

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

FRED BACHNER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer:	Maxine Weiner
Date:	April 22, 1985

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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FB - Fred Bachner [interviewee]

MW- Maxine Weiner [interviewer]

Date: April 22, 1985¹

Tape one, side one:

MW: Where were you born?

FB: I was born September 28, 1925.

MW: In Berlin?

FB: In Berlin.

MW: And your father and mother--what did they do for a living?

FB: My father was a--how do you say it? He had a shop manufacturing men's clothing.

MW: And did your mother work?

FB: My mother worked in the shop, yes.

MW: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

FB: Yes, I had one brother who was three years older than I am.

MW: That's it--two children?

FB: Yes, two children.

MW: What--were you a religious family in Berlin?

FB: Yes.

MW: You were Orthodox?

FB: Yes, Orthodox, yes.

MW: You went to *cheder*?

FB: I would not term it a *cheder*, it was a religious school.

MW: And did you go to public school as well?

FB: I went to public school, Jewish public school.

MW: A Yeshiva?

FB: No.

MW: No?

FB: No. In Germany we Jews had to go to a Jewish school.

MW: From what time did that happen?

FB: Since the first grade.

MW: So that would be since 1931. You were in first grade in 1931? So as early as 1931 there were special laws for the Jews?

FB: Yes.

MW: When did that start?

FB: That started when Hitler came to power.

¹Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

MW: When was that?

FB: In 1933.

MW: But even before that you had to go to a Jewish school in 1931?

FB: I don't remember if I went to school when I was six or seven years old.

MW: Okay, so it started in 1933.

FB: Yes.

MW: What other restrictions were there on you and your family? But before we go into that, I'd like to get an idea of when you were a child, maybe this is hard for you to remember since you were so young.

FB: I remember everything pretty good when I was a child.

MW: Okay, good. What kind of relationship did you and your family have with non-Jews in Berlin before Hitler? Were there signs of antisemitism at that time?

FB: Well, yes, there were, and we strictly associated. My father strictly associated himself with Jewish people.

MW: Always?

FB: Always, yes.

MW: He didn't have much contact with Gentiles?

FB: No. The only contact we had with Gentiles was, I remember, that we had people working for us, and we somehow established some kind of relationship, that he was friendly with, or on very rare occasions they might have invited us. And I remember when my father and my late mother went away on a vacation, they took us in and cared for us.

MW: The Gentiles, employees, did they treat you well?

FB: Yes.

MW: So, Hitler came to power in 1933. In what ways did that affect you and your family?

FB: Well, at the beginning it did not affect us at all. The circumstances didn't change that rapidly at the very beginning. They succeeded in establishing a policy that Jews were not allowed to go here in the park, and not in the movie, not sitting on the bench, you know, not going...

MW: When did this happen?

FB: ...public places. It happened in 1945.

MW: 1935.

FB: I'm sorry, '35, '36.

MW: And what kind of restrictions were there? You couldn't go to the movies?

FB: No. As a Jew you were not allowed to go to the movies. You were not allowed to sit on the benches. They were marked, "For Aryans Only."

MW: So you were 10 years old when that kind of stuff started to happen? How did you and your family feel about that?

FB: Well, I guess my father thought that this is just a restriction, that's not

going to get worser than that, and we took it in stride, so to speak. You know, that this is what it is. That's what you have to live with if you to remain in Germany.

MW: Did you have any thoughts of leaving at that time? In 1935?

FB: Yes, my father started to make inquiries. There were some families from another side in America and we started to write to them to get us affidavits. So that took place over years and we were put on a waiting list when our number on a quota system to come through. You know, it was already 1938 that they were finally able to give us papers for immigration to the U.S. But due to the quota system we were put on a waiting list. When we were able to be called to the consulate to receive our visa, in the end when the war broke out...

MW: That ended that.

FB: That settled that.

MW: That's unfortunate. That's really unfortunate.

FB: Yes.

MW: Well, can you tell me--the war broke out in 1939?

FB: Yes.

MW: Can you tell me about you and your family between 1935 and 1939, what life was like in Berlin?

FB: Well, life was a strenuous life because the Nazi powers, the Nazis started to get more and more power. And the actions against the Jews became more and more noticeable. And the antisemitism grew more and more, not only from the adults, but as well from the children.

