HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HARRY BASS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Eileen Steinberg
Date: August 22, 1983

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HS - Harry Bass [interviewee]
ES - Eileen Steinberg [interviewer]
Date: August 22, 1983
Historical Endnotes by Dr. Michael Steinlauf

Tape one, side one:

ES: This is Eileen Steinberg interviewing Harry Bass, August 22, 1983, side one. Please tell me where you were born, and when, and a little about your family.

HB: I was born in Bialystok, Poland, October 10, 1920. We were a family of eight, six kids and my parents. Four of us survived.

ES: What was your life like before the war, or before your life was changed by the Nazi victories in Europe?

HB: Well, I was like any other young boy in Europe. Belonged to Zionist organizations and active. Living a happy life, especially in Poland, before the war, in '38, '39, wasn't so bad. There was plenty antisemitism, but in our city we didn't feel it that much, because particularly in Bialystok, if you know the history, it was known as a Jewish city.[1] The whole city was practically, the Poles many times expressed themselves, "The land is ours, but the properties and the businesses is Jewish." So, it was this until the occupation from the Germans.

ES: So generally, you didn't feel any antisemitism as you were growing up?

HB: No. Not too much.

ES: Okay. Did you or your family belong to any Jewish organizations? You just mentioned you belonged to a Zionist--or to a synagogue, before the Nazis came to power? Tell me about the organizations you belonged to.

HB: I did belong to the Zionist, the Begin's Party, Jabotinsky,[2] and in fact I do know Menachem Begin well, whenever I go to Israel, he always--sometimes, whenever we have a chance, which is really always, we stop in to say hello to him, because he remembers me well. He used to come and talk; we used to have seminars for our organizations, and he used to be one of the big wheels, and Zabotinsky himself came to Bialystok lots of times.

ES: Tell me about the Zionist group that you belonged to? What kind of activities were you involved with?

HB: Well, we were young at that time, and the activities were practically every Friday night. We used to have different guys talking to us, and teaching us Hebrew, and all kinds of things. Teaching us that--the past--Trumpeldor,[3] how he felt, you know, as youngsters, you tried to explain the history of the party.

ES: Did your family belong to a synagogue?

HB: Yes, we did. Absolutely, especially in Bialystok. My mother was a very religious woman.

ES: Were there many synagogues in Bialystok? What type of Jewish population was there?

HB: Bialystok? More than 100 synagogues. More than 100 synagogues. In fact, I had my own speeches. We had, one time, we had our own program on the radio, a Jewish program, years ago, and I spoke about my hometown, that Bialystok has been known for one of the most, biggest Jewish centers of Europe. A lot of synagogues and a lot of organizations and parties, left parties, right parties, orthodox people, and in Bialystok itself, we had a lot of nice, prominent people in this world. Dr. Zamenhof,[4] for instance. He was the one who--Esperanto language. You've heard of the Esperanto language?

ES: Yes.

HB: And also the past President of Israel, Katzir, he was a Bialystoker. Yadin, you heard of him too? He was also a Bialystoker. Whom else can I mention? There were a lot of Bialystokians. I have it in my speeches, but for the moment I can't think. Maybe it will come to me later.

ES: Okay. Did any men in your family serve in any national army?

HB: My father.

ES: Tell us about that.

HB: My father was in the Polish Army, First World War. He was also in the Army in the Second World.

ES: Can you tell me a little about your life in Poland in the early part of 1939, before the German invasion?

HB: I guess I mentioned some of it now, that like any other young man in Europe, that we were involved in the groups, and we were a happy bunch. But in '39, in the beginning, it felt already at that time when the Germans started to build up, and there was talk about a war, and Nazism. What we felt in '37[5] [October 1938], when the Germans did send out some of the Jews which were not born in Germany, they were Polish-born, but they did remain since the First World War, and they did send them out. They used to call them the *Flüchtling* [refugee], or I would say, the refugees, or whatever. It was felt...

ES: Okay. Was there a *kehilla* in Bialystok?

HB: Yes. A *kehilla* is like a federation.[6]

ES: Okay. How did your family feel about it?

HB: About what?

ES: The *kehilla*.

HB: Well, I guess, anybody was more or less, like being young, in any other country, and any other federation. If you were able to, you supported it. And, like I told you before, we were a well-known family in Bialystok. If anybody knows the name Bass, they respected us.

ES: What occupation did your father have?

HB: We were in the meat business, butchers.

ES: What happened to you and your family during the weeks following the German invasion?

HB: Six, five or six weeks after, we were in hiding places. Five or six weeks after they made out the Ghetto.[7] We all came into the Ghetto, except my father. My father was in the Russian--he was a Russian war prisoner.

ES: Okay. Did you receive any help of any kind during this time from non-Jews? You said you were in hiding. Were you helped by any non-Jews?

HB: Yes, I did. In fact, I did get--well, I wouldn't call it exactly help. I used to trade with them. Bring me out some, let's say, like, certain leather goods, or like, what do you call it, clothing, and trade it for food, and bring it into the Ghetto. Illegally, naturally.

ES: Right. Where was your family hiding? Where?

HB: Hiding, for instance, where?

ES: You said during the, before the Ghetto was set up?

HB: Well, we were living in our own house. Before that particular section, that particular street, did not get into the Ghetto part. So that when we were hiding, we were hiding in stables, on roofs, in basements, not to be caught by the Germans, because they used to go around day and night and catching people and taking them away for labor, or for any other reasons.

ES: Did you go back periodically to your house, or did you stay away from it completely?

HB: We stayed away. We stayed away.

ES: When were you ordered to go to the Ghetto?

HB: Six weeks, June, like, I guess, must have been August time, because the war started in June with the Russians,[8] and it was like five, six weeks later.

ES: Okay, we're talking about the Bialystok Ghetto now? It was set up in that time?

HB: Well, I'm talking about the Bialystok Ghetto. I cannot say anything else about other ghettos.

ES: Most of your community, most of your community go to the Bialystok Ghetto?

HB: Well, the whole city. As the Ghetto was formed, they used to bring in people from little villages, little towns around, and bring them into the Bialystok Ghetto. In fact, I have stories of my own, about the same thing which I just tried to explain to you. I used to bring in food. I can tell you about a story when I went one time, there was a girl, that her brother used to belong with me in the same organization. He was a year older. He was taken to the Russian army. He was 19. And I felt some kind of closeness to that family. And when the Germans came in, they brought them in from little villages, and they threw them into stables, horse stables. In the wintertime it was wet, and you know, the horses. I felt we couldn't do nothing about it. The only thing I could do about it was to give them some food. I, we went there not too long ago, a few years back, I went to a Bar

Mitzvah, to one of my friends, he grew up in New York, and I was looking, I knew that she survived, and I was looking for her for years and years, and I couldn't find her. Whomever I asked, everybody gave me different places and different name. She was married, and nobody knew her name, her maiden name. And, sure enough, she was in the same Ghetto that that lady that I went to the Bar Mitzvah. And as I sat at the table, my wife and me sat right by the head table, because we were very close friends with those people, we went to school together, and we grew up together, and she felt so good that we came. She was honored, because [unclear] education, what I explained to you before, I did them a little favor, because in 1947, '48, in Germany, there was a quota system. By being a quota system, nobody could emigrate, especially the Polish quota was the slowest quota. But they did permit like teachers, cantors, actors, they were excluded. So, she went with me to school, and I felt some kind of a closeness, and I went that time, I'll never forget, she is a Philadelphian, she worked in HIAS in Philadelphia, but she was at that time worked in HIAS in Munich, and I gave her some papers that says she is a teacher, and she came to the United States. So, I felt, I did a lot of those things for some people, and she felt so close to me she put her head [unclear] while I was sitting and eating, and that particular girl, Mindel was her name, and she came over to me and she started crying, "Are you Yussel?" I said yes. She recognized me immediately. I didn't, because when I left she was a tiny little girl. That girl was nice and thin, but she recognized me and she came over to me. We started to cry and we started to talk about it. So the rabbi, it was an orthodox Bar Mitzvah, by the way, because she sent the boy to the orthodox Yeshiva, because at that time it was the Korean War. She didn't want him to go to the war, so that she sent him to the Yeshiva. And the rabbi came over to us and she told the story. She said, "Rabbi, anytime the men came into our house, we had food." You ought to hear, the Rabbi made a speech about it. I was crying.

