HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ALBERT FERLEGER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Eileen Steinberg
Date: July 31, 1984

This page left intentionally blank.

AF - Albert Ferleger [interviewee]
ES - Eileen Steinberg [interviewer]
Date: July 31, 1984

Tape one, side one:

ES: Please tell me where you were born and when and then a little bit about your family.

AF: I was born Chmielnik, Poland, June 15, 1919. I come from a very Orthodox family. My father's name was David. My mother's name was Doba, and I was brought up with a Hebrew and Yeshiva education and also public school. The education was good.

ES: What kind of occupation did your father have?

AF: My father--we had a wine factory and restaurant, and my mother and my father worked in the store. My sisters went to school and when they got older, they helped also in the store.

ES: How many sisters did you have?

AF: I had five sisters and two were married, one had two children and one had one. My sisters lived in Ostrovske, which is a city approximately 150 miles from where my parents lived. Of course, one got married from Ostrovske so she moved where her husband was in business and my other sister's husband worked also in the same city and...

ES: She moved to the same place?

AF: Yeah, so they both stayed in Ostrow Wielkopolski.

ES: That was at the start of the war?

AF: Well no, they lived there a few years before the war, they moved there.

ES: What was your life like before the war?

AF: Well, my parents were fairly--I would say for a small town in Europe they were not bad off, they were decent off and they paid, I went all to private schools and when I was about 15 years old there was no higher education schools in our city and I went to a large city. There were a few reasons, first of all, my parents were very orthodox and I started to join some Zionist organizations which they hardly approved of, but to a degree they did because it was a Zionist religious organization called *Mizrahi*. However, I went through my brother-in-law's friend to Lodz, the second largest city in Poland, which was Lodz and I, through some recommendations, I found a job in a textile dyeing plant and since before the war in those years you needed to be licensed to have a master textile, I went to school at night and I worked during the day. I worked hard just to prove to my parents, I guess, that I could make it.

ES: What years were you in school?

AF: From 1934 towards the end to 1939.

ES: Did your family experience any antisemitism before the Hitler period?

AF: Of course.

ES: Tell me--give me a few examples.

AF: Well, antisemitism in Europe it's a--you really have to live it to understand it. It's a very hard thing to explain. There were numerous newspapers who were just preaching antisemitism. There were groups of Polish organized organizations who were standing, especially in the big cities, but even the small ones, were organized the slogans not to buy from the Jews and it was right on top of the papers and it was in every, in every--in most of the Polish papers that were controlled by Polish organizations or by Polish groups and, of course, and Jewish kids since they were wearing, mostly in small towns even the large ones, special clothes, the long *Kapotes* [long coat worn by religious Jews], and those special caps, they were recognized, they were also recognized by being dark, you know, I mean, a Jew is recognized a mile away, and you know, so a Jewish boy would always--you see our city were mostly Polish people, I mean mostly Jewish, mostly 99%, 95% Jewish people, but if you went outside the city, a mile outside, you could get beaten up and…

ES: Did that happen to you?

AF: Oh, yes, several times, you either run away or they give me a couple kicks. Jews didn't go near a church around Christmas. Easter, Jews kept the stores closed, they would, you know, like windows or something like that. It was felt even in our city, but like if we, we would--if the Jewish soccer team would play with the Polish soccer team, if the Jews would win they would get kicked around and get beaten up, you know, it was a sad, okay? Especially in the Eastern European countries, I mean.

ES: Your parents, because of their business, and being in a town with mostly Jewish people, the business was it affected or not affected?

AF: Well, you see, we had our, in the small towns, first of all, to have a wine factory and restaurant with the alcohol you had to have a special concession from the government which we had since our great-grandfather for generations were in this business. However, from before the war and I would say, I think it was in '39 already, my father already got a piece of paper notifying them that within a year or two a year or something--I don't know exactly, they would, I don't exactly, they would lose their liquor, they would be able to sell like the wine and the hard liquor license they would lose because they taking it away from Jewish people.

ES: So it did very much affect...

AF: Yeah, and then don't forget, you know, before the war there was a Madame Christo, she was a Hitler, because a Polish senator and they already didn't let the Jews slaughter as much beef because they said it was inhumane, it was all kinds of things, my God, it was every day in Congress and they had to paint signs with their first name on it so that the *Polaks* [non-Jewish Poles] should recognize, like a David was a

Jewish name, Abraham was a Jewish name, John was a *goyish* name so, you know, it was felt all over no two ways about it.

ES: You mentioned that your family was Orthodox, what kind of organizations and what kind of synagogue did you belong to?

AF: Well, you see the Orthodox Jews were usually concentrated in small rooms, like they had a rabbi they believed in, you see there you have to understand a little bit the European, especially the Polish Jewry, in Poland there was a rabbi like there from a synagogue, a major synagogue, who got paid from the Jewish community service, there was a special Jewish community who was allowed to levy taxes on you for the synagogue and for the rabbi and for the *shochet*, all the Jewish--for the sexton, for the cantor, for all the Jewish things, and they had their own office and their own tax department and there was a major rabbi who he was set by the eldest, you know, from that community and he got paid, then got paid from them and you obeyed by their rituals and whatever there is. They got paid from the city. Then there were in every small town or big town, for that matter, were groups where rabbis, it was called a *reben a ruf* [phonetic]. The *reben* was a *rebe*. A *rebe* was the spiritual leader of this particular group, dynasty, like spiritual dynasties. There was a Ghero [phonetic] dynasty, Kuzmir [phonetic] dynasty, [unclear] dynasty, there was every dynasty, and they were going for generations and my father belonged let's say to the Kuzmir dynasty. Kuzmir dynasty in our city, had let's say, I would say about 40, 50 people, let's say 40 to 50, 45, the [unclear] are men, usually men belonged down there. The women would go, sometimes on Saturday they would go to the next room which would have like a door, and they would listen to the service. They wouldn't go in there. So this was the Orthodox Jewry. The non-Orthodox, the Conservative, which here you called Conservatives, down there they didn't work *Shabbos* either, you know, but they were like horse and buggy drivers or barbers or shoemakers, they belonged to a simple--they weren't the Orthodox Jewry, so they would go to the major synagogues. See, the city controlled or owned two big synagogues, which one of them the Nazis burned as soon as they walked in. They dynamited, I guess we'll get to that a little later.

ES: Yes.

AF: They dynamited, they put a lot of Jews in and the rabbi and they put in the beginning some Polish priests and people, too, but then they let the Polish and the priest out and then they didn't know that there was a back exit through windows, there were windows facing another wall in the bathroom there and most of them ran out, just a couple of them and then they dynamited the whole thing.

ES: You mentioned the synagogue and the religious life, did you or your family belong to any other type of organization before the war?

AF: Let me tell you something, the Orthodox Jewry, that's all it was...

ES: That was it?

AF: That was it, that's why I told you I personally--my sister started to belong to this *Mizrahi*, which was a Zionist religious organization and then she dragged me into it. The youth usually did belong some place, but the older people they believed in the rabbi and whatever the rabbi said, like every year or twice a year they would go to him, they would give him a $10 bill with a *kvitel* [a written note asking for a prayer] which meant, they would write down everything they need and God should help them, they would have to marry off some daughter, they don't make a decent living and all that and all that and this child is sick, and this wife has this disease, and this one is this--and the *rebe* would read all that and after he would read it, he would bless them sometimes he would advise them maybe they should use this medication because they knew a little bit about everything, they were like psychologists. You came down--that's why when I look at all these things here, here it became big business, down there it was a little industry, but it was there.

ES: Everybody was a psychologist.

AF: No, not everybody, these rabbis were really smart people. There were smart. They were very well educated and they were very smart, because see everybody told them their problems, then they listened in when they were with their father from the same generation or the next generation and they were in it, they knew it.

ES: They had a lot of background. Tell me a little bit about the *Mizrahi* organization that you joined, how old were you and was it in the same town?

AF: Yeah, well I actually started, I must have been about--in the beginning, it was like in hiding, you know must have been about 13.

ES: What year would that have been?

AF: Well, 1919, around 32--the beginning we started in hiding--my sister was older and she belonged there and then I would go up there and my parents wouldn't know and then we would have some meetings about Israel and about this and that and sing songs, you know.

ES: So you enjoyed that?

AF: Yeah.

ES: Did any of the men in your family serve in any national army?

AF: No.

ES: Can you tell me a little about your life in Poland in the early part of 1939 right before the German invasion?

AF: You asked a good thing. You see, the reason why I'm talking a little more than I should than you're asking me, I thought it's interesting for you to know this yourself. It's very hard to explain to the average people if they're not intelligent enough to understand why Jews didn't want to go to the Polish army. They went because they were forced to, but most of them didn't want to go. Antisemitism was down there terrible. If they got a Jew down there if he was Orthodox, forget it.

ES: They would make him miserable?

AF: They would make him so miserable, it's unbelievable. They would come in the middle of *Shabbos*, they would come in to him to shine his shoes. Then a farmer, a *bulvano* [crude or gross person], didn't know how to sign his name was his corporal and all that kind of stuff and even if you weren't religious, they would never, first of all, a Jew could never become an officer, never in his life unless he was a doctor or a lawyer, then if he was a doctor, they most of the time, they wouldn't take him because they didn't want any Jewish officers, high officers. So it wasn't like they didn't want to go to fight for their courage and they hated the people anyway, but the major thing is that the Jew had it horrible there.

