

YEHUDA MANDEL [3-1-43]

Tape three, side one:

NL: This is tape three, side one, continuing our interview with Cantor Yehuda Mandel, March 17, 1982. Yes, so, even before the Nazi occupation there was mounting antisemitism.

YM: All the time.

NL: All the time.

YM: All the time. If you look back to 1920, you know what happened in Hungary.

NL: Yes.

YM: Hundreds of people were killed, and, and, eh, persecuted, then already, because they had that, they had that need to do something against the Jews. Why? The main reason in my opinion is, was, at that time, when everything was fine, was the Church.

NL: I see.

YM: The Church, the Catholic Church had an immense influence. The state religion was Catholic, and they had an immense influence on the people. And I don't have to tell you that the Church did not do too much good for the Jews at any time, and, ah...

NL: Was there also an economic factor, Jews were the prime elements in the middle class I believe, weren't they?

YM: Actually, yes.

NL: Yes.

YM: Yes, that's true. And jealousy.

NL: Jealousy.

YM: And, eh, was prevalent all the time, everywhere.

NL: Hmm.

YM: However, the time I'm talking about and which I experienced, it was already official. There were laws passed by the parliament against the Jews, what I have told you before.

NL: Yes.

YM: So, do you think I should go back, eh, go on?

NL: I think...

YM: On my own, or shall I, eh, shall I continue, or do you have any questions concerning...

NL: I was just going to ask one more question. Were you aware of any large numbers of Jews leaving Hungary at this time, or talking about leaving?

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YM: If there were people who were leaving, it was a very, very minute, little, eh...

NL: Group.

YM: ...group, or percentage of the Jewish people. Hungarian Jewry really could have saved itself, almost completely, if they would have been aware of what they are facing.

NL: Where could they have gone, Mr. Mandel?

YM: They could have gone to countries like Canada. They could have gone to countries like, in a, in a limited way, even to Palestine of that time, and many, many other places. But, everyone else, I think, or most of the people, including myself, we never realized. Finally, we had, we had it on the wall as they say. It was just to be seen. The picture was there. Hundreds of, hundreds of people were leaving Germany, going through Hungary, going through Yugoslavia...

NL: You heard stories about the persecution.

YM: From all facets of life, and we could have seen. But most probably, and this is my own feeling, we didn't want to see it. We had it too good.

NL: Yes.

YM: Finally I, as a person 32 years old, come to Budapest, and when my salary had to be established, so the Secretary General tells me, "We'll put you in this-and-this class, classification of salary scale," he says, "you know, this is the salary the Minister for Interior, for the Interior is getting, so you should be satisfied." So we, we couldn't spend it, and we couldn't, as beautiful as we wanted to live, we just, we just had more than we could observe, or could use. And this probably was one factor. Finally, Austria was occupied, we saw it, we felt it, we, we saw it, we knew what happened in '39, we knew what happened in '38, we knew what happened in *Oberoestreich* [or *Oberösterreich*] in '37, '38, '39, and we still stayed there.

NL: You felt immune.

YM: Ya. It can be, can be anywhere and everywhere but here. And this is the *klala*, the curse, of Jews. I, as I read on now and read all through the generations, we didn't understand. Other people say we are smart. I think we aren't so smart for ourselves anyway.

NL: When it comes to survival.

YM: Right. Any more questions?

NL: Not, not at the moment. And so you decided to go to London, then, or did you...

YM: I applied, and I got an answer very quickly, "Yes, we, we are happy to have you for this and this Shabbat," and I should come.

NL: So this was '37.

YM: End of '37, yes. Or the beginning of '38, '37-'38. I think it was February of '38 if

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I am not wrong. I went to London. I was introduced to the Chief Rabbi and the *Bet Din* [Rabbinical Court] was sitting with me for all morning, and I went through the, the eh, tests which they give there, because there, they, if you are engaged by the United Synagogue, it's for a lifetime. So they are very careful with their engagements, and who they engage, and how, and so on.

NL: May I ask what language you spoke?

YM: Yiddish.

NL: Yiddish.

YM: Or, with the *Bet Din* I spoke Hebrew.

NL: Hebrew.

YM: Ya. Eh, and, I couldn't, I didn't speak a word of English, so how could I speak any other language but Yiddish?

NL: Well, I, I wondered.

YM: Yiddish with the people in general. For instance, I stayed in a hotel, so the owner of the hotel was very honored that the Duke's Place Synagogue sends to him the *hazan* and so forth, he himself served everything I needed, but he spoke in perfect Yiddish, so no problem.

NL: Yes.

YM: With eh, Rabbi, eh...

NL: Hertz.

YM: Hertz. I don't know if you know it, that he was born and in childhood lived in Hungary.

NL: No, I didn't.

YM: Ya. And he remembered a few Hungarian words.

NL: [chuckles]

YM: So that was our little joke.

NL: Yes.

YM: So, eh, I went through the whole thing, the United Synagogue sent me for medical exams and all that, and finally, after I performed services and after they felt I may be a candidate, and this again bears out what I said before, we just didn't realize what we are faced with. There were two meetings of the very selected board of the United Synagogue. Sir Waley Cohen was the president, and some other people, four or five that I remember, one Dr. Rosen, who was the vice president of Duke's Place Temple, he was with me because he spoke Yiddish and in a hurry, if I had to say something, he was the man who translated my Yiddish into

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English. But anyway, what I want to say is, I performed services *Shabbes*. Monday, Tuesday, were taken up with seeing the doctors, getting through the health examinations, and all that, in the afternoon have meetings with the board of the United Synagogue, and Wednesday, and they prepared the agreement, and we are supposed to sign it on Wednesday evening. Fine. Wednesday morning I receive a telegram from Eppler Shambur [phonetic], he was the executive vice president of the main organiz-, main community in Budapest, "Your papers are in order again for another four years. We expect you home. With love."

NL: Oh my.

YM: My family is in Budapest. We are beautifully, eh...

NL: Situated.

YM: ...situated, and I go to the United Synagogue main office, and tell the secretary to call Sir Waley Cohen for me. I couldn't talk to him, so I asked him, he spoke Yiddish, too, to translate and tell the, eh, president, Sir Waley Cohen, that I am again well-situated in Hungary and I am leaving, I don't want them to bear any expenses, I will go back home. And I went back in 1938 to Hungary. So did we see? We were just blind. We didn't realize what's going on.

NL: But you may have thought there was a change in the atmosphere inasmuch...

YM: I, yes.

NL: Yes.

YM: I surely did.

NL: Yes.

YM: But it wasn't so. And I was--I didn't see clearly.

NL: Well...

YM: Our eyes were completely--in Yiddish they say, *Oz Got vil einem schtroffen, nemt em zu dem ruyabid*. [If God wants to punish someone, then his capacity of seeing is taken away.] The capacity of seeing.

NL: Of seeing.

YM: And this is exactly what happened to Hungarians.

NL: But what did happen that seemed to indicate a change in the atmosphere? Was it a freak or a fluke?

YM: When I came back, the parliament was discussing the second law against the Jews. That's the way it was. In 1939, I stayed there with all kinds of trouble, here and there, again some, eh...

NL: Restrictions.

YM: ...some restrictions, and here I won't be able maybe you know to perform

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services again, and this news came, and went, and came, and went, but you have to understand that the community as such had an immense power, an immense power. In spite of everything.

NL: Political?

YM: Political and locally. Even with this antisemite who was the head of the Alien Department, even through somebody else they had influence on him.

NL: I see.

YM: And I stayed on. The first, the first, eh...

NL: Excuse me, but was your son feeling some discrimination in school?

YM: No, because he was all, among all Jewish children.

NL: He was in a Jewish school.

YM: In a Jewish school.

NL: I see. And your wife, was she teaching?

YM: She was not teaching, and she didn't feel it.

NL: She didn't feel it.

YM: Here and there you heard the [unclear].

NL: But it was tolerable.

YM: Or outside, I don't know, you saw something of this, but it wasn't an organized way of hurting Jews. However, it seems, through the Alien Department of the Ministry of the Interior, I was drafted into the, eh, into the labor camp in 1939 already.

NL: Mmm.

YM: During the summer we were in a place for the summer.

NL: Resort.

YM: Resort. I received a, I received from the Ministry of Interior to report so and so here and here at this and this time. I knew it is no good, because this is the way they gathered the people who were later on, trans-,

NL: Transported.

YM: Transported to, deported to Kamenets-Pudolsk. I went home, and spoke to the organization, mainly to this executive vice president, who spoke to the chief rabbinate of Hungary. We had a wonderful person. His name was Dr. Havashi, Shimon-Simon Havashi. And he said the following, "Look, you had difficulty already because you are a Czechoslovakian citizen. How about if we do this? I will call the organization of chaplaincy." The Jews had chaplains just as the Catholics had chaplains. "You are qualified. You are *musmach* of *yeshivah* [master, authority]. President. We will write up your whole history. I myself will contact the minister for military..." For, eh, I don't know what it was, [mumbles].

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-1-48]

NL: Military affairs.

YM: Military affairs. "And try to make a deal to them. You will serve as a chaplain in the Hungarian army." Wonderful. Very good. So this happened. I was accepted. I went into the army, instead of being herded up and, I don't know, wherever they wanted to take me.

NL: To the Russian front.

YM: Ya. And I worked there as a chaplain. I stayed in my position, but whenever there was any question of, of Jew-, I mean, anything to do with Jewish chaplaincy, I was there in the hospitals, in the barracks, military barracks. If there was any other question...

NL: If someone died.

YM: If someone died, or funeral, or even weddings and so on, I, I was the one.

NL: You moved around.

YM: Moved, moved around. But I kept my position and stayed in Budapest.

NL: Ohhhhh...

YM: In and around Budapest. I did not go away. I did not have to leave my position.

NL: I see.

YM: 'Cause that was one condition of, eh...

NL: Your appointment.

YM: Of my appointment, that the chief rabbi said, "He has a high position here and is needed here. However, he will serve wherever you need him, whenever you need him. He is at your disposal. We have in the whole country two or three chaplains, and we can't get you more. We don't have the people, but here is your chance." So, they agreed. So, here it went on...

NL: Excuse me, did you have contact with other Jews in the labor force, and could you see what was happening?

YM: This was not the labor force yet. At the time when I went...

NL: Oh.

YM: ...in '39, Jews were still in the military.

NL: This was the army.

YM: The army.

NL: And you had a Hungarian army uniform.

YM: Ya.

NL: I see. I see.

YM: Later on, this went on 1939, '40, I think even '41, then came a decree, a military decree, "Jews cannot wear Hungarian uniforms anymore, and have to be demoted." If they were officers, they were demoted to privates, put into the, into different companies, labor

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companies.

NL: Labor companies.

YM: Labor companies. And, there were people for instance who were high, highly, eh...

NL: In high ranks.

YM: In high ranks. They couldn't keep their distinction in any way, and had to be demoted as laborers. Even this didn't open our eyes. I think very few people escaped after this. I could have, for instance, and I'm not going far away, I'm just talking about myself, because the others were better and well-versed than I was. I was at the time a Czechoslovakian citizen, a Czechoslovakian citizen. As a Czechoslo-, the Czechoslovakian, the Hungarian quota, the Rumanian quota was filled with a waiting list for the United States to, to get in for years and years. But the Czechoslovakian quota, for reasons of course, because very few immigrants...

NL: Left.

YM: Very few left Czechoslovakia. It was a beautiful, wonderful little country.

