Interview with Thomas Buergenthal
November 28, 1995

Tape 1, Side A

Question: I'm just going to have you say your name and when you were born.

Answer: Thomas Buergenthal, born in Czechoslovakia -- Lubochnia, Czechoslovakia. Today it's Slovakia.

Q: I'm going to speak with you today mostly about the period after the war and liberation, but I do have one question about the time that you spent in concentration camp, which is this: at the period when you were still with your mother and father, did they ever sit you down and, in essence, sort of give you advice on how to survive, try to teach you a survival strategy, or did they themselves know what actually might work in that situation?

A: Well, I -- not really in any sort of formal sense, at least, I don't remember it. Of course, as a child, you probably learn much more from observing than you do from being told things. But I do remember my father saying -- when we were -- when he and I were left alone -- that the one thing that was critical was not to eat food that was dirty or contaminated. That's the only sort of thing I remember because a lot of people would try to eat things out of garbage cans, and then of course get sick. He always warned me about that. Otherwise, I really can't think of them sort of telling me “You should do this or that,” but one of course saw a lot of things that one had to do. I observed my father, who's great strength was that, that you could see that he always thought things out before he did it, and he would not be sort of cowed into

running but he would make his decision and then stick by it and that was something I noticed, that a lot of people got killed or were caught because they acted too fast. They didn't sort of take account of the environment and then act. That's something he did; he was a master at that.

Q: There was a point where you had been separated from your mother and you were able to see your mother briefly, in a concentration camp. Did she say anything at that point, give you any advice?

A: No, but, you know, I think both my father and mother sort of knew that I -- I had sort of grown up in the camp. And they probably knew that there wasn't any advice that they could give me that I sort of, that I hadn't already been doing. Really the only advice or the only goal of our life, the long-term goal, was to stay alive, and the short-term goal was to have something to eat that day. And that was -- so survival was the long-term goal. But I really can't remember that they said it, or for that matter that they had to say it. I think they probably knew that I knew what had to be done.

Q: In listening to your testimony that you gave on video tape, I was struck by how you were able to be in a situation and make the best of it, for instance, by becoming an errand boy to one of the German soldiers or to a Kapo; or later, right around liberation, you became a mascot to a group of Polish soldiers, and every time there you are in those situations. How did you end up in those situations?

A: You know, it's hard to say. I've never thought about it, but as I said, I'd grown up in the camp and it seemed that sort of the -- that there were certain things you had to do in order to be able to survive, and in order to be in the position where you could survive, and those things sort of came naturally. I don't know, I must say I've never thought about it. The mascot part -- this was after liberation -- there that was really not planned at all or—because what happened was that I was liberated and we met these Polish soldiers and they knew that I spoke Polish, and they thought I was Polish, and they took me with them. And then sort of the mascot part came naturally. So I can't claim any credit for having known what I was doing, at that stage.

Q: You say that you grew up in the camps, and certainly, when your life was disrupted, you were about five I believe -- and then, you were about ten I believe -- and correct me if I'm wrong, when the last place you were was liberated. How did you grow up, what happened to you, who was the little boy when your life was disrupted, and who was that boy or boy adult when the camps were liberated?

A: Well, we, of course, were already on the run from 1939 on, and I remember very little from that period. I was born in 1934, so in '39 I was five years old. I was a scared little boy, that's all I remember. I remember our crossing the border from Czechoslovakia into Poland and worrying that something would happen to my father and knowing my father and mother were very worried about what was going to happen; being fascinated by some of the new languages I heard -- Yiddish for the

first time in my life in Poland. Really, I didn't start sort of facing the reality of the war and what it meant, and sort of the reality of trying to survive, until probably 1943, because in the ghetto still, when we survived the first in 1942, when they, when they dissolved the ghetto and sent most of the people to Treblinka.

Q: This is in Kielce?

A: This is in Kielce, in Poland. I was still very much sort of part -- I would do what my parents wanted me to do and I would be the child that did what had to be done. And in '43 I sort of began to be aware that I had to -- even though I was still with my parents -- that I had to do certain things on my own in order to survive. And then, of course, when I was left --

Q: Such as?

A: Such as, well, for example, when we were in 1943, we were in a work camp, and when that camp was dissolved, the initial thing was that I had to hide in order not to be seen by the Gestapo because they were taking all of the children away. And then what happened, I actually survived this: they saw me of course, we were all lined up on one of these fields in Kielce, and they start pulling me, and my father pulled me back. And then my father took me to the chief of the Gestapo, who was standing in front of everybody, and said to him, "This is my son." And this man looked at me, and I said to him, in German, "I can work." And, you know, it just came out of me. How do you say it in German? “Ich kann arbeiten”? And his response in German

was "Na, das wollen wir mal sehen" -- "Let's see" -- and he let me live. This was -- I was the only one of the children from that -- from Kielce who survived that way. There were two others who hid in the house where they took all of the children. And that was sort of the beginning of my awakening to the fact that I was going to have to save my own life.

Q: And in that case, instead of running away or trying not to be noticed, you went right into the belly of the beast. You went right face-to-face with the danger.

A: Well, that, in part, that was really my father's doing, who, who, who had sort of analyzed the Germans and knew that you had to often confront them in certain ways and that they had great, sort of, difficulty with their own propaganda and with the reality. Here was a kid who spoke German the way their own children spoke German, who didn't look as Jewish as they perceived Jews to look from *Der Stürmer*, which was the German sort of propaganda newspaper. And suddenly to have this kid talk to them, it personalized it. And I think this was my father's -- he sort of contributed to my doing what I did. He must have said himself, "You have to." Maybe he -- I don't remember, maybe he said, "You have to tell them you can work." It could well be, but it worked. And after that, in Auschwitz again, the first time, when I worked for the Kapo that, the Kapo was somebody my father had known before, because it was a man who had been in the ghetto with us in Kielce and was shipped out of the ghetto to Auschwitz two years before we did. So, by the

time we came to Auschwitz, he was a Kapo -- quite a brutal one. But he treated his friends well, and he sort of took me in. It was a terrible sort of society, to live. But that helped. I also -- in Kielce still, I worked as an errand boy for the man who ran that work camp, and I must -- I don't know how that came about. But what I remember -- I don't know whether I told it on tape, I probably did -- I used to sit outside his office and he would listen to the radio and I would listen, and would sort of report to my parents on the news because we had no news, of course. So I became the one who tried to memorize all the news that I heard on the German radio, and report it to my father and mother and I suppose through them, to the other people in the camp. I even reported on the fact that Mussolini had been captured and they didn't believe me -- of course they thought this kid is imagining things.

Q: At that point, a young boy, you might have felt angry or even intense hatred for the Germans. What was it like to work for one, one-on-one as an errand boy, and how did you cope with that?

A: You know, I didn't have to cope at all, that's the curious thing. He was a very, he was very nice to me. He never mistreated me. But he was quite brutal. He would beat people if he saw them not working. And so I figured out he would do that and so when he made his inspection tours, I would just really sort of run ahead and make certain motions. He had a hat with a feather and I would motion to people that the feather was coming so everybody started to work, so -- because I had seen him beat

a lot of people if he caught them not working. But he wasn't, he wasn't, never abused me, never mistreated me. That's strange, you know, as a child I remember he used to have a visit from some officer of the SS who would arrive with a bicycle, and he would hand me the bicycle, to take the bicycle and put it in the bicycle stand. And believe it or not, in all this environment in which we lived, I learned to ride the bike with this SS man's bicycle. You know, a child is a child.

Q: And you weren't afraid to do that that they might come out of the tent and see you playing with the bike?

A: I must say, I thought about it, but then I figured when he told me to take it and as long as I didn't break it, I was all right. You know, the fear factor was not -- the fear factor was one of survival and not of sort of what could happen in between for doing this or doing that. Because I really, when I think back, I was not afraid and not because I'm not a person who's not afraid, but because it just didn't seem there was any reason to be afraid. There were many reasons in the camp to be afraid, but not to these sort of episodes. I was describing to my class -- they asked me the other day -- I remember breaking in with a friend of mine in Auschwitz and in the kitchen of the SS and stealing milk, which was the first milk I had drunk, we had a cup of milk in two years. And if we had been caught we would have been beaten to death, but it sort of: there was the milk and we had to drink it.

Q: Were you ever afraid that you yourself would just arbitrarily get beaten, or perhaps

be chosen to go into the crematorium? After all, you saw this happen often, every day. Did you imagine that happening to you?

A: Well, first of all, beaten. You know, one got beaten because one pushed in the food line, and then they swung the stick and I was beaten on my back, but nothing really very serious. No, the fact that one thought, that I thought I would die in there, that was a reality. And it happened quite a number of times, where the risk existed and I knew exactly what was going to happen. As a matter of fact, I was in situations where I thought I was finished, there was no way out. No, that fear, and that fear was tremendous. Until, you know, once I hit a moment when I realized there was nothing more to do, I couldn't escape anymore, and suddenly a tremendous peace came over me, I thought I was going to die. I had done everything possible not to get caught and there was no escape, and I sort of made peace with myself and with death at that point. But it didn't last very long. You know, the survival instinct comes right back.

Q: Let's move on now to the point at liberation, and if you can, just situate us. Where were you, how old were you, and what kind of physical state were you in?

A: I was at liberation, in the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen which is about 20 kilometers outside of Berlin. And by that time I had survived the death march but lost -- I had frostbite, and was operated actually, in an infirmary of Sachsenhausen. They had sort of a hospital set up, because it was one of these model camps, demonstration camps, where they would keep people and could show that they were

actually treating people well, but at the same time would execute people and do everything else. But it was a model camp, and I was there. I had two toes amputated. And then when the war was coming to a close, the Germans decided to evacuate the camp. But those of us who couldn't really walk very much, and some people were much sicker than I, we were left behind in the hospital. And the assumption was that they were going to come and shoot all of us; this was sort of, we all expected that was going to happen. I was able to move. I had a crutch or a cane or something, so I think I was operated maybe three weeks before, or so. It was strange, after the evacuation of the camp, it was very strange but it was very quiet. And then you begin to hear artillery fire coming closer. And I think I went to sleep, evacuation must have been the day before. The next morning I got up and it was very, very quiet except for the shooting coming closer. I crawled out, went out and looked up and saw in the entrance of the camp, over the entrance on the inside -- they always had a machine gun mounted with SS guards sitting on, and there was nobody there, the machine gun was empty. I came back and told people. Of course, nobody believed that this was happening. And then we just waited and the shooting came closer. Then we began hearing small arms fire and suddenly -- so I think it was in the early afternoon -- we heard the gong, the camp had a big bell in the middle of this field, and a Russian soldier had driven in with a jeep and was ringing the bell saying, “You're free.”

Q: In what language?

