, just on word. He didn't have to give a deposit, or if the farmer needed money, he knew where to come. He came to my father. He asked for a loan, he asked his daughter is getting married, he needs

two, three thousand dollars. My father would give it to him with no signing, with no anything, just by knowing each other, on word.

SR: So there was a good relationship.

GD: So that, a very good relationship. My father had a very good friend, which was a bishop, Catholic bishop, where I remember as a kid I used to go there with him. We used to play cards every week. He also had, the head doctor of the town was his best friend. The owner of a drug store, who was not Jewish, was his best friend. They would go together fishing. They would go together once a week bowling, on Sundays. And they had *very* good relationships.

SR: And that was gen-, it was generally true that there were pretty good relationships between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish community?

GD: Right. Was not bad.

SR: Not bad.

GD: Czechoslovakia was not like some other communities in Poland or in Ukraine, in Russia, where they were very big antisemites, where they made pogroms, pogroms, and all kind of things. This didn't happen by us, thank God. We didn't have these problems. And my father, especially, was very much liked by everybody, because he did well, and he was a very generous man, who would help the poor, poor people who didn't have enough, have enough, they came to the bakery. They would get enough bread. They would also get other support, money.

SR: The Jewish community in general, was it a charitable kind of thing, and people helped each other...

GD: Yes.

SR: Supported each other?

GD: Yes.

SR: How many people were in your hometown? How big was it?

GD: Oh, maybe 250 Jewish families.

SR: That was not a large community.

GD: No, that was not a large community. But, when I lived in Bratislava, that was a big city. There were about 70, 60, 70,000 Jewish families.

SR: That was...

GD: That was the biggest...

SR: Good size.

GD: A good size.

SR: You say that was the biggest city as far as Jewish community?

GD: Bratislava Jewish community, right.

SR: In other words, Prague was not...

GD: Prague was not as big...

SR: Did not have as big...

GD: No.

SR: No.

GD: Prague was bigger in size, but not as much Jewish people.

SR: Between 1933 and 1939, that was before Hitler marched in Poland...

GD: Right, to Czechoslovakia.

SR: Czechoslovakia. Well that, that conference took place, right, right before 1939...

GD: Right.

SR: Then they went in there. Did Nazi power over Europe affect your life in any way?

GD: Yes. Yes. Yes.

SR: How did it affect it?

GD: Well, I had a lot of friends that we went to school, German boys, girls, and when Czechoslovakia was not yet taken over by Hitler, these friends volunteered to become *Hitlerjugend*. And they started to shy away from us, and they started to, not to be friendly to us. And they volunteered, and they also left Czechoslovakia. They went to Germany to become...

SR: They went to Germany.

GD: *Hitlerjugend*. Right.

SR: Were you, was your town in the part of Czechoslovakia, was it the Sudetenland?

GD: No.

SR: It's not.

GD: The part that I was born was the Carpathian, was near the Polish border.

SR: Oh, O.K.

GD: The part that I lived in Bratislava was Slovakia, which was also bordering partially with Poland, a different section.

SR: When Hitler had his conference with England...

GD: Yes.

SR: That, then, it wasn't your part of Czechoslovakia that he was talking about...

GD: No.

SR: When he said he...

GD: He was talking about Sudeten.

SR: Right. O.K. But even so, there were still many Germans living in...

GD: Oh, yeah, were still Germans in my town.

SR: In your area.

GD: In my, in my town.

SR: I see. I see. Did you have any close friends who began to shy away from you, or were these casual friends that you, that you knew?

GD: I would say I have close friends. We were playing together football and everything, but they start to shy away.

SR: When did the war begin to affect you and your family? When Hitler came in...

GD: The war begin to affect us in 1940. In that part where I was born, the Hungarian army came in. Not the Na-, not the German army.

SR: Right.

GD: And the Hungarians a half a year later, as they came in, in 1939, 1940, they took away the bakery. The first thing they did, they took away bakeries and restaurants from Jewish people.

