

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MICHAEL FINKELSTEIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Maxine Weiner
Date: April 21, 1985

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Melrose Park, PA 19027

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MF - Michael Finkelstein [interviewee]

MW- Maxine Weiner [interviewer]

Date: April 21, 1985¹

Tape one, side one:

MW: Michael?

MF: Yes.

MW: O.K., Michael. Do you mind if I smoke?

MF: Well...

MW: Be honest.

MF: If you have to.

MW: I don't have to. I'm sorry. Things have changed so much.

MF: Yeah.

MW: Many people are not smoking, because the non-smokers are asserting their rights.

MF: Well, it's not only that, but, I'm allergic to it.

MW: Are you?

MF: Yeah.

MW: I'm glad I asked. You're here from California?

MF: Yes.

MW: And you've come for the Gathering?

MF: Yes.

MW: Aha, O.K. Whereabouts do you live? In Encino?

MF: In Encino, yeah.

MW: And, you're married?

MF: Married.

MW: Do you have children?

MF: Two children.

MW: How old are they?

MF: I have a son 28 and a daughter 26.

MW: And is your wife also a survivor?

MF: Yes.

MW: O.K. We're gonna spend an hour together, and I'm gonna try to get a sense of what life was like for you before Hitler. How life got progressively worse under the Third Reich, how you survived, and how you've come to be here today. All right? So to start with, I'd like you to tell me as much as you can about your family that you were--the family of origin. Where were you born?

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

MF: I was born in Radom, Poland.

MW: Radom?

MF: Yes.

MW: How do you spell that?

MF: R-A-D-O-M.

MW: What year?

MF: 1928.

MW: That would make you how old?

MF: I'm gonna be 57.

MW: O.K.

MF: And I was born to a very loving family. My father was an only son, and my mother came from a larger family of brothers and sisters. And we were all very close. And I had a grandfather and grandmother and...

MW: You had, your two parents, how many brothers and sisters?

MF: You mean, my parents? My father didn't have any, but my mother had, she had two sisters and a brother.

MW: In the same town?

MF: Yeah, yeah. We was all in the same area.

MW: A closely-knit family.

MF: Very close, very close.

MW: And you had brothers and sisters?

MF: I had one sister.

MW: And.

MF: And she survived.

MW: She survived too.

MF: She is also in Encino, California. We were a, I w-...

MW: How old is she, older or younger?

MF: She is older. She is two years older.

MW: You lived in the same area as aunts and uncles.

MF: Yes, yes, all very close by.

MW: And you were close-knit?

MF: Close-knit, yes.

MW: And loving. What did your father do for a living?

MF: My father was in business. He was dealing in raw, in the production of leather, you know, the raw materials, in the hide, he was dealing in the hides of cows and sheep and so on. Like we would be wholesaling this to factories that processed it, to a processing factory. And later on during the war we were involved in manufacturing of shoes, and...

MW: Were you in a reli--was your family religious?

MF: Yes.

MW: You were...

MF: Everybody was religious.

MW: You were given a Jewish education?

MF: Jewish education, yes.

MW: Did you also go to public school and to...

MF: I, yeah.

MW: *Cheder*?

MF: I went to public school and to *cheder*. And, but things became very hectic in the public schools, because the Polish children that were there, they were intimidating the Jews.

MW: Before Hitler?

MF: Before Hitler, yeah.

MW: This was, something that went on for many years?

MF: Yeah, yeah, yes. They were very antisemitic, because they were taught by their parents--by their parents that the Jews were the whole cause of all the problems and that we killed Jesus. That's what they always, if, when, if they wanted to call you a name they would call you Jesus-killer, Jesus-killer, you know. And so eventually I had to leave public school and just go to *cheder*. And I had a very good Jewish education, and my parents would do anything to educate their children. And...

MW: Was there, besides the antisemitism in the school you attended...

MF: Yeah.

MW: In this community at large, in the general community, were you and your family the object of any kind of antisemitism?

MF: Well, we...

MW: Before Hitler?

MF: We usually lived in a community where there was, you know, a majority Jewish population, so we didn't really feel it. But the only time we felt it is if you went out--we went out of our area, see. You were always intimidated by the Poles, by the, they were antisemitic. Every one, and during the war the Poles were even worse than the Germans. They were just, you know, when the Germans ordered all the Jews to be turned in, or to turn in let's say their radios, to turn in their own things, but the Poles would be the ones that would show a finger at the Jews, which are Jews and who has it and all so on.

MW: Tell me about that. Are you saying you were protected from antisemitism because the community was kind of...

MF: Yeah.

MW: Closed off...

MF: Yeah.

MW: From the regular community?

MF: Yes, because we had not, we didn't have much to do with the Poles. Well, mainly, you know, circulation with the Jewish population.

MW: When did you first begin to feel the impact of Hitler's government? When, how did it, when did it...

MF: Right away.

MW: Begin to affect you?

MF: Right away.

MW: What year?

MF: Right away, as soon as they came in, 1939.

MW: 1933? 1939.

MF: 1939.

MW: What happened?

MF: Well, as soon as the...

MW: That was when Hitler invaded...

MF: Yes.

MW: Poland.

MF: Poland, and they marched into our city.

MW: And what happened? How did that affect you and your family?

MF: Now, first of all, slowly they started to take away all the businesses, and they took away the properties, and they would, the apartments and homes they would take away and settle Germans in them. And the Jews had to move in together.

MW: Is that what happened in your town?

MF: Mmm hmm.

MW: When did you move into the ghetto?