ES: She remembered.

HB: That's why I know those things. If I were to sit with you, you could sit here with me five years. You will write stories that are unbelievable. Even being in Philadelphia.

ES: Well, we're going to try and hear some of those. Were you able, at first, to leave the Ghetto to work?

HB: Yes, sure.

ES: Okay. When was the Ghetto closed?

HB: Completely?

ES: Yes.

HB: Well, any day they would close it completely when they had to make a selection, or they had to take out people to the crematoriums or to kill them. That's the time they used to surround it, and they didn't let anybody out. But otherwise, the Ghetto was practically open[9] because we used to go out of the Ghetto to go to work every time.

That's why I used to go out and get in touch with some of the Gentile people in exchange for food and things like that.

ES: So you were able to really come and go rather freely, except when they closed it?

HB: Yes, well not exactly freely. Every little thing has a little story. Like I said, I grew up there, and my father was in the Polish Army. He was a secretary for the war veterans there, and I knew a lot of Poles in Bialystok, and I had some--I would say a little bit more, maybe a footstep to the Gentile community, to some of the people, and I used to go out and exchange for food, and bring it in. I also had a man, in fact, he lives in Philadelphia. He was staying at the gate, going into the Ghetto. He was like a watchman, with some of the German soldiers. Sometimes they used to take him into their room, and started to play cards with him, and they got busy with the cards. He let them make it, you know, win a little bit, you know, it got them into the cards, so the other guy who used to open the gate, we used to run with food at four, five o'clock in the morning, when it was dark. That was the only time we could go in, otherwise they would not allow it.

ES: You said that they brought some people, refugees from other villages, into the Ghetto. Did they bring any refugees from other countries?

HB: No, not from other countries, as far as I know. I don't think so. Mostly from the province, like, we called a province, it means like from the surrounding areas.

ES: Okay. After the Ghetto was closed, were you able to have contact with the outside?

HB: Well, we used to have a little contact, very little, usually late at night. Sometimes, like I explained before, some of those people used to be in the Partisans, or other connections, but very limited.

ES: How did you and your family support yourselves in the Ghetto?

HB: In the Ghetto? I just explained that to you.

ES: By going out and meeting the Gentiles...

HB: And bringing in food. Not only my family, I wish I could prove it to you, but tens of families. When I talk to you, I feel like crying about it.

ES: Was there any telephone service from within the Ghetto to the outside?

HB: Maybe there was telephones, but we didn't have it.

ES: Okay. Because I had spoken, I had heard someone else speak, and they spoke about telephone service to the outside, and I was very surprised about that. I didn't think there would have been any.

HB: I don't know. When I tell you the stories, it's exactly the way it happened. But sometimes, people may dramatize it. I never heard of a telephone...

ES: No, this was another ghetto. This was another ghetto I was...

HB: It may have been possible. I'm not arguing about it, but I know one thing, even in Bialystok, when there used to be the *Judenrat* you heard of the *Judenrat*...

ES: Yes, I was just going to ask you to describe the...

HB: The *Judenrat*.[10] So, I don't know. They had a tie. I never came into them, and I was never in contact with them, so I wouldn't know.

ES: How would you describe the *Judenrat* in your town? How did they choose the people?

HB: From one to ten. I mean, from one to ten, to rated number ten.

ES: Okay. Explain why.

HB: Because they put themselves out. They put their lives on the line to save, many times, they came to certain things, and they would ask for people, they put themselves out to take them. We are ready to go to them. In fact, I know, this is a fact story, that in Bialystok, at one time, they came in to take out some Jews, I don't know if you heard it, but it's in history. A guy by the name of Malamed[11] and he escaped. They didn't catch him. So at that time they came in, and they put an order into the *Judenrat*, if he wouldn't give himself up, they will take out 10,000 Jews and they will kill them. You know how they did it. So, after two, three days, they didn't find him. But he came out himself. They came out with Vitriol. You know what Vitriol is? It's a liquid acid. And when they came in to take him, spilled the bottle. Seven Germans got killed. They started to shoot between themselves, and they did not shoot him, because he escaped. But he came out, and they hanged him that time, in the middle of the street. Now also, then, how do you, for instance, describe the *Judenrat*? When they started looking into, you know what a bunker is, a basement. People were hidden in basements, in bunkers, and places like that. And they knew there were Jews there, but they were afraid to go by themselves already. This was when the revolt in Bialystok,[12] they were afraid to go by themselves. So they used to send the *Judenrat*, those Jewish police, what they used to call them, not exactly police, they used to keep order, *Ordnungsdienst* they used to call them, the Jews they used to keep order. They used to send them instead. And they saw the people, and they came out, nobody was there. So you figure it out, if they did a good job or not.[13]

ES: What age were you when you were in the Ghetto?

HB: Me?

ES: Yes.

HB: '41, 21 or 22.

ES: Okay. So you were finished with your education by that time?

HB: Well, I didn't, I wasn't finished, but we didn't get any more schooling. After '39 I did get the Russian, I went to Russian school.

ES: In the Ghetto?

HB: No. There was no Ghetto in '39. The Ghetto started in '41.[14] From '39 to '41 the Russians were in our city.

ES: Were there any schools in the Ghetto? For the younger children?

HB: There were some schools hidden, naturally, yes. There were teachers, they used to teach school.

ES: But it was all done secretly?

HB: Secretly. Actually, it was nothing open.

ES: Did you have any communication with the outside world, or about events through newspapers or radio?

HB: Newspapers we used to get from time to time. Most of the while I used to sneak in a newspaper, Polish newspapers, from outside world, but anything particular, no.

ES: So you really didn't know what was going on outside of the area where you were?

HB: We did know, through, like I say we were in contact with the partisans, and some of them did know what was going on, but also on a limited basis. One of them, or two of them, someone did know. Everybody was careful, everybody was...

ES: It was just by word of mouth that you heard things, then? Were you aware of any underground in the ghetto? Tell us about that.

HB: Well, I knew some of my friends which were involved, and like I explained it from the beginning, I was also involved, limited. I wouldn't say a lot, like some of--maybe other ones more, but I was involved, because by coming outside, the outside world, so I used to get some, take in some parts of certain--you know, I wouldn't say big ammunition, but on a smaller scale, parts, if they needed it, and things like this. I smuggled them into the ghetto.

ES: How did you feel about resistance to Nazi oppression?

HB: How do I feel now?

ES: No, how did you feel then?

HB: Well, I felt I wished we could do more, but, I guess, armies--in our circumstances, I guess. We did more than we could.

ES: To what extent did the Poles help the Nazis persecute Jews?

HB: Well, the Poles, I think they had a bigger part than the Germans and the Nazis, because many times, many times, I myself, those that did know me used to call me out by my names, "Here goes a Jude," which is "Here comes a Jew," and things like that. So they were all, plenty of them--my brother got killed this way. They pointed at him, and the Germans took him and they killed him in jail.

