# United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

## Interview with Paul Strassmann
## January 8, 2004
## RG-50.549.02*0076

# PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Paul Strassmann, conducted by Margaret West on January 8, 2004 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in New Canaan, Connecticut 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.

**Interview with Paul Strassmann**
**January 8, 2004**

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection. This is an interview with Paul Strassmann, conducted by Margaret West, on January the 8th, 2004, in New Canaan, Connecticut. This interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's post-Holocaust interview project, and is a follow up interview to a USHMM videotaped interview conducted with Paul Strassmann on July the 11th, 1990. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number one, side A.

Answer: Good morning, this is Paul Strassmann. I-I'm being interviewed by Margaret West in my home in New Canaan, Connecticut on January 8th, 2004. I am Paul Strassman who was born in Trencin, January 24, 1929.

Q: I'd first like to ask you to tell me about your early childhood.

A: The earliest that I remember of my childhood was the -- the rituals of the family that revolved around Jewish holidays. The peak holiday was, of course, always Pesach, Passover, and it was big fuss, the dishes had to be changed. And lots of cooking took place. I always ran errands for my mother, helping her out. And I remember, perhaps as early as at the age of four or five, I learned how to pull the

dough to make a streudel-thin dough. These are all trivial examples of what I remember.

Q: Tell me more about those family traditions and rituals, o-other observances, birthdays, religious holidays.

A: The Jewish community in Trencin consisted of about 2,000 souls out of a population of about 19,000, so it was a very large Jewish community. The Jewish community was centered around the school, which was a parochial school, and the synagogue. The -- the -- so far as I can remember, my grandfather always took me to prayers on Saturday morning. There was regulated holidays that had to be kept, and my mother maintained originally, during the 30's, before the trouble started, she maintained a kosher home. It was a -- a Jewish religious procedure that didn't make much sense to me. What particularly didn't make sense to me is that all the praying was done in ancient Hebrew, and I didn't understand a word of it. They never tried to teach us what all of this mumbo-jumbo meant. As a matter of fact, my father, although he was one of the leading lights of the community, was known to be highly critical of the local rabbi for never speaking Slovak, or even German that people could understand. So there was this peculiar dichotomy, on the one hand of a very formal, ritualized religious experience and a gradual rebellion against the -- which was largely engendered by the time I was about seven, by my association with the local Zionist organization, co -- Hashomer Hatzair, which was a leftist

organization, who was, at least mildly speaking, anti-religious, socialist, communalist, and totally rejecting the existence in the -- in the -- in the -- in the -- in the Slovak environment and totally focused on everybody getting out and moving to Palestine, and to live in a kibbutz in a communal Utopian environment. And as time went on, this influence became stronger and stronger, because that was a community that made lots of sense. The songs were very good. The -- the s-singing in the synagogue was always wailing. The -- the -- the singing in the Hashomer Hatzair was very zippy. Subsequently I found out that much of the communist singing was actually stolen from the Zionists, and -- but the songs were very strong. I always said, years later, that the communists and the leftists always had the best songs and the ugliest girls. But the songs were great, and the entertainment was great, and there was a great deal of hiking, and -- and sort of rebellion organization -- r-rebellions -- rebellious thinking against the environment that was closing in on us, already starting in ’36.

Q: Now, you were only seven when you joined this organization, so obviously it was with your full family blessing.

A: Well, I wouldn’t say so. My grandfather, the religious grandfather highly disapproved of it, but my sister, Ella already was part of this religious and -- anti-religious attitude, and she had joined Hashomer Hatzair before me, so she sort of dragged me in. And also, one of the teachers in the Jewish school was a -- a rebel.

He turned out to be, subsequently, the editor of the Pravda newspaper, and of course, they shot him afterwards in the anti -- anti-Communist purges. But -- so there was a very lively environment going on, a tremendous amount of change, and a great deal of debates about the future and ideas. So I was exposed to ideas like that very early in my childhood.

Q: Hm. How much older than you was Ella? What -- when would she have been born?

A: My sister Ella was born in 1925, so she was four -- almost four and a half o -- years older than me, and I've been always very, very close to her.

Q: And what is her full name?

A: Her full name is Ella Fabian. And she married a -- a -- just about the only eligible Jewish boy who was left in Trencin after the Holocaust. He survived being put behind a false brick wall, and two bricks were removed from time to time to feed him and take the soil out. And he never regained his health, but she married him anyway, and they have two beautiful children. They are both medical doctors and I visit them quite often.

Q: And the grandparents you spoke of, would they have been your -- were they maternal?

A: Well, my maternal grandmother is a lady of particular distinction that I talk about very much. She was the local marriage broker. Did I ever tell the story about here?

Q: No. I would love to know.

A: Oh, Grandmother Emma was really something very special. She was married to my maternal grandfather, Alexander Weiner, who was a master cabinetmaker. It was apparently a deep love because during the first World War, when he went to war, and no, he didn't write for a couple of years, everybody thought that he died, and she got very, very sick. At any rate, meanwhile she made a living by having a very small store selling embroidery. And this was embroidery patterns. So when the little girls had to come in to start working on their trousseau, they had to come to Emma's little shop and she imprinted on their pieces of linen, patterns. And in those days, my mother tells me, the girls had to start working on their trousseau at the age of five. I mean -- I mean, if you didn't get married by the time you were 19, you were really just not marriageable, or wa -- there was something wrong with you. At any rate, the girls started working on a trousseau, and because the girls had to come in and do very complex embroidery, my grandmother could tell how intelligent the girl was, and how industrious she was, which was two criteria, basically, for recommending somebody. So my maternal grandmother, Emma, apparently was known very widely in the whole community as absolutely reliable I.Q. testing that -

- that never made a mistake. And so she made a living, b-both as a marriage broker, as well as a -- as a seller of embroidery.

Q: So this would be done quite formally. People would pay for her advice?

A: Oh yes, oh yes. Marriage brokers were paid, and of course the other thing was that my grandfather Weiner made -- was known for making chests which were inlain -- inlaid -- h-he did very fine cabinetry. This was inlaid wood veneer. And so, usually somebody who was a little wealthier, at the age of six or seven, they were starting to get on the queue with my grandfather Alexander, to start making a chest. Well, Grandfather Weiner liked to drink, and so the delivery on these chests was always uncertain. But he was a fun guy. He was always singing, he -- he -- he was really -- Grandfather Weiner took m-more c-care of me than anybody else in the family, because he had the time. And I was then apprenticed to him at the age of 11, and he taught me how to do inlaid veneer. So I worked for him for awhile. So it was a very colorful kind of an experience.

Q: And very loving.

A: Well, yes and no. My father was a very tense person. And -- and there was always a question -- course, I was -- I was a -- a child that caused trouble. I-I was known as the troublemaker. I-I had a reputation as being a particularly rebellious child. And years later some people tell me about kind of the pranks that I used to pull, and my father was a very stern task maker, and I just had to tow the line and

very often I didn't. But the rebellion was there to begin with. My mother was a very loving woman, but she was really the brains behind the business, we ran a big business, my father had a big business. She was the cashier. She was the peacemaker am-among the employees. She was very charitable. She was actually the head of the WIZO, which was the women's Zionist organization, in Trencin. Everybody loved her, a-although there were some women who wore a grudge against her because she stole the best man in town. And i -- years later, a woman who survived told me that she could have been my mother. She was a -- she had her eye on -- on my father, except for that conniving matchmaker, your grandmother. So that's -- that's -- these are the kinds of stories that one -- I remember.

Q: What would be the kind of things that you would get up -- up to, and where did that rebelliousness come from, I wonder, in your case?

A: Where does the rebelliousness come from, I don't know. I was not considered to be a bright child. I was not considered to be one of the leading scholars. I mean, there were kids who were -- had better grades than I did. I was always looking at things. I-I must say that one of the memories that I have was that in the third grade -- so I must have been eight years old, maybe less, I became very interested in condoms, which was a no-no thing in those days. I mean, that was totally out of -- out of bound for everybody. And I did not know exactly what it was, but I was told this is really hush-hush. Well, what happened is that through some arrangements, I

got hold of a pack and brought them to school. Now, that was considered to be -- I was badly beaten up. You know -- in those days, you know, the kids got physical punishment. I had to stretch my hands, and I got caned over my hands. Now why I did it, I don't know, but it should have sort of -- you know, I got a kick out of it. Particularly the -- the teacher, who was caning me, was an idiot. And he didn't hear well, he didn't speak well, didn't see well. He was in his last year before retirement, and I think I just had to get at him one way or another. So -- so, discipline was always a problem with -- with me, including some really bad st-stunts that I pulled on girls, but it's -- it's history.

Q: We'll get to that.

A: Yeah.

Q: Now, tell me the full names of your maternal grandparents and then I'd like to ask about your other grandparents.

A: Yeah, the maternal grandfather was Alexander Weiner, my mother's -- she was born Weiner, Frances Weiner. Her -- Alexander's wife was Emma wa -- she died quite early, in the 30's. And -- and they really mer -- wro -- ma -- had a major imprint on -- on -- on my sensibility and understanding and -- and -- and -- and care. By the way, I just want you to know i-is that Grandfather Weiner was a diabetic, which mean he had to eat early, and he -- he had to eat more frequently than anybody else. He made a mean garlic soup. I mean, really strong garlic soup. To

this day, a garlic soup, to me, is the best soup you can eat. And my whole family is still kidding me about the fact that I will eat anything as long as it has garlic. But it's in memory of my grandfather.

A: And your paternal grandparents?

Q: Well, the paternal grandfather, Filip was a sick man, he had angina. He was a very withdrawn kind of a person, never talked too much. He was no fun. The -- the -- he married a woman from a family that -- that had lots of aunts. Oh, it was a huge, huge family. And my paternal grandfather's wife Anna was very small and she always liked to give me food that I didn't get at home. So her specialty was baked potatoes with lots of onions, garlic and when you render goose fat, the skin -- sh-she mixed that in. And so for years I ate on that and of course when I came home I didn't have an appetite, for which I was always punished, of course.

Q: By the way, of your maternal grandfather, does any of his furniture survive, do you know?

A: I recognize some of his pieces in the homes of the Gentiles that I visited after the war. They vehemently desi -- [coughs] deny -- let me stop. [tape break]. You -- your question was about precious possessions. One of the things that I learned from the Holocaust is never to care for precious possessions. I can walk away from this house any time.

Q: Yeah, because you've -- you -- you've learned from those experiences.

A: Yeah, what I learned from the experience is that the ability to walk away from something is very important, it's [indecipherable] survival. If there is a major lesson I've learned from the Holocaust, it is my ability to just, when I see a problem, something going wrong, I just walk. And -- and I would say that is a characteristic which is something very deeply ingrained in my behavior. And if there is a single pattern that describes what I learned from the Holocaust, is that ability to walk away.

Q: We'll come back to that later in the interview, but because you've mentioned it, I will ask now about your decision to leave your home in 1948, when you, more than many others, had a reason to stay. You had a heritage and things you could pick up --

A: Property, yeah. We had a heri -- heritage property. I could have inhe -- I -- presumably I was inheriting lots of land, houses. My decision to walk was much earlier than when people were forced out by the communists. I -- although many of the Jews who came back, they were spending their time reclaiming properties and going to court, and going through recovery and reclamation and restitution and all of this thing, I wanted no part of it. I didn't -- never touched it in my years there. I basically felt that the -- the country was poisoned. The people that I saw on the streets when I walked, were -- were the people who were killing and stealing and robbing and -- and -- and committing crimes, including the people who gradually

came to the forefront in a political position. These are people I knew from the uprising as criminals. You know, I said, I just don't want to live in this country. Just don't want to be there, regardless. So I told my sister, you take everything is here -- by the way, I never took a penny out of that place. Never took a penny, I've never claimed anything. I was never paid or made any claims to the Germans, although all the other Jews did. Never wanted to touch it, that was tainted stuff. So this is -- this is a very important characteristic of my experience that -- that I did not cling -- I do not cling to things which are basically, in my view, morally evil. When you see anything that's morally evil, wrong, you don't stick around. And -- and that is really the reason why, starting in 1946, the idea was, I'm not going to stick around, I'm just going to go wherever I can. Of course, the idea was to go to America, where there was unlimited opportunity and nobody knew me.

Q: Now, was it that clear cut in the beginning? I mean, th -- all -- did you rationally think through the pros and cons of leaving everything and going with nothing to America?

A: Well, the big moment, the big moment in my life, you know, in -- in other words, in -- when you look at life, there are only few things which are so called, a fulcrum. And this is when you roll your dice, and if you don't roll the dice right, you die. It's -- it's -- you know, it's -- it's -- or -- or perish, or whatever. When the -- when the uprising took place and -- and the Germans started persecuting Jews and

partisans and arresting people, we went to predetermined houses where we wo -- you know, hide and we -- the Christians are going to keep us hidden and we were going to crawl into the attic, or crawl into a closet or -- or whatever. And, you know, these experiences, everybody has a different experience about what they did. I went to the house, which you may or may not recall from my interview, to the house of an employee who was a very trusted interview -- employee of -- of my father's. A long employee who owed very much to my father. His wife was very unhappy, his wi -- by the way, the marriage was a bad marriage to begin with. And she was grousing about, y-you -- you know, the Germans coming, finding me there and shooting the whole family because they to -- that is what the Germans were advertising, anybody hiding a Jew is going to be executed. So I -- I was told to just go out to the -- near the river, and sit there during the day, when presumably the Germans were going to do house to house searches and then come back at night and they're going to feed me. And the big decision, this is one of these fulcrum decisions which sort of imprinted me on my whole model, walking away. When I sat at the river, I said, I'm not going to go back. I'm rather going to go take my chances where the shooting was than go back to what is presumably a safe house. Same thing happened in '48 -- or '46, you know, I could have stayed there, but this idea of walking was by that time very heavily imprinted in me. Also, th-that my behavior in -- in the partisans was very much -- a-as you know, during the partisan

warfare, there's always a little cottage where you can go to and some peasants will hide you or keep you for the night, so instead you being outside in the frost, you're going to come into the village and stay there and get fed. Well, lots of partisans lost their life that way. I just didn't do that. There was always a bunch of guys who say, well, it's just too dangerous. So this idea of not necessarily staying comfortable, but doing the contrary thing is something which is not just Paul Strassmann, this is something, when you look at history of Jews -- I'm just finished reading for the second time Paul Johnson's history of th -- of Jews. You know, when you say, well how did the Jews survive for, you know, whatever thousand years it was, you know, how did they move from -- from Sumer to Egypt to Canaan to Assyria to Babylon and back and forth. And then went to Persia, then went to -- to -- to -- to Damascus and to Anatolia. Th-The -- the wandering Jew. Well, the survival of the Jews was one that they always were ready to move. They would have stayed put, they would have died and perished like everybody else who stayed put. So this is not just a Paul Strassmann kind of an imprint, it's just deeply -- now whether it's genetic, I doubt, but it is, what do you call it, r-racial, or religious or psychological orientation. It's something that -- that very much has been a pattern of everything I've done and how I've progressed in the United States.

