

Interview with Leslie Pollak
Holocaust Oral History Project
Date: March 31, 1990 Place: San Francisco
Interviewer: Sue Siegal
Transcriber: Helen Miller

MS. SIEGAL: Today is March 31st, 1990. My name is Sue Siegal.

A I want to thank you for the wonderful cooperation you have shown in this case.

I'm Leslie Pollak. I live in the peninsula, Palo Alto. I was born in Rumania in 1921 to Jewish parents and we were four children, and we had very good Jewish education. However, my parents were not very religious, but they were traditional, and in the years of 19 -- the late 30s when Hitler got very strong and my father saw that there is no future in Jewish education, he thought it would be much better if we learned a trade. I learned carpentry and cabinetmaking. My father figured if we'd be lucky to be able to get out to Palestine, at least I'd have a trade on my hands.

Q DID YOUR FATHER HAVE A TRADE?

A No, my father did not have a trade, and he didn't regret it. In those days when my father was a young one in early 1900s, Jewish boys had very few trades because the Hungarians did not really welcome -- did not like any Jewish boys to learn trades.

Q WHAT DID HE LEARN?

A Well, he learned to be a clerk and

Spelling
bookkeeper, and so he made a living that way, and later on in the 1940s, when the part of Rumania where I lived, Transylvania -- I come from a city called [Radya], it's near the border right now, and the two dictators of Europe, Mussolini and the miserable Hitler, turned over the part of Transylvania to the Hungarians, and we fall into the hands of the Hungarians.

Spelling
So I came up to Budapest and I was working in Budapest maybe to send money for my parents to make a living back in [Radya].

Q MAY I ASK YOU, LESLIE, WHEN YOU WENT TO SCHOOL AS A YOUNG BOY, MAYBE EVEN FROM AGE SEVEN, EIGHT, DID YOU EXPERIENCE ANY ANTI-SEMITISM FROM YOUR CLASSMATES IN THOSE EARLY DAYS?

A I was lucky to go to a Jewish school, a Jewish gymnasium, and we were all Jewish boys and separately there was another school for the girls, but luckily we came to your Jewish gymnasium. We had our own -- we had Jewish hospitals, Jewish schools, Jewish gymnasiums, Jewish museums, so the city was about 120,000 people, and we had between 120,000 who were Hungarians and and Rumanians and we had 35,000 Jewish people.

The elite, I would say, were the Jewish people. The prettiest girls were the Jewish girls and most talked-about, and the newspapermen mostly were Jewish,

but we lived good with the Hungarians and the Rumanians.

In business -- mostly the Jewish people were in business, and the Hungarians were industry, industrialists, and the Rumanians were the officials. They were the tax collectors, the policemen, the mailmen, so the country [prompted] them and they conducted the affairs of the country.

Q WAS THERE A LOT OF SOCIAL MIXING BETWEEN THE JEWISH --

A Unfortunately not too much. Not even close to one percent of what we have here in America. I have to admit there were some misfortunate situations. We were quite apart, but mostly for religious points of view. Otherwise, we understood each other.

The only thing what we did not have social functions together like on Seder night. I never remember inviting non-Jewish people, so the welcome -- the way we do it over here in America, have together the one country and all the people work toward the same goal. And the misfortune was in Hungary that the -- due to religious -- every religion pulled to its own, the Catholics were afraid to lose members, so they kept the Catholicism to themselves and to their people and did not like -- were not welcome to mix with Jewish people or Protestants. So were the Protestants the same way, and not at least our own. We were not encouraged to do

that.

Q DID THE JEWS LIVE IN A PARTICULAR PART OF TOWN?

A No. I would say no. It was mixed everywhere. There was no ghettos, there was nothing with the sections. The Jewish section, no. It was everywhere and whatever people could buy. There were some little sections, the shule, the synagogues, around there there was some kosher delicatessens in the section, but otherwise people lived in all parts of the city.

When the Nazis got into Hungary in 1944, in April the 19th, they were one month -- they started already with Eichman -- started to put people in the ghettos and we had no idea what was going to happen. They just gave the orders, and the Hungarian gendarmes got together the people and no Hungarian would help us.

I had a feeling they could hardly wait for us to evacuate our homes so they could rob our clothes and our homes and our furniture, and they did later on we found out when I came back after liberation. They just wanted to put the blame on the Germans like they did all the wrong things. They were just the poor guys sitting on the side doing nothing, but definitely they did not help us. They could help us quite a bit, but they didn't. I would say the Rumanians were much better to us which

they helped me, which I come to later.

When I was in Budapest, I was working as a cabinetmaker. I made many furniture for the Nazis heroes. We were under contract with the German government and the Hungarian government and we made pretty good money on that, but I was much happier later on when I was in the battalion, the Arbeit Battalion, and we were making the -- they needed carpenters, workers, to make coffins for the German heroes. I was very glad to to that. I'd rather do that for no money than making furniture for the Nazi Army for money.

In 1944, September 15th, Hungary got out very clumsily from the war while they were overrun right away by the Nazis, and the Hungarian army was put back to fight again the Russians. Our company, which was a workman's company which we had no guns. We had shovels and hammers and all kinds of working tools mostly for road-building.