ES: Were you aware of any Poles who helped hide Jews, or who smuggled food or goods that helped them survive?

HB: We did know some, a few of them, yes.

ES: Did any of them help your family?

HB: My family, well, actually what I explained before, that I used to go out and used to trade with them, exchange for food, because of my family, because they knew me. That was my family, actually. I didn't just go up to anybody that I didn't know. I used to go to some of them that were probably all right, I wouldn't say, maybe they would give me a certain amount or a limited amount for my own family, but we had some goods to exchange, so naturally we used to get it in bigger quantities to help other ones.

ES: Were these the Gentiles that you knew before you were in the Ghetto?

HB: Yes. That was in the neighborhood that we used to have our business, and I knew them, they knew me when I was a little kid yet.

ES: Did you work in a labor unit when you were in the Ghetto?

HB: I used to work in the Ghetto, outside the Ghetto, yes, for the Germans, sure.

ES: What kind of, what did they have you do?

HB: Well, Bialystok, whoever is familiar with it, when they came in, the first day that they came into Bialystok, they started up, as I explained it before, Bialystok had over 100 synagogues. The first thing they came in, so they put some bombs, you know, firebombs, and they pushed in thousands and thousands, you know, I have all the documents of it, thousands and thousands of Jewish people, which they lived in the neighborhood and the surrounding areas around the synagogues. They used to go on the streets and whomever picked them up and put them into the synagogues, and they burned, thousands of people got burned, and they left the city burning three days and three nights. So the whole city burned under. They used to stay at one end of the city, you could see five miles away to the other end of the city. Bialystok was, they used to have a big park, like Philadelphia, for instance, Fairmount Park, it used to be known as one of the largest parks in Poland. And everything was burned down until it all went to the park. So, we used to go out and clean up the city for years, not only for months, it took maybe a couple of years. And then it was not all cleaned up. Do you know how much was there to clean up? A whole big city like this, and so many houses and buildings.

ES: So that was most of the work that they had you do, then, go out and clean up what they had destroyed?

HB: Well, we had to clean it up for them to go by with their machines and cars and all this, because...

ES: To make it easier. When were you deported from the Ghetto to a concentration camp?

HB: December ‘42.

ES: Okay. which camp did you go to?

HB: Straight into Auschwitz,

ES: Okay. Who was sent to Auschwitz? Just you, or any of the other members of your family?

HB: Me, my brother, my sister, my uncle, and my two younger brothers.

ES: What happened to your mother and the rest of your family? Did they remain?

HB: They did remain there. They didn’t find them because when they took us out, somehow she must have been at a neighbor, or maybe she wasn’t there, or, I don’t know what happened, because everything was so fast and so confusing, that we didn’t see each other.

ES: When they took you out, was it one of the roundups, or were they just taking people? That’s when you were taken.

HB: Right. See, it's also a little story. I could have escaped. Maybe I wouldn't say it that I would have escaped completely, but at that particular time, I could have escaped. But my sister was at that time only 13 years of age, and when I started to sneak out through the back door, she started to cry about my leaving us.

ES: So you came back?

HB: Yes, and my sister still remembers it. She started to cry, you know, and I myself figured, it got me so, so I told them, whatever is going to happen to Jews happens with me.

ES: Describe for me your trip to Auschwitz.

HB: Well, they put us in in those closed, what they call them, the animal wagons, you know, the horses or cows, the closed wagons. And, no food, no nothing. People used to drink urine of one another's. You know, it was so hot in the wagons, they used to push in like 100 or more, maybe more people in the wagons. That's the way they transferred us. They brought us into Auschwitz.

ES: How long did it take? How many days?

HB: How many days? It took two days.

ES: Okay. Your sister, your father, your brother, were you all together?

HB: No, my father wasn't with us, he was in the Russian war prison. My father wasn't with us.

ES: Oh, I thought you said--okay. So it was you and your sister and your brother?

HB: My brother, the one there, and my sister, and my two younger brothers. We were all, five kids were there. One brother, the one that I just showed you the picture of him, he was the one that got killed when the Poles showed up on my brother. He was killed in Bialystok in '42.

ES: Okay. I'm sorry. I misunderstood you. Your father then was a prisoner. So he was...

HB: My father was, since '39, he was not with us anymore. He was a prisoner in Russia.[15] We didn't know about him.

ES: Oh, I see. Okay.

HB: The war started in '39, in September of '39, and October, and in November when it was finished, so the Russians took him as a prisoner into Russia. He was [unclear] he traveled six weeks, they got him all the way down into Siberia. Then when they formed the Polish Army, Anders army,[16] I don't know if you heard of them, Anders used to be an army in London, so they formed the army, and at that time the Russians let him go out of there, and he was with the Polish army in Russia, fighting the Germans.

ES: I see. So, your mother then was the only one of your immediate family that was left in the Ghetto.

HB: Right.

ES: Your father was off in Russia, and the rest of the family then was sent to Auschwitz.

HB: I was the one that worked as a manager in the restaurant. I used to be the one the bread-giver in the house. It was that time, I was 20 years of age.

ES: So you were the head of the house when your father was not there.

HB: Right, right.

ES: On the trip, when they put you in the cars to take you to Auschwitz, did the five of you stay together?

HB: Yes, in the same wagon.

ES: Okay. Tell me what happened when you reached Auschwitz.

HB: Like I say, I even had plenty chances to jump out of the wagon, like I say, but I don't know if it would be a good idea, or it wouldn't be a good idea. Some of them did, and I never heard of them. They didn't survive, because the soldiers used to stay on top of the wagons and they were watching them. So like I say, I didn't know, but I would take the chances or not. By the same thing, my sister, and when I would make any kind of move, she started to cry, and it touched me, so I figured, whatever--we didn't know exactly where they were taking us. So, whatever happened with them, would happen with me, but I wouldn't leave them. So then we came down here, and we stopped in Birkenau, naturally they started to chase everybody out, out, out, and started to select. Left, right, left, right. So, my brothers and the other brother, the one who is in Florida and my sister, they sent the other two, they were youngsters, one was 9 and one was 11, and they pushed them over the other side, with some older people, women with kids, and that's it. They went to the crematoriums, and they took us into the slave camp.

ES: So you never saw them again after that.

HB: No. And then we came into the camps, and naturally they started looking for trades. Who was a shoemaker, who was a tailor, who was a--knows how to do some cooking. So, I raised my hand, and I worked in the kitchen, close to two and one-half years, and that wasn't too bad.

ES: All right. So that meant that you were left, and one brother and one sister. Did you have contact with your brother and your sister?

HB: With my brother, I had contact till the last five, six months before, like end of December, in January,[17] when they evacuated, we were separated. Somehow they took me in a different transport, and they got him on a different transport, but until summer we were practically--more than two, two and one-half years together. My sister, I used to see her once in a while when we used to walk by there, because women were separate.

ES: Yes, I know.

HB: I was in Auschwitz, and she was in Birkenau. Birkenau is, I don't know the meaning, what means Birkenau.[18] Birkenau was, I'd say, a wooded area, and I'd say...

Tape one, side two:

ES: This is Eileen Steinberg interviewing Harry Bass, on August 22, 1983, side two. Mr. Bass, you were telling us what the meaning of Birkenau is.

