

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MICHAEL EBNER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Marian Salkin
Date: August 29, 1981

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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ME - Michael¹ Ebner [interviewee]

MS - Marian Salkin [interviewer]

Date: August 29, 1981

Tape one, side one:

MS: Mike, we'll start from the beginning, here. Please tell me where you were born and when and a little about your family.

ME: I was born in, the name of the town is Tisza. It's a small town right by the river, Tisza. It's in the lowlands of Hungary.

MS: Would you say the southern part of...

ME: Middle.

MS: Middle, southern.² What was the closest large city that you were...

ME: The largest city was about 21 kilometers away. The name of the city was Nyíregyháza.

MS: Well, then how far would you be from a center like Budapest?

ME: Budapest was 290 kilometers.

MS: That's a great distance. You just told us where the city you were born. What year were you born, Mike?

ME: I was born in 1922.

MS: In 1922, okay and a little about your family.

ME: Well, my father was a merchant. He was a business man. And he was, the whole city, the whole town, was Orthodox.

MS: Orthodox Jews.

ME: Ultra-orthodox, very traditional Orthodox and they had a very, how shall I say it, the whole community was based on religion. If you see the movie, I mean the play, *Fiddler on the Roof*, something like that scene, if you will. You know, the people were, some of them were tradesmen, some of them were merchants, some of them were manufacturers and so on.

MS: How many sisters and brothers did you have, Mike?

ME: I had two brothers.

MS: And yourself, there was just...

ME: Three.

MS: Three in the family. Alright, what was your life like before the war or before your life was changed by the Nazi victories in Europe?

ME: Well, I started as soon as I became 13. It was a custom in this country that the religious, even the not so religious Jews, they send their children in the yeshiva. Yeshiva is a kind of, you know, like a center of Talmud.

MS: Jewish learning, higher Jewish learning.

¹On his release form, Michael signed his former first name, Miklos.

²In northeastern Hungary

ME: Higher Jewish learning. And what was the custom, they sent them away, far from home. They should be having a little bit for experience of life for themselves. And I was sent away when I was 13. I would say I was maybe 150 miles from home and we were there about six months and we came home just before the High Holidays. And after the High Holidays, we left again and we came back Passover. Every six months, we used to come back home and when I was 16 years old, my father wanted me to learn some kind of trade because there wasn't anything like higher education, secular education, for a Jew. It wasn't, you know, he couldn't. So that's why he wanted me to learn a trade. Because in case, you know, how can you gather what life is going to be? At least I'll have something in my possession if I know a trade. So, my uncle was a, he had a knitting mill in that town and he asked my uncle on Friday night, because he used to come visit us Friday night, and asked if he wanted to take me. And I was just 15. And the uncle was very religious and he said, "Look, as soon as you became 16 years old, you have a place in my shop. I'll teach you everything else." It so happened when I became 16, he took me into his place and I worked there until about I was 19 years old.

MS: Excuse me, Mike, but the war was on already during this time, wasn't it?

ME: The meantime, the meantime. It happened, I think in 1939, in the meantime, it started in Poland in 1939. But, we didn't know too much about the war, because I think, that country Hungary was more or less on the German side, so they didn't feel. They gave them soldiers. They gave them every kind of-- they cooperated with them, with the Germans. They let them go through towards Russia. The trains were flowing every day. They gave them everything that they wanted so they didn't invade us.

MS: Yes, but that was later on. That was not in 1939.

ME: No, but they had free access. They had free everything. So they didn't invade us so, I think maybe for us Jews it was a little bit easier than the other countries, like Poland, they invaded the Germans and right away they started the Final Solution so we didn't feel it. I didn't feel it until about in 1941, I think. I went to Budapest. I wanted to learn more about the trade and I went to Budapest.

MS: You're talking about the knitting trade, right?

ME: Yes and I went up to Budapest and I was working there and I wanted to know more, I wanted to see more factories. And I was there just until I had to report for the army. I mean, not the army, the labor camp, 1943, October, and I was in Budapest. I was there, maybe about two years or close to it.

MS: At any time while you were a young man growing up and working in your community and then in Budapest, were you ever conscious of any antisemitism on the part of the government towards the Jews of your community?

ME: All the time, all the time.

MS: Tell us some of the experiences that you or your family may have experienced.

ME: The first time when I was about, I would say, 15 years old, and I was in the yeshiva and I was walking on the street. You know, a 15-year-old kid doesn't carry with him no papers or documents. The police came and arrested me. They took me in jail.

MS: Was this in your town of Tiszaelök?

ME: No, no, no. It was not in that town, it was a different town where I went to the yeshiva. Because I was in two places, initially, first I went to one, then to another one. That was already in the second place I was. They put me in jail. I had to prove, because at that time, in Poland, you see the Polish Jews are taken already and they were afraid that some Polish Jews would come over to Hungary and they didn't like them. They had enough there their own Jews. So I had to prove that I was born in that country. But I didn't have any papers with me. So, somebody came from the yeshiva and they find out who was. I wasn't by myself and there was a lot of boys like me there. And they call up my father on the telephone and my father had to come and bring down the papers, my birth certificate and all the papers that, you know, and that's how I-- this is the first time I-- well, they knew, of course I knew, even a child knew [unclear]. But this was one of them that I experienced. I was in jail the first time in my life. That was one experience.

MS: Were you conscious of refugees, Jewish refugees, that were fleeing from Poland and trying to get away from the Nazis, coming into Hungary?

ME: No, I didn't know about that, but one Sunday morning, there was somebody, I think the *shamas*.³ He used to come if there was anything, like the heat, in the synagogue, you know, in the congregation. He was coming and telling people that we should go to the synagogue because some rabbi is going to have a speech. And, you know, I was about, I was a young child and this rabbi came and he had a speech, a fiery speech, that they are killing people, Jewish people, in Poland. He had a speech like that that I would be a pessimist, I would just give up right then and there. That's the first time that I realized that they are killing Jews, not in Hungary, but in Poland.

MS: Yes, can I ask you, was he believed? Do you think the people in the congregation believed him? And where was he from, Poland?

ME: Yes, yes.

MS: He had escaped from Poland?

ME: Yes.

MS: I see.

ME: Yes. He knew when he said that and he told us, "Anybody who can escape, escape." He said that.

MS: Do you know what year, can you figure out what year this was?

ME: No.

MS: Do you know about how old you were? Then you can figure the year out.

ME: I don't remember. Must be 1940, 1941.

MS: Yes, because they were invaded in 1939.

³A synagogue official or assistant

ME: Because I remember, I remember, I had an aunt. She was very rich. She had a flour mill. And the daughter, my cousin-- the auntie-- helped me to go to the yeshiva. She paid for me. Every time I finish the six months I went been there, I come home, went there, I tell you, somebody who had a flour mill in that country was very rich.

MS: Was this in Hungary?

ME: Hungary, yes. She said to me, "My son, anything." Her husband passed away a long time before. The husband was my mother's brother. I went over and I told the auntie, "Look, Auntie, you have money. You pick up yourself and go. And don't even ask no questions, just go, [unclear] just go."

MS: Were you telling her that she should leave the country?

ME: Leave the country.

MS: This was Hungary.

ME: Hungary. Leave the country and go-- it must have been 1940-- and long as you can.

MS: Well, why did you single her out to warn her?

ME: I didn't single her out. I said it to everybody who was sitting at the table. But, I was a young kid, 15, 16, 17 and the uncle said, "Look, Michael,"-- the uncle is another uncle like another brother from my mother's-- and he was sitting there. He said, "Michael, if it's gonna be good in Israel, it's gonna be good here. If it's gonna be bad here, it's gonna be bad there." "Uncle, you're wrong, you have to leave this country, as sooner the better because it's gonna be very bad." The way I heard that rabbi was speaking.

MS: Oh, you were influenced by what you had heard from the rabbi and this is the advice that you were giving to your family?

ME: And I was begging her, begging them, go and I'm sure. I'm 100% sure that they were taken to Auschwitz and they were killed in the gas chamber. But I'm sure the last moment that she had, she was thinking of me, what I told her.

MS: This was several years before, of course.

ME: This is what I think now that that must be her last moment. That I warned her and I told her and I begged her and she didn't listen. I could. I wanted to go away. I was just 18 or 17. She gave me the money. She says, "Go." But I don't know if you remember there was two boats going from Hungary toward Turkey and they sank them. The Germans sank them.

MS: And these were both filled with Jewish refugees?

ME: Yes. They wanted to go to Israel. If you look at it, you will find I wanted to be in one of them.

MS: But your own family, no one in your family made any effort to escape from Hungary?

ME: No choice, no choice. We didn't have the means.

MS: Did you know of anyone? Any friends or neighbors that were able to escape?

ME: No.

MS: No one at that time.

ME: Too late. It was too late already.