A: I don't really know. It must have been in Russian, but Russian and Polish is relatively close. And the instructions were that we were free, we could go anyplace we wanted except not this way because that's where the Germans still were, so you go the other way. And the first thing that we did was to storm the place with the SS kept their supplies. And people, of course, these were all people who were quite sick and everybody dragged themselves to the supply place and people began to eat. It was very lucky for me that I couldn't eat. I remember finding a pickle. There was bread and everything else and all I could eat was a pickle. It probably saved my life because a lot of people ate and not having eaten for a long time, just gorged themselves and got quite sick and many of them died. I didn't. I just couldn't swallow. And then sort of a day later, there was a young Pole, must have been in his early 20s and I—we -- decided we were going to leave. So we just went out on the road and started moving, then we were joined by some other people, there were some women, also from -- I don't know where they came, but Polish women. And we -- the houses -- this was the city of where the camp is, Sachsenhausen, is Oranienberg, and we must have been in the area of that, moving away from Berlin. The German houses were standing empty because the Germans had fled, and often times the tables were still set, dirty dishes were sitting, and you could just occupy a house and we just moved from one house to the other, until these Polish soldiers

came and started talking, they talked to the women, of course. And then they saw me and they said, "Where are you going?" I said that I didn't know where I was going, I was trying to find my parents. And they said, "Well where they would be?" And I said, "They would probably be in Poland," and so they took me with them.

Q: Let's go back a couple steps. I'm curious about what else the Russian said, what was that scene, like when the Russian soldier gonged the bell. Did people come out and stand around, then did you guys hug each other? Was there a feeling that you were really liberated at that point, or did that come a little bit later?

A: You know when I see pictures of people who are liberated by American troops, by British troops, they were liberated. We were none of these scenes as far as I remember. The Russians just told us, "You can go." There was no effort made to help us in any way, to provide any medical services, and there was no hugging. I don't remember, I mean we felt a great sense of relief because we expected to be shot, but none of that -- it was probably too, in retrospect, it was almost too much. It was hard to believe that we were free after all this and that nothing had happened to us. No, I don't remember these scenes of liberation. I really don't remember even realizing that I was liberated until the war was over because everybody started shooting into the air, and it came, sort of, on my birthday. But I didn't have any sense of the tremendous joy that other people must have experienced. I was alone in many ways. I think that if my parents had been there it would have been different.

Q: And when you had hooked up with the young Polish boy and you were moving around in the town outside of Sachsenhausen, did you feel frightened that Germans could come up and recapture you, perhaps? What was the mood like, or were you just sitting back with your feet up on the table in these homes and having a nice time?

A: Well, where we were afraid, of course, was when we were still in the camp because we didn't know what happened to the Germans, whether they would come back and whether it was really true that they had left. But once we were out, I don't remember worrying about it. It seemed that it was over, and the fact that the Germans had just disappeared without a trace, the soldiers, must have had that impact. But I just don't remember that maybe as a child you're liberated, you're free. No, I had no sense that there was any danger from the Germans at that point. Of course, I then ended up, when I was a mascot, in the battle of Berlin, and that was quite -- there was a really almost hand-to-hand combat and there it was quite dangerous.

Q: Tell us about that. First you met some soldiers from the Polish army, tell us about that. How did you meet them and then what happened?

A: Well, they came to one of these houses, and I must say, it's hard for me to sort of remember very clearly, how it came about that they took me with them. But they did. They were members of the First Polish Division, the so-called Kosciusko

Division,[1] which had come from Russia. These were people apparently who had been, at least the officers, members of the Polish army in '39 who were then shipped to Siberia. And when the Russians needed troops, they were brought back and given a chance to fight in the Polish army under Russian control. And I, so this was the group and I was in. The soldiers who took me in, they were members of the scout company, so we were sort of the forefront of the division. They took me in. They gave me -- they made me a small uniform and I had shoes. They even gave me a small revolver, another revolver -- a automatic pistol. They had found a circus horse some place, a pony, and -- because much of the army was still horse-drawn. They had supplies of the Russian and Polish army -- was still brought in by horse-drawn carts. There was a lot of horses, and I had my horse and I could keep up with the soldiers, and I had a wonderful time. One of the things I remember doing -- this was a great sort of past time at that point, this shows you how children are children -- shooting at things that I don't know whether people still know what that is -- the electric wires and telegraph on poles are held up, wired around porcelain, white porcelain sort of, what would you call it, cups or -- . The big game was to shoot at those things and shoot them down because, of course -- that was one of the pastimes I engaged in with my Polish soldiers. And also I learned, the one of the people who

[1] The Taduesz Kosciusko Division, a soldiery comprised of Polish patriots under Russian command, appeared in July 1943.

took care of me was a shoemaker for the company, another one was a tailor. And I think -- I don't know whether I could still make a pair of shoes, but I actually observed how you make shoes and I helped and I probably at one point could have made a pair of shoes from scratch.

Q: So here you are, you're a little boy, probably less than six weeks ago you had been on a death march out of Auschwitz and all of a sudden you're dressed, you have a uniform, and you're riding a miniature pony with Polish army division.

A: It's -- when you think about it, it reads like, sounds like, a novel from García Márquez,[2] but it's true. And it, the strange thing is that the sort of, the absurdity of it, the comic aspect of it never occurred to me as a child. Its -- you know, at the same time, all of this I thought was going to lead to my being reunited with my parents, and I never even thought that this wasn't going to happen, this was all part of a process. In the meantime I could eat and I no longer had to be afraid and I had fun. I had a horse. Actually, on the food, I should tell you that I, since I had no appetite and the Poles were quite concerned that I couldn't eat, they started giving me, at first, a half a spoon of vodka, then a spoon of vodka, and that stimulated my appetite at the point where I could really keep up with them to drinking vodka because it was my medicine. That was sort of the only lingering thing that had survived from the camp. Well, of course, I had -- -my amputation was still—I had to change bandages. I did

all of that myself. I don't even remember ever being taken to a doctor when I was liberated.

Q: Tell us more about the eating. What could you eat, and how did that gradually change? Was there some food that was more comforting than others, or when you were able to be around larger amounts of food, perhaps with the Poles, the Polish army division, were there some types of foods that you began to really want to have an appetite for?

A: No.

[end of side one of tape one]

Tape 1, Side B

A: What I remember was the Poles would drink a lot of vodka, eat bread and smoked bacon with it. And that's the sort of food I remember eating—a lot of bread, and bread, of course, I could eat, although I really didn't have much appetite. But with the vodka, I ate and drank whatever they did, and I remember a lot of bacon, that the poles usually drink this with vodka. But there must have been other food, I just don't have any memory. The only thing I remember is that when we stormed that place in Sachsenhausen, still, that all I could eat was a pickle, and I hadn't eaten a pickle for a

[2] García Márquez, Gabriel José (1928-), author.

long, long time.

Q: Did it bother you that you had been deprived of food for so long? You must have fantasized about food or talked about it, and then you could finally eat more freely, and you weren't hungry?

A: No, that never occurred to me. It occurs to me now when I know I shouldn't eat and I have what I -- so now it's much more real. Now so often I think, oh here's all this food that I could eat and as a child I was starving and couldn't eat it and now I'm not allowed to eat it or shouldn't eat it. But no, I didn't, and I think it has a lot to do with having, being a child and taking a lot of these things for granted. This was life and this is what happened. One day you don't have anything to eat and the next day there's suddenly food. But I remember though, for years afterwards, would always think that you should always eat before you did anything of importance because you never knew when you were going to eat again.

Q: Did you find when you were younger, that you ate quickly, as if someone might take the food away from you?

A: That could be because I still eat quickly, probably too quickly. I don't know whether it's related to that or not. There were certain foods that, you know, bread of course, to this day good bread is something that I -- I always use the example that when I hear the word bread in German or Polish, I can smell it. It has sort of an emotion attached to it, whereas the English word for bread is a word that I learned, it's an

intellectual, is an intellectual concept, but it doesn't have all the emotion tied up with the words chleb,[3] or the word Brot[4] in German, which was all of the things that I was deprived of and that I needed the most. The one thing that I thought I would never eat again would be turnips because we used to get turnip soup in Auschwitz, with a little piece of bread which was often the only meal we had. But now I find that even well done turnip quite good.

Q: Can the smell of it or the taste of it, does it bring back memory flashes?

A: Not anymore. But good bread still brings back sort of feeling of how wonderful it is to be able to have this, which I didn't have because we really lived on bread. It was the most important thing, and to this day, I really can't get myself to throw away bread. Stale bread is something that I find all kinds of excuses to let somebody else throw it away.

Q: That's interesting. So instead of resenting or hating the bread because it's all you had, you actually sort of cherish it.

A: Oh, yes, very much so. The turnips I hated.

Q: Does your family recognize that about you, the kind of attachment to bread, and will they tease you about it or even get a little frustrated with you: “Why are you holding onto these bread crusts?”

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[3] Bread (Polish).
[4] Bread (German).

A: No. The problem is that, of course, they know that for some reason, it must be poetic justice, that bread has the worst weight-gaining effect on me, and so I'm not really supposed to eat it. I eat hardly any bread except for when I'm in Europe where my discipline goes. And they know that. Actually bread and sausages, which, of course, I can't eat because I had a bypass a few years ago. All of the things that I missed as a child I can't eat now. It's a small price to pay for survival.

Q: Can you tell us now about being a young boy just liberated from Sachsenhausen and you have hooked up with this group of Polish soldiers? War is not over and you are with them and you go essentially into military situations with them. Tell us about that.

A: Well, the first real military situation I got into was, I helped liberate Berlin. We came into Berlin while the battle for Berlin was still raging and we were camped in the park near where the rocket artillery that the Russians had. We're shooting over at the Germans and the Germans were shooting back. And I slept in an armored car because there was still fighting going on, and as we drove into Berlin, you could see there were Russian soldiers, dead soldiers on one side, Germans on the other. The battle was still raging for about two days. But then of course, the Germans surrendered and we actually took German prisoners at the end of the -- when Berlin fell. But during the battle, you know, people got killed. That was a danger that somebody could get killed. Actually some people from our company who had

ventured out on the street in the truck, the hand grenade was thrown -- because the Germans were still occupying the houses -- but nothing happened to me. I didn't participate in any of the fighting, I didn't shoot either. But we were counting because these rocket-propelled grenades that the Russians had, the Kosciusko would shoot out, sort of, six or 12 at the same time, and they were supposed to be moving because you can very easily locate them. And we were concerned. I remember the Polish saying that they really should be moving because the Germans could find where they were and then start bombarding us and them. But the Germans, at that point, German artillery was no longer very effective and nothing happened.

Q: Were you frightened at that point and you wished that you had not hooked up with these Polish soldiers?

A: Oh, no, I didn't wish that I hadn't hooked up, but I'm sure I was frightened, naturally, yeah. It's a long time ago, when you think this is in 1945, late April, beginning of May of 1945; it's a long time. But I remember the concerns that we all had about German artillery hitting us.