Q: It could be, I suppose, this real survival instinct. I had -- on the one hand, you could say that you're -- certainly with the partisans you're -- you seemed to have

nine lives. You were young, you were taking risks, but it's an interesting to -- way to -- to look at it, that it was in your blood, that it's part of the -- part of your heritage. And there does seem to be moral overtones, that rather than hiding, you were taking an active role that might make things better.

A: Yeah, in fact my son that I lost was very much interested in the subject, and -- and he was a brilliant, brilliant scholar at Harvard. And he always wanted to know, you know, what -- what makes it tick? You know? Give me an equation, you know, give -- give me something quantitative. Because you know, I always do things quantitatively. And I said, well, a-as you know, in -- in games theory and in mathematics, and in gaming, there are things called algorithms, okay? And so he wanted to know, what's the algorithm. And anythi -- in conversation with my son, then I said, you know, the -- the -- the algorithm in life is that you always want to migrate to where your number of options that you have, increase. So the algorithm is that if you are somewhere in what's called a mathematical sack, cul-de-sac, you're down to one option. And so in gaming theory -- this is called option theory, by the way, and by the way Van Neumann did a formal analysis of this [indecipherable] so -- so there's a mathematical basis for it. In gaming theory you have to look always for space, for more options, even if it costs you more, because once you have more options, even if the price is higher, the probability of you possibly doing better is greater than if you are what's called, in a zero sum game.

Cul-de-sac, it's called -- in -- in mathematics, by the way, this is called a knapsack. I mean, there is formal theory over this thing. And my -- my second son Steven, who has a Ph.D. from M.I.T., he -- he -- he's a -- he's a class one nerd, you know, mathematics, everything has to be quantitative. You know, one day I just on a napkin, drew for him this whole theory of life, that life is really of maximizing your options. That's what life is. In fact, when you look at the --

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

A: According to this theory of option, it means that if you stay hidden in a house of an employee whose wife is sort of a hostile party to this whole deal, you are basically cooped up and there's no options. I mean, you are just totally wedged in, and you have no place to go. When you are just in shorts, and with a t-shirt and sandals, and one sandwich, in the reeds of the river Váh, and going back two miles is that house, or going forward, actually swimming down the river and then going to the mountains where shooting takes place, that's more options. So you go.

Q: Yes. Now you spoke very critically of that wife and that being a bad marriage and -- in your earlier interview.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: What -- did you know, in your community, much about that woman? I assume she could not be trusted, and you were at risk in the household.

A: Well, about that wife I knew very little, except that the a -- other employees were -- were always joshing this man, who was my father's confidant, about this wife that he picked up. And I picked up enough sort of, innuendo, to -- that my -- my -- my radar said, well there's something f-funny in here. Y-You must understand, in the back of my father's store were, you know, were the merchandise and were the -- we loaded cars. There was lots of rough play and -- and -- and -- among the employees and of course I always mixed around and listened. And I picked up that this was one unhappy, henpecked husband. So -- so, you know, but yo-you just factor that in -- into the equation. The fact that they didn't want me to stay inside the house, and you know, this was only the second day. I was there only one night. On the second day, get out, you know, was enough of a signal that I would have no options at all because when the Germans really started looking for people and doing house to house searches, I would have no place to go.

Q: Let's go back for a moment, because we've jumped from your early childhood --

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: -- to this period when you w-were in hiding. And tell me a -- the context of what had taken place by then, and what had happened to your father.

A: Well, the tragedy was -- is that the -- my father greatly mistimed the whole issue of how we will survive. Ye -- we received, in 1942 at the end -- towards the end of the deportation, a presidential exception, which also covered the grandparents.

Grandfather Weiner was sent to concentration camp, but it was the Slovak concentration camp. The Slovaks kept some of the carpenters, and some of the Jewish craftsman to make furniture and artifacts for the Slovak new powers. So they kept a camp where the Jews were slave laborers, but they did -- were not shipped to -- to -- to annihilation camps. So Grandfather Alexander was in a place called Novaky. We were in Trencin. My father, because of his prior connection with a very distinguished Catholic priest, by name of Bernetsky, really an outstanding friend of my father, secured a presidential protection, so that we were not deported in 1942. But we always knew that the day of reckoning will come when the front moves in from the east, and the Germans retreat. At that time, there will be wholesale destruction and annihilation and murder and who knows what happens. And so, starting in ’43, we started rehearsing where do we go, where do we hide when the front moves. My father had set up a hiding place, and then a fall-back hiding place and a third place. In other words, there were like three places to go to. When the -- the beginning of the uprising, but it was not so full born yet, but when the guerilla attacks started -- it was precipitated, by the way, by the -- by the communists, for reasons which -- that’s another story. We decided to go to back-up place number one, which was in a town called Selec, which is not too far from -- from Trencin, in the mountains. Was a small peasant village, there was peasant who was for money and my father already provided food and what have you, we’re

going to go there. Well, when my father decided to -- to go to Selec, well then, there were other people who my father was obligated to. My father inherited from his partner, who I may or may not have mentioned, by name of Kubicek. Kubicek went to the Zionist congress in Basel in 1938 and never came back. My father took over custody of his wife and his son. So -- and there were two aunts, so my father took a truck from the business, loaded everybody and in we go into Selec to hide. Of course, the whole village saw that here comes a whole bunch of Jews, you know. It was just not well thought out. So we were there for two days, which was, I think August 27 and 28 and my father recognized this was really -- it was just too noisy, there were just too many people. And everybody was in the same place. So the decision was to go back to Trencin and regroup and start going into places where everybody will go in onesies or twosies --

Q: Yes.

A: -- to hiding places. Well, that night Gestapo came and took my father as a hostage, and my grandfather Weiner. And just happens that that night I was not sleeping at home. Of course, we were, by that time, living in very, very low, low -- low kinds of housing, you know, housing that was very, very low grade. You know, it was out in the boonies. I think we had only one bedroom and one living room, so it was crowded anyway, so I stayed with a friend. So in the morning I was told the family was taken, my father was taken, and therefore I should go now to

contingency place number three, which was the -- this employee, so -- so within three days, we went from contingency one to contingency two, to cont-contingency three like this. And these -- so you were at the end of the rope by that time. And it was still now only September one or September two, 1944. So you were out of an -- a -- a rope, you're at the end of the rope now, already, and the -- you know, the show only started, I mean the -- the bad times only started now. So that th -- was the context under which I said, this is a bad option. I mean, I have no place to go.

Q: And how old were you then?

A: 15. I was 15. I was a sturdy 15. Really experienced hiker. Because I couldn't go to school at the age of 11, my father apprenticed me to my grandfather. When my grandfather was shipped to the labor camp, I was then apprenticed to work in a machine shop, which was a wonderful experience. And in the machine shop we were fixing threshing machines. And i -- the -- in -- in those days they didn't have ball bearings, so they had bushings made out of copper, and when they didn't oil it properly the copper melted, so you had to re -- ream the bushings, and I learned pouring, holding the mold when people were pouring metal to make a bushing and then reaming it out and fitting axels into it. I -- the people in the machine shop were a bunch of real tough guys, including one guy who was wounded in the Spanish Civil War, in a communist brigade. Was a rough guy, and who subsequently became the commissar of one of the battalions and was guilty of enormous

atrocities. And after the war he became the deputy chairman of the communist party. And he was one of the guys why I decided, with that guy around, I -- I don't want to live in this town.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: That -- it was one -- one dangerous guy.

Q: Yeah. Do you think your father, just as he took you on hikes --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- was also, in your apprenticeship in the threshing shop --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- deliberately toughening you up?

A: Oh yes. Oh my -- my father always -- of course my fa -- because of his background, believed in tough. You know, physical, mental tough stuff. And of course, Hashomer Hatzair particularly emphasized that.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And of course the town I come from used to be a garrison all the way going back to Roman times. Trencin was the last mountains -- mountain pass from the Carpathian mountains into the D-Danube [indecipherable] and the Romans were -- had their advance camp in there and on the castle, I will show the picture if you're interested in. It was a huge, medieval castle. And we used to, you know, at -- at -- at seven years old our favorite game was to go into the castle and play cops and

robbers and Crusaders and particularly figuring out how to defeat the Turks, because the Turks used to come to Trencin and devastate the population, so -- so, you know, th-that environment was already that kind of a mental process. This was not a mamby-pamby kind of a protected environment.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And of course, starting in ’37 - ’38, we were badly beaten up by the hooligans, as Jews, you know, so we had to go in packs on the street.

Q: But at the same time your father was also, with optimism, making sure you continued your studies, your piano lessons and your tutoring.

A: Oh yes, oh -- well, meanwhile, my father, of course, paid for piano lessons, which we couldn’t afford, and for English, you know, I -- starting in ’38. But we always knew -- you know, my father’s ideal life -- I mean, he alway -- was to move out of Slovakia -- Czechoslovakia, move to England, put his son into an English school, and live in a setting like I live in right now. A garden and privacy and quietness. And th-that was his idea. My father’s idea of life was to live like an English gentleman, reading books and -- and -- and writing, and -- and -- and -- and -- and not -- not having to deal with this tremendous pressure, this enormous social pressure which existed in that place.

Q: And of course you -- I-I was just thinking of the fact that your survival in that one instant, clearly rested on your father sending you away that night, to stay with

this former employee. I -- I mean that y-you were the only son, he seems in so many ways to have --

A: No, no, no, that night when my father was taken by the Gestapo, I was with a friend who was not an employee, he was just a chi --

Q: Oh, that's right.

A: -- was a childhood friend, and we -- we were quite friendly with him. He was half Jewish. And th-the reason I stayed there was that, you know, it was just I s -- I used to sleep around with friends, you know, we visiting back and forth, and it was late, there was curfew already and they said, well, why don't you stay there.

Q: Oh, so that was not a --

A: It was not a [indecipherable]

Q: -- a kind of instinctive thing on your father's part.

A: No, it was not, it was -- it was just stupid luck. I mean, it was just --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- just luck.

Q: Mm. Do you remember what -- what it was like, what you felt emotionally, knowing that your father had been taken?

A: Well, in some respect it was a sense of betrayal, because I did not know -- see, nobody ever told me what the plan was. I did not have any money. I did not know what the financial arrangements were. See, part of the problem was that I was a big

blabber. And my father really didn't share too many things with me. So -- you see, the assumption was always that dad will take care of everybody. This idea that I, at the age of 15 would be independent, and have to make decisions on my own, I don't think that was on the agenda. See, the assumption always was, the father of the family will sort of direct everybody and decide who goes where. And so part of this experience was that here I was with no clothing, just wol -- told, why don't you go to this house. No -- there was no question of money, what the arrangements were, nothing. I didn't know what the deal was. I did not know where it leads, what was the further fall back, nothing. So not knowing anything, I finally decided, well, you know, you either sit here, go back and do what everybody else was doing, or just get -- get on with something. And I guess that was the -- the -- the decisive moment, because had I stayed, I would have been -- sure ended up in a concentration camp. They -- they would have surely found me and shipped me off.

Q: Now the protection that your father had from -- was it Monsignor Be-Bernetsky?

A: Yes.

Q: How rare would that be? I know your father was prominent and successful --

A: It was quite rare, it was quite rare. It was quite rare, yeah, it -- it -- it was. It was -- well, you know, I can give you the numbers, you know the numbers are that -- that there were 83,000 Jews in Slovakia, 64,000 were shipped to annihilation camp with nobody coming ever back. Of those who left, which was like 18,000, a

number, maybe 4,000 went into slave labor camps to -- to work for the locals. Then whoever was left [sneezes] -- excuse me -- either got false papers or sort of disappeared, or got legitimacy, and of -- got -- got papers, so-called white papers, and [indecipherable] and it -- it was a big deal. It was a big deal.

Q: Would it have involved any assumption of risk or danger for Bernetsky that he was --

A: Protecting.

Q: -- protecting your father?

A: Bernetsky was untouchable. He is considered today a sort of, you know, the town square is named after him, a-a-and he -- he was close with Tiso, who was the president. The president of Slovakia could write an exception, you know, under his signature. For my father and the family to be protected required the signature of the president of Slovakia.

Q: And it seemed that you never had to pass as a non-Jew. Am I right in -- I -- I mean, al-always your community knew who you were, and who your family members were, but from a bureaucratic point of view, you did things so that according to paperwork, your -- you'd be placed in the category that gave you a better chance for survival.

A: Well, there was a few wrinkles with this thing. We had to get baptized, and the question was, well what's the faster ways of getting baptized? Well, to become

baptized as a Catholic -- and Bernetsky offered that, was a very complicated thing, and you know, the timing was short. My father was very good friends also -- because my father was one of the leading citizens in town, with the senior -- the -- which he's a sort of a -- like a auxiliary bishop, by name of Zimon, a wonderful scholar of the Lutheran church. And so in 1942, after a proper course in catechism and so forth -- which I did very well, by the way. Frankly, I liked the catechism better than I liked the Jewish stuff because I could understand it, you know, it was in Slovak and it was sort of interesting, historically. And -- you know, and Jesus was a Jew, so it must have been okay. And also, the beautiful thing about the -- the Lutherans is th-the organ music. You see, the Jews didn't have music in the synagogue, only wailing, you know, the -- no music. The -- the Lutheran church had a wonderful organ and then in the chapel they had a harmonium, which I used to like to play on. But, you know, the -- the -- the s -- the psalms, you know, mostly old -- this -- this was Lutheran of the Augsburg persuasion. I don't know you understand the -- Lutherans -- Lutherans come in various flavors, you understand that? Okay. There was lots of Old Testament songs, which have been -- which have been -- which are sung, according to music [indecipherable] by Johann Sebastian Bach. And they're beautiful, they're absolutely beautiful. So I had a great time with the Lutherans. Everybody knew, of course, that I was a baptized Jew. I mean, y-you

know, in this little town, everybody could tell that. But i -- you know, it was just -- just wonderful.

