United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Jack Ahrens
January 27, 1999
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Jack Ahrens, conducted by Karen Michel on July 28, 1994 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Queens, NY and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

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Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection. This is an interview with Jack Ahrens, conducted by Karen Michel, on Wednesday, January 27th, 1999, in Mr. Ahren's home in Bayside, Queens, what's a beautiful view on a gorgeous day. That's the coffee making in the background. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape one, side A. Name here.

Answer: Oh, name

Q: Yeah.

A: [indecipherable] fax. I can give you my fax number today.

Q: Okay great, terrific.

A: Okay, [indecipherable]

Q: Okay, thank you very much, thanks. Okay, I -- I'm going to ask you questions that go all over the place. There's some things I'm interested in from your previous interview and then --

A: Sure, go ahead, go ahead.

Q: -- from early [indecipherable]. Now, I -- I know you go by Jack Ahrens, but obviously you weren't born Jack Ahrens.

A: No, I was not born Jack Ahrens.

Q: What was the name you were born with?

A: I was born -- in Polish it was Yakob Aronczyk. A-r-o-n-c-z-y-k.

Q: And when did you become Jack Ahrens?

A: I became Jack Ahrens in 1955, when I became a ci -- when I applied for my citizenship papers.

Q: Why change your name?

A: I cha -- My wife was a schoolteacher, and for a first or second grade tea -- kids call her Mrs. Aroncheck and try to spell it, it wo-wouldn't -- would have been rather difficult. And then, I didn't want my children to stand out of the crowd with a strange name. I wanted them more or less, be able to blend in, cause they knew immediate -- they knew how to spell my last name and they knew how to pronounce it, but it helped them in school, in later days, because they were just born at that time. My daughter was born in '53, my son was born in '56, so she wasn't -- he wasn't even born yet.

Q: How did you pick Ahrens?

A: I don't know. I don't remember exactly. I think it's more or less out of a telephone book. We looked for the same, more or less, beginning, but -- I was married at the time, of course, and I did it in conjunction with my wife, and we sort of decided on it. She didn't want A-r-o-n-s. In a way, she didn't want to give away that she was Jewish at the time. Let them guess. Ahrens is a name that you have to guess.

Q: Why was it important to her?

A: It wasn't important. She was a schoolteacher, she was teaching in a private school at the time and it was not a Jewish school. Maybe she would -- she just didn't want to -- point to herself that, I am Jewish. However, she was proud of being Jewish.

Q: Was there still, in the early 50's, did you feel anti-Semitism?

A: Yes, I did. That could be one of the hidden reasons. Maybe subconscious, or I don't know, I never tried to analyze myself. We sort of looked at it for awhile, then we decided and we went along with it. And I have never regretted.

Q: When sometimes you're in a deep sleep and you wake up from a dream or something, who are you then?

A: I am Jack Ahrens. I have separated myself from my past, from the times when I was -- however the friends, my friends, people that I grew up with, and surprisingly enough, there is quite a number of them, still -- they accepted my last name, but they call me by my nickname that I had since I was born, and that was Yasha. That's what they still call me.

Q: Yasha. What did your wife call you?

A: She called me Jack. Remember, she was American born.

Q: When did you get married?

A: '51.

Q: What was your wife's name?

A: Selma Kaplan.

Q: With a K or a C?

A: With a K.

Q: How did you meet her?

A: That is quite an interesting story. If I s -- go all the way to Adam and Eve, to the very beginning, my mother was in the United States from 1934 to 1930 -- late ‘37. My father died in ‘31. She remarried, and she married an American man. His name was Epstein.

Q: First name?

A: I don’t even know his first name. I never me -- I -- I pa -- I think I met him when he came to our town and he -- they met, but I don’t remember him. She spent time in Brooklyn and she made friends with a woman by the name of Sarah Kaplan. Sarah Kaplan was married to -- or rather, Sarah Kaplan was a -- the oldest sister in the Kaplan family. One of her brothers married my grandmother’s sister. That’s why my mother became friendly with Sarah. Sarah’s father was the youngest brother in that family. So actually, when I came here, my mother introdu -- not introduced me, made me call her and arrange a blind date. And that’s how the whole thing started. It’s actually -- My mother was a shadchen -- th -- the -- the -- the matchmaker, at the time.

Q: I -- I noticed in your tape you use a lot of Yiddish. Is this kind of a -- one of your many languages that you --

A: Used to be, or -- it’s strange, but I ha -- I spoke many languages at one time, and I sort of forgot them. I regret it. I regret it deeply, but I cannot converse any more in Polish, I cannot converse in Russian. I -- I used to be able to converse in Italian. I have great difficulty using these three languages, which I was fluent at one time.

Q: Is that partly psychological?

A: I think so. I think so. It's -- My problem was, when I came here -- and I came on a scholarship -- I was studying in Italy and I feel -- you'll find my history of studies, what I have started in -- in 1940, under Stalin, in Lvov, then I went to school again in 1944, after being liberated. After the ghetto experiences and hiding, I sort of saved myself by going to school instead of being forced to go into the Russian army and become artillery meat. I had no other, basically, I -- I had nothing in my background that would prepare me to ma -- for th -- i-i-i -- to survive, to make a living. My family was quite wealthy and they sort of isolated me from normal life. I was not in touch with business. The only thing I knew is more or less engineering and education. So I just kept going and I pursued the -- the career in engineering by going in Lvov and then being accepted in Turin, in Italy.

Q: Why -- I-In your story, education is so central to everything. Why is education such a compelling and defining source for you?

A: This was my crutch for survival. That's what -- Basically, that's what helped me survive, also. In looking back, when we left my hometown Lida, in 1940, and went to Lvov, the reason why we went to Lvov, there were two-fold reasons, basically. One, that my mother and myself, we were able to get the Russian passports -- acceptable Russian passports. By that, meaning that our occupation -- my occupation became student and my mother's occupation becau -- became a working person, robotche. In spite the fact that we were Capitalists, according to the definition of USSR at that time. The reason why we picked Lvov, because I wanted to go to Vilna. But Vilna had not polytechnic institute.

And Vilna got separated from Lida, because at that time, they made a separate country out of Lithuania. That would have meant crossing a border and difficulty in getting in touch with the family. So, we picked Lvov, where we could sort of disappear. Lvov, normally a city of 150,000, at that time had maybe 300,000, with all the refugees coming from Kraków, from Warsaw. It was on the Russian side of the divided Poland, from the -- after '39. And I was able to -- I was accepted to the non -- the pothip -- to the Polytechnic Institute. And that was my crutch, I figured I can -- I ha -- I have no other background -- I have nothing in my background that will allow me to make a living. I had to be on my own. Fortunately, the Russians were offering scholarships. Top students were getting a -- the -- a -- it's not a scholarship, a stipend -- a living allowance and coupons where you could buy things or you could purchase things. And I -- I have looked -- I have my -- the booklet where they have entered my grades and I have never anything -- I never had anything below a B -- what you would call B in here. Fact, I don't think I had any B's, I had all A's.

Q: You said you kept it? You still have it?

A: Not I kept it. I don't -- I have -- I have it, because when I came back in '44, it was strange, but the Germans, during their occupations, they destroyed the Polish intelligentsia -- I mean, they killed the Polish professors. In fact, they did it before the killed the Jews, they killed the Polish -- the Polish professors in Lvov. But the-they -- Lvov itself was not bombed, was not destroyed. So the archives of the Polytechnic Institute remained intact. And that was the reason why I was accepted, because they had

everything on file, including my photographs, I could not claim that I was someone else. And when they issued me the booklet where you enter the grades, they entered -- I s -- I still have it. If you want to look at it, I can show it to you. You do want?

Q: Yeah, I'd love to see it.

A: Hold on a minute.

Q: Oh, my gosh.

A: That's Lewovsky Polytechnic Institute. Here is the essa -- S -- SRSR, that's the Soviet. And this is the lukovok nishka, that's where they enter the grades. See Yakob Aronczyk in here? There's my picture from 1944.

Q: Very handsome.

A: Thank you. I had hair. See, this was issued in '45. And they entered the grades from 1940. Those stamps in here are because it was translated into Italian.

Q: That's one of the lire stamps. Why was it [indecipherable]

A: I ha -- I ha -- I'm sorry. There is one good. Otherwise it's all excellent. See, this is from 1940 - 1941.

Q: So when you went to Italy, it was translated then?

A: They -- we -- in order to be accepted to -- in Turin, they had to -- they had to have a translation of that. This is '44 - '45. See, here are original signatures of the instructors, or professors.

Q: Why, in all the moves that you've made, did you keep this?

A: I -- I had to save that. First of all, I had no reason why to hide it, wh -- after I got it. In ‘45, I could have identifications paper on me without being afraid that somebody c -- that I’ll -- it’ll give me away. However, there were times where I -- where ID papers were critical and I had to hide them. But I was never searched. See, here is ‘44 - ‘45, this is the end of it. You can see when I had the last tests. The six -- six in there, that’s June, the sixth month. See they -- they use Roman numerals for the month, 16 is the day. This is six, that’s June, ‘45.

Q: So you were 24 years old?

A: Yes.

Q: [indecipherable] from Turin.

A: See it?

Q: Yeah.

A: The same one, and -- and this is ‘45 - ‘46 - ’47. Where are they? I took so many exams at that time. Here. Just that. That was in ‘47, the last one was in ja -- 30th of January, 1948.

Q: And you came to this -- to the United States when?

A: I came in February, in ninet -- 1948.

Q: Why the US?

A: My mother was in the US already. See, I have mentioned to you that my mother was married to an American citizen. However, she never became a citizen, because she had property in Poland and in order to hey -- to save the property, she had to be a Polish

citizen. When she came in 1938 to liquidate the property, the war broke up in thir -- broke out in ‘39. She had what she -- was called a re-entry permit for the United States, but not a citizenship. She did not want to become a citizen because she was married to citizen. So she had a re-entry permit, which was never honored by the Germans. She showed it to them, it did not help. You’re Jewish no matter what. It didn’t do any good. You’re not an American citizen, that’s -- that’s what counted. But she went -- when -- when we ended up, after th -- our odyssey, in Italy, she went to the American consul, I think it was in Rome. And he said, I cannot honor it, because you’ll come to the States, you’ll be a burden. Somebody has to send you an affidavit. If you -- you get an affidavit, together with a re-entry permit, you’ll -- I’ll issue you a -- a -- a permit -- a visa immediate -- not a visa, an entry visa, immediately. She had some friends in here that she -- from before, they send her an affidavit and she left -- I’m trying to think, it was late in ‘46, I think. In ‘46, or -- in the fall of 1946, she left for the United States and she was here. In the meantime, I was able to enroll myself, the tur -- University of tur -- Polytechnic Institute in Turin. And that was quite an odyssey also, cause Italian universities are quite strange. They don’t accept you. In svite -- in spite the -- the fact that they gave me credit for this -- for a -- the -- Lvov Polytechnic Institute, they would not accept me unless I could show them th -- my original high school diploma. Of course, I didn’t have it with me. The high school diploma was in Lvov. Lvov was in the Soviet Union. There was absolutely no way how I could get it. And then, I never thought, when I left Lvov, to go to the bursar and ask him gave me my high school diploma. They

wouldn't have given it to me anyway. I was able to find, through some friends, my last high school principal, from my home town. And because our graduating class was only 30-odd people, he did remember me. He was an official in the Ministry of Education. And he send me a document, which looked more official -- he asked me, "What kind of grades do you want me to put on there?" I said, "Put whatever you want, I don't care, as long as I have the diploma." He says, "I know that you passed, but I don't remember the grades." I said, "Put anything you want." The document looked more official than the actual high school diploma. The matura in pol -- from Poland, that I have received it in -- in '39, and I was the last graduating class b-before the war. And on that basis, I was accepted at the Turin Polytechnic Institute.

Q: Did you speak Italian when you went?

A: No. It was quite difficult. You had to study with that vocabulary, with the dictionary. Polish Italian on one side, and the -- and the text book on the other side. In spite the fact that I was in Italy from late '45 - '46 - '47, it's actually almost two and a half years, we were always sort of separated from the Italian population. I was always with my friends, with the -- with the displaced people. We lived for awhile in a Displaced Person camp, where Italian was of no use.

Q: What languages were spoken in the camp?

A: Any language you knew, anything. Polish was good, Russian was good. They -- I think they refugees Esperanto. The -- The Yiddish. I think everybody spoke Yiddish, with a different inclination, you know, the Polish Yiddish is one, the German Yiddish is

another and the armenik -- American Yiddish is a thi -- a-a-again different. But the Yiddish was the universal language. And it ca -- and I felt sorry for myself, because I -- when my mother was away in the United States, I lived with my grandparents. My grandmother and my grandfather, they spoke of course Yiddish between themselves. But when it came to speak to me, they broke their tongue and they spoke Polish. Says, "We don't want to corrupt your language. You're going to a Polish school, you speak Polish, so you can -- you can be proficient in your school." That's why I -- Yiddish, I had relear -- learn Yiddish, actually. In spite the fact that I heard it all around me, I didn't use it. And between ourselves, my friends, we spoke Polish. My mother and father -- I was only 10 years old when my father died, they spoke Russian between themselves. And it's strange, but my mother's friends, they spoke Russian between themselves also. The reason, because they grew up and they -- my mother was unusual for her generation. She had a high school diploma from Russia -- from Czarist Russia. And at that time, a high school diploma for a woman, it's like a Master's degree in college now. She was a m-more educated than -- than her -- many of her friends.

