

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

DAVID BUCHSBAUM

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Gail Kammerman

Date: January 19, 1989

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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DB - David Buchsbaum [interviewee]

GK - Gail Kammerman [interviewer]

Date: January 19, 1989

Tape one, side one:

DB: I was born in Gorlice, Poland in April 20, 1921.

GK: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

DB: We were a family of 11 children, four sisters and seven brothers. One brother was married; my older sister was married. My older sister had a child. My brother, another brother was married; he had a child, five year old. My sister had a year old child and she died. And she died through the child. My sister-in-law, my brother's wife, with the child, were taken away to Bergen-Belsen, with my sister and my sister-in-law and then my older brother did not have any children.

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

DB: We were not rich; we were average people. My father owned a grocery store, small business and we lived a decent life. We were not hungry because we always had food, through the grocery store, to eat. Up to 1939, when the Germans came in and occupied Poland, especially our city.

GK: Did your family experience antisemitism before the Hitler period, and if so, please tell me about it.

DB: In 1938, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia I believe, when Germany, when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia, the mood in the neighbors, the *goishe* neighbors, the non-Jewish neighbors, changed a lot. They used to-- we had a grocery store, not only our business, all the Jewish businesses-- they used to stand in the front, some of them, organizations, they had organized antisemitic organizations called *endicia*¹, that's what we called it. And it has something of a meaning. And they were standing in front of the doors of the Jewish businesses and they used to say, "Do not buy from the Jew, buy from your own." This started in 1938. And continued up to the war, up to the Nazis occupied our city.

GK: Did you or your family belong to any Jewish organizations or to a synagogue before Nazism changed your life?

DB: I myself, my father belonged to the synagogue and I was one of the Hasidim, I would say, my father was also, and some of my brothers. The Bobover Rebbe's Hasidim, this is, I don't know if I have to mention what Hasidim are, the followers from a rabbi. We had a very religious home and observant home. And kosher, everything was kosher. And then organizations, we would like to immigrate to Israel, but

¹*Endecia* refers to *Narodowa Demokracja* – ND – a right-wing Polish nationalist movement which became more anti-Semitic after the death of head of state Jozef Pilsudski (1935). (YIVO)

there was no way to get a certificate. We needed a permission to leave, to enter Israel, could not get it. Was impossible, only for the rich. You had to pay a lot of money to get a certificate. Those who could afford it, they did leave, for Israel, for Palestine, in those days.

GK: Now, did any men in your family serve in the National Army?

DB: No, none of us.

GK: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about your life in Poland, in the early part of 1939 before the German invasion?

DB: The last month or two, three, when we knew that Germans were going to invade Poland, we used to have shelters to hide ourselves, to hide the people in case of a bombardment. We expected that we were going to be attacked, because other countries were attacked already. So, we used to have shelters, which were in very poor condition; we were not prepared for it. And we used to watch and see if a plane was coming over, because planes were very rare. We didn't have no planes in those days, but if you hear a plane, right away we alert everybody to go into hiding in those shelters.

GK: Alright, about how many Jews lived in your city or town, and was it a highly organized Jewish community? If there was a *Kehillah*, how did you or your family view it, and do you feel that it represented the best interests of the community?

DB: This is before the war you are talking about?

GK: Yeah, this is about 1939.

DB: 1939, we had the population, the general population of the city of Gorlice was 15,000, approximately. Jews were 25% of that, about 3,500 Jewish families, Jewish people altogether. We had a *Kehillah*, a Jewish *Kehillah* organized, and we had quite a bit of synagogues which were run by the *Kehillah*, and some were like *Shtiblekh* [Yiddish – small Hasidic house of prayer]. Hasidim *Shtiblekh*, there were quite a bit around the town, 3,500 people, Jewish people, only.

GK: Okay, do you think they represented the best interests, the *Kehillah* of your...

DB: Yes. They did, they did. And until 1939 or 1940 when Nazis occupied our city.

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

DB: There was a neighbor, which he was, he was in the National Army, a boy, a young boy. And when the army was defeated, they only lasted about two, three weeks, they were defeated, the war started September 1, 1939, and in about October it was already over. So, the boy, this next-door neighbor boy, came home. He was from a very fine family. They were more [unclear] they were not Hasidim, but he was, more than a soldier, he was like a captain or something because he was in college, high education, he had a high education. So he came back, and he was a neighbor, he stopped in, he said to us, how should I say it in English or in Jewish, he said in Jewish, he said to us, "*Yidden*

antlayf.” It means, “Jews run away wherever you can.” Because your days are numbered here. So this was the 19 October, I would say.

GK: What was his name?

DB: His name was Sigmund Pester [phonetic]. He was the next-door neighbor. They had a lumberyard, I remember. I was already a boy in twenties, I knew, I’m sorry. They heard everything I said. So, my mother, we figured men are more likely to be harmed, so we packed things and everybody took a package, whatever he could, some clothes and something to eat, and we ran south, towards the Russian border. We didn’t know ourselves where we ran, we just ran away from our city to another city. After a while, they caught up with us. The Germans caught up with us. When we left, the Germans were not here yet and we knew that other cities in Krakow in Poland and [unclear] and different cities, finally they caught up with us. And there were thousands and thousands of people, especially Jews, on the roads.

GK: What year was this?

DB: In 1939. Right after September, right about two weeks when they invaded Poland.

GK: Okay.

DB: And we were marching, they caught up with us. They came to across us with tanks and artillery, all kinds of weapons and motorization. We had never seen anything like it in our lives. So, myself and my few brothers, my brothers, they caught us and they put us in a prison, because all the Jews, they put all the Jews wherever they could in a prison. We stayed there for about five to seven days. In a small room with about 15 people, in a room, 10 by 10 maybe.

GK: What city?