HB: Birkenau, is, I'm sure they have--that's a place that is, like I explained before, they usually used to build those crematoriums. Birkenau was the crematorium section. It used to go under the name of Auschwitz.[19] Auschwitz is the town. It's outside of Birkenau. So they built the crematoriums, and it's a wooded area, and it's a swamp, a lot, and that was the place where they first take you off the trains, and they selected there, and then we used to march. The ones that they used to take into the, like into the labor, for work, they used to take to Auschwitz. And all the other ones, they used to take them into Birkenau, that was the crematorium, that--washrooms, and all the other things that destroyed people. That was Birkenau, and it was hidden. If you would come through on an airplane, I don't know if you would ever see it, because it was all woods around there. Many times, like in the fall, they used to stay to count at the *Appelplatz*[20] [place for roll calls], they used to call it, and they used to stay sometimes. By the time they got done standing there for hours, they used to sink in, all the way onto the [unclear]. It's hard to describe how people sometimes, it happens sometimes that people are stronger than I am. That they could survive something like that. It's unbelievable. I can't even try to describe it.

ES: After you were in Auschwitz what kind of work did they have you do in the camp?

HB: The first couple of weeks in Auschwitz we used to unload some bricks. Bauhof commanded them. Bauhof means the railroad used to come down, the train used to come down, and we used to unload the bricks, because they did build some new buildings there. What for, I don't know, because I wasn't too long there. I was only a little while, like I say. And then I went to work in the kitchen.

ES: What did you do in the kitchen?

HB: In the kitchen I peeled potatoes and we cooked, and we cooked potatoes mostly, but that's for the SS kitchen, not the kitchen for them. And it wasn't bad for me, because I was the only Jew, and there was about 22 or 23, mostly Russians, and for certain reasons, they respected me a little bit, because they needed a translator to translate from Russian, because the Russians, somehow they're hard at languages. Even, in the United States, they have a hard time learning to English or special German. So, we did all kinds of things over there, whatever needed to be done. In the kitchen, cut up meat and cook, or whatever.

ES: Were you able to eat a little bit better than the rest because of the job that you had?

HB: Oh yes, no question about it. I had my food, I didn't eat openly. Sometimes, certain guys, they, even the soldiers saw this, they did see, and sometimes they even asked

you, "Here are," they used to call me Herman. "Herman, here's stick *wurst*." That is, here is a piece of salami for you, or something like that. So, some of them, they were nice. In fact, I'll tell you a little story about one of the guys. If I would find him, believe me, I would give them half of my things for that guy. He was a German soldier. At one time, I used to give out a lot of, they used to give out a lot of potatoes in the skins, you know, cooked. The Germans they have a tradition, like we have, like bagel and lox, for Sunday morning breakfast, and they had home fries and eggs. That was their treat on Sunday morning. So sometimes we used to get a lot of soldiers, so most of the potatoes went, and many times, we used to have a lot of potatoes left over. So the next morning, Monday morning, there they used to go then, it used to be those commandos, those prisoners used to come out and take, like I say--I have a lot of friends that know what I did for them, so I used to stay under the wires, one by one, the potatoes, and throw them on the other side. Once or twice they caught me. So, the last couple of months, they sent me on a *Strafcommando* [punishment detail], it's a, you know what a *Kommando*[21] is, a group. They sent me to a group where we unloaded cement, and I worked there six weeks. I was almost dead. I was almost dead. Because that little soldier, he recognized me, he was [unclear]. And he comes over to me and he says, "Herman, "*Du schaust so schlimmaus*." [You look so bad.] So, I didn't know him, I, honestly, didn't recognize him, because I was almost dead. And I raised up my eyes to him, and I said to him in German, "You know by cement *kann ich gaz nichts machen*, which means "by cement, you can't eat no cement." So, he said, "Tomorrow morning you go on a different group, a different commando." So I couldn't sleep through the night already. I couldn't wait for it to get light, for the dawn. Finally, 5:00, the bell. I was the first one out from my barrack, the first one out, and I came on the place where we all stand up, where the commandos formed. Then, when it gets a little lighter, we are all marching out. So he walks around and looks for me. And he comes over to me and said, "Come with me." And my *Kapo*,[22] you know what a *Kapo* means, *Kapo* means command police. That *Kapo* comes over, he was a Pole, and he was screaming that you could hear him for miles. In all kind of names, you know, they have all kind of good names. But he might have been twice as tall as he was, but he was still a German, and he was a prisoner. So he said, he called me over, and where do you think he took me into?

ES: The kitchen?

HB: No. In the warehouse where they supplied all the food.

ES: Oh, my.

HB: And you should have seen that. I had a friend of mine, he lives in New York now. Nathan is his name. And he saw me, and got scared to death. I was afraid to look at my face, I was so skinny. I was always slim and tall, but after five, six weeks working in that place, I got so skinny and he got scared to death. After a while I walked, as soon as I walked into the warehouse, the first thing I did is I did get a hold of a, you know, the condensed milk, the sweet milk, it comes from France. I don't know, I think the French

they were the first ones to discover it, if I'm not mistaken. But it came from France. The first thing I did was made a hole and sipped one out. And through the day, before the day was gone, I had two of them already. And I also had some cans, you know, little cans of peas. And I started to eat, and I am telling you, what an appetite! I never had enough. And I was to go in places, and everything I found there was ready to eat, I ate. After being four or five weeks, I was so fat that I could not--my friends used to come over, and they used to pinch me, honest to God. That's why I had the strength to go through that march. That was like September or October of '44 when I came.[23] But what I am trying to explain, after the war, I didn't know how to describe, and I wish I would find that little German. He saved my life. If I would have been there another week, I would have never made it.

ES: I haven't heard too many stories about good German soldiers. That's one of the few stories.

HB: That helped me. He took me away from there, because, see, there was also a story in a story. When I worked in the kitchen, sometimes that soldier, some of the soldiers, he was appreciative, this guy. They came in, and sometimes they used to have like a day off or a night off. They were young guys, 19, 20, some of them 22, or whatever. They used to come in and say he was going out, to meet the girls, or wherever, so he used to come and he wanted a bottle of beer. They didn't bother me, so I would go down to the basement and pick up a bottle of beer and gave it to him. And they used to have those little cigarettes, they used to come 10 in a package, Czechoslovakian cigarettes, they used to call them zora. So I would take a package of cigarettes and give it to him. So, like I say, that was the thing that saved me. There was quite a few that I helped in certain ways. Like I explained before, when they caught me giving out the potatoes, some of them would beat me up to pieces. But some of them walked over and said, "That's enough, that's enough." And things like this. But that little one, if I would see him, I would give him one-half of my property.

ES: How long did you work in the warehouse?

HB: It was, like I say, we started up in like September or October until the evacuation, until January 18. About four or five months.

ES: Tell us about the evacuation. What happened, and where you were taken.

HB: Well, the evacuation, that was on January 18, 1945.[24] And at that time, they called everybody on the *Appelplatz*. The *Appelplatz* means the place that they counted us. They used to count us 55 times a day, like diamonds. They were scared that somebody would run away from them. A millions times, many times if it didn't agree exactly to one person, they used to keep us for hours and hours at a time counting. You know, there were thousands and thousands that they had to count, sometimes. So they put us up in the *Appelplatz* and they started to march. So we marched and got to was almost, I don't know, I shouldn't say it, but certain things--that particular evening it started to snow, wet snow, and the snow was piling up. All of us practically, we used to have those Holland shoes,

you know from Holland, the wooden shoes. And that snow used to stick, pile up, and they used to trip over. And they used to drive in the back with bicycles, their motorcycles. And whoever fell down, they killed them off. I was fortunate, like I say before, from when I worked in that warehouse, I got to know a couple of guys, civilians, and they got me a pair of shoes with long, high tops. With long laces all the way up the shoes, like army shoes.

