

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ALFRED WALDNER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Edith Millman
Date: May 28, 1989

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AW - Alfred Waldner [interviewee]

EM - Edith Millman [interviewer]

Date: May 28, 1989

Tape one, side one:

EM: Mr. Waldner, could you tell me when you were born and where?

AW: I was born August 20, 1913 in Teschen, or now called Cieszyn, *Früher hies es zu Österreich gehörten jetzt gehört es zu Polen.*

EM: That is, "It belonged to Austria, and now it belongs to Poland."

AW: Right.

EM: Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

AW: We were-- we had a restaurant in Cieszyn and we were a fam-- a middle class family, well off, and we were three children. I was the oldest one and two sisters were younger. All of us were well established and going to school and every one of us were planning out our future. Naturally, we were young, I was the oldest one and when time went by, 1939, September 1, the Germans broke through into Obertesch. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Naturally, right away they started all the routine, the German routine forcing the young people to go to work in the military establishments. We call this the German *Kaserne* [barracks]. And after comes out the brutality and the beatings and so on and so on. My father had to give up the restaurant because it was a Jewish establishment and we had for a while living in the-- the family was living in a house, 27 of October 1939...

EM: Wait a second. I want to ask you a little bit about your life before the war. Was your family religious?

AW: Traditional. They were, in other words, what we are talking about we hold up, we knew about, we believed in our Jewish heritage and we tried to keep it up. And naturally, we went to the routines, Sunday school and so on, and naturally, our parents was involved in philanthropical work and we as children was already following the traits of our parents to hold up the Jewish tradition.

EM: Did you belong to any Zionist organization?

AW: I have to admit, I was working and I had-- I was very little involved, but in comparison to my two sisters.

EM: They were more involved?

AW: They were more involved in the Zionist movement at the time.

EM: Did you experience antisemitism before the war and in what form?

AW: Actually, there was very-- there was nothing special that had something to do with antisemitism. In the last '34, '35, '36, when our town became more polarized, the polarity was going more and they were bringing out from Warsaw, from other northern parts of Poland the-- especially academics what they called, and then they start

beating up Jews and demolishing Jewish businesses, but this was characteristically done by Polish people, by Polish students and we were starting fighting back. It came to a point that the restaurant was demolished.

EM: That was in what year?

AW: That was in '36, '37, and they'd be coming in, but it was bearable. Naturally, then started already Hitler with the trend in Germany-- first the trend in Austria, then Germany, then they came Czechoslovakia and the *Sudetengebiet* and partitioning of Czechoslovakia into different parts. It was something coming and then the German propaganda and so on. But we are still naïve and hopeful it will not come to such a point that we had to leave and so on.

EM: Now tell me about your experiences at first when the Germans marched in.

AW: When the Germans marched in exactly September the first, at three o'clock, they crossed the bridge, because at that time the town was divided, the south was divided-- was Czechoslovakia and the north was Poland.

EM: The southern part of the town?

AW: ...yes, of the town. The south was Czechoslovakia, Chehayo [phonetic] we they called it, and the northern part was-- the little river divided the city and they crossed the bridge without any...

EM: Difficulties.

AW: Difficulties, or how you call this in German, resistance, because they were running away and right away the first-- they closed up all the Jewish businesses and took away and demolished some of them. And naturally, our parents had to leave that restaurant and move out of the house and had no entry into that restaurant.

EM: Just a minute, was the southern part of Cieszyn, the one that was Czechoslovakia, was that occupied by the Germans earlier?

AW: Yes, by the Germans too, because they were going that way, they were coming from *Sudetengebiet* and they broke the front and they come this way [unclear] on the first of October, the first of September they were actually there.

EM: In Poland...

AW: The war started.

EM: Now tell me, were any laws announced against the Jews, like did the Jews have to wear an armband?

AW: Yes, naturally, immediately we have to take the armband and so with that...

EM: What were they, white?

AW: White and blue.

EM: White and blue.

AW: Right. Naturally, we [unclear] had forced labor seven days a week from the early Monday morning to end of week, no six days a week, we had one day off on the beginning. And that was going on...

EM: What kind of labor were you doing?

AW: Only the forced labor cleaning, street cleaning, and cleaning of the military barracks, and just manual labor that just, so the people has to be [unclear]...

EM: ...working.

AW: ...so they took away the pride. That was going on...

EM: How about the restaurant, was your father able to continue with the restaurant?

AW: No, the restaurant had to be right away, immediately given up to the people that were before working for our parents and they became now the ...

EM: ...owners.

AW: supposedly the owners of, *Treuhänder* [Ger: custodian], of the restaurant.

EM: Were these Germans or Poles?

AW: No, they were...

EM: *Volksdeutsche*?

AW: *Volksdeutsche*.

EM: Could you tell me when you were sent to a camp and what happened?

AW: On October, the last week, no, the second week of October came a proclamation that all young men have to be, have to get registered for special work what they call the Germans, *Umschulungslager* [German: re-training camp or re-education], and even gave us documents that we had to get pictures. We had to pay at the end of the month a certain amount of money for transportation to the *lager*, to the *Umschulungslager*, but we were still naïve and were not forced. Everybody was hopeful, could not realize that we were naïve and we went regular-- even my mother took me to the railroad station and she saw a normal carload, like a pa-- like say for example...

EM: A passenger car?

AW: Yeah, a passenger car, *Dritte Klasse* [German: third class], everyone was fine, nobody was chasing. That was going on, that was in the afternoon and evening we had come to Dziedzice. And in Dziedzice they chased us out of cars and told us, "Get rid of all the luggage" and now comes the chasing of the carloads and now becomes-- starts the catastrophe, and during the night we landed up...