DB: This was in Yachslav [phonetic], I guess about 20 miles from [unclear]. Chrzanow [phonetic] I think was the name of the little town. Not Yachslav, Chrzanow [phonetic]. And after a while they came in, they opened the door, they told us to go. And we left and we went back home. We had the chance to take some kind of transportation and you know whatever we could, we went home. Back home. And it was for a while, it was quiet until 1940, beginning of 1940 came out a decree, it was posted all over the city, the Jews must wear Jewish stars on their arms. Every Jew, no matter how old he is, except the child from six years old even. They had to wear a Jewish star. And men and women, everybody. We knew that this is something they should know, who is a Jew and who is a Gentile. And, they left us, in the beginnings, they left us alone. There were some from our friends what I knew, when they, they ran away and then they were coming back, like we did from Chrzanow. They were further up closer to Lemberg, and they were coming back home on their way. They never-- we found out later on they never came back home. We found out later on that they were all murdered. Boys and men. And it was in the woods, they took them to the woods in the forest and they shot them to death. But you see, in the city, in our city where I lived, they didn’t touch anybody, especially,

they took us out to work, to clean toilets, wherever they had occupied buildings for their own use, for the military use. We used to clean the streets, the Jews, for no pay. We had to go to do it. They organized some kind of a committee, the Jewish *Kehillah*, I would say a committee, it was like a committee.

GK: Jewish council?

DB: A council, a committee. They used to organize, send out-- one should work every day in one place and someone-- everybody had a duty to do, to perform. And they were watching it, and whoever they did not like, they beat and they cut off their beard, they defaced people, they torn at their clothes, they did a lot of things to them and this means was free, I mean this was not a paid job. We had to perform this duty. And this went on until 1940, end of 1940.

GK: You were living?

DB: Still in the same place.

GK: Now at that point, was it like a ghetto?

DB: Yes, I am coming to it.

GK: Oh, okay.

DB: The end of 1940, it was the end, it was September or October, of course synagogues were all taken, we couldn't go pray no more in the synagogue. But the Jews were still organizing themselves in private homes. We used to have *minyans* for *Shabbes* or holidays. Just to perform the religious duties. In 1940, by the end of 1940, they started to move some areas where the Jewish could now live. They laid the roof to the area they designated especially for Jewish people to live in. They called it a *Judenviertel*, a Jewish quarters. So it was not enough room for this, for so many people, apartments in the houses, so in my house, we had a room, a kitchen and a large room, so we had to give up the kitchen. The people, a son, a husband arrived and a boy, a little boy, lived with us. And we lived already seven, eight children, because some were married in those days and they were on their own, but we were still single people, we were a family of about seven or eight, my father and brother, we had to take in this small apartment another couple with a child. They should live with us and use the same kitchen because there wasn't enough room for everybody to live in. So everything was pushed together. The whole Jewish quarters were so tightly populated with people that it was impossible to move about. Crowded quarters it was. And this was 1941, the *goyim*, the Gentiles, could come into our quarters. We could not go out to the other section, unless we had from the Jewish committee a pass. You had to have a pass. The Gentiles used to come in and we did some business with them, this way we could survive. The businesses were all confiscated. No Jewish business was in existence no more. They confiscated everything, they put a lock on it, and nobody could open it or go in it. But, and then they came in trucks and they took everything out. They just took it, the Germans, the Nazis took it away. But some Jews they had the businesses, they took some merchandise and they hid it, they hid it in the basement. So when the Gentiles came in with food, they had food

for sale, like potatoes, or a little flour, or anything to eat, so they brought it in, and we took-- the money had no value. The Polish money had no value-- *zloty*, but we used to exchange. If you had something to give, clothes or material to make clothes. They used to make their own clothes.

GK: That's how you supported yourself?

DB: Yes. How we lived and my sisters, two sisters work, seamstress they worked. And this is the way how we survived. And in 1940, the end of 1941, a couple weeks before the New Year, they came out with a new decree, that all Jews who owned furs, any kind of fur, whether it's a beaver, even sheepskin, or any kind of fur, whatever it was, or mink, or sable, any kind of fur, whether it's a coat or a hat, or a mitten, anything you had to bring it in and deliver it to the Germans. And we all did, complied with the order, for fear they shouldn't be killed. Then 19-- this was 1941, end of 1941. In 1942, January 3, in 1942, Saturday morning. We didn't have a synagogue. My father was a very religious man, he had a short beard, he already cut it, my father never went out of the house, because he was, you know, he was afraid, he was middle aged, 56 years old, he had a little beard he didn't want to shave it, because this is not the way to live in Poland. To go with the religion. We had a *minyan*, a Saturday *minyan*.

GK: Where was it held?

DB: In Gorlice, the same city. About two blocks from our house, and just a marketplace on the other side. The name was, what was the name? [Unclear]. In the house where they had the *minyan* and we went there 9:00 in the morning, it was a very big frost, a winter frost, January 3. And I went in and my younger brother and my father and about 11:00 we finished and we went home. When we left the place, it was about two blocks from the house. I saw it was a very, very quiet, unusually quiet outside. Because in Europe, no matter how big the snow was, people used to walk in the snow, or sled, or horses. There was nobody on the streets. I didn't know why, so we walked, my brother and my father and all of a sudden two Germans came over, two Gestapos-- one a civilian and one in uniform. I know only the name of the one who spoke two languages, his name was Kushka [phonetic], he spoke, he was a *Volksdeutsch*. *Volksdeutsch* means he was a German who was half Polish and half German, and he spoke, he was interpreter, and he spoke Polish and German. The German in the uniform came over to my father and he asked him where he lives. He was talking to him and he didn't know exactly what he want from him. So he asked him, "Where do you live?" So he says, "In this house." Before you know, "You can go home," he says. We went for it. Before we made about two steps, my father was dead, shot to death.

GK: By which one?