We were taken back from the Polish border to inside Hungary and we had a whole day's march; early morning until about 5:00 o'clock or 6:00 o'clock, but I did escape. The way I did escape, I told the sergeant while we were marching on the road, "I have to go to the bathroom." He said, "You hurry up." I went into the woods. There were some trees and I kept on going while our battalion, the (12.2) Hungarian Battalion, they took

to a school.

They arrived there about 8:00 o'clock at night with three hours more of marching, and over 300 boys. They kept them there until the trainload came next day and put them on the train and took the whole company to Mauthausen.

I was lucky, and another fellow who was in the same battalion, after I went in the woods, I heard some voices, and I was afraid maybe it's a German soldier or a Hungarian gendarme, but luckily I see a colleague of mine. He also took off, he had the same idea as I did. Together we hid in the woods and we were hiding all night.

Around morning we could see before the stars to get light, we started to walk and we walked to a small, little house where we saw Rumanian peasants doing this fibers. We knocked on the door and the Rumanian said, "Oh, poor boys. I don't see we are Jewish. What happened to your parents?"

Q DID YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR PARENTS?

A I had no idea. There was only -- the deportation was in May and the beginning of June, and this was in September when this was, when I was ready to escape. He was sympathizing with us and he said, "Boys, if you want to I will hide you here," and we said, "Thank you very much for taking us and the consideration

of giving us a break."

So this brave man and his wife hide us in the top of a stall where they have the cows and horses, in the top of that stall, and the ladder and in between the roof and --

Q IN THE HAYLOFT?

A Yes, in the hayloft.

There we were hiding up to one week or ten days. My memory is bad, so I can't remember how long. So both of my friends were hiding there until the night somebody comes and said, "Boys, come out of here. Some German officers are here and they are looking for war, and they usually look in places where you are hiding." And we came down fast and they took us between corn stacks, and we hid there inside the corn stack. It was very cold and wet, lots of water.

Anyway, we hid there for a few hours and later on the landowner comes and says, "Boys, the Germans left." So then we came out and back up to the roof again. Then, about 5:00 o'clock in the morning, we heard a great explosion and then we know that the Germans blew up the bridge so the Russian Army could not follow them. And about --

Q LESLIE, EXCUSE ME. WAS THAT RIGHT NEAR THE RUMANIAN BORDER BECAUSE YOU SAY IT WAS A RUMANIAN THAT HID YOU?

A Yes, it was a Rumanian peasant that hid me, but the territory was given to Hungary, so this territory of Transylvania at this moment was Hungarian.

Q I SEE, SO IT HAD BOTH HUNGARIANS AND RUMANIANS LIVING ON IT?

A And Hungarians, but Hungarians won't help us. The Rumanians did help us, correct.

So when the big blow-out came, we had the feeling that the bridge over the river Tisza was blown up to stop the Red Army to follow the Nazis. But it didn't take long time because that was maybe an hour later they had the pontoon bridge built real fast. They were on their way to chase the Nazis.

About 9:00 -- excuse me. About 8:00 o'clock in the morning we had the bells ringing and a little boy came and say, "Hey, Uncle John, the Russians are coming." And so we heard that and we get our pack together and wasn't thinking very much about the landowner who hid us, and we started our way. On the road there was a lot of armies coming through with the heavy artillery of the Red Army, the Mongolians, [Speckies] and all kinds of Russian Army, very colorful.

There was one man that was bandaged very strongly, his arm, and he looked very much to me like Jewish, and I asked him, "You know Yiddish?" He said, "Sure," so we had a nice conversation. And I said, "You

got wounded so badly," and he said, "No, I luckily have a great protector here. The doctor here, she is Jewish. She is from Moscow and she help me so I should not go to the front because I would be dead long time ago. She shelters me." That shows you a Jewish heart.

I tried to talk to the doctor, but, of course, she didn't speak any Yiddish and I didn't speak any Russian and --

Q IT WAS A WOMAN DOCTOR? PART OF THE ARMY?

A Yes, part of the army. Beautiful Jewish girl, beautiful Cossack hair, and she was wonderful person. We tried to talk with each other, but she didn't know neither German, neither French, only Russian, and, of course, she didn't speak any Yiddish, but she was a wonderful person, she helped.

A few minutes later, I saw a wonderful, good-looking sergeant. He looked to me he could not be Russian, he was dark and handsome, and I asked him, "Do you speak Yiddish?" He said, "Yes." He helped us a lot. I asked him, "Can you give us some papers so we will be able to go back home and the Russian Army would not grab us as prisoners?" because they thought everybody is a prisoner.

He said, "The Russian Army will not give any papers. Even if I give you papers, other ones will take it away from you, tear it away, but I advise you to stay

away from the roads because the Third Ukraine Army is coming down and they are just a bunch of hooligans. They might just do you harm, so you better hide for a few hours." So we hid until the Ukrainian Army passed.

So he helped me a lot, he helped us a lot. It is a Jewish heart how they help each other.