ES: Were things any worse in '39?

AF: Well, they started to get worse, I would say, in '33, gradually they got worse. In the 30s, you didn't see all these stories that I told you before, of course.

ES: From '33 to '39, things got progressively worse?

AF: There was a big German propaganda in Poland.

ES: About how many Jews lived in your town?

AF: 8,000 families.

ES: 8.000 families. Was it a highly organized Jewish community?

AF: For instance, in what respect?

ES: Was the government and that sort of thing?

AF: Highly organized Jewish government?

ES: Was there a *Kehillah*?

AF: Yes, this was the *Kehillah* that I explained.

ES: This is what you were talking about before. Okay, and your family felt that it represented your best interest?

AF: Yes, well, they were voted in by the people. It was democratic vote, usually.

ES: What happened to you and your family during the week following the German invasion?

AF: Okay, this is a beginning story. Okay, when I was in Lodz, like I told you before, before the war. Now when the...

ES: Can I interrupt you for a minute. In 1939, during the invasion...

AF: Yeah, well just a second, hold it one second...

ES: You were in Lodz going to school?

AF: No, no, it was a week before I was in Lodz. A week before my mother gave me a telegram to come home. We saw already the war was already written on the wall so I packed up the stuff and came home. Back home, there was no question, you didn't' ask no question, mother wants you home. Come home. They're my parents, okay, so I came home. Now in the first of--the ninth month, started the war in September?

ES: September.

AF: September first, when the war started, I was already home at Chmielnik. Right the first night when they broke the border and crossed the border I don't remember was it the first night or the second that I don't remember, but there were rumors going on that they take the Jews in the coal mines and all that kind of stuff, the young Jews, so most of our city young people started to run east, walking, there was no, you know, no horses, no wagons, no cars so we started to walk, and I left the city since I was the only boy and my father was an older--and the rest of the girls home. And I walked. Well, I had a chance to go only roughly, I'm trying to think the cities I went to, maybe about two to 300 kilometers and when we came to a little--to the water which was the Vistula, I think, there were guys, *Polaks* who were taking Jews across that little water, but you had to give them 500 and 1,000 and then I heard half of them they threw them in the water. Anyway, so the ones that couldn't swim drowned. You know, it was already--I didn't even have a chance. It was all packed already and I was stuck in that city. And then, the Germans, of course, caught up with us in that city and they were bombing. Once I was near a bomb, maybe ten meters, ten yards, they threw a bomb in a small little station, train station and a lot of people got killed from the bombs, civilian, because the Army was right away into nothing. You know how it is, and robbing away. So after the army the tanks went by and it got quiet a little bit, we started to walk home. There was no transportation and of course, on the road there was roadblocks of Germans and they took away all your silver, and your money whatever you had down there and they didn't even--you see this was the *Wehrmacht*, the army, they didn't even ask in the beginning if we're Jews or not Jews, they took from everybody. And I got finally made it home, I don't know how long it took me awhile. When I got home, already, the synagogue was burned, the few Jews that they killed, whatever they killed, I don't remember how many and they killed a couple of them, they shot right in the windows and then I was home for about three or four days. I think it was on a Friday night, the occupation, the Germans had already taken the whole area, and they came in, they took my father because they put a contribution, a tax on the city, a quarter of a million *zlotys* and since my father was one of the wealthier ones, so they took them as hostages, they took 20 hostages, and they gave them three days to come up with the money or two days, I don't remember exactly and if not, they would kill them. Of course, after a while, they went through the cities they robbed every Jewish store. The *Polaks* put the cross on the window and put a sign it's Polish and they usually didn't break into any Polish stores. They would go into a farm, take a cow and leave a piece of paper, if they needed meat, you know, because the Jews didn't have no cows, but there was a textile, there was a restaurant, they just broke the doors open and robbed everything, whatever they could get a hold of and then they were going around, while I was back already, going around from house to house searching for any merchandise hidden in basements, well, the excuse was they were looking for radios, ammunition. Jews didn't have no radios, they didn't have no ammunition. If they had radios, they threw them out and whatever they found, whether it was leather or goods or

fabric or anything, they took it. They went around with trucks, and they just loaded up everything.

ES: Were they able to raise the ransom for your father to come home…?

AF: Yes, well, my father paid his share and this one paid his share and they arrested some more, let some go--this was the first one, then a couple of weeks later, they came with another ransom. It was a half a million.

ES: What was happening with the restaurant at this time, did they do anything to it?

AF: Well, they, let's put it this way, they took, whatever, all the whiskey and wine, whatever was there, they took it, they robbed it, that was the first day. And then you see, it was Polish clientele, you didn't have most of the time we had like farmer, Polish farmer clientele, they would sell a cow, they would go to drink. It was a different kind of drinking, it wasn't like drinking in a bar. If it was a market day, like Thursday, everybody brought their eggs and chicken and cows whatnot to the market and they would sell something and go out and have a couple of drinks with some neighbors and friends and this was mainly our business and then during the week, they would come and go, but at the time already started the bad part of it because the Polish people were afraid to go in already in to Jewish places and then a lot of *Polaks* started to right away open up Polish businesses because the Jews could not keep up the store or they had nothing to sell so they...

ES: So they came in and took over?

AF: They came in and took over. They came in legally and take over because they would go into the city hall and say they want this store and they would give it to them. It was already Polish controlled by Germany, it was Polish set up. Okay, now, where are we? We are in the end of '39, right?

ES: Right.

AF: Okay. You want to go further?

ES: Yes, I would like to know, what happened that year and the next year.

AF: Okay. In order to understand, I think I ought to tell you also that the week I was away, the 10 days that I was away. The Germans came in the second or the third day, I think, and they took hold of the city and they opened a police *Gendarmerie* station. An officer came down to the city and asked the Polish guy probably, they were already Polish stooges who spoke Yiddish so they spoke German. The Germans understood them, you know what I mean, and they asked who was the Jewish committee before. You know, the SS they knew everything was just planned, so most of them ran away, the Jewish leaders from the *Kehillah*. I would say most of them because they were in hiding, okay, so they took Dr. Grunwald which was a rich guy in the main street and had a big store. They went up to him and they said, you're going to be the chief of the *Kehillah*, *Judenrat* it was called.

ES: Right.

AF: If not, you get shot.

ES: You didn't have a choice.

AF: You didn't have a choice, and you bring us 12 people or whatever. You name us 12 people who would be the leaders of the city. So he named 12 people and they went around, found 12, 10, 8 or 9 and they incorporated more and they said you have a room--they already burned see where the Jewish community was, where the synagogue was, next to the synagogue and that was burned and they took in fact this building, it must have been his apartment. He had a very large apartment I don't know, I wasn't there before the war, it was right next to his apartment. They took a couple of rooms up there and they set up...

ES: That was the new meeting place?

AF: Yeah, a secretary, because the secretary was the secretary of a bank and the bank was liquidated right away, you know, they robbed everything, there was no bank. You know, when they walked in, everything was taken in a bank, no bank, you know. So the secretary from the bank Zeltsman, I think was his name, [unclear] Zeltsman he became the secretary and then a couple of others and this and that--then a couple of months later--and first of all that winter approached.

ES: Tell me what happened that winter.

AF: This winter was about the hardest winter that I ever remembered in my life, snow. The snow--the Germans wanted the roads to be clear and the snow was probably, it was more than six feet. It must have been more than 12, 10 feet high, snowing day and night, and the Jews ran out --every day the Jewish Committee this--had to deliver 6--, 800 people,1,000 people on the roads. They didn't take no Polish people from one city to the other to clean the snow, clean the roads. When a guy was down in the--when they cleared up the snow, one had to stay on top of the other to get out.

ES: Oh, that deep!

AF: That deep, and all men from 14, I think it was 14, to 48 had to come to these roads cleaning, if they caught the guy they beat the daylights out of him in the house. Every man had to get out in the morning in groups and go on the roads and clean the highways that the German army could go back and forth. And this was going on--and any time they needed Jews to load up from lumberyards, Poles, every amount of work, but there never was, every Jew had to--there was no business, no work, no nothing, had to go serve the Germans.

ES: But did they come back at night?

AF: Yes, you come back at night, yes. So, and they were taking some girls, too, like to cook or to wash laundry for them or whatever it is, but most of it was men. It was call *Zwangsarbeit*. It was called forced labor. And after during this winter, you know, it came all these Jewish committees got notices to take a list, what do you call it--to get a list out *Arbeitskarte* [work card] to take a list of all the Jews, registration, okay. So they formed groups, the Jewish committee formed young, boys and girls, going

around from house to house and registered Jews. It was five in a house, how old they were and everything else. And every man had to get a *Zwangtsarbeit* card that means a forced labor card, an identification card, when he was born, he's a Jew and he's eligible for *Zwangstarbeit*, forced labor any time the Germans asked.

ES: Need him.

AF: Need him so later on in the summer when they didn't need so many people so the Jewish committee would pick from lists, like they would send out they needed and they needed to plow in the gardens and then they needed to help load up merchandise from still the stores and factories, from grain plants and all that kind of stuff and this is where the, and of course, the Jews had to deliver so much tea and coffee and white flour and cakes to the Germans and this was when the real problem started, I'll never forget. Most of the Jews were off--the only thing they had was what they were hiding and digging holes, and hiding, alright so far, what next.