MF: We moved into the ghetto I think in 1940. We had to live like three, four families in one apartment, in order to make room for the Germans, because they had confiscated apartments to put the German soldiers in. And then when we went into the ghetto...

MW: You, you lived with other families...

MF: Yes.

MW: You, with your parents and your sister?

MF: We lived in the ghetto with one more family and we have taken, two grandmothers lived with us, all in the same apartment. So we were about three, four, six, eight, ten people, ten people in a one-bedroom apartment. And after that, they liquidated this large ghetto, and made a small ghetto out of it. Much smaller one because most of the Jews, they took away, you know, to gas chambers, from our city.

MW: Before, I want to go into that, but before we do, can you tell me a little bit more about life in the ghetto with your family? How did you support yourselves?

MF: Well, first of all there was a shortage of food always. And we used to smuggle in goods from outside the ghetto into the ghetto, and you know, this is how we supported ourselves.

MW: By selling the food that you smuggled?

MF: By, smuggled in, yeah.

MW: Food mostly?

MF: No, soft goods and different material things that we would smuggle in and sell it in the ghetto. And also by taking things from the ghetto that we made and take it outside the ghetto to sell it.

MW: Was that legal? Or w-...

MF: It was illegal.

MW: Was it, if you got caught you would lose your lives?

MF: Got caught, yes, yes.

MW: And yet you still did it.

MF: Yes, we had to do it. We had to do it because we had to support our families. And, I was a child. I was only ten years old at that time.

MW: What were your thoughts, when you had to leave your home and you had to go into the ghetto? Did you have, did your parents have thoughts about leaving? What were their fantasies about what was gonna happen?

MF: Well...

MW: How did it affect you?

MF: My father was always a Zionist. So eventually, even if the Germans [unclear] and we were, he was always hoping anyway to Israel one day, even when it was Palestine. But when this happened, there was no way out. I mean it was life or death if you were to leave the ghetto. There were so many instances...

MW: Before you went into the ghetto...

MF: Yeah?

MW: What were the restrictions that you, you had to sell your business?

MF: Well, no, not that we have to sell. They took it away.

MW: You didn't get anything for it?

MF: No. We were not allowed to listen to the radio. We had to turn in all the radios. There was no television at the time. We had to stand in line, I think, I remember it took us a day. It was a life-threatening situation, that if you didn't turn in the radio and they caught you, you know, you could get shot.

MW: Did you see people getting shot?

MF: Well I didn't see, because I didn't know of any that withhold the radio at the time. You know, they didn't want us to hear what's going on in the rest of the world. And slowly, you know, they took away our rights. We had to wear armbands, and if a German would walk on the sidewalk the Jews had to walk, get off the sidewalk. Slowly. And then eventually they, you know, they threw us in into a small area.

MW: O.K., before they did that, when these kinds of restrictions were being imposed...

MF: Yes?

MW: What did you think about that as a ten-year-old child? Do you remember?

MF: I thought it was terrible. I mean, there was no freedom, no freedom of movement. Of course we were used to some discrimination before the Germans came in, because of the Poles. But that made it that much worse. And the Poles were cooperating with the Germans. They were helping them.

MW: In what way?

MF: In what way? Like, you know, they never put up any resistance when the, when the Germans were evacuating the Jews out of Poland, or into concentration camps, or into death camps, you know, like Treblinka. They never protested. They never did anything to help a Jew. There's very few instances where the Poles would help Jews. Of course, my wife, she was hiding out with a Polish family, but only because her uncle kept paying money. And every time that if there was any kind of a threat, they would tell her, "Just go out and take care of yourself. You're none of our business." They didn't try to hide her or anything, you know. Every one of us can write a book that big if we wanted to go into details.

MW: What I would like you to do today, as you come to it, tell me little anecdotes. Give me a real flavor what it was like for you as a human being to be subjected to this kind of cruelty. I want to get a sense of that.

MF: Well, I was about 14, maybe, 15.

MW: This, you were in the ghetto at this time?

MF: No, this is later on when they took us into a concentration camp.

MW: So, hold that for a minute...

MF: Yeah, all right.

MW: O.K. Let me get...

MF: You mean something in the ghetto?

MW: Yeah, how long were you in the ghetto?

MF: In the ghetto, I think about a year-and-a-half, or two years.

MW: With your folks...

MF: Yes.

MW: And your sister, and all...

MF: We were all...

MW: The other people.

MF: What happened is my mother got taken away before in, from the [unclear]. Because one day they came and they chased us out of our homes. And they diminished the population at that time by maybe three-quarters.

MW: They took them where?

MF: They took away to Treblinka, to death camp. And at that time they took away my two grandmothers and my mother, and the rest of my mother's family, which we never saw again.

MW: Do you remember when that took place?

MF: This must have been in 1940.

MW: What was that like for you?

MF: It was terrible. Now, at that time, and that's when I saw people being shot and killed on the spot. When we were standing in line and they were, you know, it was a matter of a hair between life and death. Like they would, there was an S.S. officer would say, "You go here, and you go to the left, and you go to the right." And one row was to go to the gas chamber, and one row was to still live on, but we didn't know for how long. We knew that sooner or later we're gonna be finished.

MW: So they deported a large number of people from the ghetto.

MF: From the ghetto.

MW: You remained there?

MF: I remained. Yeah, I remained with...

MW: With, with your father and...

MF: My father and my sister.

MW: And a sister.

MF: Yeah. And also, there was a surviving child, my cousin. Because her parents were taken away all together, and she was younger than I was at the time. So we took her in and she stayed with us. She is here today too.