SR: So your mother's bakery then was...

GD: Was taken away.

SR: Taken away.

GD: Putting out, put it out on the street. We were lucky we had another house.

SR: Were you home, back home at that time? Or were you...

GD: Yes, I was back home at that time. I came home at that time.

SR: Did you come home because of the war, or...

GD: I came home, I had finished my schooling, my learning about tailoring and designing. So I came home and I was helping by the bakery. And I also took a job for the company where I was working. Later on, when they took away my, our bakery...

SR: Right.

GD: I opened up my own store without a license, because Jewish people would not get licensed. They would take away all their license. And because I was very good at my work, and I worked for all those big shots, the police, the head of the police, for their wives, their daughters, and for themselves, they allowed me to work in the middle of the city without a license and without anything. And I took in a friend of mine as a partner, who lives today in Los Angeles. His name is Emanuel Adler. We both ran a very nice store, and tailoring, designing together.

SR: This was under the Hungarian army?

GD: This was under the Hungarian regime.

SR: Were there other restrictions on Jews, besides not giving them licenses and taking away the bakeries and...

GD: Even those who had license to work, later on they took away all the licenses from Jewish people. This was the first step, to take away bakeries and restaurants.

SR: I see.

GD: A half a year, a year later they took away everybody's license who was Jewish, even my wife's father, who was a tailor, and he worked in the same town that I did--although I worked without a license and I had all the privileges that I would have a license, even more so...

SR: Because you sewed for the right people.

GD: Because I sewed for the right people. I sewed for the mayor of the city, and for all the big shots. So they, nobody would bother me.

SR: Right.

GD: So, I was not married then. I knew my wife just because she lived not far from my business. And her mother would come and cry to me, "Please, Gabe, do something for me. Help me get the machines back. The police took away the machines, and my husband cannot make a living. So, if you can, if you could do something to help my, my husband, to get the machines back, he would appreciate very much. We'll never forget you." So at night, I would get back the machines from the head of the police, and give it back to them, and they would work another few days. Then the police would confiscate them again. Finally, the police realized that they have connection, and they're getting all the time the machines back, so they stopped bothering them.

SR: So he was able to keep them. And, what fin-, what happened as the war progressed?

GD: As the war progressed, in 1943, no, first I want to tell you about 1941.

SR: What happened?

GD: In 1941 they took a lot of Jewish people to try out how to mass murder Jews. In 1941, in May, they took a lot of people, including my grandfather, who lived five miles away, who was a farmer all his life, with my grandmother, and her daughter--two daughters, with their husbands and children. And they took them away to Galicia. I couldn't do much. I was trying to help them, and I couldn't do a thing, because the police wouldn't help me. So they took away thousands of people, and they took them to a city which was called Kamenets-Podolski. [city in the Ukraine where mass killings of Jews took place Aug. 27 and 28, 1941.] On the outskirts of the city, they were digging their own graves, but not graves. They dig big, I don't know what you call that, you know, big...

SR: Trenches?

GD: Trenches. And they told the people that the trenches they are digging is against the Russian army, as they come with tanks, they shouldn't be able to go through there. But, they didn't know that they are digging their own graves. And after a few, two weeks, all the Nazi soldiers surrounded the area, that land where they were concentrated, on fields, all around the hills were Nazi soldiers. And one day they started to shoot and they killed about 80,000 people...

SR: In one day?

GD: In one time. And that, there, [pause]...

SR: It's something that is very hard to understand, [unclear].

GD: There was my grandfather.

SR: Right. Your grandmother.

GD: Grandmother.

SR: And other people, too.

GD: And uncles.

SR: They had no idea what was gonna happen.

GD: [pause]

SR: By this time...

GD: One boy, a friend of my younger brother, survived. He threw himself in, in the grave.

SR: Mmm hmm.

GD: Alive.

SR: Mmm hmm.

GD: [pause; weeping] And he came back to our town a few weeks later, and he told the story. And nobody would believe him.