DB: One of those two, I could never remember exactly which one. I believe it was the one in uniform. And then this was already about three or four houses away from my own home. My mother ran out and she took us, she thought that maybe men are more prone to be killed than women, so she pushed us up in the attic and there was a little

window in the attic and I looked out and I saw how my mother and her sisters they-- and how they helped my father to, you know, to shlep him in, pull him into the house-- but he was dead already. And my mother came out and started to cry, "My man, my man!" She was from German, too. But she ran out without a coat, and the Star of David was on the coat. So she-- he said to her, "[unclear] go back home and put on your Star of David because you are going to be shot also." And I looked out the window, I saw a neighbor, he was shot already [unclear] was on the side, he was dead also. And my mother called, there was one Jewish doctor in the city, and the rest went away. There were a few Jewish doctors before the war, but this one was still there, and on the way, they called him to come, they figured, no phone, there was no phone but somebody notified him. So on the way coming to our house, somebody told him don't go because it was a hopeless situation. He was afraid himself also because this day they shot 16 men and one boy, Jewish only. This was in 19--[unclear]. January 3. Then, the next day, and the same day that afternoon, Saturday afternoon, they came with big horses and wagons and sleds and they put the bodies on it and they took them out to the cemetery. The next day we had to go out. It was frozen, we had to dig out [unclear]. And Sunday, the other family from the dead came up to the cemetery and they put a fire on the ground on the cemetery to thaw the ice, and they made one big grave that they were all in the same grave together and they buried them. This was in January. From then on, every second day, there was shooting, shooting, shooting, only Jews, not *goyim*. Only Jews. There was a *shochet*, a neighbor who was *shochet*, you know what *shochet* is? A *shochet* is a man who was killing for kosher. Kosher ritual. Kill chicken. So somebody called him to, you know they used to observe the Jewish tradition, he had a calf or something. So he went out and to somebody to kill this calf. So the *goyim*, they were-- they knew him, his name was Peretz Kauffman [phonetic]. He was a man in his fifties, maybe 50, he had nine children, very small children. So they asked him to go in, the neighbors [unclear], the gentile neighbors told them, told the Germans that he was a *shochet*, and they explained it. When they explained it in German, they called him, to show what he does for a living. So they went over and opened up his coat and looked what he has in the pocket and they pulled out a *hallaf*. A *hallaf* is a big knife which he killed the animals. So they asked him, "What do you do with this?" And he said, "This is my living, I do killing of animals for a living. This is, I get paid for that." And he took out a revolver and shot him to death. And so, his wife came out also. She sat down, "This was my man, my husband, who is going to support my family?" So he says, "Where is your family?" She says, "I have children, the youngest is a baby, two months old, and the other one is a year old and he had like nine children, every year a child. So he says, "Bring out the family." So they brought out the whole family, they put them, they took them on the side and took them to a cemetery and they shot them with a machine gun also [unclear].

GK: Going back a little bit, when you were in the ghetto, because what it was like, did you attend school or classes of any kind? I know that you said that you didn't go to the synagogue?

DB: No.

GK: Did you attend any type of school, no you didn't.

DB: No.

GK: Did you have any communication with the outside world, like through newspapers or radio? Did you hear anything about, how did you hear what was going on?

DB: The only thing that we had was the newspaper. But it was printed by the Germans. Even the Polish paper, what we used to have a city paper, it used to be the news, that they fed them, what they told them what to print. So we knew more or less how the war was progressing in the beginning. But there were some rumors, which they had radios, which you weren't allowed to have but they had them anyway, because anybody who had a radio had to give it back to them, they confiscated. In case they found anybody with a radio they were shot to death right away.

GK: How-- your family supported itself by trading as you said back in, and your sisters were seamstresses?

DB: Yes. Seamstresses.

GK: Did any members of your family leave the ghetto to go to work?

DB: No.

GK: No one was, no one did.

DB: No.

GK: Did-- were you aware of any type of underground in the ghetto at all?

DB: [Unclear] In our city, we were such a small amount of, a lot of them ran away to where the Russians occupied part of Poland. They crossed over the Bug, the River Bug, which was the border between the German occupation of Poland and the Russian occupation of Poland, because Poland was occupied by two sides, Russia and Germany. So a lot of the youngsters, young people who could travel, they left the families, the older people, and traveled with them or young kids and they went over to the other side, to the Russians. So there was nobody to organize any resistance. The few people who remained could not do anything and even the Gentiles could not help us much because there was a decree if a Gentile were hiding a Jew, outside the Jewish quarters, he would be killed together with the Jew.

GK: Did any non-Jews help you or your family during this time?

DB: A non-Jew?

GK: A non-Jew.

DB: There were some which helped us, feed us, not for...

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

DB: [unclear]...they had said with the Germans with the help of the Ukrainian police which were our enemies also.

GK: Around what date was this?

DB: In July, beginning of July 1942. After the decree came out, we had to get out, from anybody, any men from 12, age of 12 to age 65, had to go on this special specified place in Sokol and to register. But was no registration. They picked out half of us. There was too many. There were about 800 or 900 people, they picked about 400 or 500 of us, and they marched us through the streets down to the prison yard. Because there was no place, not enough room for us to house us inside the prison, so they kept us in the prison yard with a big fence around. And we stayed there overnight-- and in the meantime, what we were waiting for our next, before they took us to the prison, the women or the wives or the daughters or the sisters, brought some kind of package. They knew they were going to take us away, from the city, away from home. They brought us a package, everybody had a *tefillin* [Yiddish: phylacteries that Jews wear in the morning prayer] and a *tallis*, [Hebrew: prayer shawl] was the first place to take along, there was no question about it. And some food, just whatever they could afford, whatever they could spare. And some clothes to change. We took those bundles, and I saw one, a friend of mine, he was a second cousin, and so [unclear]. They told us, distinctly we should sit, sit down, you should sit down, should not get up. If you would get up you would get shot. So this man was sitting in the middle of this big place, where we were sitting, and the wife couldn't find him. So he got up to show her where he is, she should give him this little bit of package to take along with him. He was shot to death on the spot. And then they picked about half of us up and they took us to prison. As I said before, and they kept us within the prison yard. And this was in the afternoon already and we stayed. This was *Tisha B'Av*, the Jewish *Tisha B'Av*, stayed. They kept us overnight. And we were laying outside on the grass, it was a nice day, yeah, a warm day. About 4:00 in the morning, we heard some movement, dogs barking, and we knew they were coming already. They came in, and a couple of them, about five, six of them, men, Germans in uniforms with dogs. Big dogs, and the dogs were so vicious, they jumped, they held the dogs back, they went up and down between the rows. And we had a speech in German, they knew that the youth understand German so they said they were going to send away. They were going to send you away to a labor camp. You were going to work, you were going to get paid and fed and housed. You will have a wonderful life there. And they took us 10 in a row and they lead us with the guards, with them on both sides to the train station. We went on the train station. There were boxcars and they're packed in as much as you could in each box and they sealed the boxes, the car, the train boxes, and on each one was a guard in the front, sitting there on the front. And they took us about, they took us about during the day, all day and toward the evening we arrived to the destination which was