Q: What did you call your parents?

A: Mother and Father.

Q: But in Polish, or [indecipherable] Russian, what?

A: Papa and Mama, as far as I -- as far as I can remember.

Q: Did you speak to them in Russian or in Polish?

A: Polish, Polish. I didn't speak Russian. Be -- I had a potential knowledge of Russian, because when you put the radio on -- we had a good radio -- of course television was not in existence, that we could listen to all of Europe, and Russia was right next door. Especially, I -- I loved classical music at the time and the Russian orchestra known for their proficiency in classical music. They're still known. So I had the potential knowledge of Russian, but I never used it, until '39 - '40, when the Russians came in. Russians came to me sort of naturally. I had the knowledge stored in me and I just let it out. And what -- what gets me now, I still have it stored and I cannot let it out. It's sort of something is holding me back. I am missing the grammar, I am missing words. I cannot build a sentence, I can -- it's -- it's very difficult. I cannot think in Russian.

Q: Do you ever go to Brighton beach?

A: Occasionally, occasionally. But I still -- I speak to them in English, I make them speak to me in Russian. I have -- They speak Russian to me and I speak English to them. Maybe because I hate failure. I can fail and I'll get stuck somewhere without being able to express myself.

Q: Where does that come from?

A: I don't know.

Q: You were an only child?

A: Yes.

Q: You seem, in -- in listening to your -- your previous interview, to have this incredible self awareness, all the time. You knew when to stop, when to start. You knew you could

challenge authority at certain times and get away with it. And you did it constantly, it seems like. You found the way around things, around people, around situations.

A: You had to, that was the only way how to survive.

Q: You think it has anything to do with your having been an only child?

A: Maybe, I don't know. I never had any brothers or sister, I never had anybody that I could basically share my thoughts and my -- to the fullest. Even my closest friend, my wife, at times didn't understand me and didn't know what was actually guiding me, what was pushing me. Cause, remember, I came here in '48, with a minimum knowledge of English. Absolutely minimum. And I -- all of a sudden, I became an upper junior at the University of Illinois, living in an all American bo -- fra -- fraternity house with a bunch of spoiled -- basically spoiled kids.

Q: I'm going to turn over the tape. Just a second.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning of Tape One, Side B

Q: This -- Tape one, side B, interview with Jack Ahrens. Why Illinois? Why did you -- Why did you go there?

A: A friend of mine, at the time. We -- We know each other, but I haven't spoken to this man in 40 years. We exchange New Year's cards twice a year, for the Jewish New Year and for -- for Happy Holidays around Christmas time. We exchange cards and that's as far as we go. We lived together in Turin. The American Jewish Distribution Committee created a student home in Turin, where we had, I think 40 - 50 students living there. In

fact, we already -- we had -- think I had two reunions in -- here in the United States. I am in touch with some of the people that I met there, that we lived together. He was -- He could have been more aggressive than I at the time, but he got in touch with the Hillel Foundation in Chicago.

Q: How did he do that?

A: I don't know. Probably through somebody. He start writing to them and I remember the woman's name, Marilyn Applebaum, and he was accepted to the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. I said, "Let me try, too." I started to write to Marilyn and through Hillel Foundation, I was accepted at the University of Illinois, the fraternity -- my fraternity, Tau Delta Phi, gave me free room and board. The Hillel Foundation was paying to the university for my -- the tuitions and books. And I think, if I remember right, they gave me something like 30 dollars every three months, allowance.

Q: What language did you write to the Hillel people in?

A: In English, with a vocabulary -- with a dictionary next to me, with great difficulty. But, I seemed to -- I got through to her and I got the acceptance.

Q: You know what you've got? Chutzpah.

A: That's right. I got even more chutzpah when I --

Q: That's the clock?

A: That's the clock.

Q: And there're different bird -- bird sound for each hour?

A: Differ-Different bird every hour. Different bird every hour. Doesn't last that long, but every hour is a different bird. You'll have plenty of distractions, this is going to come off in me -- in -- in a minute.

Q: I notice you're really into clocks.

A: Key --

Q: There's another clock over there, is that --

A: Yeah, but that clock is going backwards, if you notice it.

Q: Yeah, yeah, I do.

A: Can I pour you some coffee?

Q: That'd be lovely, thank you.

A: Ah, you want a mug?

Q: Fine. I'll -- I'll turn off the tape recorder for a little bit. Why so many clocks?

A: I don't know. That one I built myself, this one I built myself. That's from a kit.

Q: Time important to you?

A: I love it I love building things. I build a robot, which -- which walks and talks, from a kit. That company, I -- I mean, that was my loss, it kit -- went out of business and that was really my loss.

Q: But I'm curious about the clocks, why you would have -- we're in one room with three clocks.

A: I like to know what time it is.

Q: Was there a point in your life when that was really, critically important?

A: No. There was a po -- time in my life what I didn't know what time it was. I had a wristwatch and that's -- that's it, that at times wasn't working properly.

Q: When was this?

A: When we were hiding in the cellar. Time of -- was of no essence. Is just a matter of surviving and especially when we were in a complete darkness for days.

Q: That's -- from -- from your body right now, it seems like that is still very present for you, that experience.

A: I -- I'm going to tell you something that I had never told anyone else, basically. I mean, now, we are going off on a tangent, you were asking me some o -- some other things, but we are going off on a -- on a tangent. When we were in hiding, and there were 11 of us, there was one man, my mother's age, roughly. There was an older woman by herself. There was my mother and myself, that's four. And then there was a Hashidisha family of seven. One of the men, that man that was there, my mother's age, he had a gun and I had a gun. After the Pole was arrested -- the man that was hiding us, he -- the Germans -- I mean there was a trial and all that and supposedly they had to confiscate all of his property and the people -- the -- the -- th-the -- the -- the people that were actual -- that were removing the property from the basement and from the house, were the leftover Jews from the Yanoffska concentration camp. Remember, that was already -- that was early 1944. Ghetto was already liquidated, there was nothing in existence. In fact, I have a book by -- I forgot his first name, Wells, Villigeker, where he describes -- he is -- he was one of the people that was on Yanoffska Street at that time. He describes his

experiences and it's strange how he actually is telling me things that I -- that I -- that I have lived through. When they were removing the properties, that man could not take it any more, and we had to let him out. He went on the outside and he perished. He must have gotten caught. We survived. Now, the time when we were there, the experiences of hiding in that little hole and the relationship between the peoples, how we interacted, how we behaved toward each other, I wanted to write a play or write a book. I never had -- whenever I thought about it, I never had enough words. I cou -- I could not describe it, because it was absolutely unbelievable how the children were -- had a pillow ready to smother their old man because he was deaf and deaf people don't know how ca -- how loud they are. How the Germans were on one side of the wall and we were on the other side of the wall and we heard them hit and yell and -- and scream at the Jewish boys which were out there. We -- We assumed they were Jewish boys, cause we never saw them. And it's strange how the box that was hiding the entrance, to-together with that pole I have pa -- we have painted bricks on it, so it looked like bricks, that nobody noticed it? Or maybe somebody noticed it and deliberately ignored it to save our lives. We ne -- There are so many conflicts in there, so many possibilities, what actually happened? There -- I'll never know, and it's bothering me. I -- It's in my subconscious, but I still try to put it out -- out of my mind, because if you ask me the names of the people that were there, I don't remember. I don't remember their last name, and I don't remember their first names. The man that got out, he was fr-from our hometown. Him, I remember, because I remember him from before. But otherwise, the names -- it's sort of

fu-fuzzy in my mind. The details are there, I can visualize it, but I don't feel that I have enough words to describe it. Now, to go back to my chutzpah. When I went to the consul -- to the American consul in Genoa, cause from Turin, you had to go to Genoa, and I showed them that I was accepted at the University of Illinois and that was beginning of February, of '48. He says to me, "When does the semester start?" I said, "I don't know, they accepted me." He made some quick checks, he says, "You know, the semester has already started. If you go by boat, you have no reservations, you have no -- no way how to get there for at least a month. I will not give you the visa now." So I asked him, "What about if I fly?" He said, "I'll give you the visa immediately." So I went back to the AJDC and I said to them, "I have a commitment from the American consul."

Q: AJDC is?

A: American Joint Distribution Committee. They were that th -- They were the ones that were running the student home in Turin, and they paid for my flight on TWA, February 15th, from Rome to Geneva. From Geneva to Shannon, Ireland. From Shannon, Ireland, to Newfoundland, Canada. From Newfoundland to New York.

Q: How long did this take?

A: I think it's all within, I think 14 hours or 18 hours or something, but there were stops, because there were propeller planes, jets were not in existence, I -- at the time.

Q: What were your feelings when you were on that plane?

A: I was afraid. I was scared what's going to happen. Will I be able to cope with an American university? After all, my scholastic background was partly Polish, partly

Russian, partly Ukrainian, partly Italian. Now here, I have to translate everything into English. I didn't know what's going to happen to me. When I came to New York, in 1948, it was Friday -- late Friday afternoon. Immigration wouldn't let me out. They said, "So many Jewish students, so many people are coming here on scholarships, we have to check with the university, is it true or not." They called -- I said, "Call them." They called them, and Friday afternoon, the offices were closed. I spend Saturday -- my mother was waiting for me at the airport and that was the LaGuardia, because Kennedy was not in existence. Idlewild. I said hello to her an-and I says, "I'll be back." What else? The immigration inspector said to me, "I have to take you to Ellis Island and -- but before you go, I don't know if they're going to let you stay here or not. I have a taxi here, you are alone, let me give you a tour of New York." So we went riding around New York, he showed me -- and the Empire State Building, and the thing that really stuck in my mind was the Fulton Fish Market. Like a major attraction in New York at the time. I spent on Ellis Island, Saturday and Sunday. Monday morning they called University of Illinois and they apologized to me and they let me out. I stood with my mother for two weeks in New York. I didn't go right away. What's the hurry? I wanted to see New York, I wanted to spend time with her.

Q: How long had it been since you'd seen your mother?

A: At that time, about a year and a half.

Q: What was it like to see her again, here, in this country?

A: In a way, I was disappointed. I was disappointed because that -- she was -- the kind of work she was doing.

Q: What was she doing?

A: She was a waitress at the resorts and -- in the Catskills. She had no professions. She spoke the language, but not that well that she could have an office job. She was a middle-aged woman. She was -- She was in her early 40's. My mother was exactly about 20 years older than I am. That was the only thing that she could do and actually make a decent living out of it. Her husband died, in the meantime, while she was in -- in Poland, he died here. And his family sort of disappeared, they -- th-they disowned her and th-they didn't -- they didn't want to know about her, nothing. I mean, she was completely on her bu -- on her own, by herself, with -- the only friend that she had was that woman that I mentioned before, that Sarah k -- Sarah Kaplan, that was the wife of a -- of a relative and so on. It's not a relative, I don't know. She was the only -- She was the only friend that she had at the time.

Q: Where was your mother living?

A: My mother had an apartment together with her sister and her sister's husband. That's another pa -- That's another interesting story. My mother had -- What'd they have? Two brothers and two sisters. There were five of them. In fact, just about a month ago, they called me from Israel that my uncle has pa -- had died, at 93 or 94. He left for Palestine in the -- in '28, I think, or '27. 1927. He was one of the original Halitseem, [indecipherable] Palestine.

Q: Did you ever want to go to Palestine, or [indecipherable] Israel?

A: Yes, I did. However, I wanted to go there after I got -- after I have gotten some sort of a profession. To come there without any skills, without knowing the language -- the Hebrew -- I mean, I have the basic knowledge of Hebrew. You know, when they -- you get prepared for Bar Mitzvah, I had a -- I -- I -- someone teach me, and -- but I never went to -- to the Hebrew school. There was a Hebrew school in my town, Talbud. I never went to the Hebrew school. So I never -- I was never prepared for Palestine.

Q: Well, as I recall, you could at least ask the four questions and pretended it was Greek.

A: Oh yes, oh yes. We -- That's another pa -- another story, but her sister and her hus -- her husband, the sister's husband and the sister, they were sort of distant cousins. To marry, they had to get a permission from a rabbi, because they were relat -- they never had any -- they never had any children anyway, so it didn't matter. He was a chemical engineer, a very able chemical engineer, who built one of the major rubber factories in Poland and got pushed out by other people who sort of took it over. Then he went abroad and built a factory, I think, a rubber factory in Greece, a rubber factory in France. He had a French ler -- French degree, a degree from Toulouse, I think. Eventually, he settled in my -- on our hometown, and he and -- with his brother, made -- b-built a factory where they used to make rubber heels for shoes. In spite the fact that factory was small and basically the two of -- I don't know how many they employed, but owning a factory made them Capitalists. So when the Russians came in, the thing got nationalized and they had to escape. They went to Vilna and they were one of the 8,000 that got the visas from

the Japanese c-consul in Kovno. I think you heard of -- I forgot his name. They ended up in Japan, in -- rather in Shanghai, but because they were skilled -- they were both engineers, Canada accepted them. So they ended up in '40 -- in the early 40's, they ended up in Canada. From Canada, they came to the States. My aunt was left in Lida to liquidate the property. She was selling whatev -- whatever they had in the -- in the house. The furniture, the clothe -- pardon me, the clothing, and all the other things. So then when they -- Russia closed the border with Lithuania, they had to cross the border to go into Vilna. The husband was still there and she and a number of other peoples got caught on the border -- the border, arrested by the KGB. Within two days or three days, there was a trial and they were sentenced to deportation to Kazakstan, which in a -- the long run, saved her life. In fact, his father -- my uncle's father -- father was arrested not at the same time, but arrested also and sent to the same area of Kazakstan, and my aunt was there with his fa -- with her father-in-law, who died there. But when she was in -- when she was in -- in Kazakstan, she survived the war over there and in '45, she came to Lvov. From Lvov, she was able to go, somehow, to France or I don't know, I -- I -- I don't remember the details of her story, but she ended up in the United States, because her husband was here, before my mother came there. They had an apartment on Newkirk Avenue, in a building which is basically -- last time I saw it, it was abandoned. It was a four story walk-up. Newkirk and East 21st Street. And my mother got a room out there, with them. I think it was a two bedroom or a three bedroom apartment, on the top floor.