Q I HAD ONE QUESTION. YOU MENTIONED THAT IN APRIL OF '44 THE NAZIS FIRST CAME INTO HUNGARY, AND THEN IT WAS IN SEPTEMBER THAT YOU REALLY FELT THAT THEY WERE PUTTING THE PRESSURE ON ROUNDING UP THE JEWS. WHAT HAPPENED IN THE INTERIM?

A The gradual deportation of the Jews started on one month after the Nazis entered Hungary, so they entered in April, and in May they put the Jewish people already in the ghettos. And from the ghettos they took the Jewish people with trains, put them in trains, trainload of so much people pushed in. They could hardly breathe, and [Adam] wouldn't have put so many people -- and my family was, unfortunately, in all the 35,000 Jewish people who lived in [Radya], were deported from Hungary. Very few of them came back.

I was lucky. My sister was home. She was in concentration camp in Austria, and she came back heart-broken, but my mother did not survive and my father died in Germany, and my brother was with him. My brother was 16 -- no, 15 years old, and he survived, but

he got lung tuberculosis and later he was taken to Switzerland and I haven't seen him since.

Q IS HE STILL ALIVE?

A I don't know. We tried to look for him everywhere, but couldn't find him so far, but luckily I do have another brother. He is in Budapest. He survived the Holocaust by running away from the Hungarian Army and joining the Hungarian partisans who were very little, very small in number.

These partisans put up by some of the Hungarian Socialists and some Communists who were fighting the Nazis and the German and Hungarian Nazis. They were very few in numbers, but just enough to help people, particularly nice Socialists who really believed in human dignity.

Q SO OUT OF ALL THE CHILDREN, THERE WERE FOUR IN YOUR FAMILY --

A Four in the family.

Q -- YOU WERE THE ONLY ONE THAT WAS IN BUDAPEST?

A Yes, my brother, too.

Q YOUR BROTHER THERE, TOO?

A Yes. And I was taken -- in 1943 I was taken into Hungarian working battalion, and my brother stood in Budapest in our apartment. We had an apartment in Budapest. And he later on was drafted, but not the

Hungarian Army, but to a working -- it was what they call a framing of the Hungarian Army.

Q I KNOW THIS WAS A LONG TIME AGO, BUT CAN YOU REMEMBER WHAT THE PEOPLE WERE SAYING AND HOW WERE THEY REACTING AT THE TIME WHEN THEY KNEW THAT THESE JEWS WERE PUT INTO GHETTOS BY THE GERMANS. DO YOU RECALL ANY KIND OF --

A Fear?

Q YES.

A Fear of helplessness. We did not trust the Germans, but there was just no place to run where -- we felt like cordoned animal. There was no place to -- the women and children were crying and everybody had the feeling this is the end because all we heard before that Hitler -- in Mein Campf and in his speeches, now he shall destroy the Jewish people.

Now we see that he really meant business, and we blamed ourselves for not acting sooner and getting out of there.

So many people who didn't take -- there was my uncle. We were a poor family. We couldn't afford a passport to leave. Parents and four children, the six of us, we just didn't have the money to go and who would let us in? We didn't have any funds to go to Palestine. At that time it took about a thousands pounds for a person to settle in Palestine. My father didn't have

the money for the trip. My uncle could have, he was a very wealthy man, but my uncle did not believe Hitler was serious.

Later he paid dearly because his whole family was destroyed. Because he was a wealthy man, he was put into a kind of tremendous torture to get his money. Finally, bleeding in a sheet, they took him into Auschwitz and he was murdered over there.

So it was a terrible tragedy that Hitler was not taken serious. I would have gladly given my life to kill that son-of-a-bitch or so thousands of Jewish boys, but nobody took him serious. There was just a plain impotence on our part. We just didn't do nothing about it and nobody thought that something was going to happen.

Q WELL, MY FATHER DIDN'T THINK HITLER WAS GOING TO LAST EITHER, YOU KNOW. HE ALSO FELT THAT HE WAS GOING TO JUST OVERSTEP HIS BOUNDRIES AND SOMEONE WAS GOING TO --

A But later on, when we see that he is succeeding, that we know that he is very serious, and we are still hoping the French, who in 1914 -- between 1914 and 1918 so wonderfully fought by [Weldon] and by [Saddan], they would beat the Nazis. And then misfortune came when the Maginot Line was run over and the terrible tragedy that we trusted the French.

We thought that at least they are the people of the French Revolution, Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite. Little did we know that the French aristocrats, and even the middle class, just plain hated the working class and the lower class. They still never forgive the French Revolution for it, and there was another sympathize with Hitler and then even the Russians and should have been their allies.

It was a terrible disaster how they sold out Jewish people and how they gladly served the Nazis with the Jewish people here. You can have them. They were very good at that, what fate befell us, and so they are compatriots. Their own citizens who live with them and work with them, so the people of [Amasola] the victory was a terrible disappointment for us.

Q THERE WERE A FEW PEOPLE WHO HELPED THE JEWS, YOU KNOW?

A Yes, here and there. It was so small that I don't know if it was even five percent here and there. I heard the Polish people did not behave, but there were some Polish people were, the righteous Gentiles, but I just don't know anybody in Hungary, so the Polish behave much better than the Hungarians.