MS: You say your family are very Orthodox, so obviously they knew you were synagogue members all your life, all your childhood, yes?

ME: [unclear]

MS: And did any men in your family serve in the National Army?

ME: My father was in the National Army. My mother's two brothers died in the First World War. I think they don't even know that, they knew they died in Russia. One of them I think he was in Kiev and he's buried in the Catholic churchyard because they had their first-- I don't know how she knew it. Somebody came back-- that her brother is buried in the Catholic church right in the yard. A Jewish boy. And, I, all my life, I wanted to go and now it's already, we've known about it. I just imagine it's Kiev and I don't even know, but, I know it's in Russia. The other one they don't even know, he's just disappeared. It's like, you know, missing in action.

MS: But you said your father also served in the National Army.

ME: My father served in the First World War, too.

MS: In the First World War. And then you told me before the interview that your father served again in the Second World War in 19...

ME: Before the Second World War. Maybe it was in between because you see, Hungary was fighting with Czechoslovakia, they got back a piece of territory [unclear]. But he didn't do the fighting, he just-- they call him and he go in.

MS: And how long was he in the service?

ME: It must have been maybe six months because I had to replace him. I had to -- I was 16 years old and I had to run the business.

MS: Can you tell us anything about what happened to your family once Hungary was invaded by the Germans and where they were deported to or how they were deported? Do you know anything of the circumstances?

ME: I was in the labor camp at that time. I was about 21 miles from my home from the town. I knew that the Germans invaded Hungary because it was Passover at that time and we supposed to go to have a Seder in the synagogue at that town where we were stationed and the last minute they cancelled that. And we knew that the Nazis, the Germans came in so it was already difficult to go out. But I managed to get out. Me and maybe a few of us. There was one of the guards who was not a Nazi. He was Hungarian, so he was not a Nazi. And this guy, when my mother came over-- now, the reason I'm saying that because I cannot say that everyone was bad. This guy, when my mother came over, he came over and he says, "Mother," he told my mother, "Mother, don't worry. I take very good care of Michael. As long as I'm gonna be here you know he'll be with me."

MS: Excuse me, Mike, you're saying that your mother came to the camp or she tried to...

ME: Every two weeks, we had visiting. And when I came there, I must have been there for maybe, I don't remember, October, November...

MS: What year, 1943?

ME: Wait a minute, 1944.⁴ Yes, no, wait a minute, yes, no, '43. '43 till '44 Passover [unclear], something like that. It must have been a couple of months and my mother used to come every two weeks because it was just only nothing 20 more miles. What is 20 more miles? We didn't have a car but the train was running pretty good. She took the train and she came. And this guy said to my mother, "Don't worry. I'll take care of." No, this guy, he said to me, "Michael," he says, "I'll take you out Passover night." He says, "You take all the dirty laundry from the people," because they used to take the laundry out for washing. He said, "It's a good excuse, we going to take it out." So we took another two guys with me and three guys and I had a distant relative there, the *shamas* of the town and he took us out to the laundry and he says. "You can go." And we go in there. We had supper. They gave us supper but they told us the situation.

MS: This was in the synagogue?

ME: It was in their home, right in their home.

MS: Oh, in their house, alright.

ME: Right near the synagogue. They told us it's tragic. It was just maybe a day or two before they...

MS: They knew the invasion was coming?

ME: Not the invasion, the deportation.

MS: Oh, the deportation.

ME: Yeah. The invasion was already done. That was already-- they were not supposed to go out from their homes. We didn't know what was going on. But, he let me loose, this guy. He let me loose. He says, "Go and come back there." He know already. And then we came back with him [unclear].

MS: So, did you know how your family was deported, then?

ME: Yes. So, what happened was about a little while after that, they picked up all the people, you know, from all over. Every town, they picked them up and they brought them in to the concentrator, you know, to one place. They brought him into this town Nyíregyháza.

MS: And what town was that?

ME: The big town.

MS: Tis...

ME: No, the other town that I lived close to, 21 kilometers. I mentioned it before.

MS: Give it to us again, please.

ME: Nyíregyháza. It sounds funny but it's Nyíregyháza.

MS: Nyíregyháza.

⁴Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944.

ME: Yes. That's where they were concentrated, they bring them from the nearby towns and they were there.

MS: All the Jews were brought together in there like in a center.

ME: From all over around. They were from 50 miles around or maybe 100 miles around.

MS: It's Nyíregyháza.

ME: And I got a permit for my company, not only me. I was-- they gave us maybe two separate-- they gave us a week a furlough. I got this week and the other half of it got another week, because my commander knew what was going on so he wanted to be a little bit of a mensch. He gave us-- I don't know how he did it but he did it. He gave me permit to go out from there. I could escape. I could do anything I want. So he gave me that paper I could go to Nyíregyháza because I knew my parents were there. My parents wrote me a postcard that I should never in this life go back to this town where I lived because they are going to kill me.

MS: Back to Tiszalök.

ME: Yeah. My father advised me that I should never go there because they might kill me there. I don't know why, I never spoke to my father after that. So what happened was I go into this town near Nyíregyháza, I want to see what they are there. So I go into the ghetto and the guard is standing there. The German guard was standing there, not the Hungarian guard. And, you see, it could happen that I could go in and I could never get out from there anymore. So I said, "What is the difference?" But it's a lot of difference. I was free over here and there I go to die. So I show him my papers. The guy says, "Go." I go in there. I tried to ask questions. Where are my parents? You know there was a chaos. You know how it is, people don't care for nobody. Nobody cares for nobody. Nobody cares for anybody. I came in. There was, like street blocks, was cold and dark. There was no place for nobody to sit, to sleep, to drink, to eat or anything. What am I gonna do here? I want to see my parents. I have six, seven days to, to-- what am I gonna do? So I said, "Where are they?" And somebody told that are about maybe 15 kilometers out of town. How am I gonna go 15 kilometers out of town? Walk. I want to see my parents. So, finally, I found them and then, I was maybe 19 or 20 years old, this man was maybe 45 years old. He was a bachelor and he came also from the neighborhood because he also want to see his parents. And I ask him, I says, "Did you?" He says he was already there but he would go again with me. So we go walk. As we come to that place there, there was a farm, like a big farm. I don't know, there was like a barn or a maybe with 10,000 acres of land, with buildings there for the workers and a school for the children and that's what they...

MS: This was another center, then. Is this another center then that were accumulating Jews?

ME: Yeah. They didn't have enough place in the start...

MS: In the first place.

ME: So they put them outside.

MS: So it was like a second, a holding complex.

ME: Yeah, yeah. There was, I think they had how shall I say, a big farm, like, you know. They grew tobacco, they had wheat. They had all kind of, you know, like a farmer. They had big places, like big sheds, of what do you call them, to dry tobacco.

MS: Well, yes.

ME: So that's where they were housing these people in those big sheds, barn, or whatever you call them. And I go in there and he asked the soldier, because this man, whom I...

MS: He's traveling with you.

ME: He was; he is a Jewish man. He was in charge of the police. He had a position, a government position in charge of the police.

MS: In which community?

ME: In that Tiszaölök community.

MS: In Tiszaölök?

ME: Yes. He was in charge and the police, they were gendarmes but I'm calling them police. But it's a difference between the police because these were national. They weren't city police, they were national. They were all over the country, the same thing.

MS: The same uniform, the same command, right?

ME: They were gendarmes. So these people who were in Tiszaölök, the same sergeant and his gang brought these Jews into this town and they were there with them. They were holding them. And this sergeant used to go to this man for orders every day. So he knew him very good. And after work, they used to sit down together and drink because in a small town, that's what they do, drink. So he goes with his superior to drink. So he probably figure maybe he won't be so harsh on him, because he knew that the parents are going to die. So maybe he figures, maybe he's gonna be a little more, you know...

MS: More lenient.

ME: Lenient. So we go in, he didn't find him, he find one of these henchmen. He says we can go in but he didn't tell us we can't go out. So, as soon as we go in, we cannot go in as free men because two guys, two gendarmes, behind us, I mean were gone already, like we are prisoners. Walking through the camp, there must be, I don't know, maybe thousands of people. I saw my father. My father saw me. And he thought that I'm in trouble. He didn't know what was going on with me. He figured maybe they catch me with something and they put me up against the wall and shoot me. So they bring me in. And there's a little schoolhouse there. And I saw there were about 25 or 30 elderly Jewish men there. They brought us in there and they told us to go between them. And we ask him what's going on. They said, "Well they beating everybody up because we're not supposed to come here. But they told us we can come in." Ah, they tell you, you know. So, what they did with us they made us climb up the tree to see those big tall trees. Climb up on the top of the tree and you know, they climbed up. I was a young kid. I didn't want to climb.

