HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

CHARLES WILLNER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Lucille Fisher
Date: November 11, 1981

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CW: Charles Willner [interviewee]
LF: Lucille Fisher [interviewer]
Date: November 11, 1981

Tape one, side one:

LF: An interview with Charles Willner by Lucille Fisher. November 4, 1981. Can you tell me where you were born and a little bit about your family?

CW: I was born in Poland in 1926 in a small town of Dombrowa.

LF: How do you spell it?

CW: D-O-M-B-R-O-W-A.

LF: Where was that in relation to, let us say, Warsaw?

CW: It was in relation to Krakow. In relation to Krakow it was about 100 kilometers from Krakow, maybe 80 kilometers from Krakow.

LF: What was your life like before the war?

CW: Before the war, as you can see I was born in 1926, but the war started in September; I was about my *Bar Mitzvah* time, I was born September 15. The Germans occupied our town just before my 13th birthday. So as far as my life is concerned, during the time of that date, it was erratic. We had plenty of food, but we had to work for it. I finished five grades of school at that time, and I helped in the family business which was—my grandfather had a bakery and I helped out; and my father was involved in different types of businesses. As a youngster, since the age of six, I worked very hard in various kinds of operations which was necessary to do. I would get up 4:00 in the morning, feed the cows, clean the stables, carry the water from the wells for about a quarter of a mile. The two pails of water were twice as heavy as I was. But that's the way it was.

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

CW: Yes, we had a certain amount of antisemitism at that time, but you see, after, when the war started, all these little things really were forgotten.

LF: Let's talk about what you felt was antisemitic before the war.

CW: At that time they resented, as far as Jews were concerned, with our way of life. Most of our people were religious, Orthodox. We were wearing *peyes*[1], and we didn't walk around without a hat. They might come over to you and pull it, and call you all kinds of names. You felt like you were a secondary citizen, since I remember myself. You didn't feel as comfortable as a real Pole would have felt, so we really felt like secondary citizens.

LF: Was school the same way?

[1]Sidelocks.

CW: School was the same way, yes.

LF: Did your family belong to any Jewish organizations or a synagogue before Nazism changed your life?

CW: No organizations, as I recall, but we did belong to a synagogue, which, as I mentioned before, we—my father did not have a beard or *peyes*, but he believed in Judaism and we did go to the synagogue most every day, especially weekends. There was no doubt. But I do not recall that, we did not belong to any special organizations at that time.

LF: Most of your friends were Jews?

CW: Most of our friends were Jews.

LF: And it was an observant household?

CW: Yes. My mother also helped; she was also working at the time. We had four children when the war started, I was the second one, and I had an older brother, which is with us today. I had another brother, who was born in 1933, which is not alive, and a sister who was born in 1935, and she is not alive. When the war started in 1939, we were four children in our family. At that particular time, when the Second World War broke out, my father was drafted, and for four or five weeks, which the war didn't last too long, he wasn't home, but when the Polish Army surrendered, he came back.

LF: Then your father was in the Nationalist Polish Army?

CW: Yes. Not only this, my father was the most decorated hero in the Polish Army in the First World War. He had a star which they used to call, which will be known by the Polish people, "*Virtuti militari*." It was one of the most outstanding medals. It was given in those days for heroism.

LF: Was he proud of that?

CW: He was very proud and he was treated quite a little differently than originally, than a Jew would have been treated.

LF: What do you mean?

CW: He could go to a lot of places where others were not accepted. He was accepted. Many times he could go into courts—he was very knowledgeable—and a lot of people could not afford a lawyer, so they selected him. He did not have a law degree, but with the Polish language, with which he was very well educated, and with the heroism which he established for himself, so they did allow him to come into courts and speak for other people without any pay.

LF: What did he do for a living?

CW: Most of the time, first of all, he was in the Polish Reserves for quite a while, and then he got sick, so he had problems. In those days most of the people,

as far as we were concerned, had cattle *hendels*[2]. They used to buy cows and all kinds of things for the Polish Army.

LF: He worked for the Polish Army?

CW: No, really not, this was all on his own, but this was the way he made a living, purchasing cattle.

LF: Before the German invasion in '39, life was like what? Tell me about your friends and what you did...

CW: If I want to look back to them days, we were quite satisfied in a way, because we really didn't know any different. So everything was coming along. We felt that is how life has to be, and that is how it is. So we really seemed to be very happy, as far as family life is concerned. We had a grandfather, a grandmother, another grandmother who lived in the same town. We were about 45 grandchildren involved, and then uncles and aunts, and we had a pretty contented life. And, as I say, we lived, and naturally we are a family of four children, and a grandmother lived with us, and mother and father, and we only lived in three rooms, but we felt that is how it has to be, and we didn't know any different. But in looking back, so life wasn't that great. As I look back now, but as far as them days were concerned, I wish they had left us alone, and we could have continued living the way it is, and we would not have known any different. But as far as childhood is concerned, it wasn't easy, because it was demanded from us, from six or seven years of age, that we have to behave like a grown-up. We had to work for a living and we had to go to school...

LF: Was that for most Jewish families?

CW: Most. I can only speak for myself, and I would say, for most Jewish families. And in my town, we had 6,000 Jewish families, and most of them were working people and struggling for a living so I assume most people had the same type of life I had. But I seem to have enjoyed my life up to that time. I was outgoing and outspoken. I wasn't afraid of anything, and it seemed that everything was going the right way for me, as far as I was concerned.

LF: Was there a *kehillah*[3] in the town, was there an organization in the town?

CW: Yes, they had also various types of organizations, like *Histadrut*[4] organizations for the immigrations to Israel, which my uncle, my father's brother, as a matter of fact, was one of the first ones to arrive in Israel. He was a soccer player for the Polish Internationals, and in them days it was impossible to get to Israel, but the Polish Internationals were playing against Palestine, and I don't recall the year, but I think it was in 1933-34, and he remained in Palestine, in Israel, at

[2]were cattle traders (Yiddish).
[3]Jewish Community Organization.
[4]General Federation of Labor, founded 1920 in Palestine.

that time, and never came back to Poland. I saw him again in 1966, when he came to see us in the United States, but he passed away since then.