Q: Yes. I -- I really just meant that distinction between those who hid their Jewishness, and y-you were really, as a family, not doing that, but also assuming this membership in the Lutheran church.

A: Yeah, and a -- a -- yeah, we -- we were not hiding anything, there was no way of hiding it. I mean, everybody knew who s -- Adolf Strassman, my father was and who I am, but -- but i-it was a convenient way, and the Lutherans who were a minority in the town sort of felt that they were -- and the Lutherans never went in with this Nazi stuff anyway. I mean, in the ar -- in the underground, much of the pro-western connection -- i -- yi -- as you know there was a London underground and there was a Soviet underground. The -- the Soviet underground was a bunch of atheists and -- and -- and quasi-criminal element. The intellectual underground in London was mostly Lutheran. And I turned out to be quite a scholar in -- in Lutheran affairs, and of course I went, you know, the catechism, answered all the questions and -- and -- and -- you know, I -- I did just fine. I enjoyed it. So -- so yi -- y -- sort of everybody went along with this thing. It was a very interesting period.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I have only warmest memories on -- on that period. I mean, in -- in the period of the war, which is 1942 to 1944, it provided a period of relative stability.

Q: Does your story of what happened in this case shed light on Madeline Albright's family history, and the fact that, I think, she di -- she was not aware of her Jewish heritage --

A: Oh, balderdash --

Q: -- until a late si --

A: -- balderdash. I don't believe that, but -- but if she was or she wasn't, a -- I mean, there -- there was no point of hiding it, if -- I mean, these are small circumstances, small town. Now she u -- if she came from a big town like Prague, and I don't know of the detail, it's possible that the thing was sort of expunged, but in a small town there was no way of forgetting who was a Jew, and who wasn't a Jew.

Q: I just thought that -- that th -- the practices and the things done to help s -- Jews survive in Czechoslovakia might differ from what was happening in other countries, and that therefore --

A: Oh yeah.

Q: -- her case -- that it shed some light on her story.

A: Yeah, I -- I -- I -- I --I -- I'm sure of that and you know, that the conditions were different in Bulgaria. For instance, I -- I happened to be presiding last year at the Bulgarian memorial, and it was very interesting for me, th-that was a totally different approach of solving the situation. The -- the -- you know, ge-getting a presidential except -- exception, the white paper, and by saying, well yeah, but that

you also converted to Christianity, you know, that was another check mark and that was okay. At least in ’42 it was -- you know, in September of 1944, all the bets were off, I mean, none of that applied.

Q: Mm-hm. But what was happening in your family’s story, where your father previously seems to have been masterfully studying strategies --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- is most interesting. I mean, yo-you suggest that with some forward thinking and astuteness, you could work the system, to some extent.

A: That is correct, you could work the system as long as options were available. Once the Germans took over, there were no options. I mean, they eliminated all options, I mean, there was -- y-ye -- if you were a Jew, baptized or otherwise, you know, your -- you were either shot or shipped to -- to concentration camps.

Q: Mm-hm. Now you were 10 when the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia?

A: No, th-the Germans did not occupy Czechoslovakia. The Germans occupied only the Czech Republic and they created what’s called the Protectorat. They did not occupy Slovakia. They made a deal with Monsignor Tiso to create a Slovak state, because they just had their hands full, and th-they wanted to draw on the military capability of Slovakia, which was quite considerable. Slovakia ultimately put up 92,000 soldiers working for the Germans, fighting with the Germans against the

Soviets. So the Slovak, two divisions went into Russia, advancing all the way to the Caucasian mountains.

Q: But it was -- it was that -- well, really my question is, your life would change dramatically when you were 10, am I right?

A: Yes, yeah, life changed dramatically because the Aryan laws were put into effect by the Slovak legislature, following the script, the German script, and that means Jews were stripped, in a very methodical way of all property, all privileges. And it was a bureaucratically highly organized process of taking property away. The -- it was very important that the various people who owed their loyalty to the Nazis and to the Slovak, were getting as much property as possible. So it started as a way of stripping the Jews of property, shipping most of the Jews, like 85 percent of the Jews into annihilation camps, and then whoever was left, depriving them of all the civil rights and -- and property and radios and fur coats and -- and automobiles, and -- and -- you know, th-there was a long list, I still have those lists of what you can or cannot do, and what street you can be on, what is your curfew, whether you can have a window looking at the street, or not looking at the street. I mean it was a very elaborate, bureaucratic structure that got erected to do this. And, you know, as time went on, you know, things got closed down. The synagogue got closed down, the Jewish school got closed down. Going to a movie got closed down and so forth and so forth. And it -- it was -- there was -- it was always a next step.

Q: And when you were living in poor quarters --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- in what you describe as a shack, but it -- it would be a couple of room, that would have happened within the space of a couple of years?

A: Oh yes. First we had a beautiful house that my father built in 1933, which was on top of the store on the main, commercial streets. So, immediately we could not live in the rooms which were facing the street. That was -- immediately we were pushed down into the two rooms which were behind, not looking over the street. So that went on for about eight month or so. Then came an ordinance that you cannot live on that street altogether. So then we moved to another apartment, a one bedroom apartment. It was a very small living room, an upstairs walk-up, not too far from our original house. And we were there for maybe a year. Then an ordinance was passed that you cannot be even there, because it was ho -- it had hot and cold water. Jews cannot be in any apartment where there is both hot water and cold water. So we had to find a place which was really, you know, a slum, beca --

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection. This is an interview with Paul Strassmann, conducted by Margaret West, on January the 8th, 2004, in New Canaan, Connecticut. This interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's post-Holocaust interview project, and is a follow up interview to a USHMM videotaped interview conducted with Paul Strassmann on July the 11th, 1990. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number two, side A. Did you ever go back and look at your old home?

A: We -- I surely did. I -- my father's house on the main street, when I finished my officer course in 1945, in a military uniform and with a Tommy gun, I just walked in at two o'clock in the morning, banged at the door. And of course it was occupied by the people who took over my father's business. They were absolutely petrified, you know, it was immediately after the war, and I was basically a political officer. You -- you must understand that when I got out of the partisans, I was considered to be an exceptionally reliable person to be used for whatever purpose, such as eth -- ethnic cleansing, you know, I was ready to do anything. And so I went back as soon as I could to find out if anybody was alive and of course they were petrified, they immediately moved out of the front -- front rooms of the house, to the back, where we used to live. And I stayed there one night. I wa-wanted no part of it, I found out

nobody knew about anything about my family. All they knew that my mother was found shortly after she went into hiding and that nobody knew where my sister was, and everybody knew that my father was shipped to concentration camp right away. So -- so that was in ’45, I immediately went there. Since then a v -- you know, under the communists, I couldn’t go back. The -- it was shut down in 1948, when the communists took over. First time I went back to Trencin was in -- maybe in 1978 or ’79. By that time the house was razed and a huge monster complex was built up as -- for Soviet kind of apartments. But I go there now at least once a year, sometimes twice a year. I just finished a very major project in Trencin, which may be of interest to you. When I went there in 1986, I went finally to the synagogue, which of course was converted into some kind of a music hall, but next to the synagogue was a small chapel, and everything was piled in, what that was left from the synagogue into the chapel. It was a warehou -- i-it was a ma -- badly messed up closet, that’s all it was, the benches were stacked up. And on the wall were the names of the Jews that perished. 1536 names. And they were just printed on pieces of paper that was curling and getting mildew. And there on the spot I decided that that is not going to be. And after four years of work, and getting people from all over the world to cooperate, last year we unveiled 24 bronze tablets with the names. I paid for it, just about all of it. And it is now a sanctuary. So I’ve been back -- I mean, this idea of getting that memorial up into the -- into that chapel was very time

consuming. I must have made like 10 trips negotiating with various people. See, the Jews didn't want to have any part of it. They didn't want to stir trouble. So -- but finally I -- y-you know, it got very complicated. Nobody wanted any part of it, you know, why do you want to stir things up? Well, I stir things up.

Q: Would there be repercussions fo -- th-that the Jews would suffer f-f --

A: The few Jews, and I think there are eight or nine, that's all there is, and they're all in their 80's like my sister, want to be left alone, peaceful. They don't want to be bothered. They don't want to be called Jew, or anything. So their idea is to lay low, and if there's one thing this guy doesn't do, it's lay low, you know? So -- but ultimately, people came from Israel, and from Germany and Switzerland and England for the unveiling. I think they were more interested in talking to one another who survived, because they grew up all together. These are the survivors. They're looking at the memorial, but that's okay, that memorial is go -- it's -- it's -- it's -- it's -- it's wedged into the wall with deep rivets. Th -- it's -- it's heavy metal, like this. So it's fairly indestructible, I mean, you would -- really would have to blow it up. And I just feel good about it, and to hell with everybody else.

Q: And there had been Jews a -- I understand in Trencin since -- I as -- somewhere I saw that first records were of 1760, perhaps before that.

A: Oh, Jews have been in Trencin, you know, I mean for -- the records go back to about the 11th century, because you see, Trencin was always a military town, it was

a base. It was always a government town, it was a trading town. And so Jewish traders came and gone. That's why you have those large co -- concentration of Jews in Trencin. Because the Jews were basically the lawyers and the record keepers and the -- the -- the Hungarian and Austro-Hungarian nobility used Jews as their record keepers, as their bookkeepers. See, the [indecipherable] never wanted to be tainted by anything commercial. So they -- and they actually, as you know the history, they invited the Jews to come in to help them to manage Poland and -- and many of those countries, because the Jews were totally dependent on the nobility. And so there was a very large Jewish population and the Jews were being used as a money gatherer because the Jews really were, until about 1860 could not own land. So the Jews were used as instrument of feudal oppression and tax collection, which of course was one of the sources of anti-Semitism, which was deeply endemic in that part, particularly among the peasantry.

Q: Now, you talk in your earlier interview about anti-Semitism being essentially an urban phenomenon.

A: Yes, well because the Jews were urban.

Q: Yes.

A: Yeah, yeah. The jur -- the Jews were, of course, here and there, sitting in the -- in the properties, where they were maintaining property, and they were innkeepers.

But that was p -- all part of the taxation mechanism that the feudal regime maintained. See, the feudal lords, they don't want to mess around with that.

Q: Now, I'm -- I'm going back again, but from whom would you have learned about what happened to your father, and when would you know that he'd been taken to Sachsenhausen and tortured?

A: I knew it from secondhand, of his torturing, because when I got back into Trencin as a political officer, I was hell bent to even some scores. And we were interrogating a number of people, and I j-just found out what happened, because everybody was saying, well it wasn't me. It turned out that the Slovaks, jointly with the local Germans went -- and they had a list of hostages that they wanted to pick up, people who were suspect as working with the partisans, you see, because my father managed the food business, even under the Slovak regime. My father made sure that some food got moved into the villages. So my father was on the list for a collaborator.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Yeah.

Q: So that you -- you learned that later on. Now, y -- t-to what extent did you settle scores? I think you make some reference to ugly times, or whatever, initially after --

A: I -- well -- le-let me -- le-let me say, looking back at it, I really didn't settle any scores. I really did not kill anybody. There were some people that I testified against,

because of some of the acts that they committed, but they were let go anyway, so -- so there was no scores to settle.

Q: Again I want to go back to ask you about th-the fact that your family did not leave in 1938, when th-they had made preparations to escape. And you tell the story in your earlier interview about your mother as treasurer --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- hiding money and then it got damaged by a steam radiator.

A: Yes.

Q: But it -- it seemed to me that your father's family responsibilities weighed heavily on him.

A: Absolutely.

Q: And did he ever speak about -- with regret about not going, or -- ju -- I'd just like to know more about that.

A: Yeah. Th -- as I noted before, during the bad years, which is '39 through '44, the parents really didn't speak much. They -- they -- they felt that -- that -- that I was a potential source of -- of leaks. Of course, my sister subsequently told me that she also did not know what was going on. I think it was just the way my father and my mother operated is they -- they wanted to keep everything very tight. Also, in those days you did not speak to your children as peers. It was a different social structure. Children were there to be told what to do, to be educated, to be trained. And -- and -

- and you had obligations, it was almost a feudal kind of a relationship. It's not the American way, you know, where -- you know, the conversation between the father and the mother and the children is fairly free, at least in my family. So we -- we just didn't know. We didn't know their thoughts.

Q: Mm-hm. But have you put yourself in your father's shoes, and it does seem to me that the reason he chose not to leave with his immediate family was because of that responsibility to the extended family --

A: Oh yes. Well, yes, clearly, the responsible for the extended family and particularly to his parents, he was very devoted to his father. He went and visited his father every night. And th -- he could not get his father out. I mean, we had passports. You must understand. In 1938, my father, my mother, my sister and I had pass -- valid passports. We could have walked out any time.

Q: Did your parents ever regret this, do you think? Or was it an unspoken regret, if that was there.

A: It was unspoken, it was never discussed. They never discussed, you know, what could have happened, or what didn't happen. That was never discussed, not to my best knowledge, and neither to my sister's knowledge, who was older and she says she didn't know. She just didn't know.

Q: Mm. And I assume that this would be what would happen in so many families where it would be possible for some members to leave, but it's very hard to leave close relatives behind.