MW: How much longer were you allowed to stay there?

MF: Not too long, maybe we stayed in the smaller ghetto, you know, they herded us into a very small area, and they let us stay over there, because we had a--there was a big manufacturing area where they were producing for the Germans garments and different things, and that's why they let us stay.

MW: Oh, you worked as a, in a factory?

MF: Yeah, we--there was factories, there was shoe factories, garment factories. And we worked there. And from there they took us away to a ammunitions factory. And that's the one that's called Pionki. I think I wrote this down here. Yeah, let's see, here. We went to Pionki there. And this was a terrible experience, because the people that they...

MW: P-I-O-N- right? So you were taken from the ghetto and you had, you lived at Pionki?

MF: Pionki, yes, and that, this was a terrible experience over there, because I was very young, and over there if they would catch somebody smuggle, they would hang you. And they would take and chase out all the people from the barracks into the square, and hang them right in front of us, to scare the people off we shouldn't, you know, smuggle things. So, in order to support ourselves, to have some mean of living--besides, you know, just whatever they gave us like a quart of soup and a cup of coffee and a piece

of bread--in order to get medicine or things like that, you would have to smuggle and sell things out on the outside. And during [unclear] they hung three or four people at the same time and made us watch it, all of us.

MW: You were, you were about 12...

MF: That was very...

MW: At that place...

MF: Yes, yeah, and this was a terrible thing.

MW: It must have been terrifying.

MF: Terrible.

MW: Was your father with you at this time?

MF: Yeah, my father and my sister.

MW: They were in that labor camp as well?

MF: Yeah, yeah, we all, they split us up. There was times where I as the young boy had to work 16 hours a day, and sometimes they'd make us work 24 hours.

MW: Really?

MF: Yes. It was, and from there--this wasn't everything--when the Russians were getting close, then they moved us on to Auschwitz.

MW: Before you get to that...

MF: Yeah.

MW: In Pionki, how, what were the living conditions like?

MF: They were not living conditions. They were surviving conditions, let's say. It was like they put in 20 people into one room, you know. We had bunk beds, and the bunk beds even, two had to sleep in one bunk bed, in one bed, because it was just crowded. And the sanitary conditions were terrible. And then there were times where I didn't have any food. We had to live, ma--when, you know, when they couldn't get in and out because the war was getting closer to us, there was times where we had to live maybe just on rice or cheese, old cheese, [unclear].

MW: What were the years you were at Pionki?

MF: [unclear] say?

MW: What were the years you were at Pionki?

MF: What year did I put down? I think '42...

MW: '43?

MF: '42-'43.

MW: How long were you there?

MF: At least a year.

MW: How were your parents doing?

MF: Well, my mother wasn't there any more. My father had a hard time, because, you know, he wasn't used to that kind of thing. He was a businessman.

MW: And I suppose for both of you, not knowing what happened to your mother must have been pretty...

MF: Oh yeah. Well we...

MW: Pretty depressing.

MF: We had a pretty good feeling that they were taking them all to the gas chambers. We, we got reports that that's what happened.

MW: Where did you get the reports?

MF: From people that, some people that, that ran away, that risked their lives. They jumped off the trains, you know. They took us in trains. And some people who risked their life and jumped off the trains would come back and tell us all about it. Because they came back to look for their relatives. People that were brave enough, you know, ran away.

MW: Did you have any other source of information about what was going on in the outside world?

MF: Once in a while, but it wasn't reliable, because it would come from the Poles. And the Poles, either they would make up a story, but once in a while they would tell us the truth. But they *never, never* tried to rescue people, or to help.

MW: The transportation from this first place that you were at, from the ghetto to this labor camp, how did you get there?

MF: We went in open cars, boxcars, no cover, nothing, even if it was raining or snowing. No water, no water for days, no food.

MW: Did people die on the trains?

MF: Oh yeah, many people died on the trains or some of them got shot because they tried to escape. [pause] We were always transported in open boxcars, because that would help the, that would help them to solve their, you know, the "Jewish Problem". You know, instead of putting them to the gas chambers, dying out on the way, when they were transporting us.

MW: What was the year you were transported from the ghetto to, where was the first camp you went to, the first place you went to after you left the ghetto?

MF: We had a, well, Pionki.

MW: It was Pionki.

MF: Yeah.

MW: O.K., how long did it take to get there?

MF: Well, probably at least two days. [pause]

MW: In cattle cars.

MF: Mmm hmm.

MW: Were you and your mother--you and your father together in the car?

MF: You mean in, in the...

MW: In the cattle car?

MF: Yeah, well we always tried to stay together.

MW: Was it hard to stay together? Were there [unclear].

MF: It was very hard, because many times they were trying to separate us.

MW: Why was that?

MF: Because, you know, like, we were young, me and my sister. And my father a little older, and they always tried to keep the different ages separate, because if anything happened they figured that the young people, they could get out a lot of work from them still, before they kill them. [pause]

MW: How long were you at Pionki?

MF: For about a year.

MW: Did you have any contact with your sister there?

MF: Yeah, yeah, we lived together. At that time they allowed us to live together in our families, because this was the, more of a work camp than a concentration camp. Of course we had no rights or anything, but they would--we would walk to work, you know, it was all-inclusive area for--you could never get out. It was all surrounded by barbed wires, between the living camp and the camp where we were working, you know, the factories. It was all enclosed with barbed wire and, you know, the German soldiers were patrolling it with machine guns and these things.

MW: Did people, were people shot at that camp?

MF: Shot?

MW: At Pionki?