Plaszow, the first concentration camp which were-- we were unloaded, the train was going inside the camp. And they opened up the doors and we went in and we saw that it was established already. There were some Jews there, and we were put, everybody was put in a different barracks. They were barracks built special for us. And at the front door was a big fence around it and the fence was electric, electrified. If you touch it you could get electrocuted. So nobody dared to come to the fence to try to escape. And there was a tower in the middle of the camp. You know, in the tower was sitting a guard all the time, watching, and at the gate, there were two or three guards. In the front of the building was one barrack, which the head of the camp, his name was Müller². He was a German, he was injured in the war, so he had one hand was injured, couldn't move it. It was paralyzed. So he had this privilege, to be instead to go to the front, the Russian front, because those days already the Germans was at war with Russia. So he came back wounded, so they gave him the privilege to run this camp and he was in charge. He lived there with his wife and two kids. Two small kids. The next day, we were, they called us, "Who was a carpenter? Who has any trade?" So I said, "I am a carpenter," even though I was not. Even though I wasn't a carpenter, my brother and I went and they took us to build the bridge over the river Wista [Pol:Vistula]. It was-- they built a train to go through it, because the trains what they had, the bridge and the train, what they had before Poland was built, was not enough for the traffic that they had to deliver ammunition to the front, the Russian front. So we built this bridge and whoever, they did all kind of manual labor. They poured cement or they built the high spots on the bridge. And in the morning, we left about 7:00 o'clock, was an *Appell* [roll call], they count us, and how many leave for each *Arbeitsstelle* [place of work], is a place where every group had a separate *Arbeitsstelle*. 100 people, 150 people. There was about 2,500 people in this special specific camp where I was. And they took us out and put us 10 in a row and 100 rows, 200 rows, whatever they had people. And they count us when we left the place, and they counted us when we came back. If one was missing they marked it down and they took, they warned us and the man who left and didn't come back from the *Arbeitsstelle*, the place of work, and they didn't catch him, we will have to pay for it. Not with money. We didn't have no money. One Sunday, I see they're making an *Appell*. It was called an *Appell*. They had chased everybody out of the barracks and they put them 10 in a row and 100 in this way. And Mr. Müller, the Gestapo, the head of the camp, came out and he said that last week five people were missing during the week. They went out, they left, and in the morning, some didn't come back. They stayed very good with the non-Jews and they ran away, some way they hide themselves. So he took every-- he was counting, every tenth was going to be, get, what do they call it-- with a rubber, with a heavy rubber, like a chain or whatever, chain on one end with the rubber on the other. And he is, one of the, the *Haefiling*, we were called *Haefiling* [German: prisoner], he had to perform this

²Franz-Joseph Müller, second commandant of Plaszow.

job. So they are counting, every tenth, nine was fine, the tenth had to lay down and one of the, of our people had to take this chain, and beat him on his back. But, because it was our own people, they didn't do it so hard. I was so lucky, I was the ninth, and the guy before me-- I was the tenth and he was the ninth. And he didn't know exactly [unclear], Rubin [phonetic] was his name I remember, so he went up before me. He said, "Will you give me something?" So that I shouldn't get the hits on my back, he got it. [unclear] So this was the way it was. They didn't kill anybody so far. This was 1942, in July, August, September, the whole year. Then the winter came on, was a problem, whatever we had, we had some clothes we brought along, some clothes my mother used to gave me, I traded in for food. The food they gave us wasn't enough. They give us some soup, a very thin soup, once a day and half a pound of bread.

GK: What members of your family were in this camp with you?

DB: Myself and my brother. The brother who died in 1980. I didn't mention.

GK: Where was your mother during this time, and your sisters?

DB: When I-- when now we were in the camp, in July, my mother and my sisters still remained home, behind, and we could get once a month a letter from them, or two weeks, I don't remember exactly. So I got a few letters from them. But they were talking about liquidating the ghetto and sending everybody to work, and how I am doing and this and that. I couldn't write back, but this was before Rosh HaShanah, the week, the month of Rosh HaShanah, September, I knew already they stopped having any mail. It was already people who came, not Jewish people but *goyim*, non-Jews, came from the city and said they put them all on trains, they send them to Belzec. Direction to Belzec, that's what I put on the questionnaire. They put them there. All the sisters and their children and my mother and everybody. Since then, I never heard about them. And we were there, too. The winter went through, we didn't have-- in winter you had to have--the winter were very bad, very cold, and we just-- we didn't have heat in the barracks. So when we came back from work, from the *Baustelle* [building place] where we worked, we used to work with wood. So we took the chips along, back with us. We used to have a stove, in the middle there, an iron stove to heat the place. And the non-Jews used to help us, bring some food for us. Like bread or corn or meat. But we had to cook it, or some kind of cereal. We had to cook it, we couldn't eat it raw. So, it was 100 people, 150 people in one room and there was one stove, so we had to waiting in line, everybody waiting in line to cook this little bit food. And ...

GK: Were you aware of any resistance groups, Jewish or non-Jewish in the camp at that time?

DB: Not at that time, I didn't know of the resistance.

GK: Not at that time?