Q DID YOU TRY TO SEE WHETHER THERE WERE ANY HUNGARIAN RIGHTEOUS GENTILES?

A I looked, yes. I looked everywhere, and

hardly -- I haven't seen any. I have seen Hollanders and I have seen, of course, the Danish and I have seen many Polish, but I haven't seen Germans or I haven't seen any Hungarians.

The Hungarians were indoctrinated right after the First World War with such anti-Semitism, and they believed all the baloney what they get from the [Rehoty] regime that the Jewish people are all Communist on the one side, other side of the Jewish people are Capitalists, so they turn it whatever way they wanted as to whatever something is no good, the Jewish people.

They believed all that baloney. They just never used their own head. They never sought any intelligence to use their own minds.

Q YOU THINK THAT IF THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE MIXING BETWEEN THE NON-JEWS AND THE JEWS THEY WOULD HAVE FOUND OUT THE JEWS WERE NORMAL PEOPLE JUST LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE?

A It would help, but the propaganda was so big, the only thing -- the only people which I know that were nice were those few who were Socialist, Social Democrats, and Social Democrat Party, and there were some workingmen who headed it off, because there was -- in Hungary there was no Social Security, there was no unemployment. When a Hungarian workingman lost his job, he would live out of his savings if he had any. If not,

he had to sell his coat or his shoes because there was no unemployment and live in complete misery.

So many of them were Socialist, but many of them just took the terrible propaganda of the rightist of the Hungarian Nazis.

Q YOU SAID THAT YOUR DAD SURVIVED THE CAMP?

A My dad did not survive, unfortunately. He died in Buchenwald, but my brother survived and I still can't find him.

Q YOU HAD ONE BROTHER AND TWO SISTERS?

A I have two brothers and one sister, and my sister lived in San Francisco and, unfortunately, she died a few years ago. She went through hell. She went through the concentration camp in Austria, but she got out, yes. So did my brother-in-law. My brother-in-law was lucky. He came from Germany, and luckily he had a chance with his family to get out to Shanghai, which Japan allowed so many Jewish people.

Actually, they wanted the Jewish people. At that time they were not part of the ratpack with the Nazis, so Japan did allow Jewish people to come to the conquered territory that they conquered from China, and they wanted these people to give some blood infusion to the economy of the conquered territories.

I give this, those Japanese, they were smart, yet Chaing Kai Shek with his China, he was so miserable, he

did not let any of their territories -- China was big enough, he did not let any Jewish people to go into China into his territory. Yet, Japan did.

Q YOU MEAN THE JEWS WHO WERE IN SHANGHAI?

A Yes. They got the visa in Berlin and Germany because very few people wanted to give visas for Jewish people. At the time Hitler wanted to get rid of the many Jewish people. It was before 1940. There were very few people who give the Jewish people visas.

I know the French didn't want to give -- I went with my father up to the French Counsel and I spoke pretty good French, and I ask him to let us come to France. He said it was impossible. I said, "How about let us go to the colonies. You have Algeria, Morrocco, Tunis and a big part of western Africa which you dominate. I will be a good worker, you could use my skills. My father is a good worker. Could you help us?"

He said, "C'est impossible, monsieur."

The French were so miserable. They were themselves the -- their throat was already under the Nazi Army, so they were already struggling themselves, but they did not show any sympathy. They could have sent millions of people.

Q TELL ME, WHEN DID YOU COME TO AMERICA?

A I come to America in 1950. In 1946, in

January, I left Rumania, I left my father's house and I came with my sister to the American zone in Germany, and we got a place in the UNRA camp, and the UNRA camps were made up by the United Nations Relief Association and we had a place to stay. We were together with all the refugees and we started our new life and one -- when I came from Transylvania to Budapest, I met my wife, so I had my sister and I had my wife with me and we came together to [Hoking], Germany, and there we stood for four years, from 1946 to 1950.

In 1950, finally May 10th, we got to Sacramento, California, and we have been in that hot Sacramento for almost a year until finally I decided to leave Sacramento because I had a feeling -- I was working for 90 cents an hour, and I felt that I'm much more worth as a cabinetmaker than 90 cents an hour, and I came to San Francisco.

After a while I got myself a job in San Francisco and I was working for a Showcase company for ten years as a cabinetmaker. I saved up money to go in my own business.

In 1961 I went into my own business. We started a restaurant and delicatessen, and so we worked ourselves up and meanwhile, we were working very hard. My wife helped me and I invested in real estate and started to work myself up in real estate. I felt that

making every sandwich by hand, hey, maybe it later helps, but it never amounted to much.

I started in real estate, which I was very fortunate. But, unfortunately, five years ago I lost my son. He was 36 years old. A terrible tragedy. My wife after that could not survive six more months, could not survive the loss of her only son. It was the second tragedy that hit me.

Q IT WAS VERY SAD.

A I luckily have my daughter and son-in-law, and try to make a new life, which is very, very hard.

Q YOUR DAUGHTER LIVES HERE?

A My daughter lives in Palo Alto. She works in a department store in Palo Alto.

