

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

VICTOR COOPER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Rebecca Siegel
Date: April 21, 1985

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Gratz College
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VC - Victor Cooper [interviewee]

RS - Rebecca Siegel [interviewer]

Date: April 21, 1985¹

Tape one, side one:

RS: This tape, this interview, is made between Rebecca Siegel and Victor Cooper of New Jersey.

VC: New York.

RS: I beg your pardon, it is New York. Please tell me, may I call you Victor?

VC: Go ahead.

RS: Since it's my husband's name...

VC: Go ahead.

RS: ...it'll give me pleasure.

VC: Go ahead.

RS: Please tell me when and where you were born. And a little bit about your family.

VC: My date of birth-- is it [his speaking] loud enough?

RS: Yes.

VC: My date of birth, December 26, 1914. In Strzemieszyce, Poland. In the coal region, southwest of Poland, southwestern corner at that time, not far from the German border. My father died when I was six weeks old. I had three older brothers. My mother never remarried. All of us, all my brothers with their wives, some of them married with their children-- I was married, I had a child-- perished during the war. My son was six months old. My wife was 18 years old. My whole family perished. 1939 I was drafted to the-- I was a reservist in the Polish Army in the war, Polish-German War. Towards the end of the war I was captured, was imprisoned, a prisoner of war. In March '40 the Germans, with the intention to deny us the international right of a prisoner, shipped us Jewish prisoners to Lublin and the minute we went off of the siding of the cars, on the siding, across the sidings were the German SS. They took us Jewish prisoners to the camp on the [unclear]. They took our uniforms, our boots, and gave us rags. The minute we walked in, a number of us were shot by the commander of this camp, who openly permitted that everybody was going to do it. In about a week [unclear] in their underwear jumped the wall. [Unclear] factory, hide in there, and I met one Jew with a little horse and buggy who worked for the SS. They took him to work. He took me to his home-- a very poor Jew-- next to the old cemetery in the country. He and his children, young children-- two daughters about 10 and 11-- almost starved. But they shared whatever they had with me.

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

RS: And how old were you at this time?

VC: At this time, in '39, in '40, I was 26 years old.

RS: Okay. Go ahead. [pause; noise] It's on. No, it's on. Just leave it alone because it makes noise.

VC: The name of this fellow, this family, was Shamai Piatok. And to this day I wonder what happened to them. He gave me a few rags and I, in a cold winter in the frost, smuggled on the destroyed railroads to get home. And I want to emphasize, that I came to Lublin with the second transport of Jewish prisoners. The first transport was chased from Lublin to Biala Podlaska and almost annihilated. The snow was red. I was one of the luckies in the group, that I came with this group that somehow they didn't exterminate. Maybe there was intention the way the commander said he's going to do gradually every day. I came home, in a situation that is hard to describe. Before I went home one of my brothers was then at home. I didn't want to go into the house. I shed whatever I wore and I asked my brother to warm up water and to take a tub with hot water outside and burn what I had worn before because it was crawling on the floor. I was in the Strzemieszyce Ghetto when they liqui-, almost liquidated, because I worked in a shop there-- the shops that was organized by us in order to be able to have a chance to st--, to live a little longer. We were transfered then to Bendzin. From Bendzin to another little town outside a little, a village, [unclear], from which I was taken in June, 1943. At night they rounded up, which a usual thing there. And it is hard to describe the horror one could see there. Of course we were hardened already to this. We saw it. First they took the older ones, the children. Us, they had, we had, we had to kneel in the fields not to be able to see every thing what's going on. But we heard the shots. After the train with those whom they took there left, and presumably for Auschwitz, they took us after a while to the train. Despite the fact that they hosed off the platform, we still saw blood on it, which means it was a massacre there. When they put us on the train, we knew that we are the youngest ones, that we are destined to work. They took us to one camp, Carovina [phonetic], and I worked there in a coal mine. And after a few weeks, just a short few weeks, I became a *Muselmann*, which the term *Muselmann*, person who is already in the grave almost. They liquidated because the task was accomplished. They liquidated this camp and they chased us to Markstadt.

RS: Victor, excuse me, since we're going to have interference, I think it's better for me to move this, not too close but just hold it up. Yes.

VC: In Markstadt Krupp built factories, I worked in *Kommandos*, the hardest one, earth moving and cement. In '44, April, early April, it was still very cold, Markstadt was liquidated. Part went to Blechhammer. Us they took to a concentration camp, Fünfteichen. It's a funny thing.

RS: [unclear]

VC: That's what it's named. It was built on a open field. In my times, when I was there, it was terrible. They chased us to this camp. We were wrapped only in a

blanket, because they took away the clothes. They came over towards the evening and we had to line up to have a tattoo done. Part of our group had the tattoos done. This was done outdoors. But when [unclear] was getting dark, they took us all to the barracks. And they didn't tattoo the rest anymore, next day. In May...

RS: Then you did not get a tattoo?