MF: Oh many times. If they tried to escape, they were shot. Or if they smuggled, so you see, we were making ammunition over there, and ammunition is made of alcohol. And alcohol was a good item, you know, to use, to sell to the outside, because you know, for alcohol you could get bread, you could get eggs, you could get butter. You know, and the alcohol was expensive, because it was 100 proof. In order to produce the good ammunition, it had to be 100 proof. So whenever somebody tried, you know, like a--if somebody got sick in the family and the--he had no medicine, he tried to do anything. So people tried to smuggle outside the alcohol, and sell it...

MW: To save their family.

MF: To get medicine. I remember I was in one of the camps with my father and I got sick. I had a fever. I had pneumonia. And my father had hidden some jewelry. And he went out. In order to get a couple aspirins he gave away a gold ring. [pause]

MW: How long were you ill?

MF: Oh I was ill almost till they transported us. I was about two months in the hospital with pneumonia.

MW: They had a hospital bunk?

MF: Yeah, it was, yeah, it was very, very primitive.

MW: And you had pneumonia there?

MF: They didn't do much for you. They just let you lay there. Mo--the older people, if they got sick, they just shipped them out to the gas chambers. Younger people they didn't do it so. And besides, you know, you had to be very, very shrewd and conniving in order to survive. You had to do so many different things.

MW: You as a child, were you doing things like that, or mostly it was your father?

MF: No, me, because then after we were separated from my father, we had to do the things in order to survive, to live.

MW: When were you separated from your father?

MF: I was separated from my father in 1944.

MW: Were you at Pionki all that time?

MF: No, no, we, they shipped us out...

MW: When...

MF: To coal mine and...

MW: From Pionki you went to a coal mine?

MF: Coal mine in Upper Silesia [German: Oberschlesien] in Poland.

MW: In Silesia.

MF: Yeah.

MW: You and your father and your sister?

MF: My father, no, no, then they separated us by then.

MW: Where did she go?

MF: You see, we, they sent us out from Pionki to Auschwitz. And in Auschwitz they separated us.

MW: So you, when you worked in the coal mine, you were living at Auschwitz?

MF: No, they, that was after Auschwitz. Because Auschwitz was like a transit camp.

MW: Let's take the first step, O.K.?

MF: Yeah.

MW: When you left Pionki.

MF: Yeah, then we went to Auschwitz.

MW: O.K., when was that?

MF: This must have been in '43.

MW: O.K. And it was you and your father and your sister?

MF: Yeah, we all, we all went to Auschwitz.

MW: Were you separated from them?

MF: Yeah, in Auschwitz, yes, they separated us. But I was still with my father in Auschwitz.

MW: But you were separated from your sister?

MF: Sister, right.

MW: Tell me about, how long were you at Auschwitz?

MF: I must have been in Auschwitz maybe a couple months.

MW: What was that like?

MF: It was horrible.

MW: Was it worse than Pionki?

MF: Yeah, because Auschwitz we knew was a death camp.

MW: So it was more terrifying.

MF: Yes, because just a few blocks from where we were living, and besides, you know, we were already in regular barracks like for cattle. It wasn't, you know, like before. And you had to struggle to survive, to get a piece of bread, because we got a slice of bread maybe and a pot of black coffee and maybe a quart of soup for the whole day. And in order to have something better, you'd have to do some kind of a service where you can manipulate and, to find food. So, that's what I was going to tell you, that a, an interesting episode happened to me in Auschwitz when we came. They took us all out, outside. And you know, they were supposed to check us in to each separate blocks, so many people into each block. And each block, a block was considered like, you know, a big barrack, one block. And each block had like a foreman. And that foreman could be a Pole; it could be a Jew; it could be a German. Because they were also, you see, they kept over there criminals too. You know, like German criminals, they were considered somebody that's against the government. And Poles also that would be resisting the Germans. And the Jews, because they were Jews. So, but most of the, those block foremens were either Germans or Poles. There were also some who...

MW: Who tried to resist it?

MF: Yeah, they were resistant to Germans.

MW: How did the people get that particular role? How were they chosen to be the commanders?

MF: Well, if they would cooperate with the Germans, and they were good and healthy, and, you know, they could, then they would see that, you know, like they could beat up somebody, you know, if they would have the guts to beat people and do, to treat them like dirt, you know.

MW: Did the Jewish people do it to other Jewish people?

MF: Yes, yes. It happened. There's always some rotten apples in the barrel, you know.

MW: So let me not interrupt your story.

MF: Yeah. So, at that time, you know, we were assigned to a certain block, a certain barrack. And we were all together. And there was, I think there must have been 150, 200 people in that group. And there was a few young, younger people, and then most of them were older. And that block foreman came out, and he said--and I was about 12, 13, 14--and he came out and he said, "Who is a chef, a cook, in this whole group?" And I never knew how to cook or never knew how to do anything at home, because we always had a loving family. We had a maid that did everything. We didn't have to do nothing. And in order to survive you had to lie and cheat and tell things that you, you know. So I, I stepped out, you know. I kind of took a chance. I said, "I'm a cook." He says, "O.K. You're gonna cook for me." And that was it. And, being a cook, you know, you had access to food, to eggs, to food that had protein.

MW: Who was it that you cooked for?

MF: For that block foreman.

MW: For the foreman.

MF: Yes.

MW: O.K.