ES: So you were able to walk?

HB: Naturally. And that march, if it wouldn't be for that march, we would probably have survived more than 50% of us. More than 50% died through the marches.

ES: Did they tell you where they were taking you, or you just marched?

HB: No. Just marched you. They brought us into a little town like Gleiwitz[25] [Gliwice] was a railroad station town. Then they brought us down here, and everybody fell down like dead dogs. You know, in the snow, everybody was knocked out, they drove us down 70, 80 kilometers overnight. So everybody fell down, and wherever there was a place to lay down, they laid down. And then they came down with those trains, you know, half open, you know, the coal trains, and they loaded us up. They traveled us for days, eight or nine days, and they brought us to that Mauthausen, concentration camp, and through that travel, thousands and thousands of them died, like every five minutes, throw this one off, throw them out. They used to throw them to try to make a little extra room. Things were so crowded, one on top of the other. And they brought us down here and they chased us out, and who could walk out? They were, people were dead. They walked us out and they brought us into the camp. They also sent us into those washrooms. First thing, they wash you off in 20 below zero temperatures. They used to wash us and chase us naked to the other barracks, and they used to give you those uniforms. The tall got a short one, the short got a long one, one left shoe and the other one another left shoe. I don't have to explain. And God forbid, if you stood there and looked at it, you were dead. You couldn't even say nothing, you couldn't even look at nothing. Some guy got two left shoes, another one got two right shoes, one was long, one was short. It was a life!

ES: Tell us your experiences in that camp. What happened?

HB: And try to explain it to some of them, you know, they start coming down and they start denying it. Nothing like this ever happened.

ES: Well, that's why we're doing this.

HB: I know. Well, Brandeis University has thousands of tapes of my own, my own. I can tell you now, I can tell you if you sit with me a year, every time I could come up with different things from my own experience in life.

ES: How long were you in this particular camp?

HB: In Mauthausen? Like I say, until April of '45. Probably about three months or so. Then they brought us to Magdeburg, and they load us up in those ships, and we were standing under the Elbe, and the ships were about 15, 18 days until May 3rd. Then we were liberated.

ES: And the British liberated you?

HB: They liberated, but before they liberated, the Germans sank all the boats. Thousands of thousands of thousands of people drown there. Right after the liberation, the Germans used to go out on the Elbe fishing, and they used to catch those cats, I don't know if they called them in German different, but now I know what kind of fish it is, the cat, you know, catfish. They used to catch those catfish, and they had big mouths. So they used to find pieces of arms, pieces of fingers, buttons, so the rabbis forbidded to eat the fish from there.

ES: Tell us on the tape what you told me before about your boat being torpedoed.

HB: Yes, like I say, the boat was torpedoed by the British or the French, either one of them, because that was the region that the British and the French bombarded. And that boat...

ES: And you were on the bottom level of the boat...

HB: All the Jews were on the bottom level of the boat, and the other nationalities were on the top of the boat, and by torpedoing the boat, the boat turned around. The bottom came up, and this is how we survived. Took about, I heard them talking that time from the Red Cross, that 360 people. Did you know that at that time, on that Navy base, the Navy base that they had in that town, there was a little park, an area. They pulled out, I don't know, I don't know how to describe it, so many thousands of those people, and they buried them in a...

ES: Mass grave?

HB: Mass grave.

ES: Were you, during the time in either one of the camps, when you were in either one of the two concentration camps, were you in contact with any resistance group at all?

HB: No.

ES: There was no way for any kind of contact?

HB: No.

ES: Did you feel strengthened in your experiences by religious faith, or by an ideology such as Zionism or socialism, or by hope in a speedy Allied victory? What kept you going?

HB: Well, for one thing, that strength of life to survive is so, so powerful, it's undescribable, and another thing, every one of us wanted to live to see the end to the Germans particularly, for what they had done. We tried out everything, no matter what. I should tell you, people used to eat grass. I saw it with my own eyes, that one of the Frenchmen, he was also a war prisoner, when I was working in that warehouse, he was to do electrical work. But he used to go outside. He was not allowed to come in. They used to catch little birds and squeeze them to death and then eat them. That power, that will to survive, it was unbelievable.

ES: At any time during your suffering, did you ever think about an escape plan? Did you know of any prisoners who tried to escape?

HB: Oh yes. I didn't know a lot of them, but it didn't do them any good. They caught them, and what they did, they used to hang them in the middle of the camp so that everybody would see. There were some people that tried to escape, plenty of them. That's what I said, they used to count ten times. If one was missing, they didn't send us into the barracks. They was to make sure that all was there. If not, they allowed us to go off right there and everybody was on the outlook for them. They used to catch them. Some of them tried to run away. There were ways made, but how far could you go? There was no place to escape to.

ES: So you didn't consider escape?

HB: No.

ES: Okay. And there was never any kind of resistance discussed among the people where you were, because they thought that it would be hopeless?

HB: They had resistance, they had resistance in Birkenau[26] once, they blowed up one of the crematoriums, but that was towards the end, for some reason. It was going on, but I was not involved in it.

ES: Did you hear anything about it?

HB: No.

ES: No. Okay. What can you tell me about the education of Jewish children before 1941, and then later in the camps or ghettos where you were sent?

HB: Education of what?

ES: Of the children, before 1941. Did they go to public schools? Did they go to...

HB: Oh well, like in my hometown, we had all kind of schools. We had Hebrew schools, Hebrew gymnasiums, you know what a gymnasium is. Hebrew gymnasiums, they had public schools too. Public school was a must. You had to go to public school.[27]

ES: Everybody? Jewish and...

HB: Everybody. Jewish and non-Jewish, and in fact, they used to teach us religion there too, in some of the public schools. When there was a room where the majority was Jewish people, so they would bring in a Jewish teacher and they would teach them Jewish religion, for instance, about Moses and all this, but most the Gentiles would go home. They always used to make the religion hour the last hour of school. So that sometimes when there were Gentile kids, they used to come and teach them the Gentile religion, and the Jewish people would go home. And they had a lot of schools, especially in Bialystok. We had Beth Jacob schools,[28] and Tarbut[29] schools. I know my sister went to Tarbut, and like I said it before, we had Hebrew Gymnasiums,[30] two of them. If you would hear my speech, I counted them all up, because when I sit down and have it all written out on the paper, it is much easier for me. Sure, there were a lot of schools over there in Bialystok. Yiddish, every Jewish--see, when it comes to talking about Yiddish, as

I explained to you before, especially in that particular town, was known as a good Jewish education town. Everything was--we used to come out on a Friday evening, and we used to go to, say like, the more prominent streets. So we used to promenade, walk around on Friday night. Everybody used to dress up beautifully, like years ago on the boardwalk, you know, and show off their clothes and all that. We used to walk around. So the Jewish language was like little canaries, it was singing beautifully.

ES: And you said that after Bialystok became a ghetto, that the only teaching that went on was in secret, and then you didn't see any teaching when you were in the camps, did you?

HB: No. But from time to time, we used to see like, some of them were like, say, more or less religious, and they used to come out before dawn, before the goyim and we used to stay in the corner and *daven*[31] for yourself, and sometimes they used to come Pesach, so if he had a chance to eat a potato,[32] if he had a chance, some of them did have a chance to get a baked potato sometimes, from time to time, so he would avoid to eat that food, if it was at all possible. And some times the Germans did find out, so they beat him to death for things like that.

ES: Did you have any contact with family or friends between '42 and '45?

HB: The only contact I had is my brother and sister in the camp.

ES: And that was it? You didn't know nothing about anybody else?