DB: We did not have any knowledge what other camps are doing. We had no connections with, or no papers or newspapers or radio. You couldn't do nothing, you didn't know, you were isolated in this place, all we could do was go out and you talked

with a Gentile who was working with us there. They were the *Meisters*, *Meisters* means like foreman, There were Polish foremen employed there, and we talked to them and they would tell us that they moved forward, how far the Germans are in Russia already and how much, what defeat they get and what victory they make and we didn't know anything. We didn't have no paper.

GK: Were you religious during this time?

DB: Yes.

GK: You were.

DB: We tried, they had once a week or twice a week a non-kosher soup, the others were pure-- one was, Mondays they used to give us sweet soup with sugar, sugar or saccharine, I don't know what it was. It was some kind of flax, a cereal, very plain but it was very tasty. This was the only time which I, which we ate so you didn't have to worry about. The other days we had cabbage soup, sometimes you would find a piece of meat in it. And meat was positively not kosher, but I don't know what it was, maybe it was horsemeat, who knows what it was. So we threw out this piece of meat and we ate this soup.

GK: Did you think of an escape plan during this time at all?

DB: We were all hoping that someday-- because we were all waiting they should lose the war. But we saw it was dragging on and dragging on and you didn't know what was going on. So they had plans. We used to come from our city-- they were looking to organize, and to take us up, we could escape. There was a way how to escape and to go back to our city, in [unclear], but they are few people who went, and they're Gentiles, supposedly, he was on a farm and he had a place, he had [unclear] those people, was about 15 of them, or 12 from our [unclear] city. And he asked my brother and I, we should join them too. But we decided not to, and that was the way it was going to be, is going to be because when you went out of the, -in the camp, you were in big trouble when you had to go out to work, and you couldn't have [unclear] and you starve to death. Not to death, but if you couldn't organize yourself, you were hungry all the time. But at least you were safe. The Germans wouldn't attack you. You were working, you do your job, unless you get hurt. When you get hurt you...

GK: [unclear]

DB: But I knew, once I leave the camp, and I'm on the Aryan side, which are called-- out of which the Jews are not allowed to be. Even if somebody should recognize you, or somebody should suspect, because the Jews usually spoke with an accent Polish. Because I was born in Poland but we were more educated in the Hebrew, so when we spoke Polish, you could tell right away a Jew is different, and like a southerner speaks here, comes here, you know he is from the south or Texas or someplace. So, I knew if I opened my mouth, somebody from the Poles, my neighbors they give me up to the Germans and they will kill me.

GK: Now, when you were in this camp, where did you go from this camp and when did you go?

DB: This-- we were there this winter, the same winter we worked like from 8:00 in the morning to about 6:00 o'clock at night. The only advantage that we had is that the Germans, the foreman, the German foremen who ran this project, they were cold themselves, so they had like special rooms, special buildings which they kept shovels and picks and saws, their equipment and tools. So they used to make fire there. And they had a little room for themselves and they sit there and they let us come in for a half an hour every hour or so for 15 to 20 minutes to warm up a little, in the wintertime I'm talking about it was. This was the way we could survive; otherwise we would stay 12 hours below zero, we freeze. I had my fingers frozen too. I couldn't move them. But somehow, they are all right. Somehow I saved them. They didn't have to, you know. I went in, my brother was rolling them in cold snow so they shouldn't get numb entirely. This was-- we were there and we went through the winter and the spring and came and every day the same thing, you work and work and only, some of them died from starvation, some of them died from-- then an epidemic came. Typhoid fever. So the whole barracks...

GK: When was this?

DB: In the same camp.

GK: What time of year?

DB: At, was, this was probably the beginning of spring in 1943. '43 already. We had already, I had typhoid fever at home when I was a youngster. Usually if you have it once in your life you get immune, not to, not to have it again. But if your resistance is low, if you are undernourished, you can get it a second time also. So they-- and the Germans knew-- but the leader of them talked to Mr. Müller and Mr. Müller, the leader, *Oberscharfuehrer* he was called not Müller, special name in German for leader. He was always in uniform, he knew what was going on. So, and if you had typhoid fever, you had 106°, 104° Celsius temperature, you couldn't know, you didn't know what you were doing. So he organized a group inside the camp they should put old people in bed, the sick people together in one barrack. So if there-- from the other camp came in to check on this Müller, they came from other camps to check what's going on, you know, because if you cannot get out, go out to work, for a day or two, if you couldn't, couldn't produce, you were useless, so they killed you. So there was about 300 people in the barrack. So when this *Oberscharfuehrer* came in, the other guy from the-- I think his name was Jebby, Frank Jebby [phonetic]. He was one from the big-- there was two camps in the area. I think the other camp was named [unclear] Jerusalem [unclear]. Because it was on a cemetery, a Jewish cemetery, built on a cemetery. And so when he came down, so the man who is in charge of the room, he said, "*Achtung*," everybody should be quiet and you know stand erect and this is, he said, we give the report in, this is the night shift. And they are, the people on the night shift, and this, they are sleeping now

and they going tonight to sleep. This is the way he saved them. Because if they knew there was such an epidemic in the camp, they would all shoot them to death right away. Because this was contagious. But this was an interest of this Müller because he knew, if they liquidate this camp, he had to go back to the fight at the front, so he organized this himself to save his own skin, his job. That's why he ignored it. And I had it too, my brother had it. The typhoid fever. And, but after you got the temperature dropped, even if you couldn't walk good, because when I walked I could see, I just had to walk steps so we held each other and we walked on to work. And others took our place because this is very contagious. I know a lot of them died, a lot of them. I would say about 15% or 20% died.

GK: Well, did you go, did they have a medical clinic or did you go to...

DB: There was a clinic, but...

GK: Did you go?

DB: Not me. Not with this sickness, this sickness was no clinic, because was too many people. If you hurt yourself, your foot or something, we went in and they put on a little bit of-- they had something.

GK: By the typhoid, you were not helped?

