OK, now what is this picture, please?

This picture was taken about three months after liberation. That was in LÃ¼beck, Germany, and they gave us those ID cards. They took our picture. Of course, it shows the concentration camp jacket, but that was a borrowed jacket. It isn't the original one that I was wearing. It was just there for the photo.

Why would you wear the camp uniform for the photo after liberation?

I don't know. They told us to do it, and I guess just so you look like a prisoner. You can see my hair already grew back a little bit because before liberation the hair was being shaved. Now if you turn it over on the other side, they have got-- should I go ahead and do it? They got my birthdate there and where I'm from originally. My profession, which they put drechsler, which means wood turner. And I don't know what this second one is. Let me look at that a bit. They got twice Lodz. I don't know. And then of course they have in English and German.

And where were you at this time that you got this pass? Where were you?

In LÃ¼beck.

In a camp, in like a resettlement camp?

Well, that was not too far from the camp. We'll get to that later from where I was liberated. Well anyhow, it says by order of the military government, the bearer of this pass must receive in every way privilege and help. And that's both in English and in German.

And what was the pass for? To go in and out of the camp?

No, I don't know. They just gave it to you. I guess so if you needed some help or something, you had something to show. And in Germany when you have a piece of paper like that with a stamp on it, it's important.

In that photograph you look like you must have gained some weight already.

Yes, I already gained about 30, 40 pounds since that [? time. ?]

OK.

OK, my uncle that survived lived in Feldafing, which is a DP camp. I went out to visit him and spend a few days there. And while I was there he took me down to the office, and I got the identity card so that I could get around the camp.

So when was this?

That was August 4, '46. Oh, wait a minute. That's wrong. It shouldn't be. That's because I was already in the United States at the time. Oh, must have been sometime in the beginning of '46. Oh, wait a minute. That must be the other way around. I got it. Yeah, yeah, it's 8 of April, '46. They put the date for the month. I was wondering why. At that time I already had my driver's license, and I was working for the US Army as a driver. So my profession was driver-- change of profession.

Why does it list only this one camp?

I don't know. That's all they did. I guess it's all they figured that they had room for.

OK.

OK, this is the driver's license I got in Frankfurt am Main in Germany. I went and I took up a driver's class. And after I

got that license, I applied with the US Army for a job as a truck driver. There's a long story to it, which I'll tell later.

Good. And you were saying about your handwriting--

OK. My handwriting is quite scribbly, and that's due to the fact that I haven't had much education before that. I only had four or five years of schooling before the war and none of it all through the war. So my education was minimal at the time.

OK.

This is the only picture I have got of my mother and her family. It's just so-- my mother is under a pillar on the right hand side. This is my mother. She must have been at the time a teenager. There is a brother and a couple sisters missing out in the picture.

Do you know their names?

Pardon me?

Do you know their names, the ones who are missing?

Well there's a brother, Jacob Kalinski, who survived.

And he's not in the picture.

He's not in the picture. I've got pictures of him after the war but not from before. There's a picture of [? Nasielski ?] That's one of the sisters, and that's her husband. And [? their ?] son is one of the cousins that survived.

And what's the husband's name?

I just remember the name that shows here. I don't remember his first name.

OK.

And their son is living in Israel right now.

Do you know what her first name is? [? Nasielski? ?]

Yes, [? Hiagila. ?]

OK. Anybody else in this photograph that who they are?

Yeah. The man on the right hand, this is Szmulek, of course, Kalinski, and you already went though my mother. Her oldest sister is the one that we went together to Auschwitz. Her name is Hanna Rivka. Her husband-- I don't remember his first name-- but I believe the family name was Diamant. We already discussed that one. That was a brother, Abram, a sister, [? Lucia, ?] my grandfather. That was their child, the older sister's child.

Do you know her name?

Yeah, that was Hanna Rivka.

Yeah, but the child's name.

No, I don't I don't remember the name. Then my grandmother, and of course that's the father, [? Nasielski ?] that survived. And then one of them is Polcia. And I think this one is Sala, but I'm not sure. It's--

Are they twins?

No, no, but they're very close in age.

Do you have any idea when this picture was taken?

Pardon me?

Do you have any idea of when this picture was taken?

No. The way I got that picture, when I came to San Francisco, I found out that a sort of what would you say? Not really sister but the-- well, she was related to my grandfather. And she knew my family, and she had that picture. So I took it, and she let me have it, and I had a copy made of it. And that's how I obtained that picture.