HB: No.

ES: Do you remember when you first heard that Jews were being murdered in mass numbers, or were being gassed? When did you first hear, or realize that this was happening?

HB: That's about...

ES: Did you know before you went to Auschwitz?

HB: Well, I knew it before that they--not exactly gassed, but murdered and killed. Because I explained when they first came into Bialystok, the first day, I wish I could show you the Bialystoker book,[33] we had a Bialystoker book, it's that thick of a book, and it tells you all the days when they first came in. They took out most of the old, prominent and old intelligent and most educated people, lawyers and doctors and all the other professions, They were the first ones. They used to call them the *Shabbesdicker*.[34] You heard of it? So, they took them out and they took them outside of the city and killed them out and burned them alive, or whatever they did. So that was the killing or shooting, just like you asked me before about being together, that was the hiding, too, because we knew that they shoot, and the other thing, that they murder you, but we never heard of gassing.

ES: When did you finally find out about that?

HB: The gassing? When we came to Auschwitz.

ES: Were you involved in any of the selections? You were involved?

HB: I was selected several times.

ES: Yes, okay. What do you owe your survival to?

HB: What do I owe my survival to? I told you, I wish I could find that guy, I wish I would know about it. Or maybe to God too. Who knows?

ES: Were you ever treated in a camp medical clinic?

HB: Never went there. That was the worst thing. See, I showed you my finger. Two years, when I was unloading in the kitchen, so the track [unclear] went through and broke my finger. And when I came out from camp, pus was still coming out of it. For two years, more than two years, I was walking around, but I never went there. Once you went there, they marked down your number, and that was it. They used to come, sometimes in the middle of the night, and called you out. They load them up in the trucks, and that was it.

ES: You mentioned the number. You have the number on your arm. Where did you get that? At Auschwitz?

HB: At Birkenau.

ES: In Birkenau before...

HB: That was the first night. As soon as you were unloaded from the wagons, you used to get undressed, they used to shave us from top to bottom. When you're out, take a glove, dip it into gasoline or kerosene, and rub it all over your body. They used to do it, they didn't do it, but they had the men working for them. And then they used to go like in a line. One used to give you a couple pair of shoes, and the other gave you a jacket, and the other one gave you shoes and whatever. And then they stand you up and put your numbers on and send you to the barracks.

ES: When you were in the camp, in either of the camps, were they guarded by Germans, or by non-Germans, or both?

HB: All, mostly the Germans. The ones that I was in, all Germans.

ES: The guards were all Germans.

HB: All of them were in German uniforms, as soldiers. They might have been other nationalities, this I wouldn't know. But they had German uniforms, so they were considered Germans.

ES: That's what I meant. Okay. You explained to us about that one soldier that you say you owe your life to. How would you describe the treatment...?

HB: I mentioned it to my wife a million times again, that whenever I got a chance to talk, I wish I would see him, but I didn't know his name. I don't even know where to look for him.

ES: Maybe some day, the way you met these other people, maybe some day him, too.

HB: I would like to, believe me, because I know, that he took his life in his hands, too.

ES: Oh yes, I know. How would you describe the treatment of the *Kapos*?

HB: *Kapos* is like any other human being. Some of them were nice. We had a *Kapo*, a Jewish fellow. He used to stay sometimes while staying above, and whenever we used to lay down and rest up, or didn't do it, and he used to stay and watch and when anything came up, he said, "Boys, up." So, and some of them, some of them were like dogs. It's like anything else. It's only nature. You could find it in private life. Sometimes people are nice and people are not nice, just like this.

ES: How would you describe--I know this is a difficult question, but, the daily routine in the camps. You had to get up very early and get counted...

HB: Yes, and they used to give you a cup of coffee, chicory, or whatever, and a piece of bread, a piece of margarine, or sometimes they used to give us bloodwurst. You've heard of *Blutwurst*, you know what it is? That's the German's favorite, *Blutwurst*. But I don't know it. And that was the routine, every day the same thing, every day the same thing, like a cycle.

ES: And then you went to work, if you had work to do?

HB: Well, I worked in the kitchen...

ES: So you had it a little bit easier in that respect ?

HB: A little bit easier, and I was not dependent on my bad food, anyhow. Most of the time, I used to give it away to the other boys. That's why, I don't want to praise myself, and I don't want, I'm not looking for anything. But I'll tell you another story which, sometimes it sounds unbelievable, but it's true. I want to call up my wife, and you'll hear it. There was a guy living, now he's dead, he was living in Chester, Pennsylvania. I never knew the guy before the war, but the day he worked in the coal mine, about 60 kilometers or so, called the Jawiszowice[35] it is near Auschwitz, too. Because near Auschwitz, in the mountains, there were a lot of coal mines there. So he worked in the coal mines, like I say, you work in those places, coal or cement, four, five, six weeks, by getting 700-800 calories a day, I don't have to tell you, no matter how strong, you can't last no longer than four, five, six weeks. And they brought him back from there because he was all skinned out. He looked like a scarecrow. So they brought him down and had them back, and they used to put them together into the barracks. And from there the trucks used to come down at night, pack them up, and taking them to the crematoriums. Fortunately, it's like anything else sometimes in life, fortunately, at that time they had a big transport from Greece, the Jews from Greece, and the crematoriums were all backed up. But they were all in the barracks anyhow, and they thought, they're not going to escape, they're in the barracks, and they're 90 percent dead anyhow. So what do they have to rush themselves for, anyhow? They used to take them in the times into the crematoriums were not too busy, so they used to burn those from the camps. Those, they used to call them "*Musslemen*",[36] you know, *Mussleman* means scarlets skeletons or people undernourished, or things like this. *Mussleman*, a man means a skinned-out man. There is nothing on him, just skin and bones. So and I happened to find out that a couple of other guys--and I had a chance, so I used to wait, 5 o'clock and we used to go into the kitchens,

sometimes 5 o'clock to do some cooking, and I used to take out some food. Buckets of soup. Five o'clock in the morning, and crawl against the walls. And the searchlight used to go around, things like this, I don't have to tell you, the searchlight used to go on day and night. And we used to crawl over and bring buckets of soup. Those guys, they were eight, nine days there. He got fat like a pig. Swelled up. We used to bring them in gallons. And this stuff, you know, when you eat a lot of soup in a month, in a week or ten days or so--he got so heavy, and then I walked over to one of those guys, to an SS man and I told him I have my cousin. He had the same number that I did. He comes from our part of Europe.

Tape two, side one:

ES: This is Ellen Steinberg interviewing Harry Bass, August 22, 1983, tape 2, side 3 [1]. Please finish with the story.

HB: So, I told him that I have a cousin, and I would like him to let him out. So he asked me, "What's his *Beruf*, what's his trade?" So I told him, he's a painter, so because I knew, painting, he doesn't have to go out to work on the street. Always, most of the time, he is inside, because when it rains or snows, they don't do painting outside. So, it was totally inside, and as long as you don't go outside, you have a 100 percent chance to survive, even if you eat half, because your bones are not always cold, and things like that. So they took him out there on the [unclear] and the guy survived. The guy lived, like I say, he lived in Chester, Pennsylvania. Then, only recently, he developed cancer.

ES: I'm sure he's as grateful to you as you are to that soldier.

HB: Yes, but listen to me, before he died--I feel like crying, honest to God, before he died he told his family he wants to see me. I was lucky for him. That's the story. Ask my wife about it.

ES: Like I said, he felt the same way about you as you feel about the soldier.