LF: Were there Zionist feelings and beliefs?

CW: Yes. There were Zionist organizations but I was too young really to know all about this, and too busy with our family life and other things. You know, as a child in them days, you were really not treated like we treat our children today. What you were asked, you answered. If you were not asked, you could not voice an opinion. It wasn't that simple. As children in them days, all we had to do was sit in a corner, and were supposed to behave ourselves, and that was what we did. We went out to play soccer, and we played soccer without our shoes, because if we came back home and our shoes were torn or what ever happened, we really paid for it. So we played without shoes. It wasn't that simple, but we enjoyed it.

LF: Not the way it is today?

CW: No, as I say again, we didn't know any better. That is why also, I was bringing up my children, I said to myself, "I never gonna touch my kids," because I don't think it helped, when I used to get a beating. The more they used to beat me, the worse things I used to do. And I can be proud of myself, up to today I brought up three children, and I never touched them, ever punished them. Yes, I didn't buy them certain things which they liked, but never put a hand on my kids, ever. I can say it with honesty because of the things that I went through as a child.

LF: Do you really feel that it was a brutality on the part of your parents?

CW: No, they loved us and I tell you, I only have good, even with all this that I am saying, it doesn't mean that my father was a barbarian. He was one of the most lovable persons. I only remember him up to 12 years of age. I haven't seen him since. But I can only remember the good things about him. He was lovable, and he liked people, and they all loved him. But that is the way of life. You know, I guess everybody...

LF: A strong father.

CW: Strong-minded, and that's what you have to do and that's what you do, and I think it helped to a certain extent. But as far as minor things were concerned, what I call today, because I played soccer on a *Shabbos*, so I was beaten for it. This was unnecessary. I was never beaten for something which really—what could I have done when I was 12 years of age, mischief things? But you had to respect your family name, make sure that people didn't talk bad things about you, whatever. You tried to live up to it. If you didn't, you were punished. You were not punished by taking things away from you, that was the difference. Today we can tell the kids, "Don't watch television at night." Them days, what was my father going to take away from me? There was nothing to take away. Was he going to starve me? So they beat you. That was the only way they could get back at you. So that's why today all this is not necessary.

LF: In your family, did you get any feeling from them as to how they felt about organizations within the town you were living in, how they felt about the *kehillah*, about Zionism, about other organizations, *Histadrut*?

CW: I can only tell you this, I do not remember right before the war, but I can remember as the war started. As my father was a military man all his life, he did try to organize groups of people at that particular time, to organize between themselves and go fight back the Germans, instead of what they were doing to us. If we are going to die, let's die at least with respect and honor. I will tell you, the problem we had in those days is we believed too much that God is going to help us, but my father used to tell them, "It is true God is going to help us, but, first of all, we have to try and help ourselves."

LF: How did he go about that?

CW: Well, we tried to solicit people; we tried to talk to people. We needed money. We tried to get money together so we should organize, hide, to buy guns, buy munitions, but no cooperation whatsoever.

LF: When were they looking to do this?

CW: Right when the war started.

LF: So your father wanted to do this. Did he succeed in doing this?

CW: He did not succeed, as far as I know. I left in 1940. I was only home about from September to January, 1940.

LF: Do you remember the Germans invading?

CW: Yes, very well, I remember when the Germans invaded. They invaded in September of 1939, and this was about two weeks before my *Bar Mitzvah*. As a matter of fact, when I had my *Bar Mitzvah*, we had a headache. My father was not home at that time, because he was in the Polish Army, and I even remember what we served at my *Bar Mitzvah*. We had black bread and herring.

LF: Your father, you say, was in the Polish Army, in the First World War...

CW: In the Second World War. In the First World War he was only a youngster. In the Second World War, my father was an officer. So he was drafted before the war started. As I said previously, the war didn't last too long. The whole army just gave up, and he came home about I don't recall, maybe four or five weeks later, and this was already past my *Bar Mitzvah*. So I had my *Bar Mitzvah* when my father wasn't. As far as the first couple of days…

LF: So in the weeks immediately following the invasion...

CW: You know, it's not easy for me to remember.

LF: I know it's not; you were young, but your impressions...

CW: From the beginning, for the first week or so, we didn't realize what really hit us, until they came out with all kinds of different proclamations as far as the Jews were concerned. And it started to affect us. We had to move out from

certain places, combine families together. We had to start wearing the yellow bands with the Jewish star.

LF: You had to leave your home?

CW: We were in our homes, but we had to go out from certain neighborhoods which we had to combine with other places.

LF: So that the Jews were lumped together.

CW: They came out with all kinds of rules, which we can do and which we can't do. Martial law, you could not be out at night after a certain hour, and the most part of it—the synagogues and all the religious schools, and in school itself, even the public schools, we could not attend any more schools, as far as a Jew was concerned, and we were recognizable because we had to wear the bands. This was going on like this for quite a while, but, until we started to realize what was happening, it took a couple of months.

LF: Tell me about your feelings of you and your family if maybe you can remember; were you scared or believed what was happening?

CW: I can tell you this. In 1939, in 1940 already, beginning in 1940, they made certain proclamations at that time, the Germans. Whoever is going to register themselves to go to work for them willingly, their families will never be molested. I happened to be a strong individual, tall for my age, not much taller than I am today, and I did register myself at age 13, and I was taken away to a camp which was called Pustkuv. [also spelled Pustkow] P-U-S-T-K-U-V or F.

LF: This was a work camp?

CW: Yes, this was a camp, this was a place where the Germans originated the V-1's and the V-2's, that is the rockets they used to manufacture there.

LF: Where was that?

CW: In Poland, eastern Poland, and I was taken away there. At that particular time, I know one thing. Before I left—you asked me about my parents and feelings. Before I left home, my father took me aside and he was only age forty at that time, and said to me, he only wants to hope, pray to God that one of his children will survive to see the end of Hitler.

LF: So he really recognized...

CW: He really realized, yes.

LF: Do you think the other Jews did?

CW: You see, this was the problem because we believed too much in God helping us. We all believed that something is going to be better tomorrow, but they did not realize what was really happening to them. My father was different.

LF: So, your father was different.