EM: They chased you out of the passenger...?

AW: And chased us back in the carload.

EM: In the-- what kind of-- cattle car?

AW: Cattle car.

EM: Oh, aha.

AW: And...

EM: Do you want to rest a little bit now?

AW: No, we go over this, as fast as possible. And [unclear] it was like less than-- I don't know how many people were in that-- one on top of the other. You know, then your foot...

EM: Wait a minute.

AW: The next, following day, in the afternoon all of a sudden we landed up in Nisko, by Sandomierz. It was a plain field and you know, the-- over there the ground was mud and it was very hard to walk on it, but it was part of the trip and there were already many thousands of people from Czechoslovakia and here I found my cousin, Ervin, that time Ervin Bleiweiss.

EM: He was from where?

AW: From Czechoslovakia, from Mistek.

EM: Mistek.

AW: Okay and they were already forced to build in the barracks. But we, somehow, we ran away and we went in the city.

EM: You and...

AW: And others, we were not forced. We saw something coming, sooner or later they are going to lock up everybody, so we start thinking about running, escaping from the whole thing. And I come-- after a few days we-- I convinced my cousin to escape with me together and we went-- that time the Russians were in Rawa Ruska, and we were caught in our escape by the Russians. And we spent a few days in the cell, but somehow at that time they believed that the Czechs they are friends of the Russians and I was claiming that I am a Czech too, so they let us go free, and by train, and by-- we arrived in Lemberg. In Lemberg was the Russians and we tried to find some people, friends, and somehow we were given quarters for all the refugees in the middle of Lemberg or Lvov. And then here I found again-- we found our relatives, the Probst, they helped us and we were eating, they gave us some little food and then I actually I found with the Russians because our friends they connected me. I found a job as a driver in a liquor factory, Kronik. So we were visiting and in the evening I was coming to the quarters, we were sleeping on the floor [unclear]...

EM: Were you with your cousin at that time?

AW: Yes, all the time.

EM: With Ervin?

AW: With Ervin, with Eric.

EM: Oh, Eric.

AW: And I give him, I was able to give Eric a job because he was an electrician, to give him a job in that factory, the liquor factory. Then he found a little girl...

EM: And you found one too?

AW: Right, so anyhow, so we were-- at the present, at first under those circumstances, we were free and we were doing a little black-marketing. I was bringing a

little liquor, vodka, and the girl with Eric, with the black-market, so everybody was just vegetating and keeping alive.

EM: How long was that going on?

AW: It was going on for a year and then naturally, then with the World War the Germans broke through the front and the Russians went back as far as I don't know what and now comes the catastrophe.

EM: So you didn't go east with the Russians?

AW: I didn't go. I stayed. One night they came, the Russians, and they took all the refugees and cleaned up and took Eric and his girl East. I lost track of them because I was hiding in that factory so they didn't caught me and besides that I had some Russian papers, they were falsified, so I was able to stay there. Then came the German and here starts the whole thing and there was a ghetto established in Lemberg.

EM: Tell me, before the Germans came and you knew that they would come, were you afraid of the German occupation?

AW: I didn't reali-, I actually I didn't realize what's going to happen. It came so rapid that I didn't realize and I had a place where to be.

EM: Did you stay by your cousin or you stayed by yourself?

AW: By myself and overnight. Now comes the real, the low point I had to go to work. And we were-- I was going-- forced to go to Janowska, Rosik, but we were still...

EM: What was Janowska?

AW: An *Arbeitslager*.

EM: An *Arbeitslager*.

AW: At that time an *Arbeitslager* and it was not new. They were building all the barracks and the Jews were building the barracks. I said, "I am an auto-mechanic." I didn't know much, but anyhow I started to work in the *Heeres Kraftfahrwerke* [German: military motor vehicle workshop].

EM: What was that?

AW: *Heeres Kraftfahrwerke*.

EM: *Heeres Kraftfahrwerke*.

AW: And I was working there and going here every night home and I was...

EM: But did you live in the ghetto?

AW: I lived in the ghetto, we were going back and forth.

EM: Between Janowska and the ghetto?

AW: And after a while...

EM: How did you go from the ghetto to Janowska, by truck, or did you...

AW: No, no, we were walking. As a *Kolonne* [German: column], as a colony.

EM: How far was it?

AW: From one end to the other?

EM: Yeah...

AW: It was I think a kilometer, if you couldn't you know-- you could make it, it was not so hard. Then all of a sudden one day the *Obersturmführer* Schneebauer made an *Appell*, and says "*Ab heute geht niemand nach Hause.*" [German: As of today, no one goes home.]

EM: *Ab heute geht niemand nach Hause.*

AW: And we were *eingesperrt*.

EM: We were locked up.

AW: We were locked up and now it becomes a *Konzentrationslager*.

EM: What, Janowska became a concentration camp.

AW: A concentration camp. And now we're working over there and all of a sud- they look for people that speak fluently German and they look a little bit decent they became because they were short in *Kraftfahrer*...

EM: Driver.

AW: ...driver, so one of them I became...

EM: ...a driver.

AW: ...selected, I became a driver, first on a truck and then a driver for one of the SS men, and that was going on...

EM: You were a private driver for the SS?

AW: For the *Sturmführer*.

EM: What was his name?

AW: Gebauer.

EM: Gebauer?

AW: Yes.

EM: How did he treat you?