MW: Can you give me a sense of your own experience during those years, what it was like for you?

FB: I was playing on the street with kids of my age and they started to call me, "You Jew you go away. We can't play with you," and things of that nature. And I found to be discriminated by the gentile children, refused any association with me being that I'm Jewish.

MW: How did that feel?

FB: Well, that felt like being rejected just like somebody would have a pest [plague]. You feel rejected, not just as a human being, but as a person being, I shouldn't call it religious, but as of a Jewish tribe, that you are a Jew that nobody wants to be bothered with.

MW: How else did it affect your family? Was your business taken? Did you have to move, things like that?

FB: Well, I wasn't very much informed in my father's business because I was a youngster. I went to school, and I was busy with my schoolwork. But my father always complained, you know, that the work he used to get from the supplier diminished from time to time and it started to be less and less. He used to employ about 10 people, and as time got worse he had to have a smaller shop.

MW: Did you and your family at this time belong to any Jewish organization?

FB: You mean at the time during the war? I'm sorry I don't get your question.

MW: Did you and your family belong to any Jewish organization?

FB: Yes, I belonged to the *Maccabi*, *Hashomer Hatzair*, and to *Bar Kochba*.

MW: What were they?

FB: *Bar Kochba* was an organization which dealt mainly with the--I'm looking for the right word, you know, like gymnastics and sports. And *Maccabi* was a Zionist organization where you were informed and practiced Jewish history, you know, sort of preparation for *aliyah* to Israel.

MW: The Zionist organizations-- were those organizations continued? Were they allowed to exist? As time went on, what happened?

FB: Well, it existed during the time, but then things started to get worse. And people started to leave Germany and emigrate to various other European countries, and even to on *aliyah* to Palestine. It started to be less and less. When I left Germany in 1939, the organizations had a very minimal amount of members.

MW: You left Berlin in 1939?

FB: Yes.

MW: Under what circumstances?

FB: Under very not ordinary circumstances. In 1938 the German government decided to take all Polish citizens and send them back to Poland. So, in 1938, that was after the...

MW: Polish Jews? Polish gentiles?

FB: Polish citizens which was 99.9% Jewish. The whole thing started after the assassination of the ambassador in Paris, which was done by a fellow by the name of Grynszpan. One day, let me retrace it, you know that Germany was a dictatorship country. Everybody had to be registered, what you were, who you are, what your nationality was, and so on and so forth. So it was very easy for the police to find out who you are, what you are, and come to pick you up. So when they picked up my father, being he was Polish, and they repatriated him and my late-- I shouldn't say that -- my brother back to Poland. So one beautiful day in November Poland was faced with the absorption of thousands of citizens, which they never knew existed. I shouldn't say never knew existed, because everybody had a passport, but they were Poles not living in Poland.

MW: Your father and brother were sent back to Poland?

FB: Yes.

MW: Where in Poland were they sent?

FB: Well, they were sent to an absorption center, and then from there my father was permitted to go back to the town where he was born.

MW: And your brother?

FB: With my brother.

MW: And what happened to you and your mother?

FB: We remained in Berlin because Poland put a stop to it and they thought we are going to issue visas to these people to return to Poland, the wives and the children. I was just 13 then and they didn't take me, but they took my brother. He was over 13.

MW: And what happened with you and your mother? You stayed in Berlin?

FB: We stayed in Berlin and...

MW: How did you support yourself?

FB: Well, we gave up our apartment and we moved in with another family where also the husband went back to Poland. And I did some odd jobs, not that this supported us, but it brought in a couple of dollars, a couple of marks every week.

MW: Did your mother work?

FB: Yes.

MW: What did she do?

FB: She was a seamstress.

MW: What was life like in those years without your father and your brother, and you and your mother living with another family? Tell me.

FB: Well, life was sort of a day-to-day life. Socially we only associated with close family. We kept together and we were waiting, helping each other.

MW: Waiting for what?

FB: For a visa to go to Poland to join my father and my brother.

MW: Tell me what happened as the war progressed.

FB: As the war progressed we finally, three months before the war started, we were able to join my father and brother.

MW: Three months before the invasion?

FB: Yes. And the place where my father was, was very close to the German border.