CW: He knew it. He saw what's happening; he saw what's going on, and that's why he said, "You go your way and see what you can do for yourself." And when I left, I will never forget this, my father crying, and asking me a few things,

and telling me a few things: I should stay away from smoking cigarettes, because my father was a chain smoker, smoking day and night, and coughing his lungs. "Don't gamble," he says to me. And I tried to live up to one thing, I'm not smoking. I never smoked, but I like to gamble a little. This was, I think, in January 1940, so he knew what was going on, he knew what was happening.

LF: Were there any non-Jews that were helping at that time?

CW: Not that I was aware of. You see, I am a little different than other people my age, like my brother for instance. He remained another two and a half to three years with my family, so he really knows a little more as far as town living was concerned and the ghetto was concerned. I was in the concentration camps for five and a half years so, which I do not have too much knowledge myself, and know only what my brother told me about my family, what happened to them and so forth. I did not see it myself. He was the one who was home, so he has a little more knowledge.

LF: So he has a different story...

CW: He has a different story as far as home life is concerned, right after the war started in 1939, because I was only about four months at home and then after that I was all in concentration camps. I came home afterwards, which will come into it later on. So I can only tell you up to that time.

LF: So that actually—was this an actual work camp that you went to?

CW: This was a work camp, and I registered to go there. And when I got there, it caught me surprise. When I got there, there were no living quarters, and it happened to be in the winter, no eating facilities, nothing, only the little clothing we took along with us.

LF: Who went with you? Any people from your town?

CW: I remember about three or four truckloads. They put us on a truck and took us out together. I don't recall, it's about five hours drive, and I remained in there, and we had to put the barracks together and the eating halls and other facilities. We went through torture when we first went; that winter of 1940 was dreadful.

LF: Tell me a little about it.

CW: I can tell you this, which there are certain things you cannot forget, and, excuse me, but I have to bring this up. You had to go to the bathroom. There's no place to go, so where would you go? You go on the outside. It is cold, right. The next morning the Germans would come along and say, "What did you guys do here?" I said, "We didn't have no place else to go. What should we do?" So they made us pick it up with our hands, and clean it up. The next evening, we had the same story. We still did not have no bath room. Where are we going to go? And this went on for about eight weeks, until they built bathrooms, and that kind of life we had.

LF: And you were working to build the camp?

CW: I was working at that time to build the camp up. Fortunate, a couple of months later, they needed someone to clean for the officers, the S.S. officers in the camp, and I was one of the fortunate ones to be selected to work for them. So this what really helped me at that particular time for a while, at least I was warm during the day, and I now had food to support myself during the day, not only enough for myself, but I was able to take some food back to camp and help others.

LF: So you worked at the officers' quarters?

CW: Officer quarters. I cleaned their rooms. I cleaned their shoes. And this was for quite a while, but not for long. This was from about April 1940 till about November 1940, and then something terrible happened, as far as I was concerned. For the officer I worked got themselves involved with a Jewish girl, and he must have had sex, which I understood very little. So all I did was do my work, and he had a friend, an officer, which I guess must have been with jealousy involved. I don't know now what could have been. One day I see he takes a stool and he stands up near the door that had a glass on top, and he looks in to see what was going on. I guess he must have seen whatever. So I don't know what really happened, but the next day they took the S.S. man away from these headquarters, and they called me in.

LF: Excuse me. Let me change the tape, because I think our half-hour has gone over on this.

Tape one, side two:

[Very long segment before interview is resumed.]

LF: So this man was found out?

CW: Yes, that he had something to do with this particular girl, and as I was working there for eight months, and they tried to connect me with the situation, that something else is going on, except this, a lot of monkey business, and they're taking me away to Krakow, which is, there was a prison there called Montelupich, how you spell it I don't know. You can relate this to Sing Sing over here. It was an island, in the middle of water, and I was put in a cell with a group which they were supposed to be, they used to call it "torture cell" which means they got sentenced to be killed, and chained. I could only walk one step at a time, and fed with one meal a day in the morning, a slice of bread with black coffee, that's what we had to live on.

LF: Let me bring you back to where we were. So here you are, a little past 13 years old, and you are in this prison on a trumped-up charge.

CW: Right. I was there, I think it was November or December, if I recall that. Every day I was interrogated, brought down to a basement, and I was whipped 25 to 30 and sometimes to 50 a day. I am telling you what I know about this group. I was held there six weeks, and after six weeks I was released.

LF: Did you know anything about what was going on?

CW: No, nothing. Up to today I don't know what was going on. As I got older, I realized what the men were doing with the women. In my own mind I didn't know at that particular time what was going on. But when they released me from prison—this was in January 1941—and when I was in that cell, everything was taken away from me, my shoes, and I walked out of that prison at that particular time without shoes in the winter.

LF: And they just let you go.

CW: They sent me to the S.S. headquarters. When I did go to the S.S. head quarters, I realized I'm making a mistake. Instead of going there, I turned back and I went to a place I knew. I remembered an address where we had relatives in Krakow at that time, and I hitchhiked to that particular place. I even remember the address today yet. It was called 1 Wasowella *Strasse*, and I went up to my relatives at that time—and it was in the evening—and they looked at me, no shoes, and they asked me where I was coming from, and I told them, so they thought I was crazy. People still lived in their homes at that particular time, and they thought something was wrong with me.

LF: They still were not in the ghetto?

CW: No, not at that time, and I realized, I don't know why I was scared,

I was scared they would call somebody or something, that somebody else will pick me up, and I left and I walked away, and I left. I disappeared. Then I found some rags. I covered my feet and hitch-hiked home by train from Krakow to Tarnow, and from Tarnow to Dombrowa, my town.

LF: To your town?

CW: My town. When I got to Tarnow, I hadn't eaten for about two days, so there was a showcase on the outside next to the station. I broke the window, and I took out salami, which I thought that salami must have been there for weeks in that window, and I ate it. At that time I was so hungry I didn't know what I was eating. I came home at that particular time—it was early in the morning, about 4:00 in the morning—I knocked at the window and my father answers. So he asks, "Who is it?" I says, "Chillek." At that time they thought that I am dead. They did not know that I am still alive. I used to write letters home from that camp, for about six or seven, I don't know how many weeks. They did not hear from me. They didn't know what happened to me. So they all took it for granted that I was killed. As a matter of fact, they started to say *Kaddish*[5] after me. But I had a grandfather—should he rest in peace. Through his faith, through his way—how much I loved him—I am still alive today, because I think he was the one who helped me go through all this which you don't know nothing about yet.