Q AND DOES SHE HAVE ANY CHILDREN?

A Not yet, but we hope pretty soon. I hope so.

Q IF YOU WERE TO THINK ABOUT ALL THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO YOU, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE GERMANS CAME TO HUNGARY, TO TRANSYLVANIA, WHAT DO YOU THINK GAVE YOU THE COURAGE TO LEAVE THAT BATTALION OF WORKING PEOPLE AND RUN INTO THE WOODS?

I ALWAYS WONDER, SOME PEOPLE JUST KEEP GOING AND DO WHAT THEY ARE TOLD, AND OTHER PEOPLE HAVE THE COURAGE TO BREAK OFF. I WONDER WHAT THAT WAS?

A Correct. What it was, I did not trust the

Hungarians and I did not trust the Germans, and I know if will keep on going, they will transport us somewhere and still be a slave or maybe killed sooner or later by the Nazis. So, in order to catch up with the freedom, it will be just somehow by getting into the line for the Russians. I knew the Russian Army is coming, and I had to deactivate myself. I didn't dare to go to the Russians because they think I'm a spy. Besides, I couldn't speak Russian, so I just have to act as one of the people who they liberated.

I take them as liberators and this is the way it luckily worked out while the Hungarian Army withdraw and by waiting there until the Red Army came in. But it was really -- there were many friends of mine who were not so lucky. They hid in the woods and the Hungarian gendarmes caught them and they were shot instantly.

Instantly they were shot because these Hungarian field gendarmes come around to look for people who desert or people who run away, but luckily I hid pretty good so they could not find me in the fields, but that man helped me quite a bit.

Q BECAUSE HE WAS HIDING YOU?

A Because I was hiding in his house, but, unfortunately, I could not find him any more so I could have shown my gratitude to him.

Q THIS FRIEND THAT ALSO CAUGHT UP WITH YOU IN

THE WOODS, ARE YOU STILL IN TOUCH WITH HIM?

A Unfortunately not, because all I know his name was Noam, and I didn't even remember any more of his name. He probably doesn't remember mine. I hope he is in Israel. He was from Czechoslovakia, the part of Czechoslovakia that was turned back to the Hungarians. Now it's Czechoslovakia again, but I hope that he left Czechoslovakia and he went to Israel.

Unfortunately, he was not a close friend. He was just one of the 320 people who were in my battalion.

Q WERE THERE ANY OTHERS YOU KNOW OF AT THAT TIME THAT WENT INTO THE WOODS OR YOU JUST KNOW ABOUT THIS ONE?

A No, this one alone. But later on, in May of 1945, some boys I met who came back after and told what happened in Mauthausen where my company was taken, some of them survived, a good part of them didn't. Those who survived were as thin as my finger, and the American army came into Mauthausen and liberated them.

Also, my sister was liberated in Mauthausen from the American Army, and from then on we started a new life.

Q THANK GOD FOR THAT.

A Yes.

Q YOU WERE ABLE TO START A NEW LIFE?

A It was very hard to start a new life, but we

had no choice. We were young, we cried a lot, and we were hoping -- we didn't think of anything else. We just wanted to go to Palestine. We didn't trust anybody else. There is nobody we can trust.

We had seen how pathetic the rest of the world was. They didn't give a damn about us. They could have saved us. How well we could have come -- if South Africa would have let us in, let in at least four, five million people, there wouldn't have been the trouble there is now. There were all the people to let in and work hard and build up the country and help them so they -- so the white people wouldn't be such a minority.

But they were silly with their racism and this time the racism would have worked against them.

Q WHEN YOU WENT TO THE U.N. CAMP, WERE YOU ABLE TO WORK THERE AND EARN SOME MONEY THERE?

A Well, they paid us with cigarettes and we got cigarettes for our work, and we sold the cigarettes on the black market. So we made a living.

The United Nations Relief Organization, the UNRO, provided us with food from American sources, some Canadian, and we got everything in cans, all kinds of food, even butter came in cans. So we didn't go hungry. We had army rations, some of the army -- left over from the American -- from the GI's, were turned over to us, so we did not go hungry.

We know that sooner or later they are going to allow us to emigrate somewhere.

Q DID YOU HAVE A QUOTA AT THAT TIME?

A Yes, there still was a quota until about 19 -- probably '48, and then Truman made a pledge that those people who were liberated in the American zone, they will be allowed to emigrate to America.

Q WITHOUT AN AFFIDAVIT?

A Correct. You didn't need an affidavit as long as they were there at the time of liberation, so -- if they could prove it by the papers they had. So that helped quite a bit.

I wanted to go -- for a long time I wanted to go to Israel. Didn't trust any other country, but then my sister got sick, and the doctor said -- after 1948, when Israel got independent and so many people went to Israel, the situation was very hard on newcomers because there wasn't enough shelter, homes, houses, and my sister developed in the concentration camp a heart condition, and she couldn't stand the hot weather. The doctor said, "If you go to Israel, the hot weather, we going to lose her."

So I had to choose to come to America instead of -- and this is the way I got to America and not to Palestine.

Q HOW COME YOU CHOSE SACRAMENTO?