A: Well, yes. I -- I would say that -- that the fir-fir-first -- everybody always said that nobody expected it to be so bad. There was this old pattern, well somehow we're going to mu -- muddle through. You know, this also will come to pass. I don't know if you've seen the movie, "The Pianist". You remember the early scene -- by the way, I only saw the first eight minutes of the thing, and then I wa -- got sick. There they are, ready to move out and leave Warsaw, and they hear on the radio, Churchill announces that England and France is going ag-against -- in war against the Germans and they all have a big party because all their problems are solved. You remember that scene? Well, that scene was repeated again and again and again. This is denial. The -- the -- much of the existence in those days was denial. People were denial -- were in denial all the way to the entrance of the gas chambers, and even then they were in denial.

Q: Why do you think that was so? Is that human nature?

A: Well, I don't know about what is human nature, but -- but a-a-as you know, when you have no option -- this goes back to my options theory, okay, if you have no option, if you are -- if you have only one option, and that's all you have, the only

thing you can do about it, if it's a horrible option, is to deny it. You don't want to face up to it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: See, the moment you have options, you cannot do denial because you then have to confront -- you know, of the three or four things that I can do, which one will I do? Then you have to go into so -- irrational process. So if you are pretty well set in a given groove, denial will be the most natural way to try to deal with it, other than committing suicide.

Q: And it helps to protect your children, and your spouse, and --

A: Yes, yes, yeah.

Q: -- and so on. Tell me what happened to your mother and your sister after your father was taken.

A: Well, Mother went into a place for hiding, you know, she -- she already knew this was fallback number three, she went there. My sister didn't like fallback number three, but she had false papers, so she went and took a train and went to Bratislava, where she worked as a servant. My mother was betrayed in 30 days. Somebody said, well there is a Jewess in this house. Most likely, of course, it was given that she was betrayed by the people who were keeping her. My sister was picked up on the street, somebody recognized her. And my mother was shipped to Ravensbrück and so was my sister. My sister barely made it, I mean she was this

close. She -- she then did the forced march. M-My mother died of typhoid. My sister was very sick and she was on this forced march and they were shooting anybody who was a straggler, and she just fell down and two of her friends picked her up and walked her. That's how she survived.

Q: Has she ever been interviewed by the --

A: Oh yes.

Q: -- Holocaust -- oh.

A: Yeah, I have a ca -- I have a copy of her ta-tape. It is a very guarded description. She -- she censors her feelings very much. I mean, she -- she just feels that -- that she was left really helpless. And very much alone. And really did not know what to do.

Q: That sounds much like your feelings, initially.

A: Initially. But she had no -- no -- she had no place to go. She just went to another town. And once you were in another town and you were moving up in an open, sooner or later they're going to get you.

Q: I wonder if you feel, or you have any memory of when you were on your own, whether you have any sense that you clung to f-fond memories of childhood, and did they wa -- ho -- wa -- did that give you strength to keep going? As an observer it would seem to me that -- that start that you had in life, of security and a -- and an extended family, a really stable, good background would give you reserves, sort of

inner reserves that might help you to keep going, but do you -- do you consciously have any thoughts? Do you remember having memories of family times?

A: Le-Let me sa -- tell you very, very clearly on this one. None. The -- the -- the conditions were so brutal and so difficult, that just coping with the here and now, and what do next totally occupied me. There was no -- looking back would be -- have been a weakness. So if you're totally occupied with trying to make the next step, the -- you know, the next sortie, the next raid, the next piece of clothing that you need because winter is coming. The -- the -- the -- the -- the -- the struggle for survival in -- on a very brutal military conditions was so extreme that looking back was really not very useful. And -- and I usually don't look back. It was interesting, about two days ago I had a conversation with my daughter. She had a contract that expired early in 2003, and the people paid her for awhile, and then she protested and so they finally gave her a new contract. And th -- it's a nice contract, it's a three year contract. The question was, they didn't pay her for about four month and there was a back pay issue. And her husband screamed at her that she should not sign a contract because th-they owe her back pay. I say, forget about it. Forget about back pay, you know. It's gone, you know? Look forward, they're giving you a good deal for the next three years. Take it and run.

Q: Move on.

A: Move on. So this idea of move on and the -- the -- the -- that is the only thing that -- that -- that is important. Except when it comes something very close, like the death of my son. That you -- that's something that -- that sort of looms because that is a d-deep wound. But, you know, whether you had a nice house, and nice clothing and nice this and tha -- that's -- that's -- doesn't matter. That's the -- that's easy. That's -- you can walk away from there. For instance, during the Cuban crisis, I picked up my children and moved them out to upstate New York. You know, we had a nice house in Mount Vernon, so what? I mean, I mean, this means nothing.

Q: Trappings.

A: Yeah, it's all trappings.

Q: Yes. Well, you moved on. I-In -- was it 1948 when you came to the United States?

A: Yes, yes, October in 1948.

Q: Yeah. And you'd been, of course, a remarkably young, noncommissioned officer, looking like a young boy in uniform, it seems to me.

A: Oh yes.

Q: You were a young boy.

A: Oh, sure.

Q: But you -- tell me about your -- your plans to come -- I think your goal was, from early on, to come to the United States.

A: Yeah, and get an education. I mean, the important thing in life is to get an education, get a wife, and have a house, and live as closely as your father talked about, namely live somewhere with a garden, and -- and have children and -- and -- and have peace and quiet. You know. It's that simple.

Q: And your -- w -- t-tell me about your -- th-the -- the logistics of how you came to the United States.

A: Okay, the logis -- the logistics was that I knew the communists would be taking over, because they actually came over and said, you know, Strassman, you're a hero, but you are the son of a capitalist. Would you do us a favor and just go? So, a very close, wonderful friend of my father, who was if so -- so -- who was a brother-in-law of the man who went to Basel -- you know, my father took care of a mother and a child.

Q: Yes.

A: So they went to America right away because he was an American citizen, so he could get his wife and his son to America right away. I, of course, was not a relative, but he issued an affidavit for me and put me on the immigration waiting list. My immigration visa hadn't come through in '47, or even '48, but the brother-in-law of this man who was in America, a very wonderful guy, said, look Strassmann, you better get out. You better get out while the getting is good. So he found a school in England which was teaching electronics, who signed me up for a

course. And with that course and the fact that I'd all kinds of certificates and what have you, plus the fact that I paid 50,000 dollars for a passport, I was able to leave Slovakia with a -- one suitcase and no money, on February the seventh, of 1948. The communists took over on February the 15th, and shut the place down.

Q: Just in time.

A: I went -- and I went to -- to Paris where this man, his name is Freddie Kobler, came from London to Paris to pick me up, he was waiting for me at the North Station as I came from the train, and he looked at me and said, boy do you look bedraggled, I -- ya -- you know, you -- you -- I -- I have to take you out into a real restaurant. And so he took me out to a three star restaurant and served me a steak. I got promptly sick. He couldn't -- I couldn't si -- you know. I cried when he -- when the steak came on my plate, I said, oh this is a ration for a whole family for a month, I cannot eat that. And then in the evening he took me to Folies Bergère where I saw for the first time a naked woman, which you know, in -- in those days, you know, ma -- ma -- that was very puritanical. And then I came to England and I went to school in England, getting my English fixed up, and I was in England from February 1948 until early in October 1948 when a Liberty ship w-was returning empty from Plymouth to New York. And I got, for 83.50, a fare on an empty -- in the hold of a Liberty ship. I just want you to know, the real Americans all came from Plymouth, you know.

Q: Yes. Now, are the --

A: And so I arrived in -- in -- in Brooklyn. M-My father's friend picked me up at the dock in Brooklyn and brought me to a house in Forest Hills, and I decided that I have to start my career in America, so I found a job in -- in Thanksgiving -- for Thanksgiving at -- in the Gertz Department store in Jamaica, New York, selling socks. And I sold the socks from Thanksgiving right through Christmas.

Q: Let me go back. The passport that you left with --

A: Wasn't --

Q: -- when had the money been paid for that? When did you obtain that? Was it the passport you had earlier, or is it a new one?

A: No. I had only one -- one Czechoslovak passport, which I obtained in January, late in January of 1948, and I obtained it by paying a lawyer, basically 50,000 dollars, who then went around -- you couldn't get the passport any other way except paying a lawyer who then went and paid off the various bureaucrats and got a passport. The passport was not valid to go to America, was just to go to England to school.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: And that would be th -- the money was going to someone, it was essentially a bribe?

A: Oh yes, of course.

Q: And how would you access the funds? I mean, presumably this was --

A: Well, I was still in Slovakia.

Q: Yes, and --

A: And -- and, you know, my sister had money from the store. I mean --

Q: Well --

A: -- my sister took over the store I mean wa -- she got back the property. Sh-She married her sweetheart, who was sick. But she was in the store, and there was money. And I said, well give me 50,000 then.

Q: Yes.

A: This was in kraus, this was not in dollars.

Q: Now your sister could have left, but she was --

A: Oh, yes.

Q: -- dedicated to her sick husband?

A: Well that, and the property. There was lots of property and she, you know, claimed the property and asked for the restitution of the property and there was a big store, there were fields, there were -- all the uncles were killed, so they had property. So I said, take the whole thing.

Q: Mm-hm. Now -- I'm jumping back to the Liberty ship.

A: Yes.

Q: How long would it take you to travel across the Atlantic, and --

A: 13 days. Liberty ship from Plymouth to Brooklyn was 13 days. It's the same thing that it took prior years -- I mean, those Liberty ships were leaking. I mean, they were riding high, th-they -- you know, they were coming back empty.

Q: Tell me -- explain the -- explain what a Liberty ship was, and then I also want to know who else was on board.

A: What is a Liberty ship? During World War II, we needed a great deal of shipping cap-capacity to ship the soldiers, both first to -- to Europe and then to Atlantic. So there was a man by the name of Henry Kaiser, who used to make automobiles, who set up two assembly lines of making ships. They were called Liberty ships, they were sort of tack welded together. He made one ship every two days. And they were sort of tacky, and against all the code violations and what have you, but they brought the troops back and forth, brought them home. You know, the -- the Germans sank a few, but not too many. They went -- used to go in big convoys. And then in 1946, the relief for Europe, much of the grain went in Liberty ships. But by '48 those ships were just too small for that sort of thing, so they retired them down in the James River. I mean, there were -- I used to fly over the James River, there used to be couple of hundred Liberty ships tied up in James River. I say, which one did I come in on? They were all the same. So that was li -- li -- a Liberty ship.

A: Yeah. Who else was on board? And -- and I'm also interested in knowing what was in that suitcase? You had -- have very few possessions then, but --

Q: Oh yes. What was in the suitcase was an -- a small accordion. In fact, my -- the first money I ever made was playing accordion and I actually arrived in the United States with 20 dollars that I made on the ship. The -- most of the people on the ship were a bunch of hippies. I mean, there was no -- not too many immigrants -- or emigrants from Europe, you know, because the visas were very hard to get, particularly immigration. But starting in '46 and '47, lots of American college kids used to just go to Europe to -- just to see Europe, for whatever reasons. And that was the cheapest way how to get back. And many of them subsequently became quite famous. For instance, on the ship was Leonard Rose, who subsequently became a very famous cellist. But th -- it was mostly a student and young kind of adventure, non-conformist young people who used that as the cheapest way to get back to the United States.

Q: Now, at the end of your time as a partisan and then in the Czech army --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- you were emaciated. I wondered if, by the time that you sailed to America, you had gained weight and were pretty much restored to good health?

A: Well, you have to listen to my wife. My wife -- I -- I had a bad stomach until I married her. In other words, you know, I married her in 1954, but I had y-you

know, th-the places where I used to eat. And the kind of diet I maintained and the kind of schedule I maintained. So I had a very -- I never recovered until I married her, and then she started feeding me what she calls in a -- not very well seasoned hospital food. She's -- she -- she still just believes in boiled chicken and boiled potatoes and -- and -- and not -- not -- none of the fancy food. I love the spiced, fancy stuff. She doesn't feed me any of that. So I wa -- my -- my real health did not recover until -- until married times.

Q: Yeah. You -- you spoke about the fact that you're -- in your teenage years, despite all the deprivations, you've -- you felt as if your family was -- despite the hardships, maintaining a semblance of n-normal life with --

A: Oh yeah.

Q: -- n-no feeling that there was no food and so on, but in fact, your diet must have been very restricted.

A: Well, dur -- in -- from there -- from 1942 through 1944, you know, diet was very limited, it was wartimes. On the other hand, my mother knew so many people and they brought us fruit and they brought us things that otherwise were not available. Once in awhile we had a chicken. But we only had meat once -- once a week. Most of the time we had dumplings, or ya -- you know, sour cream with potatoes and stuff like -- which was fine. I mean, I never felt deprived. I was never hungry.

Q: Mm-hm. Clever management. Do you have any -- I mean, did you have any long term health problems that resulted from your hardships during World War II?

A: Oh yes, oh yes, I -- I had bleeding pleur -- pleurisy. So, when I came out of the partisans, which was on March 25, 1945, I was immediately shipped to the hospital and declared unfit for military duty. So they shipped me to a very good sanitorium. And -- and -- and you know, th-they started feeding me. I -- I-I -- really, I had good food. And after three weeks I was declared to be totally fit to go and kill some more Germans. [laughs]. So -- so they shipped me out of the sanitorium and that was that. But -- but m -- you know, always had problems with stomach. And of course then, in the summer of 1945, I had a relapse and I was again shipped to a sanitorium, but that was on my own money. And I think during the month of August of 1945, I was bedridden for about a month, but ri -- I was fine after that.

Q: So there, not surprisingly were affects of that kind of existence.

A: Well, actually, the most serious disease I ever had was -- I -- I don't think I mentioned it, but in 1949, I went to Cooper Union, the ci-civil engineering course, you know the story how I got into that -- that -- that school, wonderful school. And in the -- the summer of 1950, after having a course in surveying, I volunteered to go to Israel to do surveying of Arab lands, subdivide Arab lands, f -- you know, for the new jew -- Jewish settlements. And made a load -- loads of money, I mean -- I mean, they really paid well. I didn't know, when they told me to go and how much

they will pay me, that this actually involved getting shot at, because you see, the surveyors is the first thing you kill. You -- you -- you understand, you always take a shot at the surveyors. But the problem was that towards the end, and I, against any advice, drank from an Arab well, water, because I was so thirsty. And I came in with a horrible case of dysentery that lasted for about a year. I was sick a year af- after that. But what the hell.