VC: I did not get a tattoo. Flossenbūr-- Fünf-, Fünfteichen, was a part in the group of the Gross Rosen System. In Gross Rosen, although it must, may not be known too well here, was one of the worst camps I was in. At that time, the Hungarian and the Greek Jews were brought to camps. And they needed more camps. They took 24 Jewish boys from the Flossenbürg, which was not a strictly Jewish camp, and they selected and they sent, through Gross Rosen, to the Eulengebirge to build camps. The whole procedure was in Gross Rosen, you know, until we came through Gross Rosen no Jew ever went in through the gate and went out through the gate. He went out through the chimney.

RS: Yes.

VC: The terrible things there was that we went into the *Brausebad*, to the shower, we knew that we were not going to be gassed because they needed us. They took away the clothes, shaved us from top to bottom. We had to go into the bath, it was like a basin in the floor. We had to duck underneath, there was a, this basin was partitioned in two parts. We had to go under, dive, duck underneath, come out through the other side. On the other side we got completely new clothes. And of course, we were again inspected by the SS. After a few days we were shipped to the Eulengebirge to build camps. In November, '44, I was transferred to a penal camp in Fürstenstein by Ravensbrück.

RS: That was in Germany?

VC: In Germany.

RS: In Germany?

VC: Yes. And we built tunnels in a mountain.

RS: What did you, did you ever know what the purpose of it was?

VC: Well, we did not know exactly but we could surmise. That, either to hide ammunition or to hide the art-, the other pieces that they had.

RS: Yes.

VC: February, beginning February '45, the Russian Army approached. They were already in Schweidnitz.

RS: Can we hold that for just a moment, Victor?

VC: Yes.

RS: Because that, I want to try to fill in a little bit more of your experience before the, the liberation.

VC: No, no. This wasn't liberation.

RS: Oh, you said the Russian Army. I mean...

VC: Yeah, that's right the Russian Army...

RS: Okay. Go ahead.

VC: ...approached. They were in Schweidnitz, about 15 km away from Floss-, from Fürstenstein. They evacuated us. And this now it was very cold, and we walked-- this was a mountainous territory-- we walked, I think, for two days and a night. In the meantime, quite a number of us were shot and killed in the road. Until one night they loaded us in cars in Czechoslovakia, I think it was Parchnitz, the place. And there were two stops. One stop was in Pilsen, the other stop was in Prague, for the purpose to throw out the corpses from the cars. We were driven for another two days and a night until we finally were unloaded not far from Bayreuth in Bavaria. We marched...

RS: The home of glorious Wagner.

VC: Right. And that's what I want emphasize. And I want to also, in parentheses, to remark that the reason why our President selected, not Dachau now, and not Flossenbürg, which was in the plan, but Bergen-Belsen is because Flossenbürg and Dachau had gas chambers in, and crematoria. Bergen-Belsen didn't.

RS: Right.

VC: When we were unloaded, although it was a cold day, the place was sunny. We marched up to Flossenbürg and I climbed towards the mountain. Flossenbürg was located on top of a mountain in a big hole in the mountain. When we came up we were in the clouds. We were constantly in the clouds. Of course, the inscription at the main gate was *Arbeit Macht Frei*. And the funny thing about Flossenbürg is that there was a camp within a camp. There were four blocks: 20, 21, 22, 23. Each block was fenced off barbed wire, within the camp. Each block, barrack, each block, barrack, contained probably around 1000 plus. We were squeezed like the herring in a box. In the bunks, which were three tiers, we slept two and three in one. The same night when we came they took each individual block to the bath, to the shower. Of course, entering the shower we were scared because they had no use of us, and we were afraid. And we just looked what it's going to come out from there. Fortunately some cold water came out for a brief, maybe one minute. And right away we were chased out. We didn't get our clothes back. But we were thrown some rags, accompanied with beatings. On top of it, we got marks with a crayon, with a ink crayon on our foreheads, various colors, marks, with various letters, with a cross in the middle. It scared us because this might have meant something. Well, I landed like many others. I landed with one ladies' shoe with a high heel and with one wooden clog, and a jacket that reached me to the navel, and short knee pants, rags. This was civilian clothes that they probably took from other camps when they exterminated the civilians. Well, the bargaining right away started between the barracks through the wire, exchanging for the small one got the small. There was one latrine in the middle. And the latrine served for all four blocks. There were four entrances. There was one faucet. And of course, it's very difficult to get either water or to get washed. The latrine, let's, I would call it, basement of the latrine was fenced off where we deposited,

every morning, the dead bodies we dragged out from the camp, of course naked. And of course, I will never forget, in the morning once I saw a young boy of about 16 running down to the below, turning over the bodies the naked bodies. And I ask him, "What are you doing? Are you crazy?" He said, "I'm looking for my father." From there a group, no-- I want to tell also, that I felt in this, all you saw in Flossenbürg was the clouds, a piece of sky and the high towers. You couldn't see beyond the, the, the mountains. I felt as if I were like chained helpless on Mount Olympus. From there they needed some work group, and I was selected-- again to the railroad, again to the car. And after two days driving, riding, they finally shipped us off, out in a place called Estenfeld, a terrible thing. There was no water, although for a short while during the day was in a wooden bucket some water flowing. Hence, the soup was very watery, and when you went for the soup there were other non-Jews, prisoners, mostly Polish, Ukrainians. They grabbed this and they, they took it away from you. I worked on the night shift, again, in tunnels. Going to work, many of us were shot. I still to this day, cannot imagine how I could have been a long time in concentration camp, after much being in that shape, how I could lift a heavy automatic hammer, and keep drilling the ceiling of the mountain to enlarge the tunnel. And the American troops approached, they evacuated this camp.