Q: What was it like for you to see the German soldiers brought into custody, taken prisoners? What were your feelings toward them? Did you feel like you wanted to go up and say something to them about what you had experienced yourself?

A: Well, I was delighted obviously, that they were prisoners of war and we were being guarded. I don't remember, first of all, I don't remember any of the Poles attacking

any of the German prisoners, and I don't remember having that feeling. I remember having that feeling very much when I came back and I was reunited with my mother in Germany and seeing -- we had a balcony in that town, my mother's home town in Germany, in Gottingen -- and sitting on the balcony on a Sunday and seeing the German families taking a walk and my father hadn't come back. And at that point, you know, the desire of sort of seeing -- when I first came back I would love to mount the machine gun on that balcony and shoot all of them. But if I think back in Berlin of the German prisoners we took, I didn't have that feeling for some strange reason. It may have been too distant or… I remember there were negotiations going on for the surrender of the Germans, and at one point it looked there was some danger because there was a whole forest full of Germans as we were moving back and our company was quite exposed but the Germans wanted to surrender. And these negotiations went on all night and I slept through the whole thing and when I woke up in the morning, most of the German officers had merely negotiated in order to be able to escape. That's also I remember from that episode.

Q: Did you talk at all about what you had just went through or did you plunge yourself into this new life? Did anyone say, "What was it like for you to be in one of these concentration camps?" Was anybody talking to you about that at that point or did you feel a need, a desire to talk about it?

A: No, actually I don't think anybody was talking about it because, of course, these

people had come out of a Russian concentration camp, they had gone through the entire war, they knew what it was all about. If people talked about anything it would be always to say, “Where are you from? “Where are your parents? “What did you do?” There I always had to be very careful because I didn't want -- first of all, I wasn't sure it was a good idea to say that I was Jewish, and second I didn't think that it was a good idea to say I was born in Czechoslovakia, so they just assumed that I was Polish. And so I sort of structured my own story that I came from Kielce, which was the ghetto where we had been, and that I expected to find my parents back in Kielce. That was sort of the extent of that conversation, but I must say, I don't remember very much of that period. It's strange; I have memories, sort of episodic memory, but not chronological memory. So that I, if you say, "Well what did you do then and what did you do then," it's often that I just simply don't remember.

Q: Actually something you just said raises a question. Did you feel Jewish and if so, how so? I mean, had you been able to in any way affirm your identity as a Jew in this period or were you really too little to have been given that by your parents?

A: No, I felt very much that I was Jewish but it's strange, my family was not a religious family at all. I had no religious education at all. Religion and Judaism became part of survival for me and I think that was part of what my father, my family brought me up. The Germans wanted to kill us because we were Jews and we were going to win this battle with them as Jews and we were going to survive. And so the Judaism that

was instilled in me was the Judaism that said that we were going to win over the Germans, we're not going to let them kill us and we were going to be proud of the fact that we can survive. I remember my father always saying, "We are going to be alive long after they are six feet under." So in that sense, Judaism, the fact that we were different, was part of the thing that helped us live. That was very strongly instilled in me. But never religious, never from a religious point of view. But my father was very much, very strong as a believer the fact that he was a Jew, but not a religious Jew at all, neither was my mother.

Q: What happens after the Polish army division pulls back from the battle of Berlin? What happens to you? What is going on at that point?

A: Well, we pull out of Berlin, eventually we are put on trains, again on trains, end up in an army camp in Poland, in a town called Siedlce, sort of a military garrison where I stay, I don't know really how long, it must have been a few weeks. But one of the Jewish soldiers from that company, who knew that I was Jewish and with whom I spoke, then takes me to a Jewish orphanage in Otwock, near Warsaw, which shows you that I hid my Judaism one way but as far as the Jewish soldier and I were concerned, I knew that I was Jewish and he knew that I was Jewish. And he took me to this orphanage where I stayed for a good year until I found my mother.

Q: Were you sad to be taken away from the army garrison?

A: Oh, in some ways, yes, because I have this sort of wonderful military life. Yes and

no. I -- again, you know, the strange thing is, is you ask these questions. Part of my life or the way I used to think was that these things happened -- and you didn't spend much time thinking about them, very little introspection about events. You -- like, it's sort of like swimming. You're downstream, this is part of what has to be done. It never occurred to me that I shouldn't leave. He said it was a good idea to go to the orphanage and I went with him. The orphanage was actually, a lot of it was quite nice. Orphanages sound terrible but this one was where we were treated quite well. That point is when I began to think that I would find my parents. Again you know, as a child there was a strong belief that I would find my parents.

Q: Describe arriving at the orphanage. What did it look like? What did you look like? Were you in your little military uniform at that point?

A: You know, I should have brought a picture. I still have a picture of my military uniform with this Polish soldier who eventually I think went to Israel. I must have because I had nothing else, so I must have arrived that way. I don't really remember the arrival part but I do remember that I was sort of -- and that made it easier. I was the only one there who had been in the camps. All the other kids had been hidden some place or had come from Russia or some place. So I was sort of an oddity and there was a lot of people asking questions, how was this. And the treatment was wonderful. I was still very thin and underweight and the cook in this place always made sure I would get a whole cupful or a soup bowl of cream so that I could gain

some weight. I don't think that was such a good idea in retrospect. And eggs, you know, all of the things that I don't remember having. And of course the orphanage was interesting because the orphanage was divided into sort of two types of kids. And, there were the real orphans, and I was considered one of the real orphans, without a mother and a father, and we were the tough kids. Then there were what we considered the weaklings because they had one parent but for some reason they were there. And, I was the youngest of that group and was treated extremely well, had a lot of fun, played games. And again, sort of, unthinking about what the future was going to hold and always believing without really doubting it, questioning it, that sooner or later I would find my parents.

Q: When you describe yourself being in the group of the tough orphans, it sounds like when you were young, when you were ten and just coming out of the concentration camp, there was almost a certain amount of pride, that you had survived and that you could handle yourself in these situations. Almost kind of the feelings of a young man and after all you were still a little boy.

A: No, I think that was very true. I think that was in part because I saw, and because of my parents, I saw the fact that I survived as a victory, that we had won over them. They wanted to kill us and we made it; we didn't give them the joy of killing us. So there was a tremendous sense of satisfaction, that of survival, unlike what one reads now that people supposedly feel bad that they survived and others didn't. We never

had that feeling and neither did my mother because my mother survived. I mean we felt very bad that, for example, my father didn't survive. He died just shortly before the end of the war. But we never felt that guilty about the fact of surviving, on the contrary. We were, it was a sense of satisfaction that we had survived. Really it was a sense of victory, that we didn't let them kill us.

Q: That's an interesting thought, I'm not sure I've really heard that before.

A: I've never heard it. All I read about is people feeling guilty that they survived. I mean I can understand that, I can understand it in some ways, other ways I can't understand that. If you survive, honestly there's no reason you should feel guilty and we certainly didn't. And really the people that I know from the camps never had that feeling.

Q: You said that you played games at the orphanage. What kind of games, and what was that like for you? After all you'd been working, you'd been an errand boy, you'd been a mascot to an army division. What was that like for you to have your day filled with eating a lot of food and playing?

A: It was wonderful. You know the strange thing is when I think back, here I had my toes amputated and I played soccer. I played a lot of soccer, and I had the great advantage because of my amputation I could also shoot with my left foot, so I was one of the few kids who could shoot left and right. It -- the transition wasn't difficult at all. It was an easy transition. It would have been much harder the other way

around. That is, I think, an important thing. That I, if you were my age, the post survival period and the adjustment and the survival period was all much easier because in the camp I never thought like other people must have, my parents, how wonderful it was to eat a good meal or anything of that sort. And missing all of the conveniences that one had, I couldn't take it today. I've often thought that I couldn't survive today. But as a child, from my point of view, things got bad but then they got so much better. And, I never thought back that there was any -- it came naturally and I didn't think about it.

Q: How much did people ask you about what your life had been like, for instance, in Auschwitz, and did you have a feeling that they were trying to find out information perhaps for later, for war crime trials or perhaps just to comfort you, to see if you'd experienced any trauma?

A: Well, in the orphanage, since I was the only one there who had been in the camps, the people from newspapers and newsreels would come, and I was sort of a minor celebrity. Whenever people would come to the orphanage I would be trotted out to ask questions. But not because they wanted to comfort me or anything, it was just somebody -- if they wanted to talk about the orphanage, this was an example. Actually, you probably know that there was a book written, a diary in the camp, the man who wrote that diary and the excerpts from the diary, the parts that deal with me, he asked a lot of those questions. And when he describes interviewing me in the

hospital about Auschwitz, he was struck by the fact that it was all sort of reported in the matter of fact way. I -- it's still like this to this day, I think in part because of my age or maybe I'm just totally insensitive to the experience but not very introspective about it.

Q: You were speaking about the Norwegian Odd Nansen. Actually he described you as a very beautiful young boy—"pre-Raphaelite" is how he described you -- and he said that the only way he saw any anxiety was in your hands and that you had the hands of an old man.

A: And now I do. No -- and he described them as very nervous hands and I suppose they still are probably to some extent. No, he was the only one in the camp that I remember asking me about things. And I was even -- I sort of thought, how strange that somebody would ask me about these things since we were all living it and there was nothing very unusual about it.

Q: And in fact, he was living it also but what struck him was that you were such a little boy and that you might have walked with a canister of gas to the crematorium.

A: Yes, of course, to me that was nothing very unusual or extraordinary, and to him it was very different. He was a wonderful man and one of the few diaries written in the camp on a day-to-day basis. I met him after the war. I found him after the war and we stayed in touch until he died. He actually saved my life in many ways. And I'm still in touch, whenever I'm in Norway, his son and I get together. Actually we were

together last year.

Q: You say that often you describe things in a matter-of-fact way. I wonder though that kind of being around death all the time -- you've just described a little bit ago about seeing the Russian soldiers and the German soldiers and you must have seen many bodies in the camps. Is that something that became matter of fact for you also?

A: Yes. Without necessarily saying that it was matter-of-fact in a way that you just don't notice it. It was -- the death and seeing death in the camp and seeing people dying could not but affect one in the camp. But again as part of the self-defense mechanism, you tried not to think about it, you tried not to see it. Although, you know, it's strange, I can talk about my experience in the camp, I can write about it. I can't see movies about it. I can't read. A lot of things they affect me tremendously, increasingly so. And I think in part because I must have sort of suppressed a lot of things that come out now. But I'm struck by the fact how much more, how difficult certain things are for me today than they were even 20 years ago. I, when I just even see a snippet of a movie, say Schindler's List, they would show something on television, I would break down. Despite the fact that I give the impression that nothing phases me, that I just simply can't take. For example certain Jewish music, religious music, brings back memories of the camp that are very difficult for me, for example, a ceremony at the Holocaust Museum, to stay without breaking down.

End of Tape 1.

Tape 2, Side A

Q: Have you ever been to the Holocaust Museum?