Q: So that's where you stayed with her?

A: That's where I stood with her, right. For the couple of weeks. Then I went to the University of Illinois. I was with the -- in the fraternity.

Q: Yeah, I want to -- I want to stop for a second, cause you're going very fast through all --

A: Go ahead.

Q: -- a whole lot of stuff. Okay, you -- your -- on this endless, seemingly -- sounding, at least, endless airplane ride to the United States, what did you expect to find here?

A: I was looking to get away from the uncertainty -- uncertainty, to start building my life, to get some sort of a profession where I could -- where I know if I cannot do it -- if I cannot work for myself -- be on my own, is work for someone in a productive capacity. My father was an engineer. He -- An engineer basically without money. But he had the skills. The family put up the money, he was running the foundry that they had. He made a -- I loved to go there and watch how they melted the iron, how they cast the -- the -- the -- the plows and the -- the agricultural -- the equipment that they were building there, how they machined it, what -- e-everything they did. And I was only a little baby at the time, but I loved to watch it. That sort of instilled in me, the a -- the -- the -- the love for engineering, love for being able to create something with your own hands. That's why I put so many things together.

Q: Including that crystal radio when you were in hiding.

A: That was a lifesaver, because it gave it gave us a lot of information.

Q: Do you still listen to the radio?

A: Yes, I do. I have a short-wave radio, which I listen to -- I like to scan the world to listen what the world thinks about us.

Q: When you say us, who do you mean?

A: Us? I consider us Americans. I consider myself now as a full pledged citizen of this country, with some loyalties maybe stretching far. I support Israel, but I am not one of those that will say that because Israeli want it, it's foolproof and it has to be that way. I love to read -- on the internet, I read the Israeli papers. The Haaretz and the Jerusalem Post. I look at them every single day. I have a computer in the other room, gift from my son. I don't know how he became so proficient in computers, but he must have six of them in his house. In fact, when I have a problem, I call my youngest granddaughter to tell me. At eight, she knows more than I do.

Q: Okay, so we were talking about -- I'm going to change the tape in a minute, again -- your -- f -- what -- I asked you what you felt on that plane ride and you told me what your career goal was, but not how you felt.

A: I don't remember how I felt. I felt sort of liberated. If I got out of this, that I am going somewhere. I did not see any future studying, finishing my engineering career in Italy. It was sort of you gi -- you get a degree and what do you do with it afterwards? You are sort of -- it's like a dead end education. I could not see myself competing with Italians in -- even in my profession. I had to get out somewhere where I could have more freedom. I had -- my knowledge of Italian was basically small. It was -- I could converse, but I was

not fluent in it. I s -- I didn't come to a point where I was thinking in Italian. Because in order to be fluent in a language, you have to think in that language.

Q: I'm going to change the tape now.

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: Jack Ahrens interview, tape two, side A.

A: It's difficult with -- to answer what wa -- what was I thinking about at the time. I sort of felt relieved that I am getting out from there, cause I was fu -- looking toward future something. I know in America you can -- it's a goldeneh medina. Sort of, y-you can do something. Where, out there, what would I do?

Q: Other than the material goals and your occupational goals, did you feel that you would experience less anti-Semitism, that you would be more accepted? That your past wouldn't exist, any of that kind of thing?

A: I did not experience any anti-Semitism in Italy. Maybe because I didn't know who was Jewish and who was not. It came to a point where I was so stupid that I was talking to someone whose last name was -- I remember now, Suchadotti and I asked him, "Are you Jewish?" He says, "Of course." I didn't realize that Suchadotti in Italian, is Cohen in English, or Kaplan, or -- there are certain names that imply who you are, and I was so ignorant, I didn't even know that. And then, again, I was in a circle with people who were of my own background, who were in Italy temporarily. It was sort of like a weigh station. You were there for the next year, two, three, four, but no one actually was planning on settling and staying in Italy.

Q: What was life like in the DP camps?

A: We didn't live that long in a DP camp.

Q: How long were you in a camp?

A: In Italy, in a DP camp, maybe a half a year.

Q: How did you come to be there?

A: When we were tra -- when we left Lodz, we were traveling with so-called Bricha. Bricha was the underground, Jewish organization that was guiding Jews out of Poland, out of -- with the goal of sending them to Palestine. So you had to go to an area -- they were sending them into Displaced Person camps in Germany, around Munich, Salzburg, in Austria or Italy, with the idea of having these people available to col -- to -- to send to Palestine whenever things became possible. That's when Exodus started, the ship. In fact, many of the people that I knew ended up on Cyprus, because they were caught.

Q: How did you connect with Bricha?

A: You just knew it, you just knew it, that's all. One of the people that was -- one of the men who was stationed at that time in Prague, lives in New York now and we went -- through him -- he was a man -- he was a -- from my hometown, so I knew him. And that's where it came in with the different papers, with the different nationalities that we were impersonating at the time, to confuse the border guards, to show -- they -- I am sure they knew about it, but they had to have the legal papers to allow us to travel. After all, it was such a drop in the bucket, of people that were traveling, of displaced people that were moving. Just didn't mean anything. I -- I remember when we were stopped, I think it was in Salzburg and Innsbruck, our tr -- we were on a train, traveling -- we were traveling in the direction of Italy and there was an American train traveling in the opposite direction, with American soldiers and my mother got off and she went to talk to

someone. She wanted -- She was in -- th-the -- she was desperate, trying to get in touch with someone in the United States, so she could use her re-entry permit. She got -- She remained -- She missed the -- Our train pulled out and she re -- and she got stuck in there. The next station I came, I got off and I went to talk to someone and the problem was the language. Because, in spite of the fact that I was under Germ -- with the Germans for so many years, I never spoke German and I don't speak German. And German still remains a hated language. I found out that she ended up in Munich. So we remained in -- I think it was in Salzburg, if I remember right. I remained there for an extra day or two and I -- somehow I was able to send word for her to come down and she came down and we got reunited. And, with the group of people that I was tr -- that we were together, we kept going and we ended up in Kramona, in Italy. We went through the Brenner pass, we ended up in Italy. We were in camp in Kramona maybe three months when we decided, what's Kramona? It's a dead-end place. Let's keep on going and we're -- w-we ended up in a Displaced Person camp in Rome.

Q: Cheenacheeta

A: Cheenacheeta. That's where th-the old movie studios. From Cheenacheeta, which is in the suburbs of Rome, we were able to go to Rome and find someone from our town to say, "What are you doing there? With the UNRRA packages and with the little money that you might have, rent an apartment and you will be able to live, you will able to do something. You're -- It's a -- It's again an dead end thing." So we rented a room in Rome. We had the packages, the food packages from UNRRA to survive on. You used to

sell some of it. I don't know where the money came from. I tried to buy things, sell things, but I was never good at it. In fact, I used to go to Milan on the train and because I was wearing American army fatigues, I couldn't speak English, I couldn't speak Italian, I used to speak like a mumbo-jumbo of something or speak -- say the few words in Italian, try to imitate an -- an English accent and get away without paying the -- the -- the -- without paying the fare. Go up to Milan, buy some watches, bring them back to Rome, sell the watches in Rome, at a profit, of course and that's how we used to make a living. Then again, I tried to enroll in Rome, at the University of Rome. And they said, "You can't do it without a high school diploma." There was a -- sort of a -- like a soup kitchen in Rome, operated by -- I think it was by the American Joint Distribution Committee, where you could go there and get one nice, good meal, hot meal a day. And then Rome was a city that I s -- I must have spent a couple of months in the Vatican museum, just -- just looking there. I was in -- it was insatiable, looking at the treasures in the Vatican museum or with my love of music, I used to go and -- to standing room at the Rome opera, just to listen to th-the real famous singers that I knew at the time. Benjamina Jilly and I can't remember the -- who was the -- the -- the -- the -- the female star of the time.

Q: Did you ever go to German opera?

A: No. What do you mean by a German opera?

Q: If say there were different --

A: Opera -- I -- Opera in German?

Q: Say Wagner is being performed.

A: Yes, I did once, in New York and I slept through it.

Q: Oh, I was just curious, cause you said you had such a negative feeling toward the German language, if --

A: I slept through it. I just had a very interesting experience, which is completely on a tangent. I have a very good friend, who has a daughter. She is a -- a psychologist. Her husband is a professor of German literature at NYU, in New York. His brother was married to a woman who he -- who he divorced, who remarried since and married an opera singer. That opera singer was here in New York, in 1991. He is Czech, himself, with the -- when ma -- the Metropolitan Opera brought in Katta Cabanava, opera by Yanachek, he was one of the leading men. I was invited then, we went to the Met, we had dinner in the dress circle and the first time we were invited behind the -- behind the curtains at the Met, him being a star, he had a room with a star, not the -- when you go to the Met, you go -- first there are the dressing rooms for the chorus and then there the stars. For the stars you need a special permit to get in there. So, we went there. His name is Peter Straka. Peter Shtraka, not Straka. I call him Straka, they call him Shtraka. He was just now in New York again. There was a revival of Katta Cabanava, all over -- all the mo -- all the month of January. And I have recorded that opera of the -- from -- they had a Saturday matinee. I pi -- I recorded it for him. In fact, I just sent my -- my friend's daughter, she went to Zurich and they live in Zurich. I gave her the tapes to give it to him. And that opera is in Czech. I have the original recording. My original tapes, I have them here. I copied them off, copied them and I es -- gave it to him. And I was -- and I

found beauty, actually. Wh-When -- The first time when I listened to the opera at the Met, I was bored. Czech opera in Czech. But I did find, when I listened to it the second time or the third time and the fourth time -- because I had the tapes, I had to edit the tape. I took out some things, the opera quiz, you know, the -- I took it out. I found a lo -- I found it being quite interesting. So I ju -- I like the -- not just Italian operas, not just French operas, but here was a Czech opera which was rather interesting.

Q: Okay, so you were -- you moved to an apartment, you -- out of the DP camps, into an apartment with your mother?

A: My -- With my mother.

Q: You went to school?

A: No, I did not go to school, because the Rome -- Rome has no poli --

Q: Oh, because they need your -- right --

A: Rome has no Polytechnic.

Q: Excuse me.

A: Rome has only university. And the university would not accept me because I didn't have a nattoo -- a high school diploma.

Q: Right, I remember now. Okay, sorry.

A: A friend of mine -- it's the -- I ca -- you can call it a friend, an acquaintance, who could not -- an older -- old -- o-older acquaintance. Say older, he's probably three or four years older than I am. I don't know what ever happened to him. He was in Poland and he wrote to me, through some other friends he found my name, can I get him his documents,

his papers, because before the war, he went to the University of Pisa. See, being Jewish, Jewish boy -- Jewish -- people of Jewish persuasion, were not accepted for a higher education in Poland. They had a quota, 10 percent and that's it. So, the ones that could afford, scattered all over Europe. He ended up here and some other people that I knew, in fact, he was an -- he was a friend to an older brother of a very good friend of mine, from my hometown, that they grew up together. He asked me to get him some peep -- papers from Pisa. I said, "I'll get it for you." But try to find my -- see what you can do for me in the Ministry of Education. He started his search on his end. I got him, in the meantime, his papers and he said to me, "You know, your old high school principal is in -- connected with the Polish Ministry of Education. See if you can write to him and maybe he can do something for you.

Q: Hang on a minute.

A: So I -- I send him up a photograph, a picture of me, with a letter describing my high school graduating class. Giving him the names of my -- some principal -- some teachers that I had, just trying to refresh his memory. He asked me, "I remember pri -- I remember you perfectly well. I remember you and the people that were with you," because, see here, a graduating class -- or high school graduating classes, several thousand. We had 30-odd people. So he remembered. He send me the papers, he send me the documents. I send him some packages, gifts and so on. He says, "Don't send me any more, I don't need it. I am well provided here." And that allowed me to decide. I already had the paper. In the meantime, my mother left and I was left alone in Rome.

Q: Why did she leave? Why didn't you go with her?