ES: Alright, so that took you through to the summer of 1940?

AF: Yeah.

ES: And the same thing continued into the fall?

AF: Yeah.

ES: And the winter, again, the winter of '41 was that as bad as '40, too?

AF: No, in the forties they already started--it was already then they made a list, they took young Jews, in fact, I was on the list, but I ran away at that time, they took a few hundred young Jews to, I forgot, near the Russian border some place.

Tape one, side two:

ES: We were up to 1940 now, were you ordered to go to a ghetto to work?

AF: Yeah, what has happened, since there was a majority of us, 99% of Jewish people there and since there were the few percent of Polish people, the Polish [unclear] whoever the orders were for Jews to leave the main streets, main thoroughways, and the main streets, it was called *Gnetska* in Polish, it was called like region, like where the Jews were allowed to live and the Jewish Committee sent notices where to move and then some people they had to force to take in these people, some people took them in like willingly and some paid to get in to other apartments or homes whatever. Some families would united and daughters would have to move to their father or to their sister or to brother or to friends whatever and little by little, when the Polish people took over the Jewish businesses, they took their apartments, too, so this is how it started to squeeze together and to...

ES: Smaller and smaller...

AF: Smaller and smaller area.

ES: Did your family have to move?

AF: No, my family, but we took in some other people, which I'll get to that.

ES: So you were able to stay in the same place?

AF: Yes, we were able to stay in the same place, yes.

ES: You mentioned that at this time, some of the Jews were being sent...

AF: Yes, and some of the Jews, well, they had a list from young people, they had to submit a list and send out notices. I heard about it through this guy who was the head down there through one of his family, there was some kind of my family. Anyway, there was some list being made. I didn't even know that I would be on the list, but I know that they were looking for young boys, so I ran away to a different, well, it was a different city, it was in the middle of the night. We Jews weren't allowed to go, if they catch me we would be killed, it was actually a rabbi, my mother's rabbi, to a city which belonged to a different district, I don't know how you call it, it's a different govern, like here governor of Pennsylvania and Jersey, this was different, like it belonged to Kielce [Keltz is Yiddish for Kielce] area and this belonged to another area, and they send the list and they arrested my mother and my mother had to pay somebody like they made a list of four people wanted to go who didn't have any money and this way their family would be taken care of and my mother put some money up for the family to be taken care of, but they sent him home anyway and I got out of this problem, and I came back about a week later.

ES: You didn't mention on the tape, you told me, but you didn't mention it on the tape, where were they sending these people.

AF: To Bialipoblask.

ES: Which was a concentration camp?

AF: A concentration camp, yeah.

ES: Did you know what was going on in the camp when the people were sent there?

AF: Well, let me put it to you this way, this was a small camp. The Jewish community was able to send a guy by the name of Munipaster, which he was later the *Kommandant* of the Jewish guys who kept order in the ghetto, and he was fluent in German. He used to be an actor on the civilian Munipaster in Romania, but he spoke German fluently. He was born and raised in Germany, and he was able to bring home about 99% of these boys, by paying off the Ukrainians, the Germans to this concentration camp, he was, well, what they were doing actually, they were drying out fields, and they built up some wooden hutch, and they kept them there and gave them once or twice a day to eat, but he was able somehow between paying off the Germans and the Gestapo, he was able to bring most of them home.

ES: To bring them home--so at this time, you had people being sent to a concentration camp also and most of the Jewish community was being squeezed into a small ghetto.

AF: Right.

ES: Were you able at first to leave the ghetto to work?

AF: Well, there was nowhere to work, no Jewish businesses, there was nothing...

ES: The only thing you did was forced labor.

AF: Right, there was nothing to work. About this time, same time, the poverty became very, very big and people were just starving in the streets and there came a guy from Lodz named Weisgro. I got to know him, I knew his son, his son was before that in our city, and he was a big *macher* [big shot] in the *Kehillah* in Lodz at the time, and I introduced him to this president from the Jewish *Kehillah* and he said--why don't you make a kitchen for the poor, at least let them have a hot soup and he became the kitchen. Anyway, they liked the idea and Jewish Committee used to get X amount of potatoes for the community and X amount of flour, you know, for the bread because we had our own ration bread and everything else and this kitchen had X amount, and anyway, I started to work in that kitchen with him to organize that kitchen and we went around to get plates, and went around to get people spoons and kettles and whatnot and started to build stoves and I worked with him on that kitchen to help alleviate the hunger in it.

ES: How was your family able to support itself during this time?

AF: Alright, okay, I'll tell you. It's a good question. In the very beginning, okay, we had some money, weren't poor. I was involved in yarn, textile so I brought home a lot of yarn that I had stocked in there and then in the very beginning, the Jews were traveling from one city to the other and brang some textiles and materials, whatever it is, and we were hiding it between the ceilings and between the floors, you know, the Jews were hiding it. And ever since, since this went up in price so much, every few

weeks you would take out a piece of this material and you would sell it and you would have what to eat and you didn't eat that much, you know. We also had barrels of wine hidden in certain areas. We would have attic. We would take away the ladder, it was closed up the ceiling, there was a lot of merchandise. The ones who had it, you know, but most of the poverty was with the poor they didn't have nothing because they lived from day to day, okay, next.

ES: Did you have any contact with anyone outside of your little ghetto?

AF: Like with Jewish people you mean?

ES: With anyone at all.

AF: No, with Jewish people there was no contact. You didn't have no telephone. I'm talking about later, the first couple of months, it was alright. You could have contact, you could write, your mail went but then later, nothing went.

ES: For example, your sisters, they lived in another town.

AF: No, they didn't write, first couple of months we went there, I told you I was there, my mother was there, in fact, we were bringing some merchandise there, here, you know. See, the first couple of months there weren't the Gestapo, SS wasn't involved, the army didn't even ask if you're Jewish, you know, only a few months like this. No there was no, later on there was no mail, the only thing is sometimes if a Gentile would go there or if you would send, we did send some, no, I think they sent it to us, a gentile guy that my sister had a baby, through somebody.

ES: That's another question I was going to ask you, during this very difficult time that you were in the ghetto and right before, did you have any help at all from any gentile people?

AF: Well, I'll get to that, that's why I told you. I was approached in I would say late '40, it must be '41 already, by Polish communists from before the war to buy some underground paper to support the underground goal.

ES: The Polish underground.

AF: The Polish underground, yeah. So I knew him, he was a baker. He worked next door the same in our building in the same house so I said yes, he would bring me a little newspaper clipping and every week I would give him seven *zlotys*. For every month and a couple of times, we would get a group, I would get like a group together to get a little more and he promised they would get bread and would help us, whatever it was. During this time also used to come, it was a little later, from the Jewish underground especially from *Hashomer Hatzair*. The fact is I didn't know, but I knew later on who he was the one who, Anielewicz[1], who was in the Warsaw...

ES: The Warsaw Ghetto uprising?

[1]Mordechai Anielewicz – ZOB commander commanded the Jewish fighters in the Warsaw ghetto uprising. ZOB (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa) - Jewish Combat Organization. www.ushmm.org "Warsaw Ghetto Uprising" article accessed 11-28-17.

AF: The ghetto uprising chief, my wife knew him well, she belonged with him in the same group in *Hashomer Hatzair*. He was in Chmielnik, but it was him I helped a couple get to the train station because I had later on since I worked in the sanitation committee later after the kitchen. I had a pass to go later in the evening, I took them down, but there was--you see the Socialist movement there was no, but I'll get to that little later, okay, go ahead.

ES: Were you able to hear any news of the outside world through newspapers or radio?

AF: Only from the German printed paper. Radio, the Jews, didn't have radio. There were a couple of people that we trusted, Polish people who, one was a *Volksdeutsche* [Ethnic Germans born outside the *Reich*] and he was a Polish patriot, but he was--he came from German descent, and he had a radio and he told little stories, but we really didn't put too much--and then I used to get once in a while, there was some underground newspapers.

ES: Was there an underground in the ghetto that you were...?

AF: Not a Jewish underground per se, there were groups of people like the *Hashomer Hatzair* would meet and would do some Zionist work or would get together and try to do some little thing and every group like kept together. The ones belonged to certain movements, but not as fighters.

ES: How did you feel about possible resistance to the Nazis?

AF: Well, everybody felt, nobody was able, everybody knew that nobody was able to raise a finger because if France of the Maginot Line could not hold them up for 24 hours, how could you with your bare hands stay in front of a gun?

ES: To what extent did the Poles help the Nazis persecute the Jews?

AF: I would say 99%, although I was survived by a Polish family, but they were one of the...

ES: One of the few...

AF: One of the few, just, Avenue of the Just.

ES: Yes, I know that avenue.

AF: Did you watch that the other day on television?

ES: I did see that on television, but I was at Yad Vashem and I remember the guide saying...

AF: Yes, but this whole thing was very interesting program.

ES: I saw it a while back. Were you aware of any Poles who helped hide Jews?

AF: Yeah.

ES: Who smuggled food or goods?

AF: I was aware because I was saved myself by a Polish family.

ES: Will you tell me your story now, what happened to you and your family?

AF: You want to know it now? This is the hardest part. I guess I might was well go ahead with it. Well, since we had a restaurant and we had a Polish clientele, I knew a lot of Polish people, we knew a lot of Polish people. However, nobody was trying to help since my--well, we'll start with the liquidation, okay, let's get so far because this is a little hard on me. When the Germans took away, liquidated, completely liquidated our city, they left 75, young, big, strong husky men to clean up the ghetto and they also left in hiding some of their special people, who, tailors, shoemakers and highly specialized, professional. They hid them even from the SS, even and...