MW: Where was that? What was the name?

FB: The name was Chrzanow.²

MW: How do you spell that?

FB: C-H-R-Z-A-N-O-W. And we joined them then, when we got the permission to go to Poland. And it was summertime, so we spent a couple of weeks together. My late grandmother, she had a farm where we spent the time together. And then the war started. As you know, as history tells us, it didn't take the Germans very long, and within a couple of days they started to invade. They started to come to that particular town where we had settled. We started to run away from the Germans.

MW: On foot?

FB: On foot, yes.

MW: You and your father and your mother and your brother?

FB: Yes, and we ran across fields, farm fields, up the roads, because the roads

² Chrzanow - near Cracow, Poland, with about 8,000 Jews in 1939.

were taken up with all kinds of armies-- Polish armies. But the Germans caught up with us during the next three days-- paratroopers-- so we decided to return to the place that we left. And the atrocities started right then and there. There were people there, Jews, who also fled.

MW: We're talking about 1939 still?

FB: That's right.

MW: And there were a lot of Jews in the town and what did the Germans do to them?

FB: Well, first of all they beat them up, cut off their beards, and they took them to perform labor to establish these military camps for the Germans. Because when they came in, they had to put up tents in order to live. So that's what they took these people for and they were separated from their families.

MW: Were you among the people that filled the camps, the army camps?

FB: No, not at that time.

MW: You stayed with your mother?

FB: We stayed with my mother, my brother and my father.

MW: And your father went?

FB: No.

MW: None of you went?

FB: No, my father didn't have a beard, so he was spared at that particular time. But we proceeded to go back to this little village where we started out from to escape the Germans. And when we came back we went back to the apartments and we didn't know what to do and what the next day will bring.

MW: How long were you there?

FB: Well, as the Germans invaded the country and established themselves, things started to normalize themselves by the Germans to start to grab people off the streets to take them to work in the army installations.

MW: How long did you stay in the town?

FB: How long did I stay in the town? I stayed in that town for approximately a year and a half.

MW: And how did your family support themselves in this town for a year and a half?

FB: Well, things started being very hectic. They started to make-- I don't know how you would call it in English-- but they staged several actions, they staged actions during the day of grabbing people off the streets to work for them. Then there was a Jewish committee organized from this little village. Everybody had to work.

MW: Were you and your father included?

FB: Me and my father included, yes.

MW: What kind of work did you do?

FB: This is the whole story what kind of work I did. My father went to work

into a factory where they manufactured German army coats and jackets.

MW: And what did you do?

FB: I went to work for a German distributor. He distributed soda and beer. I was given a team of horses, which I never know how to drive, and I was given a carriage, and I had to load the carriage with sodas and beer and beer barrels, and to the various locations to distribute the soda and beer, you know, and the beer barrels.

MW: Hard work and you were not paid?

FB: No, I was not paid for it.

MW: How did your family get food?

FB: Well, my father and my mother, they got paid for the work they did at the factory.

MW: How long--what happened when you left this town? When did you leave?

FB: I left the town when the town was cleared out from Jews.

MW: When was this?

FB: This was in 1942, beginning of winter, February.³

MW: And where were you taken?

FB: Well, I escaped due to the fact that I had to get up at four o'clock in the morning to feed the horses and clean them. I noticed what was going on, that the town was sealed off by the German Army, and they started to take the people out of the houses.

MW: You saw this and you left?

FB: I seen it so I went into the woods.

MW: And your family?

FB: They were taken.

MW: Where? Do you know?

FB: My father was taken to a labor camp and my mother was taken to Auschwitz.

MW: You had a brother?

FB: Yes, my brother was taken to the camp at the very beginning of 1940.

MW: Did your mother and father survive?

FB: My mother did not survive, no.

MW: And your father?

FB: My father survived and my brother survived.

MW: Okay, so you went into the woods in February, 1942.

FB: Yes.

MW: Go on. I'd appreciate if you could talk a little bit more quickly because we're going to run out of time and I want to get the whole story on tape.

FB: Well, alright, I'm going to talk a little more quickly. I'm trying to make it successively the way things have happened.

³He might mean 1942 as the last transport from Chrzanow to Birkenau was in February 1943.