RS: Can we hold that...

VC: Yes.

RS: Just a moment. What kinds of people, when you said there were Ukrainians and Poles, where were the Jews from in that camp? Do you know from which parts of Eastern Europe and Germany they were from...

VC: Not only from Eastern Europe. They were from all over. They were from Greece. From Poland. From Hungary. From Czechoslovakia. From Germany. From France. And this was all international.

RS: Right. Did, were you have, did you have any opportunity to talk with them...

VC: Yes.

RS: ...about life before...

VC: Yes. [unclear] they knew...

RS: What did they, what did they tell you about the life, life of Jews in their own villages and countries, before the apprehension.

VC: I don't think we talked too much because we knew what the situation was. We knew what was in Poland. We knew that even in 1937 they got the bombs in Poland. We knew what the Polish government did. We knew what the Prime Minister Slavos Skladkowski², General Slavos Skladkowski, in the [unclear] Polish sayings said after the pogroms. It's a famous word, a Polish word *aufshen* [phonetic], which means "Of course. Of course. Rough them up, but we're don't have to kill them, of course." We

²Felicjan Slawoj Skladkowski - Polish Prime Minister, 1936 - 1939.

knew also that the Polish Senate had a third of their senators appointed by the president because they changed the Constitution from 21, which was a Democratic Constitution. And one of, a [unclear] General, Christophe, a wife, his wife, became was appointed prime minister, was appointed senator. Madame Christophe. And when Hitler was marching at the gates of Poland, not only did the Polish party, some antisemitic parties rough up Jews and beat and pogrom, but there was an organization similar like the German SS., the SR. Similar uniform except instead of brown they had cherry color, with the same boots, [unclear], beating up. But this Madame Christophe had a speech in Parliament, this was in '38 I think, forbidding, proposing a ban on ritual slaughter, so that the Jews couldn't slaughter cattle or meat. Of course, you had to, it is, it is, you know, ironic. Here is a trance, the country is, was about to be liquidated. Annihilated. And all they had in mind was the Jews.

RS: Yes.

VC: This is all they had concerned.

RS: Yes. But then-- knowing, this is before the invasion of Poland-- you knew, all of you already knew the quality and the character of the Nazis. You were hearing stories from 1933 on, the role of the Jew in their...

VC: Nineteen-, yeah...

RS: 1932?

VC: From 1923.

RS: Yes...

VC: Even we heard.

RS: Sure. What were the, were there resistance activities even before the war? And then once you got into the war and you were taken to various camps, was there resistance, active resistance by the Jews?

VC: In the camps or before?

RS: Before. The, in, in the ghetto...

VC: Before the ghett-...

RS: First.

VC: Before the ghetto.

RS: Before. You were a young man.

VC: They, I, I want to refrain...

RS: Yes.

VC: To have physical resistance was an almost impossible, be a heroic thing.

RS: In the face of such power.

VC: First of all, you can resist if you had a way out. If you cage an animal within four walls, and he is isolated from everything, and he has no escape hatch, he resigns himself his fate. When we talk about resistance, if we characterized resistance, the will to survive, the hope, the continuation of certain-- despite the fact that we were forbidden-- continuation of some institutions, starting from self-help institutions to

cultural institutions, this is a part of [unclear] resistance. Of course it is very difficult for one who hasn't lived through it to understand it. I personally came across some such remarks, "Why didn't you fight back?" Well, when we were in concentration camp, we were really under their rules. We wished that we were in the front line. And I was in the war and [unclear] in the front line. Sure we, we, we were overrun by the technical power of the Germans. However, I had a gun. Even if I couldn't harm them, but I felt if I fight back. If you can't-- I always recalled a little book, a little story. I think it was by Eugene O'Neill.

RS: Don't go too far.

VC: The Hairy Ape.

RS: Yes.

VC: If you recall the Hairy Ape, such a strong man, such a fearless man, when he is put in a cage and he is hosed off with a hose, he leans back, he sits back in a corner, in a corner. He looks like an ape. That's what, how we felt.

RS: It was almost prophetic wasn't it? The play was prophetic.

VC: Yes. So, to say about those people who don't understand it, you had, you couldn't even escape. Everything was, we didn't have a country, first of all, that was not occupied by Germany. Second, we didn't have a country in which the people, the non-Jewish people, and I don't talk about helping, but at least being neutral. The first German words that they first learn was pointing a finger, "*Juden!*" This is the first. Of course I thought to myself when they will be through with us, they'll start with you-- maybe not to such an extent. And that's why, maybe, I have no compassion for what's happening in Poland now.

RS: I don't blame you.