I let them climb. I had them 'til they're ready to climb. If I don't climb, they shoot me. I knew that they are not playing, you know, game. So, finally, I climb up on the tree but I was almost down in the bottom. And this guy, the guy who came with me, was the police chief. He was down on the bottom and this guy was hitting there with a big stick.

MS: The man that came with you...

ME: He was below me.

MS: Yes, alright.

ME: I was pulling him up. And this guy was hitting him. Everybody who was down, he was hitting. He was so much down that he was hitting him. He was hitting and beating him and he was crying to me, "Michael, if you know God, please pull me up because he's gonna kill me." I tried to pull him up. So finally, I pulled him up as much that he couldn't reach him anymore. So finally, they started. I don't know how long we were up there.

[Tape one, side one ended. Long gap to end of tape.]

Tape one, side two:

MS: You were telling us that you helped raise him above?

ME: Yes, then after when he was already satisfied, everybody had to jump down. Now, the one who was up on the top of the tree, he had to jump. It was mud on the bottom, water. It was raining the day before and everybody had to jump down. You can imagine how everybody looked like after jumping down in the mud. So, what was going on inside, they were interrogating a man who was a shoemaker by trade. His one foot was shorter than the other foot and he was bringing food for a Jewish friend. That's why they pulled him up by his hands in his back. They tie up his hands in his back and they pulled him up five inches from the ground. He was a short guy, a weakling, a sweet guy and they pull him up. The man was crying and you know I don't know how long he was there, but they told him, "This is what a person gets who brings food for a Jew." After that, I knew what was coming to me. So, then they came over. Then the big shot came out. Everybody, they stayed in line like report one by one. He was going from one to the next. My friend was standing near me and he, the big shot, when he came to him, he couldn't face him. He couldn't face him. He said, "Send him away." He sent him away.

MS: Do you know the reason for this?

ME: Because he was his superior before. He has a little bit of, maybe. He just didn't want to show it. When he came to me, the other guy, not the big shot, the sergeant, the other guy, he says. "Sergeant, this guy was here yesterday and he knew he's not supposed to come here." "You're not going to get over alive from here," he said to me, like so. But he was here yesterday. Send him away, too. That's what they told him. Then, they stand like, one guy here, the second guy maybe 20 feet away or 20 yards away. And so on, they were standing one after another, with a long stick. And this guy was hitting me until I got to the other guy. And the other guy was hitting me until I got to the other guy. Until I got out from the place. They had chains hitting me, I mean us. I was the last one. I was the last one. The people who were first, they got the beating. I was the last one. He was beating the one before me. And I said I have, I have a tactic, I am a 20-years-old boy, I just going to go close to him. Because if you're close to the guy, he can't hit you. He can only hit you if you're far away with that stick. And I was just going against him. If I hit him, it's fine. I'm just going against him. And I was going, you know? I didn't have too much here. They came out from there and these people, the boys [unclear], they got old from there. But as I was in there, I saw my father. My father came out and he said to the sergeant, "Sergeant, this is my son." He says, "I don't know you." And my father says, "Sure you know me. You owe me money yet." He was mad, he says, "Why didn't you ever talk to my son? I didn't know why he's here or what." And then I saw my mother. That was the wall of that shed and it was like, you know, between the two boards, there was a broken piece. Outside it was sunny. Inside it was dark. The only thing I saw my mother's glasses from there and I saw her crying. That was the last time from them.

MS: That was the last time you saw your parents?

ME: Yes. That's the way I know it.

MS: So, then, you did not know what happened to them.

ME: Never.

MS: But what happened to you, Michael, after this incident? Were you able to leave this encampment?

ME: Yes, yes. They left us outside. We went outside on the highway and we went back.

MS: You went back to your camp.

ME: I went back, after, to my camp. I said, "There's no way." What am I gonna do outside? There is no way outside. There, at least, nobody's going to bother me. I mean...

MS: In the labor force.

ME: Yeah. I got food, I got, you know. There was more safe than outside because, you know, I had to go and report. You know, that was the law there. You come into a town, you have to take your paper and report. So, I go and report. So this guy tells me, "Who gave you permission to come over here?" "Sir, I got the paper from my lieutenant and I came to visit my parents." He says, "What do you mean?" I had a yellow band on my hand.

MS: Was that yellow band an indication that you were a Jew?

ME: Sure, sure. Yellow band. He said, "With this you want to go?" He says, "You dirty Jews. You think you want to win the war? We are going to show you we are going to win the war." So, I, I didn't know who was going to win the war. I didn't know any politics and he was, he was getting me. I didn't say nothing. Because probably, something happened that, I don't know what happened, but something must've happened that he said that. Then he go.

MS: And these were just local officers in each town...

ME: Yeah.

MS: ... that you encountered? From there you went back to your unit or...

ME: Yes. I went back. It was no, you know, no use. This is what I wanted to say, I went into a ghetto before I went over to see my parents and I didn't have anything to eat. I didn't bring anything to eat. I sat there one night.

MS: Excuse me, Michael. You said you went into a ghetto.

ME: That was the ghetto where I was first. I asked where my parents were. I showed them my paper and then I went out. Then, that's where I go. Then I went back there to sleep. I showed the gentleman my paper and he let me in. So, I figured I'd be there tomorrow and then I'll take the train back again and I go to my unit. So, I go in there. I slept on those wooden tables. I had no cover. I had nothing. But there was girls there from, I don't know, from, I think, my wife's town. They had no food. You know, we don't have any food. What can we do? I says, "Look, give me some money. I go and buy

you food.” I risked my life. If the general, if he would desire food with me [unclear]. I go outside. I show him my papers.

MS: In other words, you had access inside. You can go in and out of the ghetto.

ME: I didn’t ask no questions. I show him my paper. I told him I am hungry. I go to eat. I went to the store. They told me what to buy, bread and this and that. I couldn’t buy a package. I just bought whatever I could put in my pocket. I bought something. I don’t know it was sardines or whatever. I put it in my pocket and I gave it to them. I slept on the wooden table, just before I went back. But, the next day, I went back. But that was my last time I saw my parents. This is the way I remember my mother and the way I remember my father. He was standing near me. The sergeant was busy with my friend and in the meantime, he asked me, “My son, why did you come here?” I said, “I come here to see you.” Just like that. And that’s all it was. He didn’t let me even talk to him. He said, “Let me kiss my son.” Nothing.

MS: And you couldn’t go into the building to see your mother.

ME: No, my mother was, I just couldn’t even see her. I just saw a crack on the wood. I saw her glasses. I could recognize her features, you know, you know. She was crying because she was listening what was going on. They thought they brought me in for, I don’t know what I might have done or something. They didn’t know.

MS: Well, did you ever find out what happened to your parents?

ME: Sure, my brothers were with them. I had my two brothers with them. They went to Auschwitz and they were gassed. They [were] killed like any other, like everybody else.

MS: Almost immediately? This you don’t know?

ME: My father was together with my brother and they told my father he should go on this side when they were selecting. This side means they were going with my brothers to work but he was pleading with Mengele with that-- that he want to go with the elderly people because he cannot work so hard anymore. He was 48 years old. And I said to my brother, I said, “There were two of you there. Why did you let him go back there? You could go out and finish the work if there is any work because I wouldn’t let him go in there.” I would not let him go. I could work for two men. But, you know, it’s easy to say that now.

MS: Yeah, sure.

ME: But he went to his own destiny. He didn’t know what he was. He asked, he wanted to go with the elderly people. So the elderly people were, you know, like all religious people. So, probably they went to oven right away.

MS: And your brothers then went into...

ME: My brothers went to Auschwitz but then later they came back.

MS: So, in other words, by this time, they were not in Auschwitz a very long time because...

ME: They been in Auschwitz ‘til the end almost.

MS: Which was just a few months from...

ME: Not, my brothers they went in 1944, then 1945 they were a year then.

MS: Almost a year then.

ME: But me, I was just there. I was in the labor camp. They just started to move from where I was in 1944, October. So, October, November, December, then we went over the border from Hungary to Austria. Then January, February, March we start moving to concentration camp from one camp to the other camp. I was, maybe, January, February, March, April, May I was liberated. So, that was enough. I was almost finished, completely.

MS: Well, Michael, tell us a little bit what happened to you once you went back to join your labor camp after going to the ghettos and seeing your parents and the war progressed. Can you tell us a little of what happened to you from that point on before you were put into a labor camp, put into a...

ME: There was a bombing. Americans bombed us, Americans. Then the Russians, they missed a spot. They were moving backwards. The Russians were pushing the Germans back. So are we. We were going back, towards Germany, Austria. Finally we wound up in the concentration camp.

MS: What was your experience once you were put into the concentration camp? Do you remember any specific details of your treatment there?

ME: One of the first things, of course, you see is that there were dead people all over the place. I didn't see any dead people up until then.

MS: And this was the first camp and you were not sure of the name of it? Is that true?

ME: It was just a transit, you know.