LF: What do you mean?

CW: What I'm talking about: I believed in my grandfather for survival.

LF: You're talking about your grandfather. I'm interested in what you have to say about him.

CW: You see, all this is coming back now. As we started off with my youth, it was hard to bring up every little thing. As I mentioned before we were a family of about 40 or more, and grandchildren, and all of us lived in the same town, and before we used to go to synagogue on Friday or Saturday.

LF: So you were saying, you got back to your parents at home, and they thought you were dead, and you were talking about your grandfather, and I would like you to talk a little more about it.

CW: As my parents thought at that particular time that I am not alive anymore, and they wanted to say *Kaddish* after me, and my grandfather said, "No, we will not, until we are sure what happened to him." That particular morning when I came home, my grandfather dreamt that I am coming home. He was an old man, short fellow, with a long beard. That morning when I was home, he came down to pay us a visit. "I dreamt that he came home. Is he home?" And I can only say about my grandfather what I mentioned before, why I believed so much in him, since I remember myself every holiday and before the weekend *Shabbos*, he would take all

[5]Prayer said by mourners.

his grandchildren together, and took the *tallis*[6] and covered them all, and he used to *bentsh'n*[7] us. You know what I mean?

LF: Yes, bless...

CW: And this, as a kid, you never forget. Any time I got in trouble, I felt it was the end of me, I never prayed to God. I never mentioned God's name in five years. I always prayed to my grandfather to come to my aid. And it seemed every time I asked for help, he always was there to help me.

LF: He was alive during these years, or when he was gone?

CW: When he was gone. He died a couple of months later, after that incident when he came down to see me, he died.

LF: So this has strengthened religious feeling?

CW: This is my religious feeling up to today. Until today I do not believe in God. I became acquainted with God all over again when I started to raise my own family, and started to see that there is a God, that the world cannot exist by itself, that someone is guiding us someplace, and I do believe in God. But it took a long time for me to realize that there is a God. During the war, as far as the five-and-a-half years of my time, from the age of 13 to the age of 18-1/2 or 21, I would say, I did not believe in God, because I could not see, no way, God should stay by and see all them things they were doing to, not to people who might have sinned, what He would have called sinned. What did my sister sin at the age of six? My brother at the age of eight? Or thousands or millions like that? And this I could not understand, I could not see. So that is why I always say my grandfather, but he was God's man. I said to myself, if anyone should have been alive, it should have been him, because he was the one who really catered to God in such a way, that no other man in the world alive did.

LF: He was your intermediary.

CW: Not in my way, in his own way of life. He believed in it, and I believed in it too, but in a way, as a child, you are forced to believe in certain things, and certain people are doing things because they believe what they are doing, and thousands like my grandfather went through this, and they were gone. It is hard for me to realize and believe it.

LF: When you came home, then, what was going on there?

CW: This was in 1941. And after that when I came home, I went back, you see, there are a lot of things in between here what's really happened. I was coming home quite often during the time of 1940 until 1941. I used to get passes. My family still lived there, and I got passes from the work camp.

LF: From the original work camp?

CW: Yes. I used to work with a German officer who used to give me a

[6]Prayer shawl.
[7]Bless.

pass to go home to see my parents, so I used to go home, as I said before. I did not go hungry them days. I just happened to be one of the lucky ones. So going home, I used to see my father and mother, and on the way back to the camp I used to take with me all kinds of foods to a different city and help other relatives, which we had a little more than somebody else. So I want to bring in this picture now, about what happened, this one incident, at that particular time. As I was going from Dombrowa to Tarnow, I bundled myself with all kinds of foods around myself. It was the winter time.

LF: How did you make these trips? By train?

CW: Car, no train, most by horse and wagon used to hitchhike from one place to another. They caught me with all them kinds of things on me. Where am I going with it? They took me down to the S.S. headquarters, and they sentenced me to death.

LF: This is while you were still in that camp?

CW: I was still at the work camp. I was home visiting my parents, on the way back to camp. So as they sentenced me to die, so what can I do? How they used to do it? They used to put you on the wagon, horse and wagon, two white horses, and used to take you to the top of a hill and used to drive you around all over the city, and anybody saw you on that wagon with them two white horses, they knew you were sentenced to death; you will be shot. People at that time saw it, and what could they do? So news travels. At the time, we were only 18 kilometers from Dombrowa to Tarnow. That particular time already people must have come from Tarnow where I was from and must have given my parents the news that they saw me on the wagon.

LF: Did they do this over a period of time?

CW: Yes, they did this all the time.

LF: And how often did they drive you around?

CW: Only once. As I was close to the place where they were supposed to kill me, so a man with a beard walks out of his home, and goes to the well to get water out of the well. They stopped the wagon, and they called the man over and asked him for his passport. He says, “I live in here; I don’t have a passport. Let me go in. I give it to you.” They said, “You are supposed to carry a passport with you,” and they took him on the wagon with me. They killed him, and I buried him, and they let me go alive.

LF: How do you figure that?

CW: How I figured? They felt sorry for me; I was 13 or 14 years old.

LF: These were German S.S.?

CW: Two German S.S. They felt like they had to kill somebody so he, that man, whatever his name was, may he rest in peace, was a Jewish man, was killed instead of me. I buried the man, and they let me go. I came home that night

back again, and they thought that then I was surely dead. Now, at that particular time, before they were supposed to kill me, that's the time I prayed to my grandfather, and my grandfather helped. He came around. After that, I went back to the camp again, and remained in there. Afterwards I did not come home anymore. This was the last time I was home.

LF: That was the last time you saw your parents.

CW: That was the last time. This was, I don't remember the time, in 1941.

LF: Tell me, when you saw your family, or, you, when you were in the camp, was there any understanding or any communication with the outside world? Did you have any information about all that was happening? Maybe through a newspaper, through a radio, through people talking?