NL: Few applied.

YM: Few applied. And I could have come here in 1938 or '39 without waiting a day, just leave my things there and get out. But I didn't do it. We just didn't believe it.

NL: But you see, you had three or four years of relatively calm life.

YM: Ya. This is what kept me there, and kept everyone there. They told the joke that, I don't know, an aunt or mother or grandmother is the--sacrificed herself for a piece of furniture, because she couldn't leave that. Or the dining room, or the this. And this was all true. And I, I'm taking the examples of...

NL: This is, I'm afraid, human nature, not just Jewish.

YM: Of myself. Ya. So, I stayed and in 1939, from 1939 until about '41, the end of '41, something like that, I served as a chaplain of the Hungarian army, as a Jew, Jewish chaplain. After this, when everyone else was demoted, I was demoted myself. The only distinction we had was this cap that you see on that picture.

NL: Picture.

YM: Ya, picture. And we worked as laborers. For the first, '42, '43, and even part of '44, I was never over the border, let's say, not in Poland, not in...

NL: Russia.

YM: ...Galicia, not in Russia. In 1944, March the 19th, the Germans occupied Hungary. And then, of course, the screws were tightened and tightened. The Jewish Committee was established, and this and that, and later on, as you, as you have seen probably

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from the Joel Brand¹⁰ book and so on, the details I won't go in, because this is public knowledge. In June, a group finally--the way it went and how, is very well described, I think in Joel's book. A group of about 1700 Jews, the outstanding, leading Jews of Hungary, were gathered together, and with German permission, left Hungary to go to Palestine, to Israel. The motivation were the trucks, of course, which he expected to get, and all that, but this is history, so I won't go into that.

NL: Could we go back a little,

YM: Sure.

NL: I think it would be very important for us to hear about your experiences in the labor battalions between '42 and '44, if you would tell us where you were.

YM: In the labor battalions I was, I remember the first one, I was in--let me write this down for you...

NL: Yes.

YM: ...because it's Hungarian. This was the first camp. Let me write it here. Eh, probably 1940. 1940, it was Laplo Danya [phonetic].

NL: Not far from Budapest.

YM: Eh, no, about, let's say, about 100km, something like that. The same year, yes, I have to say it, while I was even in labor camp I was always taken out or...

NL: Repatriated?

YM: ...forced out by the community of Budapest, that I got a permit for this Shabbat and that Shabbat.

NL: I see.

YM: And *Rosh Hodesh* and High Holy days, of course, and wherever I was, I could always come home and perform those services.

NL: I see. The authorities, respected that?

YM: The authorities respected it because the command came from higher up place given to this lower command, and I went up. Eh, in the labor camp itself, I had many, many people who knew me from home, but I tried, and I did, not take anything to be different for me than for anybody else. If the wheel barrow had to be carried, I carried it like everybody else. I was strong. There was nothing wrong with me. I was a healthy, strong, comparatively young person, so I worked on with everybody else.

NL: What kinds of work did the battalions do?

YM: We built so-called, eh, *Flugplatz*.

10 Brand, J., and A. Weissberg, *Desperate Mission: Joel Brand's Story*. New York, 1958.
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NL: Fortifications?

YM: No, no, eh, airports.

NL: Airports. *Flugplatz*.

YM: Which were never used, and they knew it would never be used. But in order to keep us occupied, and to take the last drop of strength out of us, of course, this was done. We worked in another place, Bilka [phonetic], 1943, probably, Bilka. 1943 is, eh, that was a stone...

NL: Quarry.

YM: Quarry, ya.

NL: Yes.

YM: Eh, I don't remember now the name.

NL: It will come.

YM: Ya.

NL: It will come.

YM: So...

NL: And, the Hungarians themselves were in charge, or were there some German overseers?

YM: [unclear] the, up to 1944, there were no Germans. Eh, the Hungarian military was in charge. In each company there were two-hundred-and either sixteen or twenty-six Jews who had no worth [?] or "work"?) whatsoever.

NL: No-

YM: No worth of command or anything. Eh, to each of these companies, nine hundred, two-hundred-and-sixteen or -twenty people, there were twenty-four milit-, eh, milit-, I mean soldiers, Hungarian soldiers, non-Jews, who had ammunition and had, and they were our guards. They guarded us. There was a commander for each...

NL: Unit.

YM: Unit. And a sub-commander for each unit. If we were lucky enough to have a person with whom we could talk, especially if it was a person, like I had one, for instance, who was an official in a bank. So I used to deal with that bank and I knew him from before. So I had some influence on him. However, if there was one like we had in this place, Bilka, who wanted us to run eh, for six, eight miles, and people were just fainting, he could do that. He was sitting in his little car and chasing us. Which car was behind us...

NL: Just maliciously.

YM: Just maliciously, for no good reason.

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NL: No good reason.

YM: No. Now, I myself was in many cases, because of my position probably in the community, employed as or rather assigned to be--because I had this training, I think I mentioned to you, from the Czechoslovakian army yet, that I took the courses for male nursing, I was assigned to be the nurse. This gave me a very good opportunity. In Hungary it was no problem, but then we worked, for instance, in Bilka, which was already a Ruthenian, eh, district, so I could talk to the people who lived there, and here and there I heard the radio and brought back to my, to the other Jewish people some news.

NL: Some news.

YM: Some news from Bilka. The whole process of the labor camp was unhuman. And I remember particularly one case when we went the first time, we went over the border of Hungary, a sergeant major told us, "Don't think that we are taking you from here to bring you back. You Jews should know what you are--what you are faced with." That was in '44. Of course, we knew already anyway what we are faced with. The Hungarian population, with the exception of a very few, was antisemitic. They didn't have to be coaxed into hating the Jew. They were brought up on that. The young boy who grew up with the church where he went every Sunday and he heard from the priest, "Now we will celebrate the holiday which will bring back the birth of our Christ, who was killed by..." and that went on and on and on, and all kinds of other things.

NL: What other work did the Jews do in the labor battalions besides help to build aircraft, or airfields.

YM: Airfields. They were in stone...

NL: Quarries.

YM: ...quarries. They were in coal mines. They were in--no field work, because a Jew, a Jew later on, '40, '41, '42, after the Jewish laws were passed, couldn't even talk to a non-Jew in a community if there was, let's say a kindhearted old lady who wanted to give these Jewish workers, laborers, some bread or some milk, to sell them, for good money. She couldn't do it. If you were caught, you were extremely punished.

NL: Punished.

YM: Yes.

NL: Severely.

YM: Severely.

NL: Digging ditches, I suppose.

YM: Digging ditches, later on. That was already 1944, when the Germans thought

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that they would save themselves by, eh, by having those ditches and...

NL: Tanks.

YM: ...tanks won't come through.

NL: Anti-tank ditches.

YM: Crazy things. And, eh...

NL: So many Jews perished...

YM: Many, many.

NL: ...in this, in these, years.

YM: And many Jews were killed.

NL: And many were killed.

YM: Sure, in the labor camps. If you couldn't work any longer.

NL: You were killed.

YM: Done away with. That's it.

NL: Were you given enough...

YM: Food.

NL: ...food to sustain? No.

YM: We were given food. To some people, they could survive on it. Some people just faded away on it, because it was no food of any value, of any...

NL: Did you live in barracks, [unclear].

YM: We lived, as a rule, not in barracks, but in, in places where animals were placed for, what would that be,

NL: Preserves?

YM: Stables. No.

NL: Oh, stables.

YM: Stables, ya. Now we are at 1944.

NL: One more question...

YM: Ya.

NL: ...please, eh, Cantor. Did you have any contact with your family during '43 and '44?

YM: Yes. I did, and not only that, but because of the strength of the community and the heavy influence they had on certain poli-

NL: Certain politicians.

YM: Eh, I was always home, let's say for *Pesach*, for *Rosh Hashanah*, for *Yom Kippur*, for *Shavuot*, for, and many, in many years, many of these years, and we are talking now

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from '39 through '44, it's five years almost, there were times when we were discharged. The whole company was discharged because it was snow and ice and so on, and it wasn't even, not even an excuse could be found why they are keeping us there.

NL: Mmm.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-55]

Tape three, side two:

NL: This is a continuation of the deferred interview with Cantor Yehuda Mandel. This is June 4, 1982, and we'll now continue from the other portion of the tape. Yes, Cantor Mandel, would you like to add to the material you've already told us about in connection with this last experience?

YM: In great strokes, I would like to say the following. 1944, October the 15th, as you probably remember, Horthy, the Hungarian, eh...

NL: Regent.

YM: Regent, somehow or other got together with the Allied Forces and made a declaration, and through his Ministry of the, of the, Exterior, as they called it there, he made a decision to which it seems the government, the ministers, at the time, agreed, or didn't agree, but it seems it was without the knowledge of the Germans...

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: ...who were at the time already, of course, in Hungary...

NL: Yes.

YM: ...because they came in the 18th of March, or 19th of March, 1944. He made up his mind that he will declare Hungary joining the Allied Forces, and he did that...

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: ...on the 15th of, eh...

NL: October.

YM: ...October.

NL: Now, excuse me, may we just step back, because there's a very important segment, and I wondered if you, in the places where you were, were aware of the change. I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing the name of the head of the Arrow Cross, but in the fall, late August or early September of '44, the Arrow Cross movement came into control under Szálasi.

YM: Szálasi.

NL: Szálasi.

YM: Szálasi is the proper pronunciation.

NL: Yes. Now were you aware of that, Cantor?

YM: Eh, no.

NL: No.

YM: Not at all. We knew--we weren't aware of Auschwitz, we weren't because we were kept away from everything. And even if we stole somewhere a little news, it was just that

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controlled news which the Hungarian or, eh...

NL: The Germans.

YM: ...or German stations disseminated.

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: ...to us. So we weren't aware of anything.

NL: Mmm.

YM: We were terribly scared, and lived under that constant fear of being killed, because we were told time and again by the Hungarian guards who were with us that we weren't brought here to be taken back eventually home, or to, or to get through...

NL: Survive.

YM: ...this period, or to survive. We were brought here to eradicate us, to *erase* us, they used the expression.

NL: *They* told you that.

YM: Yes.

NL: So...

YM: Yes.

NL: So this was the Hungarians, not the Germans.

YM: The Hungarians.

NL: Not the Germans.

YM: I have to say one more thing about the German and Hungarian guards. That the hatred, or rather the, the, ed-, education these poor peasants were given, and the antisemitism which was pushed into many of them by force, that they were just filled with hatred, and they killed, so to say, like it would be a *mitzvah* [good deed] to be performed. The German killed when he had an order to kill. The Hungarian peasant boy who came in, and we had, in a company there were about 224 people, there were, there was a guard to every four men.

NL: Oh my.

YM: Can you imagine what that is?

NL: Oh my.

YM: We couldn't move, we couldn't go, we couldn't look, unless we had a guard along with us.

NL: And about how many Jews were there in the whole, eh, assemblage?

YM: Each, oh, there were, at times there were presumably more than 125,000 in, called in for work, for...