Q: Now, tell me about meeting your wife.

A: Oh, Mona, Mona was upstairs in the art school. The art school of Cooper Union. The engineers were very busy, I don't -- you know, I was the class president, I was editor of this or that, a chairman of the judiciary and what have you. And self-supporting, so I also had a job, Thursday, Friday nights and all day Saturday as a draftsman, so that I -- I was making a decent living. Decent living, sure, you know, 2,000 dollars a year was really all you needed the -- in those days. All -- you know, all you ate was potato chips and rotisserie chicken that you bought in a supermarket, and you know, perfectly good food, plus some Twinkies, you know? That -- that can last very well. And there was this girl in -- in Cooper Union I had my eye on. She was really a beauty, I mean, really beauti -- her hair, she had a braid all the way down to her waist. She looked very traditional, she wore a dress up to her s -- to her -- to her neck, you know? And she was -- what -- five years younger, and she was very subdued, you know, sort of -- you know the other girls in the art school were

sort of wild. There was lots of girls. I-I was the -- the big man on campus, you know, as the chairman of this and that. She was one of the girls who were -- really did not come on, you know? So she was interesting. On graduation day, 1953, us engineers, who really didn't have time for anything because th -- you know, it was much more convenient for a date to go upstairs than to go scurrying around the town. We went upstairs and we invited some of the girls from the art [indecipherable] to go to -- for hot dogs at Coney Island. You know, it -- that was the big thing. So this whole bunch of girls from the art school -- it was one s -- one class below our class. I was al -- oh -- because of my military, I was older than my -- my -- my -- the other guys in this school. We went to Coney Island and somehow they put her next to me on the roller coaster. Now, have you ever been on a Coney Island roller coaster? The most dangerous thing, I mean, people get killed all the time in those days. Well, we go into the roller coaster and it's just really bad, I mean it's really -- I mean it's one of these extreme things. We get on the top, we come diving down and this girl goes limp on me. She basically -- whatever, she either fainted or whatever. Well, I grab her, because you know, in those days they didn't have any of the safety stuff, she could have fallen out. Well, we get off the roller coaster, she's as white as a linen. And I say well, you know, I really have to take care of you, I saved your life. And she said, well what do you want to do? I said,

well you know, I have to take you somewhere. And that's how we met and never left. So that's the girl I saved. She always had an eye on me anyway.

Q: Tell me about Mona's family, and do you share a lot of values? What was her background?

A: Yes, her father was a very unusual guy. He was a philosopher, he was in a Jewish tradition, a student. He really was a very bad businessman, very bad. But he was a scholar and he read. The mother pretty well ran -- wonderful woman, wonderful woman, her mother. They ultimately ended up living with us. And th -- Mona's father, Joe and I got along very well. Joe's idea was that the world is coming to an end, and that you have to go and really live out on a farm somewhere, so it will be self sufficient. So he bought a 10 acre farm, upstate New York, in Duchess county and built a sort of a dinky house, and -- and well, got cattle and geese and planted an orchard and the conversation was always survival. Subject that I sort of could relate to. This where went during the Cuban -- Cuban episode. So -- so he and I used to go up, you know, as the kids, my little children were growing up, leaving my mother-in-law and Mona and the little kids and he and I went up farming, to prepare for doomsday. It's a long, sad story. He used excessive amount of insecticide because he wasn't a resident there, and he ultimately got a stroke from -- from the insecticides, you know -- you know, the insecticide was very powerful, he over-overdosed the place with insectici -- insecticide and herbicide.

Q: Now, not realizing its toxicity?

A: Well, he did, but he -- he was -- it was not on his mind. But I married into a wonderful family, I really -- he was a true friend. Joe was a true friend. Mother -- I called her Mother, was a very loving person. She stayed with us. She was really a true grandmother to my little children. You know, we had four children, one after another, and the-there was lots of work to be done. And my wife Mona never wanted to have any servants. First we couldn't afford it, so you know, my -- my -- my wife washed the diapers. I mean, there was no -- no such thing as -- you know, buying them, diapers. And she taught the children -- she's -- the children were very literate at the age of four.

Q: So you re-created, and we -- and were blessed with a wonderful family.

A: Actua --

Q: Seemingly so much by chance.

A: Well, i -- yeah --

Q: The girl in the --

A: Well, you know, there's no such thing as a chance, you know. You know, the -- I -- I -- there were lots of girls I could have picked from, and there were some girls who were very seriously interested in me. In fact, there was one girl who actually announced that she is marrying me and told everybody. And that's bad, though, you don't do that.

Q: Yeah. Now you were -- you were eyeing the woman who was right.

A: Yeah.

Q: The sort of quiet one.

A: Yeah, the quiet one.

Q: And the reserved one, or -- or what have you.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: N-Now, tell me about your choices in raising the children. To some extent you've explained that really in -- in telling me how you started, but did you want to bring them up with this so-sort of real sense of their Jewish heritage? Did you observe religious holidays?

A: No, we -- they had all choice. They all had choice, and one of them is religious, strong Jew, a devout Jew, reasonably so, and the other one no part of it. But everybody had a choice, and -- and that's their call. I never, for better or worse, for better or worse, never tried to tell my children what to do. My model has always been they have to find their own choices and then live with those choices. I was not going to mastermind for them, anything. Nothing.

Q: Mm-hm. And tell me about the -- your children. When they were born, and their names.

A: Well, Vera was born in 1957. She did extremely well in school, in high school. She scored 800 on the SAT, eight zero zero, you know? [indecipherable]. You don't

score 800 on the SAT. Then she went to Johns Hopkins and she was going to be -- go study medicine, and something happened in Johns Hopkins, and I really don't know what, where she suddenly just decided she was very insecure about herself. What it was, you know, I visited her; she just clammed up. She then went for a Master's degree in public health. Went to work for a number of insurance companies. She's quite an expert in her field. She's a recognized expert. She has maybe 80 published papers in the field. The men she always -- she is on her third marriage, although one of them sort of had a heart attack and died on her. But the men she always -- were sort of weak men. She -- she always picked a very weak person. She has two beautiful children, absolutely gorgeous children. She's all right, but she's still struggling. She still has to figure out what she wants to do. You know, she's 47 now.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: The second child is Andrew. Andrew has always been interested in simulation, war gaming. He is the Jew. Very militant, he -- he -- he wants to take on the whole world.

Q: How much younger than Vera?

A: He's just barely less than two years younger than Vera. And -- and Andrew has a Master's degree from Carnegie Mellon and a summa cum laude from Wesleyan. He's literate. He's really a literate person. I mean, he reads. You know, he's a

student. Has two boys. He married a woman he shouldn't have married. He tells me, Dad, why didn't you tell me? She -- she married him because she expected that he's going to be a rich man. When she discovered he's not going to be a rich man, she just walked. It was just too much -- too much work for her to take care of. She -- she wanted to be taken care -- she was a Jewish princess, if you know that expression.

Q: Sure.

A: And, you know, Andrew is a very hard working, very honest, straight kind of a kid. Ab -- as straight as they can be. I mean, he's never done anything crooked, or anything. He has only had two jobs. [indecipherable] always everybody likes him on the job. And that's Andrew. Then comes Steven, two years later.

Q: Mm-hm. Let me go back, first of all, to Andrew. Does he have custody of the children, or --

A: Oh yes, he --

Q: -- oh he's -- he's remarried.

A: -- he's got custody.

Q: Oh, oh, okay.

A: Oh, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah --

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: -- the judge looked at the situation and said, I don't want that wa -- wa -- woman to -- to -- to -- to have anything to do with those children, you know. Which is rare, by the way. Of course, when he got custody of the children, me and Mona got -- my wife got custody of the children. I mean, you -- you understand that, because he has -- he has work. And he's a consultant, he travels.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So that's Andrew. Nice guy, a nice kid. Then you have Steven. He's the rascal of the family. Steven was born two years later. The jokester. Bright as can be.

Q: Like his father, sounds like?

A: Oh, he's a fa -- he's a jokester. Never cracks a book in his life and always gets A grades. And I said, Steven, how do you do it? [indecipherable] well, I study the teacher, I don't study the subject. He has a Ph.D. from M.I.T., has a undergraduate degree. He just went to M.I.T. and stayed. He would have stayed in M.I.T. all his life, he di -- had a great time, lots of girls. Good looking boy. I mean, he just draws girls like -- like -- like, you know, the catnip, you know, just very congenial. He's a Boy Scout and an Eagle Scout. A real solid citizen, honest as can be. Very smart, very good friend of mine. Very good friend of mine. I mean, he and I talk once or twice a day. Let me give you a Steven typical. Comes high school. I say, Steven, you have to start applying to college. He says, it's too much paperwork. And -- and then I-I say, well yeah, but you have to, you know, you have to spread your risk,

you know, you have a number of col -- where do you want to go? Well Dad, you went to M.I.T., I go to M.I.T.. I say, it's hard to get to M.I.T.. Oh, don't worry. So, you know, now -- now -- now, you know, it's March and I say, Steven, where are your applications? Well, I applied for early admission to M.I.T.. Now, you know, in those days, early admission means that you don't apply to anybody else and you've -- you understand, you -- you -- you -- you just roll your dice, and that's it. I said, you can't do that. He goes up to -- to -- to M.I.T. for an interview. I buy him a Brooks Brothers suit, th-the kid has never wore a suit in his life before or ever after. One of the beautiful things about Steven is very early, you know, I had computers in my house. Never told the kids to go be interested in computers. Steven -- all my kids had to go to work at the age of 13, just like my father, you know, you -- you have to have a trade. Steven decided to sell Apple computers. This is when Apple came out. Well, the salesman in the electronics store didn't have a clue what an Apple computer was like. Steven was a hacker from the word go. He sold more Apple computers than anybody else. So -- so he goes up to M.I.T. and they -- during the interview he tells them how to sell microcomputers. M.I.T. said, well, you know, fine. Early admission? You're in. So he comes back in the evening by train from Boston, sort of mischievously, like I didn't do it kind of a thing. I say, well Steve, what happened? Well, they accepted me. I said, well, when are you starting? Well, they accepted me. So -- so he never filled out a piece of paper. I mean, he's a

real rascal. I mean, this kid is a rascal. Very good natured, really helping me. Y-You know, I'm -- I'm doing some fairly complicated things. So that's Steven. And then of course, comes --

Q: And M.I.T. made a good choice.

A: And M.I.T. made a good choice, yeah, yeah. And then, of course, comes the apple of my heart, Eric, the youngest. Beautiful child. I mean, this kid had everything. Eagle Scout. He was -- he'd has his own software company. He started doing software in high school, when a teacher gave him a project to do, physics, like a pendulum, he wrote a software program to solve all the pendulum problems in the world, and handed in a floppy disk as his homework. The teacher then said, you know what -- and now, Eric is now 14. There may be other kids who would want to -- to -- to take advantage of this thing. So Eric, with my help, opens a software business, Strassmann, Incorporated, and start selling and licensing worldwide, Apple programs to be peddled to high schools throughout the world to solve homework in physics.

Q: Wh-Where were you living then? Where did th -- where did he go to school?

A: Well, we -- we -- we -- we lived in New York and then when Vera came we had a small, two bedroom apartment. And then when the other kids came, I bought a house in Mount Vernon, a four bedroom apartment. I always wanted the kids to have their own bedrooms. And then I built, in 1969 -- in '68, this absolutely

gorgeous house in Chappaqua, a six bedroom house. I mean it really -- it made the front page of the real estate section of the New York Times. It was made out of redwood, I mean, and it was made by Finnish carpe -- boat carpenters, who used to come during the winter season when Finland sort of freezes up, to work here where it's warmer. And they built my house like a ship. I mean, it was really some house.

Q: Like Shackleton's boat.

A: Oh yeah, that -- that was really built. And -- and so --

End of Tape Two, Side B

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection. This is an interview with Paul Strassmann, conducted by Margaret West, on January the 8th, 2004, in New Canaan, Connecticut. This interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's post-Holocaust interview project, and is a follow up interview to a USHMM videotaped interview conducted with Paul Strassmann on July the 11th, 1990. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number three, side A. Chappaqua.

A: Chappaqua.

Q: You --

A: So s -- and Eric could do anything. He -- he was a worker, for instance. You know, he was 12 years old when we built the house. He laid the pavement for the sidewalks. He -- he was a worker. This kid, I mean, you know, we have pictures of him, always with a shovel, or something, or helping. A scout, very much admired as a scout. Very thoughtful. He -- he was a -- a child that was thinking about -- was not impulsive. He was a very thoughtful, very bright, but not assertive, he was sort of a lovable teddy bear. Everybody loved this kid. And -- and -- but he always liked to experiment. He did -- I mean, he did always something, you know, he -- he -- he put a knife into the electrical socket when he was three years old. He climbed this tall

tree that we have here, this 50 foot tree, all the way to the top to see how far he can go. As quiet as he was, he was always pushing the limit. This kid did not have any limits. And so we lost him in 1984. I must say that was the most devastating thing that ever happened to me. I mean, this is -- you know, when you look at life, you know, what happened over the last 75 years, that is the thing that was the -- the worst thing. Worse than the Holocaust, worse than anything, because this kid was just -- and he's destroyed my wife. I mean, she -- she just absolutely shrank, as a result. And life has never been the same. He was such a good kid, and -- and -- you know, I -- I always felt that if I ever have somebody who could be a president of the United States, that was the kid who could make it. You know, the -- the -- when you get an Eagle Scout, there's a -- what's called a court of honor. Do you know about Eagle Scouts?

Q: I do.

A: It's a big deal.

Q: Yeah.

A: It's a big deal.

Q: It shows a lot of discipline and dedication and it's a big accomplishment for a kid.

A: And -- and charisma, because you have to be able to organize the other kids, who look to him as a leader. Everybody always looked to him as a leader because he was

not a pushy -- he was a leader leader, he actually went out and did things. He wa -- a-at the court of honor the scout executive said, well I've seen lots of Eagles in my life, never seen one like this. So that is the tragedy, yeah, yeah.

Q: What happened?