VC: Because my, my, my expression is "a plague on both of your houses." In 1946, when a few Jews came back to Poland, the question was-- because of Poland's requisition took away everything what the Jews had, first the Germans, then the Poles replaced the Jews-- so the question is, "You survived Hitler? He killed so many Jews and you survived?" The Polish A. K., the Armia Krajowa³, which means the backbone of the Polish uprising in 1944, [unclear] slaughtered 41 Jews in Kielce⁴ in 1946. So this is, if you don't underst-, if you don't the history and the life of the Poles, it's difficult. The Polish clergy, the Catholic clergy, carries a lot of share, a great share of what happened. Not only what happened then during the occupation, but the preparation before, the way they had it in their teachings.

RS: For several hundred years.

³Home Army. Polish resistance movement from 1942 - 1945.

⁴On July 4, 1946, 42 Polish Jews were murdered and 82 wounded of about 200 who had returned after WWII. Two or three Gentiles were also killed by Jews defending themselves. Especially significant in post-war history as the pogrom took place 14 months after the end of WWII and the extent of the Holocaust was well known.

VC: If I try to talk to a Catholic here, he equates the attitude as it, in the present time in the United States, the more or less tolerant attitude. And I say more or less with reservations. He cannot understand what it is there. And even the Jews wouldn't understand because they already know the situation as it is now. Well, then there were the satellites. Then there were Ukrainians. And then there were the Lithuanians and the Latvians. And the Hungarian SS. You know, the SS which were worse, many times, than the Germans. And of course, the Austrian SS was worse than the German. Now I stopped where, when we were evacuated from Estenfeld on the march to Buchenwald. We was some 4000 people. It took us two days and a night. At night, and it was cold-- it was beginning April-- we were in camp for one night in a field, freezing cold, shots. On this march, and later on the death march, anyone who got weaker got shot on the spot. There was no food and no water. Anyone who went out to the ditch near the road, for a lap of water, was shot. Ukrainian SS, Lithuanian SS. A few hundred feet from the road, there was a little pond. People run there. Prisoners run there for water. They laid down on the floor, on the ground, sticking their heads in the water and up. They shot them and kicked them in into the water. Their bodies, their corpses were floating. Well, of course I made up my mind, as long as I can last, I will. When we finally came into Buchenwald, through the main gate which had an inscription on top, "*Recht oder Unrecht mein Vaterland*" which means in translation "Right or wrong, my country." And anytime I hear patriots and chauvinists here say, "Right or wrong my country," I shiver. First of all, because they don't quote the rest of it what it says. And you know what...

RS: Quote it.

VC: That is?

RS: Quote it.

VC: "Right or wrong my country. If it's right let it be right. If it's wrong let's correct it. But right or wrong, my country." But the interpretation eliminates the center. Well, the minute we walked in Buchenwald, the [unclear] administration was on the, the red triangles, which is political. Of which incidentally I was also, as a Jew, dubbed. We were surprised about the treatment we got. And we realized that Buchenwald is a paradise compared to the others, compared to Flossenbürg, compared to Gross Rosen. The first thing the *Block Ältester*, the *Kapos* were in Buchenwald, they asked us.

RS: Were the *Kapos* Jewish?

VC: No, not necessarily. Most of them were not Jews because Buchenwald wasn't only a Jewish camp. They ask us, "Who beat you," when they saw somebody, you know, the *Kapos* from us, "with a stick?" And right away, I wouldn't say broke their bones, but they treated them there accordingly. They asked us, "Who beat you?" And whoever beat us got his beating. They hauled out from the kitchen some soup. They gave us a piece of bread which we hadn't seen for ages. Soup and bread. So of course, this was a paradise. We knew that if they don't shoot us, we may survive. We knew that the Americans are approaching because, we knew they approached Buchenwald, of

course first we went through Weimar. And I will never forget...

RS: Also a very important cultural...

VC: Yes, cultural, cultural [unclear], yes.

RS: Yes.

VC: And when we went through Weimar, it so happened that we went through the main streets. There were across the streets in a empty lot were the anti-aircraft, the ditches dug for the Germans. One fellow in our group, that week, the SS men pulled him out, took him near the ditch, shot him and kicked him into the ditch. I watched because people watched from the, from the houses. And some were on the fifth floor. A woman watched also. And all of a sudden when she saw it, she screamed and she fell back, apparently fainting...

RS: Hold it. Hold it. [tape off]

Tape one, side two:

VC: ...seeing such a scene. And even such a thing, fainting of a German woman, gave me satisfaction. Now you see what you are doing. We walked from Buchenwald, from Weimar to Buchenwald which is some five to eight miles. Don't know exactly. When we approached Buchenwald, there was a very interesting sight. Outside of the barbed wire, close to the barbed wire, there was an armament factory the Guslav Elvetica [phonetic]. The Allied Air Force razed it literally to the ground, not touching the barbed wire. And of course, now in retrospect I ask myself, you are claiming that you couldn't bomb? You could pinpoint exactly to the millimeter to exterminate but you couldn't exterminate, you couldn't destroy the, the, crematoria?

RS: And you know what else we are saying...

VC: The gas chambers?

RS: They knew where to pinpoint...

VC: I am aware of it.