A This is where the Jewish Relief Organization sent us from New York. Most people, when we arrived, they didn't want to come to California. There was a belief between mainly -- mostly Polish immigrants that were with me that Sacramento, not California, can be a brand of hell because you can be burned from the heat, and in California -- but luckily I read before many literature, and I read the Grapes of Wrath from the American authors, Upton Sinclair, and I knew that California is a great country -- great state, with many good products, and there is work if you want to work.

The temperature is very pleasant and also my wife was a very well-read person, and so we choose California instead of New York. We said, "Any time you want to ship us to California, we are ready to go," but I didn't think of Sacramento.

Sacramento was a small town at that time, even if it was the capital of California, but a small town. There just wasn't enough work. It was not paying enough, so after a year, finally I learned enough English to go on my own, and I came to San Francisco and got my own job as a cabinetmaker.

I was working for ten years and by the Showcase Company who was at that time a great fixture company. Of course, today is already history. I don't think they exist any more.

Q SO YOUR FATHER WAS RIGHT, WITH A TRADE YOU CAN ALWAYS MAKE A LIVING?

A Yes, correct. Thank God for him. I could even serve the Nazis with the caskets and help people not to go to the front where they were shooting, mines, and was pretty dangerous. I was inside working in the woodworking shop making caskets for the Nazi heroes. I was lucky that part.

Q LESLIE, WHEN YOU WENT BACK LOOKING FOR THE MAN WHO HID YOU THOSE TEN DAYS IN '44, DID YOU TALK TO ANY OTHER HUNGARIAN PEOPLE? DID YOU HAVE ANY CONTACT? WERE THERE ANY JEWISH PEOPLE LEFT?

A Well, not in Rumania. In Hungary, when I went to look up this man, this farmer who hid me, I stopped in Budapest with my brother and my sister-in-law and my own wife. We went to look up this man in Transylvania, but it seems like the whole farm where I was liberated was erased. The war -- they made a [colhosar] out of it because the central plan for the Communist hierarchy, and they took the people with small farms, took them around Bucharest and put them there to work in a commune. These people were shifted away from here and it was a heartbreak for me that I couldn't find them any more.

Q AND THERE WAS NOBODY YOU REALLY KNEW WHEN YOU WENT BACK? THEY WERE STRANGERS?

A Nobody, yes. I did find some people in Israel who come from my town, thanks God they survived, but all together between 35,000 people -- we were lucky if we had about 5,000 survive. Most of the younger ones, those who were not deported, those who were with me, those who run away, those who ran to Rumania.

We did not know that we would have run to Rumania, we would have survived because Rumania was lucky. Rumania did not turn over the Jewish people to the Nazis. At the time, when they wanted to take the Jewish people out of Rumania to deport them, August 23rd came and Rumania changed sides and the king arrested [Antinesco] and gave the order for the Rumanian Army to attack the other side. That shortened the war for about a whole year because as soon as the Nazis flee, the Rumanians attacked from the sides and from the back. The Red Army came down to Rumania and to Bucharest south, and then to Bulgaria, and went right into Yugoslavia. So the Nazis were fleeing right and left.

Q AND YOU SAY IT'S THE RUMAINANS THAT ATTACKED THEM FROM THE SIDES?

A Yes, that's right. They attacked them and the Nazis felt betrayed, but it was good for them. They were going around saying the Rumanians betrayed us, so they wanted in ways to fight village-to-village and

Spelling
destroy every village. The king was smart. The king we had was now in Switzerland and he choose to get rid of the Nazis and he made an alliance with the Russians and a big secret, which was much smarter than [Midori] in Italy or Governor [Horty] tried to do. When he was overthrown, he just couldn't -- he was so clumsy in making this push against the Nazis that he was overthrown right away.

Spelling
So one day he ordered the Hungarian Army to withdraw, and the next day come the new dictator by the name of [Solash] who was a Nazi, and he ordered the Hungarian Army back to the front. Unfortunately it failed.

Q ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN THINK OF THAT IS IN YOUR MEMORY OF PARTICULARLY THE TIME WHEN THE GERMANS CAME INTO BUDAPEST? YOU MUST HAVE THEN -- ALREADY THEN MANAGED NOT TO BE ROUNDED UP BECAUSE YOU WERE ABLE TO CONTINUE WORKING. IS THAT BECAUSE YOU WERE IN A WORK CAMP?

A I did -- correct. What I did was in 1942 I should have come to the Hungarian Army or should have been called into the army, but what I did was I kept on moving every month to another place. So when the order came out for my induction in the Hungarian Army, they couldn't find me because I moved and then they come to another place, next place, and I moved again, and then I

moved from Budapest to another town, then I moved to a third place.

For about a half a year they couldn't find me and half a year later, when they found me they gave me an order to run right away to this place where -- this is a paralyzed company and I would have to go with the paralyzed company. But I was lucky with the paralyzed company. When I got there, the colonel of that company ordered no more newcomers. "I'm not going every day and order some more provisions for the people. Now when they come, you send them back."