AW: He was a murderer, but somehow I was treated, in comparison because he needed me, so I was treated under those circumstances, what was normal.

EM: So tell me, did you see him beat others?

AW: Yes, he was shooting, beating, any atrocities, well it was practically-- it is almost incredible how this man when he got wild, what was he doing. He would make like, make the human beings like targets.

EM: So he was doing that in the camp?

AW: In the camp, in the camp.

EM: Tell me, you said you were locked up, was the camp surrounded by barbed wire?

AW: Yes, it was, naturally, and by guards. Nothing was going on...

EM: Did any people escape from the camp, did they try to?

AW: Very seldom, but they escaped because there was an *Arbeitskolonne*, and they were going outside, working on the cemetery and making up buildings and from that they had the possibility to escape.

EM: Did you drive this SS man outside of Janowska?

AW: Yes, yes, yes, but somehow he told me never escape because you get caught and I don't want to get shoot and I had nobody, no connections with the world, so I was-- whatever happens, happens. I was sitting, I did not escape.

EM: How long was this going on?

AW: That was going on for one and a half year then I became a dri-, then a new man came in and he said, "I need a driver," and I was transferred to the new *Untersturmführer* and was transferred to Tarnopol. In Tarnopol they started-- there was-- they were free, but they started to make-- it was only a ghetto, then they started to build an *Arbeitslager*. I was still a driver and then I was working in the office of the *Arbeitslager* and the circumstances somehow I was visiting...

EM: You were what?

AW: Being in that *Arbeitslager* in...

EM: In Tarnopol?

AW: Lemberg I got sick of typhus and I got out and I got back as a driver. When I came back from that hospital I was transferred to that new man and we went to Tarnopol.

EM: Do you remember his name, that second man?

AW: Rokita.

EM: Rokita?

AW: Right. Here we were...

EM: How was he in comparison with the first one?

AW: They were all beasts, I mean...

EM: Was he just as brutal as the first one?

AW: That man, he was a musician. He was sadistic when he found a Jew that knew some music and he told me when he was in Austria he broke every Jewish musician his fingers, so he never could perform. That same thing he started to do in Tarnopol, but somehow there were not too many and he was a little violinist, secondary, but he was thinking he was a virtuoso.

EM: He was a violinist?

AW: He found himself one cellist who was really going to school before the war, to conservatorium, he was playing...

EM: Was he a Jew?

AW: Yes, he was an inmate. So he needed-- he had somebody. And he was playing not only the cello, he was playing the harmonica so naturally he wanted entertainment so he took him always to his quarters...

EM: Was it harmonica or accordion?

AW: Accordion.

EM: Accordion.

AW: So he took him always to his apartment which was on the gentile side of town, he was entertaining them.

EM: Now, he lived, the German lived outside...

AW: Outside, in the middle of town.

EM: And where did you live?

AW: I lived in the camp.

EM: In the camp.

AW: Right.

EM: So where was the car you had to drive?

AW: The car was always in the camp.

EM: In the camp.

AW: I was picking him up and sometimes he was walking, which was not a distance, a long distance...

EM: So where did you have to drive him around?

AW: I had to drive him to different camps. They have to somehow, all the-- you know, he went to do inspections in different camps in over there in all the little zoning of Tarnopol, Kamenets-Podolski and all the little towns. In every little town there was an *Arbeitslager* and he was controlling this. That was going on one and a half, one year, and then he was transferred when the ghetto in Warsaw was demolished and was already *judenrein*, after the whole catastrophe.

EM: That was in 1943 already?

AW: Yeah, then he was transferred and they was bringing in for clean-up of the ghetto from Holland people, and he was-- but that was not long...

EM: So did you go with him to Warsaw?

AW: Yes, he took me with, but that was only one or two weeks, then he was transferred again to Radom. Here in Radom already, they took the car away from me and they put me back and there was a ghetto and they put me in the ghetto and here starts-- I was separated, I become like anybody else and because they knew that I was his driver, so they transferred me to-- where they were mining-- Ostrowiec where, near Eisenhütte.

EM: Iron works?

AW: Yes, iron works. Yes, and they made-- over there, yes then I got over that-- then I was transferred especially to be liquidated because I knew too much about the situation, what they were doing in camps because I was visiting, I was seeing all the *Schiesserei* [German: shooting] in the camps with Rokita. So they said to me he has to be liquidated and I was becoming a sign...

EM: Tell me a little bit about what you had seen when you traveled with this Rokita.

AW: Shooting and killing, and the planning between the officers, how they are going to attack and when they are going to liquidate all the people.

EM: And this Rokita, he also did the shooting or was he just...

AW: Yes, he did the shooting all over the place. And so anyhow, coming to Ostrowiec I became *tset be fau* [ZBV], *zur besonderen Verfügung* [German: for special disposal].

EM: Special...

AW: In other words, in the next 24 hours or 36 hours I was to be liquidated.

EM: What do they call it, ZBV?

AW: *Zur besonderen Verfügung*.

EM: *Zur besonderen Verfügung*.

AW: And one day already they made a little...

EM: How did you know that you were ZBV?

AW: Because they told me already. I became a special sign here.

EM: They gave you a special sign?

AW: *Zur besonderen Verfügung*.

EM: Where did they put it, on the uniform?

AW: Yes, on the uniform.

EM: Can you describe it? What was it, just ZBV?

AW: Yes, and I came to that camp and there was a sign. Then the SS, in order to have a reason to liquidate me the next 24 hours, they said I want to escape, so for that they had to put me in jail so I cannot escape. And they took already the clothes from me and during the night I was supposed to be thrown in where they melted the iron. I was supposed to be thrown in...