SR: I was gonna say, I bet nobody believed what he said.

GD: But we later found out that it was true. He cra--he got out of that hole, got out of that trench at night, because they thought everybody is dead. And all dead people were on top of him, and under him, and blood was all over the place. And he was going through hills. He never went through the towns or through cities. He went through hills, and at the side of the hills. He spoke Russian, he spoke Polish a little bit--Czechoslovakian is similar to Polish--and he got some food on his way. And he walked hundreds and hundreds of miles till he got back home. When he came back home, he told his story, and we started to believe what happened.

SR: This was the first...

GD: In 1941.

SR: And he...

GD: This is, was Eichmann was trying to...

SR: Oh.

GD: Find out a way how to mass murder all the Jews, before they started to take all these people to Auschwitz.

SR: I'd never realized something you just told me, that this started with Czechoslovakian Jews. I'd always thought that it was Polish Jews. I didn't realize that something like this...

GD: No, they took...

SR: Had happened in Czechoslovakia.

GD: Czechoslovakian Jews, and they took them to Poland.

SR: Oh.

GD: They took them with the trains to Poland. They took them to certain places, where they, where they murdered them.

SR: So by now the Nazis were there, then, by 1941. The Nazis were...

GD: By 1941, the Hungarian Nazis with the German Nazis worked together.

SR: I see.

GD: The Hungarians would take us away from home, and give us--put us into the trains. Also my family was supposed to go in 1941.

SR: Right.

GD: Because the Nazi baker, who took over our bakery in 1940, he asked the chief of police to take away my family, because they wanted to take away the other house. He wanted to have peo--his people who work in the bakery, to have a house where to live. Because he took over our house and bakery. We had another house, which we bought from a Catholic bishop. And we were lucky that we had that house, otherwise we wouldn't have where to live. So he was trying to send us away with other people, with other Jewish people. And we were not on the list. They had lists which people to take away. My family was not on the list, but they added to the list, because...

SR: He asked...

GD: He was a Nazi, he asked the police chief to take my family away.

SR: What happened?

GD: It just so happened that on lunchtime, I used to come home to eat lunch. We don't have big suppers. We have big lunches. And I saw what was going on in town. And I had my business, and I worked for all these policemen, chief of police, and I was in good relations with them. And they didn't know exactly that my family, because my family didn't live where I had the business. They lived far, far away. So two policemen were in the house, and I come home for lunch. And those policemen knew me, because all the policemen knew me. When they saw I come home for lunch, they ask me, "What are you doing here? Gabe, what are you doing here?" So I said, "This is my family. I came home for lunch." And I see that they are packing already. So, the two policemen had a little conference. And one of them ran right away to the head of the police, to find out what to do. So, when he ran to the police chief, and I saw what's happening, so I wanted to go with my family. So, the policeman said, "We don't want to take you. We only want to take your family." And, this policeman who went away to talk to the chief of police, and the chief of police started to walk towards, towards our home. In the meantime, I walked out of the house, and I was going to buy things to take on the, to store things, like luggage [blowing his nose. "Excuse me."] to put things like shoulder bags...

SR: Yeah.

GD: To carry stuff for us. And I said, "And I'm not gonna stay away. If my family goes, I go." I walked towards the city, towards the shopping center, and towards me walks the chief of police. And he stops me. And he says, "Gabe, you don't have to go. We have to take your family." I says, "My family was not on the list!" "How do you know?" "Well, I have an idea that my family was not on the list, and I don't think you should take my family." He says, "I'm sorry, I cannot do nothing about your family, but you don't have to go." And I said to the police chief, "Wherever my family goes, I go." And we part, and I went to buy the things that I had in mind to buy, and I really wanted to go with my family. And I knew already where they're going. I knew they were not going for a picnic.

SR: Yes.

GD: But, I love my family.