I was so lucky. If that came a day earlier, I would have been caught in there, but I came just the following day when the colonel gave the order. So just -- I think luck was with me. Unfortunately it wasn't with my parents.

Q BUT YOU DID SHOW A LOT OF RESOURCEFULNESS BY ALWAYS MOVING, BY NOT JUST SITTING THERE, LETTING THEM TAKE YOU. YOU HAD A LOT OF INITIATIVE.

A That's right. I didn't leave it for last minute. I kept on moving. I kept on protecting myself such as I could, and the same thing when I run away.

Q YOU WERE YOUNG.

A I was young. I made my decision. I didn't consult with nobody because usually when I consult with somebody, people talk me out of it, and when they

talk me out of it I was just defeated and I just didn't want to be. So I made my own decision.

Q AND YOU LISTENED TO YOUR OWN INNER VOICE?

A That's right, my own inner voice. Luckily I was lucky to survive all these hardships.

Q THANK GOD YOU DID.

A Yes. Thanks God I did. It would have been beautiful if I had my son and my wife.

My son was born in 1948 and he died in '85. Such a short time.

Q HOW SAD. HOW VERY HARD FOR YOU.

A It is very hard for me.

Anything else?

Q YOU HAVE BEEN VERY GENEROUS IN TELLING US A LOT OF THINGS.

A I was lucky. I did not go to concentration camp. I probably would not have survived there. But probably if more people would have taken more chances -- but who knows how they would have -- really, there was nobody on our side.

Transylvania, while the Rumanians were fairly good people, they would have hidden people if they had a chance. But it was the Rumanians not the Hungarians. God save somebody that goes to the Hungarians, there was right away a gendarme on them, but the Rumanians, even today the Rumanians and Hungarians fight with each

other. But I believe the Rumanians are much better people, have a better heart, better understanding.

There may be some Hungarians that are very good people, but very, very few. Most of them took the propaganda what they got from about 1920 till 1940, and later on in the 40s they took it as truth. So for 20 years be in this repressive propaganda. The anti-Semitic paropaganda all the time from the newspapers and the Hungarian government did all the damage to the Hungarian people.

I think the Hungarian people were not themselves already since 1919 when they lost the war and tended to blame the Jewish people for losing the war.

In a similar light, the Germans --

Q ARE THERE ANY JEWS IN HUNGARY NOW, THAT YOU KNOW OF?

A Yes. Now they are in Budapest, a community, about 80,000 Jewish people live in Budapest and very few live in smaller towns. But most of the people are in Budapest and government today is friendly and different kind of people.

These people are first -- the Communist -- under Communist government they were two-sided. They wanted to be friends of the Arabs, too. However, they didn't feel that they owe us much more than they owe the Arabs. They didn't protect us, they didn't help us. Yet, they

were saying they were even-handed. Meanwhile, wherever they could they helped the Arabs because of the pressure from Moscow.

But now, since Gorbachov, they themselves made the new approach with Israel and many from Israel are visiting Hungary and some Hungarians are visiting Israel. I seen many doctors coming to conferences, some engineering conferences coming to Israel, so they are not from Israel.

So right now is a good relation between Hungary --

Q ARE RUSSIAN JEWS GOING TO HUNGARY AND THEN FLYING FROM HUNGARY TO ISRAEL?

A Yes, amazing, yes. They do come from Moscow. They buy a ticket from Moscow all the way to Budapest, Hungary, and I'm not sure if in Hungary they buy another ticket to Tel Aviv. Could be they buy a ticket right away from Moscow to Tel Aviv, but they have to go via Hungary. But, instead of going to that lousy Austria they go to Hungary, and from Hungary they travel right to Israel which is a [state] now.

My brother told me that the planes are full. All the Hungarians were flying in from Budapest and Tel Aviv which opened a year ago, and thousands coming to Budapest and they both transport back Russian Jews to Israel by coming -- they bring the Israeli tourists to

Hungary, on the way back they got some Hungarians. But mostly the Russian Jews come back, but it is a wonderful thing.

Q DO YOU WANT TO END YOUR INTERVIEW?

A Yes. Now I feel --

Q YOU FEEL YOU SHARED YOUR STORY?

A Yes. I'm glad I could share my story with you.

Q WE ARE GLAD, TOO.

A And I hope that it will help, showing the world what happened to our parents and what happened to us. Those who think this cannot happen again, just look at the time when Germany had a very nice democratic government in 1919 and 1920, and the only way they thought that to keep away was to -- the war should not repeat itself, but Clemenseau thought to take Germany apart so [Feelson] did not allow him. So we had a little agreement for 20 years. 20 years later they were back again at our throats like Churchill said. Germans are either at your feet or they are at your throat.

This is so true now. Germany is reuniting again, and these leaders who are so democratic and nice today, they will be passed 20 years later, nobody could mention their name any more when they are going to have a new leader out there.

Q YOU DON'T HAVE ANY FAITH THAT THINGS WILL

CHANGE?

A I don't have absolute in the Germans because they are very militaristic.

Speaks
I have a cousin who lives in West Berlin, and she says you don't know. The only reason she lives there is she got a real good [marking] from Germany and she can help her children in Israel. If she would be in Israel, she could hardly make any money, but here, because her husband was very well off, was very wealthy and she gets her husband with a good [marking] and that is a good amount of money.