EM: In the fire?

AW: In that fire. That night something happened. That man in charge of the camp was supposed to fill out that order was transferred on the front, so I was-- in the morning I said forget about it, that man is gone, nothing happened.

EM: Wait a second, who told you that?

AW: The Jewish people that were in charge of the camp, they knew because of the previous experience with that Rokita. In other words, they wanted to carry it out so that nobody knew what happened. They didn't want a witness.

EM: I understand, but the Jews knew what's going to happen?

AW: Yes, they told me, they prepared me, because I said I didn't want to escape. Anyhow, so the next morning I became a human being.

EM: How many Jews were in this camp?

AW: It was a small camp, a few hundred Jews and I was going over there to work in a cement-- they were building a cement factory and I was working on the machinery to build up the thing. But it was going for a short time because the Russians were breaking the front lines, so they transferred us to Birkenau.

EM: To Birkenau. Now, how far was-- you said there were iron works, how come you worked in a cement factory?

AW: Because then they started iron-- that iron works was just a reason, but I wasn't because it was just two days and then I went to regular work because they wanted to liquidate me so they put me in that special colony that goes to that iron works where they were melting.

EM: That was near the camp, the iron works?

AW: Yes, near the camp.

EM: Near the camp. [Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

EM: This is side two, tape one, interview with Mr. Alfred Waldner, Edith Millman interviewing. Now tell me a little more about...

AW: Now we are arriving...

EM: You were transferred to Birkenau.

AW: In cattle cars, as normal, and we are arriving in...

EM: How large a transfer was it, do you remember?

AW: It was-- in other words, there was a transfer, they collected all the little *lagers* that were around there, Radom and all the little towns.

EM: You were in Ostrowiec?

AW: And there was a big transfer that was arriving and in other words they consolidate all the little *Lehrläger*, *Arbeitslägers* and everything was transferred to...

EM: To Birkenau.

AW: In Birkenau, you become-- now comes the selection and here at night I became [got] my tattoo number B4632.

EM: What year was that or what month?

AW: Around July...

EM: July of 1943?

AW: Right. Yes, I think '43, yeah.

EM: No, well, July '43 the ghetto in Warsaw was destroyed in April and May '43.

AW: So it was July '43. I was a short time in Ostrowiec, only two or three months, a little time. Now in Birkenau, first was selection, left and right, who was going to work or who was going to be selected. We were selected to work, so we became [got] the number and now we are staying in Birkenau for one or two days and now we are walking to a plant Buna Monowitz.

EM: Buna Monowitz.

AW: It was part of Auschwitz and here we are informed that they are going to build-- they were building a chemical IG Farben.

EM: IG Farben chemical plant, but where did you sleep, in Buna or in Birkenau?

AW: When we were in Birkenau, we sleep on the floor.

EM: Yes, I know, but you said you were taken to where in Buna?

AW: Now in Buna Monowitz there was already an *Arbeitsläger*.

EM: There was a camp?

AW: There was a camp already and here everybody got selected and ready to [unclear] and the following day or two days later you were assigned to work for IG Farben, a chemical plant that was supposed to produce out of coal, butter or margarine.

EM: Margarine out of coal?

AW: Yes, because coal has a substance of oil of fat so they were trying to extract that oil and make it a colorless fat in the form of margarine. And naturally, some *Arbeitskolonnen* that were very brutal, they were beaten. I was in a column that was supposed to be mechanics so we were working inside in the buildings and trying to make pipe-- link pipes and connecting to machines and we were at least not on the outside exposed to the weather conditions and so on.

EM: How about food, did you get...

AW: [Unclear] coffee in the morning, they watered it, that black water and piece of stale bread that was stone, and at night we get a little soup, but again, I found some friends, Polish friends.

EM: Jews?

AW: No, Gentiles.

EM: There were Gentiles who worked there also?

AW: Yes, even one was out the same town who was a political inmate. They were receiving packages from home and they were privileged to have a little bit better food, but that little man, he was living on the same street as we were.

EM: In Cieszyn.

AW: So he had a little leftovers, soup or bones or anything, but this was giving me life. And it was going on, this was naturally tragic, you couldn't go to your barracks, but hunger takes the risk of life.

EM: Were the Poles in the same barracks as the Jews?

AW: No, they had their own barracks.

EM: They had their own barracks, but how could he smuggle and give you that food?

AW: Because he left it in the bushes, a special place, where the little *Schüssel* [German: bowl] he left somewhere, and I give-- I had two, so he gave me one and I shoved the empty one back and the next I had, so we were exchanging.

EM: And when could you talk to him, during work?

AW: I never-- he was working in *Wäscherei* [German: laundry].

EM: In the laundry.

AW: In the laundry. I couldn't-- but somehow we exchanged, we recognized each other, he knew, understand that I asked for a little food. This was going on for I think, for a year and all of a sudden it was Christmas night, the 24th, and the Russians broke through the front and they couldn't any more get no time to liquidate people, so we were forcing on a march to Gleiwitz and in the winter many people died. They were dying like flies on the march.

EM: How far was Gleiwitz from...

AW: It was a day march, or more one and half days. And then we were loaded on cars loads again, open. It was cold, people were freezing.

EM: They were open cars? Coal cars?

AW: Open cars and we were transferred after I think 14 days on the outside.

EM: You were in the cars for 14 days?

AW: Fourteen days and we landed up in north Germany, Dora-Nordhausen.