HB: He didn't know what to do for me, but nobody could have saved him. At this particular time, we couldn't save him. Over there, he was a young man, 28 or 30 or so, I don't know. But, I could tell you hundreds of stories like this. This is just--I went through fast with it.

ES: You were in the two different camps. How many people do you judge were in the camps at any one given time?

HB: Auschwitz used to consider [unclear], I was there with between 18,000 and 20,000 at each time.

ES: How many were in your immediate barracks?

HB: In that barracks there were 1,000-1,100.

ES: Did you notice any children in the camp?

HB: In the camps? Well, I myself didn't see any, but they used to bring in children when I used to go to work. I used to see them sometimes when they brought those loads.

ES: They were sent to the crematorium immediately?

HB: Naturally. Maybe, occasionally, once or twice, maybe some of them, if the SS felt like something, they used to take a little youngster as a pet for playing and things like this, yes.

ES: You told me that you were aware of people sometimes praying privately in the camp.

HB: Yes, I saw it myself.

ES: Was there any effort made for little groups to get together, or was that considered too dangerous?

HB: No, people wouldn't get involved. I wouldn't say they wouldn't get involved, but, like you say, it was too dangerous to do it. But, singly, from time to time, I saw it. I had a--even in my own, they used to have a *shtube*, *shtube*[37] means like a special room. Every barrack had four and two, six rooms, and each room was like 150, 180 people, according to the size of it. So that's how I figure each barrack had 1,000-1,100 people.

ES: What were the sleeping arrangements? I've seen the pictures. It was different levels, is that the way?

HB: Right, one, two, three.

ES: How many on each level?

HB: Six of them, in Auschwitz, was like six of them.

ES: Six across?

HB: Right. And sometimes we used to put one head this side, and the other head the other side. Sometimes there were long guys. They [unclear], and you slept awhile. This wasn't so bad, we did it so we could survive.

ES: You've mentioned the soldier that helped you. Is there anyone else that you feel was a major factor in helping you survive? Any other particular person? Or just him.

HB: No, I can't think...

ES: Did any past memory help to sustain you? You talked about wanting to live. Was there anything in the past before the camps that helped keep you going?

HB: Well, like I said before, and I'll say it again. The thing was that we wanted to survive and to keep on going, and to see the defeat. You know, sometimes you feel that you would like to see the day that--that's what kept us, me going, and I'm sure, most of us.

ES: OK, tell us again, where were you when you were liberated? You were actually...

HB: On the boat.

ES: On the boat. And then taken to the town.

HB: Taken to the little town. It's a little, I don't know, but they call it a marine or navy, a navy camp. That was like outside of a little town. There was a little distance to walk. We used to walk there downtown, when we'd feel a little better, sometimes, we'd take a little walk into town. It was a nice little town. Neustadt-Holstein.

ES: That's where you stayed to recuperate, at least a little bit...

HB: Yes, we were there about six or seven days, because, first of all, I was in the hospital there for about five, six weeks. And then I started to get a little bit better myself, and if I could say so, everybody started to emigrate, looking around. Because I knew that I had my brother and sister just five, six months before, so I figured, maybe, so with luck I was fortunate. I had my sister and my brother survived.

ES: That's what I want you to tell us about on the tape. How you found the rest of your family.

HB: So, like I say, when I was liberated, and we started to travel around, so for me, there was a camp, Bergen Belsen, I'm sure you heard of this one. It was only like 100

kilometers, that's like a distance from here to Atlantic City, 60 miles or so. So we all went there. You know, to there came people from the other side, like from the American zone, came to Bergen Belsen. Bergen Belsen was a big camp, a lot of people over there. And everybody kept coming to the big camps, and everybody was looking for one another. There I met a guy, one of my friends, and he told me that my brother survived. My brother lives in Munich. And that's what happened. So, I went back to my little place what I had, and take my little things, my belongings that I had, and started to travel. It took me a few days, but I made it to Munich. And I--everything we got together, and I arranged it myself, and I stayed in Munich, and I got myself a job in Munich then.

ES: Okay. And tell us how you got together with your sister.

HB: My sister, again, people started to travel from Poland, to Poland, back and forth, and I sent mail to that guy that he lives in our house, and he answered me back that my sister survived, and my father is alive. Well, and I was waiting for them. So as soon as I heard that they are coming into Austria, I went to Austria, picked them up, and brought them into the American zone and set them up in Landsberg. Landsberg was also a camp. You heard Landsberg was a, what do you call it, well-known jail, Hitler was in the in Landsberg jail. And it was also an army camp now, because Germany was all army camps, all, what do you call it, [unclear] prisoner's camps. That's all it was. Germany was one camp. There was also a camp, and in those camps there were living those prisoners after we were liberated. So my father was there with my sister for a short while, and then they came to the United States.

ES: Okay. I want to go back to something you told me before, but you didn't tell us on the tape, about the man who moved into your house. Tell us how that came about.

HB: The man that moved into my house?

ES: Into the house where you used to live.

HB: Oh yes, the Gentile man, well, sure. Well, as we did go into the Ghetto, so we run into him and we told him, because if nobody would move in, a stranger would move in, and probably would destroy, or whatever would happen to it. So we would rather let him move in, you know, because at least we knew him. He worked for us for a long time, since I can remember, through the years. So we figured, if anything should happen, or if the war will finish, at least we will have a place where to come back. So, but we never went back, and whatever happened out of it, we don't know. But this I do know, that the property is still there, because from time to time--I have some of my friends still living there, a few families, not too many. In fact, one of my friends went there for a trip not too long ago, about a few years ago. And I asked him, so he stopped in, and everything is still there, and the city is all built up, but you know what he told me--don't go there. In fact, I had in mind, one of these days, maybe, if God will spare me, I'll take my wife, and I would like her to see the place where I was born and all this. But in the meanwhile, with Poland [unclear] it looks now as though sometimes you don't feel like taking chances on getting involved. But I would like her to see it, my wife to see it.

ES: But that--the man you had move into your house, he really was the one that helped you, he was the contact...

HB: Yes, well, like I say, we knew him, he knew us. We sent letters to him. My father sent letters from where he was there to him.

ES: And your sister sent letters, so he was able to put you in contact with each other.

HB: That's how we got together.

ES: So he was important that way. What year did you come to the United States?

HB: 1949. March 29th. This is Marina Felker [phonetic] [name of boat]

ES: Okay. Where did you live between '45 and '49?

HB: Munich, Germany.

ES: With your brother and sister?

HB: No, my brother, here, he was in Munich, but he didn't live with me together. My brother got married, and he had his own place. But my brother wasn't too long also. My brother came here to the United States in '47, because, like I said before, we have a large family, and they sent out affidavits, and my father came in '48, and my sister in '48. Like I said, they came to Germany in '47. They were, like, a short while, and then came to the United States. And then I came in '49.

ES: Tell us what happened to your mother. How you found out, or did you find out anything?

HB: Well, some of my friends told me where she went. She went with some of the other people, in August 16, 1943, they evacuated the whole Ghetto. They load them up, on the trains, and that's where they went.

ES: Which camp was she sent to? Do you know? To Auschwitz...

HB: No. Treblinka.

ES: She went to Treblinka. When you came to the United States, which city did you go to?

HB: Right here in Philly.

ES: Did you have any relatives here?

HB: In Philadelphia? My sister was here.

ES: She had come ahead to Philadelphia?

HB: That's why I had to stay here, because, like I said, I was always a cautious and a devoted brother, so she went to school here, because she was the youngest in the family, we used to watch her. And, I helped to get her along a little bit. My whole family was in Chicago, my whole family.

ES: I know, you told me that. That's why I was wondering why you were here. How come your sister came to Philadelphia?