Tape one, side two:

GD: To put things in, and to take it with me. And I went, by the time I went home, my family was already taken to the biggest *shul*, a concentration place where they concentrated all the Jewish people. So I came home. Nobody would tell me nothing. I walked into the house. The house was empty. Everything was there. They couldn't take, just a little clothing and a little food. And I packed my stuff, and I went to the same place where my family was, because I wanted to go with them. I figured if they can't do nothing for me, I worked for them already so much, and I didn't charge them much for these policemen. They didn't pay much. I knew that someday I'll need help from them, so I didn't charge them too much. When I walked into the biggest *shul* in our town, and there was a--officers, police officers, their assistant chief of police, and he sat by a table. And I walked in, and he saw me. He got up from the table, he came over to me, "Gabe! What are you doing here?" So I said, "My family is here, [weeping] so I'm going." I says, "I'm going with my family." [crying] So he looked up the list, and he saw that my family was put on the list. Yeah.

SR: Yeah.

GD: So he said, he said, "Gabe, sit down here in my office." And he went up to the chief of police, and he said to me, "You're not gonna go." And I said, "I'm not gonna go if my family is?" [crying]

SR: Right.

GD: [pause] So I was there from 8 o'clock at night till 3 o'clock in the morning. And they had a plan to lea-, to take all the people at 5 o'clock to the railroad station and take them away to that place where they massacred 80,000 people. This assistant chief of police, he liked me very much. His wife liked me. And he didn't let me go, and he worked it out with the chief of police to let my whole family go back home--one out of 80,000. When we went back home, in 1941, they wouldn't touch us. They wouldn't bother us, till 1984, till 1944.

SR: You mean '44.

GD: Till 1944.

SR: So you were able to live and work...

GD: Right. Right. So I had my whole family home. And everybody was O.K.

SR: Right.

GD: Also, we had a next door neighbor who was a Nazi. And my mother lived with them very friendly, very nice. And she helped him a lot before the Nazis were in charge, when it was Czechoslovakia.

SR: Right.

GD: So, he put a lot of people in jail, and he helped kill a lot of Jewish people. But my family he tried to save. He also, in 1944, he suggested to my mother to let my sister hide in his house, in his attic. But my sister wouldn't go...

SR: Oh.

GD: Wouldn't stay away from the family.

SR: Oh.

GD: And also my friend, my father's friends, the bishop and the farmers, were trying to help my family [crying].

SR: So that they were good to you when they wanted to...

GD: [crying] And my mother wouldn't go, because she didn't want to jeopardize their lives.

SR: She wouldn't leave them either, then.

GD: She didn't, no. She didn't want to put them in trouble, because if they ever find us...

SR: Oh.

GD: They would...

SR: The people who wanted to hide you...

GD: Yes.

SR: She didn't want to put into trouble.

GD: Right.

SR: She must have been quite a woman.

GD: She didn't want them to do that. [crying] And that's why she is not here today.

SR: She did what she had to do.

GD: To beg her to come and stay with them. And she said, "If they ever catch me, you will be in the same trouble that I am." And she didn't want to.

SR: So she wouldn't let them hide any of you.

GD: She, she didn't...

SR: Because...

GD: No, well, she wanted to leave my sister should stay...

SR: Right.

GD: By the neighbor, but she wouldn't.

SR: Your sister went with your mother?

GD: Yeah. She went to Auschwitz.

SR: Auschwitz. What happened? Everybody was told to go? How did they...

GD: They, the, well, in 1944, when Eichmann took over Hungary, he didn't leave nobody there. He took everybody. And because we were not in Budapest--in Budapest some people were saved--but we didn't live in Budapest. And he didn't want to leave nobody there. So he took all those people to, who lived in, not Hungarian country like it was before Czechoslovakia, he took them all to Auschwitz. By that time Auschwitz was working already.

SR: Yeah.

GD: So in 1944, in May, 1944, he took all the rest of the people who were left at, from 1941, the few Jewish families, and he took them to a ghetto, which was called Taitch [phonetic]. And then from the ghetto, they took them straight to Auschwitz. And I was in a working camp. And because in the working camp I was very good with my officers, I got permission a few times to go back home. I went in to my working camp in 1943, October. And I had the, four times permission to go home, which none of the Jewish boys who were with me ever got home, ever got permission to leave.