CW: We only knew what was happening around us—nothing else.

LF: You didn't get any hints or anything like that of what was happening?

CW: Nothing else. Nothing whatsoever.

LF: So, then, you are back in the camp again...

CW: I was back in that camp. I was in that camp until 1942. Afterwards I did all kinds of construction and different work. Everything was manual labor. I was never trained in any particular thing. So in that camp I was until 1942. From that camp I was shifted to a camp Mielec.

LF: How do you spell that?

CW: M-I-E-L-E-C, I think. This was a *Heinkel-Messerschmitt*, which means it manufactures airplanes. I was in that camp from 1942 to 1944.

LF: So the first camp was rocketry, and the second was airplanes.

CW: And the second was airplanes. First of all, I worked in that particular camp in Mielec on loading and unloading trains, whatever used to come in—iron, metals, whatever it is—for quite a while. As a matter of fact, an uncle of mine, who was my mother's brother, came to that particular camp, and he was disposed of. He wasn't able to work. He was shipped out because he was too weak and...

LF: He was sent out to a...

CW: He was taken out. In fact, he passed, before they took him away, he had saved up little pieces of silver and gold, and he handed it to me, and he was beaten and beaten.

LF: Was that a death camp?

CW: This is not a death camp, this is a working camp, and people who could not work, that's it. They sent them to a camp...

LF: ...where they were disposed of.

CW: And I went through a lot of things in that camp. The worst thing I went through in that camp, I got sick with typhoid, and I can only tell you what I saw with my own eyes that people were dying left and right, and how I survived

without even any water—I hollered all the time for water...

LF: No medical care?

CW: No medical care at all. Burning from fever. I was dying, and I don't know how I survived that camp, that typhoid—I guess my youth. In my youth, that I had plenty to eat—anyway, I survived. After I got out of the typhoid sickness, I went back to the same kind of work I did before, unloading and loading.

LF: What did they feed you there?

CW: When I was sick with typhoid? I will get to it. I was working there, and I was lucky again; I was selected to work in the kitchen. I became a chef. I was a chef over a year, and this helped me help a lot of people around myself. They used to throw out, they believed in throwing out a lot of food, I mean, unnecessary things that were something that people could help themselves. I also had an experience in there that I was lucky again. We used to have every—blackouts at night. Planes used to pass by—it was a plane factory, so...

LF: I better change this tape. With all the interruptions we've had, I don't know how long the tape has been playing, so I think this would be a good time to change it.

Tape two, side one:

LF: You were saying that you worked in the kitchen, and then...

CW: Then I had a little misfortune that time. There was a blackout once. I was supposed to prepare food for the midnight shift, so with big forty-gallon kettles, and we used to cook oatmeal or different kinds of foods and, instead of pouring in oatmeal to cook, I poured in a sack of salt. I did not see what it was. It was dark. I kept stirring, and people were coming in midnight to eat. I gave them salt water instead of giving them some thing to eat. Not only they nearly killed me for that, but I nearly killed the people in what to eat. So I was lucky enough again. They sentenced me they would kill me for this, but I went through that. I had a fortunate, now, this particular camp in Mielec, that I did not starve, as far as food was concerned because this one year of working in the kitchen helped, but a lot of other people who went through there, it was terrible things.

LF: How long were you there?

CW: I was there until 1944. I don't recall the month, but it was the time the Russians kept coming closer, and the Germans kept on surrendering. So they took us from that camp and transferred us to a camp, which they worked underground, in a sale mine, and they made the planes, they put, they worked in the planes, the parts, they worked on the parts.

LF: What was the name of that camp?

CW: I forgot. I was only there about four weeks, but it did not work properly because the salt used to eat everything up.

LF: The metal.

CW: Anyway, I was there about four, five weeks. After that place, they took us—as the Germans kept on coming the Russians kept on coming closer—they took me to a camp called Plaszów.

LF: How do you spell that?

CW: This is near Krakow. P-L-A-S-Z-O-W, I don't recall, anyway.

LF: You had no contact with your family through this?

CW: After 1941, nothing.

LF: Was there any underground, or nothing that you were aware of?

CW: Nothing. I always thought that our parents are still alive. I didn't know any thing about it. So I was sent to this camp, and this was the worst time in the five-and-a-half years that I experienced in this camp. I want you to know that you are the first one, through this tape, that is going to hear this. I do not like to talk about it to my own family. The only one I ever spoke about this to is my own son. When I arrived at that particular camp, this was a couple of weeks before Yom Kippur, and this was Yom Kippur Eve. They assigned us, I don't recall how many, but quite a number of us, but the Germans decided that they would uncover all the

deads, which they called, that particular place, *Poliowa Gorka*. I will not spell it, but that is how it was called. They used to mass-kill people there by the thousands. There was a mountain on both sides with a ditch in the middle, and as they killed the people, all they did was kept covering on top, on top of each other, so thousands of them were buried. And the Russians kept coming closer, and the world started to know. I guess they realized the world would uncover the real truth what they had done, so they took prisoners, and we started to uncover the deads. That's what I worked, and we uncovered them, and we worked day and night, and built on the outside, and burned them. People, women pregnant, you could see, you could see, I don't have to go any further. The Germans made us pull out the gold teeth from their mouths. A few of them I used to put in my pocket, a few of them I gave back to them. The reason I put them in my pocket, I used to go to camp, and for a gold tooth I used to get an extra slice of bread. I worked in there for about 11 weeks. This was my worst...

LF: It must have felt like 11 years.

CW: My worst, not only the smell, the thing what you had to do, to see what you can. And that one experience which I have experienced which the world should know about it, too, that they say this never happened again, this never happened before. They brought in 14 young women, from the age of 12 to maybe 25, one man and 14 women, one guy. They were caught crossing the border.

LF: Jewish girls?

CW: I assume; I don't know what they were, and I will not make that statement. There were 12, 14 women, and one man. The man, I know, was the guide supposed to cross them some place from one country to another. They brought them to that particular place where we uncovered all the deads, and they made them undress, completely undress. After they had to undress, they came in, and they shot them all down, killed them all. One of them was fortunate enough to remain alive, and after the mistake that she really made, she should not have gotten up, after she got up, she begged for her life. She says, "You killed them all. Why don't you leave me alone?" And this man says, the German, he's gonna leave her alone, and takes out the gun from his holster, puts it right against her temple.