A: Well, actually I've not been able. I haven't had the courage to walk through. I've been there, I've given a talk, I've been in the auditorium, but I haven't been able to do it. I probably will one of these days and I want to take my children. But I just, I don't have the courage. It took me, well I didn't go back to Auschwitz until '92, first time I went to Auschwitz. Actually, it worked out it was much easier than I thought it would be. It was much harder going back to Kielce where I had been in the ghetto. I'll have to go the Holocaust Museum, obviously, but I'm afraid of it. That's the same, I haven't been in the Yad Vashem even though I was in Israel and I could have gone, emotionally I'm just afraid.

Q: Can you tell us what it was like to go back to Kielce, that is, where you were in the work camp and then there was the massacre? That was where you were in the ghetto and then there was the massacre that you survived there.

A: Well, the strange thing is that what we did, my wife and I, decided to sort of go back to my roots and we actually went back to the place where I was born and we drove around. And she would record, she would ask me questions and I would tell her about things. As we were driving into Kielce, I suddenly remembered the address of the house and the street where we were in the ghetto. I hadn't remembered it for

years, I couldn't remember it. It suddenly came back to me. And we drove into Kielce, and I sort of directed her, and I'm a person who gets lost any place. I get lost in Washington, DC, if I don't see the Washington monument and here I sort of directed her within two blocks of where we were in the ghetto and found the house. The interesting thing is -- you know how children are -- I kept telling her, "It's this big house, I don't know, it must be six or seven stories high." When we got to it, it was a three-story building. It was just as dilapidated, just as terrible as it was when I remembered it. And the faces of the people, there was a tremendous amount of antisemitism in Poland, and in Kielce particularly it was quite bad. We were always afraid that if you tried to escape from the camp you would be handed over to the Germans. The faces of the people and the lack of the fact that there was no monument any place in the ghetto to say this was the ghetto. All I could think about was, I want to get out of here. I just couldn't take it. Thinking that my parents lived in this one room in this house. My mother had just died and I couldn't wait to leave. It was lunchtime and we were going to stop and have lunch, I said, "I don't want to do anything, I just want to get out of this place." I'd spent four years of my life there. But it was exactly, I mean the part of the ghetto, that whole area -- and the lack of any remembering, any effort made to remember that 20,000 people had lived here who had died. I did go -- we did go to a museum. We tried to find a museum and I asked for a book on the Jewish community of Kielce; eventually they found

something that had been issued, there had been some exhibit I don't know how long ago, but there was nothing in the museum that you could see. This was the city museum of Kielce, and there was nothing about the wartime experience. A book that I eventually got -- it's sort of small little book about the Jewish community which must have been issued during the Communist period. It was shocking to me, well, first the way that nothing had changed, but then it was sort of totally, it's as if all of this that had happened there had no impact on the people and they didn't even want to remember it, whereas it was quite different in Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, I had come in, we went first. I was in Birkenau in the nice camp in Auschwitz, so we went in there first. And I was very concerned how it would go. As we walked in we saw a sign that said, “ARCHIVES,” and my wife said, "Why don't you go in and introduce yourself?" I was at this point thinking I should be writing down my experiences. And I said, "No, I want to be a tourist, I don't want to bother with any of that." And she insisted, so she usually prevails. I went in, introduced myself, and they took me to the director and he then introduced me to the archivist, and they were a whole group of people who came in. They were at that point actually working on a study on children in the camp. So they wanted to know, where were you and everything else. And then I had them check my number and find out when I arrived, and they had all of the -- they had the document, they knew the number of people that came with my transport to Auschwitz.

Q: This was -- you're talking about the tattoo that you got when you did arrive in Auschwitz.

A: Right. And what happened then as a result of this activity, the whole thing for me became an academic exercise, so then we had a car and they put a guide at my disposal and we went to Birkenau, but it was no longer the Auschwitz. So the transition was made much easier because of all these questions.

Q: I want to go back to the point where you are in the orphanage. Tell us how you were reconnected with your mother and any details that you know that were told to you in retrospect. How was the tracing actually done?

A: That's a wonderful story because my mother believed that I was alive when everybody told her that it couldn't be, but she believed it and she insisted. Matter of fact, my mother walked back -- she was liberated not far from Regensburg -- she walked back to Poland, to Kielce, looking for me. There were people who had -- because she and my father had sort of different weigh stations where they were going to meet after the war. And people there had been in the camp with me and some people had seen me at this point or at that point. They all told her, "He can't be alive, forget it," you know. She insisted. Well, my uncle, who lived here in the United States -- my mother then went back to her hometown in Germany, was very sick. She was sort of three months drugged just to sleep it all off, and got in touch with my uncle and they started the search and so the Jewish agency for Palestine and

various search bureaus of Red Cross and other things. In the meantime, I was in the orphanage and in the orphanage -- the orphanage was run by Jewish Communists, so-called the Bund party, who wanted Jews to stay in Poland and become good Communists. But the orphanage had been infiltrated by a Zionist organization and one of our counselors was a young woman, a Zionist woman from the Ha-Shomer Ha-Za'ir movement, which is a Zionist labor movement. And they decided that those of us who wanted to go to Palestine then -- this was in 1946 -- we should run away from the orphanage and we would be picked up by the people from that group and then taken to a kibbutz in Poland and then eventually be shipped illegally to Palestine. And so, the procedure was that every week or so, one kid who wanted to go there would run away from the orphanage and would disappear. But we all who wanted to go, put our names, tell them that we wanted to run away, so they made a list with our names. But I was told that since I had been on newsreels, that if I ran away that would really draw attention to the whole thing, so I had to be the last one to run away. But the list with names was sent to Palestine and it was sent to the Jewish agency in Palestine and somebody in the Jewish agency looked at those lists -- this is pre-computers, imagine -- it was written in heaven -- saw a mother looking for her child and a child with the same name on another list. Notified my uncle in the United States, and then my mother and then eventually they -- an American organization smuggled me out of Poland and Czechoslovakia to the American zone

in Germany and then to the British zone in Germany where my mother was. That was in December of 1946, so imagine, I was separated from my mother in 1944.

Q: Do you remember the moment that someone came and told you, "Your mother's alive, she's in this place and we are going to take you to her?"

A: Well, that was actually very different. I received a letter in Polish supposedly from my mother, written in handwriting, curious enough I could not really read, but I knew my mother's handwriting, and I knew that my mother didn't write Polish. And I thought it was a trick because every so often people tried to adopt us from the orphanage so this letter came supposedly from my mother, delighted that she found me and she was going to get me out of there. And I was sure that wasn't my mother. It wasn't until I received a letter from my mother in German that I knew it was my mother. You see, we couldn't talk on the telephone. None of that existed.

Q: So it was your mother.

A: It was my mother but she had somebody else write the letter in Polish thinking that I had forgotten my German or since it was going to Poland.

Q: And what did that letter say?

A: Well, I really don't remember what it said. I wish I had kept it. Actually the letter was written by a man who was in the camp with us who later became my mother's second husband, a wonderful man, a doctor. The only surviving doctor from -- who then died unfortunately in '48. But he wrote that letter. I knew my mother couldn't

write Polish and we were always, you know, this adoption thing, this is the tough kids in the orphanage didn't want to be adopted. It really didn't dawn on me until months later.

Q: So the orphanage said, "Fine, his mother is alive." And now I'd like to know a little more detail about getting smuggled out of Poland and into -- again it seemingly this should have been easy for you to be reunited with your mother but here you are again in these dangerous situations.

A: Well, nothing was easy after the war. I had no papers for one thing, no passports -- you would have had to have visas and everything else. The orphanage was very cooperative and the orphanage was also supported by Jewish organizations from the outside, particularly the American Joint Distribution Committee. So they, sort of through my uncle, started beginning to move this reunion and how to get me to Germany. What happened was that somebody came and said that they were going to take me to my mother and the orphanage agreed. I suppose they investigated it, and I went with them. We had to be smuggled out of Poland, this was in the winter, this was end of November, December 1946. We crossed over the border into Czechoslovakia, it was freezing and I was very affected because of my frostbite. We had to walk across the Czech/Polish border, they had bribed the guards, it wasn't dangerous but it was still a sort of, it was an illegal operation. I then ended up, I was picked up by an American woman working for one of these organizations in Prague,

taken to a hotel. I had never been in -- what I remember from this, it's funny how these things stay in your mind. It was a revolving door and I didn't know how to get into it. I was just standing there worrying. She walked through the revolving door and I was supposed to follow her and here I stood, I didn't know how to -- after all this, the revolving door was something I had never seen before. Well, we stayed in Prague for a few days and then again we took a train but we got out of the train -- there was another group of border smugglers from a Jewish organization called Brichah which took us from the Czech side to a German town called Hürth in Bavaria; it was the American zone. Again, trudging through border, walking across with bribed border guards, and ending up in Munich and eventually going on a military train with her from Munich to Göttingen, crossing into the British zone of Germany, and my mother awaiting me -- not in Göttingen, she couldn't wait -- in another town. Well -- and then you know, then I just couldn't believe it at that point, that's when the realization set in.

Q: So, resume, how did your mother recognize you?

A: I don't know how she recognized me, but I recognized her immediately. We had only been separated three years. That was no problem.

Q: Do you remember some of the first things you talked about in those first few moments?

A: Not really, I think it was so overwhelming, you know a lot of crying. The usual

thing.

Q: So then your mother took you home. Had you ever been to where she was living before?

A: No, because actually, even though my grandparent's house still stood, my grandparent's were forced to sell it and my mother lived in an apartment in a nice house in town and life suddenly became normal after all of those years.

Q: And, in a sense, it hadn't been that long since you hadn't seen your mother but in another sense you had become essentially a man who figured out how to make his way in the middle of this war. How did she react to that? You must have been very independent by that point, not her little boy anymore.

A: I don't know whether that's true. I reverted to being her little boy in many ways. But it's interesting because I spent -- we had to think of school and all of this -- and I had a year, a little more than a year of private tutoring from a retired German teacher, and he said that he couldn't get over the fact that I would be a little child in one sense and a grown man in another when we discussed things and I imagine that was the same with my mother. Although, with my mother, we discussed -- there was a lot of reminiscing about the camp, you know -- where was this, what happened. But I was a child, I played, I did everything. I wasn't at that point -- this was in 1946, 1947 -- how old was I? 14, 13 years old. I couldn't speak German too well. Again, this was sort of the interesting part; it took me a while to get back into German because I had

spoken much more Polish than German, and it took me sort of a month or two to be fluent again in German even though at home we used to speak German and Polish. I spoke German with my mother and father when we were together and Polish with my father when we were alone.

Q: And so there was a kind of -- let's catch up and what happened to you. Where you did sort of sit down and just really debrief with each other?