ES: But they needed them to do work?

AF: They needed them to clean up the ghetto, they knew they would have to clean up all these homes and all these things and...

ES: Where were the people sent when the ghetto was liquidated?

AF: Alright, well, they took them all six o'clock they said they want them to be in the marketplace, there was a big marketplace and if they find anybody in the house they would shoot them. I remember my mother put up the lock on the house she thought she would come back. And…

ES: This was in 1942?

AF: Yes, and they took, they put 75 people away and they picked up strong men and I didn't want to go later, because I wanted to go with my father, and my father said maybe you go, maybe you'll remain alive, maybe you'll send us packages because, well, I skipped a big part of it, which I'll get back to it later, I guess. And…

ES: Were you one of the 75?

AF: Yes, this was the hardest part to live through, I don't have to tell you that because this as the hardest part to go through, and after me, and they put us in a couple of rooms. Of course, there were some, later on came some more from hiding, from underground, from hiding, from different cities and they accumulated another 500 or 1,000 after they liquidated them. Then they took to Treblinka, which was a liquidation camp. We knew later, after the war, I knew because somebody who was down there as a carpenter in Treblinka saw them, saw them come in to the gas chambers, right down there they went to the gas chambers.

ES: Did they see your family or just people from the town?

AF: They saw people from our town. He brought pictures from them because whatever they couldn't fit in into one oven, they put them in ditches and they burned them alive and they poured gas on them. But you see, it's very important for people, I guess especially for future generations to understand and know and even the ones who are putting it together, they sent in about six months before this, they sent a whole city of Plotsk, which I don't know how many, there was a few thousand Jews to our city without-- with just barely the clothes they had on themselves, they liquidated the whole city, sent them to our city. There came an order a day before to make some room, there's some Jews coming in. We didn't even know when. Since I was later on the sanitation

committee, I worked after we got organized in the kitchen then the typhus started in the city so I helped in the sanitation then I helped to keep order. They had to bring the sick in, it's a long story, then to take them to bury them and so I helped--putting up those people who came in from the other city.

ES: So you really had two cities in the ghetto?

AF: Yeah, well, we had about 12 cities, small towns from around it, but later on, we became so crowded there lived about eight people in a room, you know, this was--the more they liquidated small towns around the city, the more crowded it would get, but this big city, Plotsk, they sent most of them to our city and our city had to send them to small different cities, some of them, but most of them were in our city. So you would go, I would go, let's say back to some family and say the committee sent me to take those two people in, some of them took them, some of them didn't. Some of them you sort of had to put pressure on them to keep them. It wasn't easy, okay, because they all came hungry without nothing. They went through a [unclear] concentration camp where they took everything away from them, money, silver, gold, everything. They told them they're going to shoot them if they don't give them everything so they gave them everything. So this is when the real hunger started, the real thing, so therefore, when my parents went, we thought, they thought, maybe they sent them to another city. See, it wasn't like they...

ES: They didn't know.

AF: Nobody knew nothing, because like they sent from this city to here, then they sent from this city to here, until they sent you to liquidate.

ES: Right. When was it that you found out?

AF: Where they went?

ES: Yes.

AF: After the war.

ES: It wasn't until after the war that you found out?

AF: Because there was no way to find out. You see, when they took my uncle from another city, from Lublin, my father's brother, with his family, when they took him into, I just told you where they took him to Majdanek, it was a big concentration, my wife was in there, too. When they took them to Majdanek, they gave, as soon as they got there, they gave everybody a postal card to write to family that they're in a good camp, that they need some food and some clothes so we got a postcard. We didn't get any other mail, but this mail we got because it was sent through the Germans so everybody took packages and the millions of *zlotys*, whatever anybody could spend. Look, my father found out his father didn't have no clothes and his food so he took a pair of pants from him and the last pair of pants and some food and we made packages and we sent. So everybody sent their packages and the Germans got it.

ES: And here you thought you were helping your family?

AF: And you think, they were burned already alive.

ES: They were dead already.

AF: I mean, this is why, it wasn't simple going to resistance to what.

ES: Right. You didn't know.

AF: Even if you knew, look, if one guy would stay here with a gun, if 50 people--if one guy rapes a girl on the train station in the middle of the rain, people are afraid to go over there and stop him, with 50, 100 people around him. You know, it's not as simple as they say. Okay, now.

ES: You stayed then in the ghetto with 75 original people?

AF: Okay, with the 75 original, with the rest of them we buried the next day, where they shot right in the place down there the old some whoever, some committed suicide, so the next day, we were ordered to bury those people because we buried them, said the prayers, you know, the whole *shtick* and then they started to go around from house to house and sell the furniture to the Polish people and whatever better stuff, clothes they took to the German police, the station. Yeah, and little by little, they squeezed us into those couple of houses to be together, to have a fence around-like, kept us there and in the meantime I, me and another friend of mine we knew some people from during the war, from before the war were on the left wing movements. They weren't really communists, they were farmers, like--but they were willing to help whether it was for money or not, it still, of course, it was for money, but it's still unknown to me even now, since I still write to them, I send them packages, whether it was really for money or not, or to help. I think it was to help and for both. I met a few people, first of all, the one I kept supporting all the time. They were supposed to bring us guns and ammunition to go out in the woods because we heard there were some groups in the woods. Later on we found out they were Russians, in fact, one from our city was dropped with the Russians in the *Swietokryska woods*, which was far away from us, but look, we figured there was no choice, they were going to take us away too. We wouldn't go so we wanted to hide. It was no use fighting in the open. There was no way, you know, and we wanted to have some guns to be able to drop some food, simple. So we made, they wanted first ten rings for guns, golden rings, so we tried to sell some whatever we had belongings and this and that and we got together ten rings and they were supposed to bring us two guns that night and some other people gave them more rings and chains, they were supposed to meet them and they never showed. Then the next day they showed in the camp ghetto outside and they said no, they need eight more and we got them eight more and they never brought nothing, this was [unclear] so we knew already that this is gone. Then we started to meet some people that we knew and you know, the ones who asked you right away, what do you got and let me take it, we didn't trust. But it was this guy who some this other friend of mine knew him more than I did he knew my family and I found out that he was from the [unclear] a member of the Polish working farmers, people from before the war they had, it was in the 20's a group of Polish uprisers, like socialist forces. He was a member and he wasn't a church believer so it sounded that it was alright, but we had no

choice. So we sort of prepared him that we're going to hide and his son, I mean the young son, was in the underground. He was a leader. He was an officer in the underground.

ES: The Polish underground?

AF: Yeah, and he was going to take us into the underground for fighting purposes. He really didn't really know that his comrades are going to kill the Jews because he belonged, at the time there wasn't a liberal one there was only one kind, the real *Polaks* who didn't want the Jews either. He knew it and he didn't know, the young fellow. The old one was thinking of hiding and then would go out in the woods the nighttime and then would come back in the nighttime, and then would go out in the woods in the daytime and when it got tough, then they came, they surrounded again that little ghetto and they took away most of the people and they still left the original 75 and maybe a few more. Well, so I saw already what was going on and they already had me in the line and one officer took me out of line because I asked, I think it was because of that, I still don't know. I asked him permission to go to my father and take out my father's picture. That's all I wanted to take out from my house. It was a nice picture, big beard, you know. He said, that's all you want? I said, yeah, and maybe someone my age, I don't know, and he pushed me back into the line to remain. It was all a miracle.

ES: Was this a Pole?

AF: No, this was a German. This was a German officer, a Nazi officer, and one morning they killed, a day before, a leader from that little ghetto, you know, and he was that guy who took out all the Jews from that Oswescim-Brzezinka [Auschwitz-Birkenau]. He was with them like a buddy and if they killed him, I said that's it, time to run away and we made an appointment with this guy to meet him in the woods in a certain area and we came we were supposed to whistle twice, he was supposed to whistle back three times and we whistled and he probably went to another area, but anyway we got there. We knew, we thought we knew how to get there, we got there. Is there anything in between?

ES: Wait a second, you and another person, you went with?

AF: Yeah.

ES: This is October, 1942, and you're going into the forest with your friend.

AF: And we're hoping to find this guy, but somehow we lost each other, missed each other and we got down there in the middle of the night, I would say, alright, maybe two o'clock, whatever. We got in and the father was there and he says the son went to pick us up and the son came back, anyway, they were united. Well, the first, so we ate, of course, and they put us on the attic. It was very cold already, started we were very cold and they brought us up some food. Within the next couple of days, some old Jews went into hiding and the Germans heard that they, saw they were missing, and then there were some informers already who informed where the Jews were hidden, and they caught, started to catching up, catching some Jews and the Polish farmers, some other Polish inhabitants, of course, they shot them right away, the Jews. Later on, they even shot the Polish family.

ES: Punished them?

AF: Yeah, punished them, the mother and the son, which I knew them because I used to bring some Jews over to her house to hide and it got very tough and the farmer was, started to get scared. We made a deal with the farmer, he said when it all cools off he would take us to the underground in the woods, they have some huts down there and to be able to be with them and they would try to help us with food, then we could go around and organize with guns to take from the Polish farmers, but within a few days he found out differently himself. His own buddies--they weren't really told to do that--his own buddies, the Polish buddies went to Polish farmers who kept Jews and shot them themselves.