A: Ah, it's a long story. It's -- it's a -- yeah. It's -- again, he was pushing, he was pushing the limit.

Q: Mm-hm. And of course pushing the limit is what special people do.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And I suppose -- would you say that that's what you had done always? Or was Eric [indecipherable]

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, an-and he was very close to me. You know, his statement always were, when I grow up I want to be just like Dad. And he always asked me how -- why did you do this, why did you do this?

Q: What did you -- I wondered if there's anything special that you did in memory of him. I only ask that cause --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- sometimes -- oh, I -- I'm -- I shouldn't be putting his on tape [indecipherable]

A: Well, what happened was, he was so admired at Harvard that Harvard did something that has never been done before. The students, from their own money, when they graduated, decided to take all the money -- because you know, when the

students go in and they sell their books and furniture to the next class, and what have you, they took all the money and informed the faculty that they are putting a granite bench with Eric's name on the quadrangle. Now, you know, there's lots of rich kids at Harvard and so forth. There's lots of parents. Mr. Bok, who was the pre -- chairman -- president of Harvard was so taken --

Q: Derek Bok.

A: -- Derek Bok was so taken by it, that he gave permission for the students to put that bench into the grove on the quadrangle and it's still there to this day. What I have done, Eric's royalties for the software -- you know, by the way, all my books are dedicated to him -- Eric's royalties go into a fund to send Boy Scouts who cannot afford it to summer camp. It continues to this day. And there is a library, Eric's computer library in -- in a kibbutz in Israel. There is a funding to put computer books there in his memory. It's going to be 20 years this year, and I'm putting together, right now, in the middle, putting together a book about Eric for his siblings and for the grandchildren.

Q: Good. You know, I'd -- I -- my comment before, it doesn't really have a place in the interview, but a boy who lived next door died on that Lockerbie plane crash.

A: Yeah.

Q: Special -- a special young man, I think, and his parents started a music scholarship, and it just simply that it's -- the students benefiting from the scholarship has been helpful to them --

A: Oh yeah, I know --

Q: -- to feel that --

A: -- that it's the right thing to do.

Q: -- but it's some --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: But I'm sorry that you had such a loss. Hard for -- hard for your other children, too. Their loss is different to yours, but they see you suffering in a way they --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- both parents, anyway. The -- going on. Let's move on now to your career.

A: Okay, yeah.

Q: I really -- family came first.

A: Yeah.

Q: But then you've had a really most interesting career, which you say was because you became involved with computers, but I think it was much more.

A: Yeah, wh-what happened over here was after Cooper Union, when I've -- and I finished Tau Beta Pi, and you know, honors, and number two man in a very tough school. Cooper Union is a tough school because it's all -- everybody there is on scholarship. And it was very competitive, these were -- this was the last crop of World War II veterans who went on the G.I. Bill of Rights to school, and th-they -- they were a different generation, I mean, very serious students, I mean no horseplay, no nothing. And my conclusions was that although I loved engineering and always wanted to be an engineer, I felt that I just didn't have -- I was not an educated person. And there was a trustee of Cooper Union by the name of Rossi, who set up a scholarship for the Sloane School at M.I.T., which in those days was other than Harvard Business School, but for engineers it was the school on -- on -- on -- on management. And I was nominated for the Rossi scholarship, because of all of that. And I basically said that -- that I would love to go to M.I.T. -- and by the way, M.I.T. accepted me, but a Strassmann doesn't take scholarship money from anybody, I am self-supporting. Now everybody tells me, including my wife Mona, that was absolutely stupid. But I declined the scholarship because I considered it a act of charity. Now, this was still the old way, you know, you don't take money from anybody.

Q: Adolf Strassmann's son.

A: Yeah, I don -- doesn't take money from anybody. So -- and I just made quite a bit of money working on the New Jersey turnpike, summers. So -- so -- so I said, well, I'm going to pay my own way, which I could afford. You know, in those days the tuition at M.I.T. was 40 -- 4,500 dollars, which was an awful lot of money, but I made eight. And of course, I worked overtime and weekends and what have you, but I had 8,000 dollars, so I could afford 4,500 dollars. So I went to M.I.T. Sloane school. That's when I started dating Mona. Mona was either in New York or at her dad's country place in Salt Point, New York, Godforsaken place out in the boonies. And she just said, well, if you're interested in me, you better court me. And I asked her father for permission for me to court her, you know. He says, take her, you know? He liked me very much. But, you know, you don't -- did -- don't ask -- nobody does that any more. So I said, yeah, but i-in the Bible, you -- I have to earn a wife, and I don't have money. So, he said, well, you know, what do you want to do? I said, well I want to do something on this farm for you so that I can show, because it was a -- Abraham built for his father-in-law Laban, a enclosure for sheep. Said, I'm going to build something for you. And my father-in-law -- potential father-in-law said, well, you know, I could really use a barn. So I built a 22 by 22 barn to earn my wife, which was subject to lots of conversations over the years. So I finished that, and the --

Q: Who helped you?

A: Oh, my father-in-law helped me, you know, you know. But -- but I d -- I did quite a bit of it myself. But that was considered t-to be that, you know, how old-fashioned do you want to get, I mean, you know, you're really getting Biblical. But I felt, you know, I have to earn -- this is a wife, I have to earn it, you know? So that was that. So while I was working weekends on the barn, I was also working for a company who was building the New Jersey turnpike. And the problem was that that summer there was a dispute about toll collectors, and you may or may not have heard that story. You haven't heard the story?

Q: No.

A: Oh, that's the story. Well, I'm sitting in a drafting room, checking blueprints, you know, a-and there was no air conditioning, and when you lean your sweat on an Ozalid blueprint, you leave an orange mark, yeah, really miserable, smelly, but that was the job I had. And one day as -- as -- as Al Matimbi, the senior partner of Howard, Needles, Tammen and Bergendoff, a very distinguished consulting firm, they built most of the turnpikes in the United States, walks through. He says, Strassmann, I understand you going to M.I.T.. Yeah. What are you going to study? I said, well I'm going to study management. He said, well do you know anything about statistics? Oh, sure. Well, we got a problem. We have a union dispute on the New Jersey turnpike we just built, where the toll collectors say that we are -- that they are overworked. And we need somehow to figure out whether they are

overworked or not, because the governor goes through the tollgates and finds that they are just standing there doing nothing. Course the governor goes to work at 11 o'clock in the morning, but -- ah, so I said, oh, th-th-this thing is answer, you know, you have punch tickets in ev-ev-every toll gate, with round holes. All you have to do is count the punch tickets and find out how many cars go through, do some time motion studies on the toll collector -- I make it up as I go, and we'll figure out whether they are overworked or not. He said, you know what? Let me take you off this -- this drawing board and let me put you to work on the New Jersey turnpike. For the next two years in grad school, I processed hundred thousands of punch cards from the New Jersey turnpike, through the only place in the world where there was a computer like this, M.I.T.. When I got done I had a Master's thesis, which is today considered to be the first Master's thesis in the United States on business application of computer. That computer scheduled toll collectors and compared what they were doing against what the machine was doing. I got paid an awful lot of money. Howard, Needles got paid extremely well for this thing.

Q: Everybody was happy.

A: Everybody was happy. I finally had enough money to be able to afford a wife, because I was not going to have a wife -- my father-in-law was going to give me money. I said, f-forget about it, you know, I -- I'm supporting my wife. So -- so I

got into computers in 1954. Really liked it and from then on I was in computers and -- and -- so you sort of wander into these things almost -- almost by accident.

Q: Well, to what extent do you think that your career has been luck, arising out of the story you just told, or is it much more complex, with strands that come from your background and also energy and discipline and --

A: Well --

Q: -- maybe ambition.

A: Yeah, my -- my children have always asked me the question. My answer to that is everybody has luck. The question is, do you pick it up or not. But everybody, sooner or later, has luck. The -- everybody has coincidences, and some people jump at it, and some people sort of walk away from it, or don't recognize it.

Q: Yes.

A: So --

Q: Someone else might have said, oh I don't think you -- I'm prepared at M.I.T. to help you with those punch cards.

A: Oh, yeah, something like -- something like that. And -- and so the ga -- the question is -- again, coming back to this whole question of choice, luck is -- and I'm giving you the mathematical concept, luck is an event, it's in -- what's called a node. And out of that node goes a number of options. One of the options is to do nothing. Another option, of course, not even know that you have a node. Now the

real game of life is that you have a node, which happens, and it happens to everybody. Now, of course, if you are in America, you have more nodes than if you are in the Soviet Union. I mean, this is -- this is part of the social context. In other words, you cannot say that a peasant in India a -- or in -- in Bangladesh has all his luck opportunities. Th -- you know they are -- the tragedy, they are all constrained in a world where there are no choices at all. But if you are in America and you happen to be moving in a given direction which seems to be evolving and where the options are continually opening -- in other words, if you are in -- in making buggy whips, you know, ther -- ye -- you know, you're th -- unless you do something else, you know, you just don't have those options. But the luck is there, it's always there. In America more so. And as you climb up on the chain of luck, which by the way looks -- gr-graphically it's represented at what's called a decision tree. I don't -- I mean, there's a formal branch of economics called decision trees. By the way, ma -- the first professional paper I ever wrote, that was published, was on so-called stocastic decision trees. Stocastic is probabilistic decision trees tr -- dec -- decision trees that branch out probabilistically. Which means at any given juncture you don't only have branches, one or two branches, but you have a whole spectrum. It's just -- just occurred to me I never mentioned it that way, but that -- coming back to the question of -- of luck, what you learn from Holocaust, coming back to the theme, is that certain things happen, or the -- what happened in 1944 is that I go where the

shooting is. I go up the mountain, I get a hand grenade, come down the mountain and there is bunch of Russian commando groups who just looking for somebody just like me to walk ahead of them, okay? Now that's stupid luck, okay? Now somebody else would say, well, you know, I'm not going to go with the Russians. By the way, the guy who went with me, imme -- immediately wanted no part of it because the Russians were really a ragtag bunch of bandits. I mean, they were really a bunch of bandits. And I say, bandits, you know, this is fine, you know? Besides, they wanted me, you know. Besides, they gave me a rifle, you know? So luck happens and then you learn to -- to push it -- push it, as far as you can do. Now, in case of my son Eric, he pushed it too far. But, there you go. So -- so th -- that is the model, then. The -- the model of the Holocaust is that those people who get squashed, and there are lots of them, wh-who -- you -- you know, the people who brought me to America, you know, the friend of my father's and so forth --

Q: Yes.

A: -- they stayed confined. They started -- they went into the Jewish lodge and they meet Sundays, for years and years, bemoaning the tragedy and what happened, and they sti-still speak Slovak, and they have lectures about, you know, Vienna in 1934, and th -- Prague -- you know, Prague theater in 1932. I mean, they're still in the back country. They're still mentally back there.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: The -- the -- the -- th-the model that I believe I represent is -- the notion is that opportunities happen, and you have to look forward, and see how far it gets you, even if it kills you.

Q: Take risks, seizes opportunities.

A: Seize opportunities, take risk, and -- but do it within certain confines of value, because there are others who came to the United States, Jews --

Q: Mm-hm.

A: -- who basically went after money, you know, how much money can I make? And they become speculators, criminals, embezzlers, con artists, stock market map -- manipulators and all of that. There's -- you know, New York is full of that. I mean, there's -- there is a whole Jewish money-optimizing, with no feeling for America, no feeling for the community, no feeling for the society, who are very, very successful, particularly in real estate and so forth.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: You know, beco -- becoming billionaires. Money is an outcome. I always tell my children, whether you get money, or don't get money, well that's an outcome. That's not a goal, ever. So, you know, one has to really put around this whole question of -- of values, also a question of what do you represen -- what are your beliefs? What is the ethics? And what is the -- what's called the sense of honor.

Q: Right. Which -- which your faith t -- informs, if you like, if you allow it.

A: Yeah.

Q: I mean, what your faith teaches.

A: That's right.

Q: To --

A: Yeah, th-th -- this is the essence of faith. The essence of faith is grace, fellowship, trying to make life better if you can, and have responsibility to your society and to your community. And so that's -- it's this -- but you never, never compromise on that, even if it works against you. For instance, you know, the people in the Jewish circle, particularly the people who brought me to America, always berated me that I never applied for reparations from the Nazis. I mean, just -- you know, it's unthinkable. I mean, it's just -- just not right. Just not right.

Q: They felt?

A: No, I felt it was not right.

Q: Oh, right.

A: But they felt it was not right for me not to do it because you know, I'm -- I'm leaving the -- the bastards with money. But i -- but -- but that's not the question of money, it's a question of honor.

Q: Yes. You know, I -- I know sometimes people feel that it's at least a -- a -- a gesture that has meaning for them. I mean, wh-wh-wh-why do you think y -- y -- you feel it's sort of morally wrong?

A: Yeah, a -- a -- a moral wrong di -- does not get right by money.

Q: By a pay -- amount of money.

A: By paying them the money, ever.

Q: Yes.

A: Okay. You know, that's -- that's -- that's very fundamental.

Q: Yes. I have to think about that, just because I was thinking of a case where a friend whose, you know, family lost property in Vienna, but just felt deeply moved to -- to get this sort of -- the paperwork of reparations and so on. The -- the acknowledgement of --

A: That was so wrong that the acknowledgement isn't good enough. No amount of acknowledgement is good enough, okay?

Q: Yes, of course, yeah, you're -- you're right. I -- I needed to think about it.

A: Yeah, yeah. No -- I mean, just not right. Certain things are such horrible crimes --

Q: Yeah. But how can --

A: And sometimes doing the right thing, against your interest, turns out to be unbelievably attractive and profitable. Let me give you a si -- my favorite story. My favorite story is here I become the chief information officer of Kraft. You know, Sealtest milk, ice cream, cheese on the loading dock. I have 48 computers making it possible for people to come up at four o'clock in the morning to the sh -- loading

dock, get the pieces of paper, where they deliver this ice cream, or this cream and so forth. And it -- now it's 1963, and I just can't get all of the -- the business is fantastic and now they want more sophisticated delivery tickets, what have you, and IBM cannot do it. Just can't do it. IBM says, well look, we are making new machines, the 360 series are going to be fantastic, but we cannot give you machines that can cope with your workload. And I said, guys, you know, you keep promising things to me and you're not delivering. Well, it turns out that I get a phone call from a guy by the name of Art Messerschmitt from Syracuse, and he says, you know, I'm golfing with this Honeywell salesman and the Honeywell salesman -- and I know they have a very good machine -- the Honeywell salesman tells me he's going to put a Honeywell machine side by side with the IBM machine, charge me nothing, and when the Honeywell machine does exactly what the IBM machine, but twice as much for half the price, you have to promise me that I can get rid of the IBM machine. Now, in 1963 getting rid of IBM is, if you know, no-no. I mean, they just -- not good for your career. You understand that? I said --

Q: Now -- yes, I -- I know the saying, nobody --

A: [indecipherable] fired.