MS: Inter-transit?

ME: We were doing, like, it was on the border, right on the border.

MS: Between?

ME: Between Hungary and Austria. They had those ditches like, you know, like the soldiers used, you know, during the war. And you know, these are old trenches already, so what we were doing-- we had those long spikes, you know. We were putting down spikes about a foot from each other. Then we were putting long tree branches, you know. It's like we were doing some weaving with those branches to keep the earth from falling in, to cave in, because it was spring time and that's when they were doing this with us.

MS: And this was in the morning?

ME: Uh, huh [affirmative]. This is what we were doing all over. We were cutting trees and I remember once where-- and that was horrible. There was, like, a telephone pole. It was long, heavy twig. It was so heavy that ordinarily if they give you 20 people to lift it up on the shoulders and put it on the truck, they wouldn't do it. The guy came. The German, the Nazi, he opened up his holster with the gun and he said, "Look, either you're gonna do it or I'm going to shoot you one by one. If I shoot one, then you're

gonna have one less and then you're gonna have to do it. If you don't do it, I'm gonna shoot one again. And then you're going to do it."

MS: He wanted you to pick up this huge tree, then?

ME: Pick up the tree and put them on the truck. Okay? I don't know, we were 10 or 8 or 12. I don't know. But I'm sure that we were weak, malnutrition we had. We were completely exhausted. We had nowhere to sleep, because we were sleeping sitting in the mud. We had no sleeping place in there. So, I remember that poor fellow from Budapest was a tall boy. I was a short boy. Now, how can I lift that piece of wood evenly with him? So you can imagine that he had to be bent over just to stand up. He couldn't stand up. And he couldn't do it on the first try. He said, "I'll let you have it on the second try." Then we did it, because if not, they would have killed us right then and there. Then, they were not kidding. They did mean it. But that poor guy was in front of me and I tried to lift that tree, my portion anyway. I put it on my shoulders, but I tried to lift it to give him a little bit of-- because this guy, he wasn't a farmer, he wasn't even a working man. He was just probably some guy in the city.

MS: Probably be a student?

ME: I don't know what he was, a student or a lawyer. He must be some kind of, you know-- I tried to, but, you know, I didn't think he'd survive it.

MS: That was one of your experiences in your first camp.

ME: Yes.

MS: Well, let me ask you again because I'm not clear on it. You say when you got to the first camp, you were behind the lines. You were being pushed by the Russians, who were coming up.

ME: The Russians pushed the Germans and we were behind them. You know what was the front line? They are facing each other. Now, either one of them has to get out, now the Germans were beaten. The Russians were going ahead. The Germans were [unclear]. We were behind the Germans. As they are coming, so are we.

MS: Yes, I see. Well, then, I don't understand one thing. I mean, you were part of the labor force and so the Germans, then, decided that they were going to put you into these camps. Somehow or other, they put you into these camps. They maneuvered you into these camps.

ME: [unclear]

MS: You weren't sent in on the cattle cars.

ME: No. They don't have the cattle cars anymore. They are walking by foot.

MS: There were guards that came. You were in groups walking and they just put you into this camp, then.

ME: From one town to the other town. Every town gave them guards for us. And they guard us from one town to the next. I don't know, 30 miles or whatever they did. They were going with us from their town to the next town.

MS: I see.

ME: Then from there on the other guards, they came.

MS: So in other words, in effect, you were marched into the camp?

ME: Right.

MS: Yeah.

ME: Death march, that was the death march.

MS: All right. Now was there any thought or possibilities as you were marching to get away from these, from the guards, to escape somewhere or that was not possible?

ME: These guards were standing so close to one another.

MS: To one another?

ME: That you could not breathe.

MS: All right. Fine, this is the information we want.

ME: Yes, but. But. Let me say something now. I was walking maybe 1500 kilometers. From the place where I worked on the airport up until the camp, it was 1500 kilometers. So from the border...

MS: That's hundreds and hundreds of miles?

ME: Yes, so when they, yes, maybe 30, 40 kilometers a day. I don't know how many miles that could be from the border to the concentration camp. I have no idea. The only thing I know that when we were going from-- once it was raining and I only had, I didn't have decent clothing because when Americans bombed the airport, you know, In Hungary, I was working in shorts, no shirt, nothing, everything burned down there. It's a long story. So I was left without anything. So they gave me, the Hungarians there, the [unclear] they gave me a pants and a jacket and an overcoat, an army overcoat, a soldier, without any stripes or anything and a cap. And it was very cold for the winter but nevertheless, it was on me and maybe, I just don't know, maybe that's why. I was walking and I had my belt. In order to get a little warmer, I put that belt around me on the outside and it looked a little bit more like a soldier or something, you know. So I don't know if it confused them.

MS: You are talking about the guards.

ME: Not the guards, not the.

MS: The people that you were walking with?

ME: No, maybe the guards. No, not the people, the people knew me. The guards. All of a sudden, this man is walking with a little dog. He's a guard, he is an ordinary man with a mustache. He is carrying his food, whatever. He was near me, I was on the left side, this side and he was near me, to march, to march, to march, we were walking from the morning, I don't know, as far as we could see at night. He is asking me questions, he is not supposed to say a word. Maybe because I have a uniform, I don't know. Didn't ask nobody, just me. He said what is your name?

MS: He was German?

ME: [unclear]. He was Austrian.

MS: Austrian.

ME: What is your name? I told him. What's your profession? I told him. But he spoke like, like he didn't look at me. Not supposed to. Because they were watching him, he was watching us. We were walking for miles. And I knew as soon as the man is asking me questions he must be a good man. He was a guard, he was guarding the forest. He was a forest ranger. And he said to me, he said, "You know, Michael," he said, "We are going to stop for eating, you know, for 10, 15 minutes, we are going to stop." He said, "I will sit down on the right side," because there was like a mountain, "Sit down on the right side and I'll eat and I'll throw food for my dog but my dog ate already and I wanted you to pick it up and eat it." He said, "I cannot give you directly anything. But you just sit yourself up and slowly pull yourself close, as close as you can and never mind the dog, you just eat it." What can I do? We stop, he sits down, his back towards us, [unclear]. He is not bothering, he started eating bread and bacon, eating and he throws for his dog. The dog is sitting there but the dog ate already and I just pick it up and eat it. Nobody knows, even my own friends, they don't know. They don't know. Everybody was busy with himself and I was sitting, I was laying on my stomach and he was just slowly throwing the bread for his dog and I was there, the dog was there and I was there and picking up and eating it. All right. When that soon was finished, when this one was finished they came down and said goodbye again.

MS: They changed guards?

ME: Again. Then we was passed through, this was going on for weeks. Going through a town. I don't remember the name of the town. We were going, going, I remember it was cobblestone town, I saw an officer, German, I think, he was in the air force, walking on the street, boots, tall guy, run across the street, as he crosses the street, passes by me and near me picks out something from his pocket, he put it in my hand and he said, "*Sag kein Wort*," [Don't say a word], I shouldn't say nothing to nobody. And he just crosses us. He gave me a sandwich, two pieces of bread with salami in there. A German soldier, I never know who he was, I will never know who the man was, but he risked his life, because if they would find him he is giving for the Jews some, you know, I'm sure...

MS: And no one saw this?

ME: No one, not even the man who was near me he saw it, he didn't even see it. Because I just put it in, I didn't want to get him into trouble and I was far away from there and I tried to open it, they would take it away from my hand, they were animals. These were not ordinary humans. There was sometime night, there together you sleep, they bring up from the end of the town somewhere to a farm. The man at the farm he is cooking those small potatoes for his pigs, he had a lot of pigs, he said to me, "Hey come in to here," he said, "I made these for you." He said, "Never mind the pigs. You eat them. Don't tell the rest of the guards. I could feed my pigs, they could feed these pigs." We ate together every day with pigs. It was good warm hot potatoes. We were lucky that the pigs didn't bite us because, you know. I don't know, I know I am a farmer boy, I know what it is. We

ate them. You know what it was, we had those tiny little potatoes, everybody ate them. They couldn't say nothing, he was feeding his pigs. There were guys like that.

MS: And these were Austrians?

ME: Austrians. There were woman. There were women, in the morning, going to the market and the woman was taking the bread and cutting the pieces and throwing it.

MS: Well, they, when you went through towns, when you went through communities, obviously the people who lived in those communities saw, they would have to see you marching through the towns, so what you are saying is that there were a few that had a little compassion...

ME: Right.

MS: ...and who would try to...

ME: Right, right. This woman was throwing bread and he told her, "If you are not going away from here I'm going to shoot you." She started, I mean she was keeping and she was throwing the bread.

MS: And the guard threatened her?