LF: And you witnessed this.

CW: I was there, and I took all the 14 bodies, and I put them on top of the stack to burn them. This I witnessed. This was my first, worst in the five-and-a-half years, I am sure, and, I am repeating myself, this is the first time I have ever spoke about this. I am not happy to talk about it.

LF: Of course you're not.

CW: Very seldom I even talk about the past experiences altogether. Sometimes I feel it is necessary to come up with all those things, for reasons that maybe the world will prevent such a thing from ever happening again, because what

human can do to human is unbelievable.

LF: Man's inhumanity to man...

CW: Unbelievable. You just can't imagine in your own mind that such a thing could ever happen, that such a thing ever happened. But it did happen, and it could happen. We have to be strong enough to see that such a thing will not happen by keeping this alive.

LF: That's right. That is just the purpose of the tapes, that there be some living history...

CW: This was in 1944, and I was in that camp for, oh, how did I survive? We will get to that. After a certain period of time, after we, every six weeks or eight weeks, we were disposed of, and others brought in, so there's no one alive to tell you the story. How did I remain alive? The day that my group was disposed of, I got sick, and I did not report to work. That's the way I am here to tell the tale. The following day, the Russians kept coming closer, and we were put on wagons, on cars and trains, and we were sent further. I was in a camp they took us in a camp was called Gross-Rosen. This was already in Germany.

LF: How do you spell that?

CW: Gross-Rosen, I assume, G-R-O-S-S R-O-S-E-N. That particular camp I did not stay long because...

LF: That was toward Germany?

CW: This was toward Germany. I was in that camp two days. We stood all night completely naked. They took all, everything what we had, and we had to go be washed, and they gave us different clothes, and put us on trains, and sent us to different camp. This was already 1944, the end of 1944. After 1944, I was sent to a camp was called Brinnlitz.

LF: How do you spell that?

CW: This was a camp where they worked, we made ammunition. That camp was managed by a German by the name of Schindler[8], which he was very well-known after the war, that he was a friend to the Jews. And he is the one that they have a lot of different memorials after him. He died in Israel. He saved a lot of Jews, and we went to that camp. I had to be again lucky to be sent to that particular camp.

LF: And that camp was where?

CW: This was in Sudeten in Germany. [actually, in western Czechoslovakia] I was in that camp until the last minute, May 1945.

LF: Now tell me, during the years that you were in the camps, did you ever think of escape? Did you ever know anybody that tried to escape?

CW: Yes, you are asking very intelligent questions, which I am glad you

[8]Oskar Schindler.

are, because it is impossible for me to remember, to go back. It is easy said, but not easy done. Now, for instance, in Mielec, I could have escaped a hundred times, but I had to take 10 people with me. If I escaped, 10 die. So, would you have done it? You see, they had us so organized, they had us so well done, the Germans, that they knew how to do it.

LF: The psychology of it.

CW: We saw this. Some used to escape. I could have escaped 10 times, but I knew that after I escaped they're gonna take, they're gonna call in the morning: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine," the tenth goes to death. Every tenth person was killed after somebody escaped, so it was an impossibility at that particular camp to escape. We could have, but other people would have died for you. Very few people wanted to do it. The ones who have done it, we cursed.

LF: Sure.

CW: We were afraid. We used to watch each other. When we used to know that somebody wants to escape, we used to squeal on him, because they were afraid they would kill us for it. After all, as long as you were alive, you are hoping you are going to keep living. So this was the situation as far as escaping was concerned. In later years, maybe. The Germans were disorganized in certain ways. We could have escaped, but where would you go? You were already in Germany. So you were recognized wherever you gonna go, you were recognized and caught again. So it wasn't that simple, as easy asked as done. Like, I had a program here, going back a number of years, we had a program here, where Sylvan Cohen was involved. We were invited, myself and my brother, for an Automotive Industry group for Allied Jewish Appeal, and we were the main speakers at that particular time. We called that program, "Could it happen again?" So, and we were the main speakers, myself and my brother. I won't talk about myself, but I had a brother. Well, I was in business with him for 18 years...

LF: Yes, I know your store and...

CW: He is a stockbroker today, and I am only talking about myself. My brother has his own story, but he is a part of it; he is part of me. What were we talking about?

LF: You were talking about...

CW: Escaping. And then we were talking about something else. I jumped into different things, that's why it's hard. You asked me if people can escape, and I said it was impossible to escape. Then I went to Brinnlitz, right...

LF: No, we didn't talk about that.

CW: Yeah, I did go from Gross-Rosen to Brinnlitz...

LF: That was the last camp you were in, with Schindler.

CW: In that camp I was till May 8, 1945.

LF: And then?

CW: In that particular camp, no one can complain about this camp, because we had enough food, enough to live on [unclear]. We later realized, we used to make ammunition, instead of putting in powder, ammunition powder, we used to put in sand, and all them kind of things we used to do...

LF: Sabotage?

CW: Sabotage.

LF: He was in charge of the camp?

CW: He was in charge. He was the owner of the camp, in charge of the camp, and he really was a man which really...

LF: This was a work camp?

CW: This was a work camp.

LF: How did he get away with it, do you think?

CW: I got away with it for them, but they didn't realize it. But, later after the war, we found out all them things. We didn't know what we were doing. Maybe a few individuals did, but I didn't know. But anyway, we knew that we—in fact, he was responsible that we were all alive in that camp, because all the mail that was going out of that camp. He had something with the postmaster and every mail that went out of that camp, they read before they sent it to the headquarters. And if it was against us, it never went any place. That why we were, we were one of the ones fortunate enough that the Germans left us intact. When the Russians came in, we weren't even touched. You see, the Russians occupied us on May 8, 1945. The whole camp was intact, and overnight, when we got up, the Germans weren't here, and we were there without anybody watching us. We didn't even know it, because the way Schindler handled it. Otherwise, they would have taken us from there, and taken us someplace else, whatever they would have done.

LF: What was his background?

CW: Schindler?

LF: Yes.