MW: That's what I want you to do, exactly.

FB: I got to think about the time and how it happened. Now, I'm going back.

Tape one, side two:

FB: It was also permitted from the military government to go to the camps to deliver beer to the army, to the German Army, so at one time I delivered a load of beer to a camp which was about 10 miles away. And there I see that my brother was in that camp. So when I entered the camp I spoke to the German commander there and I told them that I noticed a person there, and it looks like this is my brother, can I go to see him and talk to him. So he permitted me to talk to him. So when I spoke to him I made arrangements with the camp commander that he be permitted to come to the village to buy medications for the people in that camp. Now he got the permission and he permitted him, with the guard, to come back to the village to buy the medications. When we came to the village I managed to get him to come home and get a meal and this and that, you know. But we bribed the guard with vodka, liquor, you know, so he was permitted to repeat these things whenever there was medication needed, which happened from time to time. I also was lucky to establish the fact that the people in this camp were from Belgium, and they started to pass away in great numbers, and it was not cemetery there. I persuaded the camp commander--I don't know, he must have been a good fellow--to permit me to come on Sunday with a different carriage to pick up the people that died and get 10 people to come to the village to bury all the people who died during the week. And he permitted it by supplying the guards to come to the village. I, in turn, also started to organize that in the village they started to cook soup, and clothing, and this and that. So whenever the people came in they were treated, like you would say, with a bonus, by getting soup and clothing and things like that. And every time there were other 10 people that were permitted to come, so it was on a rotating basis that they came into the town and met other people there and we were able to help them in that way. And I was able to establish that.

MW: So you were in town, and your brother was not there with you. He was in a camp and you were there with your mother.

FB: Right, and my father.

MW: And you saw what was happening and you got up very early and you ran into the woods.

FB: Yes.

MW: Okay, take it from there.

FB: So when I was in the woods I joined a group who were the partisan group. And at one time, when we were hidden in a soap factory way outside the village, we were caught by the Germans and we were taken to the police, beaten up, and [unclear] we were sent to a camp.

MW: What camp?

FB: At that time that was still a forced labor camp.

MW: What was the name of it?

FB: Faulbrück. F-A-U-L-B-R-Ü-C-K. [subcamp of Gross-Rosen]

MW: Faulbrück?

FB: Yes.

MW: And you were there from 1940 - 1943, without your family?

FB: Yes, without my family.

MW: You were there alone.

FB: That's right.

MW: So that was from the age of 15 - 18?

FB: Yes.

MW: What was life like in that camp?

FB: Life was very tough because the sanitary conditions were just indescribable, the food was horrible, and...

MW: All men?

FB: Yes, only men. And typhoid broke out in that camp, which I also had, and I survived the incubating period due to the fact that I had a friend who came to me and gave me water. There were no medications, no doctors, no nothing, and that's how I survived the typhoid period. But 85% of the camp died from the typhoid sickness.

MW: So you did forced labor from 1940 - 1943?

FB: Yes.

MW: What kind of labor?

FB: Well, we worked in rebuilding factories for the war, from Krupp, the steel manufacturer, or whatever he is. We carried oxygen tanks, cement, unloaded railroad cars, you know, hard labor.

MW: Did you live in barracks?

FB: No, in this camp we lived, it was a mill. There was a four floor tall building and we lived in there. There was a narrow staircase, and when we had to go down in the morning it was a horror. Because to get these hundreds of people down in a narrow stairway, normally it would have taken hours, you know. There was a guard on top, not a guard, a Kapo, who started to beat you up, and you just fell down, so to speak, in order to escape the beating. That's the way the morning started, and then we came out to place where we assembled. And there we were counted, and then we marched off to go to work, which was a distance away. And from that place we returned in the evening.

MW: When you were sent to-- what's the name of the camp-- Faulbrück?

FB: Faulbrück.

MW: How did you get to Faulbrück in 1940, you and the people that were captured? What means of transportation was there?

FB: We were sent with a special police car because [not clear].

MW: So you lived this horrible life for about three years?

FB: Yes.

MW: And you managed to stay alive even though you had typhoid, typhus, and you recovered from that?

FB: Yes.

MW: And you did the forced labor?

FB: Right.

MW: And what happened that you left there?