ME: Threatened her and there was another man, the farm was right, far away from the road, you had to go a little distance so he gave the little kid, the kid must have been seven, six, seven year old, he gave him the bread and he was running and the kid gave the bread. He figured he won't hurt the kid. Whatever he could, that farmer, he gave the kid. A little kid. He figured that if he goes he might shoot him, but a kid, why is going to kill a kid. The kid came around, I saw it with my own eyes that he did that. The kid brought over whatever he brought, gave it to somebody and he ran.

MS: And disappeared and the guards didn't try to intervene?

ME: [unclear] because one farmer who put out corn on the cob, dry. And he said I didn't have anything, he just put him outside for his chickens. Said he can feed his chickens and said, "You take it, you take it."

MS: Each night they would take you into-- they would stop at a farm and you would...

ME: Sometimes not a farm.

MS: Sometimes not a farm, just in the open field.

ME: Fields, yes.

MS: About, do you have any idea how many of you were gathered in this march? You have no idea?

ME: 10,000, 15,000.

MS: Oh my.

ME: The only thing I know, that I was young, 20 years old and I was in the front almost and I wanted to see what was going in the back and I slowly, slowly and slowly, it was very, very dangerous to be on the back.

MS: Well, what do you mean, you slowed your pace?

ME: Right.

MS: So that you fell back.

ME: Back. I fell all the way back because I thought, maybe I will find my father, maybe I will find somebody and I did find somebody, a distant cousin.

MS: In that same march?

ME: Yes. A cousin, another guy, but I was going back, back until I was a part of the last march. And there wasn't, the Germans who were there, who was the last one, they killed. They had an order they should shoot everybody who cannot walk anymore. So nobody, everybody who was left behind was dead. I was young, I was weak but I was young...

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

ME: It's alright. Then they shot the horses-- you know, everybody chopped off, they let them chop off a piece of meat and by the time it came to me, that was the end of it. It was only the skeleton. And this guy that was Ukrainian these guys who were killing us. They were not Germans. They were Ukrainians.

MS: They were Ukrainian?

ME: They were Ukrainians. They were the guys. [long pause on tape]. He used the gun like this on me. I said, "If you don't mind, take the gun off like this." He said, "Okay." I figured, "What the heck." He says, "Go ahead." You know I don't know, I don't trust these Nazis. So I took the axe. My eyes was on the gun, on his gun. I figured, as soon as he let his gun, I says, "Put the gun up like this." He put. As soon as he let the gun down, I'm running. You know, I started chopping the feet of the horse. When I chopped the feet off, he didn't let the gun. I picked up the...[long pause on tape]

MS: So, when this march finally ended, you were then in Mauthausen?

ME: When this ended, I was-- I don't even know where I was. It was one of them. It was one of them, because from Mauthausen going to Küstrin⁵ again, they were killing us, Germans, the Nazis. They were-- they stationed themselves on two mountains from each side. We were in the valley. The higher they went in the valley, they were on both sides of the highway. And they were shooting us from the mountain.

MS: Well, how did you get out of Mauthausen?

ME: Well, see, they had to evacuate the Mauthausen because the Russians were coming already.

MS: So the guards from Mauthausen were with you on this?

ME: The guards were coming with us and they were taking us and I heard that-- you know, the political prisoners were in Mauthausen like Horthy there. You know he was...

MS: He was the regent of Hungary before.

ME: ...of Hungary before and we had a newspaper editor. He was a newspaper editor.

MS: Do you know his name?

ME: [unclear], yeah. I think he was a M. P., member of parliament. There was newspaperman and these liberal member of parliament. They were political. One of them said-- because they were walking like prisoners in a jail, they were right near us. They got food, but you know they didn't...

MS: They were treated a little differently?

ME: Yes. But they told us that the newspaper guy was with us. He had friends on the other side. They told him that they going to take us away from here and they going to have three transports. First, second, third. That he should take the third one because

⁵A subcamp of Sachsenhausen.

they are going to kill all the first and the second one. They should take the third one. See? And that's what I heard and my mother's cousin heard that. And he says we gonna go with the third one. They was coming, the Germans, the Nazis were coming. Everybody out, everybody out. We tried to hide, you know.

MS: Wait a minute. When you say the Germans were coming, you were still in the camp at this time?

ME: Yeah, well, the guards were coming to round up the people to go.

MS: Into the transports?

ME: They didn't know where. To just go out. It was chaos already so I didn't want to go. I says, "I'm not going." But I went with the third transport. They still killed half of us. They probably killed the first and the second. They killed off two.

MS: What was the transport, what kind of mechanism was it? Was it actually a truck?

ME: Walking, walking.

MS: That's the transport. That's how you describe it.

ME: They called the first part, the second part, the third...

MS: But, you were still-- it was a march.

ME: Walking, death march, death march. We came into this mountainside. There was a guy there. Their commandant was a guy, I remember, I was standing on the left hand side. He was on the left side of the road. We were on the right side. He has his left hand missing. His name was-- it was so long ago. His left hand was missing. His machine gun strapped on his shoulder like that. I saw him shooting like that. He was shooting the tall boys. When I saw him, he was pointing the gun right near me. My friend, my friend the other one, done, just done.

MS: He was just killing them at random.

ME: Just at random. And a...

MS: What did you do?

ME: I was scared to death. What could I do? I said, "*Sh'ma Yisroel*." I'm dying. The next one is me.⁶ The I heard that [ME bangs on the table]. I said, "It's me." But it wasn't me. Maybe the next one's going to be. They were coming from all over. These guys were up in the mountains. These guys were from this side. They were shooting from all over. All of a sudden, there was snow there. I had wooden shoes on me. You know, snow sticks to the wooden shoes. All of a sudden, one of them fell down and I was going like somebody who has one feet longer than-- you know, I was going like limping and I couldn't get rid of it, you know? Then start all over again. That was horrible. It was like-- Haupman, Haupman [phonetic] was his name, this guy's name. He was...

MS: He was the German who was doing the shooting?

⁶Said to be the most important Jewish prayer. It is a declaration of faith said daily and traditionally a Jew's last words.

ME: He was giving the orders and he was giving the shooting. And all of a sudden, a truck is coming from the opposite direction and one of these guys, must be a big shot, he got out the truck and he says in German, "Who gave you an order to shoot these people?" Then he said something like, I don't know, maybe we did, I don't know. Do you know what happened? We were surrounded by the Russians for a while. We didn't know that. They knew it. We were on a mountain and the Russians were there already all over the mountain and all of a sudden, the Nazis, the Germans, they disappeared. They didn't say nothing. They just disappeared. We were going in the woods, in the forest. All of a sudden, they disappeared between the trees. Nobody is there. So, what am I going to do? What am I going to do? Should I go there? Where am I going to go? So I saw that this is the way it is. Let me go and look for food, me, everybody. So, I saw a house right near the road in the mountain and I go in there and the guys says in German, "You know,"-- it was a big, big barn. It wasn't a barn. They were keeping apples in that place there. It was like a big wooden building. He opened up and says, "Look, I would rather have you have it than the Russians because the Russians are going to have it anyway. I'd rather you have it." I go in there. I got apples, beautiful apples. I put four in my pockets, everything and eating, carrying the better food. Then we go back to the highway. The Germans are back already.

MS: You didn't understand how that happened, though.

ME: No, no. I didn't do any damage. But the way I understood, that some of the guys, they found the wine cellars. See, they have wine cellars, huge tanks of wine.

MS: Where are the wine cellars?

ME: In the mountain.

MS: In the mountain?

ME: It was in the mountains, you know. There's a door. You know, in the mountain. Big, huge. These guys, instead of opening the tap and getting some wine, they broke the tap and the wine was running out of that thing. It was all water. Not water. That's why they said we damaged the property. They were shooting. That's why they were shooting.

MS: Well, tell me, what happened after the Germans returned? Did they try to ...

ME: [unclear]

MS: Okay. Then did you get out of this situation?

ME: Then, you know, we came to a place where-- I don't know, it wasn't-- a little town. There was a *Stalag*. I didn't know how much place it was.

MS: What is a *Stalag*?

ME: A *Stalag* is a barrack, is where the soldiers sleep.

MS: Is it like a prisoner camp?

ME: You know what *Stalag* 13?

MS: Yeah, talk about *Stalag*. Is it like a barracks? Like a barracks.

ME: Yeah, yeah. So there's bunks there. So, we went into that place. It's cold, like anything. But, as long as I'm outside. Half of them is sleeping outside on the-- you know, the town had a church and there was other like, how do you call it, plaza...

MS: Like a courtyard?

ME: It's a big, big place there, empty place and they slept on the ground there on the snow. When it came in the morning. Almost all of them were dead already, frozen, awful.

MS: How long was it until you were rescued from this march? Because, if you were surrounded by the Russians, or the Russians were very close...

ME: No. Well, the Russians-- it took a long time because we were liberated by the Americans.

MS: Alright, well, can you continue the story from this point, from this march, that you were on. They were taking you then to another camp, right?