CW: He used to have a factory, before the war, of housewares. He had a houseware factory.

LF: I wonder if it was a moral thing with him, or a religious thing.

CW: No, he happened to be a friend of the Jews. Also, maybe he was against what Hitler stood for. It doesn't mean that all the people wanted to see what Hitler had done; I wouldn't say that at all. I was asked once the question by someone, what I think [of] going to Germany to school to become a doctor? This was going back 25 years ago, and I says, "Don't you ever trust them!" You have to have your own mind; there are thousands new Germans being born every day today, and we Jews cannot hide under the aprons; we have to show the world and the Germans, the new Germans, we are the Jews, and not what Hitler once told them. We should live amongst Germans today, just like we lived years ago, but be aware

who you are, what you are, and just don't trust them. Show them that you are a Jew, that you can live, the rest of the world, that you want to live in peace, and you want to bring up the children a way not to happen what happened before. But if you gonna escape from all this, from the rest of the world, and try to hate everybody else for it, if you catch the German that has done it, which most of them know about it, punish him for it, don't try hide away from it. Nothing wrong to go to Germany. I don't disapprove to go to Germany and to study in Germany, and talk to the people. Let the new generation see.

LF: What is your message for America, what would you say?

CW: Not to be as naive, or to play naive as in the Second World War. If something like this ever occurs, if they hear something, then check into it a little more steeper, and really have an interest in what is really happening, not go to sleep with your wife and make love, and forget about next day what you ever heard, that this didn't happen, and my stomach is full and I have a warm bath, and I will forget about, and that is what really happened in the Second World War. I do not blame the American Jews for this what happened. This something had to happen, and we paid for it; it's nobody's fault. It's one of them things, but if they would have been a little more, showed a little more interest, I think, thousands of us would have been alive today. I think they were too naive to believe in something, which I myself can't believe now what I went through, and I don't blame them to a certain extent. The message is that we should stay united.

LF: The Jews should stay united.

CW: Stay united.

LF: Militant.

CW: All of us.

LF: And you think the State of Israel will help us.

CW: The State of Israel made us what we are today. Now, I can walk high today, and say that I am a Jew; it's that simple. We don't seem to realize that we happen to be the fortunate Jews. In all the thousands of years, we have been chosen to live to see the State of Israel and it is something that we have prayed for years: "*L'shono Habo B'Yerushaleyem*—Next year we shall be in Jerusalem." My grandfather was no older than I am. Why didn't he see the State of Israel? He was praying it all his life, and his father was doing it, too, and his father before him, but I was selected to become the selected one to see it, so I don't have an answer, but I can say this: we should stay united, and we should not, if we see a problem there, we should not push it away, we should try to see to it...

LF: Be militant and stand up for it.

CW: That is my feelings about as far as our survival is concerned.

LF: So, you were liberated there.

CW: I was liberated in 1945.

LF: And then what happened?

CW: After that I—the Russians took over, and gave us three days freedom, and told us to do anything we wanted to do. A lot of Germans lived there. If you want to kill, take things, anything you want. We went out, and we didn't kill nobody. We only asked for material things. Because we had the prison uniforms, so we asked people to help us, to give us clothes.

LF: The Germans you asked?

CW: They were all Germans lived there, and they gave us clothes.

LF: But the people that liberated you, the Russian Army...

CW: They did not help us; they just let us go, they let us free, that is all.

LF: But they didn't supply you with anything.

CW: No, nothing. We went out, and we got ourselves. We went to places, to families, and we asked for clothes. We were given clothes. And as I said, the Russians gave us three days, anything we wanted to do, we could have done, rob, kill, anything, but we didn't. We only wanted...

LF: How many people were in that camp?

CW: I don't remember really. I think we were about 3,000, if I am not mistaken, 2,800 , I don't remember.

LF: And you went off into the various communities and tried, and did you receive clothing?

CW: We did, we did. They gave us whatever we needed, and not, very few of us knew what really happened at home. So we tried to hitchhike to go home. From Czechoslovakia we started to go to Poland. It wasn't that easy because all of the bridges were blown up and things, but I hitchhiked from one place to another, until I came to Poland. When I came to Poland, I finally hitchhiked from one town to another town another town, until I finally came home to find my family. I was in the concentration camp with one man for five-and-a-half years, and he was my age, maybe a month older, I don't remember, but they were very well-to-do, very well off. They had a big farm and hundreds of cattles and things. So right after he went home to Dombrowa, I went, we lived in center city, so I went where I lived, and he went home, to the farm. And I met another, quite a few years older, which he was [unclear] and his name was Ehrlich, and we got ourselves a little room. And the next morning we got a call, that we should come pick somebody up. What was the call, the fellow who was with me five-and-a-half years in concentration camps, that the Poles killed him the minute he got home.

LF: Oh my!

CW: The reason for killing him, he had to give back the farm. It belongs to him. This is another thing. This was after the war, 1945.

LF: The Poles that had occupied his farm they just killed him.

CW: Whoever killed him, it was never investigated, so I went to the farm

with the [unclear] Ehrlich, horse and wagon, and we brought him to center city for burial. He had a "*KL*."[9] I have in my hand over here, and his "*KL*" was that size. And I laid him to rest in his grave, and put his hands like this. That "*KL*" was in my mind for years and years. That kid was 18 years old after the war, had survived five-and-a-half years of torture and misery, comes home, and the first week in his homeland where he was born, his father and grandfather, and his life is taken away.

LF: And the war is over.

CW: And the war was over. After that, I said that this is not for me. I don't have a welcome here. I don't have family here. I had nobody here, there is nobody left. Well, I knew that I had an aunt, my father's, a sister. She was supposed to be hidden somewhere, and I could not find her. So I picked myself up, and I went back toward Germany, and I worked in a place for the German Consulate and I got myself a passport.

LF: This was in Germany?

CW: This was in Poland, and I went to Czechoslovakia, Prague, I went there for a while. From Prague I went to Munich, and at that time I was only by myself. And I came to Munich, Camp Landsberg am Lech. And a friend of mine—which I spent with him in the concentration camp, too, and I always talked about my older brother—well, he comes over to me, and this is two or three months after the war. My friend said to me, "I saw the Red Cross book, and the name Kalman[10] Willner, born in 1924, in Poland, Dombrowa, and he is in Munich, he's alive." And that was my brother.