MF: You know, a lot of them were also looking for young boys, to use them as homosexuals and so on. But this did not happen to me, thanks God. But, so I became the cook, and being a cook I was able to help my father and help friends, because if you had access to the food, you know--like in order to get a dozen eggs, you had to sacrifice seven breads. You know, it was trading, back and forth, in food. But he had all the food he wanted. He had meat; he had fruit. He had salami. He had eggs. And, which we never saw. I mean, as a--all we used to get is some potato peels with water as our food. And we-

Tape one, side two:

MF: Which helped me survive, because everybody was just getting down to bone and skin, because we had no nutrition. We had no protein, you know. Most of the people were so skinny. Like when I was liberated in 1945, I only weighed less than 100 pounds. And I was at the age where I should have been growing and being healthy. So the people were going down the drain slowly, the ones that didn't, couldn't help themselves, or didn't get any help from the outside.

MW: People were dying.

MF: Yes. Slowly, eventually they would die, or when, you know, they used to come, you know, that Dr. Mengele that they're still looking. I met him personally. I saw him over there in Auschwitz. He used to come, and look over every block of people every so often. And when he saw somebody wasn't as healthy, he'd say, "Out, to the right." And then they would load up the carloads of people and take them over to, to the gas chambers, not gas, gas chambers, and then to the ovens. And my worst experience there was that two blocks from us you could smell the burning of the flesh of the people. We didn't see it actually, but at night you could see the flames. And we knew that's what it was. They would take the people, select them, the ones that were assigned to die, and ship them out.²

MW: How did your father do?

MF: My father was fine, being that I was able to help him with everything, until 1945.

MW: So you were, but you were only in Auschwitz temporarily.

MF: Temporarily, yeah.

MW: When did you leave Auschwitz?

MF: In Auschwitz, after a couple months we were there.

MW: You were a chef while you were there, right?

MF: Yes. I was a...

MW: A cook.

MF: Yeah.

MW: And then you went to where?

MF: Then, you see, we had a friend in Auschwitz that was an accountant. And he was working in the office. And he was a good friend of my father. And we asked him if whenever something comes along that they're gonna have a place out--we wanted to get out of there--to let us know where we can get in, and out of Auschwitz. So he told us once that there was a transport going to that Upper Silesia, to the coal mines, which was good, because it wasn't any more or so. You know, they always had access to it. They could have always come and get us, but we thought that maybe the war will get closer, and we'll have a chance to survive without having to come back to Auschwitz where you

²Mr. Finkelstein's description suggests that he was in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

will go to the gas chambers or to the ovens. So, that's the reason we got out of Auschwitz and went to the coal mine town.

MW: When was this?

MF: That was in '43.

MW: You and your father?

MF: Yah.

MW: And how long were you there?

MF: We must have spent there about nine months.

MW: What were the living conditions?

MF: The living conditions were better than in Auschwitz.

MW: You had more to eat?

MF: Well, better food, and a little more to eat. And being that we were considered laborers, and not, you see, when we were in Auschwitz, we didn't do nothing. They were just chasing us back and forth and doing things, make us do things that were unnecessary, in order to keep us occupied so our mind wouldn't work and plan things like an uprising. But, over there, we did manual labor and working in the coal mines, whoever was healthy enough. And whoever got sick or anything, then they shipped him out and back to Auschwitz. So we tried to stay healthy, and you know, I being young, were always able, I was always able to organize things so we had a little more food than others.

MW: You were pretty clever, weren't you?

MF: Well, you had to be.

MW: But it sounds like your father really depended on you more than you depended on him.

MF: He, at the time, at that time.

MW: At that time.

MF: Because for an older person it was very hard to get around. Because he would be recognized. And right away, you know, they called him names if they found out. The younger people they didn't pay so much attention.

MW: Where did you get your strength from during this time?

MF: The what? The strength?

MW: Where did, yeah.

MF: You see, we had one thing in mind, is to survive, and to be able to say, "We were there, and we saw it all." And, my father, you know, we were always talking about that we hope the day will come when even when he's dead we should, we should, to come to his grave and say, "We survived. We're here. And the Germans are gone." You know, that we outlived the Germans. Because, we were always talking that the Jewish people had plenty obstacles in their life, and they were always, you know, persecuted. They were always trying to kill us off and [unclear] was doing the--you know, so many years ago, in the Egyptian times, and later on in the Spanish Inquisition,

and then the Russian Czars with their pogroms and the Polish pogroms. But yet we survived. We outlived them. So that's what gave me strength, you know.

MW: The history of your people is what gave you strength?

MF: Yes. Yes. Because we knew that somebody is going to survive, no matter how few it'll be, but somebody's going to survive.

MW: And you thought it would be you?

MF: I was hoping. Everybody was hoping.

MW: Did you have any sense for how long it was gonna take?

MF: Well...

MW: Did you think much about that...

MF: We were...

MW: I imagine you thought about it all the time.

MF: Actually we were very pessimistic about it, the Holocaust. We knew that sooner or later that we were all gonna die. But how long it was gonna be, you know, we were always talking about it. We knew. We were very pessimistic about life. We knew it's gonna, it's not gonna, [unclear] under the conditions that we couldn't live. It was impossible, that there has to be some kind of rescue in order for us to survive. And this is actually what happened, that...

MW: Before we get to that, Michael, tell me, you were at the coal mines for nine months...

MF: Yeah, approximately.

MW: And then where did you go?

MF: From there, when the, you know...

MW: And your sister was where at this time?

MF: We didn't know.

MW: You didn't know.

MF: We didn't know, because we were separated in Auschwitz, and the men went to different, and women went to different direction. At that time, from what I found out later, she was already in Germany, in Bergen-Belsen, that famous death camp, you know. That's where Reagan is supposed to go and visit and lay a wreath. That's where she was liberated. But we didn't know nothing about her by that time.