Speaks
While it's not great, but anyway, she can help with her own family.

Just telling the story that she told me, that still gives me the chills. One day was in the supermarket and some people came in the line and they were looking Jewish, so one of the German women said (speaks in German), meaning they forgot to gas these people.

So when they say they never know about it, don't you believe them. They know very good what they did, and they are today still militaristic and still think they are much better people than the Americans. They are better people here, they show us that they really are friends of America. But when they talk between themselves -- because I speak perfect German and I

travel on the trains -- and they think the American are [hauptkultur].

Q THAT MEANS THEY HAVE NO CULTURE?

A Yes. The Americans have no culture, the French are dirty, Franceau is smuzy, the Hollanders -- only the Germans are perfect, and if there is any good in this world, it should be shared between the Germans and the Germans do not have to share the good things in the world with anybody else because anybody else is not German. They still believe that they are the super people.

I know they hate the Japanese because the Japanese give them a lot of competition. They really think that they are the masters of the world. They're not going to be happy until they succeed because they didn't need Bizmark or the Kaiser to make them superior. It's born in them. It comes in their blood.

Q YOU THINK EVEN THE YOUNGER PEOPLE WHO GREW UP SINCE THE END OF THE WAR?

A I have a mixed feeling. An educated one -- I would say an educated one knows better and they are apologetic whatever happened in these horrible years. They are very sorry, but they don't feel they owe us an apology because it is not their generation. It is their father's generation and they do not have to be responsible for their father's generation.

But they know what happened very well, and today you can still feel if you -- I was in Berlin for a few days and I had the feeling that they really think they are superior. When I was in Berlin and they were talking about bombing they said, "Look at what the Americans and the British did. They bombed so many buildings here."

I was in East Germany in a town where about two houses were not built up. They wanted to leave it as a documentary to show how the war is like. That happened to be that building in Dresden. The building in Dresden is still in ruins and that was the headquarters of the Nazi party and the Russians didn't let them put up that building just to remember how war is.

And they say, "Well, the Americans bombed us and the Americans were so barbaric, and the British, together they ruined so many buildings." They don't want to know anything about what they did, about the beginning of the war, what they did to London, what they did to Coventry. They just like to forget it, don't even mention it, never heard of it.

Only complaint what they got -- I'm afraid they never got what Churchill promised, ten times as much. But if they got even, they just lucky. They got only so much because they did horrible things to Poland and to Britain and they themselves, they were offended when

they got bombed, the super people. "We shouldn't get penalized, we are superior to them, they are inferior, they should get bombed."

That's what they are feeling, even today.

Q YOU REALLY THINK THAT?

A Oh, I definitely know it. You have to know the Germans to know very few of them are really democratic unless they go through something different, but they still get from them -- they bring superiority feeling from their mother's milk.

Q YOU THINK SO? YOU THINK TWO GERMANY'S SHOULD'N'T BE UNIFIED?

A I think they are going to pay a horrible price again. Sometimes people never learn. It seems The French never learned. Everything that is going to be with us today, they don't think that -- once they going to be unified they will be quite different. They worked for a way of the unification to get back their territories from Poland then from Czechoslovakia then they want more [leibenstrom], then they will want more colonies and they will want to be masters of the world again.

I just don't trust them and I think the world is going to regret it again and they are all German to unify themselves.

Q WHAT ABOUT THE WHOLE RESTRUCTURING OF

EUROPE, YOU KNOW, THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY IS DIFFERENT TODAY THAN IT WAS IN 1929, '30, '32.

A Well, yes. The rest of the countries are mostly democratic and they never had -- they were never brought up like Bizmark did to the German people, to make them feel super race. I do hope that it's going to work out, that there is going to be a European community, but it could end up another way with Germany being a very strong power and Germany dominating and dictating the rest of Europe.

That probably is not going to be any more of my worry because that's going to be 20, 30 years later, but after a while it will come. They want to unify themselves, everything is going that way, too, to get back the way it was and continue because it's in their blood.

Europe will be very, very sorry they did it. So many things are going to change and the way Hitler was used against Russia and they thought Hitler is a good thing because he is going against Russia, and this is going to be some other thing coming up. They going to use -- to get into power, going to be against Russia again or against France or somehow is going to be a way they try to show why they have to cling to power or to be a strong Germany.

Is going to be problem unless Germany is going to

be needed against Russia or against China or God knows against somebody else. So they can build a new empire against --

A LET'S HOPE NOT.

A Let's hope they are going to be democratic and let's hope -- but it's a very dangerous element and I hope the world learns for two times making a mistake. Many people make a mistake once, but to make three times a mistake would be real foolish. Only a fool will do that.

Okay, thank you very much for the occasion you gave me.

Q YOU HAVE A LOT OF INTERESTING THOUGHT, IDEAS.

A I hope you will be successful and this is going to be for the archives, put away for the younger generation, and my grandchildren will be able to see us and know what I went through and what my parents went through. I think you very much, Mrs. Seigel.