A: Yes. And things would come back and you would talk about this or that and another thing that is so interesting, people often think that when people get together from a camp, all we'd talk about were all these terrible things that happened. The truth of the matter is that we often laughed about things in retrospect, about things that happened that were funny, about this or that happened. So the human spirit -- you couldn't take all this if it were only reminiscences about all the terrible things. So my wife often sort of marveled about the fact that even in recent years when my mother and I would get together we would talk about these things and talk about them often and remember this funny thing, and remember this. It wasn't only remembering the terrible things that had happened. I imagine it was probably when I was little we talked more about those things.

Q: Because after all life does happen.

A: Of course.

Q: At that point what did you know about the fate of your father? Was it still a mystery,

and if you did know anything, how did you know it?

A: No, at that point my mother already knew that my father had not survived. It's strange because I had always believed that my father would survive. It's strange, my mother was not well, my mother had thyroid condition so I assumed that if one or the other of them was going to survive it was going to be my father who was going to survive because he was also, he was very strong and very healthy. But he was executed three days before the war supposedly ended, in another camp, in Flossenburg, where they executed a lot of people just before the end of the war.

Q: So that was a situation where perhaps the Germans were going to surrender or leave and they just emptied out the camps by killing people?

A: I understand that he was in the group, there were orders given apparently to not let any of the prisoners -- most of the camps fall into -- be liberated. And where he was the order was executed, in fact.

Q: How did you find that out? Did people tell you that who were there or did you research it later in life?

A: No, I didn't find it out, my mother at that point already knew.

Q: So was there a point -- then finally you knew about your father -- where you stepped back and took a sort of time to mourn him in any way, you and your mother together? I'm not sure how.

A: You know it's strange but life was so unordinary if you want, that you didn't mourn

in the same way. It was a loss, you know, we lost so many people. It was a terrible thing that my father hadn't survived. It was something that I still feel today but mourning wasn't something one did in the way one does for example, if somebody dies and one goes through this period. It was a reality one simply accepted, added to all the other things that had happened. But one didn't mourn the way we do in ordinary, everyday life. That simply didn't happen. I'm sure when my mother first found out, it must have been extremely difficult. But by the time I was reunited with my mother I think I -- I don't know when or if ever, on the one hand I always believed I was going to find my parents, but at the same time I must have at some point in the orphanage already concluded that I wouldn't be reunited, that neither of them lived.

Q: When you think back to when you finally got to Germany and you're with your mother, those first few days, and you're looking around and all of a sudden your life is beginning to look a little more normal, do you, I mean, was there one moment when you sort of remember looking around, maybe going to a market with your mother and saying, "Okay, this is pretty normal, my life is normal now?"

A: No, you know. I think I assumed that my life had been normal from the very beginning. The fact that it wasn't normal was part of it being normal, this was all part of the life that I had lived. I mean you would think that going back to Germany for example, would be difficult. It was difficult. It was very difficult initially for my

mother but this was the only place she really could go back to. My mother always told the story with a very bad conscious, very guilty, because she was standing on the street corner in her home town and an old lady came up to her and asked her to help her across the street and my mother said, "Nobody helped my mother across the street in this town." This was right after she came back. Then for years she would talk about it and say how terrible it was that she had acted that way. So you know, we had all of those feelings. But then I went there to school initially but at first the thought to go with these kids whose fathers had killed my father. But then you realize that these are people you don't know whether they killed your father, most of them probably didn't, and you make friends. And you find for example, we lived in the house with somebody, who was, a Catholic family that had actually helped the Jews in town, had been in danger themselves. And so that sort of abstract hatred becomes transformed into the fact that they're human beings regardless of whether they're Germans or not Germans and not every German was guilty.

Q: When you first got there and you had to brush up on your German and you had a German tutor, how did you feel about that? I mean you were after all learning this language that you must, at that point, you might have associated with the camps and kind of negative things.

A: But remember, it was also the language of my mother. I've never made that association. I always had terrible trouble seeing Germans in uniform but not the

language. And it wasn't a problem then. But of course the difficulty was that one did sometimes see types on the street that reminded one of the SS and others, so they probably were. My mother would every so often look at some woman walking by and say that she must have been a camp guard. And you know, those memories would invariably come back or people would make some remarks or people would see her number. She always wore short sleeves and people would say to her, "Don't you think you should have this tattoo removed?" And she would say, "This is a badge of honor, I would never remove this." You know, and she had a lot of the -- [end of side one of tape 2]

Tape 2, Side B

-- lived in Italy, starting I think in 1953 until she died. Every so often if she would see a German tour guide, she would make some sort of remark but at the same time she was very forgiving in many ways.

Q: Did you ever consider removing your tatoo?

A: No. But I think it's, it's -- and nobody told me to, that it would be a good idea if I removed it. But I think you'd tell it to -- she was a very pretty woman and so I suppose it was a natural thing to say, "Shouldn't you remove it?" But no, she was very wonderful, she was a very little person. She was less than five feet tall, very

charming but very tough. I mean, the fact that she could survive that camp. And she actually survived Mengele[5] who looked at her in the selection process and said to her, "You have a thyroid condition" because her eyes would show. And she in her wonderful north German looked at her and said, "Doctor, you're a magnificent diagnostician." And he let her go. You know that's kind of sort of --

Q: When you were beginning to integrate yourself into this German town, how open were you about being Jewish, about being a survivor of the camps and was it something that people talked about or were people saying, "Some of that's exaggeration, it didn't really happen"? What was going on then in terms of your experience?

A: First of all, we were very proud of being Jews and being survivors. And of course you know, my mother's family was known. This was a small town, this is a famous university town, it had 50,000 inhabitants but my mother grew up in that town and we were known. I was the only Jewish child in the school and the German kids would sometimes look at me and say, "You don't look the ways Jews are supposed to look" because their only notion of Jews were these cartoons that they had seen. The kids, you know children are children. I never experienced any antisemitism in the school, never had any sense. I've experienced antisemitism more in many other places, but never in school in Germany. People said they didn't know. The only

[5] Josef Mengele (1911-1979?), Extermination camp doctor at Auschwitz.

incident really that I remember in school was, of course, the teachers tried to avoid speaking about the war altogether. It was never mentioned in history class. History was taught. You spoke about the German mythology and the 17th, 18th century but never about the 20th century. That was never taken up. But in one class, I don't know whether it was even a history class, but the issue came up of the bombing of Dresden and Hamburg and the teacher was saying how terrible that was and I raised my hand and I said, "Well, if you're going to talk about that, why don't you also talk about all the other terrible things that you people did," and all hell broke loose. The teacher got very huffy initially and then, of course, worried because this was right after the war and they had to go through denazification and all of these things. Then he came at some point to our house and apologized. But that was the only incident which this matter ever came up. Of course, they tried to never talk about it. The kids would sometimes ask, “What's this number?” and “How bad was it?” Because these are kids my age.

Q: What would you tell them, would you be honest?

A: Oh, yes, I would tell them this is what happened, and then they would tell me that their father was -- you know, some of the kids' fathers were prisoners of war. But it was curiosity more than, but I never had the sense of any sort of antisemitic feeling or any sense of, "Oh, it's a pity that you weren't…" You know, the usual thing that one expects is, "How come you survived and why did you survive, what a pity that

you…" None of that ever.

Q: Did you ever have any fear that if you were very open about who you were about as a Jew, or confronted any authority, that somehow the rug could get pulled out from under you again, that you could be persecuted for being Jewish?

A: No, never. You know the strange thing is that when you enter a class, I learned very early because I learned it in the orphanage, too; in the orphanage, I was the kid who was sent to get the mail from the post office, this was in Poland. Because a lot of kids, the Poles would throw stones at and attack them and yell antisemitic slogans at them. I would go and pick up the mail and nobody would yell at me. For one thing I didn't look Jewish. But I remember once confronting somebody and who said something about me and the first reaction was to just slug him, and I learned very early that with all of that, the best way was to just be extremely aggressive and if somebody said something like this, you just whopped them one but you didn't act as if you were afraid. And that was also very effective in school in Germany when you enter the class. I was quite strong. And so you took on, not because of antisemitism or anything else, but when you came into a new environment you had to assert yourself and so you took on the fellow who was supposed to be the strongest. And I remember I was very good in arm wrestling and I could beat anybody so we would prove ourselves, you know the usual, almost like monkeys assert their superiority. But I never had any problems in school. I had to prove myself like I imagine any

other kid has to prove himself.

Q: So you had gotten strong now, you grew strong again, healthy?

A: Yes, I was extremely healthy. Quite athletic. I did, I played soccer in the orphanage. I boxed in Germany. I ran -- I actually won the 100-meter championship with my amputated toes, which nobody knew about. So it -- and I loved sports. It was all of the things that Germans to be able to do was another part.

Q: Did your mother have a strategy for keeping you healthy in terms of cooking? Was it a kind of concentrated effort?

A: No, I never had the sense that -- she let me do, eat what I wanted and at that point in the beginning it wasn't always easy to get food after the war but we always had relatively good food. Of course, any food we would have had was good from my point of view at the time but I don't remember. We received some care packages actually from the United States and my relatives here sent some food. It was always a big event when a package arrived from the United States with different things coming out of cans.

Q: How did your mother earn money? What was she doing at this point?

A: Well, my mother wasn't doing anything. At that point we -- she -- received a pension. Initially we received -- there was actually aid given to Jewish, from Jewish organizations and at one point she was the president of the Jewish community which consisted, I think, of about 20 Jewish, Jews' families and individuals. And there was

food brought and distributed, and we—she -- received after my father, which later on was increased and she could actually live quite well on that pension. And we traded, you know, we used to trade. If you got a pack of cigarettes from the Unites States you could trade that and you could live for a week on the food that you could trade with the farmers that would come in for coffee or cigarettes. Right after the war until 1948 in Germany, if you got any cigarettes and coffee from the United States, it was a wonderful way to obtain good food from the farmers.

Q: Were there any military Allied troops at all in your town, or did you have any sense of a military presence there?

A: Yes, there were English troops. As a matter of fact, it's very interesting. The -- a current British member of parliament -- a Jewish member of parliament, a man by the name of Janner,[6] whose father is already represented the Jewish, the east side of London in the British parliament -- was a young soldier and came to visit us and the befriended us and I stayed in touch with him. He took me to movies and brought us some food, but there was a British occupation troop there.

Q: How did they know you?

A: They apparently asked for somebody, whether there was any Jewish community and Jewish families, and he made a point of finding us. And that happened often. People, if there were Jewish soldiers in town, they would try to find whether there were

Jewish families and whether they needed anything.