ES: Oh, my!

AF: And if not some of them reported them to the Germans. So you see, because this was still not a--it was still the Polish AK[2], which was the [unclear] National Guard, like they were for the *Polaks* and not for the Jews, so when he saw what was happening, the son, he came home and they really--I saw that they were sort of [unclear]. However, we thought the summer would come and the West England was going to come in and they're going to attack and they're going to take it one, two, three. The underground newspapers told us that. So he thought the Polish farmer thought the same thing. And then it was very tough to be on the attic already because we were afraid for breathing and afraid that the Germans would bring the dogs, smelling dogs, so they took us, there was a house, storage house, where they storaged the corn, the wheat, in the store, you know, and they made some kind of little thing, there under the store and we were there for a couple of weeks. Then it got very hot. They started to look for Jews all over and that farmer called us in one day, they saw already the son so they don't take any Jews in.

[2]*Armia Krajowa* – Home Army, an underground military organization in occupied Poland, which included units that were openly murderous of Jews. The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1933-194 by Nora Levin, 1973: p 382.

Tape two, side one:

ES: What happened?

AF: Where were we?

ES: You were in the farmhouse.

ES: In the building outside.

AF: Anyway, he called and it was about maybe three or four days before Christmas he called us in, the father, he said, look--in the meantime, we heard there was other Jews that they were hiding with him, Gershon, from the same community they were coming nighttime for some food, he gave them some food, he told us that. He said, look, it's getting very hot. How about you go in the woods during the day and come here every night, we'll give you food and he said, you can't stay here. Anyway, I started--this friend of mine who was with me, he was sort of a simple man, he sort of believed all this, and I said look, if we ever get out of here, that's it, that's the end of us. They would never let us back in, to him on the side, I said, look, you know, I told him I have some stuff, and I did with gentile people that we were hiding, and after the war and in my father's house, we had a big house and my grandmother's and this and that and my family in America. I gave him the whole *shpiel*, you know. I said if you help us, I said, and maybe let's figure out a way and I remembered my father telling me from the first World War that when the Russians were raping and robbing the Jewish girls, that they dug a hole underneath the basement someplace to go under another, under the ground and they closed it up and the Russians came in, they put some kind of a closet down there and they couldn't find the women and the money. So I says, how about if we start digging some place in the basement, they couldn't keep you because they kept potatoes there and the potatoes had to last the whole year so there really wasn't any other place. In the winter, it was hard to keep us, the dogs shouldn't be able to smell us out, if they came with dogs. So I says, look, where can we maybe find a place that we can cover some kind of an entrance, some place underneath just to dig up a hole under the ground and go there, and they liked the idea. I sold them the idea.

ES: He was willing to cooperate.

AF: Yeah. He went on Christmas Eve night to the woods to bring some trees to make some kind of a--we went out on Christmas Eve that every farmer is home Christmas Eve, they had a feast and he went out with us and the son and we dug up a hole underneath the stable, outside the stable, in other words, the stable was here and the horses were staying here, the cows here and this was on the outside of the stable and they made a hole from the stable going there.

ES: They could get into it from the stable.

AF: They could get into it, right, slide in on the floor. Of course, when the horse made pee, it went all the way down into us, but that was normal. And in the middle of the digging they caught a stone. The stone was as long as this counter, so they couldn't move that stone so there was only room--you couldn't make it too big. It was only room

enough for us to lay side by side and not to stretch out the leg, but to lay like this because you couldn't turn around. If you had to turn around, both of us had to turn around the same time and they put those trees on top and put some pieces of wood, whatever it was, and then they put earth on top of it and they planted tobacco on top of it because tobacco had big leaves.

ES: Could you breathe?

AF: Who said we were breathing? They made a little hole with pencils, who said we were breathing. We were working. That's why I have my problems, but that's neither here nor there. There was no window, no door, of course except the sliding in, this was covered with manure because the horse was staying in manure. The horse started to kick. He kicked in the wood. The other one was [unclear]. One time, a farmer was running a cow in town so the cow ran away from the farmer, stuck a leg in there, lucky that the cow took out the leg and the farmer told our farmer saw this and he has hidden potatoes. Every farmer was hiding something from the government, so you know, nobody suspected, and I don't have to tell you one time, the dog barked, we thought they're coming for us.

ES: Did you stay there all day?

AF: All the time, day and night, and we made down there and everything was there.

ES: They brought you food?

AF: They brought us food twice a day, early in the morning and late at night, and the son took the manure out from us. We were laying naked because everything rotted away from us, we had no clothes, just naked and the rats got used to us. At the beginning, we used to knock for the rats to run away, and later, the rats didn't--they weren't afraid. We got some little newspapers there they brought us down. We couldn't read except in the middle of the night, we would open the little door and a little kerosene lamp would be able to burn so we could read a little bit and we would stay outside, upstairs to watch and this was going on and on and on. I'd like to finish this as much as I can.

ES: How could you, could you keep track of time?

AF: Well, we kept track of what he told us, that's all we could keep track on and it wasn't easy, I don't have to tell you that.

ES: How long did you stay like that?

AF: Two years, a little over two years.

ES: Two years!

AF: And lice, I don't have to tell you, with bugs and lice, everything was just running, and burning and everything else.

ES: How about the two of you together, that must have been terrible with two people?

AF: I pulled a tooth out with a string and lucky I don't know, well, I was a very strong man, the other one was strong, too, but the other one a couple of times, you know, this part is the hardest part, a couple of times, this thing fell apart, it rotted away, like you say all this time, you know, it wasn't dry wood lumber so it fell apart, so lucky that big stone was there otherwise we would have died from the whole thing.

ES: Collapsed?

AF: Yeah, it collapsed in pieces, like the stone was here, the entrance was here, the stone was here, the big stone was here and we were here.

ES: It didn't fall on you. It fell on the stone?

AF: Part of it on this, part of it on us. We were able, and he came out in the middle of the day and he noticed that, anyway, so right away, of course, we waited through the night and he went out and redid this whole thing.

ES: During the two years, did the Germans come to the farm?

AF: Okay, let's make this short now. The police did not come, no. They came in other places, but a couple of weeks--okay, let's go further. Every time they killed some Jews we knew, see, well, they came and told us stories and after the front moved, took part of Poland already, the Russians took part of Poland so the Germans were moving the front. So one nice day, the Germans came in and they stationed down there, they said they're going to keep a couple of tanks there and about six Germans were there, staying with them in the house. We were there. One time they were going to dig themselves--see they didn't have no bathroom. If a farmer needed to go, he went to the stable because it was good manure, you know, put it right where the horse did. So they were going to dig themselves up a little bathroom, a hole, make it, so where do you think they would go to dig? Just on us, not outside the stable, just on us. The farmer saw it through the window, he went out and said, look, I'll dig it for you. He was afraid to dig it far away so he dug it--when the Germans made, it came right down to us.

ES: Oh, my goodness!

AF: And when they were talking, we heard every word they were talking, and they would--one time, for six days, they didn't bring us down any food at all.

ES: I was going to ask how they were able to bring you food.

AF: Well, they brought us food when they left in the fields. During the day, they went to maneuvers, so they went to the field, they went out on orders and patrols, you know. So they would take the horses and went out on patrols, but don't forget, the horses were staying right on top of us, they were talking to the horses right on top of me. And…

ES: If you would have made any noise, that would have been it.

AF: Oh, come on, and what did I want to say...

ES: You said for six days, they weren't able...

AF: For six days, they weren't able, because they had orders to wait, to move...

ES: And they were waiting to get the orders.

AF: They were waiting to get rid of the orders, so do I have to tell you, six days, we were drinking pee, twice and this other buddy of mine, he already had passed out and said don't save me, and I tried to knock him, and I put that pee on his face and all that and somehow I survived, I don't know how, don't ask me how. I just don't know. Look, we were ready to die then. About the sixth day, they said it was six days, I lost time for that, we were really out, he was out more than I was, but I got him back a little and then they got orders to move farther, so they moved one or other months or so, and then they brought us down some food.

ES: But you never were able to get out of that hole that whole time?

AF: No, never stood on the ground, no.

ES: What happened at the end of the two years?

AF: All right, then the Russians came in because, you see, the Russians were in six months before, but we didn't want to go out. It's a good thing we didn't want to go out because I wasn't able to walk. You see, the ones who could walk and run the 30 miles across the water, these are the ones the Russians kept down there, but then the Russians moved back. Well, it was a little politic the Russians wanted the Polish underground to work with them and the Polish underground didn't want to, so they wanted them to bleed out, as far as I heard later after the war, but anyway, then the Russians moved back so because they had already. Anyway, the Russians came in so the first couple of weeks...

ES: All right, please continue.

AF: When the Russians came in, for the first couple of days or even a week, we didn't even want to go out. The only thing I told them to do is make a hole to breathe, and then first of all, we didn't have no clothes, everything was rotted away and the clothes we gave to the farmer, they used it, you know, and they got us together out of a piece of wool with some straps, some kind of boots, or whatever, and some kind of old jacket and me and the other guy, and he came out there one time and said, look, the time has come, go ahead and then, firsts of all, he came and told us a story that all the Jews are back, this one is back and this one is back. There were five Jews back, or eight, that was all the Jews. And which when we came to the city, there was about a handful from hiding because they didn't liquidate any concentration camp at the time opened up yet.