LF: Oh my!

CW: I look, I went after the book, I open up the book and I saw, "Kalman Willner born in Poland," and that's my brother. I didn't wait. I went to Munich, walked, hitch hiked, and I knew exactly what camp he is in.

LF: How did you, oh, he had put it in the book.

CW: It was in the book. He looked for me. We all [were] looking for each other in them days, you see. And I went to the camp; I walk in and people were there and they said, "Yes, your brother lives here." Meanwhile, somebody from that particular room went to center city, and saw my brother in Munich, and said, "You are here, your brother's here." "My brother! My brother, alive?" Instead of taking a trolley, he was running for 10 miles, and he came, and he walked in. We hadn't seen each other in six years. My voice changed, and he changed, and we looked at each other, and that was the reunion as far as my brother was concerned. He was the only one in my whole family that I had alive. My father was dead, and my mother was taken away, my brother and sister were taken away to the gas camps to

[9]Could possibly refer to a tatoo "*KL*" — *Konzentrationslager*.
[10]Also interviewed by the Holocaust Oral History Archive on October 16, 1985, under the name Carl S. Willner.

Treblinka in 1942. And my father had remained after that, and went to work and back [unclear] and after that he was taken to the coal mines, and he died in the coal mines.

LF: So, then you and your brother stayed together and...

CW: No, after that we—myself and my brother—we stayed together, trying to find out if we had any more, we had relatives living. My father's brother who lives in Israel, but he changed his name from Willner to Budher and we couldn't find him. What was the reason at that time, I did not know. And we knew that we had two aunts, two sisters, in America which were my father's two sisters. And until we found out where they are, and what is happening, it took another six or seven months, maybe.

LF: You say that these camps were run by the Joint Distribution?

CW: Yes. Meantime my brother became very, very sick, cancer in the jaw. And he has had six or seven operations, which he has a scar still today, and one out of a million, he survived. This was after the war, and he was in one hospital, from one hospital to another.

LF: Let me turn to the second side of this, and I guess we will be able to finish up in a few minutes, huh?

Tape two, side two:

[Long interval at beginning of tape]

LF: So, your brother was sick, and you stayed with him. How did he get medical care?

CW: Well, he was in the hospitals which medical care was given by the...

LF: By the army.

CW: No, no, by the Joint, the Jewish agencies, all kinds of things, [unclear]. We lived in Germany from 1945 till 1949. We couldn't find anybody else from our family that was alive. So as I said before, we got in touch with our relatives in the United States. And 1949 we immigrated, and he [Mr. Willner's brother] came over here in April, 1949 and I came in May, 1948. And coming over to this country, I met at that time my wife. I never saw her before, on the boat, coming over here.

LF: Coming over here?

CW: She was born in Czechoslovakia, and at that particular time, I took pictures, and I said I am going to mail it to her. An uncle of mine picked us up, which is the one who brought us to this country, an aunt and uncle, a very lovely man, which I cherish him, who is passed away now, David Losack, and he met my wife.

LF: Your wife was also coming to Philadelphia?

CW: No, New York. We arrived in New York, and he said, "Why should you go mail the pictures; why don't you go and deliver them yourself?" I didn't know how to go there; she lived in Flatbush. My other aunt took me on a Saturday to Flatbush, and I took there, I delivered the pictures myself, and asked her for a date, and a year later we got married. This is my story.

LF: And your brother?

CW: My brother remained in Jersey. The time I got married, he married a year later. He had a misfortune a little bit in his first marriage. His wife, after being married a year, discovered she had leukemia, a terrible misfortune. She passed away after one year of marriage.

LF: Then he remarried.

CW: Later, he remarried, and has two lovely children. And this is my story up to here, and it wasn't wine or roses coming over here either. Believe me, with what we went through over there, when things didn't go our way, that's all I had to do was think back and I was happy. [unclear]

LF: Did you go back last summer to Israel?

CW: No, I was in Israel before, right before the '67 war. My brother went after the '67 war. My brother was there last year, this year.

LF: But he wasn't able to find anybody?

CW: Well, we have an uncle, I told you, we had my father's brother who lived in Israel. We saw him but he passed away since. I have a couple of cousins. One is my uncle's daughter. We have family in Israel. We correspond with them.

LF: Well, it's quite a tale, and I want to thank you very, very much for your time, and you know you have given so much of your experiences in the different camps and so on that this should be just invaluable for serious students who will look at these tapes and...

CW: I also want to close it in this respect. Anything I have said in here, I don't think I could even scratch the surface of the real happening. It is impossible.

LF: What do you mean?

CW: I can't even start—with every little detail, and all the...

LF: The feelings, the fears.

CW: What we went through, what we did, what we ate, how we survived, how we kept ourselves warm, and how the nights and days, it is impossible to say here in an hour, two or three, to come through. There's a book which you read of Russia, the author lives in Switzerland today, *Day in Siberia*. So it took 600 pages to write one day in Siberia. How can I come over here and tell you a story, something that I went through five-and-a-half or six years? So this is a brief story which I can possibly give you in a short period of time.

LF: Well, I appreciate it, and I thank you on behalf of the Archives at Gratz for this...

CW: At least I can do that. Another thing isn't here, but what can I say. In the end everything worked out fine, and as long as life, there is hope, and people should never give up any hope. When you think that it is the end, it is never the end. There is always a beginning, and that's what you have to live with.

LF: Well, it is wonderful that you have that much strength.

CW: That's the only way. If you don't have that strength and will, it will never come; you have to have it yourself.

LF: Had your wife been in a concentration camp?

CW: My wife is five years younger than I am, and she was in Auschwitz. She was a year there, and she comes from Czechoslovakia, and the Germans got there later. So, she was fortunate. She went through quite a bit, but my wife never talks about her experiences. I don't know why, but she never opens up, to myself or to her children. It's only myself, which I do talk to the kids about it, I did talk, but my wife does not want to talk about it, but she, there is something lacking. She does not want to talk about it.

LF: It's quite understandable.

CW: In 1939 she wasn't even eight years old.