EM: In Nordhausen.

AW: And here they were building the V-1 and V-2, the rockets and here we were-- because again the mechanics, the profession, they put them in the underground and we were helping to build the V-1 and V-2 rockets. But the Allied troops, the English were bombarding every day, that factory, but it was underground so they couldn't bomb this, destroy it, so they destroyed all the communication, the roads, the railroad...

EM: I'm sorry, go on.

AW: After they walk-- when we came to Nordhausen again the people got sick.

EM: But were you living in Nordhausen while you were working?

AW: The camp was very near to where they were building that underground, in other words, that was before, in the first World War Kaiser Wilhem, it was *Harz Gebiet* and they were building there magazines, food magazines and now when Speer came in he made factories for V-1 and V-2's, but in the meantime people got very sick.

EM: How was the treatment, I mean, were you beaten?

AW: I will come to that point. The treatment was-- we were not treated like human beings. We were treated like animals. There was hunger and besides that we had typhus and *wie heisst* [German: what do you call it?]

EM: Dysentery?

AW: Dysentery, *die Lauferei* [German: the runs]. Dysentery broke out because water was poison anyhow, and the food was so lousy that everybody just...

EM: A lot of dysentery.

AW: People were alive or dying and besides in that camp, there were Russian prisoners and they were already working underground because they had already known that the Russians are breaking through at every moment, so instead of building they were sabotaging the machines, breaking them. And they were hanging them. There were not any more shootings, they were hanging them by the dozens.

EM: So who else worked in these-- in this underground camp, the Jews and the Russians?

AW: Political prisoners. Mostly Russians.

EM: Political prisoners?

AW: Yes, political.

EM: Were there any Poles, any gentile Poles working there?

AW: Yes, there were Gentiles, but mostly Russians because they couldn't escape to nowhere and this was going on for a short time that I was living, but...

EM: Did you also work underground?

AW: Yes, yes, I worked underground and here we are working and somehow the Russians got German papers, newspaper, and I know that all our town was already in...

EM: Russian hands?

AW: Russian. So we knew that any day something happened...

EM: Were these Russians Russian prisoners or were they Russians that were just...

AW: They were Russian prisoners and they were war prisoners. They were POW's.

EM: They were POWs.

AW: Yes.

EM: But did they live together with the Jews?

AW: Yes, it was so bad that, for example, when the Allies, the Allied Air Force, were bombing, the Germans were mixing up in the camp where the Jews were living because they were bombarding that little town so they escaped to us. And that was going on for a few months and the Russians broke through, so again they transferred us to Bergen-Belsen. In Bergen-Belsen, again a week of transportation and so on, and so on. So we arriving in Bergen-Belsen...

EM: Describe the transportation, was this in cattle cars?

AW: Again by railroad.

EM: By railroad.

AW: Again by railroad.

EM: Did they take the Russians with also?

AW: No, they were [unclear].

EM: They only took the Jews? And what happened to the Russians?

AW: They tried-- in other words, what they did with them, most of them there, they liquidated them and some of them escaped and there was a turmoil because they had no time to organize anything. But with Jews they did the easy way, they loaded them, that's it. So we arrived in Bergen-Belsen. In Bergen-Belsen...

EM: Had you said that the Jews and the Russians lived together?

AW: In the camps...

EM; But then it chose all the Jews pulled them out and to transfer them...

AW: Because we had a different *Winkel*, yellow *Winkel* and red *Winkel* [triangle].

EM: So you had a yellow triangle...

AW: We had like a-- in Auschwitz, we had-- the Jew had a yellow triangle and the Pole or the German had a red and so on. So they knew right away who's who. Then we arrived in Bergen-Belsen and here was already everything disorganized, but hunger-- and then they opened up the canalization. They tried to poison people.

EM: What do you mean they opened up-- the sewer?

AW: The sewer, the waste, it went up everything, in other words on the streets there were waste and it was filthy. The water was black...

EM: Was contaminated?

AW: Contaminated, but again, we are-- everybody was fighting for their lives. Many began-- people...

EM: ...died.

AW: Right, and some they were shooting but didn't have time to shoot and it was so bad, now I'm speaking for myself and a few people, friends, we became friends. We were laying around on the floor and we were unable to control our organs, only what was alive was the brain and the heart and we were breathing, but we were laying in our own waste, because we couldn't anymore.

EM: You couldn't move? Were you weak?

AW: So weak that we couldn't control and we are laying, people were dying in their own waste. That was going on a week or two and sooner or later we said to ourselves when we were going to get out, we was thinking it, the world is dying, there will be no Jews. We said to ourselves when we're going to live, we're going to be Jews and try to keep up that Judaism what it was before. And one mor-- we saw that who was watching us, were old men.

EM: The Germans...

AW: Old men, 60, 70 years old and he was hardly alive. This was a sign one of these moments something will happen, they will run away. And sure enough, one morning we heard noise and they say, "The tanks are coming, some army is coming in the camp." It was the English.

EM: Do you remember what month it was?

AW: April, May. I don't know.

EM: April, May of '45.

AW: Yes, and when they saw us, the first soldiers, they couldn't believe they are human beings, so they start crying and they give us chocolate, but that was no good because the stomach were already dead so the people choked, they couldn't...

EM: Digest...

AW: Digest [unclear]. They find out that they're wrong so they stopped doing that and now they start loading us, cleaning us, and they liquidated a whole town. The town was Celle, by Hamburg and they put us in such houses, they called it emergency hospitals, and here they start-- they cleaned us, and I couldn't walk anymore, so after a few weeks-- in other words, then came the doctors and the whole troops...