ES: Can I back up for just a minute?

AF: Yeah, yeah.

ES: You came out of this hole, now you obviously could not get up and walk away, how long did it take you to get your strength, you must have stayed...

AF: All right, wait, you wouldn't believe it. First the farmer was afraid to keep us there. He didn't want the other Gentiles to know that he had kept Jews. He says go. She baked us little pieces of bread under the fire or whatever you call it, they call it falafels or whatever it is, this is what, you know, and they sent us, and somehow, I walked to the city and don't ask me how I walked, I don't know, because I couldn't walk anymore.

ES: Your friend, did you friend go with you?

AF: Yes and we walked, both walked, but obviously, he didn't get this arthritis, but I, you see, I was laying near the wall which the water was coming in, in the rain we had water up to our head. We were sometimes sticking water--just sticking nose out in that hole until the ground absorbed it, so I was laying near the wall, he was laying near the stable wall, so I had always a wet. That's why, anyway, and I walked, we walked to the city and the secretary of the city was a friend of my mother, a friend of ours of the family, a *Polak* and he took us in, we walked right in to him, and he knew where we were hidden. He was the only one who knew where we were hidden. I didn't trust him, but this other friend of mine trusted him, and he knew that we both went there.

ES: Who told him, you told him that you were…?

AF: This friend of ours that us that we were going into hiding to this place. I don't know why he told him. I was frightened, not I was frightened, look I had no choice, but we came to him and since it was a socialist government already, so he thought since the Jews came back and at that time, the Jews in Russia were like today, you know, the Jews were high up in Russia. So he took us in and we were in his house and right the next day, I couldn't walk anymore, that was it. I couldn't walk anymore, at all, not even with a cane. The first couple of days, I couldn't even walk with a cane anymore because from not moving.

ES: But you were able to walk to get there?

AF: Yeah, yeah.

ES: Somehow, when you had to walk, you were able.

AF: And we met some Russian soldier officers with tanks so we told them the couple of words we knew Russian. The first thing he asked us any girls, whiskey? Look, anyway, this is the type people you met and we were with this secretary, Polish secretary, from our city, and there was also a Russian unit staying down there in one of his, in his house, he had a big house, and I suspected that there was a Jewish girl there, as an officer in the Russian army. She didn't want to admit, but she looked Jewish, acted Jewish, spoke like--and she had, of course, there was a gentile boyfriend around there, but she brought us in food, and it was too fattening food so we started to get diarrhea and when I tell you diarrhea, it was the real thing.

ES: Because you weren't used to eating...

AF: No, we weren't used to eat fat, they gave us potatoes, we ate potatoes down there twice a day, potatoes and on Sundays, we had a piece of bread. That was our food, period, they didn't have anything else. They were afraid to buy another food and they didn't, let's put it this way, they didn't go out and get us better food than they ate.

ES: Yeah, they were eating the same thing.

AF: Yeah, the same thing, so we were there for about two or three weeks.

ES: What town was this?

AF: Chmielnik, in the city that I was born. Everybody knew me and then there was already liberated from hiding about maybe 15 people, 16 or 18 from the area, and then they started to come back from certain cities, concentration camps that they didn't have a chance to liquidate the rest of us. Some acted dead when the Germans moved out, some were laying on dead beds, left somewhere hiding in ovens or in some you know--I think Czestochowa was the first one. Then even in Auschwitz was some left. A friend of mine's mother was left like a dead person. They didn't feel like shooting them because they thought they were dead.

ES: Is this when you found out about the concentration camps and the mass killing, was this...

AF: No, this I found out a little later, came another guy who came already later. Anyway, when--so then they started to have some already freeing some concentration camps, starting freeing on the Polish soil, there was some. Most of them, they run to Germany, walking like my wife walked for two weeks, more than two weeks and other people, they kept on walking. The ones that couldn't make it were shot, and if not, they fell, without food or whatever. And then a guy came back from Treblinka where he got. They made an uprising in Treblinka, where they--so he was one of them, they made an uprising. They saw already everybody was killed and they told them to dig another hole so they knew it was going to be for them, so in the middle of the night, they broke out, they shot the German guard and a couple of guards, whatever it is, and they broke and a few of them survived, not all of them, most of them got killed, but a few of them survived. Like, I met another guy who survived with him. Sam Shield was his name, and he told us where they were.

ES: Did he tell you about your family?

AF: Well, he didn't see actually my family, he saw the whole city.

ES: But he saw people from the town and that's when you learned about the killing.

AF: Right.

ES: How long did you stay with the Polish secretary?

AF: Oh, about two to three weeks.

ES: How long did it take you to get where you could walk again?

AF: This is when I stared to walk with a cane, and I went to a Russian, they said it was a hospital. They didn't give you any medication. They didn't even have anything. They gave me some phosphorous to smear up, but I went to the druggist I knew then, they gave me something, I don't know what it is, it helped or not, but I was yellow and I was walking bent down my head because I couldn't lay straight, still I going, not walking straight, but it took a long time. Then I moved in with a guy, he was working with, he was a friend of mine's uncle and he took back his house from a Polish family that was hiding him, and this Polish family lived in his house.

ES: And they gave him back his house?

AF: Yeah, they gave him back his house, well, he later on signed it over to them, but they gave it back to him to stay, and I lived, moved in with him.

ES: You left your friend that you were with?

AF: No, with my friend, yes, and still some other people came over there, about 15 people, 20 people, in the house. It didn't mean nothing, how many people. You laid on the floor, you slept. You didn't need no mattresses.

ES: It was better than the hole.

AF: So, we, and I was really starved and this farmer came and he saw it was after the war, the Russians didn't give you nothing, not a thing. You could die. They didn't even--and I went to this Polish farmer who lived in our house, and I asked him, give me some potatoes. And he promised me, and there was nothing. One time...

ES: He never offered to give you back your house?

AF: No, forget about the house. I wanted something. He should give something, and I called even to the police and he came up to the police and he says, a brother you're going to give it to a Jew and take away my brother, you know, anyway, that was the end of that.

But you know, miracles do happen. I walked in the middle of a street, and I see some Polish people show to a Russian officer of me. They point the finger. He comes over. A guy comes over and starts talking to me Yiddish. He was an officer in the Russian Army. He knew people named Mizritsky and I said, well, they used to live here. Nobody is alive from there. Well, [unclear] part of Poland was freed already so somebody asked him if he goes to *Pest Velnis* he should find out about their family and then he says, he was a businessman, a Russian businessman, a Russian Jew businessman. He commanded a couple of trucks and he said, do you have any new money? I didn't have a penny. I didn't have old money, and I didn't have new money. He had a lot of new money. I didn't know why he asked me, but I presumed that something is fishy. He said, where do you live? And I showed him where I live. He said you wait here, and I'll be in later with a truck of merchandise. I knew the Russians were selling to the *Polaks* already, but I didn't have any money. I didn't know what to buy it with. Anyway, somehow I took his word for it. It was like you see an honest face. You don't know why, but somehow I took his word for it. I waited. I told this best friend of mine. He said he won't come, he's a bluff because the Russians they came into this farm of ours, and they told him they're going to bring him this and bring him that and a horse. They never brought nothing, they just ate and drink the whiskey and never came back. But this one was a Jewish guy, and he asked for Jewish family, and I sort of believed him.

ES: You believed him.

AF: I went around to some Polish people that I knew from before the war and also to the secretary to other Polish people who had stores and they knew me. They knew I wouldn't run away. Somehow they trusted me and I said, look, I'm going to have some merchandise, could you lend me 1,000 *zlotys*, which didn't mean much, but it was

money. This one [unclear], and I wrote it down on a little piece of paper what I put, and I stuck it in my back pocket, and I waited and waited, came like between day and night, you know, like he didn't want in broad daylight, comes about three or four soldiers with this officer and they start unloading the stuff, and he had a list everything what he had on that truck, you know. He was a businessman. He had a side of veal, a whole side of it, and he had rice, about 100 pounds maybe, and he had materials and he had cigarettes. What didn't he have! He had everything, he had raisins, he had stuff. Anyway, they start to unload it, in the meantime, there was an entrance from this side and an entrance from this side. He took it in this way, and I took it out this way, he took it in this way, and I didn't steal it from him because he knew everything what he had and he told me right away I knew everything. I got here, but I took it to the storekeepers to get more money, so I brought in ten packs of cigarettes and I said 50 *zlotys* a pack, okay, so they gave me 500 *zlotys* for ten packs and this one gave me 1,000 for 20 packs, this one gave me for a piece of material for a suit of clothes 3,000. I was out of my mind. I didn't have no prices. You see, he knew that he could trust Jewish people with the merchandise. He was afraid to unload it to *Polaks* because they could take it and not give him anything, but he had a list of everything what he had and the price that they sold in Lublin. I didn't know nothing. I didn't even know that new money existed, that's how much I knew about money, but those people trusted me, those storekeepers, everybody whatever I wanted because and I brought in like five pounds, ten pounds of rice and I wanted, let's say, 100 *zlotys* a pound and they gave me 100 *zlotys* and then when I saw they gave me 100 *zlotys*, I didn't even know what he was going to charge me, by then I had, I sold from everything a little bit and then I figured stop right here, you know, then I'll see what's what. Then he said, the side of meat is for you people, it was half a calf, exactly half, cut in half.