NL: In the labor force.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-57]

- YM: ...in the labor force. And, and, and, eh, to be detained in detention for...
- NL: So the attrition rate must have been very heavy.
- YM: Immense. Immense.
- NL: Beatings and outright shootings.
- YM: For instance, four brother-in-laws, my first wife's two brothers and two brother-in-laws, were--died at the *Duna*¹¹ [phonetic], on *Flecktyphus* [typhus], on starvation, on, eh, I don't know...
- NL: Beatings.
- YM: Beatings, and so on. So this was the, this was the trend.
- NL: Great mortality.
- YM: This was the trend. So, it is very hard to say, if we were informed or not. If we are talking about the normal, human approach to information, we never had it. We never, we heard something, we came to a spot where, where there were in the Carpathian Mountains, people who escaped to the, Czechoslova-, to the Slovakian freedom fighters, so we heard something that, for instance, Máramarossziget, which was a heavily Jewish, populated Jewish town, there are no more Jews. We couldn't understand, what is he talking about? How can this be? So, eh, but to come back to what I can say as a fact, when we heard, the Horthy declaration, we did hear, and we were at the time in Poland, yet, somewhere in Galicia, I don't remember exactly where.
- NL: Part of your labor, work?
- YM: Part of the labor force, part of the company, let's say where we were, where I was, there we heard, somehow, either I or somebody else brought the news that Horthy made this and this declaration.
- NL: Now, one more interruption, please.
- YM: Yes.
- NL: What were you doing, what was Hungary doing in Poland? Was this on German orders?
- YM: Of course. Hungarian Jews were organized into labor battalions and taken first, as I have mentioned previously, to work in Hungary, no sense at all, to build, I don't know, eh, places for...
- NL: Ditches.
- YM: Ditches. For, na-, air, airf-, air, eh...
- NL: Fields.

11 Hungarian name for Danube River.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-58]

YM: ...fields. We knew in advance, and everybody knew that there will never be an airfield there, because it just didn't make sense. But just...

NL: Made work.

YM: ...to make us work.

NL: And then Poland?

YM: No, then we were pushed and pushed and pushed, at German orders, of course, further out, so we got to Galicia, we got to Pol-, we got to Poland, we got to the Russian part, Russian Poland, and so on. And my whole family, members of my family died there, no one came back.

NL: Mmm.

YM: From there. These were the young people of the family. The others went to Auschwitz, of course. Now, when we heard, and maybe I skipped a little bit because it could just be repetition over and over again.

NL: It's all right. It's all very important.

YM: So, the way we lived was just exactly what I told you. That the Hungarian soldiers were constantly around us, pushing us, beating us, killing us, all kinds of things, and they told us that that's what we are there for. When the Horthy declaration, October the 15th, finally came out, we were all elated.

NL: Of course.

YM: And we tried very hard to get together, to organize ourselves, to be able to go back to home, so to say. We didn't know what happened in Budapest, we didn't know that almost none of our, eh, of our family members are in Budapest anymore. My own family was already long ago in Bergen-Belsen, and others were in the same place or in Auschwitz, or were destroyed already, or--the good thing was if they got into the ghetto, which was already organized in, eh, much earlier, in 1944. So...

NL: Excuse me, but if they had gone into the ghetto, you say, they stood a better chance of surviving?

YM: In most cases, yes. At least at the beginning. Of course, you have to understand that in the ghetto, ya, I have to, I have to reflect to what you have said before, and maybe it will be a little mixed up.

NL: That's all right.

YM: But don't mind me.

NL: We'll come, eh...

YM: It's too excit-, too much excitement for me to talk about it, but I am happy to put

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it down, and...

NL: I'm sorry, if it's distressing.

YM: No, that's perfectly all right.

NL: Yes.

YM: When we heard the Horthy declaration, I'm coming back to this the third time.

NL: I'm not letting you finish [chuckles].

YM: We, we, no, we thought we will, we will go home. We didn't know about what happened, about ghetto, about this, that, nothing. So, it was good. That was the 15th. I think, just a few hours later, we heard that Szálasi took over, the Germans clamped down on the Hungarians, the Hungarian government...

NL: I see.

YM: ...helped Szálasi. Szálasi became, eh, the, eh...

NL: The head of government?

YM: Prime minister, the head of the government, so to say.

NL: Yes.

YM: And he was the antisemite...

NL: Par excellence.

YM: Arch antisemite. And there, he organized, because military forces he didn't have any more, so he organized the youngsters, the 15, 16, 17-year-old boys, everyone had a, a gun, and sent them into the ghetto houses. You remember that, eh, through him...

NL: Wallenberg.

YM: Through Wallenberg, these so-called *geschützte Häuser* [protected houses] were organized. They went in there, took out the people, they took them in the morning, they never came back, as they had promised in the evening. They lined them up in the, in the courtyards, whoever they wanted they took, they took them on the street, they took them to the Danube. Hundreds of people were murdered by being shot into the Danube. Just shot at the, at the, eh, at the, eh, close to the...

NL: Shore.

YM: ...shore, and thrown into the water. And that was life in Budapest. At the time I was still--ya, I came back, now this happened probably October the 16th, 17th, something like that. But, this organization took place in the labor battalion, or rather, the Germans gave an order as the Russians pushed back in the direction to, towards Hungary, that all the labor forces must be marched in the direction of, eh, Austria, or rather, Germany, and well, if you couldn't march, you just, eh...

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-60]

NL: Died.

YM: ...died, or was killed. So, we, about 20 or 22 of us, got together, and we got as far from Budapest, a place called, eh, Sátoraljaújhely.

NL: Would you spell that?

YM: S-A-T-

NL: T?

YM: T, like Thomas, O-R-, eh, let me write it down, it's easier I think than to spell it, [mumbles, spelling it], Sator-alja-ujhely—that place I will--ujhely.

NL: You escaped from your guards, then, Cantor?

YM: Yes, yes. We escaped and walked nights, because daytime was dangerous.

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: We, if we could, somehow, we got a little lift by a peasant who drove in some direction, a car, or something, and so we got, as I say, it took us, the 17th, I remember, I arrived in Budapest the 7th of November, 1944. So it took us close to three weeks to make 210 or 250km. Finally...

NL: Excuse me, did you have any Jewish insignia on that would have identified you?

YM: No, we tore it all off.

NL: You tore it off.

YM: And walked without it, and slept in the fields. And I will never forget it, when I came to a town which is just on the outskirts of Budapest, I saw in the Hungar-, on the Hungarian paper, on the top of the paper, that the fall of Budapest is expected within the shortest while. So we pushed on, and got into Budapest, and I got in, I didn't think what I'm doing at the time, probably, I wasn't just careful enough, but I went back to our apartment, which was on Vesherlaynu [phonetic], 13. It was about two-and-a-half blocks, three blocks, away from my temple, and, um, I went up, that was the 7th of November, terrible snow, we had a magnificent apartment, corner, it was a corner apartment looking out to two streets of Vesherlaynu, and eh, Kazinsi [phonetic] Street. In the apartment, there were, presumably, because I have never seen them there, they were all over the place when I came down, and scattered all over, presumably 105 people were pushed into our apartment, which was a huge apartment, but still.

NL: Mmm.

YM: They were laying like sardines. I had a magnificent private library, among other things. My son just told me this week, he was here to visit us with his family, so he told me that for his last birthday, which is the 8th of May, he got from his wife and children the

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-61]

Encyclopaedia Judaica, and I started to cry. Why? Because in the '20's, or was it the beginning of the '30's, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* appeared first in Germany,

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: And I was one of the first subscribers, and I had, I don't remember now, was it, eight or nine volumes at the time already in my library, *Herrenzimmer* as we called it there, office. And, eh...

NL: What had happened to the library?

YM: Not, not, not to talk about Shass and Poskim [phonetic] and so on, what I accumulated. What happened? Most probably it was used for wood.

NL: Fuel.

YM: To keep themselves alive.

NL: Oh my. Oh my. Oh my.

YM: Alive. And these books were all used up. I came in...

NL: Mmm.

YM: We were on the top floor. There was no roof. Snow was falling on the Persian rugs...

NL: Oh my.

YM: I saw the dining room, the magnificent *deutsche Tischlermeister* [German master carpenter] dining room, knocked to pieces, the Rosenthal...

NL: China.

YM: China, knocked to pieces, two or three pieces remained...

NL: Oh my, oh my.

YM: And, I thought I will get a heart attack.

NL: Oh my.

YM: I didn't know what happened to my family, even then! So...

NL: Did you know any of the people in the room?

YM: No.

NL: No one.

YM: No. I could not get to anyone.

NL: Just shoved in the room.

YM: Ya. Our, ya. Our superintendent in the house was a non-Jew, and mainly the woman, his wife, was a terrible antisemite, who, a child of my brother was brought to us, thinking, from Yugoslavia, thinking maybe Budapest, you know, with my influence, and this and this, maybe he will be able to save because father and mother wasn't there anymore, so the

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-62]

grandparents sent the child to Budapest to us, and this antisemitic woman reported this chi-...

NL: Child.

YM: Child, who was then maybe six years old.

NL: Oh my.

YM: That he's here, and he doesn't even talk Hungarian, and he came without permission, and to be taken away. So, before anything happens, my wife, may she rest in peace, she sent him back to Yugoslavia, and he went, of course, to Auschwitz with the grandparents.

NL: Oh my.

YM: So, this kind of thing. But I didn't know about all this. So the only, so, I was away about half a block from my...

NL: Temple.

YM: Temple, no, from the administrative building of our congregation. I went out there. There were some people who I knew very well, and they told me in short what has happened. They, that, eh, select group of close to 2,000 people went with Dr., what's his name?

NL: Kasztner.

YM: Kas, Kasztner. And, they, they don't know exactly where they are, but Kasztner has an office, he's here and here and here. I couldn't go there either, because it was dangerous to even to breathe on the outside. So I went to another place. Finally I found some friends who told me what has happened, and that my family is together with those people who were taken, presumably, to Palestine.

NL: That was the story.

YM: That was the story.

NL: Mmm hmm. But actually to Bergen-Belsen.

YM: Actually they were, there were all kinds, I read, I just read, what's his name?

NL: Brand.

YM: Brand's book, and there, from that I see that no one knew exactly what will happen. There were moments, my wife told me later on when we met after the war in Israel, that there were hours, days, when they thought they are being sent to Auschwitz, just like everybody, like the others.

NL: That special Kasztner...

YM: That special Kasztner group.

NL: For which they had to pay a lot of money. Yes.

YM: Hundreds—millions.

NL: Yes.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-63]

- YM: So, jewelry, or whatever anyone had, had to give.
- NL: Yes. So, people were not sure what was going to happen to them, even on that transfer.
- YM: No, absolutely not. Absolutely not.
- NL: It's a very important fact to note.
- YM: Yes, eh, no, never were they sure what's coming next. But how did I find out finally what's with my family? I went into one of these houses, which presumably were...
- NL: Protected.
- YM: Pro-, protected. And a very dear friend of mine, may he rest in peace, Dr. Hershkovich, who was a rabbi in Budapest, told me, "Look, I can't tell you a thing, because what I know, I tell you. But I think you must make it your business to get together, as hard as it is, we will dress you up as a Hungarian peasant, and we'll give you this and that," eh, I had a big mustache, "and, you go on the street and we will give you papers," of course, false papers, "where we will say you are a, a, you are, eh, coming from the front, and you are injured, and this and that, and you are on furlough." So, finally the third or fourth day I think, the third day after I arrived in Budapest, I got to the office of Dr. eh...
- NL: Kasztner.
- YM: Kasztner. I don't blame him now, looking back in that he was extremely careful. His secretary didn't want to receive me, I told her who I am, who I was, rather, and I'm interested to know one thing, to hear one thing from him, can he tell me where my family is at this time? With my family was, besides our own son, the son, my brother's, eh, my bro-, my brother's brother-in-law's child, who came up because his mother was caught on the street and, she was in Auschwitz, taken to Auschwitz immediately, so this poor child knew that when there was anything, they went up to Ellami, near to Aunt Ella, so this child wandered up to our apartment, and so when it was decided that my family will be taken, my wife said, "This child must be taken too. I can't leave him here." So she took him along. So I wanted to know what happened. I didn't even know that this child is with her, but I was interested in my wife, my son, my brother.
- NL: Yes.
- YM: And, eh, I went up, after a lot of difficulties...
- NL: He didn't want to see you?
- YM: He didn't want to see me. I had to go the next day, again.
- NL: You had to go back again?
- YM: Back again, endangering my life. Finally, when I came...