FB: Well, I didn't leave on my volition, because they took out a transport of the people. You know, we were maybe 2,000 people there so they took a group of about 500 people out, and they sent us to Auschwitz.

MW: 1943. How long were you in Auschwitz?

FB: I was in Auschwitz till the liquidation of Auschwitz, which was in 1944.

MW: You were there for a year?

FB: Yes.

MW: What was that like?

FB: Well, we knew about Auschwitz. And when we arrived there we were just wondering what will happen to us, whether we will be going to the oven or whether we're going to the camp for work. And luckily we were selected to go to the camp. Nobody from our transport was selected for the crematorium, and we got processed. We had to drop our clothes, you know, and we got numbered, the tattoo numbers, and then we are assigned to a barrack. And the next day we had to out to work.

MW: What kind of work did you do?

FB: What kind of work did we do? We worked on the railroad. We worked in rooting out woods to build a highway. We were unloading railroad cars for the army. We were carrying cement bags.

MW: You weren't fed very well, were you?

FB: No.

MW: What the diet?

FB: The diet was, we got, what do you call it when you dish out the soup? Well, we were dished out a portion of soup which was water. It was made out of leaves, out of leaves, and I know that for a fact, leaves from a tree. And then we got something that was supposed to be coffee, which was just dark water. It was never coffee.

MW: How did you keep going? What kept you, what gave you the ability to endure this?

FB: I always am asked the same question, and I must answer, just faith and endurance, and knowing that there'll be a day that I'll be freed.

MW: Did you know of anything that was going on or in the world while you were there?

FB: Nothing. We didn't know anything. I was--I had brushes with death so many times. It's too numerous and unbelievable.

MW: Can you tell me one story?

FB: One story, yes. I can tell you one which is not very horrorsome but it's that from shaving in Auschwitz, I developed a rash on my face and I was transferred to

the sick bay. And the sick bay was created at a time by certain doctors who were in charge of the sick bays because they started to diminish the population of Auschwitz already some time ago. And if you got on sick bay you never got out. I was put into a bed and I was physically not in the best shape, but I was positioned in front of a door that opened to the crematorium, where the people from the sick bay were just transferred. And I didn't wash myself. We didn't have many occasions to wash anyhow, but whatever little water I had I didn't use it to wash my face. And somehow the rash got less without any medication or anything, so one day the doctor came in and looked at my face and he said, "You go out." And I thought that was the end so I was taken into the back of the barrack. And then a couple of hours later I was released back to the barrack where I used to be before, and in my opinion, and anybody who was there and knew what went on says the same thing that I am saying that it was a miracle, a real miracle, that I got out of there. Because it was just like when you got in there, it was like the kiss of death, that you were doomed to die. So I came out of there and I went back to the barracks and back to work. And it reestablished my faith that I was not ready to join God Almighty, and it proved itself on various other occasions that when I went out on the death march when they liquidated Auschwitz...

MW: When was that?

FB: That was in January 1945.

MW: How far did you go on the death march?

FB: Well, we went pretty far.

MW: How many days were you marching?

FB: I was marching about four days.

MW: With no clothing to protect yourself from the weather?

FB: No clothing. We had these wooden shoes, you know, and the snow stuck to it, and the snow that we walked on was about two or three feet deep. So every time you made a step you sank into the snow and it was an effort. And anybody who dropped down just got a bullet in the head, and that was the end of it. And even the German guards started to discard their gas masks and the other things that they had. It was too much for them to walk, so imagine we as prisoners, undernourished and sick and all that, to march in the deep freeze. Because in Poland, when it gets cold there, the temperature, I'm not exaggerating, is at least 40 degrees below zero. And you had icicles from the vapor from your mouth forming on your nostrils and your eyes, and all that, and your ears, and it was really an effort to keep yourself going and to keep yourself alive.

MW: How did you do it?

FB: I have no answer. I say it was just God who kept me alive, just my faith, that one day I'm going to survive. And that's what kept me going, because the condition I was in was subhuman.

MW: Where did the march end?

FB: The march ended in another concentration camp, Gross-Rosen.

MW: G-R-O-S...

FB: No, G-R-O-S-S R-O-S-E-N, and...

MW: It says here that you were also in Dachau in addition to Auschwitz.