SR: Your family was still at home in 1943?

GD: My family was still at home, and I visited them, and I was making a little money in the camp. The officer, the head officer, allowed me to do some work for some boys, and they had to pay me--not a big amount, small amounts...

SR: Right.

GD: Fixing jackets, pants, or anything. And I was working for the officers, most of the time without any money.

SR: Right.

GD: But because he was a very nice guy--he was a teacher in a university where there was a lot of Jewish students--so he was not, he was not an S.S. He was not. He was in the regular army. He was very nice to me. He was like a father to me. And, to some of the boys, and even to the rest of the boys he was nice. He was not mean. So he, I made for his wife a few suits, coats, and he took me with his own car to the railroad station to go home and visit my parents--for five, six days at a time! The last time I visited them was in the ghetto. That was the last time that I saw them. And I, from the ghetto I went back to my working camp, and later on I found out that they were all taken to Auschwitz, and they were all killed.

SR: Was your brothers and your sister?

GD: All my, my brother was hiding in the guerillas, the ol-, the younger brother from me was hiding in the hills. And he was only caught two weeks before liberation, before the Russians came into that part of the country. And he was still taken away to Auschwitz, and he was put in the gas chambers. And, the rest of my younger brothers and sister were all taken to Auschwitz, and they were all killed in the same time. I was left one person out of fifty, sixty people from a family.

SR: Oh my...

GD: And...

SR: And you were in the work camp?

GD: And I was then in that working camp. I was in very good relations with the officer. He would never bother me. He knew what happened. He always had a nice few words for me. And, I was in really good shape as far as food was concerned, and treatment. I was never treated badly, because of my trade, and because of my profession. But, because the officer was so good to me, I ran away from the camp about eight, nine times. Anybody else who would run away, more than 500 yards from a camp, there was a law that they

could shoot him on the spot. I was never touched, because I knew my officer, my head officer, who was a captain, he would never let anybody touch me. So I had courage, and I did go around, I left the camp a few times, about eight times. And I always came back, because, and that was bad situations.

SR: You came back on your own?

GD: I was trying to hide. I was trying to hide with Christians, or in some towns where I would stay over till the Russians come, because we knew that the Russians already coming. So I was trying to run away, and wait for the Russians. But then I saw that a lot of German soldiers are concentrating in that part, so I sneaked out and ran back to my own group, to my own military place where we were working. All the Jewish boys were working there, so I went back. And the officer would never bother me. He wouldn't tell me nothing. Finally, at the last moment, his city was also taken over by the Russians, which was in deep Hungary, near the Yugoslavian border. So he told me, he doesn't want to go to Germany himself. He doesn't want to go to the--to Germany. He wants to hide himself, and he wants to wait till the Russians will free us. And that's what he did. He kept all the 220 people. He didn't want to put us on the train. He kept us walking so the Russians could catch up with us. And the Russians did. And we were hiding for three, four days in a spot, on a farmland. The city was called Bereksaz. [phonetic] That was in the Karpathen. And when the Russian army freed that city, we were all freed--and him too, the officers. And nobody bothered him. Nobody did anything to him. But, the second day, when the Russians occupied that city, one officer, he was drunk a little bit. He was a lieutenant in the Russian army. And I speak a little bit Russian. And because I was dressed good, and because I was Jewish--he was an Ukraine--he was an antisemite, he wanted to kill me. So I was waiting six years under the Nazis to be freed, and in the day when I was freed, half a day later, a Russian officer wanted to kill me. He took away my watch, my money, everything I had. And he took me with a gun and he wanted to, wanted me to go in in the city in a special between houses, where it was a closed-in place, so nobody sees. He didn't want to kill me on the street because there were a lot of Russian officers. And one of my friends who was with me, in the same camp that I was, my best friend, he ran over to those officers and he start to cry that this is a Jewish boy, and this soldier, this lieutenant wants to kill him. And when I saw he ran over to the officers, I ran away from this guy. He told me to go into this place. At that point I made a right turn and started to run away. And he turned around and wanted to shoot me. He saw the officers, and he stopped, and he put away his gun.