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-64]

NL: Excuse me, but why didn't he want to see you?

YM: Most probably, most probably the way I look back now, he did not want from anyone to give the information to anyone so that it shouldn't be publicized that someone spoke to him and given the exact information, because everyone else will be around with the same question. So, somehow I could, I can see it in that view, in, in, eh...

NL: Retrospect.

YM: Ya, now. But it was a terrible thing at the time.

NL: He had a secretary.

YM: He had a secretary, and she said, "No, you can't see him." She told me all kinds of things, that there are German soldiers in here, officers, and he's discussing something, he's in conference, what. Anyway,

NL: But he was being protected, obviously.

YM: He was being protected. The next day, or whenever I got back, maybe it was the same day because I almost, you can't imagine...

NL: Oh.

YM: ...what kind of des-

NL: Desperation.

YM: ...desperation I was in. I went back, and the secretary started the same story again. I pushed her aside and I told her, "Look, I am coming from where, from where life doesn't have too much of a value anyhow. I have nothing and no one here. My family is gone and I know they are under the guidance of this--presumably--organization." And pushed her aside, opened the door to Kasztner's office, and went in. And he started giving me the story again. This may be interesting...

NL: Yes, extremely.

YM: ...you know, that he can't tell me because part of them went already, and part. "But you know who went," I said, "tell me, are they still in Bergen-Belsen? Are they off, are they away, where are they?" So, he says, eh, he says. So I told him, "Look, here is this desk. I will break it to pieces and I will kill you here if you don't give me an answer. Because my life isn't worth anything anyhow." So, he got very, he got very, eh...

NL: Disturbed.

YM: ...disturbed by that, and told the girl to bring in the list.

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: And told me that, no, my family is still in Bergen-Belsen, but they will be transferred, I don't know, to...

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-65]

- NL: Switzerland.
- YM: ...Switzerland, with the second or third transport, whatever it was.
- NL: But they were out of Hungary.
- YM: They were out of Hungary; they were in Germany. With this *Sondergruppe* [special group], as they called it at the time.
- NL: Yes. Yes.
- YM: So, this kind of thing, you know, you can't talk even, even forty years later without eh, being very much...
- NL: Agitated.
- YM: Distur-, agi-, by it. So, this is the information, and now, what happened after that.
- NL: Excuse me, could you just tell me a little more about Kasztner, because there is such a controversy...
- YM: Right.
- NL: ...over his role. How did you know that he was in charge of this special transport?
- YM: This Dr. Hershkowich, Boblyn Hershkowich [phonetic]...
- NL: Oh, he told you.
- YM: ...told me, "This man is in charge."
- NL: Mmm hmm.
- YM: I know nothing about hi-, about it.
- NL: You didn't know his name before, earlier?
- YM: No, I'd never heard of him.
- NL: You'd never heard of him.
- YM: And I know very little, I knew Joel Brand very well, he was, he lived in Budapest, but he, Kasztner was really a newspaper man who lived somewhere in Rumania.
- NL: Cluj?
- YM: Cluj, ya, in the former Hungary, formerly Hungary.
- NL: Mmm hmm, yes.
- YM: So, eh, I really didn't know about him, and I, and I never saw, never heard of him.
- NL: What sort of impression did he make? Of course...
- YM: It is...
- NL: ...he was your enemy [chuckles].

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-66]

- YM: It is very hard to be, to be just.
- NL: Yeah.
- YM: And to give any, any description even about the man from whom you want to know...
- NL: Life and death.
- YM: Life and death, so to say.
- NL: Yes.
- YM: So, but this was a terrible, this was one, one of the most destructive day, impressions, or, or occurrences in my life. Why? Because I saw up there, my piano was broken to pieces, that was, one leg of the piano was laying in one end of the music room, the so-called mus-, eh, I had a special music room, you know...
- NL: Uh huh.
- YM: ...where I had the musical library. And so on. And, and, and here I see my *family*, my, my *child*, my *wife*, my, eh...
- NL: Everything.
- YM: ...aren't here anymore. So everything is gone. And later on, eh, I didn't have a chance to speak to Dr. Kasztner later on, when I was, for instance, in Israel already and he was there too. I always thought of it to go back, talk to the man, and see, *Ma tuvuv shel hibor zu?* What kind of a person, I never got to it. Maybe in the back of my mind I didn't want to really, to go.
- NL: Yes.
- YM: Most probably, psychologically, eh.
- NL: It's understandable.
- YM: ...eh, probably, I can understand it, but the fact is that I spoke about it, spoke about it, spoke, I will go and see, eh, what was his first name, eh, Kasztner, eh...
- NL: Rezsö.
- YM: Rezsö. I'm going to see Rezsö, talk to him, *mama-lushen, pushit*, [simple mother language] ask and see, see who is he that he could be such a murderer. And when I come to him and the girl tells him who I am, I, not that I was a bigger *yichuss* [status] than anybody else, but that he's a, that he was able to, to, throw me out, so to say, and not even talk to me.
- NL: Mmm.
- YM: So, but I never got to him face to face.
- NL: Were there indeed German guards in his office? Could you see some

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-67]

surveillance?

YM: I didn't see, I didn't see, I didn't see, but, his office was on the second floor, and down-, downstairs--why, I don't know, most probably there were other German agencies or something--there was a Hungarian guard.

NL: I see.

YM: And, of course, I went there saying that I live in the house, a Hungarian, I don't know, petty officer on furlough, so, so I just go home, and no one knew where I'm going, but this is what happened.

NL: Were there other Jews trying to see him? Were you aware of...

YM: I know of none.

NL: ...pressure on him?

YM: I know of none. But most probably there were, and this is why he was so extremely sensitive and refused. Before he found out what it is.

NL: Can you tell us a little about your knowledge of Joel Brand, because he, too, was such an important figure.

YM: Yes.

NL: How did you know him?

YM: Him, I knew only through official channels, like, I was a member of the board at the Zionist, World Zionist Organization of the *Keren Kayemet*, the *Keren Ha'yesod*, and we used to meet in good times, you know, in '36, '37,

NL: I see.

YM: And we spoke about it that the danger is very great, and this and that, and then I had the troubles with, as a Czechoslovakian citizen to remain in Hungary and work in Hungary because they, the Hungarian government, emulated so to say, the permission given to me earlier to work in Hungary, so I was in and out and tried to get through Yugoslavia, contacts with England, where I really went for a, an audition to the Duke's Place Temple and so on, so I really...

NL: And did he help you?

YM: No.

NL: He didn't help you, but you tried to get some help from him?

YM: No, not from him.

NL: Oh.

YM: I never, I never.

NL: Oh.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [3-2-68]

YM: You know, he was one of the, one of the board members, one of the boys, so to say.

NL: Was he a popular man, as far as you know?

YM: As f-

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-69]

Tape four, side one:

NL: This is a continuation of our interview with Cantor Yehuda Mandel, June 4th, interviewing. You were about to say something about Joel Brand's wife.

YM: Joel Brand's wife was an extremely capable, smart woman. And I think she would have been more capable to do the work which was assigned to Joel than Joel himself.

NL: More sophisticated.

YM: More sophisticated and with more, with more *chutzpah*.

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: Because it required a tremendous amount of *chutzpah*, which he had, but not in the right direction somehow. He wasn't the right person for the job. This is my opinion and I don't, I wasn't there and I don't know, unfortunately, the history and the facts well enough to make--to judge. This is just my opinion. Now, eh, but we have to come back, I think, to, where I left off.

NL: Yes, yes, we do indeed. You were saying that Kasztner finally told you that your family was still in Bergen-Belsen.

YM: In Bergen-Belsen, and they will be sent over to Switzerland with the first transport. We waited, as you know, these months went by.

NL: Where did you stay, Cantor?

YM: I went to stay with, in this *geschuetzte* [protected] *Haus*, so to say, the guarded, the protected house. Once here, once there, I got this document which is the runner's, eh, runner's document to bring messages from one place to the other, and as you know, as you remember, these documents were given out with the knowledge of, of, poor, what's his name?

NL: Wallenberg.

YM: Wallenberg. And I was in the, under the protection of the Switzer consulate, eh, so this was, this was the thing with which I was, which was, I was going around.

NL: Did we make a copy of this?

YM: I think you did.

NL: These are among the things you gave me.

YM: Yes.

NL: Oh fine.

YM: Yes. But I of course had falsified papers.

NL: Mmm hmm.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-70]

YM: That I am a Hungarian soldier here on, eh, on, eh, wounded, and here on furlough, and so on and so forth. But those, those papers I destroyed after the Russians...

NL: Came in.

YM: Abbreviated, eh, freed Budapest, so to say, because I was afraid many people were taken into custody for this kind of course.

NL: Of course.

YM: Being you worked for the Hungarians, and you were this and this, you know, it wasn't important it should be true, it was important if someone found out. You know.

NL: Yes.

YM: It was very dangerous. But this was what I carried around. I was dressed up as a, as a peasant, and I had this in my pocket for where I went, people knew that I am, I am official of the, of Switzer, eh, consulate or delegation.

NL: And Wallenberg gave you this?

YM: Wallenberg's office.

NL: Wallenberg's office gave you this.

YM: Gave it to me.

NL: Yes. And so you were able to get meals there?

YM: No, don't think of meals as you have a meal you sit down.

NL: Bread.

YM: But whatever there was,

NL: Ya.

YM: Whatever there was, we shared. If it was a cup of tea, it was that. If it was a piece of bread, it was that. If we could get in somehow, through one of our men, eh, some food, real food, it was cooked, and our people prepared it. There was a time, for instance, we couldn't cook, because there was no water. The water level was so low that there was no possibility to cook. So, that is the way it went by.

NL: About how many people were there in your house?

YM: In that, in that one house I would say there were about close to 300.

NL: Mmm.

YM: Ya. And this we slept like sardines but we...

NL: You were safe.

YM: Ya. We, more or less, we were safe.

NL: More or less.

YM: And these months like the rest of November, December, up to January when

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-71]

Budapest was occupied by the, or rather, freed...

NL: Liberated.

YM: ...as they call, liberated by the Russians, eh, that's the way we, we really lived.

NL: Can you say a little more about those months, Cantor? Did you have contact with other Jews in similar houses?

YM: A lot.

NL: A lot.

YM: A lot, because I was one of the people as this *Futárigazolyány* means as you see here, *Eilbot--Eilbotenausweis*. This is the, the, eh, document for a runner.

NL: Messenger.

YM: What? Ya, messenger, from one place to the other.

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: I went to Wallenberg's office, I saw him...

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: ...once in awhile. I spoke to him a word or two. Of course, there was no time. I got a pack of, of documents from him to take it to this place, to that place, and that's where I went.