Q: -- what did they say? Nobody ever gets fired for -- yeah.

A: So I say, Art, you know, what the hell? Go ahead and do it. So Art Messerschmitt brings in the Honeywell machine, slides it in, it is fantastic. Get rid

of that IBM machine. Well, so then the other controllers -- I mean, you know, the milk business, these are -- the people in Sealtest and Kraft are middle America. Penny pinching, honest farm guy, none of this fancy New York stuff. And they said, what the hell, you know? It's three cents for a carload of this stuff, let's get some more Honeywells in, so the -- I started rolling in Honeywell. Well, IBM gets very excited. What IBM does in those days is they get the guy who does this thing fired.

Q: Mm-hm, yeah.

A: I mean -- [indecipherable] So they --

Q: I should add -- you know, when we made that comment, an aside, I should finish it, which is, nobody ever gets fired for buying IBM.

A: That's right [indecipherable]

Q: Anyway.

A: Yeah, well, the -- it works the other way.

Q: Yeah.

A: He gets fired if you get rid of IBM. So IBM sends one of their heavies, an executive vice-president to have golf with Edwards, the Chairman of the Board of Kraft. And they go golfing, they're having a good time, they're friends and this. Oh, then after the golf, the executive vice president of IBM says to the chairman of Kraft, you know, this guy Strassmann is really taking lots of risks, I mean, getting rid of --

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

A: -- this guy has reputation. He's a risk taker, and you know, if you were in the business, you don't want to take any risks. Besides, IBM is going to have these new machines, you know. And Gordon Edwards, a good old Texan, says, you know, Joe, when you have those machines and you're ready to ship them, we have -- you have orders for them, yeah. We'll test them too. Meanwhile, Strassmann is shipping ice cream on a loading dock and it's not melting. So, you know, what's the problem? So Strassmann -- everybody -- of course everybody tells this story, you know, the -- the -- the -- the -- the Kraft company is good old boys. This is sen -- middle America. This is good old boys, you know. They think this is very funny. They think this is a riot. They talk about it. Four years later, Xerox decides to go into computer business. And they buy this company, which was a bad company to begin with, p-pay billion dollars for it. The chairman of the board of Xerox announces that the way how they're going to prove that this turkey is really good is that we are going to get rid of all of our IBM computers, and I have just the guy who knows how to get rid of. So they hire me, double my salaries and were willing to pay me 5,000 shares of Xerox stock for every IBM computer I get rid of. That's what built this house. Every store you look in there's an IBM computer. You know, I can point to the [indecipherable] you know. So -- so that is how things can sometimes work

for you. Xerox needed -- the only guy with a track record of getting rid of IBM computers in the United States, was Paul Strassmann.

Q: Good story.

A: So, a similar story is -- a similar story is when I retired from Xerox -- again, I'm distr-splaying a morality. The morality is, good, bad or indifferent -- I mean, Gordon Edwards could have come back from that golf game and fired me on the spot, for whatever reason.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But that's not the way I play the game. If they would have wanted to fire me, this was not going to be a company for me to work for anyway, you know. Years later, I'm wi -- quite an expert, I write a couple of books about computers. General Motors buys EDS, this big corporation. EDS takes over all computers from General Motors, it's a absolute disaster. Ross Perot gets greedy, starts charging General Motors excess money. General Motors plant managers don't get any bonuses, EDS gets all the bonuses. So the vice-chairman of General Motors is given the job to find out whether EDS is overcharging or not. Guess who they hire? Paul Strassmann. You see, I don't have any consultants, I don't have -- I don't bring in a big staff. I am a well known expert in the fie-field. I study the situation, I call up the vice-chairman of General Motors and say, look, they're overcharging you. And then he -- he says, well how much are they overcharging me? They are overcharging you at

least 300 million dollars a year, which is quite a bit of money. And it's actually more, but 300 million dollars you can prove. So he says, you know, this is very difficult, Ross Perot is on the Board of Directors of General Motors. I have to bring it up before the board. Why don't you write a half page memorandum, stand by until the board meeting and just before the board meeting you fax it to my secretary outside of the board meeting and I'll read it to the board. Which he does -- I mean, this was going to be hush-hush. By three o'clock in the afternoon every plant manager in General Motors who hates the guts of EDS has a copy of Strassmann's memo that they're overcharged by 300 million doll -- which is out of their pocket, you know?

Q: Mm.

A: So General Motors says, you know, sorry, you know, this really caused all kinds of problems. We're going to pay you your fee, but we cannot employ you any more. I come home, Mona tells me, you know, Strassmann, again, you know, you just play it straight, you know? You missed a great opportunity getting a consulting contract from General Motors. You -- couldn't you have varnished it a little or something? I say, well that's the way it is. Six months later, the vice-chairman of General Motors is now deputy secretary of defense, working for Dick Cheney. Soviet Union collapses --

Q: Who -- who would that be?

A: Donald Atwood.

Q: Okay I mean a -- wondered if I knew the name. Anyway.

A: Yeah, Donald Atwood.

Q: Yes. That's not the point, it's [indecipherable]

A: W-We -- Congress decides [indecipherable] dividend, cuts the department of ar -- Department of Defense budget by 75 billion dollars. And Cheney turns to Donald Atwood say, well you know, find the 75 billion dollars. Donald can find 30, but there is -- he's short, you know, he's short quite a bit. So he said, well we are going to do it by corporate information [indecipherable] we are going to bring into the department of defer -- corporate information management based on computers. You know, this is -- this is -- this is a holy grail, you know, every couple of years this idea perks up and dies.

Q: Okay.

A: Okay. And I am just the bastard who knows how to do it. And guess what? I get pulled into the Department of Defense as the first Chief Information Officer of the Department of Defense --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- to do the job.

Q: And I assume you were much needed.

A: Oh yes. I mean, everybody agrees and you know, I and -- you know, I [indecipherable] I don't know how many billions I saved, but I at least set the thing in a direction -- finally Rumsfeld is doing it now, but it takes a long time to move that -- that thing. But again, you know, who would have known that by calling the shots on General Motors, would end -- will end me up in this -- this position. So there's a story.

Q: Yes.

A: Now, just to show you how luck or opportunity works, I get into the Department of Defense, and I look around, and I say, well what's wrong is computers report to the controller. Computers should not report to the controller because finance people just keeps computers under throttle, computers is a weapon, it's a military weapon, it's a command and control weapon. Let's yank out the computers away from the controller. Now, to do that in the Department of Defense, I mean, is -- this is hard.

Q: Rock the boat.

A: Tha-That's really rocking the boat. We rocked the boat, guess what? Donald Atwood wanted to do it anyway, now he pulls the responsibility for computers away from the controller of the depart -- where it has been for the prior 50 years. The controller of the Department of Defense is a guy by the name of Sean O'Keefe. So we -- we make an enemy right there. So we take it out, we bring it under and the assistant Secretary of Defense for command and control, the military loves me. The

military just loves me. I get a big checkbook, I start spending money on the special forces, who until then didn't get the money. They make me an honorary Green Beret, they find out that I was a guerilla fighter. Boy, this is one of our guys, he's one of ours. And of course, I give them the money, you know, I move the money away from finance and give it to the war fighters. I mean, you can't go wrong, I mean. So the story then goes, I retire from the Department of Defense with all the honors, you know, but when Clinton gan -- comes in, that's not the place for me to be, I mean, I just can't stand the guy. NASA gets into trouble. The new administrator of NASA is one Sean O'Keefe. He says, I know just the bastard to straighten out this place.

Q: Well, he -- yo-you made an enemy of him, but he could see that the action taken was right?

A: No, what happens is that people disagree with me, but everybody respects me.

Q: Exactly.

A: Yeah. And so I get a call that, you know, would you like to do some consulting for NASA? So I -- sure. I come down to NASA. They showed me everything else. I didn't know I was walking into a setup. I ga -- arrive at NASA at nine o'clock in the morning. They give me the review of the situation. I said, you guys are just in an awful mess. Okay, Mr. Strassmann, what would do? I said, well there are three things you have to do. Well, you know, now it's 3:30 in the afternoon, would you

like to walk up and present your findings to the administrator? I walk in, oh Paul, so nice to see you, so glad to see -- you know. I present the thing, and he said, well, you know, that makes awful sense. Guess what, you're staying here and you're going to fix it. I said, well I'm here for a consulting. No, you're coming -- you're staying here and fixing it. I say, well you cannot appoint me to a senior executive position in the federal government that easily. He said, you think I can't? So he said, well, will you take it? I say, well, you know, I am a servant of this country. If -- if I am asked to do something -- he says, just wait a moment, picks up the phone, brings in lawyers, what have you. I walk at 6:30 that evening with a badge, as the Chief Information Officer of NASA. Now, the question is luck, opportunity, or what, but there is a pattern. You know, I have many stories like that.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I mean, lots of stories like that. The -- the -- the paradigm of the Holocaust, the -- coming back to the Holocaust is that what I learned from the Holocaust is that there is always opportunity. You cannot stay in a position where there's no opportunity, because you die, one way or another. And this is true. In the Holocaust this is also true, in business, this true everywhere in life. And within bounds of ethics and honor and commitment and service, you just do what's right. And then if you happen to get money for it, well so be it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But that's not the way I make the -- the decisions. That's not the way to make decisions.

Q: You know, there's a Quaker saying, you do good, and do well.

A: Well, sure, y -- well, yeah. But -- and the well may or may not come.

Q: Mm-hm. That's right.

A: So that -- that is really -- I think -- not just Paul Strassmann, this is -- this is bigger than Paul Strassmann, has to do with history of Jews --

Q: Oh.

A: -- has to do with preservation, has to do --

Q: That's what I was going to ask. It's not just the Holocaust, it's really the history of a people.

A: It's a -- oh, history of a people. Jews, when you look at the history of the people, have been extremely successful in survival. They are the oldest survive -- continually survivable civilization and culture. There's nobody else who goes that far back in a line of succession. The Egyptians are gone, the Romans are gone, the Greeks are gone. The Chinese empire has come and gone. But as a continuum, as a thread, there has be -- there has been a paradigm there that basically says that you -- you -- you -- you diversify. You don't know -- do not get stuck in Judea. Sure, you may fight the Romans, but everybody else who fought the Romans and stayed where they were, are gone.

Q: And then I was thinking of Eric's place in that evolution, that you lose some --

A: Yeah, and then you lose some.

Q: Of --

A: There's horrendous losses. There are horrendous losses in the process.

Q: Mm. But you could say they're not in vain, because they're part of the --

A: They're part of the -- part of the --

Q: -- thread.

A: -- part of the thread.

Q: And all your -- all your honors and awards are --

A: So what?

Q: -- fit with the pattern -- I know.

A: Yeah, yeah --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- yeah, yeah, just milestones, that's all. That's all they are.

Q: Yes. [indecipherable][tape break] There are many other things we haven't covered.

A: Oh, sure. My relationship with the Holocaust Museum goes back to perhaps as early as 1990 -- no, no, no, no, 1988, when -- 1988 when I gave a lecture at the Holocaust Museum on -- on the fact that the great lessons of the Slovak no -- uprising was the fact that a Jewish brigade at the labor camp, the slave labor camp,

marched out as a bat -- armed battalion, as organized battalion and participated as a Jewish organized military unit, although the -- the Jewish brigade in the British army was organized in Tobruk in November of 1944, the Jewish brigade organized in Slovakia as a Jewish unit, goes back to August 29th, 1944. And I wanted to point out that -- that -- that unit, perhaps, is the first organized Jewish military unit that went to war since A.D. 70. There was some interest on the part of the Holocaust Museum, but in those days the Holocaust Museum was very much concerned about crying about the enormity of the crime, Holocaust. The idea of fighting, Jews fighting and opposing by action, the actions on the part of the Germans was not high on the agenda, except there was a -- a researcher in the -- in the -- the Holocaust Museum, a Dr. Sybil Milton, who got very much interested in the subject, and subsequently, when I was in Washington, I met with Dr. Milton several times, we had lunch together. And I tried to convey to you my sense of the Holocaust, namely that this was not necessary some evil maniac plot, but it was a historical evolution of a state machinery that went berserk. In other words, the Nazis and Hitler unleashed the power of the state to its ultimate form of destruction. You know, the state has always done pogroms and done injustice, and done all kinds of things, but here, the superiority of industrial organization and scientific organization, in fact, went to its ultimate conclusion, namely, we are just going to plan, methodically, to destroy people. And the enormity of the Holocaust really lies

in the fact that -- in its engineering. In other words, it was planned as an engineer could -- conscious process, where they were actually calculating the capacity of the cars, the capacity of the killing, how quickly can we burn them. In other words, they applied scientific management. And that is really the grossness, the horror of this thing, which I called the -- the bureaucratization of Holocaust. In other words, the bureaucratization of genocide. And the point that I was raising was that with advanced information technology, the state can, through control of people, and eliminating privacy in the future, basically grind masses of people to destruction. In other words, endemic in the structure of modern civilization, of industrialization, is a capability of massive destruction, by means out of anatomic weapons. Sybil Milton was very, very much taken by it. I then subsequently provided to the Holocaust Museum, a collection of documents which I assembled, my sister actually helped with it, which showed methodically how the various laws were used in Slovakia to gradually strip an innkeeper, who was a veteran from World War I, and who received special license to be an innkeeper and how that was taken away, and this was taken away and the fur coats was taken, and radio was taken, and so on, until you finally got rid of the innkeeper altogether and then gassed him. And I gave a collection of something like 30 documents, where the wife actually got a receipt for the husband. In other words, the bureaucracy worked with perfection and completeness and everything was legitimate and everything was signed and

everything was covered by law. It was passed by a duly elected parliament. And then, of course, Sybil said, yeah, but where do computers come into this thing? And I said, well I don't know, but when I look at this succession of how Mr. Flak got eliminated, I can see a computerized society doing it much more efficiently, much more expeditiously, without any errors. Sybil then went away. A month later Sybil calls me up and say, I have something interesting for you. She sends to me in the mail, copies of three pages from some kind of German documentation, which shows a punch card, and shows a picture of what's called a Hollerith, Deutsche Hollerith machine, and says, could you tell me what it is? And -- and of course I said, surely, this is -- this is a machine that is being used, using census data in order to make sure that all the Jews and their property is properly filtered out so that you can schedule the Jews to destruction. And she said, you know, we are building a -- a Holocaust Museum, it's all crying and weeping, and what have you, but there's nothing in there about this concept of the grindstone of the bureaucracy actually being an engine of the Holocaust. And she said, you know, it would be very interesting to be able to prove that the Germans actually used computers in tabulating mach -- she didn't distinguish between tabulating machine and -- and I said, yeah, that would be very interesting. I took the picture and send it to a friend of mine who is a retired IBM executive. She said, oh we tried it before, we asked IBM whether they had anything to do with providing tabulating machine to the Nazis, you know. I said,

Sybil, you must be kidding, you know. So I send it to this guy in Denver, he's retired, he looks at it, he says, oh, this is Dehomag number 325, you know. And yeah, the card says so and so Jew, and property and location and he's accounted for. So Sybil says, you know what, we really would need this kind of thing on the exhibit in order to make the point. Could you get the Nazi machine? I said, you must be kidding, you know, there's no such thing. Well, try anyway. So I sent out, because of my many connection -- you know, I am a collector, you know, you saw that --

Q: Yes.