Q: How aware of you -- were you -- of the rest of the sort of post-war period? Were you for instance following the Nuremberg trial and were you aware of Albert Speer?[7] Was that something you were following or were you --

A: Well, it's interesting you should ask that because I remember the Nuremberg trials only to the extent that I remember the first, almost first English words that I remember was "by hanging," and I remember listening to the radio when they announced the sentences and we were listening to that with sort of joy. But that's the only thing that I remember of that period. But I should tell you a story that is interesting connected with occupation forces because we mentioned Mr. Nansen who had written a diary, then a book about me. I forgot his name when I was liberated from the camp. I couldn't remember his name. But when I came back to my mother I kept saying, "There was this wonderful man, this Norwegian who had saved my life and was very nice to me, and his father was very famous and his father's pictures were on even the packages of cookies that he once gave me." And my mother said, "He must have been some famous cookie manufacturer." So you know, it was just sort of the way you would treat a kid. I kept saying, "No, no, this man…" Then, one day in 1948, my mother was reading a newspaper that was for

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[6] Janner, Barnett, Lord (1892-), British communal and Zionist leader.
[7] Speer, Albert (1905-1981); Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production,

former inmates in the camp and there was a little write-up of a book that had just been published, the diaries of a man, a Norwegian, who had been in Sachsenhausen so my mother said to me "That might be your cookie -- he might know who that man was. Why don't we write to him and find out?" So we wrote this letter to him asking whether he might know the man who was so nice to me. And of course the mail was terrible in those days. Nothing happened for a while. Then one day the doorbell rings and there's a big Norwegian military truck outside and the girl who opened the door said, "Yes?" He said, "Well, we have a package here for the Buergenthal family. So she said, "Give it to me," and they said, "No, no, no, it's much too heavy, we have to take it in." So they take a tremendous crate and they bring it up and it's food collected from Norwegian children with a letter from him saying that he's the person and, you know, how delighted he was that I'm alive because he thought that I had died in the camp and as a result that's why the book was dedicated to me, among others, because he thought that I hadn't survived. Then eventually he came and he actually took me to Norway to spend six weeks in Norway, and had a wonderful time. But it was, when he learned that I was alive, he announced it in Norway and so the school children began to collect food. And apparently they collected, there was a lot of chocolate which was rationed at that time in Norway, so it was quite a sacrifice for Norwegian children to give up their chocolate rations so I could have that. The

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Hitler's chief architect.

Scandinavians were just wonderful in the camp.

Q: At this point is your life beginning to be normal? You were about 13, 14, 15, but were you ever having nightmares at anything or at that point did you have memories that plagued you, I suppose?

A: I used to have nightmares for a while in the camp, but then I found a wonderful way to solve, deal with my nightmares and I never had them again. Never had them as nightmares. I had this recurring dream that I was being executed and then in one nightmare when I looked into the barrel of the gun, some flower or grass came out of it and they weren't real bullets. So every time this nightmare recurred, I had, saw that as nothing to worry about because no bullets are going to come out of this gun and the nightmares were never a problem.

Q: Were you comfortable in Germany?

A: Yes and no. I knew that I wanted to leave. I mean, I wasn't uncomfortable in the sense that I didn't feel that I wasn't well-treated. But I felt I really didn't belong. And I felt that sooner or later I would leave and the only question was whether I would go to Israel or some place else and I actually planned to go to Israel. Then I came to the United States. Actually I came to the United States really for only one year and never went back but I didn't think I would stay. It was sort of clear to me even before I came to the United States, that I really didn't fit in somehow. Not because I had been made uncomfortable in any way, and this was probably the reason too why my

mother left.

Q: When you began to have those thoughts, what was your mother saying? What were her feelings about being separated again?

A: Well, my mother just thought that I would go to the United States for a year and stay with my uncle and come back and she thought that it was a good experience that I should go to America. America was what we imagined, it was heaven and you had to see it, it was wonderful, but she didn't think that I would stay. It was hard for her when I didn't, but I tried to come back as often as I could. But I think she recognized that it was the best thing for me to do.

Q: Tell us about your uncle, his name first of all, and how you first came here. How did you actually get here? Did you come on a boat or did you fly?

A: No, I came on a boat, on a Liberty boat, the SS *Greeley* (ph), SS *General Greeley* (ph). It was one of these, you know, the tubs that were built for a troop transport. It was a long trip, I think we were at least a week if not longer on the ship, with a large number of refugees; it was immigrants coming. All nationalities, all languages. Well, what can I tell you about it? It was actually quite an interesting trip because I realized again the survival instinct that we talked about. People had to work on the boats, people had to paint and sweep. At that point I was 17 and I realized that wasn't really the nice thing to have to do and I volunteered to be an interpreter, so I would have to go and make the announcements in different languages over the

public address system. In that capacity we had a lovely place to stay and we actually published a newspaper. I still have the newspaper that we published on the last day on the arrival in New York. It was a very wonderful group of people from all over including a Kalnick (ph) family from the steppes of Russia. I still have some pictures. Then I came to the United States. For some reason my uncle couldn't pick me up, he wasn't allowed to pick me up from the ship but I was picked up by a Jewish welfare service organization who took me to a house, like a sort of halfway house in the Bronx where I stayed a week before my uncle picked me up. The very funny thing that happened there, I arrived there and there were other kids in this house and they of course were natives already, they'd been here a few weeks and knew New York and everything. They took me, they said, "You want to see New York? You want to see Manhattan?" Of course I wanted to see Manhattan. We got on the subway and the doors opened up and they got out at one stop and I didn't make it out and I had no idea where I was because I had no address, but we got reunited at the next stop. But my uncle and my aunt are wonderful people, they're still alive. My uncle and aunt came, their names are Sylberg, Eric and Senta Sylburg (ph). They lived in Paterson, New Jersey, at the time. They came in 1938 to the United States, a very hard time. They worked in factories, one daughter. They're now in their 80s but still doing very well. And they took me in. They weren't wealthy people at all. And I lived with them for a year and a half while I went to

high school in Paterson. They were sort of my surrogate parents for many years, until I went to Bethany.

Q: Did you speak any English at this point?

A: Yes, well, I spoke some English, I had high school German, German high school English.

Q: What were your other languages?

A: Well I had Polish, German, and French, which I've basically lost on learning Spanish; it's very difficult for me now.

Q: And just to clarify, the boat that you came over on, this was formerly a group of refugees who were given permission to come over and you came as a group?

A: Yes. Well, what happened was this: there was a sort of -- instead of Ellis Island they had established a camp, the U.S. authorities had established a camp in Bremerhaven in Germany, where people who had different visas to come to the United States as refugees were first brought into these camps, their papers were examined. And then every few weeks they would have a ship ready and they would take people over on these ships as a refugee ship, and that was one of those ships.

Q: What was your first view of the United States, literally? Was it of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty?

A: No, but it was of the Statue of Liberty. Because we arrived -- it was really wonderful -- we arrived in the late afternoon and so we couldn't disembark until the next

morning and so we could see the Statue of Liberty all lit up. As a matter of fact in the newspaper article that each of us wrote in a different language. I wrote mine in German. I noted the lights of the Statue of Liberty and the lights of New York City, which made a tremendous impression on me. I reflected on Auschwitz and the crematory and the light. So it was a tremendous moment.

Q: So you did flashback on Auschwitz.

A: Very much so. I reread it the other day and I was struck by how much I -- these flashbacks come to me, for example they came to me in El Salvador, they come all the time. One really can't have gone through that experience and when you see something similar, that brings it back, of course. It doesn't bring it back necessarily in a negative way. But I saw it in connection with the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador or the killing of the Jesuits. These things came right back to me.

Q: What did you decide to study when you went to college? As we've pointed out before, you went to Bethany college in West Virginia on a scholarship. When did your interests begin to take shape?

A: Well, it's strange. Initially I thought I wanted to be a journalist but then I decided very early that I wouldn't make much of a journalist in the language that wasn't my language. When I went to Bethany, I already, I think the first year in Bethany I already decided I was going to be a lawyer and I was going to do something relating to international things, I didn't have it very clear in my mind and I actually was a

pre-law student in Bethany. My father was a lawyer so it was sort of an easy -- at one point I thought of studying medicine but then I realized again that I didn't have the science ability or background. But it's really the lawyer thing was already, actually when I was in high school in Paterson I had already decided that.

Q: And as you started to study the law, how did your interest in it take shape? Did you ever at one point think you might be a trial lawyer or some other type of lawyer?

A: No, never. I always thought I wanted to do something with law and international relations of some sort. But you know, in law school -- at least in your first years in law school, at least in the days that I went to law school -- you couldn't even get a course in international law in your first or second year. It was usually you got electives only in the third year so I had my first international law course in my third year of law school. It wasn't until I went onto graduate law that I specialized and could specialize in international law. But I always -- at that point when I was in law school I'd made up my mind I would do something in international law.

End of Tape 2.

Tape 3, Side A

Q: Where we are is, I want to go back with a couple questions about college as we're moving into your choice of law as a career. What were you drawn to in terms of what you wanted to study in college? What kinds of things were you finding

yourself interested in?

A: Well, in college I was very much interested in history, particularly American history. That fascination sort of came out of high school, I had a very fine high school history course, and then political science, international relations was always there. And literature -- I actually majored -- I minored in English in college of all things. Then in law school I wanted to study international things but I really had only one course as I mentioned before, then I decided to go on to graduate school. I did my law school at NYU and I went on to Harvard for a masters and eventually for a doctorate in international law. What was interesting, struck me, I reread my application to Harvard what I wanted to do, and in my application I said that I wanted to study international courts among other things, and then I ended up serving 12 years on an international court without knowing it. It was sort of a strange thing, but that's what I wanted to do. But I did work at Harvard on international organizations I was particularly interested in. The European common market was just beginning and I was interested in how that court functioned. Then I did my doctorate actually on a subject that everybody is surprised out, I did it on international air law. But in between I got very much interested in human rights and I wrote one of my first articles on human rights.

Q: What was appealing to you about the law? I mean when you actually started to sink your teeth into it and you're studying it every day and verbally, I suppose, debating

it. What were your reactions to it? What did you like about it, what did you dislike about it?

A: Well, if we're just talking law school in general, I disliked almost everything about it. I just hated my first year in law school. I thought it was much too technical and very lacking in -- at least the way it was taught in those days -- very little policy orientation and there was sort of various technical, dry case analysis that didn't, to my mind at the time, didn't focus on what I thought were important issues. It wasn't really until I was able to study what I was really interested in, which was international law. I got interested, I began to enjoy law really in my third year in law school, and then international law because I saw it as an instrument of being able to deal with some of the problems that I had myself experienced. And I wanted to see to what extent law could play a role in preventing some of these things. And I'm not saying this in any sort of philosophical sense, but I thought I had a background in, a language background and was sort of naturally drawn to things international. I therefore thought it would be interesting to see to what extent various organizations like the UN, the European Common Market, the Council of Europe; to what extent they're doing something that in fact might prevent the reoccurrence of the things that I had experienced. And once I got into it, that was the thing that really captivated me.

Q: What was the atmosphere at that time -- the sort of attitude about international law --

was there a feeling that it was an effective tool, or when you were studying it was there a different feeling?