NL: In other words, you were able to give other Jews papers that enabled them to be protected?

YM: Yes. And we had our people there, and they filled in the names and gave it a number, and it became an official document. In some cases these, eh, *Nyilas*...

NL: Arrow Cross.

YM: Arrow Cross, eh, youngsters, respected it, and in some cases they didn't. They just took them away.

NL: I see. So Budapest was still under the control of the Arrow Cross...

YM: Ya. Oh yes, all these months, all these months.

NL: In, eh, November, December, these months.

YM: That means about two weeks in November, the whole December, and the whole January, and those were terrible months. The worst anyone, because you never knew when you were on the street, if a youngster of 12 or 13 or 15 had just a, a...

NL: A whim.

YM: Ya. A whim, to, to kill you, he did, no problem. And he wasn't, he wasn't taken to give account for it, why he did it, what he did it, as long as it was a Jew, no problem.

NL: Mmm.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-72]

YM: Now, during this time, maybe there is one outstanding occurrence and you've probably, eh, seen that in, in the Brand book, where we dressed up as Hungarian gendarmerie. I was one of them.

NL: You were one of them.

YM: With them, and we went to the, prisons and we took out, altogether, close to 300 people. We, we cursed them, and pushed them, and hollered at them, and all that, but we told them quietly, "You are being taken, you are being rescued."

NL: Ohhh my.

YM: This may be...

NL: Oh, that's extraordinary.

YM: This is extraordinary. This is a...

NL: This is a prison in Budapest?

YM: There was a so-called *güta* folkhouse [phonetic] where they gathered from all places the people who they wanted to...

NL: Deport.

YM: ...deport. To march.

NL: An assembly point.

YM: Ya, ya, an assembly point. And we took them out. We came with false papers and we, documentation and all that. And there was one of them, this young man, eh, what was his name? He became later consul of Israel in one of the countries. I don't remember his name anymore. But his name is mentioned in...

NL: In Brand's book.

YM: Ya. In Brand's book. He was our commander and he was...

NL: These were Zionists?

YM: Ya, all Zionist people.

NL: All Zionists. I see.

YM: And he had so much *azis* [impudence], [chuckles], he had so much, really *chutzpah*, that...

NL: Courage.

YM: Courage. Nothing could stop him.

NL: Daring.

YM: Ya, daring. And we hollered at the Jews and cursed them and what, and quietly we were telling them that, "You are being taken out of here and places elsewhere."

NL: Oh my. That's, that happens, yes.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-73]

- YM: I, I just can't talk about it without, without getting goose pimples, you know?
- NL: I too, of course. This was in December?
- YM: In, in, in December, probably, or January.
- NL: Yes.
- YM: The worst time.
- NL: And where were they then taken?
- YM: Fifty here...
- NL: Into these protected homes.
- YM: We didn't take 300 at once, we took 50, 40, 50, whatever there was in that so-called *güte* [phonetic], eh, gathering eh, prison, you know.
- NL: Assembly place.
- YM: Assembly place. We took them out, and that happened three, four, or five times. We had all these, heh, eh, shields, from, what the, what the gendarmerie, the Hungarian gendarmerie used to wear, you know, while doing their thing, their killing the Jews. I lived through, eh, Ujvidék, that means Novi Sad.
- NL: Novi Sad.
- YM: You know, the *harigah* [massacre] in Novi Sad, I lived that, through. I was at the Danube. And I told you I think already what happened there.
- NL: Mmm hmm.
- YM: Now, to come, to go on, back further, when finally Budapest was liberated by the Russians, it took a day or so before I, eh, I had a *yeshivah* friend, *yeshivah* friend of mine, Dr. Breslauer, who became the emissary of Czechoslovakian affairs in Budapest, and he gave me papers to go to Czechoslovakia, because I wanted to get in touch with my family.
- NL: You hadn't heard, of course, from them.
- YM: Not a thing about them. Just what I heard from an opinion--no, what, the fir-, I went to Czechoslovakia, I couldn't get out any telegram, anything. A week or two later, that means in February, probably, or the beginning of March, we were told that a repat- repatriation affair will be taking place from Switzerland, the people who were taken by Kasztner's group to Switzerland, will be transported back to Hungary, and I was waiting that my wife will return.
- NL: But you were then in Czechoslovakia.
- YM: I, I, no...
- NL: You went back.
- YM: I was in Czechoslovakia for a short while. I came back to Budapest and waited.
- NL: What about the Russian occupation? Did you feel the sting of that?

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-74]

YM: They, they did not interfere with me personally.

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: I know many people who, for one reason or another, or even without a reason, were tak-, were...

NL: Arrested.

YM: ...arrested, and never came back, or came back in a half a year or a year, or what not. But personally I did not feel, first of all, I spoke the language fluently, and if I got into a *hoddenwieden* [phonetic], for instance, once, I walked, eh, from my house to the next block, let's say, and I saw that two Russian soldiers, eh, are coming in my direction. And as soon as we would have passed each other, they started to walk back. One was in front of me, and one was in the back of me. And I was foolish enough to wear my watch. So, as it was customary in those days, [unclear] shall see, they had already fifteen watches on their arm, but they wanted to have your watch, too. So, he says, "Give the watch." I said, I didn't give it to him right away, and maybe that was foolish, why, I don't know, but I had *chutzpah* enough maybe, I was educated in these actions, you know, and I told him in Russian, "Look, you don't have the right to take this watch from me, but I will give it to you, *if* you will give me your number and you will tell me your name. Show me your documentation. I don't want, I know you don't have the right, but you give me your name, and I will go from here directly to the commander of the Russian army here in Budapest, and you will hear from me later."

NL: Oh ho, they disappeared [laughs].

YM: They disappeared. This was one experience.

NL: Well.

YM: Another experience was you know in labor camp, we didn't have, we got any any, any news, any piece of paper, any, anything, we couldn't read. So in the evenings, nights, when we laid down already on our bunks, on the little bit of straw or whatever was on the floor, we, we had those automatic, eh, flashlights, where you have to, it had a little battery inside, and if you pushed it hard enough, it gave you a little light. So, I had one of these little...

NL: Flashlights.

YM: Flashlights, and a Russian boy, fifteen years old, was the Russian guard, came to me and told me, "Give me that!" He saw it in my hand. Saw it. So, I didn't want to make a big *schpiel* [to do] or, he was a child, so to say, I didn't want, eh, I gave it to him.

NL: You gave it to him.

YM: This happened, and this happened with drinks and watches and...

NL: Jewelry.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-75]

YM: ...whatever they wanted.

NL: Yes.

YM: Whatever they wanted. So these are the...

NL: You weren't, you weren't hurt by them.

YM: No, and these are probably the occurrences which anyone who was occupied by a force, by--I had another experience, for instance, a friend of mine whose father already was a board member of my temple, came to me after, after we were, we were already freed by the Hungarians, by the...

NL: Russians.

YM: Russians. That he has material to produce, I don't know, how many hundreds of kilo of soap. And the city was dying of dirt, and, and, and, and, filth, and...

NL: Disease.

YM: And disease. And he said he will produce it on his own, for his own money. So I, "What really do you want from me?" "You speak Russian so well. Please come with me to the commander of the city." I went with him and we sat down and, when I told the commander, it was, I think, the associate commander or something like that, I told this general what my friend wants, he will give half without charge to the government, but half he wants to sell on the open market. So the answer of the, of the soldier--of the general was, "Tell your friend that I already called in two soldiers. They will be given a few minutes. The pants he is wearing aren't his either. We didn't come here as friends. We came here as an occupying force, and, therefore, whatever he has he will have to go with these people, show him where it is, give us the material, prepare it as he wanted, and we will take it."

NL: Mmm. Confiscate everything.

YM: This was their attitude.

NL: Their mentality.

YM: Ya. So I'm not wondering now about the little boy of 15 or 16 who came and wanted my flashlight. But to come back to this, many, many people came back from Switzerland, in buses and so on, and from them, particularly one family with whom I was very friendly, came back and gave me a report about my family, from the, for the first time I heard from them probably it was March, or...

NL: The first time in how long?

YM: I left Hungary the last time probably in Ju-, May, May the 30th. We just spoke about it this last Sunday with my son, and he was there, so he remembers. Because--and he brought me an article from someone who was in the same city at the same time. It was May the

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-76]

29th or 30th of 1944 I left. Now, probably I saw my family the day when the Germans marched into Hungary, that was the 19th...

NL: The 19th of March.

YM: ...of March. From the 19th of March to about a year, a year in space, I didn't hear from my family, I didn't know these things what I mentioned before occurred during that time. I got the information that my family is in Switzerland. Then I went illegally the second and the third time to Czechoslovakia, then I could already send telegrams, I wrote a letter which I sent, eh, to, to, eh, what was it, *Sur Montreux*--that's where my family was--and my wife, because of her profession--she was a teacher--she got together 40 children and under the guidance of the, of the Switzer Jewish, eh...

NL: Welfare.

YM: ...Welfare Board, she made a class, a school out of them, and taught them for, I don't know how long.

NL: How long was she in Bergen-Belsen?

YM: She was in Bergen-Belsen from the 30th of May, we just calculated it this week, 30th of May to about, eh, December, probably. December.

NL: Under harsh conditions.

YM: Ya. Under, under, under Bergen-Belsen conditions. What more can I tell you? But they were still not as bad as the ones who were just in the, in the concentration camps.

NL: So they still, a special, special continu-

YM: Under separate, was a *Sondergruppe* as they called it, *Sondergruppe*. They were, of course, they had guards around and all that, but they got some food, they got some care, eh...

NL: They weren't killed.

YM: They weren't killed. I remember that this boy who is now in Israel, a very fine young man who my wife rescued, had an infection of the middle ear. And one of our professors, who was also in this group, Dr. Polachek, was given permission to go in with, he was a laryngologist, an outstanding man, to be taken by a German guard or whatever to the town somewhere to a hospital where he performed the operation. The child had a 103° fever and all that, was brought back, and the child today, thank God, has three beautiful children, and so on. So these kind of things which, which had transpired in those days is hard, very hard even to remember or to describe.

NL: Yes. Can you just add another point, eh, Cantor, um, did your wife, um, have to make some special effort to get to Kasztner in order to be part of this special transport? How

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-77]

did she negotiate that?

YM: No, she did not. My brother...

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: ...who was a rabbinical student at the time in the seminary, and, as I have told you before, he got his doctoral degree already with the yellow Star of David on his lapel, he was very active in the Zionist movement.

NL: I see.

YM: So he, when these things were discussed, who shall be taken, a) he was there...

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: ...and I don't know if he mentioned at all or not, but my friends who were there, like this Komoly, Otto, who was a very dear friend, I'm sure he thought of it just as well, not to leave Ella with the child, just when I am, I don't know where, leave her here, if there is a possibility to rescue them. I don't think she had to negotiate too much.

NL: So it was your brother who spoke, eh...

YM: My brother was there, ah, he was in that committee or not, I don't know.

NL: So it was not just Kasztner's decision.

YM: No.

NL: It was a joint decision.

YM: No. No. No. That was, that was a deci-, a deci-, it wasn't--probably the final decision was Kasztner's, but the suggestions, who should be taken, were given by the Zionist organization, by the leaders of the Zionist organization.

NL: Mmm. Yes, that's an interesting point. Because many people think he did the whole, eh, he made the whole solution.