FB: I am coming to that portion now.

MW: Okay.

FB: Would you have a cigarette?

MW: Help yourself.

FB: We came to that camp there and the conditions there was abnormal because there were some other camps that were evacuated to that particular camp. And there was a transport going out of this camp and that was after two days being there. And I know that the Russians are close by--that I might have to evacuate again. And I said better let me go on this transport and start my survival that way.

MW: Was that a cattle car?

FB: We got out at the camp. We were loaded into cattle cars, open...

MW: How long were you traveling in the cattle cars?

FB: About 12 days.

MW: During that time were you given food?

FB: No, nothing at all.

MW: No food, no water?

FB: No food, no water.

MW: So people were dying?

FB: People were dying, and we threw them overboard to have more room for us, to be able, instead of standing, to sit down. See, the amount of people that came in, there was no room to sit down. So we had to stand next to each other. So as people started to faint, and this and that, we just threw them overboard. Some people resorted themselves to eat human flesh, too, because there was just a great amount of hunger. When there was snowing we kept our mouths open to get some snowflakes to have some kind of relief. And we traveled under these conditions, being parked on railroad stations, being subject to air raid attacks, and after 10 days we arrived at Dachau. In Dachau there was about-- in the whole transport, I would say, there was about 4,000 or 5,000, 6,000 people on that transport--maybe 1,000 survived.

MW: How long were you in Dachau?

FB: How long was I in Dachau? I was in Dachau till April.

MW: From January to April?

FB: Yes. We were put into quarantine, is that the right English word?

MW: Mmm hmm [affirmative].

FB: And being in quarantine for a week we were sent to an outside camp belonging to Dachau and to work. And there I take a look around, and I see my brother there. So I walked over to my brother, and he did not recognize me because I was just skin and bones from the ordeal. And he was in this camp a little longer, so he was known

there and so he took me under his wing and gave me a little bit of his bread and a little extra soup and a little this and that. And he nourished me back a little bit to strength, and there we worked on an airfield. It was an airplane factory but we were not allowed to go in the factory, but we worked on the outside to make an airfield so the planes could land and so on and so forth. And we received an order in April to be loaded into railroad cars again, and we found out from the guard that we are going to be loaded into the railroad cars for extermination, for liquidation, in the Alps. And we went into these railroad cars and traveled for a day. At that particular time I think that the airplane mistook it as a troop transport and started to attack the train, and chaos erupted among the guards and we managed to-- these were not cattle cars, these were closed cars. We managed to open a window and jumped out. They had very small narrow windows on top of the cars, and my brother and I, we said, it's now or never. And we jumped off the train, and this happened to be where woods were, and we ran into the woods, and we were hiding there. There we met with French farm workers and...

MW: You were in France?

FB: No, no, they were in Germany, that was in Germany. But they had these prisoners, French prisoners of war working for the Germans in the fields. And they told us to stay there, and they came back and brought us clothing and a hat, because our head was shaved. And they told us in which direction to go where we would meet other people who would help us. And we marched, we didn't march we walked, in that direction and we linked up with other French workers, who also helped us. In the interim, the German Army started to retreat. So one night we woke up there, and in front of us they put the machine gun to wait for the Americans to come. So I thought that this would be the end, but luckily they got orders to move out. And we moved in. We started to walk into a trap because the soldiers were dug into the fields and we stepped on one guy's head, you know, and we had a lot of explaining to do, who we are and what we are.

MW: These were American soldiers?

FB: No, no, no, the German soldiers. You know, and we told them we were French workers going back to the village.

MW: Can you get to the end of the story? I want to get the whole thing on tape.

FB: Alright. So, anyway, we, after several other circumstances, and meeting up with a priest who told us to go to a certain farmhouse, we went to that farmhouse, which was full of German soldiers who quit the German Army, and waited for the American Army. And we stayed there and that night the American Army overtook the Germans. And in the morning we walked out of that German farmhouse, and we see all white flags hanging and we knew that this must have been the end. And we walked down to the highway and we met up with some German soldiers, who capitulated the Germany Army, and when we came to the highway we got caught up with a jeep with American soldiers. They didn't know who we were, and they told us to raise our hands, and that that, and then we told them that we were... *[End of interview.]*