A: -- I collect some stuff, you know that -- I love to go and look for things. And someday I'm going to tell you some of the stuff that I was able to find. I mean, really, I have a story behind each. See, I collected every item in here, I bought and collected.

Q: Yeah. And we should say that's the IBM museum of -- w-we should explain to them, anyways.

A: Yeah. Well -- well, the museum -- the --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- Xerox Historical Museum of the Written Word. Well at any rate, I sent out a -- a letter saying -- to all the computer museums in the world, and there are four, you know, do you have a Dehomag number 302? Oh no, we haven't got it. I said, well,

if you find wa -- one of them, we really need it for a museum, could you -- could you let me know? Well, the Berlin wall falls, three weeks later I get a phone call from the British museum, the engineering museum in -- in London on -- on -- on -- on -- next to the Imperial Museum. And they said, you know, somebody's offered us for sale, in Dresden, a Dehomag 302. I said, fine, can we buy it? Well, you know, they -- they just -- they -- they -- they really would like to sell it for 2,000 dollars. I say, go buy it. Well, then I go to the Holocaust Museum, oh, you know, this -- we -- how do we know it's authentic, what is this and this? I said, 2,000 bucks guys, be real. Then they had to send somebody to -- to Germany to look at the machine, they didn't know anything about the machine, they come back, yeah, there is such a machine. It -- actually the air ca -- air -- th-the expense for -- was more than the machine. Well, finally they buy the machine. The machine is shipped to the warehouse in Baltimore where all of this stuff was being staged prior to being -- to completion of the building. This is before the building was done. They invite me to come to authenticate the machine, and of course my friend in Denver tells me what to look at, what serial number and all of those things. I go and look at -- it's a gorgeous machine, just gor -- you know, only the Germans can make this fine machine parts. It was a tabulator, it was a sorter, it was an input machine, the whole thing, whole shooting thing. I said, you know, this is -- this is just a beautiful thing. Well, would you please write something? So I wrote a script for the -- for the -- for

the -- for the display unit, called the bureaucratization of genocide. Well, it didn't go over very well with the Holocaust Museum. They ultimately put the three machines on the exhibit, but they were taking too much space, so last time I know, they removed two of them. I find -- I have a real bad feeling about the Holocaust Museum, I just want you to know. Many of the people who are the biggest donor to the Holocaust Museums are Jews who are survivors, who came to the United States, made lots of money and are heavily funding the museum. You know, this is -- this is their guilt trip. I -- you know.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Now I -- I may be overdoing it, but they really did not want to take it from the fact it's a crime to something that I see, it is something which has much broader consequence for the future. And when you are telling kids about the Holocaust -- well they say, well Hitler was a bad guy. Well, when -- when do we gonna get another Hitler? You know, it's all the Nazis and the Hitler.

Q: Ah, but the mission is, you know, it's a government insti -- funded institution to educate.

A: They don't educate, in my view, and I been to the Holocaust Museum twice, I spoke there. I look at -- I -- I ge -- I'm on the mailing list and so forth, and I listen to Elie Wiesel -- Elie Wiesel. The education in the information age is to beware of the abrogation of civil liberties, of the use of computers in the police system --

Q: Mm-hm.

A: -- which can be perverted, and that I don't see as a theme emerging from the Holocaust Museum. They don't want to touch it with a 10 foot pole.

Q: They want to keep, you feel, to the narrower.

A: Yeah, they want to keep it as a feeling, well this is bad, this is bunch of bad guys, and all of those things. To me it is much more endemic. It's -- it's the -- the state going mad, like in Pol Pot's time, I mean. Like under Mao.

Q: Mm-hm. Oh, which conceivably can happen to any society at any time.

A: Can happen to any society, any time.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And that moral lesson is not visible. And you might as well tell your sponsors that, that I said so. Had to get it off my chest.

Q: You had something further to add.

A: Yeah. There was no way -- ma -- this is my commentary on the tenor and the morality of the Holocaust Museum, and the lessons to the history. And one of the very significant lessons of bureaucratization of genocide is the extremely small staff that Eichmann had in order to execute massive amount of people. Eichmann and his people, in a typical German fashion, were methodical bureaucrats first. So when Arons -- Ar-Arons says about the banality of -- of -- of -- of the crime, he -- she really does not get into the analytic mech -- mechanism of how this is done. It was

done, and I've studied it, in a very organized, methodical method which leveraged the machinery of the state, of the police, of the [indecipherable] of the judicial system, to commit the crime. When you really look at it from a legal standpoint, there was no crime. Duly elected --

Q: Democratic.

A: -- democratically elected majority people, all voting in favor, in --

End of Tape Three, Side B

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection. This is an interview with Paul Strassmann, conducted by Margaret West, on January the 8th, 2004, in New Canaan, Connecticut. This interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's post-Holocaust interview project, and is a follow up interview to a USHMM videotaped interview conducted with Paul Strassmann on July the 11th, 1990. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number four, side A. Nothing -- you're saying that nothing illegal --

A: Well, the --

Q: -- had occurred.

A: -- the Holocaust, at least the way I witnessed it, with the evidence available to me, although there were exceptions, particularly in the conquered lands, where in Russia, in -- where there was no legality at all, it was -- th-that was just plunder and mur-murder and what have you. But I'm talking about western Europe, so-called civilized western Europe, which includes our good friends the French, and -- and -- and the Belgians, and the Germans and particularly the Austrian and the Slovaks, and the Hungarians and the Romanian, etcetera, etcetera, all did that in a very methodical, prescribed, legitimate method, which means that they could argue that they were proceeding through the sovereign rights of the state to take measures

which they considered necessary to defend their social and economic well being. By the way, that argument has been made. Now, with that structure, and then harnessing the power of the state, they were then able to execute a crime in a very well structured method, which took advantage of all the best managerial know-how, such as being taught in schools today, of management. In fact, people get MBAs in subjects which are closely related to that, except they apply to cattle and apply to krispies, and hamburgers and what have you. Now, the evidence for this thing really is in what's called a transaction cost. The transaction costs for executing this crime were very low, because this was largely self funding. For instance, the Slovak paid the Germans, as you know, 10 marks for every body for resettlement and reeducation fees. The confiscations were self funding. Eichmann actually produced a profit and loss statement, because through the confiscation and so forth, they were able to get a large amount of gold into the coffers of their Reich system, although sooner or later the corruption crept in, but nevertheless, it was run as a business. The business was based on the fact that a very small number of people at corporate headquarters, with some enforcement, could take care of problems which involved the marshalling and destruction of millions of people. And one of the key elements in that process was the utilization of the Jewish organizations in co-opting the Jewish organizations into the liquidation process. The deportation lists from my town, Trencin, that I used to trace the authenticity of who was a victim or not, were

made by the Jewish [indecipherable], by the Jewish organization. The supervision and the guidance of, you know, going to this car, and going to this car, was done mostly by Jews with the enforcers onlooking except when there were some hooligans who did some stupid things, you know, like beat up people and so forth. But most of it was done in a fairly organized fashion. So now comes the Holocaust Museum, and you have a list of Holocaust survivors. And then you have a list of Holocaust survivor donors. And then you have interviews with these donors who are being awarded this or that, and being treated to this or that dinner. And then you have the Los Angeles chapter, and then you have the New York chapter, etcetera, etcetera. Well, these people get up and make a speech and they say how they suffered in Auschwitz, and in what have you. Now it turns out that none of them ever give away when they went to Auschwitz. None of them. They never do. This is one thing -- by the -- in many of my inquiries, and I will tell you some stories also how this [indecipherable] -- many of these people, by innuendo and implication esp -- espe -- especially as to the date of the way, how the destruction was done, are clearly 1942 inmates. Now please tell me --

Q: Oh, because based on putting together information from what they've said?

A: Yes. Please tell me how can anybody survive Auschwitz from '42 to --

Q: Liberation.

A: -- the spring -- to liberation, which is early spring of 1945, without being a kapo? So the money they're giving is guilt money, it's tainted money, it's immoral money, it's bad money. And they influence the -- the tenor of what I see -- I haven't been to the Holocaust Museum now for about seven years, maybe they changed the exhibits. But it is -- the morality, you see, the morality of that thing, which is really the underlying issue and the guidance for people to think about the future is not obvious, or not apparent. It's not even discussed. Now, the morality of course, is in Yad Vashem, where they have the Righteous, and th-that's a different thing. But to me the Holocaust Museum is --

Q: Well, that's also part of the story told at the Holocaust Museum, is the Righteous.

A: But without the morality, that's --

Q: Oh.

A: -- individual -- you see -- see -- see --

Q: I do see.

A: You see, that gets you into individual psychology of individual people. When you are going to teach about the Holocaust, children, and if you're looking into the information society of the 21st and 22nd century -- you know, those museum has ways of staying around for a long time.

Q: Yes.

A: Something that is the guts of the issue, in terms of relevance to the future is not there.

Q: Right. And -- and of course, all the time, life goes on and other events take place, such as the Bosnian war, which also comes under the --

A: Oh yeah, oh yes, absolutely.

Q: -- teaching message of the Holocaust Museum

A: That's right, that's right, e-except the Bosnian war is really not analyzed in terms of -- in my terms of reference. It was again the state machinery -- in this particular case the military machinery, which is the most dangerous machinery. See, the Germans were much more refined, they never used the military for this purpose.

Q: Right.

A: I mean, the Bosnians and the Serbs --

Q: Yes.

A: -- were just very crude. I mean, that's -- that's -- that's -- you -- you know, that's very crude. Now --

Q: Yes, I see the distinction.

A: And -- and those are very important, you see, the taxonomy of genocide varies. You have a Mao Tse-Tung, very sophisticated, harnessing the young pioneers to engage in genocide, but actually mobilizing a section of the communist party to execute. Then you have Pol Pot, okay? Then you have the very interesting situation

in Indonesia. There is a whole taxonomy of different forms. There is a life form out there called genocide, that has a set of indicators which should be used as an way of alerting society, so that society can distinguish it. See, one of -- part of the problem with the genocide was that the society in ’38 - ’39 did not discriminate, did not distinguish it, and the Jewish organizations were used as way of distorting and not clarifying what was really happening. We knew, for instance, what Auschwitz was, what [indecipherable]. The Jewish -- we had two people come from Auschwitz, and --

Q: To your --

A: To Slovakia.

Q: Yes.

A: Yeah. So that was known at the end of 1943. Had that been known and broadcast by the Jewish community, more Jews would have taken a different view. They didn’t. The thing was hushed up.

Q: Why?

A: Don’t rock the boat. Keep low. You might offend somebody. So, you know, if you really want to listen to Paul Strassmann, my lesson for the Holocaust, I mean, there’s a whole different story to be told, in terms of its real events, to the Holocaust Museum.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But I'm not sure they want to hear it.

Q: Mm-hm. Well, we've -- this is a small way of making sure the story is there.

A: Yeah.

Q: In their -- in the archives.

A: Yeah. The whole taxonomy, structure and dynamics of the Holocaust has to deal with going back to options. I-I wrote a paper and gave a series of lectures which were very o -- people were very unhappy about it. I pointed out that in 1944, the probability of surviving the eight month remaining for the remainder of the war, much greater if you fought than if you went to the concentration camp. In other words, there were two work camps in Slovakia, one in Sered, one in Novaky. The one in Novaky marched a battalion with a survival rate of 70 percent. Sered was done -- run by religious Jews. Well, maybe we'll negotiate our way, maybe it's not there, maybe we don't go on this transfer, maybe we'll go to the next transfer. Always bargaining. See, you were bargaining, see the -- you were bargaining with evil.

Q: Yeah.

A: The bargaining with evil. There comes a point where you don't bargain with evil, you see, because you are out of choices. Because the evil will not give you any choices. And so the probability, the morbidity rate of those was 95 percent. So you know, you're now dealing with statistics and with odds, and with orientation. You

know, you had six million Jews with lots of money in 1938, let's go and take a hike. You know, we could have gone to Madagascar. We could have gone to all kinds of other places. Again, I am talking about the survival rates.

Q: Mm-hm. Well, it's very interesting. And --

A: Well.

Q: I'd like to thank you. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Paul Strassmann.

End of Tape Four, Side A

Conclusion of Interview