YM: No. I don't think anyone, that anyone went to Kasztner for, maybe the Rumanian settlement of the, of the...

NL: Cluj.

YM: Yes, the Cluj, around Cluj, but in Budapest, I don't think Kasztner carried that much weight, a), and secondly, I don't think anyone knew about Kasztner. So if it was a case where, let's say just for the sake of argument, Ella Mandel was contacted, she wasn't contacted by Kasztner. She was contacted by Komoly, by, by somebody else, no, there were fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five people on that board, and each had his friends, of course...

NL: Yes.

YM: ...as it's impossible it shouldn't go like this.

NL: Yes. Of course.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-78]

YM: Of course.

NL: Of course.

YM: And these people were thinking of each other, who were the people, who are really the leaders of the community; who can be, should be, rescued, because I don't think that, first of all, they had to have the money, I mean, let's be practical.

NL: Yes, I was going to ask, do you know how much they had to pay?

YM: They had to have the wealth. I don't-, there wasn't a set.

NL: There wasn't.

YM: No. Diamonds, and gold, and wedding rings, and dollars, and, eh, sterling from, from, [unclear].

NL: Anything with asset value.

YM: Anything of asset, of hard currency, hard value.

NL: I see.

YM: That was taken. And, and probably they got together millions and millions in value. So, I don't think I was the one who had the amount of money or gold or diamonds, or whatnot, to, eh...

NL: Ransom them.

YM: ...to, to ransom them. Eh, I had books, which weren't worth anything, as you see, eh, firewood, for firewood they were good, nothing else.

NL: Mmm.

YM: So, eh...

NL: So you made contact, and your wife conducted the school.

YM: No. She conducted the school there. I never, I wrote to her, I tried to call her, I, eh, tried to, for her to get back to Hungary, because, on the 3rd of March is my birthday.

NL: Ahhh.

YM: Can you imagine? And when we were liberated already, people from all kinds of companies came with pick and shovel and told me, "We will give you a gift for your birthday, and it will be we will clean the courtyard of the temple."

NL: Oh.

YM: My temple was...

NL: A shambles.

YM: ...a shambles. And, eh, it was the ghetto hospital, do I have to tell you more? A stench, you couldn't go there, you couldn't get in there, the seats, the Rombach Temple is an art, a work of art, and all the seats were torn out, used for firewood, of course, and, and the...

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-79]

NL: Chandeliers.

YM: ...the, the, the *cupola*, the, top, was broken down, and when after we got together in March, and my comrades gave me this gift, I organized in my temple a rebuilding committee. And that was in March/April. And I got so much money, not I, I had a committee for that.

NL: Yes, for the funds.

YM: For the funds. With *Slichot* services in the fall were already performed...

NL: In the sanctuary.

YM: In the sanctuary, in the temple.

NL: Mmm.

YM: And I thought everything goes in the right direction.

NL: Now, the Russians didn't disturb you.

YM: No.

NL: Interesting.

YM: The only difficulties we had was to get material to rebuild the dome, for instance, what needed another--a lot of iron bars and whatnot, so we had a man by the name on our board at the temple by the name Hagadush [phonetic], who was in this line, and he got us all the material we needed for the dome of the temple. Another one got us material for the wood part, a third one, it wasn't rebuilt as it was once upon a time, but it was rebuilt, and *Slichos* we could say already, and that was a great achievement.

NL: Oh my.

YM: The choir was reestablished. Everything, I thought, everything is fine. Not only that, but the chief rabbi of Hungary was Dr. Havashi, who suggested to me at the time to go into the Hungarian army as a chaplain, maybe I won't have any trouble anymore because I speak the language and I was born in Hungary and all that, he didn't know, that's another story.

NL: Well, who knows.

YM: But, he tried.

NL: Yes.

YM: But his son became, after the war, when the so-called Hungarian government was already organized, the Russians were still there, but they didn't show themselves, I mean the Hungarian government...

NL: Took over.

YM: Ya. Eh, he became the chief chaplain of the Armed Forces, and was a very dear friend of mine and offered me a position in a high-ranking, as a high-ranking officer in his, eh, off-, in his department, because I had so much experience in labor camps, so he said, "There are

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-80]

agunot [abandoned wives] and all kinds of questions, and you will be the one to organize it the proper way."

NL: Yes.

YM: "You can stay as chief cantor of your temple. You can stay with the congregation. Stay here." So I wrote all this to my wife, but she just became so disillusioned and disgusted with Hungary, where she grew up, and she was born, and she knew the language, that she just did not want to come back. I remember the High Holy Days went by and, eh, she prepared for Israel directly. She never came back...

NL: I see.

YM: ...neither as a repatriate nor as a private person, nor anything. She was a great Zionist, to begin with.

NL: I see.

YM: And she wanted to go to be a *chalutzah* in, in Palestine.

NL: Excuse me another minute now.

YM: Yes, sure.

NL: Were you able to go back to your apartment, Cantor?

YM: No. No.

NL: Where did you live?

YM: But I got, I had a very dear friend of mine, he was a lawyer by profession, may he rest in peace, Dr. Deutsch, who, we were close, very close friends, who told me, "Now you are not going to repair that broken down apartment up there. Here on the third floor is the apartment of this antisemite who ran out, who ran away. You move in there. What will be later, we will see. But in the mean-," and that's where I lived.

NL: That's where you lived.

YM: I, I lived one, eh, floor below, and gave space, I was by myself, all the people who came little by little, I had two sister-in-laws came from Auschwitz, they stayed with me for a while, other people who needed, eh, a place where...

NL: Housing.

YM: ...a place where--housing, they lived there. And my sister-in-law, who is now in Israel, and her sister, they lived there. I had a, a, not a...

NL: A *kibbutz* [chuckles].

YM: Ya, a *kibbutz* like, *Kibbutz galiyot*. And, eh, the end, we corresponded back, I wrote, rather, I didn't correspond because I didn't get an answer. The first letter I got from my wife was already, was when she was already in Bari, South Italy.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-1-81]

NL: Oh my. She really had made a firm decision.

YM: Firm decision. She was on her way. I got-

NL: With your son.

YM: Ya, with my son. And the other boy.

NL: The other boy.

YM: And, eh, the letter read, "I read all your letters. I wrote to you. I hope you have received it. What with it all, my final decision is not to step any more on Hungarian soil." Her parents, her brothers, her brothers-in-law, her...

NL: All perished.

YM: All perished. So, it's understandable. And she walked out of that magnificent apartment, of that elegant apartment, a little castle of art, she walked out with a sack on her back...

NL: Oh my.

YM: ...with the two children. So you can imagine how she felt. And she said, "After all this, I hope you got my letters gradually, but in the meantime, I want you to remember, I am with [unclear] son, plus [phonetic], so, and so," and I knew who it is, and that was the first letter I received. Can you imagine?

NL: And you were, of course, divided about this.

YM: Right. And I decided, definitely she said not to go back to that blood-soaked country anymore.

NL: Mmm.

YM: "And I'm going to Israel."

NL: Mmm.

YM: "I will let you know where I am. And if you want to, we can unite again in Israel." So you can imagine what, what that, what that meant, at the time. That was, and finally, took a little, took time, you know, because I had to, we started the High Holy Days, there was *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* and *Succot*, and *Hoshana Rabba*, and everything was prepared for me to stay there. And I started already to work with this Dr. Ferencz Hadashi, to, eh, maybe help people the time being in an inoffi-, an, eh, unofficial capacity but help them, eh...

Tape four, side two:

NL: This is a continuation of our interview with Cantor Mandel, eh, tape four, side two. Yes, Cantor.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-82]

YM: Eh, I had a lifetime position in Budapest. I was in very high, eh, category of retire-of the retirement, eh, depart-, eh, fund. And, if I would have served my time, I would have been retired there.

NL: In a good pension.

YM: And I thought things will, things will work out, but she didn't want to come back, and I came to the congregation with a request to give me a furlough, or rather a leave of absence...

NL: Leave of absence.

YM: ...and, eh, it was worked out after the High Holy Days. It was probably well at the time in October or something like that. So, November, December, January, finally I liquidated, I told my friend, Deutsch, Dr. Deutsch, that I am leaving. He was on the board and he had, he was part of the decision-making really. Finally, I left my sister-in-law and my cousin, who is now professor in, of languages in Budapest. She was a little girl, she came back with her mother. Her mother went back to their original home, and she wanted to study at the university, and people who came back got certain rights and were accepted in the university, got stipends in the university, and she was one of them, so they lived in my apartment. And I left the 7th of February, 194-

NL: '46.

YM: '46. I left Budapest, so to say, on a leave of absence for three months. I still have their letters and the documentation and all that for it. I knew, I mentioned, that I will never come back to serve the congregation, but I thought this is the best I can do.

NL: Oh yes, surely.

YM: So, eh, I went, and this is maybe another interesting point. Maybe in the great tragedy this comic thing is interesting. Then...

NL: Excuse me, did you have any trouble getting permission to leave from the Russian authorities?

YM: No.

NL: No.

YM: No. In those days, in '46, the Hungarian government was completely established on a socialistic, the Socialists ruled the country, so to say, and there was no Russian interference whatsoever.

NL: I see.

YM: We got together again, the Zionist organization was reestablished and so on. So we got tog-, the printing machines were still working, falsified papers, and this time we got,

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-83]

with the permission and the O.K. of the International Red Cross, we got papers that there are 82 Israeli, rather, at that time...

NL: Pales-

YM: ...Palestinians who were beaten by the Germans so badly that they can't talk at all. They are deaf and dumb.

NL: My word. [chuckles]

YM: Why did we need it? Because the Hungarian Jews [chuckling] are famous for that, because they speak no other language, most of them, but Hungarian. You know, today it's much better. In those days, forty years ago it was, you know, Hungarians spoke Hungarian.

NL: Like Americans? [chuckles]

YM: Ya. Ya. So, anyway, eh, so this was the story. So what are we to do? The Zionist organization told me--I don't remember anymore who the Secretary General was--we had meetings, I spoke and spoke with these people and briefed them how they will have to behave and what will be done and all that. And we will go through Yugoslavia to Italy and will congregate at a certain spot, and from there, we will be transported to an illegal *aliyah*, to Israel. Now this is, this comes in now an interesting-

NL: [unclear]

YM: Ya. So, eh, I started out with them. We came to the Yugoslav border. I served in Yugoslavia for six years, I spoke the language perfectly, but I wasn't supposed to speak...

NL: Say a word.

YM: ...speak a word but Hebrew. And what's the story with all these dummies? No, they, they, they can't talk! They are broken up.

NL: [laughs]

YM: A colleague of mine, who was back in Subotitsa at the time already, gave us, he, he was alerted that I will pass by, so he came out to the station, looked, looked, looked, and we couldn't talk to each other, [laughs] because we weren't talking.

NL: [laughs]

YM: And I think even the border guard...

NL: Must have known.

YM: ...was, was, knew what's what.

NL: [laughs]

YM: So, here we passed by, and we were told that some people slept in the Jewish community center there. My colleague gave them space and all that, and finally we came back to the station there, that's the border station, Subotitsa, we traveled to Zagreb.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-84]

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: Zagreb was one of the big cities in Yugoslavia, and we were told that when we arrived there, I have just to look for one person who will have a walking stick in his hand, and one of his fingers will be bandaged, and whatever he does, wherever he goes, we should go after him.