EM: They chased the Germans out of the town?

AW: Out, because they were Nazis and they had to clean us, that was the punishment. And they treat us like babies and they gave us baby food and soon we became human beings and here I was in that hospital two or three months and then came

the repatriation who wants to go home or whatever it is. And then I had by *Rotes Kreuz*, so I came back.

EM: Red Cross.

AW: Red Cross. And I landed up that I took the north road that encountered with Germany, ended up in north Poland around Poznan, and Warsaw that road, and finally I came home in our house. And when I came home to my house, the house was standing, and they couldn't believe that I'm Alfred Waldner, so the Poles, the anti-Semites, made that I am impersonating that man, because they know I was shot in Cieszyn, but it was not true. So I had to come to the police and they gave me a time to prove that I am Alfred Waldner. I had no documents and there was nobody-- I didn't know that any of-- and I want to go in our house. They didn't want to let me in so I say, "Let me in," so they let me be, sleep for one or two days in the Red Cross establishment that was Cieszyn, and the police-- and over there, because five and a half years went by so there was completely so...

EM: ...new people.

AW: ...different, different people working over there, so they give me a time in 48 hours to prove by witness that I am not impersonating but am really that man Alfred Waldner, son of Otto Waldner. And I remember, I couldn't find anybody, I was going through the streets and I couldn't have anybody, but somehow I said to myself-- on the same street was a friend, a Pole that was going with me to *gymnasium*, maybe that guy. And I knew that he was studying law and I knew that he was trying to be a judge, so I says maybe I go over there and sure enough I found that man, and old man now if he's a judge and so sure enough so he went with me to the police station and he signed that I am not impersonator, I am the real man. In the meantime, it was about two or three days what has gone by, so I say-- before the war I had a little communication, a little love story with a Polish girl, and I found that Polish girl not far from our house and sure, I hear, all of a sudden, that I am in Cieszyn and somehow Elsa found out.

EM: Elsa is your sister...

AW: Yes, and Elsa was already before me by our cousin, Ernst Bielik now, and she came to that girl and here I couldn't-- I got almost deaf, it was such a shock that I lost my hearing and I lost my conscience.

EM: So you met, so you knew that Elsa came...

AW: And started rehabilitation and so forth and so forth. And that's my story.

EM: Thank you very much and I really appreciate your sharing it with us. Thank you. Is there anything else that you could add?

AW: No. Yes, when I made that vow that I'm going to be a Jew and being retired in Miami Beach I organized-- being in Miami and living in a condo, I organized a little *shul* [synagogue] for people that cannot anymore walk, are sick and cannot go after their own-- in other words they cannot on their own to see a doctor or go to a hospital. And so I established, I organized a self-help. Outside of this organization, on the outside

but in the house, ladies want to go to the doctor or what. So we-- I organized some people that are willing to help out. Besides that, on the Jewish holidays and on days, three or four times a year when we say *Yizkor* [memorial prayer], I organized this and I have professional people, a rabbi and a cantor and we have the holidays.

EM: That's wonderful. You know, I just realized that you did not tell me where you went after the war from Cieszyn, did you go to Germany? When did you meet your wife?

AW: No. It's another story.

EM: Alright.

AW: After the war coming to Cieszyn, I tried to work by friends and trying to earn a living.

EM: You were still in Cieszyn.

AW: But I didn't-- to Cieszyn because they were so much after me, because one day they made a rumor that if I live I am still Waldner like I say, then I had to be a spy because I am alive because they killed every Jew. So the police, they were on my head, so I said no, I go to Czechoslovakia and Elsa was living...

EM: Is there still the border between Czechoslovakia and Poland in Cieszyn itself?

AW: Yes, they established it again, so Elsa was living in Český-Tešín, so I went to her and there was [unclear] living with her in one apartment in Český-Tešín. Now you're going to ask me how I got to America? Yes, being in Cieszyn on of these days, two ladies were going through the city. One of the ladies, I helped to escape in Tarnopol from that camp, she said to me-- because I had the possibility at night when I was driving transporting coal, I had time in the trucks to help people to escape and there was one lady that I helped to escape...

EM: Did you help many people to escape?

AW: Yes, yes, and one of the ladies that I helped to escape, being in Cieszyn, they recognized me and says-- she was going with another lady who is now my wife and so she says, "It's thank to him that I survived," to make a story short, and here starts some communication, and they have a little son, at that time my wife-- now my wife, had a little boy that was nine years old, an orphan...

EM: Her husband was killed during the war?

AW: Yes, when I saw what's going on with the kids in Auschwitz and I saw that little boy undernourished so I said it is a mitzvah to help and here it starts the love affair.

EM: Love affair...

AW: And so she tried to make a living with starting to smuggling marks, dollars and so forth. Then I met-- then I came to Bielsko and I met your late mother, you... remember?

EM: I hardly remember...

AW: Anyhow, okay so now-- but we know that she wanted-- again antisemitism, the kid, and so on and so we try and one day I was with her and we were going by train to Prague and we smuggled dollars and so forth and so on. And we decided-- at that time there was a train to escape that maybe an immigration will develop from Germany to Australia to America and so on. So we naturally-- at night, there was a transportation and so forth, we came to Karlsbad and it was very near the border between Czechoslovakia and Germany. This is another, I got so many stories, because she got caught in jail and I took her out and we escaped and so she went with the kid and she gave me everything that she possessed and I was caught.

EM: By whom? The Czechs?