RS: So that the Lippizaner horses would not be touched.

VC: I am well aware of that fact.

RS: Yes.

VC: Of course, everything, a destruction, gave us satisfaction. We were, we were located so that right of the main gate was a crematorium. Us, of course it was crowded, were located in a const-, in a structure that we started building, brick and the steel beams. And it was so little room there that the people were almost on top of one another and they were hanging from the beams like monkeys. This structure had a basement, a cellar, where there were empty shell cartridges. I located myself on the cartridges. I met there one of my cousins and one of my best school friends, school, from school. On April 8th, they formed the first transport from Buchenwald to Dachau. And I was on the first transport. April 11th, the Americans were there already. There were, I recall, 1558 of us because they counted us. We were watched by close to 80 Hungarian Szalasi⁵ SS. And there was an attachment of Black Ukrainian SS. We left Buchenwald close to the evening, close to dusk. The minute it became dark, in the forest they started shooting and chasing us, all night long. There was a Holocaust in miniature. By next morning, or, when it dawned, a [unclear], a third of us was missing and killed. Of course, dogs and the shooting, from the noise and the, and the, and the popping of the guns, and the dogs helped in addition. Well, we marched and every day about 100 of us was killed. It came to a point where we took it as natural and whenever we heard a pop somebody was killed and fell. We said, in Polish, "*Spokojna jego glowa*. His head is now in peace, at peace." There were some who couldn't make it anymore and they knew where they were going but they didn't want to see when they're being shot. They covered their

⁵Ferenc Szalasi - leader of Arrow Cross in Hungary.

heads, with parts of clothing and knelt down and then they fell there. Whoever was weak, and when we passed through a village or through a town, the Ukrainian Black SS had a wagon, a carriage, pulled by our people, the weak ones who couldn't walk they loaded on this carriage. And sometimes on this carriage were five and six and eight, one on the top of another, and even more. And when we were outside of the village those people had to dig a grave. They lined them up there. They shot them. And the other ones would pull the wagon had to cover them up. And there was no food, no water. Every once in a while, every few days we rested in a barn or in a field because they wanted to rest. So of course, we went into a barn and we were looking right away for something whether we can organize something, whether it was dry grain, or whether there was something else. Once, once I got hold of a young pigeon, from the pigeon cage. And of course, if they had caught me they would have shot me. And when everything was quiet I took it out from under my shirt-- which incidentally was full of lice-- and I was lying next to my cousin. And I told him that I have something and I tore it apart. With the feathers. With the intestines. We ate it up. Water? When we went quite often through forests. I reached up and I took the young buds from the [unclear] trees and I chewed them. The 18th of April my cousin says to me, "Victor I can't make it anymore. I'm going in the wagon." I couldn't persuade him. He went on the wagon. But a few hours later I saw him back. He says, "I went there. I wasn't afraid of death," he says, "but the beating before that." A day after the 19th he says, "I can't and I am going no matter what." He went. Before he went he says, "If you survive and you see somebody from my family tell them that I perished April the 18th." After the war my, his sister who lived in Munich, visited me in Straubing where I was. Somebody told her that her brother was alive. I just matter of factly told her, "Don't look for him. He is not alive." April the 19th, and I'm sure because a few hours later I saw already that somebody had his cap.

RS: Well, Victor...

VC: ... had his cap.

RS: Let me ask you, he was so close to being a free man you, you were encouraging him. You were motivating him to hold out. To hold out. What propelled him to go back where he knew it was sure death?

VC: Suffering before death is worse than death. If I tell you that many of us, at least I had, had wish, we had wishes. The first wish probably was a little food. And there was conversation constantly about food. You know, some, the mind walks back, wants something that you had maybe at every stage of life. Something that to some person may be insignificant, to another is significant. But what made this, what made him do it is we wished sometimes funny. And I mentioned that recently, at a wake, when I asked, at a funeral when I was asked to say a few words at the funeral, a friend. To die in a bed. This was the highest dream, in a bed. To be buried and to have a monument. Or a sign that somebody's buried there. And to have somebody, you know, come and

reminisce and re-, recalls here is somebody I knew is buried. Now, for normal, for people who live a normal life this is unfathomable. So you're asking what? Death sometimes is a relief. You have to have maybe, I had this stamina, this determination, no. If they won't shoot me, I am not going to give them a pre-, a, a, a precedent. I don't give them a motive to shoot, to kill me. I'm not going to go out for what, as long as I can still walk. My other friend, the school friend, about the 27th, of course before I go further...

RS: You know...

VC: People tried to escape...

RS: What you just said, it's such a beautiful thing what you've just said.