NL: Follow him. [chuckling]

YM: So we were these people, you know, dumb, *nebech* [pitifully] now, they can't talk, mute, they, they come with me, after me, and we walk, and I carry on baggages, whatever we have, and we were taken to a place in Zagreb to spend the night there, and from there we were organized into groups and traveled to Italy. In those days...

NL: By foot?

YM: No, traveled by train.

NL: Train.

YM: In those days, if you were a refugee, no questions were asked, no tickets, no ticket was requested, and it was immensely respected.

NL: Open. Completely open and free.

YM: Open, ya, open. And you could, you could go, neither in Yugoslavia nor in Italy, of course, we chose the closest route, and we finally got to somewhere before Milan, and there we settled down for a little while, there was a *kibbutz* already, and then we were transferred to Milan, into, into the city, because the transports were organized from there.

NL: From Milan.

YM: And, eh, we didn't know it will take that long, but this was approximately February, let's say the 15th or something like that, and we saw it takes too long, takes too long, and there were *kibbutzim* all over the place in Milan. You mention it--in Padua, everywhere, *kibbutzim*, and there were people who didn't know a word of Hebrew. So I worked in Italy--February, March, April, up to the beginning of May, April probably, when we finally tried to get to, to the illegal *aliyah*--and I taught Hebrew in these different *kibbutzim*, traveled around, never paid for a ticket, no questions asked. I don't remember anymore what the word was for the, in Italian, what to say, but I was told, and I remembered it.

NL: [unclear]

YM: I told the conductor, aw, *bene, bene*, everything was fine. So, I traveled to these places and so, taught. Then, finally, in April, I think it must have been because I know that the *seder* we did already in Spezia. Finally, we got to, to, eh, to a date when we were told we will...

NL: Leave.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-85]

YM: ...leave. And again, fate. And I can't say *eyn adam nokef etsba' milematah ella im keyn*.¹² [From Talmud] How true it is. The eve before we have left, I don't know why, people exactly chose me or came to me to tell me, that in the, I don't know how many people among them, how many people, there are people who are absolutely kosher and wouldn't eat a bite unless it's 100 percent *toleslah* [phonetic], and there is some food in the storeroom which is about a kilometer away, and it was pouring, raining, but it's a good time to step on the, on the, on the illegal boat.

NL: Boat.

YM: Why, if I would go with a few more people, we could get the food prepared for these people. And I went and I got...

NL: Drenched.

YM: ...deadly tired. Drenched, of course, but deadly tired. When we started out about one o'clock at night or something like that, I fell asleep on the bus. And I begged my comrades, and this shows again humanity, I told them, "Look, I am so tired, I don't know how long I can sit and not fall asleep." Because you can't imagine what went on before these days and all that I ran and ran and ran and tried, can you imagine that maybe 30 or 40 people stepped over me...

NL: Didn't wake you.

YM: ...while I was sleeping, and they didn't wake me.

NL: Oh my.

YM: When the *Haganah* people drove back already.

NL: Oh my.

YM: Suddenly they heard a tremendous *geschrei* [yell], "*Ma karah?* [What happened?] Ah, ah, ah ha [unclear]? *Ma karah?*"

NL: Oh my.

YM: So they thought I got a heart attack.

NL: Oh my. Oh my.

YM: They stopped the lorry, came and tried to calm me, calm me, and told me, "*Eyn davar, nikach otcha b'pa'am haba.*" [Don't worry. We will take you next time.] And finally...

NL: Oh.

YM: These people went and I stayed there. Finally, at the next transport...

NL: How long did you have to wait?

YM: I think a week.

12 "No man can lift a finger from below unless so instructed from above." Tractate Hullin.
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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-86]

- NL: Mmm.
- YM: Something like that.
- NL: Oh yes, oh, oh, oh my.
- YM: But every minute was, was. So, again we started out and we went I think in 12 or 13 lorries. We were transported to, in the direction, to Spezia. We finally arrived there, and we saw *epes* strangely that the Italian police is around us. We didn't know what happened with the Italian police. So, none of us, and the *Haganah* people, who were among us, of course, knew very well what's going on because they, they, they didn't have to give them the whole hand, they knew from one finger. And they told us quietly that this and this is happening. And probably the English, who occupied that part of the country, told the Italians to arrest us. We were arrested, first we were told we will be taken into...
- NL: Custody.
- YM: Spezia. Custody. But then, somehow or other, they succeeded, the one who...
- NL: The *Haganah*.
- YM: ...spoke, yes, on our people. Of course no one knew that they were...
- NL: Civilians.
- YM: ...dressed just like us. They will, eh, eh, we, we can stay, they will send out guards, and so on and so forth, but we can stay on the...
- NL: Boat.
- YM: ...the boat. We stayed on the boat, and I don't remember exactly what, how long, for how long before Pesach. The, the, what organization was it now who sent us food?
- NL: JDC?
- YM: I don't remember. Sent us *matzah*, and on the *molo* [pier, dock], on the, on that eh tongue which leads to the, into the ocean where the, what's that called in English, I don't remember, you know, that built...
- NL: A walkway.
- YM: Ya, something. Where our boat was, was, is resting, standing. There, and on the boat with little lamps and candles and whatnot, I made the *seder*.
- NL: Oh my.
- YM: For that, in 1946, I remember the date, and we had a...
- NL: My, what a moment. What a moment.
- YM: We had a *seder*.
- NL: Were there British soldiers standing by?
- YM: No, Italians. The British were probably two kilometers or a half a kilometer

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-87]

away, and the British Commando definitely was responsible for it.

NL: Of course.

YM: So, we were there, I don't remember for how long, but finally we saw nothing happens, *red dahin, red daher* [talk here, talk there], nothing happened. So, I was one of the people who, who was considered to be on the command.

NL: The leadership.

YM: The leadership. So, I spoke Hungarian, there were many, many Hungarians, so I had to translate whatever was said. And, em, we tried to keep the spirit up of the people. Then I wrote this [unclear] Spezia, and the eleven hundred and eighteen people were on that, I mean, including children, of course...

NL: Mmm hmm.

YM: ...decided to have a hunger strike. And we had a hunger strike for 119 hours. In the meantime, the English became a little concerned, because in those days, you know, it wasn't as bad as it is today, you know, there was still some shame in them, and they sent down the Minister of Labor, Morrison, a Jew. At the time, he came down, and I sat in on a five-man committee. I didn't speak a word of English at the time, but the final upshot was he should give us--and when I saw, just this week, I think, *Exodus* was on television.

NL: Mmm.

YM: That's exactly our story. It was just transposed into the children camp because it's more...

NL: Dramatic.

YM: ...effective, more, more, more dramatic, more, ya. But that's our story. And, eh, he said we should give up the hunger strike, and he will go back and will talk to the government and this and that. After, I think, a certain amount of time, a few hours, because the whole hunger strike kept on for about 118 hours, so he probably was there the 80th hour or something like that. And we agreed to one thing, that we won't commit, we won't start the suicides until we don't hear him. But the hunger strike will go on. I will never forget it, in this tragic story maybe this is a little light, eh...

NL: Touch.

YM: ...point, touch, too. A German boy was there with us. And while, at one of the *mifgash* [meeting], the whole group was singing, *lo yatzul, tzarroayim* [wouldn't have been saved in the afternoon], and this boy at one point or another, fainted. The doctor came, gave him an injection, brought him back, and his first, when he came to, his first word, first words were, "*Aber ich werde nicht essen!*" [But I shall not eat.]

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-88]

NL: [laughs]

YM: [laughs] So he,

NL: This got into the newspapers? Ohhhh...

YM: I don't know, most probably.

NL: Ohhh, oh my.

YM: So, finally this guy says this, this is a light touch to our tragedy.

NL: But such spirit.

YM: Ya. So, we went on, finally we heard from Morrison that eleven hundred and eighteen certificates were granted to the Spezia people. Eh, however, we cannot leave yet. The English are extremely concerned about us, and how could we ever make it on this five hundred and some eh, ton, little boat? The Jewish Agency had to buy another boat, to divide us into two groups, and then they will give out the certificates. So we gave up the hunger strikes and we divid-, the people were divided, and these two boats got into Israel under the name, eh, in May, 1946, under the name Eliahu Golomb and Dov Hoz.

NL: Oh. Oh. Dov?

YM: Dov Hoz, the labor leader, Dov Hoz.

NL: How is the last name spelled?

YM: Hoz. I think, Dov Hoz. Hay, vav, zayin ' & %.

NL: I don't know that name. But Golomb, of course, I, I know.

YM: Eliahu Golomb.

NL: The *Haganah* founder.

YM: Ya. Ya. So, eh, I was pushed in front, you know, to be the commander of one of the boats, and I remember we had an unfortunate thing. We had our doctor on the boat, didn't know--we had many doctors--they didn't know exactly if this is typhus, typh-, typhus fever, or, or something else. So one of our men, this again may be a light moment in the great tragedy, one of the men who was so very sick with a very high temperature, had to be taken off in Greece to be taken into a hospital, to the epidemic department there, and of course the *Haganah* people came with us, but I was the one who signed the documents. You know, [chuckles] this is *meshugas* [craziness], you know but it is interesting.

NL: You were the spokesman, the official.

YM: Because, ya. And one more, more, finally we arrived in Haifa. Probably it was about 14th or 15th or 12th, something, beginning of...

NL: May.

YM: ...May. Why do I say that? Because the 18th I remember, was *Shavuot*. We

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-89]

arrive in Haifa. My wife was with the two children in *Kibbutz Shar Hamakkim*. The *kibbutz* people gave, sent someone in a car to pick me up.

NL: Mmm.

YM: And because I was the commander of one of the boats, I couldn't leave before...

NL: Everyone.

YM: ...all documents are signed, and everyone is off the boat! [chuckles]

NL: Oh, ironic.

YM: My wife was waiting two hours *after* everyone was out, and I didn't come down, and she went back to the *kibbutz*, I again did not arrive, because she was waiting for the previous transport also. But I didn't arrive. So, anyway, I had one English pound in my pocket. So I went to a taxi chauffeur and told him, "*Tikach otti l'shar Hamakkim*." [Take me to the *kibbutz*.] "*Zeh harbey kesef?*" [That's a lot of money.] "*Ayn le kesef. Yesh lee zeh. Ami yachol la tat la rami* [chuckles]" [I have none. Here's what I have.] I didn't know what it is, so he said, "*Atah hegata karega im Eliahu Golomb?*" [You just arrived with Eliahu Golomb?] "*Kayn*." "*Atah lo tzarich l'shalem anything, nothing. Shum davar. Lo kesef lo. Ekach miata shum davar*." [You just arrived with no money, no. I won't take anything from you.]

NL: [unclear].

YM: "*T'kaness, t'kaness*." [Get in, get in.] and drove me to Shar Hamakkim.

NL: Oh my.

YM: When I came to Shar Hamakkim I was asking for, eh...

NL: Ella.

YM: ...my wife was in Isr-, in Europe, her Hebrew name was Zahava, and, the, the other name, the Hungarian name, was Gabriella, which people shortened to Ella. So, I asked for Zahava Mandel. [mumbles] "Know anyone named Zahava? No." So, anyway, they changed her name to Ella, they says it's good enough a name, Ella.

NL: [laughs]

YM: Ella, what we need Zahava for?

NL: [laughing] Oh.

YM: So, finally we met.

NL: Oh my.

YM: I, I, I don't have to tell you anything about that.

NL: Oh my. Oh my.