AW: By the Czechs, it was illegal. Again I went in jail, I said I was in Auschwitz and that supposedly the judge said, "Go, you are entitled to be free." So I ended up in a little town on the German, [unclear] I don't remember the town, and here again I was one or two days and I landed up in Munich. In Munich again, she finds friends over there, they came from Poland.

EM: So you came together in Munich?

AW: Right, we met again. We tried to find people and friends and help us because there was the UNRRA in museum in Munich and we found some. Now comes that very interesting thing. In Munich the Jews have to be registered and they say, so it's winter. So in order to get *Bezugskarten*¹ and get living quarters you had to be accepted and tested by the *Bayerische Hilfswerk* [German: Bavarian aid organization] and *Bayerische Hilfswerk* and *Kultusgemeinde* [German: religious community] or whatever it is and they say to me-- the head man, who is named George, is a rabbi. His name is Orenstein [phonetic]. And I always thought even when we were together that I helped one rabbi in Tarnopol who was already supposed to be shot at night to escape and I lost track on him and Lena says, "Maybe that is that man that you helped to escape." And I said, "Ah, he's not such a big shot, I helped a little rabbi to escape, but it cannot be." But somehow she started to convince and we were staying [unclear] in that line almost naked without money, nothing and shivering and that kid and the two women...

EM: What two women, that was her sister too?

AW: Her sister and my wife, but at that time we were friends, not official. And all of a sudden that man with his whole staff, with the American staff, with the Joint walks out of the office and he recognized me. "What are you doing here?" I say, "I am waiting." So he took all that money that he possessed...

EM: And gave it to you and that was that rabbi that...

AW: It was that rabbi that I helped. And he told us all about that Jewish hierarchy, that American hierarchy, American Joint, HIAS and all that business and at that moment we were [unclear] he says, "Come on," and he went back to his office and

¹*Bezugskarten* – [German] cards or coupons entitling the bearer to buy food.

introduced us, well me to all the American hierarchy and said, “Listen, you’re going to be a *Mensch* [human being], we are liquidating a German town.” It was 100% Nazi on the way when you go to Munich south towards Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

EM: Tape two, side one, an interview with Mr. Alfred Waldner, Edith Millman interviewing. Today is May 28, 1989. You were telling me about the rabbi that you had helped to escape from Tarnopol and met again in Munich.

AW: Munich. Now we get-- I am assigned to move to a little town near Munich named Deisenhofen. In Deisenhofen I get to know that so-called *Bürgermeister* of the town, Mr. Steltzer [phonetic], and we together are liquidating...

EM: He was a German.

AW: And we are now liquidating Nazi living quarters, Nazi houses.

EM: What do you mean by liquidating?

AW: In other words, the Nazis had to go out...

EM: Evacuating...

AW: They were punished, they had to move out, some friends-- in other words...

EM: Were you destroying the houses?

AW: No...

EM: No, just chasing the Nazis out.

AW: So they could live in it because the Jews had nowhere to go, so they tried privately, instead of making camps, to let them live in that establishment in that houses and I become a little man, and here starts a normal living and we start getting from the German authorities, *Bezugskarten*, for clothes, for food and so on. Now it's a few months being there, HIAS, the American Joint...

EM: Distribution.

AW: Registration for immigration starts up with Truman affidavits for people that have no [unclear] so naturally, but I had luck and I was, through the rabbi, I was *vorgestellt*.

EM: Introduced?

AW: Introduced to the American Consul, here the rabbi told the American Consul the story about me so naturally I become so-called priority and they want to send us-- they asked us where we want to go.

EM: Did you marry already by that time?

AW: [Unclear] now, this is it, comes-- so they asked us-- but the first thing was-- that was opening was the immigration to America, and the rabbi says yeah. So we-- in order to register you cannot go like this so the rabbi said privately, "You have to marry, you have to be married."

EM: Why, they didn't want any...?

AW: We were together, we cannot go like this, it has to be...

EM: Oh, because you were living together.

AW: Besides that, I was going on the German quota and we had the priority. The Polish quota was long. So in other words, to go as fast as possible, so he said get married, so he gave...

EM: So he married you?

AW: So he gives us the marriage license, but Jewish, you have to go back to Deisenhofen, let the *Bürgermeister* give you the official license, so we went back and forth. Now we are married and so the American Consul got to like me, I don't know what, he said, "Mr. Waldner, you want to go with a first ship, *Flasher*?" No it was another ship. "You don't have to wait, you are entitled to be on the first ship," so he says, "No, let's wait for the next ship," so we went with the next ship. We arrived here 30th of August 1946.

EM: '46?

AW: One year we were in Deisenhofen and so...

EM: So you arrived in 1946?

AW: Right, and that's when it started. We arrived in the States as man and wife, a son and a sister and she had some...

EM: So the sister came on the same also together?

AW: Yes, I was always pulling everybody.

EM: Yeah, so here what were you doing, what kind of work were you doing?

AW: Now here we were arriving and and we are arriving because we had no supposedly relatives so they put us in the Hotel Marseille on Broadway and that year we starting to try to find living quarters, *eine Wohnung*...

EM: Apartment.

AW: Apartment. So we found an apartment in the Polish section in Brooklyn. We didn't know how to-- when we took the hot water we could take cold water [unclear]. It was on top of a pub and here we got the first job, she had some connection a meat-canning house in New York City on 14th Street. And here I [unclear] I been working in America.

EM: What kind of work were you doing?

AW: Manual work, pushing meat and anything, but that was-- the people that had there, she was, when she was single...