Do you know where this was taken?

Yeah. It was taken in Lodz, Poland.

But I mean in their home, you think, or in a studio?

No, I think must it must have been in a-- I mean, she got it by mail from my grandfather. And she had it, and as far as she knew it was just the family. But I don't know the details of when and where it was taken.

OK.

OK, this is the only picture I have got of my father. The way I obtained it was when I came to the United States. I was in New York, and a friend of his was living in the United States before the war. He came to visit, to pay a visit in Poland. And he was a friend of my father and my uncle and his brother, and they were together. My father was together with his brother, his wife, and the two children. And he took a short burst of a movie, a few frames. He gave me a frame of the movie, and I had it enlarged. It's not very much discernible, but that's the best that I have.

Well, you would you point to the people and tell who they are, please?

This is my cousin Paul. He survived. His sister Tola, who perished. His mother and father, who are not with us anymore.

And what are their names?

Huh?

Do you know what their names are, the mother and father?

Yeah. Father Abraham and mother Fela. And your father is there on the--

Leon.

Leo.

Leon, On the left.

My father Leon.

OK. Do you know when this was?

Pardon me?

Do you know when this picture was taken?

No. The only thing I could think of, probably in the mid '30s. I mean, I would just guess because all I know I did inquire at the time I got that, but too late now.

OK.

OK.

I wanted to ask you when you, for example, were working in that camp outside of Birkenau, were you passing by the townspeople at all? When you were either going to work or going between camps, did you see the townspeople, the local--

Birkenau. No, I never left Birkenau. But when we were working Trzebinia then we had to walk several miles through town and so on. I was seeing the people, yes. We walked in that column and guarded by the SS. We saw the people, and the people saw us, yes. And of course, we were working right there with the Polish gentiles that were doing the bricklaying.

Were any of them ever kind to you or helpful or give you extra food?

No. They weren't mean, but they weren't kind. There was only one time that I had a good experience with one of the German guards. At the time that was already the end of 1944, and at that time the people that actually were doing the guarding, the German soldiers, I guess this was they were all older people, like in their 50s and 60s.

And I was working, and there was a German guard, and he called me over. And he says, you see that big rock over there? He says, go under there and don't let anybody see anything. I went over, and I went behind the rock, and there was a nice big piece of bread. And he did that several times whenever. That was a sign of kindness because he did take a chance. If he had been caught at it he would have been punished.

Was that the only kindness you ever experienced from the guards?

That's right.

Or the kapos?

Yeah. That wasn't a kapo.

No, I know.

That was a German soldier, not an SS man, but a guard. And like I said, he was an older man. And that was about the only sign of somebody trying to help me like that.

In all the camps you were in, were you ever able to so-called organize any extra food or extra items or things for trade?

Yes. You know like I told you, I would go out and sometimes go out and push the bread wagon and break off a piece of bread. But in that, in Trzebinia, that camp, we got some blankets that we wrapped around, and I traded with one of the guys that worked, a bricklayer, for some food. But most of it you were living off what we got.

You couldn't be so resourceful like you had been in the ghetto.

No. Well, you were much guarded much more closely. I mean, you were being watched all the time, where in the ghetto you were pretty much free to roam.

How about your general health? Did you get sick at all while you were in the camps?

No, luckily not.

What about any other injuries besides your fingers that were smashed and your neck from the dog?

Well, most of it was beatings. Well, like my ears. You can see where it's like a boxer's ears.

Yes, I see a little bump.

That's from being banged around. And of course, most of the other, like being black and blue and so on. With time it goes away.

Did you break any other bones or anything like that?

No.

What about frostbite?

No, I didn't get frostbitten. No.

Did you have a problem with the lice too?

Oh, sure. Everybody had. I tried to keep as clean as possible and whenever I could wash. But all you had to do just brush up against somebody, and you [? would-- ?] I always had my hair shaved, not just cut, mainly to prevent the lice a place to live. But that was a very horrible thing.

You mentioned that you had another relative, I think a cousin you said, in the camp who got taken off in the ambulance.

Right.

What was his name?

His name was Sewek Offenbach, and he was the son of one of my father's sisters.

Did you ever know anyone else in the camps that was a relative of yours, or did you have any close friends?

Yes, when I was in Auschwitz my cousin, that Paul Gelb, and his father came there, but then we separated. They went to another place, and I went to another place.

For the most part, did you feel like you kind of operated totally alone, or did you have people you were close with?