MW: So, from the coal mine you went where?

MF: To, there's a famous camp, it's called Mauthausen.

MW: How do you spell that?

MF: M-A-T-H-A-U-S-E-N.

MW: M-A-T-...

MF: H-A-U-S-A-N. Just like you say it. [Mauthausen]

MW: Mauthausen.

MF: Yes. And this was also like a transit camp, you know, temporarily from where they sent you, to other places. It was a type of camp like Auschwitz. It was a death

camp. But many people got, you know, gassed there and killed and shot. When they evacuated us from that coal mine camp...

MW: How did you get from the coal mine to Mauthausen?

MF: We had to walk.

MW: And how long was it?

MF: We must have walked at least for 24 hours.

MW: Without any rest?

MF: Without food or water. We got very sick. So many people got sick on the, you know, people were eating the snow, because it was cold weather.

MW: What...

MF: And people were, you know, in order to sustain themselves, they took up a hand of snow and eat it.

MW: How were you dressed?

MF: Minimal, we were wearing the same clothes. And they, you know, we were wearing wooden shoes. It was impossible to walk for so many miles. And, you know, there were so many people who were dropping off on the road, and whoever couldn't walk any more. And they'd shoot them and throw them into the ravine on the side.

MW: What went through your mind on this walk?

MF: Well, what went through my mind is that sooner or later it's gonna happen to me, because so many people couldn't make it. So, you know, what they were trying to do is finish us off slowly, so they don't have to, so many people in the way. Because, you know, there was a war going on and they had to move on. And they had to pull back and they didn't want the Allies should come in and see all the atrocities what they did. So they were trying to, you know, finish us off. And somehow that's what happened at that time. And then we came into that camp.

MW: When was this that you came to Mauthausen? What year?

MF: This must have been in '44.

MW: O.K.

MF: First, you see, they marched us to a train for about 24 hours. Then they put us in into those open boxcars, and it was freezing and snowing. And the people were dying out slowly. Slowly they were killing us. And they took us with those boxcars into Mauthausen. In Mauthausen they left us outside, on the, I don't know, somehow they found pur--you know, on--I think it was on purpose, ways of getting rid of us, slowly, because of the conditions. Like when they brought us to Mauthausen, they left standing outside in the cold for 24 hours, while they were set--they were calling it delousing for the, you know, to clean us up from the camp before. It was completely unnecessary you know, in order to go to a shower, we had to stand in line for 24 hours. And we had hardly any clothing on, and the people were just dying slowly, you know, falling on the side. And whoever survived, survived. And, what happened at that, it was an ironic thing. You

know, everybody was hungry. They weren't giving us any food or water, anything. So, they, I don't know, either it was for, meant for to be for cows' food, or they were cooking this. There was laying, you know, like a pile of, they c--they used to call it, I don't know what they call this here. It's a, sort of vegetable. And they feed cows, and they also make sugar out of it, sugar beets. That's it.

MW: Yes.

MF: Those big ones. And there was a pile of it laying. It was all frozen, you know, because the cold. And that's what people tried to eat. And when they ate this, they got diarrhea. And they were dying off, hundreds of them, over night. And finally, after we got through this, so we thought we're gonna go to a better place. Then they sent us to a place that's called Ebensee. That was the last camp, where I was liberated from.

MW: When were you sent there? How long were you at Auschwitz? I mean, at...

MF: In Mauthausen...

MW: Mauthausen?

MF: We were only I think a very short time, maybe a week or ten days. And so many of us, the ones that did go to Mauthausen, never came out of there.

MW: You and your father did.

MF: We did, yeah. They send us to Ebensee, Austria.

MW: How did you get to Ebensee?

MF: Also on boxcars. I really don't remember whether boxcars, or we walked, but it's one of the two, for sure, nothing better. And when we got there, this was really, that, in that Ebensee was really a death camp. Because over there, there wasn't really anything to do. It was a camp just to try and finish off the people. Because like, if they would take us out to the railroads, to the sidings of the railroads, so what they would make us do is take a pile of old, rusty steel, move it from one place to the other, just to keep us busy, keep us occupied. Even though that we were all, you know, weak, and sick, unhealthy, and you know, physically and mentally deteriorated, but just so they, they keep us occupied so we can't think, so we couldn't think and not organize you know, an uprising.

MW: Was there any resistance that you were aware of throughout this experience?

MF: Yes, there was resistance I remember. You know, the, in Auschwitz, there were people that worked in those gas chambers, in the ovens, that planned, you know, to rise up. And they, as a matter of fact they killed a few Germans. But it was always crushed, and quelled as resistance, because there was so many people that were spying and they would tell them. And they caught them. But there was resistance, very small resistance, not to the point like it was in the Warsaw Ghetto. You see, Warsaw Ghetto was an organized resistance. But in all through the years, I, we were, we would hear here and there about resistance, but it wasn't strong enough. They didn't give you a chance, you see. They were always planning to keep us so busy thinking about food, you know--

the main thing in sustaining yourself and of trying to survive was to get some food. And as long as they kept us occupied in trying to organize a little food, we couldn't think about an uprising.

MW: So you had more primary needs.

MF: Yes. That's all anybody was interested in, is to try to get by from one day to the next.

MW: What did you do in Ebensee?