ME: Yes. That was the other camp. In this camp, I was so weak already.

MS: And what was the name of this third camp?

ME: Gunskirchen. And that camp I was already almost dead. They knew already that Americans already close because when we were marching on the road, we met American POWs. They were throwing cigarettes and boys, boys don't worry.

MS: Giving you the victory signal?

ME: Yeah. They were coming not much left, just keep it up, just keep it up and so on. I remember, there was one guy who was Italian. He was working as a blacksmith on a, a blacksmith. He said to me that I should wait a few minutes. He'd bring a loaf of bread out for me. And I never saw the guy. He gave me the bread. He said, "Don't worry. Maybe two, maybe three more days and that's it."

MS: But these young men had been captured?

ME: They were captured but they were not like us. They were not on the death march. Now, Americans, they had better treatment than us. But they were POWs. But they told us, "Don't worry. We are coming. We are coming."

MS: So, of course, this gave great hope to those, to the prisoners.

ME: Of course, we know that they were very close.

MS: You were hanging in here.

ME: And I remember that I was already so sick. I had a cold, a chest cold. You know, we didn't have where to sit down, where to lay down. We had like-- it was raining outside. It was raining outside and muddy and you know, we were sitting inside. Somebody died. It was so close, people. It was too heavy to hold it. So, they threw them out. One after another, they threw them out, outside. Once they threw me out, outside.

MS: Why? Did they think you were dead?

ME: Yeah, probably. And I didn't know what to do. So, I went into one of this, it was a Red Cross on it, I go in there and I lay down on the floor. Somebody came here almost, you know. He says to the other guy, "Here is another guy dead." He opened up

his flashlight. He says, "Oh, he's not dead. Put him in there," he says. "Put him in the bunk," he says. Put him in the bunk. I was there till the morning. The next morning, I was alive but I was very close. I laid down and I figured, "I'm so weak." But a-- I was like that for a while and all of a sudden, somebody came and said, "The Americans are here." And that's it.

MS: And this was in the camp?

ME: Yeah. I was free. That was the end of it.

MS: When the Americans came, of course, did they let you stay in the camp? Did they take over?

ME: They opened up the door and says-- a Jewish boy came. He was a lieutenant on a jeep. He came, he opened up the gate. He said, "You can go. You are free."

MS: Yes, but where did you go, what could you do under those circumstances?

ME: What I did, what I did, it was already late afternoon. So I said, "Where am I going to go?" So the first thing what I did-- the Germans have magazines⁷ there with food. So, I just broke the window.

MS: What is a magazine?

ME: A magazine is where they keep the food.

MS: I see. It's like a storage room or something.

ME: It's a big, not a storage room. It's a big huge building.

MS: I see.

ME: I go over to the window. All of a sudden I was strong.

MS: Interesting.

ME: I broke that window. I jumped in there. I don't know why I did there. The strength, and not only me, the young kids jumped. Going to that building, it was bad all over up to the mountain up there. So, I took bread, I break it in two. I throw away one end. I eat the bread and it was margarine. Took a piece of margarine, took it apart and I eat that much. That margarine. Then I felt I have a little bit. I ate a little bit. Now, I took bread and I throw it out for the rest of the people. There was too many people. They couldn't jump in. So, that's what happened. Then we broke open the place where they kept the guns, just in case if they come back again. Because they came back again. On the march they came back. If they come back again, then we will let them have it. But, we took their guns with ammunition and we started shooting. So, if they come back now, we'll let them have it. We didn't know what was going on in the world.

MS: Did you know where in Austria you were? Do you have any idea where you were?

ME: No. Next morning, then we started going on the road. We came to the big highway.

MS: About how many were you when you say, "We started going?" Do you have any idea?

⁷In the sense of a place where goods are stored, warehouse.

ME: Thousands. Who know how many thousands?

MS: This was the entire camp.

ME: Who knew what was there? It was mixed up, it was scared, it was hungry, it was people sick. I started walking. I mean, everybody started walking. We get to the highway, I saw a GI.

MS: I was going to say, did you start to see American troops?

ME: Yes. On the highway, there was a GI standing there. He took the gun from everybody away. He was breaking it up on the stone, on the milestone, you know. He says...

MS: What are you doing that for?

ME: Why are you doing that for? Avant [before] we didn't have any gun. All of a sudden we could defend ourselves. He says, "We don't need their guns. And you don't need the gun. We'll take care of you." We didn't like the idea. I want to have a gun.

MS: Tell me something. How about a language barrier? The Americans were speaking English.

ME: I didn't speak. There was one guy who spoke the language between us.

MS: There were others who spoke English?

ME: Yeah. There were guys who spoke, oh yeah. We had all nationalities there. I met in Mauthausen, okay. Now that you mention it, I remember. It was a sunny day, March. A guy who must be in his forties, he said to me, "*Ponimayete Rossii?*" I said, "No."

MS: That means, do you understand Russian?

ME: You know, "*Du redst Yiddish?*" [Do you speak Yiddish?] "Yo," [Michael answers, "Yes."] He asked me, "Do you know who I am?" I said, "How should I know?" He was in that concentration camp...

MS: Uniform.

ME: ...uniform. He said, "I am a Russian general." I said, "If you are a Russian general, I am Churchill." He says, "Really, I'm a Russian general." He says, "You know, I was captured and I was, you know, together with the Russians and somebody found out I'm Jewish and they put me in the concentration camp. But I'm going to show them they are coming, the Russians. I'm going to get back my uniform." That's what he says, that he was a Russian general and they put him in there. I just met him...

MS: By accident. Did you ever come across him again?

ME: No.

MS: And he spoke to you in Yiddish?

ME: Yiddish. Otherwise, I wouldn't have understand it. But, you know, it happened. Things like that happen.

MS: About how much time, do you have any idea, can you remember how much time you spend in Mauthausen?

ME: Time there, we didn't know.

MS: You lose track. It's very hard to determine.

ME: There's really no time. We didn't know time; we didn't know days. Now I try to remember what happened when. Where was I? What happened? This time, it's blank. When I see they show on film like Normandy. They show when it happened, 1945.⁸ The invasion of Normandy.

MS: And you try to think, where was I during this time?

ME: At that time, because it's blank, completely blank. Since that time, it's hard to remember when and what happened.

MS: I just wanted to ask you a few questions. When you were in the concentration camps, was there ever any association amongst the Jews with their religion? Did they try to have any kind of a service? If they knew it was a Friday night or a Saturday, were there any prayers?

ME: No.

MS: You must have been interned during some of the holidays. Do you remember of any holidays that were celebrated in any way?

ME: No, no. I didn't care for any holidays. I wouldn't care. I wouldn't do anything for any holidays. Even if I would know it was a holiday, I wouldn't do.

MS: Why do you say that, Michael?

ME: Because God threw me away and I don't want to have anything. After the concentration camp, maybe it was 10 or 15 years, I didn't want to go to synagogue, anywhere, nowhere.

MS: It's interesting that you say this because I know that you're really an observant Jew and yet your feelings...

ME: Yes, yes, yes. Because, you see...

MS: You lost your faith during that time.

ME: You know, it's a difficult thing because I was born and raised in the faith and I saw what happened and you know, I don't want to be skeptical and I said, "Let me put God in my place and me in his place." And I would say, "Well, maybe I would be a better God." I'm not supposed to say that. I'm not supposed to say that because I'm just a human being. But let's say if He is really. He says, "*Rahum v'hanun, God is erekh apayim, v'rav hesed v'emes*".⁹ You know, the whole story. I can tell you in Hebrew whatever, God is merciful and He won't, you know-- all the whole thing that I ever believed in, that a thing like that could happen. It's not only, I don't know. Sometimes I feel better if I don't say anything because maybe, I don't know, when I say bad, when I say, you know, because the reason for it is this: we are not so smart that we don't know His ways. We don't know His ways because God says, "My way is different from your way." So, I cannot understand Him. But He's always right because I cannot be right anyway. So that's why I don't want to say nothing. I can revolt, I can say that I disagree. Or, you know, I can say

⁸Invasion of Normandy was June 6, 1944.

⁹Hebrew: [God is] merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in loving kindness and truth.

that. I can say that He chose us and sometimes I think, I wish He would have chose somebody else, for that matter.

MS: I understand. Let me ask you this, Michael. After the Americans liberated you, where did you finally go? Did you try to go back to Hungary, or you had no desire to...

ME: No. First of all, I got sick. I was so sick that I had to go to the hospital again from May, June, July, 'til August, I was in the hospital.

ME: Where was this, in Austria?

MS: Verse. The name of that town is Verse. I was so skinny that my skin on my forehead was hurting because it was so tight. And, they started feeding me with milk. See, I ate all this junk. I ate the bread, the butter, sugar. I ate sugar by the pound.