VC: People tried to escape. They were desperate. Maybe they didn't, their mind was so desperate that they escape, even if logic dictates that there's no, not much chance. I figured if I had at least 15, 20 percent chance I will escape. Therefore, I watched every opportunity. We marched further. One night, the 22nd, before crossing the Danube, they put us in, in barns. And I was lying next to my friend, Cynta. But before they put us to the barn, on the way, on the road, he couldn't walk anymore. So I supported him. I the sick man, with a crooked shoes, wooden shoes, and of course I held behind. And behind, I was beaten up with a butt, with a rifle butt. And the dogs kept biting. And I kept encouraging him, talking, and of course by that time, best friends sometimes have grudges against each other, being conscious that we are not going to last longer, we even brought up the grudges and we tried to tell to each other, "Well, these are trivialities. Let's forget about them." So I dragged him until we came to this barn. In the morning when they woke us up, first of all with the bayonettes they started jabbing of the hay and straw if somebody was hiding. We were not hidden. So I tried to rise him. "Come on Cynta, get up. Other wise they'll shoot you." So he says, "Victor, you go. I can't anymore. I'm staying here and here I'm going to be finished." And I...

RS: It's a deep loss for a survivor...

VC: And I tried to. And he was a very intelligent person, a student in Bedzin. I studied in Cracow. I couldn't lift him up because he couldn't stand on his feet, and he was resigned completely. Because even if I had dragged him the suffering was worse than the instant death.

RS: Yes.

VC: And there he perished. One of his brothers who was in camps in Lithuania, survived, in New York. After the war I told him the situation because he also thought that his brother is somewhere alive. [pause] We crossed the Danube. On the other side, near a place Mallersdorf they took us into a barn again a few days later. It was about the 25th, or the 26th of April. And it's a funny thing, I kept outlining for my children and drawing how the barn looked like. And when they took a position to the barn on one side, it was a large barn and a big farm house, the SS and the dogs on one side, of course guards outside, on the other side of the barn, us. We climbed up the hay. I was the one

first. Because I had ideas. Any time we were what were our chances, what can be done? The barn had a roof with a double peak. And between the peak there's an apron of sheet metal. I was up there, in the, in the inner incline of one peak. I lifted the clay tiles to look out. What are the chances? I loosened two tiles. You know, with the intention that when it would be quiet, everything would sleeping. I will lift the tiles nicely, quietly. I would take them in the hay, took off my shoes, and I'm going to go out. So I tried to do it. But, somebody watched me. Another one. And when he watched me, he tried to push himself also. He made noise. There was no other choice but run. We ran out. Of course the dogs woke up. The shooting started. I went to the back of this barn. There was a little shack, a lower shack. I jumped on the lower shack, jumped on the ground and started running through the fields. The other guy went after me. There was a great commotion around there. In the same night they shot there, near the barn, 142 of us. We ran up further, about, let's say, three quarters of a mile. And there was, on the, at the end of one field, there was a piece of ground with Yew needle trees. The ground with the trees was low. There was still snow on the ground. We slid in under these needle trees because we expected that they are going after us. Lying low on the ground we saw the dogs. We saw the boots going around. And somehow, by miracle, the dogs didn't smell us. And they didn't find us. And they went back. It was night. It was cold. We walked away further and further. And we fell asleep.

RS: And where were you at this point? Where?

VC: Near Mallersdorf.

RS: And where is that?

VC: Bavaria. Bavaria. Near...

RS: Near, in East Germany?

VC: Bavaria. No, no, no.

RS: Bavaria isn't...

VC: No. This is in southern Germany.

RS: Southern?

VC: American occupation.

RS: Okay.

VC: And the next morning, early in the morning at dawn, somebody started hitting us with the butts of their rifles and woke us up. A German soldier from the FLAK, which is *Fliegerabwehrkanone*, anti-aircraft. He took us to the encampment, made us chop wood for the kitchen. In the evening they loaded us in a truck, and took us to Dingolfing, a village not far from there, to the headquarters. And in a clearing of the woods we had to sit on the ground. We were guarded. And of course, we didn't have at that time, a striped suits, because [unclear] they took us away. They gave us [unclear] with smudges with paint all over [unclear] and crosses and so on. Colorful red and white. But we had the numbers. I had the number...

RS: But you didn't have the tattoos?

VC: No. No. No. Tattoo were-- nobody had tattoo...

RS: That was a help for you?

VC: No because nobody looked at tattoos. The tattoo was only mainly when they took, when somebody was killed or died, they took the number and registered him that he is dead.

RS: Oh.

VC: When they took him to a crematorium they registered the number, he had a tattoo. Because they were very meticulous in registering who was dead. Of course, in the register in the card file, everyone died of heart failure.

RS: And typhus.

VC: Heart failure, sure. Everybody's heart failure. So I had this, [background noise on intercom] so I had the numbers. The number was in the right chest above the heart, in the left chest above the heart, and on the pants on the side. I had, on top of for being a Jew, I had also the red triangle, which is political. And as you say, on top of it I needed this? So while I was watched, the guard didn't see it, I tore it off. And with my fingers, I made a little hole in the ground and I buried it in this clearing. After the liberation, I came back a few months later, quite a few months later, maybe six months, and I found those numbers. And I have them.

RS: Victor, your story is so moving. There's so many things that I want to know from you. What...

VC: This is not the end.

RS: Oh, I know. All right. Do you want to, except I want to...

VC: Except I'm done. Yes, go ahead.

RS: I want to ask of you before we, we ended. How did you hear about the ending, the peak, the Americans coming for you?

VC: I will come.

RS: Okay.