MF: In Ebensee, I remember, I got sick. I got an abscess here on the side, you know, an infection, and they put us into a hospital. "Hospital" it was called--where there was four people in a bed, in a bunk bed. And in each bunk was four people. And my father got sick too. My father got sick before me, and we were separated. And we were in the hospital together for a while. And I don't know what happened, whether he got well and they sent him out, and I never saw my father again after that. And I kept asking people, and they thought that he had died in the camp, in the hospital, but I never saw him after the liberation. But, was a...

MW: So your father did not survive?

MF: Did not survive. But was an ironic thing, because when I was in that bunk beds, in the hospital, every night I would feel all of a sudden that I am cold, and then this person next to me would be dead. And within one week, I remember, they must have removed from there four or five bodies from the two bunks that I was in. Like if there was two bunks, so in each bunk was four people, plus four under the bed. And every time, when I was so, feel cold, I were, there was a dead body in the bed. They would remove him and leave us. And, that's when a--that was already the last straw. I felt that next I would be. And that's when the Americans came to liberate.

MW: That was in 1945?

MF: In '45, May...

MW: And how long...

MF: May 5th.

MW: Were you in Ebensee?

MF: Till the Liberation, since 19--the end of 1944 till May, 1945. I would say about six months. You didn't have to be long there, not to be able to get out any more.

MW: What was that like when the Americans came?

MF: It was like a, like seeing a Messiah.

MW: Before they came, how did the Germans deal with the fact that they were losing the war?

MF: Well, they'd never, they would never admit it. They were always, you know, so proud and, you know, hardheaded. But we had a feeling, you know, that things were going bad.

MW: How did you get that feeling? Where did, how, where?

MF: Well, they, they start losing control of the camp. And, how? Because some of, some of the soldiers, they, you know, when they ran away they, what do you call them...

MW: Desert...

MF: The deserter, you know, they would throw away their uniforms and then because they were, they were afraid. They knew that it was, that the day of judgment was coming. So they would throw away their uniforms and just mix with the, you know, civilian people out there after. And then the ones that still didn't believe it, they were such a, so hardheaded, what happened is since the German, I mean, since the Americans, we saw the Americans from where I was in that hospital. It was not far from the main road, and we looked, and we saw the American tanks coming down the hill into the camp--a day before [unclear]. So, when we saw that, we started, you know, hey, hey you have to have the strength to stand up. So we started to dance and jump and sing. You know, the Americans were coming. When the Americans came in, it was just like, you know, feeling like you're born again. And those Germans that stayed on, they got killed off by the, by, you know, by the people from the camp.

MW: Oh really?

MF: The ones that were strong enough.

MW: How did they do that?

MF: They just grabbed them and beat them, and threw them, and cut their heads off, you know. Because, I'm sure that Jews didn't do this, but you know, there were so many other people from European countries like the Serbs, Yugoslavians, who were interned over there, the Poles. And the, they grabbed all those also the people that were in charge like they called them the *kapos*, they killed them off. They killed others off. And right away took revenge. Besides the people were so removed from civilization, that doing something like that would mean nothing. You know, we were dealing with death all the time. It would mean nothing to take a knife and cut somebody up or kill somebody, because we were just away from everything. We did nothing, and we didn't see nothing but death and destruction for so many years. Life didn't mean much to us.

MW: Yours or some--anyone else's.

MF: Yes, but I wouldn't have the strength, you see. I was, I was so weak that I couldn't do anything. But, you know, the ones that were strong, were healthy, they would do that.

MW: What helped you to keep your will alive to live?

MF: Well, of course everybody wants to live, there's no question about it.

MW: That's not true. People in those conditions committed suicide or did things that would endanger themselves.

MF: Not that many, not that many, not that happened in my experience. I mean, in my case. I think the main thing is what kept me alive is to be able, even if nobody else,

to be able to tell the horrible experiences we went through, and to sustain the Jewish heritage.

MW: That's why you're here today.

MF: Yes.

MW: To do this.

MF: Yes.

MW: Did you think it, while you were in the experience itself that in the future you would feel that way?

MF: No. When I first was liberated, you know, I said to myself, "Where is God?" There is no God. I mean, to leave me alone, a young child, without a mother, without a father, without any family. But I didn't know that my sister was survived. I didn't find her till about, I think, 1946.

MW: Tell me, when you were liberated, you knew that your father was dead at that point?

MF: I didn't, no.

MW: You just...

MF: I didn't, I...

MW: You didn't know his whereabouts.

MF: Thought, I was hoping that I'm gonna find him. I didn't. But when I saw the days were going by and I didn't find him, and I talked to people that knew him, you know, and everybody gave me a different version of the, there's no use. I was hoping that I would find him.

MW: How old were you at the time of the liberation?

MF: I must have been 14.

MW: 14. And what, tell me about that. Did they, the Americans came in in tanks...

MF: In tanks, and they, of course, I don't know at the time if the American force knew how to deal with us. And, you know, all the people that were healthy enough, that could get out, they jumped on the tanks, and they jumped on the Americans and they were kissing or hugging as the liberators. And actually, you know, to us, the Americans at the time were like we saw God. And they were trying to help us, but they didn't have much experience in how to deal with us. So what happened, so many, well, first of all when they came into our camp, there were hundreds and hundreds of bodies piled up, dead bodies, that they didn't have a chance to cremate. And among the bodies, what is an interesting story, you now, we were together afterwards, the Israeli--not the Israeli, the English army had a British brigade, I mean a Jewish brigade it was called. And this Jewish brigade right away started to smuggle Jewish children from the camps; a month after this happened we were liberated I think to Italy and then to Israel. So, so what they were doing is trying to put the young children together and then smuggle them out. And among--in our group was a boy that was found by the American army in one of the piles of

the dead bodies. He was one of those. He was dead already. When they found him, he was still breathing, so they revived him. And eventually he went to Israel. He was my age.