A: She had the re-entry permit.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And she -- she received the visa to go by herself. I was not a child. I was in my mid-20's. I was not a minor. I said to her -- she wa -- she -- she was reluctant. I says, "You go. Then, when you are settled there, bring me back." But, you can -- what's the sense of both of us struggling here? You go and be there. Turin, which had a university, a medical school and a Polytechnic Institute. So it became like a Mecca for je -- for Jewish students. And the AJDC, the American Joint Distribution Committee rented a villa -- a villa on Corso Montcarlieri, I remember, right across the river Po, right on the other side of the bridge. Cr -- Cr -- It was -- It was not the river Po, I am sorry, it was another river, I don't remember. Po is in va -- the river Po is in -- in Florence. I don't remember the name of the river. And I went there and they accepted me. It's all -- The traveling was all done with American army fatigues. For the rail, I didn't have to pay. It was an overnight trip from Rome to Turin by train. But we didn't pay anything, we just got on the train and that's it. You want to la -- you want to put me off, put me off. I don't care. We were, in fact, I have ma -- I -- I was one of the original ones that started that student home in Turin. There was a -- Then, we had an administrator that ran that thing, and o -- the only thing we had to do is all of our UNRRA packages and all of our -- went into the home. The university accepted us because we were displaced people. I have never worried about paying tuition. I don't know what happened, if they paid or they didn't pay. I was just

enrolled and that's it. See, Italian universities were different from American universities. Here, when you go to college, it's like going to -- to high school. They take attendance, they ch -- you know, they check you, it's like -- you are like a kid. You had to sign your attendance list. If you signed it twice during a semester, you were given credit for attendance. You didn't have to be there. And it didn't make sense for me to be there, because I couldn't understand the lectures anyway. I had to study on my own and -- and try to translate and try to memorize, try to understand it. Because even if I knew what -- if I knew the technical language, if I knew the course, I could not converse with the -- during the oral part of the exam, because I didn't understand what he was talking to me about, but he was talking to me. If he went off on a tangent, or start asking me questions. I mastered it, to a point. And I didn't have -- my grades in -- in Turin were not as high as they were in Lvov, but they were-- I passed, and that's all that counted at the time, is I have passing grades.

Q: When did you know that the war was over?

A: I knew that the war was over one day after my birthday, in 1944.

Q: That's July?

A: July 27th. The Germans came -- The Germans were expelled -- left Lvov July 26. On my birthday, we wanted to get out from our hiding, but the woman that was hiding us said, "Please don't get out of here. I don't want my neighbors to know that I was hiding Jews. Stay another day and get out in the middle of the night." The following day, that's when all of us left, one by one. Of course, we were immediately arrested by the Russian

army patrol, taken not to jail, taken like the city hall, where we slept on a table or something, I don't -- and the following day, we were released.

Q: Why were you arrested?

A: Why?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Because we were pa -- we were on the streets after the curfew. There was a sunset to -- s-sunrise -- no, sunset to sunrise curfew, where you could not be in the streets. We went immediately to the -- what you would call the authorities or whatever you call them, and they said to us, "Find yourself an apartment." Wi -- Of course, we went back to the place where we used to live, before the ghetto in Lvov. The Poles were st -- were there and we couldn't -- we couldn't go there, but next -- next to there, there was an apartment which was occu -- was -- used to be occupied by a German general. We got in there and f- fortunately for us, it was not that the fact that the apartment was furnished, but they were -- there was some food left in the apartment that we could use, they ran away so fast. So we took over that apartment and we were there -- that was our apartment. We're -- We're -- We're sort of requisitioned the apartment. B-B -- My mother, she spoke Russian very fluently, she could write -- I mean, I could write and I could speak, but she went -- she -- almost immediately, she got a job, what you would call, with the incoming Russian authorities. That's not Russian, but Communist authorities. I didn't do anything at the time. I was going to the marketplace, buying and selling things and I'll never forget, my first big transaction was when a Russian army truck was parked in -- a Russian soldier

called me and he said to me, “I have some American canned -- canned pork -- ham a -- the [indecipherable] cans of processed pork and I like to sell it. What are you going to give me for it?” Said, “I can’t give you anything, but I will take a couple of them. You will have to trust me.” And I took two, because they were quite heavy and I couldn’t carry them and I had to hide them. I went to the marketplace, I sold them, I came back, I gave him half the money. He was very happy. And I just kept going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And I don’t remember how many I sold, but I have made a lot of money that day. And fortunate -- fortunately, I was not arrested or caught. After that, I had -- There were rumors that the Russians are going to draft all the men my age, in the 20’s, who were not in the army. I -- I knew what the Russians were going to do. I mean, a friend of mine, who I found out later, their job was going through mine fields and trying to disarm the mines in front of the tanks, with mine detectors. He had a leg blown. He is -- He is alive, fortunately. He is in Israel. But I was trying to avoid a situation like that, so I went to the Polytechnic Institute. Th-The rumors were that the Polytechnic Institute is going to re-open. I went there and the archives were intact. They found all the papers, they found all -- all of the documents. They accepted me and they gave me the admission. So when I went back to the dra -- what you would call the draft board and I showed them that I am a student which is enrolled now, they gave me a deferment. And basically I feel that what saved my life. Another thing that saved my life was the fact that the Polytechnic Institute in Kiev was not functioning, was -- for some reason, was not working. And because Lvov was working, the professors that were in Kiev came to Lvov

-- the ones that survived -- because Lvov had no -- had no faculty. The administersth -- the administrative personnel was -- remained there, but there was no one to teach. So they came from Kiev, from Moscow, do -- and some of the Poles that survived, they assembled enough faculty to teach, cause if Kiev was in existence, Lvov wouldn't have opened.

Q: [inaudible] turn over.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is tape two, side B, interview with Jack Ahrens. Just curious, you -- you mentioned you s -- you snuck out of the woman's home who had hidden you and then you got arrested, did you feel like you wer -- you know, oh my gosh, I'm not free after all?

A: The original feeling was bad, because the original Russian comment was, "So what are you doing here? Why aren't you with the partisans? Why aren't you with the underground? Why aren't you fighting?" Young, not disabled, maybe physically not in good shape, because after let's say, several months of starvation. Because, prior to that, we were fed fair -- fairly decently, but the last few months, the -- i-it was just -- it was soup. Watery soup with -- with one piece of bread, maybe. And when ya -- they just wouldn't understand. The Russians didn't want to understand that that was the only way how to survive, because the population was against us. I was with the underground. I was

with the Polish underground. The partisans in the area where we were, were definitely hostile toward Jews. And it was just as bad being in a --

Q: What bird was that at -- at one o'clock?

A: Oh, you want me tell you what bird --

Q: No, it's okay [indecipherable]

A: I can tell you the name of the bird. The population was very hostile in -- in -- in that area. In fact, the Pole that was hiding us was such an exce -- such an exception, that I just can't describe, I can't g-ge -- I can't thank him enough, in spite the fact that he perished because of -- I don't know, because he was a Polish patriot --

Q: What was his --

A: -- not because he was hiding Jews.

Q: What was his name?

A: Tracholder. Jan Tracholder. That was one of the names I had to spell to the -- previously on the -- to the interviewer. I met him -- When we came to Lvov, from Lida, in 1940, Lvov was overpopulated. From 150, became 300,000. We couldn't find a place where to live. So we finally found a -- an apart -- a -- a small apartment on the outskirts of Lvov. He rented it to us, I don't know why. Because he was -- he knew that we were Jewish. He knew exactly what was happening, but I have maybe developed a rapport with him. On the beginning, I have -- I don't say that I did help him, but I have showed some understanding in the things that he was doing. He was a builder, a -- a contractor. At that time, he was already in his 60's. And I have expressed my admiration at that time

for the Polish leaders from the 30's, like Marshall Pilsiltski. And he was a great lover of Pilsiltski, a great admirer. We have developed, sort of like a friendship, so that when I -- we le -- when we found an apartment in Lvov later and we left him, I still kept in touch -- in touch with him. I used to go out there, walk that kilometer from the last trolley stop to his shop and sort of discuss politics with him. What's going on in London, with the Polish government in London. What's going on in the world. So when we -- when the ghetto became a dead end and my mother, after she came back from being in hiding -- after the Germans caught her on the way back -- they beat her up, they told her to dig her grave, and because a German patrol brought out other woman -- I think I have described that part -- a-another woman and that woman was shot, the -- the -- the -- the SS man let her go and she came ba -- she came back to the ghetto, I saw -- I went ba -- I was abl -- I was working outside the ghetto, so I skipped my -- from my -- from my job -- from my pa -- from whatever we were doing. I -- I removed the arm band and I went to talk to him, would he accept -- would he accept my mother to go in hiding? Because we were old friends, I would call it, he said, "Let me think about it. I'll give you an answer." And eventually, on the second trip, he did accept her. I smuggled her out -- out of the ghetto with my wa -- w-with my ma -- w-w-with my work detachment, what you would call it, that we used to work outside the ghetto -- outside the ghetto walls. I -- I got her there -- I came back to the ghetto, but when I got out of the ghetto, I went with the Polish underground, with the -- with the Akar, with the army of Cryova. And when I found that they were so hostile to me that I -- I ga -- I wouldn't survive with them, I went to him to

let me in, and he did. Maybe he took advantage of me at the time, because I was able to help him. He had, at that time already, grenades, rifles, ammunition, a short wave radio receiver and transmitter, where he was communitcating with the -- the -- the Akar, the army of Cryova, he was like a center post -- center point, where the army of Cr-Cryova was -- was commu-communicating through him. He was one of many. On -- On the other hand, he was with an anti-Semitic group and he was still hiding two Jews. Two Jews that were paying him to be there, but in order to be able to convert, with what -- my mother was paying him with gold coins, with American dollars. There's what -- do -- they were of no value unless you could -- could convert them into the current currency. And in -- in order convert it into currency -- he didn't trust anyone in Lvov. He used to go to the walls of ghetto, communicate with this man that eventually came into hiding with us, that did not survive. Through him, he got another woman and another family of seven that we didn't know about. My mother and I didn't know about them. When I came back to my mother, we saw stranger -- we heard strange noises and strange shadows in the middle of the night and we confronted him and then he put us all together. The -- The reason why we saw those shadows and so on, because they had to go to the bathroom -- to dispose of their body waste. We had to go to dispose of the body waste into a cesspool or something of that sort. Or get water from the -- from the di -- from the well that he had in the ba -- in -- in his basement. But they -- the part that a being -- he said, "I was saving u -- I was saving human beings. I am not a Jew lover, I don't like Jews." And they used to say, "But you like money." So he says, "Money does -- did na -- money doesn't do any harm. But

think what I -- what I am risking with." And eventually, through -- I think through triangulation, they found his radio receiver, transmitter, from -- the Germans. They came, they discovered the arms, they discovered the -- everything, but they never discovered the Jews. We have camouflaged ourselves in such a way that they couldn't find us. And who built? I built it with him, because the Hasidisha family of seven wa -- th -- they -- they -- they didn't have to lay a brick, they couldn't do anything. They were praying all day long.

Q: What's your feeling toward Hasid's now?

A: I think it's a waste of time. Especially with what's going on now in Israel, with the conflict between the Reform, then the -- and the Conservative and the -- and the ultra-Orthodox. It's -- That's wa -- I-If -- If the state of Israel does not survive, God forbid, it will be the fault of the Orthodox.

Q: Where do you put yourself on the religious continuum?

A: Obs -- Conservative observe -- Conservative. In fact, I have -- the last couple of holidays, I went to the Reform temple. Not that I -- I belong to a Conservative temple in here, but I -- I went to a Reform temple because of my -- because of connections and so on, because of it just happened so -- and I find that the Reform movement allows Jews to be more alle -- more contemporary and to be more -- it was not a -- is -- does not take him away from Judaism, it just make hi -- makes him more modern. Is just like the -- many of the religious laws, we try to explain by using hygiene. Why are there -- Why are they there, where they sh -- th-that's the basic explanation, I don't know who -- wh-

which you -- wh -- wh -- what you are, but I consider myself Conservative, not Reformed and not -- definitely not Orthodox.

Q: When you were growing up, what did you consider yourself?

A: When I was growing up, Reform did not exist. You were or you were not. My grandfather, where I spe -- where I li -- my -- my mother and father were not observant. They were Jews, but not observant. My grandfather and grandmother, that family, were Conservative.

Q: Grandmother and grandfather on which side?

A: My mother's parents. I never knew my father's par -- family. I never met them. They lived under Communism. My -- I know my parents were in touch with them, but they were asked, "Please, you can do more harm to us by corresponding with us, than good by giving -- by sending us things." So we were never in touch with them.

Q: Okay.

A: I knew they were of -- I had some very gifted cousins. Concert pianists. But myself, I am tone deaf. I love music, but I cannot carry a tune.

Q: So -- Did you get your feeling for the religion from your grandparents?

A: I got respect for religion from my grandparents. But my grandfather's sister was married to a Hossett. When my father died, for 11 months -- I was 10 years old, I was 11 years old, I said Kaddish every day, in the Hasidisha temple, because my grandfather didn't go to temple every day. He went sometimes of -- on -- on -- on -- on Saturdays and all holidays, even minor holidays. We didn't go to school on even minor holidays. Like

Passover, first two days and the last two days. Sukkot, the first and the last. I mean, a -- Purim, every -- every holiday, we ob -- we observed every holiday.

Q: And now?

A: Now, I observe only the major -- the -- the Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. And Passover, [indecipherable]. My daughter makes a seder and that's all.

Q: Did your wife do that?

A: My wife always did. The advantage was my wife used to make two seders. My daughter makes only one.

Q: Your -- Your wife did first and second night?