VC: Well, we knew, we knew the evacuation, we knew why.

RS: Yes.

VC: I mean, sometimes the evacuation was so hasty that the, you know. How we knew? I'll tell you how we knew. In the camps where you could we got called *Voelkischer Beobachter*⁶, which is the German Nazi Party paper.

RS: Yes.

VC: We knew how to read between the lines.

RS: Yes.

VC: It's very interesting. At the beginning of the war when the *Voelkischer Beobachter* encouraged the Germans to use potatoes [unclear] and to raise rabbits, so they will have meat, we understood that they had plenty of potatoes yet, but they don't

⁶*Voelkischer Beobachter* - People's Observer, daily newspaper published by the Nazi Party from the 1920s until the fall of the Third Reich. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

have meat.

RS: Yes.

VC: Later on, when they castigated the Germans for using the good nourish-, nourishing potatoes for, for the purpose of [unclear], we knew that they don't have potatoes anymore.

RS: Right.

VC: We knew how to read between the lines. So from these papers, we knew exactly what's going on.

RS: Right. Right.

VC: We knew how to read the lines.

RS: Right.

VC: Now, I want to come, because of the potatoes [unclear].

RS: I'm afraid we're com-, we have about 10 minutes left.

VC: In 10 minutes, I'll do it. In the evening the officer, one of the officers came over. I saw him having hands in the pockets and I knew that there is a revolver there. He took us to a path in the forest, and said, "Well, you tried once. Try again." I knew what their intention was. So I was the first in that, in the, in the path. The other fellow was in the back. He didn't understand what he mean, meant. When he said this I started running, and I had a little torn blanket. I threw it down. It was already dark, dusk, and cloudy because a storm came. And I jumped into the bushes. He thought probably that I am dead there. The other guy didn't understand. He says, "Thank you." He shot him. When I went for the numbers, I went to the same path. All I find, found is the other guy's cap. He was shot there. Apparently the peasants there took the body and buried it somewhere, but the cap fell down to the ravine, and I got it. I was sick. I was feverish. It was raining all night. I was in the storm. And the fire was burning. And I was thirsty. I lied down on the ground and I lapped in, wherever there was a drop with water from the railroad car, I lapped it. Finally I landed, to make it short, I landed in a barn in a village by the name of Dingolfing. Sick. Feverish. The same night the American tanks came. But at night they withdrew. And I was sitting in the barn. And I heard the, the Germans above us saying, "*Der Kampf geht weiter*," which means, "The fight goes on."

RS: Right. Right.

VC: And that's the day they came back with the tanks. And I came out like a wild person. And I stayed until, I was afraid to venture out. I was still in the barn hiding, but there were Polish workers, you know, that they took from Poland. They notified in Straubing, which is about 20 miles away, the Americans. And in came about the 10th or 11th of May came an ambulance with a doctor. And he came and he found me. And looked at me. And I was scared of uniform, regardless which uniform. And he asked me in Yiddish, "*Bist a Yid?*" I didn't answer, and he saw that I'm scared. Because, how do I know? Maybe he got a uniform, American uniform, and the Germans could speak, some

of them could speak Yiddish.

RS: Yes.

VC: So he says, "*Haht nisht kein moira, mir zonen du.*"⁷ He took me to Straubing, to the hospital, which was run by monks and nuns. [unclear]. And he told the director, a monk, he told him, "I'll be here in three weeks. If this man won't survive, I'm making you responsible for it." I never saw, seen the man again. So they took me in that main ward downstairs. There were about 150 former concentration camp prisoners, it was in the evening. They sent, they served supper. I couldn't eat. Another nurse came took my temperature and they took me right away upstairs. And I was there for almost a month.

RS: What did you have? What did you have there?

VC: I never asked.

RS: Typhus?

VC: I never asked. I was told that all they did, they wrapped me in wet sheets.

RS: Probably to reduce your fever?

VC: After, I, occasionally I came to. And again I fell in a coma. After about a month a group of doctors came and they said, "We didn't give a broken *pfennig* for your life." Now, three years ago my daughter was working there.

RS: Wait. Don't jump too fast.

VC: Yes?

RS: Then...

VC: I took my family there to show them where I was as...

RS: Now who-- did you try to find the whereabouts of any of your family?

VC: Yes.

RS: Did you find any?

VC: Yes, no. Well, I have some relatives who left from *kibbutz* and from *hakhsharah*⁸, who left the exact day I survived. I have one cousin in New York who's retired from the-- a sister of the cousin who went on the wagon. My family? My three brothers perished. One perished in Fünfteichen. He was already a *Muselmann*. You know what a *Muselmann* is?

RS: I, very well. My own nephew was a *Muselmann*.

VC: And, to this day I cannot forgive myself that I went away. I was swollen. I was already also a *Muselmann*, but coming to the, to build the new camps, I recovered already because we looted their stockrooms. Because [unclear], you know, the army [unclear]? So, we were working there too, so we organized for ourselves, and I was married too. I had a child. I had a wife. I don't know whether I mentioned it before.

RS: No.

VC: My child was six months old. My wife was 18 years. And when the child--

⁷Are you a Jew? Have no fear, we are here.