A: Well, it depends a little bit where -- when I got to Harvard I had some wonderful professors of international law, probably among the best in the world. And they demonstrated the importance of it and sort of opened a completely new different world for me. But of course, all the people around us, that is to say not in the law school but the world around us believed that all of this really didn't exist, that there was no such thing as international law and that it was totally irrelevant. And so you always had the sense that you were sort of an academic who was studying something that had no relevance to anything that happened in the real world. I never believed this, I always thought that it was much more relevant than people thought, than the average person thought, and much more relevant than most Americans thought. I thought Americans probably had a much less of an understanding of the importance of international law than people in other parts of the world. And less of a realization of the importance of the UN for example and the significance of it than people in other parts of the world. So it was sort of almost a schizophrenic aspect when you were studying international law. You'd go to a cocktail party and people would say, "Well, what are you studying?" You'd say, "International law," and they'd say, "Does it really exist?" Then when I started teaching, you'd get the same, sort of. But what I was able to do and throughout my life, my professional life, is that I never

just did, I was never just an academic, that I wrote and taught international law, particularly human rights and international organizations. But starting in the early 70s I really worked -- in the 70s I began to represent the U.S. Government at UNESCO[8] in human rights matters, then I ended up on the InterAmerican Court of Human Rights where we dealt with some very nasty cases like disappearances and other things. And now I'm on the UN Human Rights Committee, and we're doing the same. I was on the Truth Commission of El Salvador, all the time while continuing to teach. So that, to me, international law was never just an academic subject. I also -- I have lived it almost all of the years since I began teaching. I've also practiced it in a way, not in as a law firm lawyer but as a international lawyer working in the field.

Q: When would you say you began to develop a philosophy of human rights law and that you saw that emerge in your ideals in the kinds of choices you were making and the cases you were bringing? And what is your philosophy, I suppose?

A: Well you know, I've never brought a human rights case. I've always thought that I could be much more effective in the human rights area by not being an activist in the sense of being a lawyer filing cases, but an academic who could be perceived to have a legitimacy when he spoke on human rights issue that wasn't driven by political considerations. It wasn't driven by other considerations and that had no political agenda other than concern for human rights. And that has been enabled me,

[8] United Nations Educational and Cultural Organizations

in fact, to be on a human rights court and be put in positions of being able, I think, to do a great deal in the human rights area, and to be taken seriously in the human rights area without being viewed as somebody who has a political agenda. I think it's very important for NGOs[9] and activist organizations to do the work that they're doing, but it's also important for people to be seen as committed to human rights and committed to the advancement of human rights who aren't political activists in the field. And I've always thought that I could do much more by doing that, by staying above the sort of political foray, and that was particularly important in Latin America, where from the beginning if you spoke about human rights you were perceived to be a Communist. As a matter of fact, I founded the InterAmerican Institute of Human Rights in Costa Rica, precisely in order to legitimate just a discussion of human rights, which when I first came I was involved with Latin America in the late 70s, the discussion of human rights wasn't a legitimate subject, it just became aggressive political discourse between the right and the left. And so my sense has always been that some of us, at any rate, can contribute much more through teaching and through serving as impartial arbiters in this field. In the teaching area, I -- my former professor at Harvard and I -- did the first American case book in international human rights. We established the teaching of international human rights in the American law schools. And our book came out in 1977 and

[9] National Governing Organizations

before then only three of us taught the subject. It's now taught in almost all American law schools. And, you know, I have a little book for students on the teaching of -- on international human rights, which actually the subject has suddenly taken on a life of it's own not only in law schools but every place else, which it didn't have when I first started in this field in the late 60s. Nobody was interested in this field and in the international -- the American Society of International -- didn't even consider human rights to be a subject of international -- so I worked in both of these areas and I thought it was always very important. Philosophy -- that's the philosophy I suppose. To my mind the most important thing in this field is not to let yourself be politicized; that's the biggest danger that I see. People who promote human rights, when they politicize the subject, do a great deal of harm to the victims because they then debilitate themselves in being able to protect victims. Also I've learned a great deal of patience in this field. It takes a few lifetimes to be able to achieve anything. But, you know, the most gratifying thing is to -- it's often occurred to me when I worked in Zepuan (ph) sitting on the case or when investigating human rights violations in El Salvador or now at the UN -- to think that somebody who had survived Auschwitz is given the opportunity to be working in this field now. It's a wonderful -- it's a gift, it's a blessing when you think about it, you know, that I've been given this opportunity. It's exciting and that's what sort of makes this all for me. Every time I sit on something that sort of brings back the memory, it seems to me to

say that it's almost as if there was something written that I'm supposed to be doing this. The irony, the poetic justice of my doing this, comes back so often. It came back particularly in El Salvador where so many things that I saw reminded me of the camps, from the massacres to the executions. But to think, you know, to think of the cold Polish winters and the tropics of El Salvador, yet the same cruelty, and for me to be able to be involved in this, it boggles the mind in many ways.

Q: I'm not sure most people would make that connection unless they had your experience in the camps, that there was a kind of similar, I guess, brutality going on between treatment of people in the camps and what happened during the worst of the civil war in El Salvador.

A: Well, you know, it struck me long ago when I read Solzhenitsyn[10] books about the gulag, that the unimaginative cruelty, it's always the same. You know, when you read what happened in the gulags, you say, "Gee, this is exactly what happened in the camps." And then in El Salvador for example, when the only survivor there described the massacre. When she began talking, I could have finished the story for her. I was struck by the fact that I could have continued about what happened. It's the same, I mean this brutality and the same thing in Bosnia. There is no -- evil has sort of a monotone to it. I don't know, that is the thing that always strikes me, that I just can't get over.

Q: How do you think your personal experiences shape -- how do you think your personal experiences shape what you actually decide to do in certain situations with a case? Perhaps when you're sitting on a court -- or maybe the link is not that direct.

A: The link is probably there and it's not there. In other words, it doesn't and it shouldn't shape the outcome of the decision. What it does, it's you have a much better sense of the reality in which an event happened. It's as if, you know, if I were a judge sitting on a commercial case and I'd been prior to that a lawyer practicing in the commercial law area, I would have a much better sense of dealing with this material than somebody who came out of some other environment. Well, it's a little the same for me when I deal with a human rights case. This is a reality. When I hear somebody describe a certain situation, there is an understanding of what could have happened and also doubts raise when somebody tells you something, you say whenever that doesn't sound right. And you can make those, you can have those doubts only if you've lived through something similar. So to that extent there is a connection, and to that extent it's very useful. But it shouldn't affect your decision-making process. But of course, there is the empathy that comes out of the experience, is there. And I think people shouldn't be in human rights if they don't have some empathy for what it is to be subjected to violations. But I don't know, sometimes you wonder and you say to yourself, you know, something at the UN

[10] Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Isayevich (1918-), author.

now where it's different from being on the court. You sometimes go very fast through a lot of material and you say, "Gee, we have 140 countries, 80 countries from which we can receive reports, individual cases. Death penalty cases, people on death row for 18 years, things like that. And you wonder, you know, you sit on this and what in-roads do you really make? But it's only a very -- I have that in very few moments when the going gets tough.

Q: Do you ever have moments when you think, "I'm tired of this, I'm just tired of this. I've in a sense been looking at this kind of stuff my whole life, since I was a little boy, and that I would like to be looking at shipping contracts or something”?

A: Oh, yes. Actually I do that sometimes. Matter of fact, this year I was involved in a commercial arbitration as an arbitrator. No, you have to get a -- you can't -- first of all I've never -- there are some people who sort of live with their concentration camp experience; it's become an obsession. I think I would go crazy if I did. The one good thing, I've always been able to relax, with -- I don't need very much time. But if I have these meetings and they go on for three weeks, if we can then take off for just a few days, I don't carry it with me. And this is survivor instinct. No, you have to get away. I get away from it in my writings, really, my academic writings. Even though I deal a lot with human rights issues, but it's very academic and it's something else. And I've tried to write at least one or two articles or a book a year so that keeps me obsessed in other ways.

Q: Have you ever written about your personal experience, whether it would be for some sort of publication, or even maybe perhaps for your family?

A: Well, after my bypass operation in '93 I decided -- my kids have been pressing me for a long time -- I decided to begin writing. I've written about three or four chapters. But I've come to the conclusion that I need -- I can't do it by myself. I'm much too much a lawyer when I write. It doesn't -- I describe things rather than -- and I've actually discussed it with somebody, that she might work with me. Because what I write sort of comes out wooden in many ways. And I don't deal -- I'm particularly bad in describing emotions. But it's obvious that one needs to write it down and things come back that have long been forgotten. I was struck by the fact that just sitting behind the computer and thinking of a certain event, a lot of things come back, names come back that I thought I'd forgotten and 50 years later suddenly the name of a camp commandant comes back to me, or the name of a street. That's the wonderful thing about doing that and I'll continue doing that. The problem is that academic books come in between them, and then other assignments that sort of -- I have about three of four chapters. And I did write actually in Bethany college, I did write one story and they had a publication.

Q: Fiction or nonfiction?

A: No, a story about the death march actually, that I reread in order to give the talk at the Holocaust Museum on the Auschwitz -- on the 50th anniversary of the

Holocaust, of the death march. And I had to sort of go back in order to even recall some things. No, it should be written down. I've given some interviews.

Q: You said, "It's obvious that it should be written down." You said that just a while ago. Then you just said, "It should be written down." Why?

A: Well, first of all, it should be sort of written down for the family. What strikes me about this whole thing is that when my kids were little they had no interest at all. I mean, they sort of knew, and as they got older, they're now in their late 20s and early 30s, they now say, "Write it down." And they would say, "Well, why didn't you tell me that before?" You know, this story or that story. But at the time really when they were young they had no interest whatsoever, at least none that I could perceive. But now they really are very interested and they want to know this and that. So that's one reason. I think the other reason is that these things should not be forgotten and those of us who have survived and who have the ability to recollect and express themselves about that have an obligation to put it down. It's the kind of thing that if nothing else, hopefully it will have an impact on the future, at least in making people think about how you can prevent those things. And also, you know, this notion about some of the Holocaust deniers, here is an answer at least that this happened. The further away we get from it, supposedly, more of this denial is going to come about.

Q: It seems that that's been a struggle from day one, that the Allied forces actually took Germans and showed them the camps at a certain point. Have you ever in your own

personal experience come across someone who's denied that it happened, or the extent of it, and you've been able to say, "Hey just listen to this story"?

A: No, I haven't. I've often thought that it would be wonderful if one of these people would actually call me a liar so one could maybe bring a libel suit to try to establish the truth of what actually happened. No, I've never had it. For many years I thought it wasn't worthwhile taking these people serious and I thought, you know, just a bunch of kooks. But it's surprising how some of these people have gained a certain legitimacy and that's why it's important to deal with it. Because, of course, behind this Holocaust denial, it's not so much that they are denying it just for it's own sake but I think they're denying it in order to reestablish the type of political organizations that made this thing possible in the first place. So it's part of the Neofascist, Neonazi-type movement, and if you can deny that, that it happened, then it strengthens your political movement and that's dangerous.