A: First and second night. Her -- My wife -- and she asked me would I mind if she kept a kosher home. I said, "I don't mind, but the problem is yours, not mine." And the reason why she did it, because her mother was observant. Her father was not, but her mother was. So, in order for her mother to be able to eat in her house, she say -- I say, "I don't mind, do you want to have two sets of dishes, that's your problem. I will not obstruct it. I will no -- I will -- I will cooperate, but I don't care what you do."

Q: So you eat your shrimp salad on the sly? Just joking, I'm sorry.

A: We -- We used to bring in Chinese food and have it on paper dishes. And when we went to a kosher Chinese restaurant, we walked out, because without pork and shrimp, it doesn't taste the same. Chinese food doesn't taste -- doesn't taste right. And I remember that first place, it was on King's highway -- on Flatbush Avenue, there was a Chinese restaurant, called Shanghai kosher Chinese restaurant. We walked out of there because it

just didn't taste the same, it didn't taste good. In Chinese food -- I remember when we were looking for a house in New Jersey, our standard joke was, don't look for how many temples are in the neighborhood, but look for how many Chinese restaurants in -- are in the neighborhood. Then you know if it's a Jewish neighborhood or not.

Q: So, apropos of what is going on right now in this country, is -- is the United States the political climate you thought you were coming to?

A: No, no one could predicted this thing is going to happen like this. No one could predict. First of all, the president that allowed me to stay here, was completely the opposite morally of what's going on, and it was Truman. It's interesting, but after I got my BS in '49, I have received a letter from the immigration authorities in Chicago, to report for deportation, cause I came here on a student visa and when you come on a student visa, you have to have a place where to go. The only place that I could find that would accept me from Italy -- Italy would not accept me back, I was a Displaced Person, was -- I frankly don't remember if it was Uruguay or Paraguay, but one of those countries. I think it was Uruguay. So I went to the dean of foreign students and I said to him, "You know, my plans are to go for a Master's degree, because engineers are now a dime a dozen." Fact, at that time, engineers were getting 37.50 a week. Was a g-graduating class had a lot of ex-GI's in it, under the student bi -- say -- whate-whatever tha -- it was, that shu -- that ex-G -- ni -- that GI's were allowed to study for nothing. So in order to compete in the -- in the -- in the -- in the wa-- in the -- in the market better, I said, "I'll go for a Master's degree." So, he called the immigration in Chicago and he said

to him, “What are you going to take, my best man from here?” I got a BS with honors at the time. He says, “He’s going to go for a Master’s degree.” So, “Okay,” he said, th -- th -- they said, “Se -- Let him send -- send me the proper document-documentation,” and in the meantime, Truman passed the bill that I was able to stay here without any problems. But in ‘51, I got -- I got married to an American citizen, I could have -- but I never di -- I never claimed citizenship on the basis of marriage.

Q: Why not?

A: I had it the other way, why should I? It’s -- He -- It was a -- It didn’t make any difference if I become a citizen a year sooner or two years sooner. There was another year, so what?

Q: Your wife -- Did you feel that as an American -- as someone who hadn’t been what you’d gone through -- what you’d gone through that she could even understand who you -- who you were and what you were about?

A: I don’t think she would understand. I don’t think she did understand. I don’t think that any American can understand. The things that I or other people went through are so traumatic that unless you live through it, you cannot express it, you cannot describe it.

Q: Did you talk about it with her?

A: No. Very little. Very little. In fact, I haven’t spoken to it abou -- with my children. It’s my grandson that is asking more questions than anyone else.

Q: Why didn’t you speak to your wife or your children about this?

A: Could have been maybe two reasons, basically. One, they didn’t want me to talk about

it, not to bring it out more, to more or less, let's forget about it. The attitude was, let's forget about it. Let's put it in the past. And the other one was that -- that things were so horrible and so bad that I just didn't want them to know about it. There was no reason. They knew basically what happened, but not in fine detail. I don't think anyone knows it in fine detail, because when I try to visualize that time now, the different situations that happened to me, the only thing I can say, like someone asked me, "How -- How did you manage to survive?" I said, "It's nothing but pure luck. It's nothing but luck," because just like when you are in the -- in -- doy -- i-i-in a war, and you are with another man next to you and a bullet hits him and not you, what determines it? Nothing but luck.

Q: Seems it was more than luck. You were really canny. You knew how to assume other identities, even to the point of wearing the fatigues on the trains in Italy.

A: That was not a matter of survival. That was a matter of survival, but not a matter of life and death.

Q: It was --

A: When it cames to li -- When it came to life and death, it was purely luck. I -- I have many situations where you would call -- it was the right decision at the right time. Now, why did I make that decision? And I -- many times, I tried to analyze myself, why did I decide -- just like why did I go to the right and a -- a -- a -- or -- or not to the left? I don't know. It just -- Something guided me internally.

Q: Do you think God had anything to do with it?

A: Could be. I don't know. Could be. I -- I -- I can't say I believe in God, but I believe in a -- in a super being, in something that is there, that guides our destiny. I went -- Look, I came here. I mean, I had my problems when I -- i-i-in the United States. When I discovered my mother had cancer, I had Bell's Palsy, which never came back. I still have my left side of the face paralyzed. I had what they call a decompression. They remove one ear, they drill a hole in your head and let the nerve expand. After that, I had to make a major decision. There was a su-suspicion, not that many years ago, that I had a cancerous kidney, so I decided to remove the kidney. Well, I am fine. Not so recently, I had angioplasty, with a couple of stents put in. Mean, those are all decisions that I had to make on the spot, with the help of my children. My daughter is a doctor, a physician. My son is a pharmacist. They can give me educated guesses, but you know, it's like anything else. The dec -- the final decision is mine.

Q: Do you think that the God or higher power, whomever may have -- who may have helped you survive, is the same one who oversaw the Holocaust?

A: If there is a proof that there is no God, that's the Holocaust. There is a proof there is God is the people that survived the Holocaust. I mean, where -- that thing will remain unanswered, I guess. There's no answer to that -- a question like this.

Q: Did you pray at all during that period when you were in hiding in [inaudible]

A: Probably, in my own way. Not from a Hebrew book, or not from a seder or from memory, because I didn't have any. My memory, basically, of Hebrew prayers boils

down to the four questions and the Kaddish, and the beginning of each prayer. And, you know, all the blessings over the bread and the matzoh and wine.

Q: Y-You mentioned that you thought Truman was an upstanding fellow, but I'm curious, for one -- couple things. One, what's your feeling toward this countries attitudes toward the Holocaust as it was occurring? Two -- You know, the restrictions on -- on immigration, and -- and Truman, of course, himself, ordered the bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He killed -- He was responsible for the order that killed thousands -- tens of thousands of civilians also.

A: I have very strong feelings when it comes to the guilt of this country and England, when they came to the Holocaust. Not a single train and not a single railroad, not -- nothing was ever bombed. The trains, they knew about it, it's documented that they knew what was going on and if they couldn't have stopped it, they could have slowed it down. They could have done things -- those people were as good as dead anyway. They could have at least destroyed the [indecipherable]. They could have destroyed the -- the -- the -- the -- the -- the mass killings. The Russians were actually -- were more sympathetic, because the Russian underground -- the Russian partisans were more sympathetic toward Jews, they -- they accepted Jews on a -- on a basis where you didn't have to say who you were, as long as you were willing to fight, as long as you were willing to do something. And the proof of it is -- are my own friends, who survived -- many survived in the -- in the swamps around my hometown, in the area. The Bellski brigade -- meehava -- I'm quite friendly with the -- with these people, I know them quite well. I used to play cards

with Tevya. Tuvya, not Tevya. Or the Polish a -- the -- the Poles never gave any directions or any instructions to the Polish underground, go ahead and help the Jews or do something that would more or less minimize the killings. The fact that I was saved by a Pole, that's strictly an exception. It's -- It's such an exception that he deserves anyth -- any -- any recognition possible. All I know is, the man perished, himself. His wife refused any contact afterwards. Sh -- Cause she left Lvov and she went to her child -- to their children in Kraków, and she never gave anyone any address or any location where she is or where she was. Anyway, by now she would have been over a hundred years old.

Q: What's your feeling toward Poles in general now?

A: It's strange, but the feel -- my feeling towards Poles is --

End of Tape Two, Side B

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: Tape three, side A, interview with Jack Ahrens. -- that feeling towards the Polish language, since you hadn't tried to relearn it.

A: So when I see some of my friends that are conversing -- talking in Polish between themselves, I sort of try to switch their conversation to English. And some of them do, because -- many of them do, in fact, because if husband and wife were both brought up in Poland and both wi -- have a Polish background, and their children are not present, they'll speak to each other in Polish. I tried to avoid it because I -- I just -- the same thing -- I feel a strong reaction toward German. I just cannot stand the -- the language. In fact that I am very, very friendly with this professor of German literature, who is Jewish, from the -- a Jew from Switzerland, a professor of German literature, who is re -- teaching at NYU, I didn't ask him what he's -- he has a course this year, I didn't ask him what it was, but I think last year, one -- he skipped one semester, I think, last year he had a course on German literature about a Holocaust. The -- The post-Holocaust German literature, about -- about the Holocaust, which is very interesting literature. Well, he gave me names of some books to read in translation, which were unbelievable, unbelievable. One was the transformation of a German police unit into a -- into a unit of notorious killers, how they justified it and how they became immune to killing. That you can kill eight hours a day and after the eight hours, you become a family man, a -- a church loving man and so on. A -- A -- La -- A God fearing man, if you would call it. Just like the Jews were not human beings, like they were -- like it was a mitzvah to kill them, in a way.

Q: Do you feel any of that duality toward this country? I mean, here you're -- you're slamming the US and -- and England for doing nothing.

A: That's right.

Q: And yet you -- you find asylum in this country.

A: That was at that time. Now, there is still a lot of anti-Semitism in here. There is a lot and the only way that Jews are doing what they are doing for the survivors, let it be here, let it be in the state of Israel, let it be anywhere, is because [indecipherable] Jews have the power to do it. They have the money, they have the power to do it and they have the will to do it. They have -- I don't know of any minority group which constitutes I don't know how many millions of people, in quantity, that has that many organizations, which are more or less directed toward self help and the help of state of Israel. There are hundreds and hundreds and hun -- maybe thousands of organi-organizations, whose aim is to do something.

Q: When you came here, did you experience anti-Semitism?

A: Very little. I was in a Jewish fraternity.

Q: Right.

A: I was more or less a foreign student at the university and what they are -- what -- the question was, where do you came -- where do you came from? Of course, I came from Poland. I mean, there was no connection between what was happening. People were quite -- they were and they still are quite ignorant after what happened, how it happened. I have to tell to many am -- many Americans that I talk to, the history of 1939, for

example, where Poland was attacked from both sides and divided into two parts. The -- The town where I came from actually, it's not that disappeared, but when you asking wh- where it is, I don't know where it is. It's in Belarus now, but when I was born in Poland, it was Poland. Before I was born, not that many years before I was born, it was Russia. So, actually, what is it? Europe was so fluid. I think it's one of the longest times now, the last 50 years or whatever it is, where borders are -- the artificial borders are sort of -- more or less steady and you can say where I come from.

Q: Do you do much speaking to -- about the Holocaust to groups?

A: I never spoke to any groups. I never spoke to any groups about the Holocaust. I spoke to -- I speak to some people, I -- but not enough, definitely not enough and I feel that whatever is being said is not enough. Because people should learn how to tolerate, how to -- I don't say how to love other people, but how to tolerate the other -- other beliefs and other -- other cultures.

Q: I want to -- I want to rewind a little bit, conceptually and go back to, you were in graduate school, what was your specialty in engineering?

A: Mechanical engineering.

Q: And after you gradu -- you got your Master's degree?

A: I got the Master's degree.

Q: And then what?

A: My mentor in school was a Japanese professor, Seki Consol. He was one of the Japanese professors -- one of the Japanese who was not interned during the war, by

orders of President Roosevelt. He was one of the main researchers and one of the originer -- originators of residential air conditioning, especially for housing and army barracks.

Q: So that all -- you did your Master's degree at the University of Illinois as well?

A: Yes.

Q: Was this in Carbondale, or --

A: No. Champagne-Urbana. When I finished my thesis and I spoke to him, I -- we were on a first name basis, we came good friends. I said to him, "What am I going to do now?" He says, "Don't worry," he said, "go to Cleveland. Go to Viking Air Conditioning, there is a good friend out there of mine, Mari-Marion Levy. Tell him I sent you." I said, "Give me a letter." He said, "You don't need it." I said, "Call him." He said, "I'm not going to waste a call." So I came home, I spent a little time home, I went to Cleveland. I -- I think I checked into a hotel, I come to Viking Air Conditioning. I made myself an appointment with Marion Levy and he says -- and I -- he says to me, "Who are you?" And so on, I introduce myself. And he says to me, "I have nothing here." Now, Viking Air Conditioning was a manufacturers of fans and blowers. Said, "I have nothing here." He said, "We are on a -- We are more or less winding down. We did a lot of war production in here, but there is nothing doing." And I said to him, "But you know, but Seki Consol sent me here and said come o -- go." That was before the weekend. He says, "All right," he says, "go find yourself a room where you're going to stay and come here Monday. I'll -- We'll talk about it." So, I f -- I went out, I said, "I'm not going to find a room. He's going to send me back. What am I going to look for a room?" I came Monday. He says to

me, “You know, you’re going to be in the research and development department.” I said, “Fine.” I said, “What am I supposed to do?” He says to me, “Talk to the head of the department.” I said, “Who is the head?” He says, “You.” He says, “We are just starting a research and development department.” I said, “What do you want me to do?” He says, “It’s your problem now.” S -- Anyway, I was there for a year. In the meantime, you know, we did a lot of interesting things, I did a lot of interesting things. I have designed a -- an exhaust fan unit, which was sold by Sears and Roebuck. In fact, it’s still being sold. The same unit, exactly the same way -- the same way I designed it. Here ha -- They put a few electronic controls on it, but basically, it’s exactly the same unit. Cause the company is not in existence any more. It was sold to another company and taken over by another company. But the unit still remained and Sears still has it as a window exhaust fan. I was more or less what you call keeping company with my future wife at the time. We were corresponding. I used to take off Friday after work, from Cleveland, by car, drive all night -- that’s 500 miles -- drive all night, come here Saturday morning, have a couple of hours of sleep, spend Saturday and Sunday, leave Sunday, late in the afternoon and go report Monday morning to work.