MS: So, what you did is really hurt yourself from eating...

ME: Some people who ate meat, they died.

MS: Right.

ME: I said to my friend, my friend that went to school together. I met after liberation. That happened the next day. I ate that sugar. I was so sick that I had cramps. I thought I'm dying. And I said to this boy, I said, "In case you find my father or mother or anybody, tell them that I didn't mind that I died." I don't care to die. But one day after liberation, that bothers me. But I could get, I could hold out up until now and it's one day after. This is what bothers me. And there was a girl there right near me. She was sitting on the ditch on the side of the road. She said, "You won't die. I have sauerkraut." She had the juice of the sauerkraut. Says, "You eat the sauerkraut. You drink that. That sauerkraut will kill the sugar. You might have diarrhea, but, you know, the cramps will..." - I did. There was no doctors at that time. There was nothing, chaos. I drink that, what she gave to me and I felt better then. And I said to my friend, I says, "No, forget about the whole business. I won't die anymore." But, I was still sick. They took me to the hospital for about almost, what, May, June, July, August. This is the way it happened. They took a school building. It was a high school building. And they made it a temporary hospital. I go into that hospital. I had a cane, walking, beard. I go into the nurse. I said, "Nurse, have you anything for me?" "Why, what's wrong?" I says, "I have cramps in my stomach still. Maybe you have," and I said it in German, "Maybe you have some cognac, some kind of a whiskey, something." She says, "I have something. The Americans gave me a little, tiny little ration, you know. You can have this." And then, everybody was already, have the places. Laying on the floor, sick people.

MS: There were not even enough beds for people?

ME: No. And she said, then she was talking, she says to me, "Father, how old are you?" And I says, "What do you think?" She was 18.

MS: Was she an Austrian girl?

ME: Yes. She was a nurse, Austrian girl. She was 18 years old. I was 21. I says, "What do you think?" She says, "45, 48." I said, "Do me a favor. Have you a mirror

in your purse?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Would you please give it to me for a minute?" She gave it to me. And I looked at myself. I didn't see myself in the mirror. I gave it back to her and I says, "I don't blame you." She says, "Tell me. How old are you?" I said, "21." Can't believe it. That's what it is. So, she gave me a place there to lay down. And the doctor came in, a Jewish doctor, an American. I remember like today. He speak Yiddish to me. He examined me and says, well, he says, I have malnutrition. I have a chest cold. But otherwise, physically, he's going to give me some blood, like, you know, like...

MS: Transfusion?

[Tape two, side one ended.]

Tape two, side two:

ME: Yeah. Then after, they started feeding me milk on the hour. Milk, milk. I was sick of milk. Then after they started giving me a little bit of rice, a little bit of pudding until...

MS: Until you could digest the food.

ME: I was there till August and then they were coming from the...

MS: Red Cross?

ME: From the Israel *Haganah*.

MS: They sent representatives to the hospital?

ME: No. They came. They asked, "Who wants to go to Israel?"

MS: Israel?

ME: I says, "I want to go." There was many of us who wanted to go. So, we volunteered to go to Israel but there wasn't an Israel. We didn't know that. So, they came with a truck. They gave us one loaf of bread and meat in a can and we go. They took us down to Italy and we were down in Italy for, I don't know, maybe a month or two months. When are we going?

MS: They took you to a port city?

ME: Yes. When are we going?

MS: Now, this was 1945?

ME: Yes. So, then I saw there was nothing coming, nobody's coming, August, September. So I says, "I'm going to go home and see what's going on, then I can come back."

MS: Home, meaning you wanted to go back to Hungary?

ME: Hungary. So, I started hitchhiking in a German uniform because I didn't have nothing. In the hospital, they gave me...

MS: They didn't issue? You didn't get any?

ME: I had a German uniform. Nothing on it.

MS: It wasn't the same clothing you came in with, though?

ME: No. It was a uniform with boots and everything. And I looked like a German soldier. Once they captured me and I went to Venice, we went to Venice. We went to see Venice, four or five of us.

MS: Did you have papers then?

ME: Yes, I had papers but a lot of German soldiers, they were prisoners there and, you know, the captives in Italian, they thought I was an escapee. We didn't go to the Lido to have a swim. You know where's the Lido? Near Venice on the island? So, in Lido we had to take a boat. I didn't have any money, just got on the boat, I told the captain I am a prisoner. I have no money. He says, "Okay, you can go to the Lido." And I didn't have a bathing suit either. So, one of us, we rented a bathing suit and he went into the water and he threw out the bathing suit. The second one picked it up and threw out the

bathing suit and he come out. There was five of us. I was the last one. [unclear] Then when we finished, I came out and I threw him the bathing suit. Coming back, the detective was watching for us. I was the last one. I was sick. I was just walking. He said, "Hey, come on, papers." I give him the papers. Then, when he found out what we are he says, "The whole city in front of you, the whole country," that we are the guest of the Italian government.

MS: And who was this? Who told you?

ME: It was a detective, an Italian detective. He says, "Where you go, in Italy, you just say that you are coming home from prison camp. You don't have to pay anything. That's it." So, let's try it out. You know, in Venice, you take the boat like you take a streetcar or you walk. So, outside Venice, there are the trolley buses. They have the two layers on top. It's like a bus. We are standing in line. We go in front. And the conductor is there and a friend of mine spoke the language. He says, "We are coming back from prison, prisoners, first day here." And the people started shouting, "How come they're not in the line?" He says, "*Prigioniera*, prisoners." Then they took out pictures. "You see my father. This is my brother. This is my," you know, they came over. We went all over Italy. We only had to say, "Prisoners, thank you."

I come into Hungary, get off the train. I got on the bus. The guy come over, the conductor. He says, "Tickets." I said, "I don't have any tickets." "What do you mean you don't have a ticket?" I said, "I'm just coming from the concentration camp." He says that I should get off the train, I mean the streetcar. I says, "No way." And the people already on the streetcar, they were already in two parts. One was on my side and the other one was on his side. "I haven't got no money. I'm just coming home. I just stepped off the train. I ain't got no money." So then I have to walk. And then I said, "You dirty wops, you killed my parents. You almost killed me. You threw me out from my homeland. All of a sudden, all over Italy, I didn't have to pay penny because I was a guest of the government of Italy. And here, you don't allow, you don't let me go for, you know, how can I go to my friend's and pick up some money?" [unclear] He was ready to throw me out, in Hungary.

MS: What happened when you, how long did you stay in Hungary? Did you try to...

ME: I stayed because I was tired of wandering.

MS: Did you find any family or friends? Where did you stay?

ME: I found my father's house. The Russians...

MS: You found your father's what?

ME: House. The Russians put horses in the house. The house was full of manure and dirt, you know. Windows broken, everything. And then, you know, we started fixing it up. And you know, I said, "Lenny, just take a little rest."

MS: Who was with you?

ME: Myself, my brother was with me.

MS: How did you find your brother?

ME: My brother when they came home.

MS: They also came back from the concentration camp?

ME: Where can you meet?

MS: The people went back to their homes?

ME: That's where you see. If there was anybody alive, that's where we going to have to meet. I met...

MS: Okay. Well, when you got to your home, was your brother already there or did you get there first?

ME: My brother was there already. Let me tell you what happened. I came into Budapest, 'cause I was in [unclear]. I had an uncle, my mother's cousin. He was 76 years old, for sure. He was still alive in Budapest. I used to live, when I was in Budapest, I was living with him. I came in, he was so, he was crying, "I thought that you were dead. So, anyway, your brothers are home because they came to see me," so I knew my brothers are home. I took that train home. I came into the station. And I saw my father's brother. And my brother standing on the platform. I said, "I'm not going to say anything. Let me see what's going to happen." I got off the train. They were waiting for the train. I got off the train.

MS: Were they expecting you?

ME: No, they didn't know I'm alive. I got off the train and I was passing by in front of them. They did not know a thing. They didn't recognize me, nothing. I stand up like this in front of them. I said, I called my uncle. He looks up, "Hey! He looks like Michael. That is Michael. I thought you dead." Can you imagine? They were going somewhere so they took me in the [unclear] with them already. That's how I came back home.

MS: What did you and your brothers decide to do? Were you going to leave Hungary and...

ME: I didn't want to decide anything. I was so tired. I was so, I didn't want to decide anything. We didn't know what was going on there, politically. The only thing we knew, discovered, was that they are the same Nazis like they were before.

MS: This became apparent very quickly.

ME: So, what was the use to stay there?

MS: Alright, so what was your next move?

ME: So, the next move is to gather so much money to get out from there as I can. My father's, my grandfather's, whatever. Everybody perished. The whole family, nobody, I mean just us left over.

MS: You said your uncle and your brothers and then your uncle in Budapest or your cousin in Budapest, rather.