DB: No, no. No help and no medication. Finally, we went through this and then they heard Russians are coming closer. They had a victory, the Russians had a victory. They came closer to our camp. Not far. So they decided to liquidate this, our camp and put some on a train, a boxcar again, because I believe it was in the middle or maybe toward the end of 1943, and they took us to another camp. This camp was about, I would say 100 miles away from this. This is still Poland, not in Germany. This was the name Skarszysko, what I mentioned in there. [Unclear] Barrack "A" and Barrack "B" wasn't so bad. But Barrack "C" was the worst.

GK: And you were in Barrack "C"?

DB: In Barrack "C."

GK: Right.

DB: The barrack means a camp. They divided us into three and three. There were about 20, 25 barracks build on each, on each, and they used, they made-- this was a company called Hasag. *Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft*, German, this is an abbreviation. H-A-S-A-G: *Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft*. This was a special company from Germany. The Jews make, they made ammunition for the front. Ammunition. They brought in rows of cannons and we had to fill them up with the powder and seal them. Put them in boxes, clean them and send them away. And they took them to the train and they sent them away to the Russian front. This was our job. And we used to-- this was, we were there for from end of 1943 to the middle of-- nine months, I believe. Nine or ten months, until the middle of 1944.

GK: In this camp and the other camp, was it guarded by Germans or non-Germans or both?

DB: There were, the main, the leaders were Germans and they had an army trained, Russians, Russian-Ukrainians. We say they had a special unit and they had a different kind of uniform, blue uniform, with weapons with all everything but they were a special unit to watch over prisoners. We were called prisoners, *Häftlinge*, which in German means prisoners. They were watching us inside and the outside-- they took the men from the Germans, from the SS, and they were part of those SS also, but they were, they didn't speak German, they speak Ukrainian. Some of them did speak a little bit of German.

GK: Were they civil to you?

DB: Very rude. Some of them, very few were that you could talk to them. They didn't want to, weren't allowed to talk to us, only watch us, we should do the job and we should walk, not run away, you know, and this sort of thing. The main thing.

GK: Did you have *Kapos* in this camp?

DB: *Kapos* were allowed. The *Kapos* were the Jewish *Kapos*.

GK: How did they treat you?

DB: Some of them treated us nice. Because they were one of us. They knew, a very few, very, some of them were very rude. The Jewish *Kapos* I am talking about, but when we were, when we left we, when we were taken from-- when this, when the Russians were coming closer to the other camp, closer they moved forward because they, the Germans were losing in 1944, they probably came too closer and we heard from far away already shooting with planes and this and that. So, they liquidated us, put us in trains again, in box cars, and they took us to Buchenwald, to Germany, to the Germany proper, not...

GK: This is the third camp now?

DB: The third. You asked me a question about whether the *Kapos*. When we came to Buchenwald, Buchenwald was organized in 19-- in the middle '30s yet. This was organized before, before Germany occupied yet the whole lot of countries and they had already established people from Czechoslovakia, Jews and non-Jews alike, and when we came, the first thing that we-- when they unloaded us, they took everything away. They took us through a little tunnel, everybody had to go through this tunnel, again a tunnel. We had to leave-- to undress ourselves, everything would be left inside and that is where I lost my *tallis* and *tefillin*-- my *tefillin* because I was [unclear]. I didn't need the *tallis*, only the *tefillin*, because we had to leave it and I couldn't get it no more. Up to then, I had every day before the *Appell*, I got up in the morning and put on the *tefillin*. And we went in on this one end, it was maybe a mile long, very small space, a tunnel, and you came out of the other end. It was dark inside, one just touched the other to follow. All the clothes remained in the back of us. And on the other end was sitting with the tables, both sides the Germans, and they gave us a number, not the numbers inscribed here, but everybody had like, it was like a prison coat, it looked like a pajamas, white and blue, white and blue or white and gray, you know, stripes, pants, and on each one of us

was sewed on a number. My number was 68,692, I remember still, and my brother's was a number higher, but we were together. And that's all we had, and they assigned us to certain blocks. And over here, it was more order then it was in the Polish, in the Polish camps, because it was German organized. The *Kapos* was mostly Germans. And the Germans were in the camps also, but the Germans were there for different reasons, for homosexuals they were there, or people who were against the government, socialists, there were different.

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

DB: But the *Kapos* were German in Buchenwald. But they, the head of the *Kapos* was German, but the others which were helpers or second, like, vice-*kapos* I would say, they were, some were Jewish, some were Czechoslovakian or Polish because they were there a longer time. They were established through the years, before we came. They were there in 1939 or '38. The first thing they asked us, who among you was a *Kapo* and who among you did, which *Kapo* tortured you, helped the Germans torture you? And whoever was, a few of them were good, we told them they were *Kapos* and they were good. And the others, we said this Bukisky [phonetic], we showed them, Bukisky, he was a very, very tough guy, he helped the Germans. He did better than the Germans to chase us out of the barracks and everything else. Quite a few. So we had a dinner Sunday. Sunday we used to have like a better dinner in Germany, like a holiday dinner, they served us special. Everybody sit at the table in the dining room, like a hotel, and those people, I saw with the *Kapos*, came over and they say to you, "You, you, you, you come with me." And we never saw them again. This is not the Germans that did this. The administration from the inside, I believe they were Czechoslovakish, or Bulgarian or different continent nationalities, they got in on them, because inside, the Germans had no power at all. They didn't even know what was going on inside. They only watched the people should go out to work and do the job and they shouldn't be missing. Going out without *Appell* the Germans were, and coming in. What is wrong inside, somebody dies, they put them near-- there was like a big shed, they used to gather the bodies in one place for a week. After the week, a truck came and took them to, to a crematorium or someplace else. But what I missed is, when they had to liquidate the Skarszysko before we came to Germany, they did not take the whole crews in. They were sitting at the tables outside and the trucks on one side and the train at the other side. So whoever they decided, he should go to Germany, to Buchenwald, they told them to go right. Whoever they figured they is not fit to be shown to the Germans, or he had the *epox*³. I mentioned, [unclear] on account of a powder, the powder made the skin yellow, so they didn't want those people to come to Germany, to show to them they should see what, what they did to the people. I don't know the real reason why, but this is the way it was. They put them in the trucks, and five minutes later they took them out to the woods and you could hear the machine guns shoot them, shoot them right away. So from the camp it was about I would say [unclear] in the "C" *Werke* was maybe, I would say about 2,000 people, so maybe 1,000 only left, the rest were all shot, shot on the spot. But at the