SR: Oh my God.

GD: So, the officers blew a whistle. There were about six, seven officers--high ranking officers. Because they just occupied one day this city. And they had a little conference on the street, in the middle of the city. And my friend was crying there, and he spoke better Russian than me. And he told them what happened. So one Russian officer says to both of us, "You just stay here on the side." First they called over that off-, that

officer who wanted to shoot me. And he came over, shivering, put away his gun, saluted--because these were very high ranking officers--saluted the officer. And the officer asked him, "What do you want to do?" He says, "Nothing! Nothing! I didn't want to do nothing!" So one officer told him, "Get lost from me or otherwise I'll blow your brains out." And he ran away, he went away. And the officer told both of us, my friend and me, to wait here a few minutes. So they finish the conference. And between those five, six officers were two Jewish officers.

SR: Oh my.

GD: When they finish the conference, one of the officers comes over, asks us in Jewish, "Are you Jewish?" We said, "Yes!" He told him already we are Jewish. So he says, "All right. Wait here. You gonna come with me." So we waited a few minutes. He took us, he was in charge of delivering all the food to the front. He took us to his concentration where he concentrated the food, where he had kitchens, and they cooked for the army as they were progressing against the Nazis. He gave us lunch. He gave us beautiful treatment. And he said, "You wait here. And my trucks are going back to a certain city which is called Sighet. And over there they're going to bring more food and delivering it here. So you go back from the front. Because the front could turn around tomorrow, and the Nazis could come after us. We don't know, so you go back at least forty, fifty miles backwards, in that direction." So we said, "We are from that direction. We want to go home, and that's that direction." So he put us with his, one of the officers who was going with the trucks back to Sighet. And my friend, who spoke very good Russian, the officer took him in the cabin in the front near the, near the driver. So they were sitting in the front. And they put me in the back of the truck, and I was standing on the truck, and watching all the Russian army all over the places. When we were outside the city, going towards Sighet, just a mile or so outside the city, one Russian soldier was very drunk, and he opened up a--fire on the truck, and on us. He almost killed the officer. He almost killed everybody in the truck. He just was very drunk. He didn't held good the machine gun. Otherwise we would have been all killed. The truck at that moment stopped right away, and two soldiers were in the back of the truck with me--they didn't watch me, they were just going, they were watching, they were doing their duty--and the officer in the front with a sergeant. So these soldiers jumped down with their machine guns, against that one soldier. When he saw them coming, he laid, he sat on his knees and he begged the officer shouldn't do nothing for him, he made a mistake. And the officer said to these guys, "Put him away." And one of these soldiers took his machine gun, and machine-gunned the guy on the side of the street right away and took away his gun and brought it back on the truck. And I thought to myself, *what the hell is going on? What kinda army, what kinda discipline, what kinda thing?* But on the other hand, I know that the soldier could have killed us all. So there was judgment right on the spot. And I was very frightened, and scared, and I didn't know where I'm going or what's gonna be. But, they didn't bother us. They took us back like thirty, forty miles. And then they took us, let us get off the truck

when we asked to get off. And we took the direction where we're supposed to go, towards home. And we did. And we came home, and we found about eight Jewish boys and about two, three girls who were hiding in the hills, who were guerillas. And they were looking for my brother, because he was in a different group.

SR: Right.

GD: And they could never find him.

SR: They never could, because he...

GD: So he was caught two weeks before, and he was executed. I don't know if he was executed, or he was taken to Auschwitz. Some people told me he was taken to Auschwitz, some people told me he was executed. But, he wasn't alive when I came back. And when I came back, I volunteered right away to the police, and I was working with the police from October, 1944 to, through the end of war.