Yes, I had a friend that we were working together in the ghetto. Then in camp we kind of got together and cooperated. Like if somebody picked on you, instead having to fight by yourself, there was two of us. One of us would get some extra food. We were sharing it, and we were just helping each other. And we went through that Auschwitz. We were sent out together to Trzebinia, and then from there we went back to Auschwitz together. And from there back to Sachsenhausen and back to Bergen-Belsen. And while we were in Bergen-Belsen, he came down with typhoid fever. And I went down to Neuengamme. And he stayed behind, but he survived. He was liberated in Bergen-Belsen.

I imagine that was a very good sense of support for you to have this friend.

Sure. Well as I said, he stayed behind in Bergen-Belsen. Then when I got to Neuengamme, together with another boy my age. And I forgot his family name, but his name was Moniek. And again we kind of worked together, and we went

from there where they would send us back to that Camp [? Fargo, ?] and then back to Neuengamme. And as I tell you later how I was liberated, the day I was liberated, he perished. Do you want me to go on from Neuengamme, where I left off, into the liberation?

Well no, you were talking about where you left off was where you were going to [? Fargo. ?] We were talking about [? Fargo, ?] What was it like in [? Fargo? ?]

Well, it was mostly again it was non-Jews in there. There were maybe 30. It was a small camp, maybe 400 or 500 prisoners. We were working in a submarine base, where they would strip the submarine. But we were there only about three, four weeks, and the war was coming to an end.

Had you been getting news of the war at all during that time?

No. We knew the bombing. We saw the bombing outside. You know, like we were not far from Hamburg, and we saw Hamburg burning, and we enjoyed every moment of it. And we saw where we there were a lot of oil tanks as well as storage tanks, and they were being bombed. And they were just bombing all around the camp, and we were sitting there. The guys were just down on the floor, kind of swimming, and we're just enjoying every moment of it. OK, and just came the time they said, everybody out, fall out, line up. And they said, OK, all the Jews step out.

And I said to Moniek, stay. And we just stayed in line. And just about all the Jewish men and boys stepped out. They were loaded on a truck, and we're sitting. The camp was right in the woods. Across the road was woods. And about 5, 10 minutes later, we heard machine gun fire across the road. I never saw any of the people that they took away. They took us back to Neuengamme and loaded us on a freighter. And I don't know how many people, but we were right down on the bottom.

And we were on it for about five, six days. No light, you know, it was just like a cargo hold. No food, no water. And finally we came up to another ship, which the ship was Arcona. It was a luxury passenger liner that was used before the war to carry people from Hamburg to New York, and they got us all on that ship. And they told us that we're going to be going to Sweden and be exchanged for German prisoners of war. However, the ship was loaded with explosives.

The ship was anchored about 2, 3 miles from shore. And what we found out later, the British were already ashore. We were off a town, Neustadt Holstein, which is a bay in north Germany. About the 2nd of May, we saw a couple planes fly over the ship. And what we found out, that was British planes. And they took pictures of the ship, and all they saw were the SS guards on top. And here the ship was just sitting a couple of miles offshore. So next morning on May 3, several fighter bombers, British fighter bombers, came around and bombed the ship and set it on fire.

The German SS guards took the lifeboats and took off, and there was probably over 10,000 prisoners aboard. Most could hardly walk. I got out on top of the deck, and the ship was already keeling over, and I figured I'll take my chance in the water. I jumped overboard. I was a very poor swimmer, and luckily there was like a door, a wooden door, floating. I climbed on it. And after about 3, 4 hours, the tide brought me in the shore.

What is your physical condition at that point? Could you walk, or did you have any strength or energy left?

Well, enough energy to do what I did. I mean, there wasn't much there, but I did it. Well, I walked. It was out in the countryside where I came out the shore. I walked maybe quarter, half a mile, and there was a farmhouse. I knocked on the door, and I was naked.

You didn't even have your striped uniform on.

No, I took it off because it would be just weighing you down. A woman opened the door, and she just slammed it shut. So I walked another quarter mile or so, and there was another farmhouse. I knocked on the door, and they said, OK, come in. And there were a few other people that got off the ship. And they say, there'll be somebody to take care of you pretty soon. Come on in. I walked in, and about 15, 20 minutes later, this German ambulance came up and a couple of German soldiers with the Red Cross bands [? are ?] [INAUDIBLE].