³Buchsbaum may be referring to picric acid which was used in the ammunition factory at Skarszysko and mined there as well. This acid turned those overexposed to the substance yellow and usually killed exposed individuals within three months. *Death Comes in Yellow: Skarzysko-Kamienna Slave Labor Camp*, Felicja Karay, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996, Chapter 9: "Under a Cloud of Picric Acid and TNT."

same time, I, we saw there was like a van, a closed van with a little ventilator on the top, and this van was circulating around day and night, day and night, 24 hours a day. Inside we used to hear screams. This was the Poles, what they picked up in the, which were they were suspicious, or counter-revolution or maybe Jews were there. The captain investigated, put that in the,-- they had gas inside. So they were screaming for a while and all of a sudden it was quiet, and they took them to this place, too. And over there they had a big bonfire. They used to burn the bodies in there. This was before we came to German. This was in Skarszysko. That's why I came back to it. And when we came to Germany it was so--this was already 1944. They knew they were losing the war, so it was the treatment of the Jews was entirely different and they work. We were working in the ammunition factory, same ammunition HASAG, same company. It was about three months I was there, and in the daytime, the Americans used to come and bomb the factory, and at nighttime, the British; day and night, day and night, there was always the sirens. We had to go run. We couldn't hide because we had to stay where we stayed, but the Germans, they went in the bunkers. Some of us were killed but not too many. But they tried to avoid not to bomb the camps, only the factories. Only one fire we had in the kitchen, [unclear] in the one wing of the kitchen which they mistakenly dropped bombs on the kitchen. Otherwise they only bombed the factories where they produced the ammunition. But not the camps, the camps were marked with a red cross on top of the roof was a red cross but they did on the factories also the Germans, but they [the Allied forces] had probably intelligence, they knew which one was the factory and which one was the camp. They flew very low. So this was the barrack space for us because we had to run away to hide ourselves too. The buildings were falling apart. Then we had to rebuild it, we had to take all this, to rebuild it again. The trains were-- it was a lot of trouble. After that they sent us away to Shlieben because...

GK: Let me go back to Buchenwald. Were you aware of any resistance groups there, or...

DB: Not in Germany. We heard only on the news that in 1944 there were attempt to kill Hitler, but we didn't, but they did not succeed.

GK: How did you hear this?

DB: Some people came-- had heard it on the radio. We didn't have a radio or a paper, but we heard a rumor and the rumor was true too, because it was an attempt on his life in the end of '44.

GK: Were you able to keep your faith up even while you were at Buchenwald? Even though you didn't have your...

DB: *Tefillin*.

GK: Right.

DB: We did the best we could. Whatever you could, but we organized, if you didn't have one everybody-- when you left Poland everybody had their own. But when we came there we shared. We put on-- this one put on that one a little earlier and we tried

to keep with the faith. Not all of them. I wouldn't say everybody. But a lot of them did. I was one among them, and we did keep it up. Like, it came Pesach. Pesach, we didn't want to eat. Here was the bread; they didn't know about matzo. We didn't have no matzo of course, so we didn't want to eat bread on Pesach in seven or eight days, so some of them did. So we took the bread and from the Gentiles, brought in potatoes. We traded the bread for the potatoes.

GK: Were you at a medical clinic in Buchenwald at all or were...

DB: They had, they had a medical clinic and there were a few, a little bit, more better than in German, than in Poland, much better. They helped us then because in my opinion they was organized, it was like they knew that the end was near and they knew we were going to be-- they should be nicer to us. Even though we had to go out to work to the last day. Then they sent us away, because they were bombing too much at Buchenwald, every day, day and night, so they moved us to *Arbeit* about 30 or 40 miles away, to this place Schlieben. This was a branch of this camp, was the same, the same company, had a branch, a smaller place they didn't-- maybe they thought they were not going to be bombed so heavily and we were not bombed there. We worked there for about-- until the end was near, near to the end. This was a part-- Russia was coming close. We could hear already the shooters, very, very near, so they liquidated this-- they took us out from there and they didn't have trains. They had a few trains, I was lucky enough and my brother to get on the train. But of course food was no, no, not widely available. There were the Germans on the, on the, on the train guarding us, they took us to the border, to the Czechoslovakian border, Sudetenland, which was called. The camp was called Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt was like a camp that was established a long time before. It was originally established for children only. For German-Jewish children. And then we came there. It was like, it used to be for the army, big blocks, big cement blocks, buildings. So we were lucky enough that we got on the train, but people would-- they didn't have enough trains for the people. They didn't want to leave people behind. They wanted to chase them. So they made marches. And those people who marched, whoever couldn't get up, they had marched 100 miles, 115 miles, it was a big distance, every day they marched 50 miles. Whoever couldn't do it, they shot them. If he fell, he was shot on the spot. And when we came out of the-- we didn't have much food, but I knew what we are going to, but I had a little sack with some kind, we organized some kind of food to keep us alive. They let us out once a day from the, from the boxcars to do our duties, and to have some water. Wherever they have the water, near the station some place, and then we got in again for three weeks, no-- we were about a week in the train, but the people who marched, they marched about four weeks. Every day, 30, 40 miles every day. But we were lucky we were on the train. And we arrived in Theresienstadt and when we were there already we did not go out to work. They kept us inside. They gave us a small ration, but you could live on it, and you didn't see no Germans at all. No Germans, just at the gates. And we could see, we could feel in the air, that the, the end is

very near. Because the Russians liberated us. They came into the camp, they opened the gate, May the 8. This was a day before, May 7 probably, night before was a heavy, heavy shelling and we knew this is it. There was no more Germans. You could only see far away on the road how the Germans go, you know. But they took them prisoners, Russian-Jewish, I think, they had taken prisoners. And the Russians came in on the 8, and they saw the conditions that we were in, that we were very hungry, we didn't have no food for a few days, so they, the Russians brought in big trucks with food in it and with *Pensach* [phonetic] how do you say *Pensach*?