SR: Mmm hmm.

GD: And, by the order of the Russians, we gathered all those people who were Nazis, who worked with the Nazis, from fourteen years to fifty-two years old, and we marched them towards Russia. And the Russians took them over, and they took them for work, for hard work, hard labor.

SR: Right.

GD: And after the war, I went back to my city where I used to live. In my town I couldn't live, because I couldn't take the pain...

SR: Sure.

GD: To see our houses without anybody. So I went back to the city where I learned the trade, and where I worked before. And I went back in, and I worked for a while with the Russian military secret police, with the, with the Russian *Kommandatura*. That means like, like over here, the military secret police. And I was trying to do a little bit work on the Nazis what they did to us, pay them back a little, and I did. I did it as a policeman, and I did after the war as working with the Russians together. And then finally...

SR: Did you help find Nazis?

GD: Oh yeah, we had, we found plenty of them. And we sent them back...

SR: What, did you...

GD: One of the Nazis' father, who was in my town a businessman, when I was in the policeman, police force, he was, I would say maybe the richest German in our town. My father was a very good friend of his, but in the last few weeks, when I came on vacation for a few days, from the camp where I was, where I was, and I saw what this man did, I was surprised. Because this man didn't have to do nothing against the Jews, because he was rich himself. He wasn't poor. I can understand if somebody is very poor and he goes for some, some things that the Jewish people had. But this man didn't need nothing. He only wanted to get rid of the Jews, so it showed that even those people that you thought they were nice, they were not so nice, those Germans. And he took over the biggest stores

that the Jewish people had, and he helped the police, which was a surprise to me, that he helped the Nazis to get rid of the Jews. And I saw that. When I came back, and I was, after the war, when I was liberated, the war was still on, in 1944. I was liberated in October, '44. And I was in November at home, at the police. One of his sons was in the army. I don't know if he lives or not. He was a teacher, and he was an officer in the German army. His son was only 14 years old, the youngest son. And his father came to me, and he trusted me, because he knew that I know that his fa-, my father and him were good friends. So he said to me, "Gabe, I want you to do me a favor. Please don't take away my youngest son. I have nobody else, just this one son. My other son is in the..." And I said, "Victor, why did you go after the Jewish people, in the last few weeks, when they took away every Jew from there? Why did you go to help the Nazis? Was that a nice thing from you? You didn't need it! Why did you go?" "Oh, I'm sorry. I made a big mistake!" And he says to me, "Gabe, I'll give you gold. I'll give you silver. I'll give you dollars. I'll give you anything you want. Just please don't take my son away." And I was so mad that he did, next morning we took away his son, and we sent him with the rest of the people.

SR: I understand.

GD: And, later on, I didn't live in that town no more, after the war was over, I went to my city, to Bratislava, and I lived there. So I really don't know what happened to his son. But I know what happened to a lot of these Nazis, who were very bad through the time of the war. And when I was in the police force, there was a few friends of mine, and all those boys who were hidden in the hills, they were all in the police force. And we did some work on some of those Nazis, that they were bad.

SR: Mmm hmm.

GD: We paid them back. Some of them were begging on their knees we shouldn't take them, they were sick, they couldn't walk, they couldn't do things. I didn't give a damn. Just the way they did with us, that's exactly that we did with them, except we didn't kill them. We just took them for work, that the Russians needed them to fix bridges, to fix highways, to fix things. And we gave them over to the Russian army. And that's what I did.

SR: Let me ask you this. If I can just back up a little bit. When your brothers and your sister went to Auschwitz, your mother went with them?

GD: Right.

SR: They all went together...

GD: They all went together.

SR: Except your brother who had hidden...

GD: Who was hidden in the hills.

SR: And then at the end of the war...

GD: Yes.

SR: When you were walking, when your officer was marching you, had he been told to put you into trains and send you, but he decided to walk you? I...

GD: He, not us. He had to go, too.