Q: Are you an American citizen?

A: Yes, I am. I became an American citizen in '57. As a matter of fact, it was -- I think I'm one of the few people who became an American citizen with the help of the FBI because I had won the nomination for the Rhodes scholarship from West Virginia from Bethany and then from the state of West Virginia, and I wasn't a citizen yet and in order to compete in the finals I had to be a citizen. A lawyer in West Virginia who had been an FBI agent and who was also a former Rhodes scholar moved all kinds

of things to get me my citizenship, get me cleared very fast so that I could get it. I had been in the country long enough but it would have taken much longer. But I managed to get it and I managed not to get the Rhodes scholarship because I couldn't explain in the finals why I wanted to go to England when I had just gotten to the United States, which was very difficult to explain, and I really was lost.

Q: They asked that specific question?

A: They asked me a lot of other things and all of that seemed to be going well until they said, "Well, you've just become a US citizen, why do you want to go to England?" And I really didn't have a good answer and so I think that was one of the reasons.

Q: After you became a citizen, what was it like for you -- and this would have been more recently, when there were very open Nazi rallies in this country? What were your thoughts about it?

A: Well, I really think that the reaction to the Nazi rallies here have been wrong ones. I think that one should let the people march, one should do what the Norwegians did when I was in Oslo. At one point, when they had a Nazi demonstration, the people all came out led by the bishop of Oslo and when the marchers walked by, all of the people in the street turned their backs to them in silent demonstration, which to me is the way they should be handled. If you start fights and everything, that's exactly what they want. And first of all, I think in this country we have enough other mechanisms to deal with it that we don't need to prohibit those marches. Let them,

but deal with them with dignity and not pay any attention to them.

Q: I realized you mentioned your sons and we should just clarify a little bit about your family. Maybe you can just tell us who's in your family, how many people.

A: I have three sons, a stepdaughter and a stepson, and they're all over the world now. I'm married and it's my second marriage. My wife is originally from Peru but she has the same sort of mixture that I am. She's a Peruvian, Italian, British background. We met in Costa Rica. My oldest son is in Poland right now working for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and he will actually be dealing with the elections in Bosnia for the agency. So that, I thought it was interesting that at least one of us in the family is going back to his roots. I have one son who works here in Washington, lives in Baltimore. A third son who is clerking for a federal judge in Ohio. My stepdaughter lives in Miami and my stepson lives in Costa Rica. We have four grandchildren and a fifth one on the way.

Q: The son who is in Poland, does he speak Polish?

A: No, unfortunately not, I think he regrets that he never bothered to learn it. I, unfortunately, have pretty much forgotten much of my Polish. But he just got there. He is a lawyer by training but he worked for AID[11] in Costa Rica and has now moved to Warsaw. It's probably more important for him to learn Russian because he's responsible for issues relating to the rule of law all over the former Soviet

Republics and eastern Europe. The headquarters of the organization is in Warsaw but he has to be traveling all around.

Q: Which languages do you speak now?

A: Well I speak English and German. I can get along in Polish and I speak Spanish quite well, really, because I had to work in Spanish. But I learned Spanish when I first was elected to the court and I learned it by, not formally, I learned it by listening to the interpretation with one ear and to the original in the other. In the process I lost both my Italian and my French. I can still get along in French.

Q: Go back to when your sons were little, when they were about five or six or seven, maybe eight. What were your thoughts? Would you look at them, they were little boys like you were, did it surprise you the things they did, did it make you think about what you were like, and how much -- probably they were too young then but as they got older, how much did you tell them about what had happened to you, and have you told them everything? Or does a person who's heard the Holocaust Museum video tape, do they perhaps know a few more details about what you experienced in the camps than they do, at this point?

A: I think if you saw the Holocaust video tape, they might know more than my children. Although my children might know a lot of other details that they wouldn't know. Did I tell them? I suppose on different occasions, different little snippets,

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[11] Agency for International Development

particularly when my mother used to come and visit we would reminisce. But probably not as much either as I could have or as I should have but at the same time you really as a parent, you know, you can't just try to drum things into kids' heads and if they don't want to ask, there's nothing much to tell. I think their interest is gradual, has really come more recent. But maybe, you know, I never know, because it may well be that they were afraid to ask, that they thought it would be painful, although it never has been because in our family we always talked about these things. But maybe they didn't want to ask for a variety of reasons. They certainly, I don't think, can really imagine what it was and they never really asked that kind of thing. There was something else you asked me that I've forgotten, the first part. It will come back.

Q: For instance, have you ever --

A: Oh, yes, I remember what you asked me, about when I looked at my children, how I would react. Well, you know, every so often when children were sort of my age, I would look at them and I would think, could they survive this? You know, this is the age and look, they are such children and this was the age that I was when this happened. Then you somehow think, yes, they could have. When you see street children in Latin America, how street-smart they are and how they survive, you realize kids have that in them. I've seen this in Brazil, I've seen it in other places, in Guatemala. These kids have that survival instinct. But when you look at sort of, our

children you say, “No, they could never make it.” But the fact is they could. There's tremendous resilience that children have, some children. Some children may be more sensitive than others but I think children are blessed with this resilience that enables them to survive better than grown-ups can survive in many situations.

Q: Obviously you lost your childhood in many ways. Is it something you got back later on? An example would be, when you're that young you still want to be held a lot. Did anybody ever hold you when you were a little boy in the camps or is that something you just lost?

A: No, nobody held me except my mother and father. But it's interesting, when I came back when I found my mother, I think the first year I just stuck to her as if, you know, I kissed her all the time. It was sort of all coming back. But of course I missed a lot. At the same time, you know, it's sort of curious but I think -- I did eight years of school in one year of private tutoring and it turns out I have dyslexia which I never realized I had. One of my children has that problem and he suffered quite a lot because it appeared in first grade and second grade; it was a problem. I didn't know I had it until he was tested and the doctor tested me and it turned out that my case was just as serious as his but because I started so much later, I just learned how to compensate for it. So there are a lot of things that, there were also benefits. Just to think of all the eight years of school one could have skipped without supposedly any great loss of learning. Although I have always kidded by the fact that I never really

learned the alphabet properly. I never learned the ABC and stuff, all of these little things that you learned in grade school I never learned.

Q: No, you just have a doctorate degree in international law from Harvard.

A: Yes. It shows you that it's not that difficult, that it must be that all you have to do is just skip enough classes.

Q: It is amazing, and I thought this about an hour and half ago, how much we're laughing in this discussion.

A: Well, this is what I try to tell you, that those of us who went through it all went through it because we were lucky in everything else. But also in a sense, and I'm still able to talk about it today, is because we weren't just weighed down by the terribleness of it, that we didn't let it affect our whole life. One has to be able to laugh about things, get raving mad. And some things are funny, some things are sad.

Q: Some studies have been done on children of Holocaust survivors and some have characteristics, and one is depression, is that something that has occurred in your family and do you see a link there if it has?

A: Fortunately, not at all, no. It may be because I have never been very introspective so it hasn't affected my children. No, not at all. They are—no, I don't think it has affected them at all, at least not in any negative way that I can think of. Maybe if the Holocaust survivor's husband and wife -- that might be. But, you know, my wife was a native-born American who hasn't gone through any of this and I think that

may make a difference, although I'm not even sure. I think it depends on the family, it depends on the attitude of people.

Q: What about religion? When you brought your children up, not just religion, Jewish culture -- how did you convey that to them as they were growing up? Did you make sort of a specific effort to do that and how so?

A: Well, I wanted the children to grow up Jewish and so they went to Sunday School, they were Bar Mitzvahed, and all of this. But they were not in a Jewish home in a sense that I'm not religious at all. I think my children are more religious, at least two of my sons often drag me to a temple on the High Holidays and chide me if I don't go. I think what I try to do which is sort of natural, that I try to bring them up in the Jewish sense from a cultural point of view, that they should have historical sense of what Judaism means and the contribution of Judaism to culture. And they shouldn't be ashamed of it, that it's something like any other culture, to be proud of.

Q: Where did you raise them primarily?

A: First in Buffalo. I lived in, I taught, except for the first year I taught one year at the University of Pennsylvania law school and then I taught for 13 years in Buffalo at the State University of New York. And then I taught at the University of Texas, in Austin. Then I came to Washington, I was dean at the American University Law School. Then I left Washington and worked with President Carter at the Carter Center and taught at Emory, the Emory University, then I came here.

Q: How often do you think about being in the camps? Is that something that happens a lot?

A: No, not really. It happens only if there was some reason that would bring it out. Not very much at all, only if there is some sort of specific event that triggers something, but otherwise I don't think about it at all.

Q: Are there sounds that will really bring it out, or something that will just bring back a memory? We talked earlier about the smell of bread. What about sounds or smells?

A: Not really, more events. You know if you read about or if you see, for example, if you see the people behind the barbed wire in Bosnia, that brings it back, those types of things. But not anymore. Maybe some things you read about and some German words or something, that might trigger something. But really probably there be months will go by that I don't think about it at all, it doesn't come back at all.

Q: What about being on a train, just going on a regular American Amtrack train?

A: You know, I haven't been on an American Amtrack train for a long time but I've been on trains in Europe. No, it doesn't, you know the trains are so comfortable compared to the train I was on, the trains I was on. No that doesn't. It does sometimes when I see one of those railroad cars, those sort of open cattle cars, that brings back flashbacks. Or I might even say, you know, "This looks almost like the car I was in." But no, not as much as one would think.

Q: Returning to . . .

A: Although you know, let me tell you something that strikes me. I think I mentioned it before. I am much more sensitive to some of these issues as I get older and I don't know why that is, it bothers me in a sense because I've been able to sort of -- I've always prided myself of being able to just put it out of my mind. In the sort of last ten years its, I find it harder to do and I don't know why that is. You know, sometimes people when they get very old they suddenly only remember the language they spoke when they were little. I don't know what it is but it's strange, I sometimes feel I'm going soft because I've been able just to put things very much out of my mind all my life. I find I'm much more sensitive now. Certain things bother me more you know.

Q: Such as?

A: No, I find the death of my mother affected me tremendously and since then, I've found that things relating to the camp are much harder for me to take than they were before. I haven't been able yet, I've been thinking a lot about why that should be that this connection, but it's there. It's had quite an impact on me in terms of those memories. Not only, obviously anyone who's mother dies is affected by it but it's affected me in terms of the past, much more than I would have thought. Or it's simply old age, I don't know.

Q: When did your mother die?

A: In '93, no I'm sorry, '92.

Q: That's what I wanted to ask you. Are there some things you'd like to say that I haven't touched on?

A: No, you've been very good in getting more out of me than usual, no. Just think about, I think you've -- you know it's strange, there are days when, it sometimes depends on the environment but I think we've spent, gee we've spent about three and a half hours and you've pretty much covered my life in sort of, in episodes.

Conclusion of Interview.