Q: That’s love.

A: Then, when I saw that that thing is a little bit too much and she wouldn’t -- she would -- she would not move. Says come here and that’s it. If your -- So I gave up the job and I came to New York and I found another job.

Q: What was that job?

A: That's it. I went to work for a company -- through another company, actually, whose main product was environmental testing equipment. But they developed line of heating equipment, baseboard and heating units and I became more or less the manager of that division.

Q: You said that one of the things you never wanted to do was fail. Never wanted to fail at anything. Has that been true then, for your life?

A: I didn't fail at it. I don't think I failed. I did -- I did things the b -- to the best of my ability. I was not very successful, but I sort of ca -- held my own in a dog eat dog business, because there was a lot of major companies. I had to compete with companies -- with billion dollar companies. That -- That particular division. So, I sort of branched off in there and did some design. Besides running that division, I did design of e-environmental testing equipment, which was a very challenging subject. United States used to send up satellites and rockets into space, which used to come with all kinds of data. What are the conditions in outer space? We were designing equipment that would simulate the change and the condition in the outer space. So, for example, if a rocket, equipped with electronic equipment, would be sent up, you start with ground conditions. While it's going up, because of skin friction with air, the temperature can build up to a couple of hundred degrees on the -- on the surface. But the pressure -- the va -- will change and it will come up to almost absolute vacuum. But then we found out that it isn't so, that there is a Van Allen belt, or actually the vacuum from a high vacuum, it -- it changes and there is a little more ionization in there. So we had to simulate it in a

chamber. So when people were building their electronic equipment, or their products, they could actually put it into a chamber and the chamber would sa -- would simulate -- not the fl -- the flight, but the ca -- the -- the changing conditions. So we knew -- th-those were all classified data, so we knew what -- what is going on, how the -- how the conditions progress. And the -- the -- that was a challenging design, when they used to give a set of specifications.

Q: Did your wife --

A: But that was also -- that was also a -- a -- a competitive business. We were not the only one.

Q: Did your wife work?

A: My wife worked on the beginning. She had a degree in edu -- elementary education from NYU. She even started her Masters. But then the two children came and we decided both, she'll raise the children.

Q: Did you want children?

A: Yes.

Q: Why was that important to you?

A: I sort of wanted to leave a legacy in this world. And my daughter was born and then my son. Did I want the daughter first? No, I think I wanted a son first. But I'll accept them the way they are. I'll accept them then, just the way they are. And one thing I was able to instill in them is the value of education and the -- and the value of -- moral values. I think both of them are pretty good people.

Q: Did you raise them as Jews?

A: Yes. I raised them as Jews, but then I was disappointed twice -- more than twice. My daughter went to Hebrew school. She didn't have a Bas Mitzvah. Bas Mitzvahs were not fashionable at that time, if you can call it that way. Now, they are fashionable, but at that time, they were not. My son had a very nice Bar Mitzvah. He even went to the -- what you call the Hebrew high school at the East [indecipherable] Jewish Center. He had a scholarship in there and he was quite proficient. My daughter married an Italian. My daughter was -- I think she was number -- in the top 10, I think she was number six or number four or something. In with -- In the graduating class of Medwood High School. The famous principal out there was, I think, Dr. Bernstein. Was quite known for his standards and his arc -- educational requirements. At the fifth year, that was the first year, with Downstate Medical and Brooklyn College started a program of selecting 10 students for an accelerated medicals program, seven years instead of eight years BA MD, they make it -- made it in seven years, BA MD. My daughter applied, she was one of the people that were accepted in the BA MD program. So was her future husband, from Savarian High School in the -- also in Brooklyn. Ca -- A real Catholic High School. They fell in love -- They're getting divorced right now, by the way. They met there and they got married, I think two weeks before graduation from medical school. My son, when he s -- he was accepted in the same program, but when he saw that -- the kind of work my daughter had to do, he says to me, he says, "I'm not going to do it." So I -- My wife and I, we up -- we wrote a letter to the director of the program, please give him one year

delay, a one year -- put him on a one year waiting period. Maybe he can change his mind. And we couldn't change his mind. First of all, he didn't want to way fro -- go away from home. He wanted to go to an ophthalmology college in -- which was in Philadelphia. So he didn't want to go away from home, there was none in New York. So he ended up in ph-pharmacy school. He finished Brooklyn College, with a biology major and he went to Brooklyn College, to Long Island University for pharmacy. He is quite successful now, as a pharmacist. Then again, he married a girl which -- it's a question I don't know, is she Jewish or isn't she Jewish? She says she is not.

Q: Why is it a question?

A: Because I don't know if her mother is Jewish or not. Her mother married a Holocaust survivor, with numbers tattoos on -- tattooed on his arm. The second husband. The first husband was not Jewish. And my daughter-in-law is bringing up her two daughters as Episcopalians or something. Which I might -- I object, deep in my heart, but I have -- I -- I told my son I don't like it, and he says, "It's not your choice. You can object, but that's what she wants, and -- and --" and he says, "wh-what did God do for me? Took away my mother when she was so young?" His mother died, she was 47 years old. So he is in complete denial of Judaism. And instead of trying to convert him or instead of trying to do anything, I sort of -- I accept the status quo and I ignore it. I love them all, I accept them all, I am very supportive. I try to help them when I can and this is one subject which is not discussed. In fact, when my granddaughters went to a -- that was very recently, in a church to a confirmation or something? I -- I don't remember the title of it. I went there,

in spite the fact that I didn't care for it and I didn't like it. My grandson had a Bar Mitzvah, which I was very supportive of, which I helped to -- which his father la -- his father have -- until today doesn't know that he had a Bar Mitzvah -- officially doesn't know. Maybe he knows, maybe he doesn't, I don't know. But his father's family was there. His aunt, his cousins were there, his immediate family was at the Bar Mitzvah, but he was never told and because of the divorce being in progress for many, many years, I na -- his pa -- his parents -- his mother -- his father, I don't know what he is, but his mother say, I -- I think they support him. But the fact that this thing is so wrong, that his own aunt, his mother's sister, doesn't talk to her sister because of this divorce. Mean, it's a family feud, but it's their problem, not mine. And I hope that I can see daylight already in this divorce, it's coming to an end, hopefully. But, it's time.

Q: You -- you --

A: But he is willingly -- he still has occasionally, not all the time, a woman come in -- his last he -- not his last, I think it's the hebr -- she is a Hebrew teacher. He does not study Hebrew more or less, but he studies Jewish culture. About holidays, about history of Israel and so on, which is very commendable in my book. And he wa -- does it -- and he does it willingly.

Q: Do you now, or have you ever considered yourself a Zionist?

A: I was a Zionist when I was young. In fact, I belonged to the same party -- he -- he -- g -- I knew Begin. I knew Zharbortinsky, which are the -- the -- that's the -- that's the Likood, that's the Ergoon -- this is the -- the most reactionary part of the Jewish -- of the

Zionism. The so-called, in quotation, Jewish terrorists. But, I sort of mellowed. I see that Israel is maybe a democracy, but a democracy with a question mark -- with a big question mark.

Q: Have you thought about living there?

A: No. I could not stand for their being governed and being dictated by the Orthodox.

Q: When you were a young Zionist, what was your vision, what was your purpose behind being affiliated with the movement? What did you see as the possibility?

A: My purpose at that time was basically -- is to show my identity. I was not accepted by the Poles. In order to be accepted by my peers, I had to -- Zionism was a part of being -- of acceptance by my peers. Now, there are the two groups. There was the Socialist Zionist, the Hashomer Hatsiere and th-that was the Begorians party and there was the other one, the -- the ones that the only way we are going to get our countries through bloo -- sweat and blood and fight. That was the -- the Revision -- Revisionist, the Shabortinksky party or the Leekud, now. There's the Shamir and -- and -- and -- and Begin. I felt closer to the other one. However, I had friend with the in -- on the other side, and we talked to each other, we were not enemies. We -- We had discussions. And we used to play Ping-Pong in each other's club. We were not mortal enemies, in fact that we are politically opposite.

Q: It -- It sounds like you keep in touch with a lot of the people you used to be friends and associates with.

A: Yes.

Q: How have you kept this up all this time?

A: With age, basically, many of us have passed on. I mean, they are -- they are disappearing, because o -- strictly of age. But group -- the group of my peers, quite a few survived. I have a woman in Brooklyn, for example, with whom I have started kindergarten together, and we went through the four years of public school, not -- it was a private public school, and eight years of high school, the 12 years of education, not together, but in the same class. I have a number of other people in here that I grew up together, that we know each other from the time -- friends of mine say, "How do you -- How do you keep in touch?" We sort of stick together.

Q: Why?

A: Because we have a lot in common.

Q: Do you talk about the past together?

A: We talk a lot about the past, but the strange part, when we get together, the common language now, especially with the ones that live in here, use English. The ones that don't live here, is Yiddish, because we have quite a -- I have a few of them, several let's say, and we are scattered all over the world.

Q: How many people are we talking about do you think?

A: How many? All together, you make -- I may count to 20.

Q: That's a lot.

A: I may count 15 - 20 at least. And we started, I ha -- I had a friend that passed on, in London. I have still a friend with whom I grew up together, in fact, my best childhood

friend lives in Munich, Germany since 1946, I think. Over 50 years in Munich. Basically, no one in Poland. I had -- I had some in the Soviet Union. Now they came ba -- Now they are living in here. I have in Israel, several. I had -- I have someone in our -- as far as Australia. I have them in New York. In the immediate area -- area of New York, there are quite a few. Some I knew from before the war and when I say before the war, I mean before 1939. Some knew me before 1939, because see, in '39, I was 18. If someone was 12 - 13, I didn't bother with them. That age difference has disappeared. So now we are basically in the same age group. Or, if they were older than I was, that age difference has narrowed and we know -- wa -- and a -- and right now we know each other, so we talk to each other. It's an interesting place, but -- I lived in Lida. In that general area, there were three basically bigger towns. Lida, Novaroda, Kabanareetcha, that formed a triangle. In the middle of the triangle, there was a little place where we used to go and spend our summers. It was in the pine woods, in hef cottages. The families used to rent a cottage. It also had some pension --

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: Okay. So, I'm sorry to go back on material. Let it be noted, the interviewer screwed up by getting too interested and the tape ran out, and so I tried to make it [indecipherable]

A: No, she did not, she did not. It --

Q: Mr. Ahrens is much too interesting.

A: Call me Jack.

Q: Okay. Thank you. Yakob.

A: Yeah. Jake, Jacob. In fact, in my -- in the frat house, they used to stick me as Jake.

Q: Jake. Oh boy.

A: Jake. So my -- my future wife says, “Don’t let them call you Jake, I hate that. If anything, let it be Jack.”

Q: Fair enough. Okay. What did she call you?

A: Jack.

Q: Did she? What did she meet you as?

A: On a blind -- I ha -- it was a blind date.

Q: Yeah, but what did she call you at first?

A: I don’t -- I think I told her my name is Jack or Jake or something. She called me Jack immediately. She would not accept Jake.

Q: So when you met on a blind date, was this love at first sight?

A: No. Absolutely no. Absolutely no. But the first major date that I had with her, I took her to Brooklyn Academy of Music on New Year’s Eve to see Madame Butterfly. That’s the first time she saw an opera.

Q: How long did it take before the relationship became what it led to?

A: Well, we were dating and talking to each other for probably a year and a half.

Q: What did her parents think of her dating a survivor?

A: I don't know. I was accepted there. I was accepted there, cause when I told her mother that your food is cold when you -- when you -- when you serve, she always tried to burn me with hot soup. See, her mother was not -- not a modern woman. She did -- She was a little bit on the old-fashioned side. Her father was more or less modern, more modern than -- than mother. So, we sort of developed a rapport and he was -- he -- he was a sweater manufacturer, together with two brothers. And he was more or less guiding the -- they had a small plant where they actually get the -- used to get the yarn, knit the material, then cut it, sew it together and sell it. So one brother was the machinery -- in charge of the machinery, the other one was in charge of the finishing and the third one in charge of selling. He was in charge of the machinery. So, the mechanical background sort of gave us a -- a rapport together.

Q: I want to go back to your friends, you were talking about the group of friends you made from summers and getting together. Do you have a different relationship with other survivors, not necessarily even the group of friends that you still associate with, than you do with other people? Do you have different relationship with Jews than you do with other people?