⁸*hakhsharah*: *aliyah*, immigration to Israel, training.

it was a mother, my mother, her sister. When the oldest, my brother was murdered in [unclear]. My other brother, David, was in Russia, but he was married. He came back at the beginning of the war and he was taken by the SS and he was liquidated in Auschwitz. So that nobody was left. My mother was with me after I left in June, in June '43. Two months later they liquidated the entire territory. I found out later somebody, because they retained a few people yet. They lit a bonfire from the furnace that it was there, and whatever was shot there, whoever was shot, they put them, they burned them, down in the spot there. They retained a number of, a group of younger people who did the job for them. And then they sent them to our camp. Then I learned what happened.

RS: All right, now come to the present. Then, after you came to America, who brought you to the United...

VC: No, before America I became chairman of the Jewish community in Straubing, I became the American envoy, the chief legal officer appointed me to be the trustee of the, of a robbed property of the Allied, Jewish property in this territory. So, I had plenty to do, and at the end of '49, second part of '49 I came to the United States.

RS: Who brought you over?

VC: Well, it was only the paper. I came as a DP, Displaced Person quota.

RS: Yeah, right.

VC: And, it was tough the first two years. The third time was United Service for Young and New Americans, and when I came there trying for a job they didn't have jobs. And at one time they take 20 dollars and tried to give me, you know, of course, this was such an insult to me that I started crying and I left the place. But, I would never-- I did many things in the United States until finally. And as much as I helped the former president of Federation of German Trade Unions, to help, I helped him revive the first cell, in Bavaria, the first cell of trade unions. And the first cell of the Social Democratic Party. And when he visited here, he saw other union leaders, David Dubinsky, and he talked about him. When I left he published in all the publications of the union paper [unclear]. So I started finally working for the union and I became an [unclear] in headquarters.

RS: And you married here?

VC: I married here. I have two children.

RS: And your wife is here with you?

VC: My wife was born, no...

RS: No.

VC: My wife was born in New York.

RS: Yes.

VC: One child was born in Cleveland. I was transferred for a while to Cleveland. The other child was born in New York. So the daughter is 24 now. She is *Summa Cum Laude* from Yale. She is now at Yale Law School. She had a grant, a [unclear] for a year in between. The son is 22. He is teaching at Columbia. He published

a book-- computers.

RS: Oh my.

VC: He is a Ph.D student. And, but all I would wish now, and I hope for, is to see somebody who would continue to [unclear].

RS: They will. They will.

VC: I hope so. Question is, will I?

RS: And why not?

VC: But I...

RS: And why not?

VC: I hope so.

RS: If you survived through sheer will and through using your desire to prove that you're a human being, if you survived through all of that, why not now? You're still a young man.

VC: I want to, because-- and I tell you something I didn't do badly. I did quite well. When it comes to finances, financially, I did quite well. And I am saying that perhaps a lot better than many millions of Americans who con-, who contributed to the well-being of America more than I did.

RS: Mmm hmm.

VC: I'm grateful.

RS: Yes.

VC: Of course, there are certain things that I criticize. But I'm not criticizing maliciously. I criticize because I want it better. If it, as I said before, if my country is wrong, make it be right.

RS: And why do you have the feeling that you shouldn't criticize? Who has told you that?

VC: Because I was told by some Americans when I criticize, "Why are you criticizing America?" I have to answer them that maybe when I criticize Nixon, let's say, or Carter, or whoever it is, when I criticize, to you, patriotism is anything that is said from the top. You are equating the person who happened at this certain point of history, be a president with a country. I am not equating them. The country is one thing, and any person, if he is wrong, he is the president, I am criticizing him. And if something is wrong in legislature and whatever, I'll criticize.

RS: Absolutely. And you have every right to do so.

VC: Yeah, but, but, you know, people are chauvinists. People don't understand maybe.

RS: It's foolishness, it's foolishness, I had occasion to witness an immigration hearing, and I heard a very stupid judge tell the new immigrant that they had to obey and do what their government said, and I, I had the temerity to say, "That is not how we work in America."

VC: Well, I'll tell you something, in the middle '50s, the latter part of the, in

the middle of the '60s and up to the latter part of the '60s during the Johnson administration, I might have been vocal in expressing some ideas when I saw something, which is a privilege of everybody.

RS: Yes.

VC: Four times in a row, I was audited by the Internal Revenue. And every time, there was no adjustment necessary. And my daughter said that someday she is going, you know, from a, on the basis of free access to the information, she will ask my file. I never bothered with it. And I just want to tell you, it happens even now. The Internal Revenue, I just read it recently, the Internal Revenue is bothering somebody who is opposed to certain things.

RS: I know. I know. I want to tell you before we end that this has been a wonderful experience for me, because you affirm everything that I believe about the human being, and the human spirit. It's been a great privilege interviewing you.

VC: Thank you. We consider it, and I'm saying we plural, we consider it's a natural thing. [unclear] had a very good thing, [tape machine noise].

RS: This interview for the Gathering, the American Gathering of the Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, April 21 to 23 was recorded by Rebecca Siegel, with Victor Cooper.