EM: Your wife?

AW: ...she was a meat inspector, in other words, a bacteriologist in Zloczów. Some partners escaped and came to the *Weltausstellung* [World's Fair] and settled in New York City and they had a little factory of meat-canning, horse meat-canning, so I got a job over there and they gave me a break of 75 cents an hour, but because I was somehow a friend, she was-- Lena was a friend of that owner and they give me \$1.00. I was working and they says, "We give you a break, how many hours you want to work you can work," so I started to work day and night, and here the kid has to go to school and I was going, so when Lena tried to-- started to put some beds together so we had

where to sleep. But we had friends-- she had friends from our old town and they were giving us a break. Some had a delicatessen store on Broadway, so they give us some *shmates* [Yiddish: rags, blankets], you know what it is, and that's how we started. And then we're trying to find a job where both of us can work in a printing house so then they give us a break to put the little labels homework in some envelopes, like *Marken*...

EM: Like stamps?

AW: Like stamps, she also made 50 such envelopes or 100. So I was working at night, cleaning machines, because I was not a printer, manual work again and Lena was working in the day when George went to school.

EM: George is the son?

AW: Yes, when George was in school she was working, when George came home she was home, then I went back to work. We were working on two jobs and the sister-in-law was with us, so we were working. Then after a while comes the trend that the Jews go on chicken farms, the Hirsch Society [Baron de Hirsch Fund] was financing low mortgage and so forth. And she had friends that said come on the farm to Vineland [New Jersey].

EM: In Vineland?

AW: Yes, and we went on the farm. We didn't have much money so we bought the farm from him. It was not-- even it was not [unclear], you had to go in the woods, but we went. We did pioneering work. In the beginning it was very hard, but somehow we managed and we built it up. We built up a nice little business, and then we went to school, then came the depression after the Korean War and we losing our money and we losing the farm-- back there now for example [unclear] and we went back to Jersey, because I had...

EM: But the farm was in Jersey?

AW: Yes, but we were in South Jersey, so [back to] North Jersey and here again she had friends and her friends got married to some American-- Jews, engineers, and they helped me to get a job in factories, we have nothing, in order to save, we had a one-bedroom apartment without a kitchen. We took a cooker, under the bed she was cooking when I come home from work. Then, manual jobs, 15 or 20, but then sooner or later I landed up in a little toy factory. They were looking for people and I started to work. There was three of us and one of them said, "Why don't you go back to school, you have a head, you can be somebody." So I went to Newark School of Engineering, at night, and the owners said, "Alfred, we are going to finance this under one condition, you make B or better," and I was for three years starting first night courses at New Jersey High School and then I went to college for three years and I made it and I become a *Mensch* and then the whole thing turns and we got an apartment, a car...

EM: And your son now is a doctor?

AW: No, when we were in Vineland he went to high school, but he was a good-- he caught-- when we came to Brooklyn, every time we turned around he was

skipping classes, he didn't know English but he was catching so fast he was skipping, and then we moved to Vineland so he went to high school. In high school he graduated with honors. He was a good student [unclear]. When it came time for college he said, "I want only to go to Ivy college." We said, "You must be a nut, a little shinky green horn that wants to go to Columbia, Harvard, you have to have money, bribe people." Our boy said, "If my marks don't speak [unclear]." So sure enough he gets interviews in Columbia, he gets interviews in Einstein. In Einstein he got in a fight with the interviewer because the interviewer, the professor asked him, "Who wants you to be a doctor, your mother or your--" "No, if you're going to interview me that way I don't want to be interviewed," and he jumped to the door and went out. Before he got home he already had a call apologizing. Whenever I met him I want to be a doctor, he made that up already in public school, when he grow up he wants to be a doctor, a medical man and when he was interviewed, so he says it costs so many-- we didn't have money, and that was the medical-- technically it was four years engineering and he's ready. So the son becomes accepted by Columbia, makes the college, then he goes for specialization of the heart, cardiologist, and established himself [unclear]. Now what do you want to know [unclear]?

EM: Now you're retired...

AW: Now [unclear]. I went to-- made Newark College of Engineering-- that plant become now the third biggest toy house in the United States.

EM: Which one was it?

AW: Remco.

EM: Remco, that's the one that you started with...

AW: They started with two people and became a business for \$48 million and I became part of management, successful for 28 years working with that house. I retired because of Lena and we moved to Miami, *das alles*.

EM: I just want to go back a little bit more about the help-- did you ever get help from non-Jews, from a German or from a Pole?

AW: No, only in camp when I met that man, but none whatsoever.

EM: But you yourself were in a position to help some Jews when you were in Tarnopol while you were a driver?

AW: That repays later in Munich.

EM: In Munich when this-- and Lena, you met Lena your wife.

AW: Right, through that sister I helped escape.

EM: Was Lena from Tarnopol?

AW: Yes, Tarnopol, she was from Tarnopol, but the sister-- but when I met her, she was already-- because that sister that I helped to escape told me that she has a sister in Warsaw that is living under gentile papers and that when she can escape she can live, that's why I helped her.

EM: So she went to your present wife who was on false papers in Warsaw...

AW: On gentile papers...

EM: On gentile papers on Warsaw. I think I didn't ask you when you were born.

AW: Yes, you did.

EM: I did?

AW: You want to know, 20th of August 1913.

EM: 1913, because this is important. Is there anything else you would like to add?

AW: No, thank you. I think I give you plenty material.

EM: Well, thank you very much.

AW: You're welcome.

[Tape two, side one ended.]