ES: You could certainly use that, especially for free.

AF: Right, so, of course, I gave it to the rest of the Jews who were there, you know. And then he made me a list, I forgot what it was, and I paid him and half of it, I had left.

ES: Profit.

AF: Profit, more than half, I guess, and I had some money left over and I became a businessman already. And it wasn't only for me, the meat and some rice, I gave it rest of the people, most of them were hungry. Some people, I went to some Polish people, they gave me back some merchandise that we left, my mother left some fabrics, I didn't get back nothing from nobody. I left some with a doctor who ran away because was a collaborator with the Germans. He was a Ukrainian. He ran away and that former secretary from the city, another one, he never gave me back nothing. He said he had it with his brother in a different city and it got burned. So go figure that out, you know. So he was afraid to keep it, so I was poor. Some people did collect from some farmers that they had, but I gave everybody meat and rice and for a couple of weeks, we

all had what to eat. And I was in that city for a few months until the *Polaks*, started to I don't know if you heard the story that in Kielce they killed about 25 to 30 Jews. It happened, they were friends of mine. I knew them all. And then a guy came to me and says, Abram, they used to call me, take a few Jews that you have and run away, because you will go next. And that's when I went to Lodz.

ES: What did you do when you got to Lodz?

AF: When I got to Lodz, I started--I had to eat, so I started to sell. First of all, I bought a horse and wagon, and I took some--I smuggled some flour, some geese to Lodz to sell and then I bought in Lodz some old *shmates*, no, then I went to the German side of Poland and I bought some old clothes and I brought it to Lodz to sell, so I had what to eat, you know?

ES: How long did you stay in Lodz?

AF: I stayed in Lodz for a few months. Then my wife, we got hooked up in the underground Jewish organization *Briha*[3], it was called, the people smuggled out from Poland, Jews.

ES: You began to meet together?

AF: Yeah, well, we were, in fact, Miriam was in a--she was trained as a leader, and then I was trained and we got. It was an underground organization that smuggled Jews out from Poland because you couldn't get out from Poland, a communist country. So I joined a group like that with Miriam.

ES: Miriam is your wife.

AF: Yeah and her sisters.

ES: This was all in Lodz, while you're still...

AF: Yeah, yeah. And…

ES: You were making plans to leave Poland?

AF: Yes and my wife's sister. See, my wife was in Chenstohof [possibly Chenstochov - Yiddish name for Czestochowa] in one of these community living, it was like a kibbutz, but she was trained as a leader, so they sent her to Lodz and she found out her sisters went with a group to bring them to another city already to leave, then she came and she said you have to leave because my sister and I want to leave together. So I had all this stuff, merchandise and clothes and I had an apartment, I had a bed, you now, at that time, you had a bed, you had what to cover yourself, you were a rich man, plain and simple. But I left everything and I sold everything out right away and we left and then we came on the border, we came in this underground so they made me as a leader, from a group leader and we all got Greek passports, as Greeks, and we were told that if we get on the Polish border, you say you're Jewish Greeks, you were in the concentration camp and you're going back to Greece. And we spoke Hebrew, and the ones who couldn't

[3]*Brihah* - (also *Beriha* or *Bricha*), a post-WWII movement that organized illegal emigration from eastern Europe into the Allied-occupied zones and Palestine or Israel. lit. "escape" in Hebrew. (ushmm.org article "Brihah" from the Holocaust Encyclopedia accessed 11-19-2013)

speak Hebrew could *daven* so they said prayers, and they thought it was Greek, until we got on the border, alright on the Czechoslovak-, on the Polish border to Czechoslovakia. A lot of the *Polaks*, some maybe knew we were Jews, and they robbed us what they could. I didn't let them take my leather jacket or my wife's, I spoke to them Hebrew. They kept us all night, and one of the girls from that *kibbutz* broke down and started to talk Polish, so they started to rob more, what do you think they did? And they robbed us more and we went across one border, half a border Czechoslovak and half Poland. I was like in mid-air. And then, from Czechoslovakia, we got on a train, no, no. In the nighttime, we were smuggled through a barbed wire, broken barbed wire, somehow to Czechoslovakia, and we came and we were the underground, the Israeli underground, was waiting for us down there. They told us where to go in case here, they caught here, get here, and we went to another camp there, also no water, no cold, no hot. There was a little bit of cold water running out of a little pipe and we washed ourself, freezing, in the middle of the winter. And then, we got one slice of bread from some kind of organization, I don't know where, and then I had some, since I was a leader...

Tape two, side two:

ES: Want to continue?

AF: Where were we?

ES: You were on the border...

AF: Yeah, okay, now we got into Czechoslovakia, like I told you, we got up--so we got a thin slice of bread and black coffee, and I was really hungry, my wife was hungry and her sister, the whole camp, and I said there must be some--and the Czechs are very fine people, and we walked out, and we came near a restaurant, they were gracious, too. The only thing they could give you is a ration, which means if you're back, they give you a ration for dinner. A dinner consists of water and a half a potato, running inside. This was the soup, *polifko*, it's called. That's all we could get period on the ration. So I said, give me a couple of packs of cigarettes, and I took Miriam, and I said, let's go. I walked, and I was smelling for bakery, I didn't know how to say bakery, but I was saying somebody must bake bread, and I get by and I see baker smell. The front door is closed because I imagine early in the morning, they probably were handing out the rations bread. I went in the back of the bakery, and I come in, and I see bread laying on the floor, so many loaves of bread, and as soon as I walked in, I grabbed a loaf of bread, and I broke it on my knee, and I started to eat, and he came over and I said, I took a pack of cigarettes, and I gave him a pack of cigarettes. He was tickled pink. He never saw a pack. It was American cigarettes already. It was sold on the black market over there, in, Camels, I remember like now, you know. He became my friend, and I ate enough right there in the bakery. Miriam ate, and I broke up into pieces, and I gave Miriam in the pocketbook and breast. He was afraid [unclear]. And he gave me another bread, and I gave him another pack of cigarettes. Anyway, the same night, I came to that camp down there, and I called all my people that I knew from our group, and I handed out the pieces of bread and everyone was tickled, where do you get bread? Don't worry. So the next day, I knew already where to go. We took about six packs of cigarettes and I took about a half a dozen people and little be little, we walked in and out and everybody kept up, so that was that. Then we had to leave from Czechoslovakia to Germany so then we had these papers were taken away, and they gave us the leader. We had other papers that we are, at that particular time, we were German Jews, and we go back to Germany, okay, so we had different names. Before it was Yahelewitz, and then I was Reinhauer, whatever it was. Okay, I was a German Jew already, and we all spoke German, so that was easier. Somehow or the other in Czechoslovakia--and we had each had group of people. In Czechoslovakia, a guy, and, this is a very interesting story, [unclear]. It's very hard to remember all these things, but there was another leader from another group. He was a little above me, and he started to talk to a guy on the train, a Czechoslovakian Jew, who was an informer, a Communist, Russian informer, that we are not actually German Jews, we are not Greek Jews, that we actually are going to Israel, and we're leaving Poland and the whole *shpiel*, he told him the whole story. And he came and told me the

story, *Motek*, he says, Abraham, you know, this is a nice guy, this Czechoslovakian. How do you know he's not an informer, I said. I don't like the way he told me. No sooner do I say that, the couple of Czechoslovakian police standing near the doors already. Well, this is bad, but we knew we had a long travel to Germany, it was all Czechoslovakian. So I said, look, we got to do something, I says, let's try little by little to sneak into one wagon, you know, to one train like, so standing up, we didn't have nothing with us anyway, there was no package, no nothing.

ES: No luggage.

AP: Just the way. So I said, let's try to do that, some day, I didn't want to kill. We would have dropped them down the train, if things would have gotten, if this wouldn't have happened. We decided. I had two guys with me in the front, and we would have just dropped them, he was standing like this, you know, we couldn't dropped him down. If we would shoot, we would shoot. There was nothing I could do. And he sat down on the seat and he fell asleep, maybe 12 o'clock at night, and we watched him. As I watched him sleep, they stopped at little cities, each one they stopped because to take more passenger, was a very slow train and I, we winked. We made signs and as they stopped in another city, we all snuck out. I-- let's put it this way, I don't remember leaving any. We weren't short of any people unless they were from another group who joined with us, I don't know, but we kept count. We all snuck out, and I told them to go right on the fields, not to stay in the station, and that train went away. We found out later that the same guy, the same informer squealed, and they took hundreds of hundreds, of Jews to Hungary and from Hungary to the Soviet Union.

ES: Oh, my goodness!

AF: You know, and we're so lucky and then about four o'clock in the morning, here we don't have a train and everybody was hungry because we didn't eat the day before and here it's four o'clock in the morning...

ES: And you're in the field...

AF: And we're in the field, in the middle of the field. Anyway, here we got to work a different number. We got back, we started dig out back the Greek papers and me and another guy, we said we'll go in town and we'll see what we can do. We need food. We found out, though, that, we knew, that there was in Theresienstadt a Czechoslovakian concentration camp there was Theresienstadt. My wife was liberated there. We found out about this Theresienstadt concentration camp, and since this was from a Greek, it was all false, there was no Greek papers, you know, it was a Greek stamp, but it was made by the Jews, by Israeli Jews who made that stamp. Since I said, well we had to go because, we first of all, we didn't know how far we are from Germany, we didn't know nothing really. I took me and another guy, and we said, look, if we won't come back, then we would be the ones to just a few hours sleep each one to start finding out, and we went and found out the Red Cross and some children were very nice. Czechoslovakian people are the most wonderful people in the world. They don't tell you where to go, they take you.