UI⁴: Barley.

DB: Barley, and they cook it with the lamb. This is their favorite food. So our people were very, very hungry, so whenever you came over with a dish, they filled it up three times, four times. They ate, everybody like that, so they got diarrhea from this, and hundreds and hundreds of people died after they were liberated, from the diarrhea. And they didn't have enough doctors to treat them. People didn't, they didn't know that-- the soldier came in with a, with a truck with food. They had enough food that you want more they take more, but they were not allowed to eat it. It was very fat, very nourishing, very-- and the people got diarrhea from this and they died a lot. Luckily, I was, I was lucky enough, and we stayed a few, a few weeks until they established themselves, the Russians. And then they put us in trains and they took us over, they asked whoever wants to go back home? And they came delegates from Poland, Poland was from the Russian influence already, and they came, you are citizens of Poland, come back and we need you. We want you. I didn't go to be a patriot for Poland, back. The reason I went back is because I figured maybe somebody is still living.

GK: Someone in your family.

DB: Yes. So, we went on this train and the train was going five miles an hour. We sit on the train but we had already food. They gave us food, every station, the Russians gave us food. And we went until we came to Poland for about three or four weeks we went on the train. Two weeks, I don't remember exactly. We came to the city Krakow, and then I went to my city, and there was nobody. The Poles were chasing us. There were a few Jews left. So some Jews were looking for their homes, their houses. They had houses and businesses, so who was living in it? The Gentiles what took it over and so they were trying to get it back. So that the Gentiles didn't like it-- they got it for nothing. They were living in a house that the Jews left behind, and he came, his family, and he wanted back the house, a sister or a brother or whatever. Some came from Russia because they saved themselves. So they made a pogrom you see. They started to intimidate us, and then not far from our city, Kielce, was about 30, 40 miles from our city, there they came in the Poles and they killed all the Jews what they have there. In 1945, this was about the middle of the-- in July or August, I'm not sure, I think it was in

⁴UI: Unidentified individual.

August. So when we heard this. We picked ourselves up, all of us, took the bundles. We were close to the Czechoslovakian border and we marched. We didn't have no transportation even. The march was about 30 miles, marched to the border. The border was not sealed but in those days, everything was, Poland from Czechoslovakia was like one, one country. We went to Prague. Prague was already Czechoslovakia, was a lot of Jews. A Jewish committee, the Joint was there, the American Joint, they helped us out. They transferred us, little by little to Austria, Salzburg. From Austria we went to Landsberg, Germany, and we waited for four years until we could leave. We came to this side.

GK: And where did you come in the United States first? And what year?

DB: In 19--, 1949, June 2, I arrived in Boston, and I had an uncle here, an elderly man, which I wrote to him. I had his address. And he guaranteed, he was going to-- like you have to have, if you didn't have anybody here, the Joint Distribution Committee, they guaranteed for the government they would give them a job and housing for a while, until they get situated. I didn't go through the organization, I went private because-- in the same boat, but they came to pick me up. My uncle, my cousins came to get me, to pick me up. From Boston I had to travel here. They were in Bridgeport, Pennsylvania my cousin and my uncle. So they put me on the train in Boston. It took about seven, eight hours to get here to Philadelphia, and they knew what train to wait for me, so they waited for me in North Philadelphia and they didn't know me, so they hollered, "Buchsbaum, Buchsbaum, Buchsbaum, Buchsbaum!" And their name is Blasman, Blasman. My uncle's name is Blasman. He is from my mother's side. So this Mr. Blasman's son was a lawyer. He was here with a car and he missed me. I was on the main station, the 30th Station. He missed me because until I got to the door, he said, "Buchsbaum, Buchsbaum," and I said, "Yes!" I couldn't get out because the train was moving, so he run right away to the North Philadelphia station and they picked me up from the North Philadelphia station and they come back and told me I should get off. They were waiting for me. And they took me to Bridgeport, Pennsylvania. I was there two weeks, three weeks, until my brother came. Of course my brother was married, and I was single. And then we came to Philadelphia. He was already...

GK: This is the brother you were in the camps with?

DB: This is the brother that I just told you that he died. He died in 1981.

GK: Well, which relatives that survived the liberation?

DB: Three brothers.

GK: Which ones?

DB: Myself, the one in Antwerp, he had survived. He was in camp also, my brother from Belgium. He was there since 1927. He left home, he went to Belgium. He didn't want to stay in Poland, so he was a younger boy, 17 years old boy. But during the war, he was a diamond cutter, during the war, they had a camp there too, in Belgium. So, he was in camp. So he had friends, non-Jews, Gentiles, which he used to do business with

them, and he was a very good diamond cutter. He knew his business. So this [unclear] this friend came into the camp, paid off the guards. He took him out with his wife. He was a [unclear], had no children, he was married already.

GK: Was he Jewish?

DB: My wife?

GK: No, no, no. The man?

DB: He was a non-Jew.

GK: He was a non-Jew.

DB: He took him out. My brother and my sister-in-law. The one who just died, this year, 98. And he kept him until the war was over. He used to-- there was a shortage in diamond cutters, because he was a very experienced man, my brother. And in wartime, there was a shortage. They needed him. So, he kept him and he used to give him work and the Gentiles-- he used to get paid for it and he said after the war he get everything back. And he was very good to him. He told him...

GK: What was his name, do you remember?

DB: I have no idea. I was never in Belgium. My brother never told me this.

GK: So that brother survived from Belgium and you survived and who else survived?

DB: My brother, another brother I had which was together with me all this time.

GK: His name?

DB: His name was Naftali, but he died in 1981. Here in Germany. He went to Germany and he died there. But he was an American citizen.

GK: Well, we want to thank you very much for your time and your effort. It is greatly appreciated. Thank you so very, very much. And this is an account by David Buchsbaum. Thank you again.

[Interview end.]