SR: He went too.

GD: No, no, the officer had to go with us to Germany.

SR: And he didn't want to go.

GD: He didn't want to go, and we didn't want to go.

SR: Right.

GD: So we slowed down on the road. We walked miles, slow, so the Russians could catch up with us.

SR: Right. He wasn't rushing you.

GD: We, we were, he didn't rush us. But we still made like 25, 30 miles every day. We couldn't stay in one place. Because there was like a, the Germans were running away from the front, and anybody who stood in their way, they would kill them.

SR: I see.

GD: They were afraid for the Russians. They were running like crazy.

SR: I'm sure.

GD: And, we were on their way. We were walking. So, if we would stay somewhere, if we did stay somewhere, we were hiding. We were...

SR: Right.

GD: We would go to a...

SR: [unclear].

GD: To a farm, where we would not be on the highway so they could see us or whatever. And we did that a lot. Every night we did that. We went like four o'clock we went to a farm place, and we slept in the places from the cows and everything. We didn't care, just to slow down.

SR: Sure.

GD: To catch up with the Russians, to wait till the Russians free us. And that's what happened.

SR: How about after? Where did you stay afterward? In the city there when you moved you stayed until you came to this country?

GD: After I was freed through the Russians, and I almost got killed from the Russians, I went back to my town where I was born.

SR: But you weren't happy there you said.

GD: I wasn't happy there, no. I wasn't happy there. I didn't even live in my house. I lived in one of my friends' house, close to the police station. And we were at the police, and we were even afraid that some, because we took away so many Christians, who were working with the Nazis, so we were not sure from, for ourselves. Some, somewhere somebody could kill us.

SR: Sure.

GD: So we were all going around with guns and all that, but we still were a little bit afraid. And there was, at night no civilians were allowed to walk. There was a curfew.

So no civilians after six thirty were allowed to walk. If we would catch somebody, we took them in right away to the police station and we beat him up and we put him in jail. No civilians were allowed to walk, except police or military, soldiers, officers.

SR: You weren't ma-, how old were you, when the war was over?

GD: 18.

SR: When the war was over you were?

GD: Let me see, I was born in '22.

SR: Oh, O.K.

GD: And the war was over in '45.

SR: Right.

GD: '22, '45. I was 21.

SR: You were 21.

GD: Yes.

SR: So you weren't married yet?

GD: No, no, no, no. I wasn't married.

SR: And ve-, there were very, very few Jews who came back to your hometown?

GD: Very few.

SR: So you eventually left there.

GD: What we did, when I was in the police force, I opened up my store what I had my store before.

SR: Oh.

GD: And I put in those tailors to work. And we kept all those people, we made a kitchen for all those people who came back from the camps, I paid from my money, and my friend who lives today in Los Angeles, we both worked, and we made sure that people who knew this business worked. And we had a lot of customers right away. Business was good, though we didn't take money from the work, or for our selling goods. We took food--cows, calves, chickens, bread, or flour, milk, butter, everything that we can accumulate. So all the people who came, started to come from concentration camps, who were liberated, they came to that part of the country, they were all greeted and given food for a few days--as long as they had to stay till they found themselves a spot where to work or whatever. Because the war was still on. The people didn't have where to go and what to eat. And we couldn't get in touch with anybody from Joint Distribution. We were too far away, and we didn't, we didn't need it. We did it ourselves--me and my best friend, who lives today in Los Angeles. We paid like for six, seven months, for all the food to give the people, whoever came back from a concentration camp, or a working camp. It didn't matter. So long as they were Jewish and they were from that surrounding towns.

SR: And you finally left there, though.

GD: Finally I left...

SR: Because you were so uncomfortable.

GD: After the war was, the war was over, I left right away, and I went to the city where I was living before the war--but not in the town where my mother lived, where my grandfather close there had his farms and everything, because I couldn't stay there.

SR: Right.

GD: Not because they didn't let me, then later on the Russians took over that part of Czechoslovakia. It's today...