They take you there, old, young, they take you there. Their business goes away, they take you there. So they took us to Red Cross and they gave us a bucket, we didn't have no [unclear] a bucket of coffee or soup, I don't know, my wife thinks it was coffee, five or six loaves of bread, and they gave us ropes to hang it up on the shoulders...

ES: So you could carry it...

AF: Yeah, and they told us how far we are from the German border and they gave us a paper that we are Czechoslovakian, under the Czechoslovakian auspices, we were liberated on Czechoslovakian grounds and we told them we don't have any other thing than this and I happen to. See I was trying to speak a little bit Polish and a little bit Russian because I learned from the Russians, I was with them a few months so I learned from them a little bit. Between Polish and a little bit Slovakian, it's similar to that, and I said the rest of them don't know. I said my mother was a teacher, and I gave them the whole *shpiel.* And they gave us a piece of paper that we were liberated in Czechoslovakia and the Red Cross, and that we don't have to show anymore the Greek papers that they're giving us permission to go to Greece to Germany. I came back, everybody ate, everybody drank from the bucket coffee, and we walked to the next station. We didn't want to walk to this station because we were afraid that some. They left word, so we walked with the train tracks to the next station, and about maybe 10, 11 o'clock, around 2 o'clock, whatever it was, a train came and took us to German border. When we came to the German border, before the German border, we got off. They told us that, they told us before the German border, get off. Somebody was waiting for us there already, other people were waiting, they knew we were late for two days. And they said, don't show these papers anymore, tell them that you are Polish Jews, and you're going from Germany, you're walking to Poland, and they will take you back to Germany. If they catch you. But we went through in the middle of the night, I remember we slept in Casbah, it used to be a hotel, it was all dirty, probably some 100,000 refugees probably went through this camp, were lying all over, and in the middle of the night, we went through like crawling, you know, on the borders and we somehow made it on the German. And a guy jumped on the tree, and he said, you're on German soil, don't worry about a thing, and he took us to München.

ES: What nationality was the person on the tree?

AF: He was a Polish Jew, but he was from the same group of people. I remember he jumped on the tree, you know, on us like we--he said *amchol*. *Amchol* was a word it means your people. *Am* is folk, *Amchol* is…

ES: I'm one of you.

AF: I'm one of you, right. Just like in Hebrew. It became a [unclear] motto after the war. If you wanted to pray and you didn't know if there were any Jews, you sang a song, Polish song, *Amchol*, like in Polish and someone would answer and then you would know he's Jewish. So he jumped out and said *amchol* and he told us, don't worry about a thing now. Just go and we went to, I forgot, the big city, yeah, we went to

München, Munich and from Munich, they sent us to different *kibbutzim*, you know, to Regensdorf.

ES: You mean the DP camp. How long did you stay in the DP camp?

AF: In the DP camp, I was from about seven months.

ES: And then you had relatives in Philadelphia?

AF: Yeah, my uncle sent us papers and for me and Miriam and then my sister-in-law, at the time, the HIAS, Truman gave these certificates, affidavits to come here, 160,000, whatever it is and we were one of them.

ES: I want to backtrack and ask you one more question before we finish. You spent those two horrendous years in that hole in the ground, more than two years, what sustained you, what kept you going, was it religious belief, belief in yourself that you would eventually get out, what was it that kept you going?

AF: Good question. We were talking about that the other day, we keep talking about that all the time. I just made a statement the other day with some people. If I had to go through it, again, I would want to. I wouldn't want to live, and I wouldn't go through it. It kept us. First of all, it kept us to tell the world, to show the world, it kept us, not as much for me because, like I saw the other day on this show, the woman from Holland, she's by herself, and she says that sometimes she feels guilty, a guilt feeling. Why me? My sisters and my father never missed services--his wife, my mother, their children, why me? It is a terrible, terrible guilt to think about. Like I said before I didn't even tell you five percent what I went through with my family and how we lived. And my father was hiding in the attic to save his beard, you know. It would be really too much. However, it wasn't that much religious belief because when I saw what God did to the Jewish people who went to the synagogue three times a day, it hurted me, but I don't want to say it, not only in public, not in private. I am not a person who never says I don't believe. You believe as much as you can. No, first of all, we were in it so long already that you wanted to see the end of the day. Then you were also fooled, not fooled, but taught to believe the underground press or believe that England and America are going to open up the second front and the Germans are going to run away.

ES: That it would be over soon, in other words.

AF: And then there were rumors that they were going to make peace with England and with America, and there won't be no more war, and then you figure that they're going to let the few Jews alive. There were all kinds of things that you wanted to live for and you wanted to see really their end. And then we wanted to be able to tell and we thought we're going to be carried on the seven wonders of the world, to lecture all over the world what happened.

ES: That you would be martyrs.

AF: It didn't happen.

ES: No, it didn't happen.

AF: No, it didn't happen. The Germans, when we were in the DP camps, the Germans, we were laying in little rooms, 12 people in a room, the first couple of months, and the Germans didn't get out of their homes. They threw us out of our homes, but the Americans didn't take them. They gave them chocolates, they didn't give us the chocolates, they gave it to the Germans. They had what to eat, we didn't. In the DP camps, we had soup, we weren't exactly living it up, you know.

ES: Are you bitter?

AF: Yeah. Primarily, I'm bitter in the gentile world. I'm also a little bitter in the Jewish world.

ES: Because they didn't do enough.

AF: They didn't do, well, they didn't do anything since. As you know, I was Chairman of the monument, and I worked for that for seven, eight years. I gave a lot of years and money and time away for that and finally, we accomplished it. I would say I still have the drawings upstairs. The artist designed it right here and with me, and I told him what I wanted to be done because I was [unclear] . It entered my mind to do it, but when I read, I came here and I read an article from Chaim Lieberman, I think he was writing in the *Forwards*, the Jewish paper, that so many trucks, they wanted to save so many Jews and for so many this. It wasn't even tanks, for this, they wanted to save this, and for this, they wanted to save that, and Eichmann made the deal.

ES: Yes, I know.

AF: And they wanted to put it up in Switzerland as an escrow, and the American Jewry with Strauss and with Morgenthau, with all the Jews, said how could we support the enemy because they knew that this would last the Germans for three minutes, three minutes war they couldn't do with all that and Roosevelt was writing. They caught some people in Egypt and England would not let them go through to tell Roosevelt. Then when Roosevelt found out, they didn't do a thing after. So I'm bitter the Jews didn't close the store for one day, they didn't even make a protest march. The papers didn't show it when I was working on the monument before I got involved in it knee deep, I went to the library of the *Inquirer* and the *Bulletin*, and I saw little articles on the fifth page that the Jews moved from Prague into another city. They knew here what was going on. The fact is they knew it, they knew. Roosevelt told the Mufti that there won't be more Jewish questions. That Hitler was giving up. He knew that, and a lot of the Jews--so anyway, when I saw that article, I came to my uncle who was the President of the Federation of Polish Jews, and it was in the middle on Sunday, I think we had dinner or whatever it was, and I just left all the food, and I ran. I didn't have no car, and we used to go to the uncle anyway, and I took a taxi with my wife and I asked, uncle, is that true? Yeah, he says, the fact is, I was in Washington, he says. We went to the delegation. We brought some Polish people who came from the Treblinka area, and they told how they're taking in the Jews, and there's only room down there for about 2,000 Jews and they're bringing in 20,000 every day. That means they're liquidating them. To stand up there's only,

there's ovens and they're burning and they knew that they smelled from flesh, and they said they're finding bones all over the manure. They're taking up manure from there and they're finding bones, human bones. And he says, we went down there with the delegation to Washington from the Federation of Polish Jews and, he says, and no big officer, some kind of a *schlep* that the doorman spoke to them, they left a piece of paper and they went, but the Jews didn't do a thing. They didn't march, they didn't go to Washington, they didn't say they're not going to buy bonds unless you do this, then also when I was involved in an organization and I brought a speaker who was a Polish Senator in the Polish government in England and he came to Churchill and he says, bomb the gas chambers, just bomb the ovens, that's all, they can't shoot them all, they would run away, some of them would run away, bomb the ovens. He says, why should we kill the people, he says, civilian people. He couldn't do that. This they could do, because they could fight over Poland. Poland wasn't defended with tanks. The Germans didn't have no *Luftwaffe* over Poland. They didn't protect Poland, so I am bitter, yeah, I am bitter. Of course most of the gentile world, mostly on the Pope, the Christian world, but I'm also bitter, a lot bitter, at the time, on the Jewish population, and it's not true that they didn't know. The ones who knew didn't tell the ones who didn't know. But there was a large number that didn't know, but if they were ignorant, see today, if you hide something from the press like Vanessa, it's a dirty picture, you see what is going on.

ES: They find out.

AF: And to the detail.

ES: I want to thank you very, very much for sharing your experience, I really do appreciate it.

AF: You're welcome. I was postponing and postponing, and I figured if you want to take time, if you feel it's important, like I said before, a similar story is, not similar, the only thing I had a small story or a bigger one in Brandeis University.

ES: Well, thank you for sharing it with me.

AF: You're welcome.