And said, OK, come on. We'll take you. And I said, oh my God, there I go again. And I thought we're going to go back to camp, to some camp or something. I got aboard. They said, oh no, the war is over. But by that time, I wouldn't believe much anymore what they would tell me. Anyhow, we drove a few miles, and we came into Neustadt Holstein. And as we were coming to town, we saw on both sides of the street, British tanks lined up, and we realized what's happening.

We're driven up to a military hospital, and the British had all the German soldiers that were in that hospital laying out in the yard, and we were put to bed. And there was a white sheet and some bouillon. Well next day, I got together with a couple of fellows who went out into the town, and we swiped some bread, some ham, some cheese, and we had a feast. And then we thought we were going to die.

Describe the reaction from eating that food.

Oh well, it was undescribable. I mean, pure joy but after [? fed ?] was not so good.

Diarrhea?

Diarrhea, and it came up from the top and from the bottom and just horrible. And I got so weak, and I said, oh, I'm never going to eat again. I'm never going to eat again. But I hid some of that bread and some of that ham and cheese under the mattress. And the next day. I felt better. I went back at it.

After being in that hospital a few days, they opened up-- well, it was a German, would you say fort, or a kaserne, you know, where they established like a DP for us, a place to stay. We stayed there for about a week or so. And then a couple of the guys somehow they got a woman, that her husband was a butcher at a butcher shop downstairs. They were living upstairs, and we moved in in there, and she was feeding us. Unbelievable.

By then your stomach could take it.

Right. By then my stomach came back to normal, could accept the food. And I slowly started building up in weight and strength.

How were your spirits at that point?

Well, the only thing I was trying to do at that time is find some family, somebody. I appropriated a bike, a bicycle.

From a German family?

No, it was on a street and I said, it looks like mine. And I was riding around all over into LÃ¼beck, which was about 20 miles away from that town because I heard that there were a lot of survivors there. And I was just keep going all around, trying to see if there was anybody of my family or anybody that knew any member of my family. Well, we're going into post-liberation. I thought you wanted to save that for--

That's OK.

Or you want to go on?

We can go on, but I'd like to ask you, do you know about how much you might have weighed by the time you were liberated?

How much I weighed? Oh, about 80 pounds or so. I was about 5 foot tall. My growth was stunted. My father was about 5 foot 10 or so, and I never got past 5' 5". Although I caught up with the weight.

While we're on the subject of your health, after the war or even during your time in the camps, did you ever suffer from nightmares or other kinds of things like that?

I still do.

You still do.

Days are all right, but nights, it comes back.

Every night?

Not every night but quite often. Yeah, it's just burned in.

Never get rid of it.

No.

Were you having nightmares while you were in the camps?

Pardon me?

Were you having nightmares while you were in the camps?

No.

Not till afterwards.

Not till afterwards.

What about your health in general? Do you have any problems or illnesses that you think came from that?

Well, one of my eyes is damaged from blows that I got. In fact, just a few years ago I went to have my eyes checked for glasses. The optometrist said, oh, you know what? You got bleeding behind your eye. And I went to go see an eye specialist. And they went ahead and took pictures of my eye, and then they sent me to a, what's the--

Like ophthalmologist, or--

No, no, the optometrist send me to a specialist, a retina specialist, and he checked. And he thought that I have got, what's that disease? Ma--

Macular degeneration?

Macular degeneration. And he had me come back a few times and so on. Finally, he concluded that this was damage from some blows that go back a long time because my left eye was bad all along. But other than that, thanks goodness, I--

How about you teeth?

Oh, they're in perfect shape. I never had any trouble about eating too much sweets when I was a kid.

And you didn't lose any teeth from malnutrition then during the--

No. No, thanks goodness, I've all my teeth, and they're in very good shape.

Back when we first started talking, you said that you learned German. Did you learn German pretty quickly when you were--?

Yes, I was a quick learner.

I imagine you needed to know how to take orders.

Right.

Did you learn other European languages too while you were in the camps?

Yes, I learned some Russian, some Hungarian, and that was from other prisoners in the camp. But most of it is going. Even Polish now, it's hard to, you know, I got to think that to say something, although that was my perfectly native language. My wife was born here, and of course, the children were born here and they mostly converse in English.

Oh, also did you know Hebrew as a child too?

Well, the Hebrew I learned was Bible Hebrew, you know like daven. I never knew Hebrew for conversational Hebrew.

I guess you never got to the point of bar mitzvah either. That was interrupted.

I missed it, yeah. Well, maybe this is a good place to stop.

OK.