A: Frankly, I blame myself for keeping away. I am sort of -- keep to myself a lot. I mean, once I break through, I'll break through, but otherwise, I don't have -- I never had too many friends. I sort of keep away and keep to myself. I call it mind my own business. With the -- With survivors -- With other survivors, I am not active in any survivor group or survivor organization or anything. I am willing to share my experiences, my past, but I

don't know, I was never asked to go and lecture or tell other people -- but I know people that do it and I know the people that did it. They aren't here any longer. And they said to me, "You can volunteer." I sort of have never volunteered to do it.

Q: In your interview -- previous interview, you said that one of the things you learned was never to volunteer, conserve your energy.

A: That's true, because the volunteering, it served a different pur -- that was for a different reason.

Q: But is it something that's kept with you?

A: Could be, could be. Or maybe volunteering is not luck, not fate. I mean, it's sort of pushing -- pushing your future, actively. It's not 'Que sera, sera.' Maybe -- May -- Ma -- Maybe I'm a fatalist, I -- I don't know. I'm willing to accept whatever will happen, will happen, that's all. And then i-i-in a case like that, can no -- you cannot volunteer. You have to accept what is asked of you.

Q: Do you think that could change as you get older, that you might consider [indecipherable]

A: I'm old enough.

Q: How about your -- other survivors that you meet? Do you tend to bond with them more readily? Do you -- Are you more open with them?

A: No. No, we don't talk too much about -- sometimes you know, I don't care to listen to how they -- what happened to them and how they survived. I mean, on the beginning, yes, but now I don't remember. I -- I -- I mean, I cannot look at somebody and say he did

this and he did that and he -- and he was in here and he was in there. I cannot -- I don't -- I d -- identify in that way. They here, that's all that counts.

Q: When you -- How about your -- the -- this group of 15 or 20 people that -- that you get together with periodically, the -- the network really, of people you knew as a young man. Do you talk about the past at all, or just -- you -- you accept that you had a common past that is not as pleasant as you might like and just get on with it?

A: No, we talk about the past. We talk about the past. In fact, I have a group of people with whom I used to get together. In fact, no-not -- not in the last few years, but that was the -- they were the members of that Bellsky Brigade, if you know. Y-You probably heard about them. We used to meet socially, a-as much as once a week to play cards. But then again, I was neighbors with the Bellsky's for 20 years and I didn't even know that they were there. And then someone came from Israel, or someone came and I found out that they li -- they w -- who they are and where they are. Otherwise, I just -- see, through my wife, we had -- we had a group -- my wife was very active in the Hadassah. She was a groo -- not a ch -- I don't know, it's a ch -- ke -- se -- a chapter or a group? The -- The smallest thing, president for awhile. And those women, together, we were active social -- socially together. Usually going to shows, going to -- having like little meetings together and so on. Going out socially. That kept me busy. I was in a consulting -- a -- I was not on the job at the time. I was in the consulting business and I also had the -- no fault of my own, I ended up with a -- owning a liquor store in Brooklyn. That was an inheritance. My wife's father, he bought, after he -- after he retired, or -- liquidated a liquor -- the -- his --

[indecipherable] his business, he bought a liquor store, because his son had no skill of any kind. He got angry at his father, so he went and joined the army, volunteered. So he bought the liquor store in Brooklyn, supposedly to leave it for his son. So they ran it together and then when he died, the father -- the father-in-law, he must have had a half a dozen heart attacks. I mean, he was a very sick man and his son did not help him. My dau -- My wife and her brother inherited it. Then, I had to help him run, because he didn't know anything about it. On major holidays, I -- you know, I had to go in and see what's going on. And then he decided -- my brother-in-law, that it's -- that California grass is greener than new -- than new -- than Brooklyn, and that's through his brother-in-law, his wife's brother. He packed up one day, he says, "Your," -- while my wife was un -- going -- having chemotherapy, that, "You'll have to buy me out and I -- I'm leaving." I could not sell the store at the time, there was no market for liquor stores. So I bought him out, I kept the store. Fortunately I -- I had a consulting business, I was a c-consulting engineer in my field. So my time was my own, basically. I could schedule my time the way I wanted and I had a good absentee manager. So I ran the store, in Bed-Stuy, too. At that time, it was called -- called Crown Heights. It's on the outskirts of Crown Height -- Saint John's Street, that's a -- I don't know, if it isn't bates -- Bed-Stuy, nothing is. So I ran -- I ran this and I ran the other thing and then -- and then, unfortunately, my wife did not survive it. She di -- Six months after that, or si -- si -- a little more than six months, she died.

Q: You never remarried?

A: No, I never did.

Q: Do you consider yourself a prejudiced person?

A: No. I don't think so. I had enough -- You know, prejudice toward what? I mean, the word prejudice can mean so many things. Is it color, is it race, is it religion, is it what?

Q: Well, for ga -- I mean -- give you an example. When you talked about your disappointment with your children, you mentioned specifically that your daughter married an Italian, and that your son's wife was raising the children to be Episcopalian.

A: I am not -- That doesn't make me prejudice, I accepted it. I accepted it and I lived with it and I live -- I -- I -- I mean, one is getting divorced, but the other one, I'm going to live with it. I love him just as much. I don't deny him anything and I'm not going to do anything that's going to hurt them or harm them. I would prefer otherwise. As far as -- or -- now this is -- when I say Italian and Episcopalian, this is something that by looking, doesn't show up. I mean, I don't -- you can't say you look Episcopalian. You can say you look Italian, but that could be -- that could be anything. I did a lot of business -- not a lot of business, I did business and I lived with a -- aroun -- with Blacks, because of the liquor store. The staff was all Black. Th-The -- The manager and so on, they were all Black. They remained friends. The ones that are still alive, I am still in touch with them. They call me occasionally and I call them. Even after the fact that I have sold the store over 10 years, they say, "Why didn't you keep it?" And a Black person -- I sold it to a Black person and a Black per -- and here he sold it to another Black person. He says, "It was nothing like being with you." I-It's -- I was very tolerant.

Q: How about the politics of this country after you came here? Not long after you came, there was McCarthyism. There were -- sometime -- [indecipherable] political assassinations, Martin Luther King, Junior, JFK, RFK. Yo-You've seen Civil Rights, you've seen incredible social change and political action, not always of a pleasant sort since you came here. Not always of an open and tolerant sort. How did you feel toward, say McCarthyism, toward McCarthy? Toward that whole period in our history?

A: I have never participated in any expression of feeling. That's one thing. The second thing, I have never -- I have never expressed it. I have -- Whatever I felt, I kept to myself and maybe I spoke to my wife and [indecipherable]. I remember watching [indecipherable] McCarthy hearings and what's he -- was his name? Schein or something? And Cone, I -- and I was a great avar -- admirer of Edward R. Murrow, for -- for -- especially for that broadcast. Friendly was one of my -- I still -- I love to listen to his lectures. It's on public radio and public television. I have never expressed it, I have never participated in it and I -- of course I -- I could not -- I was always for the om -- oppressed minority. However, to me the minorities, at times, they were asking too much and they were too violent. During the riots of '68, or whene -- the -- whenever it was, during the Blackout in New York, they came to my liquor store with had -- which had a -- a harmonica type gate. Not a -- Not a pull down gate, I -- I do -- I don't know how to describe it. You could see through it. They came with a station wagon and a chain to pull the gate off to rob the store. And who saved me, you think? I had a man -- a Black guy, who was my manager at that time, working for me. 400 pounds. They called him Slim.

He says, “You’re going to -- You’re going to rob this man over my dead body.” So they said to him, “Why you protecting Whitey?” They says, “What is it -- What is there -- What is [indecipherable] for you?” He says, “Look, you rob him today, you’ll loot him, you’ll take everything away, but I’ll be out of work, I’ll be out of a job. I am protecting my living. See, you are a bunch of hoodlums, I am protecting my living.” Because when the -- when the bl -- when they had the blackout, they send me home immediately, my crew. He says, “Don’t hang around here. What are you going to stay here for? You’re not going to accomplish anything. Get out.” They stood there overnight, they watched the store.

Q: At this point in your life, how do you identify yourself?

A: I identify myself as liberals. I don’t say very liberal, but liberal. I am not for political killings, political assassinations and -- but for something like live and let live.

Q: Do you think of yourself -- who -- who are you? Who are you now?

A: I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t vote -- I’m a registered democrat for only one reason in here. I vote for the person, not for the party. And I feel that democrats have more primaries than the republicans. So at least I can express my opinion twice, in the primary and voting. Republicans had no primaries, so what’s the sense of being a republican? Or being a registered republican?

Q: Is voting important to you?

A: Yes. I have missed one election in my life and that was the last election, because November second, I had angioplasty, on a Monday and Tuesday was -- and -- and so Shumer missed my vote.

Q: Thankfully, he didn't need it.

A: He didn't need it, he didn't need it. But I had to have angioplasty. I said to the doctor, "How about making it the following?" Now he says, [indecipherable], "Forget it. You must -- You do it now."

Q: Tuesday, after you vote.

A: And I -- It was too late to get an absentee ballot. I haven't missed an election since I was eligible to vote. And not always democratic.

Q: Was getting the citizenship in -- in any way part of -- wanting to be part of the political process, or didn't it -- or not?

A: To me, there was a routine. I mean, I live here, I like this country, I might as well become part of it. Just like I have -- by being a part of it, I -- I remember when I came, I used to sit in my -- in a study room in the frat house and we had out there, the dorm -- was a big roo -- dorm on top. Then, two or three kids had little study rooms where you could sit down and study with the -- with something, where you can lie down to rest if you wanted to, with earphones, listening to the radio. Not to listen to anything, but to get used to the sound of the language. Because I think the hardest part in studying any language is to know when one word ends and the other one starts. To be able to separate the words and the sounds. Wh-Wh-What's a word? So I used to just listen to the radio

and once I start thinking in the foreign languages that I -- that I knew at the one -- at the -- at the time, I felt that I really became a -- a -- a citizen of this country. And then again, having an American born wife, having children that went to school in here, I mean, they grew up in here. And I have never tried to communicate with my wife or -- with my wife being present, with some other -- using any other language. I felt it's an insult. Even if it was completely innocent, I would tell her. At times, when we were in Italy, for example, I used to tell her first what I'm going to say. Or after I said, I used to tell her what I said, if she did -- because otherwise, I felt it was an insult.

Q: So, when you went to Italy, fo -- was that -- did you go back to Turin, did you back to Rome? Did you go back to the places you had been?

A: I never been back to Turin, we went to Rome. We went to Israel in '67, right after the six day war, and we stopped in Rome. I don't remember how many days. I remember when we were coming from the airport by taxi, I was talking to my wife and the children in English and I see the taxi driver is going to take us for a ride. I said to him, "Come on, I lived here -- I lived in Rome for a year and a half. I know how to go. You better go the right way." And I told my wife what I said to him. You never saw a more embarrassed taxi driver. He thought he was going to take me for a ride.

Q: What was it like going back?

A: It was an experience. Not enough. I would like to go again, it just didn't come out.

Q: What do you mean, it didn't come out?

A: It just -- I don't know, I -- we -- I went to other places. First my wife -- First, she was ill. Then the children were of su -- were of such age that I wouldn't lea -- wouldn't want to leave them here alone. Then when they grew up and left, I went to pla -- I went places.

Q: Did you ever go back to Poland?

A: No, I refused to go back to Poland. I refused to go back to my hometown, which is Belarus and I know people that went there. I have a movie -- a film -- a videotape of people that -- that did, in my hometown. It's completely unrecognizable. It's beyond comprehension what happened to it. The Russians and the Germans had a major artiller -- artillery duel and all of downtown, which used to be Jewish, of course, like in all tow -- little towns, was completely destroyed, it does not exist. It's a field now. When the Russians came, they built a housing complex, they didn't know where. It turned out they built it over a Jewish cemetery. Because all the markings and gravestones were removed. And it was a slab, not a -- a foundation, not a basement, because if they had a ba- basement, they would have dug and they would have found the caskets. Nothing. They -- People that were there, told me there is nothing to see. And then I had another experience. In Lvov, right after the war, that must have been August of '44, by accident I bumped into one of the -- one of my friends from my town, who was a musician. Another friend of mine used to -- ha -- owned a bakery, coffee shop -- I don't -- cafe, where you could go in the back, have a cup of -- cup of coffee and pastry and even dancing the -- in the afternoon. There was an orchestra of a father and son. The son used to play the accordion. That son saved himself, ended up in the USO of the Russian army. And I

bumped into him on the market in Lvov. I looked at him, he looked at me, I said, “I know you.” And he says, “I know you, too.” Said, “Are you,” and I mentioned his name and he said, “Yeah.” I says and he recognized me too. You know, it was just a few years, but a few years of tough a life. He said he was just coming from that front. He went through Deeta, there was absolutely nothing left. There is nobody left. He told me who survived. My family, completely wiped out, completely disappeared. There is absolutely nobody from my family. So I didn’t go there. My mother said to me, “What are you going to go for?” Later -- Later I found out something very tragic and very disturbing. My grandparents were quite wealthy. They were banished from my town to a small place, because it was too close to the border, so the Russians banished them and they had to move out from there. But once the ghetto started, they were able to move back. And they had quite a bundle of dollars, gold, jewelry, gold coins. So they buried it somewhere. They were killed on the beginning, because the Germans procedure, what you called, was to get rid of the old ones first. Kill the old ones first and the very young ones, the babies. Get as much as you can out of the middle age and young and exterminate them in the -- in the -- the way -- the way they did it. By hunger, starvation, sickness or whatever th -- whatever they did. My aunt -- My -- The youngest sister, my mother’s youngest sister, the youngest one in the family. She married and they had a little girl. The girl at that time was about six or seven years old. They knew where the stuff was buried. They were in the ghetto and my aunt’s husband, my uncle, was an accountant, a very able man, extremely able man. Very, very, very a -- from a poor family, what you would call. He

married into a rich family, but believe me, he was extremely able and -- and they got a bargain. You know, at that time, you -- wa -- you try to marry someone off, it was love, all -- you want more coffee?