ME: My uncle, my aunt, my two cousins, then another uncle, another aunt and their daughters and granddaughters and the children. I have about maybe 40 of my family.

They all died. But I just want to go back to that. There is one man who gave me that opportunity to learn that trade what I'm in now.

MS: I see. Way back in your youth when you were learning the knitting line.

ME: When I went into the ghetto...

MS: That was the ghetto? You were looking for your parents?

ME: Yes. This man, he became, I don't know, how shall I say it, he became crazy or he went out of his mind. Let me tell you what this man was. This man was a man who was a salesman for a company who they were making, like, liquor, you know, drinks, like. And he came over to the United States in the 1920s and he lived here, I don't know, a couple of years, 1923, '24, '25, In 1944 or 1945, they had a child who was born for them in Cleveland, Ohio. He was, like visiting visa. Was supposed to be registered. Was supposed to register. I don't know what happened. He didn't register. They deported him back with a child together to Hungary. And the wife's mother, father and three brothers and sister, they all stayed here in Cleveland, Ohio. They still, I mean, the grandmother is already dead. But I mean the whole family is here. She went back with the salesman, with the child. Now, this man, he was so successful with the knitting mill, he became a wealthy man. Everybody in this town went to him to borrow money without interest, without any, nothing. He had a policy and I know because I worked there. They used to get the money Sunday. He used to give them \$1,000.00, \$2,000.00, whatever. Every businessman, he was the banker. He didn't charge nothing to nobody. There was just in between them. He had a book for himself. This guy, he got \$1,000.00, this guy, \$2,000.00. Every Friday afternoon, they were coming and giving back the money to him. Sunday morning, they could have their money again.

MS: I don't understand. What was the transaction that was taking place?

ME: Nothing. He gave them money to do business.

MS: Oh, I see. He would lend them money.

ME: Money without interest. He had so much money, he lent them money. He was helping people.

MS: And then they would return it to him whenever they could.

ME: He didn't give them money. He gave them the money to do business but every week they bring the money that they should know that the money doesn't belong to them. But, Monday morning, I mean, Sunday morning, they came back and he gave back the money. They do business again. Friday, they bring it back, okay? This is the kind of guy he was. And he was deported. He was in the concentration camp. The way my brothers are telling me, he took some kind of thing on his head and he was going around. He says, "Who's going to give the Jews money, if I'm here? Who's going to keep *Shabbos*?" He was going around like that. And, of course, in Auschwitz, he [unclear]. The only one who came back here. His daughter was born in America. He had a boy, another boy and another daughter born in Hungary. Four children. All of them. The only one girl that came back who was born in America. She came back. She lives here in

California now. But she's the only one. Now, I don't know if she's religious or not. If she says *Kaddish*.¹⁰ I say *Kaddish*. I'm the one...

MS: Who says *Kaddish* for them.

ME: ...for all of them, all of them. The reason why I mentioned this man is because I think he deserved to be mentioned. Because that's the kind of guy he was. That was his end.

MS: Well, that's a very touching story, Michael. He must have been a very important person to you. You were related to, in a sense, weren't you? He...

ME: His wife was my father's first cousin. She's my second, me and her were second cousins.

MS: Right, right, right. Very sad. Well, is there anything else you want to add to this, Michael?

ME: I could add a whole thing.

MS: Well, just tell me one thing. You left Hungary, then. You decided to leave Hungary.

ME: 1940-- well, you see, I met my wife at a wedding.

MS: In Hungary?

ME: Yes. We decided to get married. Then, 1947, we got married, '47. In December, I don't remember. I'll ask her.

MS: All right, well, you were married in Hungary then, and you had to apply for...

ME: I did apply but nothing doing, so we decided we escape. We decided we would escape. How can we escape in 1947?

MS: Escape to where?

ME: Anywhere. I was in Austria. I was liberated there by the Americans. See, I took over the machinery, the land, the houses, whatever is left over from my father, from my aunt. I took everything over. There was nobody there. It was all in Gentiles' hands. Everybody was using the-- they had three tractors. All the machinery with it. It was a big deal over there to have a tractor. And the houses and my father's house and my grandfather's house. And so many things that everybody was having, I said, you know. Why should they have all these things then. Land, 15 acres of land. So I took all these possessions.

MS: And were you able to sell them?

ME: No I didn't sell them. I just was living.

MS: I see. Alright.

ME: If I would have these things I wouldn't have to work.

MS: Alright, but when you left the country, what happened to them?

ME: I left them there. See, when I took this machinery over, the government became communist. They took it over and they didn't let make profits. They didn't let the

¹⁰Prayer for the dead said on the anniversary of the death.

people that were in business to make profits. So, they wanted me-- I took over after the war in 1947. You know, there is always repair on the car, you know, like machinery. So they wanted me to repair the...

MS: Equipment.

ME: The equipment and the give the government over, nationalizing. So, I should repair it and then give it to them. Where am I going to get the money from? I wasn't home. I was in the concentration camp. I have no money. If I won't do it, they will put me in jail, alright? If I escape and they capture me, they put me in jail. So, If I escape, I have a 50/50 chance to whether I make it or not. If I stay there, they're going to put me in jail anyway.

MS: I see.

ME: So, I said, let's take a chance and I escaped.

MS: So, where did you-- what country did you go into?

ME: Czechoslovakia. But I was captured at the border. I was captured.

MS: You and your wife were both captured on the border?

ME: Yes, yes. The Czechs captured us. I paid them off and then they let us go. Then again they captured us again then they did let us go.

MS: So where did you finally...

ME: Finally, then we go to Austria. That's where my concentration camp was, not far from there. I knew my way there. From there, I went to Canada.

MS: From Austria?

ME: I went to Canada.

MS: You got papers to go to Canada?

ME: Uh, huh [affirmative]. My brother was in Canada. He's still in Canada. That's where my daughter is now.

MS: I see. So, you came into Canada and then lived there for a while...

ME: Fifteen years.

MS: ... and then from there you applied for citizenship in the United States?

ME: No, I-- President Kennedy, when President Kennedy was assassinated, a year before, he had a law-- the Hungarian quota is very bad. I didn't have a chance. But, like, special tradesmen, he would let in. So, I was on as a specialist. I'm a mechanic. They let me in as a specialist.

MS: This was from where?

ME: From Canada.

MS: Into the United states?

ME: Yeah. There's a company in Philadelphia who gave me the paper to, they hired me. I was there for almost four years.

MS: I see, I see.

ME: I run the second shift for them.

MS: I see.

ME: Then I got crazy. I went for myself.

MS: So, in other words, you became a Canadian citizen...

ME: Yes.

MS: ... and then from Canada, you emigrated to the United States?

ME: Right, right.

MS: Well, Michael, thank you very, very much.

ME: It was my pleasure.

MS: It was very kind of you to give us your testimony. We do appreciate it.

ME: I think that's all I can do. I think this is-- if you ask me the reason, how come that I'm here, what I would say is revenge. That is what kept me alive. I wasn't thinking of-- I mean, not the way it is now. If I would know what's happening now, today, politically and, you know, I wouldn't make it. I thought, "I'm going to get revenge on those guys who did these kinds of things." See the world today? Read the Exponent¹¹ today? What's going on in the United Nations and all. Everybody is against Israel, against us. The same thing all over again.

MS: Well, hopefully, I mean, we have to feel that it will never be like it was. Otherwise, it would be just unrealistic to go ahead. So, we just have to hope to God...

ME: I don't trust none of them. America, I don't trust none of them, none of them. Because if we would have a country at that time, if we would have Israel, it wouldn't happen this. I didn't care for my life. I would have a country whom I could think-- I mean, there was no chance, like the way we were there. It was suicide. But if we would have, like, Israel, we know we could get ammunition. I mean, look, we were 6,000,000 of us.

MS: Certainly, certainly.

ME: Just, you know, the way the Germans did us [unclear] the perfect job. There was no way, no way to, to-- I was thinking many times about what happened. I didn't think there was nobody like I see wiseguys, sometimes. You know, sometimes you see wiseguys. Somebody is talking loud and I said, "What?" I compared him. What was he doing in that situation I was in. [unclear] He wouldn't last a half a day. He wouldn't last an hour.

MS: Under those circumstances.

ME: Right. So, that is the type of person. He just, he, you know, he couldn't. So well organized, everything. I cannot say anything and think that if God wouldn't -- wouldn't have been with them, it wouldn't have happened. I mean, look, it wouldn't have happened. And that's why many times, I think, I do things because I was taught like that automatically. But, you know, I'm questioning many times. I didn't know you were there last night, at services?

MS: Yes. Michael, I'll conclude the interview. Thank you again. Let's hope that our children will never see a world like this.

ME: I hope so.

¹¹Jewish Exponent – weekly newspaper serving the Philadelphia area.

MS: Thank you, Michael.

[Tape two, side two ended. Interview ended.]