MW: And you didn't go to Israel?

MF: I didn't, I wanted to go to Israel.

MW: What happened?

MF: I was in Italy, and at that time was the...

MW: So the Americans smuggled you, or...

MF: The--no it was the Americans liberated us. And they--the--before that was, you know, this is gonna be--are you going to edit this, or is it...

MW: No, no.

MF: Leave it as it is?

MW: We have about five to eight minutes.

MF: O.K. When the Americans liberated us in Austria in that camp, they didn't know how to deal with us, because, you know, it was an experience that, you know, only happens once in a lifetime. And they came in and they started to give us food and all kinds of things. And we wanted a lot to eat because, you know, they had to do it slowly, in a slow way, because our bodies weren't used to that shock--food right away. And they gave us food and you know, so many of us got diarrhea and we were dying out, because we got diphtheria. They got different sicknesses from stomach. So, when they saw this, they stopped feeding us. And they were giving us just rice. And then they built, field hospitals all throughout the camp. And they put most of the people that got sick into those field hospitals. And that, that's how I survived. Otherwise I would have been dead too.

MW: In a field hospital.

MF: Field hospital.

MW: And then you were taken to Italy?

MF: And then, after that field, after I got well, in about a month, I was still walking with a cane. I couldn't walk...

MW: You were in the hospital for a month?

MF: Yeah, in an American field hospital.

MW: Had...

MF: At the time we didn't think they were good to us because they were with holding food, because that's all we wanted was food. But that was for the best, because they knew that the food would kill us. So they started to give us medicine and everything. And the, you know, the younger people like me, they survived. And a lot of them died in the camps over there, in those field hospitals too, because, you know, they were just too far gone. They couldn't save them. And then I was in that hospital for a month and then I walked out one day on the street. And I ran into a couple people from our city.

MW: Where was this?

MF: A couple brothers. In Germany, in Ebensee. I went out to, from the camp. And then...

MW: And you ran into some people who were...

MF: That were in the camp with us, you know, because I never knew--saw nobody, because I was separated for a month from everybody. I didn't see anybody after the liberation. And I met them, we talked to them, and then I went back to camp. And we got word, you know, that the British army, which is the--was the Jewish brigade, was coming. They were taking the younger children away to Italy. They smuggled them through the border. What they did is put us into trucks, covered them up, and they would say that this is army troops in there. And the--but the idea was to smuggle them to Italy and put them on ships, and send them to Israel. You know, that wasn't legal. The illegal way, they were gonna do it. But, you remember that's how we had the Cyprus, they sent to Cyprus all those illegal ships. And I was supposed to be on one of the legal ships. Was 1500 that went from Italy that time. And I didn't get on to it, and I was very disappointed. And then on a--I got in contact with relatives from the United States, and they persuaded me to come to the United States.

MW: And what year was that?

MF: In '49. I stayed in Italy, by the way, four years.

MW: How did you support yourself?

MF: Oh, we were in camps that were supported...

MW: DP camps?

MF: DP camps, yes. Supported by UNRRA, was called, United Nations Emergency Relief or something [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration].

MW: And you came to the U.S.?

MF: Yes.

MW: And, in 1949.

MF: '49.

MW: And you went to California?

MF: No, I came to New York, because my relatives were living in New York. And I lived in New York for about a, oh, about a year. And I worked there. I got a job and I went to school and I learned the language.

MW: And then?

MF: And then my sister emigrated and, she was liberated in Germany and she went to live in Sweden. You know, the Swedes took a lot of people from the camps.

MW: Right, right.

MF: So she went to live in Sweden, and I found her in 1946 by, through the Red Cross sent a list of people that were all over, and she w--her name was on that list. And we got in touch with each other and she came to visit me as a matter of fact, from Sweden to Italy. And I emigrated from Italy to the United States in '49. And then she

followed me in about a year. [To someone else:] I'll be through in two minutes. Yes. And she followed me to the United States, and we both lived in New York. We both had jobs and we worked, both were going to school. And I, and she, a fellow came that met her in New York, and he said, "Why don't you,"--that was living here already, also a survivor, my brother-in-law now. And he said, "Why don't you come and live in California. It's so nice here," and all that. We decided to move to California. And she got married the same year. And I was working in California; I had a job and I went to school and I graduated from high school, from night high school. And I went to college, also night school for a couple years. And eventually I met my wife in 1954. She is also a daughter of a survivor, and she was also herself in the camp. She lost her mother and her brother in the camp.

MW: And you have children?

MF: Yes. I have two children. That's, we wrote it down I think in the beginning.

MW: What do you do for a living?

MF: I'm in business, in retail. I have several stores.

MW: O.K., Michael.

MF: To me, I think, we have, we are very thankful to the United States. Because, we made something out of ourselves being here. We were able to help Israel too, because we were in the United States.

MW: Well, thank you very much for sharing this.

MF: I hope it'll be useful, and whatever I said.

MW: And you'll be getting a copy.

MF: Yes. I had a copy, you know, when I was--I went two years ago to Washington. We had a Gathering.

MW: '83.

MF: And they made a tape and interviewed me too, and made a tape. And I have it. They made me a copy.

MW: Well, thank you.

MF: O.K.

MW: Enjoy yourself.

MF: Thank you, although this isn't, you know--when everybody ask me, and they wished me to have a good time, I said, "I'm not going to have a good time. I'm going to remember. That's what I'm going for."