Q: No, I'm going to need to change tape.

A: Do you have another one or you want me to get you one?

Q: Yeah, I do. I've got one, thanks.

End of Tape Three, Side B

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: Okay, this is tape four, side A, with the alarm, interview with Jack Ahrens on the 27th of January, 1999, in his clock filled home in Bayside Queens, New York.

A: So I was talking about my aunt and uncle and their little girl. My uncle thought somehow that he can buy up the German guy, with whom he made friends -- dragono -- I don't know what -- what he thought they would let him do, because many, or rather some from that area went into the swamps, which were surround -- which were not too far, with the Russian partisans or with the underground. He'd -- I don't think he'd believed in it. So he thought he was going -- tha-that he would be able to bribe the German and he will let him I -- I don't know what. Anyway, they took him -- He and my aunt, took him -- took the German guy to the place where the things were hidden. They dug it up and on the spot, the Germans shot them both, killed them both. That's a hearsay from people that tell me that. He shot the little girl, but he wounded her. She was killed in -- in a massacre that -- in a subsequent ghetto liquidation thing. She did not survive either.

Q: When your grandso -- How old is your grandson now?

A: He's 14 and a half. He'll be 15 in August.

Q: What kinds of things does he want to know when he asks you questions about the Holocaust?

A: He asks me sporadic questions. He -- I know he wrote a composition in his -- in his school, that gi -- his grandfather is the most remarkable person he ever met, that in spite of the fact that he whe -- he went through, he's still -- he still can help him with math,

with science, that he remembers all those things. And he is tolerant. He's curious. He asks me questions of -- mostly general questions, not detailed questions and I try to avoid the gruesome facts. Just give him like a general overview. He'll learn the gruesome facts when the time comes. I think it's too early for him to -- for me to tell him the -- the -- the -- describe the actual killings and -- and what I actually saw with my own eyes. It's enough that he knows that -- what the -- what happened, that he shows interest. The granddaughters don't. They don't ask questions.

Q: How old are they?

A: They are too young yet, eight and 11.

Q: Ah. Wh-What's your feeling toward what's almost become the commercialization of the Holocaust? Or maybe I'm putting words into your brain.

A: I don't s -- I don't think there is any commercialization. I don't think so. I think it's a way how to keep it alive. I mean, I'm not with Mayer Kahanai, don't forget or we'll never forget. I mean, I am not with that. But we still shouldn't forget. We should learn maybe how to forgive, but never forget. Make sure that it does -- not it doesn't happen again. I mean, I'm really disturbed when I see what's happening in Kosovo, in Serbia. That's really disturbs me, because I see the same hate and the worst part [indecipherable] the same people that did a lot of killing and a lot of damage during the -- f-for Hitler, now they are doing it for themselves. And that's very disturbing.

Q: Do you think in this case that once again, this country is not doing enough, we're not doing anything, that it could be doing.

A: I agree with you, they're not doing enough. They should be more forceful with their -- Milosevitch is getting away with too much. Instead of threatening him, they should do it once. Ste -- I mean they threaten him so many times, you can't take it seriously. I mean every time they -- every time something happens, it's just we're the -- he, just like with Saddam, they are letting him get away with everything.

Q: What -- How -- What is your feeling toward the appropriation of the word for other genocide?

A: It's genocide on a -- not on a such massive scale as the hol -- a-as the Holocaust, but it's still -- the -- the reason for the killing is not what you did, it's who you are.

Q: What is your feeling toward African-Americans applying Holocaust to slavery?

A: I see no relation between it. I absolutely see no relation to it -- to it. Because, frankly, from what I read and from what I -- I mean, I wasn't there before, I read, the major sinners of slavery were African -- were Africans themselves, were Black people themselves. They were selling their brothers and sisters into slavery. It was not just that the White man -- the -- maybe the White man started, but they -- they took advantage of the situation also. They were -- They perfetrated lot of slavery themselves.

Q: Cause there's a lot of -- of course, people holding Jews responsible for much of the activities of slavery. As being slave holders and slave sellers, and -- business people.

A: Jews were not slave holders. To be a slave holder, you've -- you have to be a land owner. Jews, by nature were never land owners.

Q: They -- Business people who sold slaves, who was pre -- who thought of slaves as property, a people as property.

A: That could have -- I don't know, it's quite possible that occasionally there could have been Jews, but there were so -- by the same token there were Christians, and there were Episcopalians and there were Baptists and you name any reli - and Moslems, they are now. There are plenty of Moslems now that are slave owners, and why don't they go against them? If Jews were -- Jews did many things, not by choice, by force, because they had -- they couldn't do anything else. All the other ones, they have a choice. There are certain za -- from what I have learned from history that there are -- there are certain professions like moneylending for example, whi-whic-which with Jews are associated, that were forced upon the Jews. They -- Jews didn't do it by choice. In fact, they became moneylenders after they were expelled from the old land of I-Israel or whatever you call it. When they were put into the D-Diaspora. When they were prohibited from certain trades, from certain professions, from owning land and so on. From being n-normal people. Am I right? That's my strong feeling.

Q: Who do you feel was or were the most important people in shaping you as you were a young man and as you are now?

A: I grew up basically on my own. I had more freedom than many of my friends and I am talking about the years from let's say 13 - 14, til 18. The critical years, I would call them, in growing up and shaking -- shaping character. Because my mother was in the United States. My grandparents didn't bother me. My aunt used to go to school ba -- more or less

to get my reports from school. I was more or less on my own. However, the value of education was always stressed to me by everyone concerned. Also, my uncle and aunt, we had a super radio at home, where I used to love to listen to n-not -- there was no rock and roll at that time, but I call classical music good music and also, to a lot of foreign stations, by even trying to guess what language they are speaking and what are they talking about. I was exposed to many ideologists at the time, because I could listen to the Soviet Union direct, on radio, to their propaganda without being affected. I was exposed to the Zionist trend, to both sides, thi -- what you would call Labor and Likud. I would call myself at the time, as the young -- young intel -- Jewish intellectual. I know that when my aunt and uncle, when their -- they -- their friends used to come, there was no drinking, there was no noise, there were usually serious discussions, which if I didn't participate, I listened to. Political discussions, what's going on in the world. They were talking about the situation -- about -- or the rise of Hitler. The rise -- What's going on in France, what's going on in England. About the Soviet Union, about Stalin's purges. This had to leave some sort of a re-residue in -- in my mind. I could not participate, I was too young for them. They were older and they wouldn't listen to what I had to say. With my friends, we used to get together, or -- or play cards or -- or -- or joke around. But never anything malicious. No malicious jokes, no malicious mischief. Maybe that's why those friendship lasted that long. It was -- I would call the -- a lot of -- had a lot of good time together and strange -- strange enough, the group consisted -- I would -- more than 99 percent it was purely Jewish. E-Even when -- Ev-Even if our parents, or rather the

generation above us, hardly knew each other, the children could have been friends. In many cases, the friendship -- the ch -- the children's friendship originated with the parent's friendship, or even grandparents friendship, but there were many friends in our group where the older generation hardly knew each other.

Q: Who are the people in the photograph behind you?

A: That's my family. I am the little bald boy. I am s -- [indecipherable] seven years old, I think. Behind me is my father and my -- what would be on my left, is my mother. The next two people sitting is my grandfather and grandmother -- that's my mother's parents. The next two women is -- are my -- my mother's sisters. First is the younger sister, then is the older sister. The hus -- The man behind her is her husband. The man next is a uncle who perished of typhoid fever in Lvov ghetto. And the tallest one is the one that ended up in the 20's in Israel, who died b-being 93, I think, just about a couple of months ago. I mean, of course, I could not have saved that picture. That picture was given to me by -- when I was in Israel, they -- my uncle had it and he gave it to me. That was -- The reason for this picture is this uncle, in the background, went to Palestine in 1926. He came back, I think in '28, for a visit. And that's when they went and they took this picture. My grandmother was so upset that she had a stroke after that, from which she recovered. She was partially paralyzed on one side. I mean, it could be like in the family. She had like Bell's Palsy, just like I had it when I discovered that my mother had cancer.

Q: I have one question out of something that you said ages ago, but it has been --

A: Go ahead.

Q: -- bothering me ever since, is that when you first came to New York, that -- and you went with your mother around -- looking around the city, that the Fulton Fish Market was the biggest attraction.

A: No, that was not with my mother.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: The Fulton Fish Market, when the agent -- the INS agent, he ma -- the immigration service agent was taking me to Ellis Island. He took me by cab to ride around New York. We stopped at the Empire State Building, he showed me the Chrysler Building, he showed me a bunch of things that existed at the time. And going to the Battery, we start at the Fulton Fish Market. That was a -- That -- That will -- I'll never forget, because it smelled.

Q: Did you -- Did you stop to look out over the Statue of Liberty as well, or any of that?

A: I was going to the Statue of Liberty. In the -- In that general area.

Q: [indecipherable] Oh, yeah. Did you have any feelings when you saw the statue?

A: At the time, no. But recently I went to the Statue of Liberty and to Ellis Island, a few years ago. And it is strange, but I drew a complete blank, I still have a complete blank, where I was these two days. What did I eat? Where did I sleep? I remember the building, I remembered where I was, the -- the balcony and all that. But where did I sleep two nights? What did I eat? What did I do there? I can't remember a thing. It just like -- I left Italy on the 15th, I arrived to the States on the 18th. Where was I those two days? In no

man's land. The wa -- I was nowhere. I didn't travel, I was not in the United States. It's something that I don't know. I have no recollection. It's a blank.

Q: When you left Italy, was that your first plane ride?

A: Yes. And I remember when we stopped in Geneva, whatever m-money I had, I went, I bought Swiss chocolates.

Q: You still eat Swiss chocolate?

A: Occasionally.

Q: How about sugar beets?

A: Try to avoid it.

Q: Is there something I haven't asked you to -- to talk about that you would like to talk about?

A: I don't know, I -- you a -- let me take a look. I made a couple of notes out there.

Q: Okay, great.

A: I'll see what I have. [inaudible]. Okay, one thing I want to mention, which is maybe I was forced into my educational backgrounds, trying to learn things and trying to -- to study. My family, when I was growing up, kept me sort of isolated from the business end. My grandfather had a -- together with -- with other partners, they had a major wholesale business, a hardware wholesale in -- in -- in -- in our town. They had some factories, some other interests and so on. I was never involved, never introduced to the business end of the whole thing. So, actually, to start something on my own, to go and earn a living, I didn't know how to do it. It was -- I -- I bi -- I -- I -- I was afraid. The only thing

I knew is more or less how to offer my services and let someone else take advantage of me. I didn't know how to start a business, how to run a business, how to buy and sell and maybe I was afraid that someone will take advantage of me. That's why I -- I've -- I --I thought that if I pursue an education, we -- if I try to learn things, I might be able, through there -- offer my services to the highest bidder, in a way. That's what it boils down to.

Q: Did you find that you combined your education, the formal education you got with what we would now call your street education, with your great ability to finagle?

A: Yes. I think I did. I think I did. First of all, I was running a business, a division of a company. Eventually I had to give it up, because the president of the company died. In sfite the fact -- in spite the fact that they went on the stock market at one time, then they had to withdraw because the thing ca -- became too small. It was a family affair and there was no room where to advance. It's -- The family took it over and it became sort of a stagnant. Then I was able to run a business, a retail business in a -- basically in 99 percent, at that time Black area -- Afro-American area -- you want to ca -- any way you want to call it, and bees -- be halfway successful. Because I think I was liked out there by my people with whom I made nice friendships. We knew each other quite well and it translated into good business and to them into good service. And we were friendly -- fr- friends with each other, supportive of each other in a way. I mean, they needed help, I needed help. My help was one way, their help was moral support and sometimes financial support and we -- we sort of survived. Maybe that what -- that -- that helped me.

I tried to combine both. I don't say I am successful, but I became -- whatever I have now, no one gave it to me. I had to start absolutely from scratch. The only basic inheritance was my wife's, you know, the end of the liquor store, which I had to pay my -- pay out my brother-in-law, cause he decided he -- he wanted -- decided to go to California. Unfortunately, he passed on. It's -- The whole family is -- is dead, which is very disturbing. No one to argue with.

Q: Anything else you want to say?

A: Pardon me?

Q: Anything else you want to say?

A: No, but you have been very nice. You ask very, very nice questions. And if you can think of anything else, go ahead.

Q: Well, I -- I could probably keep you here for another few hours, because I keep on thinking back on --

A: Go ahead.

Q: -- other details, but --

A: You hungry?

Q: Yeah.

A: So, we'll go out and have some lunch. You want to come back?

Q: This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Jack Ahrens.

End of Tape Four, Side A

Conclusion of Interview