HB: She came here with friends. They were together with girlfriends, and they stood together, and she came in here and she wanted to stay here, so I came in here, and

I'm not sorry that I came in here. I go out to Chicago often. Before, years before, 20, 25 years ago, I used to travel to them back and forth every few--very often, and my family came to me.

ES: So you've gotten to see them.

HB: Oh yes. All the time.

ES: Okay. Mr. Bass, now I'd like you to tell us what you did when you came to Philadelphia. What kind of job, and what kind of activities you've been involved with.

HB: Well, the first thing when I came to Philadelphia, I had a lot of people looking for me for a job. So they found a job for me, the first job that I ever had in Philadelphia, is in Atlantic City, on Ventnor Avenue--I told you before that. I worked there through the summer, and then came back to Philadelphia, and got another job, which I worked for about a year and a half, and then I went on my own, and got married to a nice good wife, of which I'm happy. We have one good son.

ES: You deserve a lot of happiness.

HB: And, got involved in every aspect in the community. Whatever needs to be in the community--the Federation, Allied Jewish Appeal, Israel Bonds, JCRC, HIAS, Jewish Family Services, you name it, and I am involved in all this.

ES: Thank you very, very much for giving me your time and for providing us with this tape.

HB: Thank you. My pleasure.

Historical endnotes for Harry Bass by Dr. Michael Steinlauf.

1. The largest Polish cities in the interwar period were from 1/4 to 1/3 Jewish. Bialystok was exceptional even considering these high figures: it was about 60% Jewish

2. He means the Zionist Revisionist Party; he was doubtless a member of its youth group, called Betar. The founder of Zionist Revisionism was the Russian Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940).

3. Joseph Trumpeldor (1880-1920), hero of generations of Zionist pioneers. A soldier who had lost one arm in the Russo-Japanese War, he came to Palestine where he was killed in 1920 defending the Jewish settlement of Tel Hai against Arab attack.

4. Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917), creator of Esperanto, which was intended to be an international language.

5. Jews with Polish citizenship were expelled from Germany beginning in October 1938. The Polish government refused to accept them, whereupon thousands were lodged in a no man's land just inside the Polish border.

6. The official Jewish community in a particular place, and the council that represented it. In interwar Poland, all Jewish communities, in cities and in towns large or small, were organized by *kehillot*; the members, not just Orthodox Jews, but often also socialists and Zionists, were elected relatively democratically. Unlike the situation with Federations in America, in Poland, all Jews, with extremely rare exceptions, were members of a *kehilla*.

7. This was in 1941, and not, as the text seems to imply, in 1939. The interviewer is apparently not aware, and the interviewee does not mention the fact that from September 1939 to June 1941 Bialystok was under the control of the Soviet Union. The Germans reached Bialystok on June 26, 1941. The ghetto was created on July 26.

8. The interviewee's recollections are accurate, given that one understands that this is 1941.

9. Compared to many other ghettos, especially the Lodz Ghetto, the Bialystok Ghetto was not as hermetically sealed.

10. The *Judenrat* was led by Ephraim Barash, who strongly believed that the key to the ghetto's survival lay in stepping up production, making the ghetto useful to the Germans.

11. According to the account assembled Eichmann trial testimonies by Leni Yahil (*The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-45* [New York, 1990], pp.470-71) in January 1943 Yitzhak Melamed flung sulphuric acid into the face of an SS soldier, who then accidentally killed one of his comrades. Melamed escaped and the Germans then executed 120 Jews in retaliation. When the Germans threatened to destroy the whole ghetto, Melamed surrendered to the Germans and was hung.

12. It began on August 15, 1943, and lasted for several days. It was relatively unsuccessful because of lack of arms, and because in the aftermath of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Germans were prepared for resistance.

13. He may be suggesting that the *Ordnungsdienst* allowed Jews in the bunkers to escape. But the interviewer missed the opportunity to find out what he is hinting at. On the other hand, Bass was deported to Auschwitz in December 1942, and therefore did not witness the liquidation of the ghetto.

14. Some 7000 Jews were murdered before the ghetto was set up.

15. His father was probably arrested by the Russians for having been an officer in the Polish army.

16. After Germany attacked the Soviet Union, Stalin permitted a Polish army to be organized in the Soviet Union under General Władysław Anders. But this nationalist Polish army never saw combat in Russia, and was evacuated to the Middle East. There was, however, a Soviet-sponsored Polish army under General Zygmunt Berling which did see action against the Germans in Russia towards the end of the war.

17. He means December 1944, January 1945. Auschwitz was evacuated during the latter month.

18. In western Poland, it was German policy to rename the geography with German place names. Birkenau is the German version of the name of the Polish village, Brzezinka, where four gas chambers and crematoria as well as a large women's labor camp were located. Birkenau is where the great majority of Jews were murdered, as they stepped off the trains.

19. The original camp, several kilometers from Birkenau, contained the main labor barracks and one gas chamber and crematorium. It was named Auschwitz after the German version of the name of the nearest Polish town, Oświęcim. The name "Auschwitz" is sometimes used to designate the original camp, and sometimes the entire Auschwitz-Birkenau installation. I will here refer to the original camp as Auschwitz I.

20. *Appelplatz*: The central square at Auschwitz I where prisoners assembled morning and night for roll call.

21. *Kommando*: Squad charged with a particular work assignment.

22. *Kapo*: German-appointed head of a work squad.

23. He is referring to the time he spent in the warehouse.

24. From January 17 to 19, 1945, 60,000 prisoners were evacuated on foot from Auschwitz. This was the notorious "death march."

25. Gliwice (Gleiwitz): A town about 50 km NW of Auschwitz, one of the main collection points for prisoners evacuated in January 1945; marched to Gliwice , the prisoners were then put on trains for Germany.

26. On October 7, 1944, the Jewish *Sonderkommando* at Birkenau, the work squad which loaded and unloaded crematoriums, blew up one of the four crematoriums and attempted, unsuccessfully, to stage a general revolt.

27. In interwar Poland, not all Jewish children went to public school. Some went to elementary and secondary schools run by the Orthodox, by Zionists or by socialists. There were also public schools for Jews called "*szabasówki*" where the course of studies (except for religion) was the same as for non-Jews, but the schools were closed on Saturday. Of course, many Jews attended regular Polish public schools. Bass' experience of Bialystok public schools adds interesting details to what is known about this experience.

28. Orthodox schools for girls

29. *Tarbut* schools: Zionist schools in which the language of instruction was Hebrew. They were relatively numerous in Bialystok.

30. This contradicts his previous statement that all Jewish students attended public school.

31. (Yiddish): pray

32. Ashkenazim include potatoes among *chometz*, foods that must not be eaten during Passover.

33. He is probably referring to the memorial book for the Jewish community of Bialystok, published the year before this interview: *Der Bialystoker yizker-bukh* (New York, 1982). There are also two other works, a photo album, *Bialystok: bilder album...* (New York, 1951), and a two-volume collection of materials on Bialystok prior to the Holocaust, *Pinkas Bialystok* (New York, 1949-1950).

34. *Shabbesdicker*: literally "Sabbath Jews," here meaning the cream of society.

35. Jawiszowice was a concentration camp *Kommando* of Auschwitz consisting of approximately 35,000 men which worked in the coal mines according to *Das National Sozialistische Lagersystem,* p.338.

36. Auschwitz slang for prisoners who had lost the will to live, and walked about in a daze; from the German word for Moslem.

37. Meaning an apartment or room; perhaps the word is *shtibl*, which in Yiddish refers to a little prayer-room, often Hasidic.