YM: Three days or four days later, ya, I stayed in the *kibbutz* for a day or two, maybe because Shar Hamakkim was such a well-organized *kibbutz*. It was a *Hashomer Hatza'ir*

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-90]

kibbutz, as you well know. And, for me it was very far, but no other *kibbutz* has given the opportunity to the children which Shar Hamakkim granted them. Ella became their immediate teacher, and they tried to educate her, she should become a teacher in Israel and so on, and she didn't want it. She didn't want it. She said, I did enough.

NL: My!

YM: She went to work in the *gan hayerachot* [vegetable garden]. For, and she worked there. Later on she became the *mevashelet* [cook].

NL: Mmm.

YM: And that was, the people were just carrying her on their hands, because the food became entirely different after her perfect, wonderful cook. I came there and saw that Shar Hamakkim *kibbutz*, for whatever reason, I'm not going into details, is not for me. I saw that right away. Though I was born and grew up in a village, and my father, he had a, I knew how to drive horses and all that, but I knew this was not for me.

NL: You were a city man.

YM: Ya.

NL: City man.

YM: I, em.

NL: Uh, what a problem.

YM: Maybe I, maybe I was, maybe I was too old even at the time already.

NL: Too many experiences.

YM: Ya. I was born in 1904, and we are talking about '46, so at the time I was 42 years old, and I thought, no, I don't have the right to come here and take all what these people starved for, for, for decades and decades, one. Secondly, I didn't feel that the spiritual atmosphere is mine. Third, they wanted to, to have me, even if I will just teach music in their schools. I just didn't feel like doing it. So three days later, and with this I will close, three days later, I *davened*, I got, first of all, a suit lent to me, given to me by my, by Ella's schoolmate with whom she went to school from first grade to the university.

NL: Also in Palestine.

YM: In Palestine. He lived there, and he was a lawyer by profession and was a member of *Yeshurun* Congregation, *Beit Keneset Yeshurun* in Yerushalayim. He lived in Yerushalayim. Three days after I arrived in Israel I had this *z'chut* [opportunity] to have, to *daven* in *Beit Hakeneset Yeshurun* in Yerushalayim.

NL: Extraordinary.

YM: See, there, in those days was no restriction yet. I went to the *kotel* [wall] and

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-91]

[unclear], and I was accepted to be the *hazan* of, eh...

NL: *Yeshurun*.

YM: ...of *Yeshurun*. And I couldn't make a go of it, because I had no, I needed *d'me maftayach* [an advance, some money].

NL: Mmm.

YM: And at the time I didn't understand. When the *gabbai* [lay communal official] spoke to me and said, "*Ha lo, atah yodeah Ivrit. Yotzay m'aclal! Yofi! Eyn lanu morim. Tikkanes le-eitzeh bet sefer sh'attah tivkhar. Yaholivot Gemara, Mishnah, Torah, ma sh'atah rotzeh?*"¹³ And I said to myself, the chief cantor of Budapest came here, you know, this is our *mishugas* [crazy], and, here in Yerushalayim, in Israel, in Palestine, I should become a *melamed* [teacher]? I didn't accept it, because they didn't want to at least lend me money, but a man by the name Friedman, was in *Yeshurun* when I *davened* in *Yeshurun*, this again shows me, "*Eyn adam nokef etsba' milematah*." [no man can lift a finger from below] Went home, half crazy, telephoned around the whole country, finally through a friend of ours, an engineer Stark, he found me, and came, *b'neyvel uve'chinor* [with harp and violin], and the congregation bought us a beautiful apartment, *Rehov Hahermon, esrim v'chamesh* [15], Haifa, and I became the *hazzan* [cantor] of the, of the *beit ha'kneset* [synagogue] in Haifa.

NL: Oh.

YM: And this here ends the story. Then it took a long time before I could convince my wife to leave the *kibbutz* but she did, and we lived in Haifa, and then I thought, you know, you come to the United States, bring a few bags, and fill them with dollars, and then you go back to Israel. It didn't happen like that, because the *milchemet hashichrur* [war of Liberation] broke out, and I couldn't go back, and couldn't stay here, I had to take a position. I took a position in New York, 1948, March or April, where I became the, yes, and I needed papers to get in here, non-quota, and I couldn't get it any other way, but in those days cantors couldn't come here non-quota, only rabbis, or priests, or ministers. So, because I am qualified, I became the associate rabbi to a rabbi, and I want to mention his name, Rav Chaim Porille, *zichron livrachah* [may his name be for a blessing], who is the rabbi of the Rumanische Shul in New York, a tremendous orthodox shul, and...

NL: Excuse me, how do you spell his name?

YM: Rav Chaim Porille.

NL: P-O-R,

13 "You know Hebrew. Excellent! Good! We don't have any teachers. Go to any school you will choose, teach Gemarah, Mishnah, Torah, whatever you like."

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-92]

YM: P-O-R-I-L-L-E

NL: E. Porille.

YM: Eh, I became his associate, and I was there for two years as the principal of their, of their Hebrew school. So I asked Rav Chaim Porille, "*Rebbe, vi a zoy kenich zein a principal in a school in America; ich ken nicht keyn vott English?*"¹⁴ "*Sogter, bei uns lernt man Yiddish.*" He says, "Here we study Yiddish." And all the reports he wrote for me to the government, because it was a public school. "*Sorgt sich nicht, alles wird zein--ihr wird nur darfen unterschreibn.*"¹⁵ He was a magnificent, wonderful person. Then, it took a year before I, I convinced my wife to come here. They arrived in '49.

NL: You had family here?

YM: Yes, I had one sister here, and that's the reason I came, because she was the only, after my brother in '49 died, we are the only one, she is the only one I still have out of seven brothers and sisters.

NL: What a saga.

YM: So, eh, she came here with our son. We settled in New York. Then, in 1949, when my brother died in Israel, my sister just couldn't take it. She went to pieces and begged me if there is any position in Philadelphia, would I please move here, because she just can't stand it. Though she had never met this brother, because this brother was born after she has left home.

NL: Mmm.

YM: She came here to an uncle. Eh, and so on. But we came, settled here, and I came to Bet Judah of Logan in 1950, eh, I think this January the 14th, and since then, I'm here, and the rest is, the rest is an open book.

NL: Thank you very, very much, Cantor Mandel. I can't tell you how valuable this testimony is. Thank you.

YM: You are welcome, I'm sure.

14 "Rabbi, how can I be a principal in a school in America if I don't know a word of English?"

15 "Don't worry, everything wil be--all you have to do is sign."

YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-93]

Addendum to Yehuda Mandel testimony 6/6/1980

Shellie Greenspun, a former student of Gratz, mailed this material to me January 31, 1984. Please keep it together with the testimony of YEHUDA MANDEL. -Nora Levin

From Shellie (Rochelle) Greenspun (above note and date)

Nora, with me you must simply live long enough...eventually everything gets done. I refer first to the promise I made to you to take down the account of the Kasztner story related to the Brand Mission in Hungary in the period of the Holocaust (a year ago). My friend, Emanuel (Manny) Mandel and his father Cantor Yehudah Mandel, formerly of Logan, Philadelphia, Israel, various camps in war-torn Europe, Hungary and Czechoslovakia sat with me to recall their lives in this period. Since Manny was a child of 8 at the time, I think it is clear that his memories are a bit hazy. However, he seemed quite clear in terms of time and place. However, his father, who was in a work camp, was not part of the group. And his mother has passed away. So what we have is a child's memories. It is interesting that the strongest memory was of the "cold" German train and the "warm" Swiss train. That transfer evoked the most dramatic response in our conversation.

I do not believe that the bit of information which has been secured has added at all to the body of knowledge on this subject. Still, it was an important task to further document those terrible times. I am grateful for having had this opportunity.

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-94]

Testimony obtained from Emanuel Mandel,
June 6, 1980,
concerning the transfer of Jews from Hungary in 1944.

On April 19, 1944 the Nazis occupied Budapest. It was the day after Passover. Emanuel Mandel's father, a Cantor, was permitted to return from a work camp in order to *daven* services. Cantor Mandel, who was present for this interview, indicated that the *Kehillah* had great power and was actually able to "force the Germans to allow him to come home. [This was the Congregation of Pest]. The *Kehillah* had over 1,040 employees involved with hospitals, hold age homes and every facet of Jewish life."

Cantor Mandel was a Czechoslovak citizen who came to Hungary in 1936. The Czechs and Hungarians hated each other, but they hated the Jews even more. The Cantor had working papers for four years. He went to serve as a chaplain and remained a chaplain even when he was sent to the labor camp. This allowed him to have special privileges. That is how the Cantor was able to bring supplies back to the congregation.

A.THE TRIP: How were people chosen for the trip?

- 1."Money, gold, diamonds, cash boullion
- 2.Active in the underground
- 3.Active in Jewish community leadership
- 4.Luck
- 5.Arrogance and push"

B.What was Emanuel Mandel's connection?

He had an uncle in *Ha Shomer Hatzair* who organized a Zionist underground network who organized *brecha*, escape through mountains and with *Aliyah Bet* via ships. Emanuel Mandel was not allowed in his grandmother's room--there was a printing press there to print illegal papers. From time to time it was moved from place to place.

C.What were the arrangements with the Germans?

The Jews were to be taken to one of three ports. All were to claim to be displaced persons--claiming Palestinian citizenship. This allowed the Germans to legitimize the whole procedure and account for the movement of 1,617 people. The ports were to be in Turkey, Spain or the Baltic. But the cattle cars (boxcars) went Northwest. They camped at night. Emanuel believes that three days (?) later they stopped for "rest" at or near Hamburg near the Hanover railroad, 18 miles or so from Bergen-Belsen. They were taken to Bergen-Belsen, a huge detention center, supposedly for three days to one week.

Emanuel indicates that this was a transit center. Their luck was the Red Cross knew of

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YEHUDA MANDEL [4-2-95]

their whereabouts and movement. Emanuel says that no one from the group died in camp except one young woman. None of the group was put to labor. *Sondergruppe* was the name of the group.

Negotiations continued.

D. What was the timing?

In June, 1944, Normandy Invasion. The Luftwaffe was knocked out of commission. Hungary was liberated in January, 1945. War was winding down. The group stayed three months in Bergen-Belsen until September. Then about 300 people, 1/4 of the group, were taken to Switzerland for additional dollars--money to be paid on tracing of the group to its destination. The Jews had money in Swiss accounts (some of the Jews) and released these additional funds to the Germans. Emanuel's mother had a 4kt diamond in a cake of soap. The cake of soap was lost on the first night after they left Hungary.

Emanuel Mandel got out in March, 1945. The war ended in May. In March, 1945, Emanuel was taken to German Switzerland. He recounts the following story. "German trains cannot run on Swiss tracks, so the train or tracks had to be switched. The train on the Swiss tracks was warm inside." He was taken and fumigated and put on the Swiss train. From March to May the area was run by the Red Cross. About 20-40 of the Hungarian kids were sent to school at Swaingallen [phonetic].

Emanuel Mandel was eight years of age in 1944. His mother, who accompanied him on the trip, has since passed away. His father, Cantor Yehudah Mandel, has a separate escape story. Cantor Mandel suggests that Kasztner organized the trip on which his son escaped. "In regard to the eligibility process it was only natural in those times that some would be saved and others would not." The Cantor did not fault Kasztner for being burdened with these decisions. "Everyone who could grabbed at freedom."

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