

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ELIAS MALEK

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Schoenfeld

Interviewer: Benjamin

Date: April 22, 1985

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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EM - Elias Malek [interviewee]

BS - Benjamin Schoenfeld

[interviewer]

UI - Unidentified Individual

Date: April 22, 1985¹

Tape one, side one:

BS: ...the 22nd, involving Elias Malek, and we are testing this tape. [tape off, then on] We'll start with that, Mr. Malek. Tell me where you were born, when you were born. Tell me about your family, your mother, your father, your sisters and your brothers, generally.

EM: I am born in Moisei. It's Romania today. And my father was a Polish script writer, a *sofer*. My mother was house, home. She was working the house. We, I had, we still, we, I, we were six brothers and sisters. And we left four, two pair of twins. And the place where I'm born is a village, small village, in Maramures. And I don't remember too much, because people, the first, people, I occupy my mind, I'm occupied with my work and I, everything I put in my back of my mind.

BS: How big was Mazo [phonetic]?

EM: Mi...

BS: Moisei.

EM: Moisei.

BS: Okay.

EM: And I would say a couple hundred families.

BS: And how many of them were Jewish?

EM: There were a couple hun-, there were, I was told that there lived there a couple of hundred Jews there.

BS: And did you get to mix with the Jews? Did you mix with the non-Jews?

EM: I was small. I just born in 1941. And at that time, the Jewish was flourishing in that area.

BS: And did you go to school there?

EM: No, I was small. I was born in 1941. In 1941, till my deportation. I was a baby yet.

BS: You were a baby.

EM: I was a kid.

BS: All right, so you really don't remember that much about it.

EM: No.

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

BS: Do you remember where you lived? In a house, or an apartment?

EM: No, no. We lived, I remember, I lived in a single, in our own house. Whether it was rented or not I do not, I don't know. And it was located by the river. There was a river that passed by.

BS: Well, when did the war did come, how did it affect your family and you, when the war came?

EM: I have no recollection at all of that time.

BS: You have no recollection. All right.

EM: I remember when I was in the *Lagers*.² I, this I remember. And I...

BS: Tell me about when you were in the *Lager*.

EM: And I remember the *Lager*. We had, there was a big table in a big tremendous room. And bunks was about five, six bunks. One on top of another. And then there was a German with a dog patrolling in the middle of the room. In the middle of the room was a big table where, I remember in that, when they gave us, when they gave me the tattoo number, I was put on the table.

BS: How old were you when you got your tattoo number?

EM: About three years.

BS: You were three years old.

EM: Yeah. I remember when they gave me, I was cry, I was crying.

BS: You were crying.

EM: Yes.

BS: Were your parents with you?

EM: That I don't remember. I know there were people there, but I, if my parents were, I don't know.

BS: And your sisters and brothers, were they there?

EM: Yeah, yeah. I, from what I was told, all the time, that my sister was all the time with us.

BS: And how old was she? Do you know?

EM: Then, yeah, she was 13 years old at that time.

BS: She was 13. And do you know what happened to your mother and father?

EM: The father was killed in concentration camp. And, my mother died right after the liberation.

BS: What about your sisters and brothers?

EM: The sisters and brothers, they was always with us, and so I am alive and they are alive now in Israel.

BS: Do you remember how you got, or do you fi-, did you, were you told how you got to Auschwitz?

²*Lagers* – maybe short for *Lagerstätten* [concentration camp]

EM: No, I, that part I wasn't told. I was told about the escape.

BS: Tell me about the escape.

EM: The escape, when the Germans tried to evacuate Auschwitz, we were told, asked, we were told in a slow manner, in a slow tone, that we should hide. There came a person he said, "You hide right under the table." The table had drawers. So the sister put me and my brother in the drawers of the table. And they were hiding under the table. The German came and they shoot everything in the room. They shoot even when nobody was there. And, they missed us. And, at the end, someone still got to us. Another German got us, and they put us in the line, to follow the last, to follow I think the last evacuation. In the middle of the evacuation came a German soldier, an officer, and he told to the soldier to let us be at the end of the group, because we were small, and my sister had to carry us. My brother also could carry us. We were small. Two pair of twins. And they were 10 years older than us. So when we went to the, in the line, the officers came and gave us a push in the, in one of the ditches which were made by a bunk. And, was not a, I, my brother said that he had good intention to do that, to hide us from the patrol what it was ahead of the group. Not, well here he pushed us to hide ourselves. And, the whole group disappeared and we were at the end by ourselves. My brother and my sister, and me too.

BS: What happened then?

EM: Then, my sister tried, and she to look for food. And there was a railway there. I remembered that very good. And by ourselves we had to go look for food. And nobody was in the station. Nobody was, nobody was, only we.

BS: And how old were you then?

EM: About three-and-a-half years.

BS: And you remember looking for food.

EM: We, yes, yeah, yeah.

BS: Tell me about looking for food.

EM: I remember. The ...

UI: You were saying something about the railroad station.

EM: ...the railroad, right. When my sister could not hold us any more, she put us down. And we were looking, well, and my brother was going ahead of us, the big one. And my sister together with the two brothers in the side, me and my brother, we crossed the railroad and my, and my brother hid himself in the stair. And he has still from then a sign. And, till someone, till a, appeared a soldier, a German, not German, a, I, I, soldier appeared. And we were mixed up whether it was a American or Russian. But, he came forward, and he brought us food.

BS: He gave you food.

EM: Yeah.

BS: Did he take you anywhere?

EM: Yes. In three, we took off, I remember that part. He took me to, me and my brother, the oldest one, to another camp and they gave us clothes. The first time we even had clothing. It was not fit to our size, but I know that we were given. And they gave me, gave us food. This part I remember.

BS: Could you understand them in the camp?

EM: Not understand them, no. But I saw their will to help us.

BS: They were Russians?

EM: That was, probably it was Russians in there.

BS: And then what happened?

EM: Then, we were transported to Russia. And we stayed a few months.

Then we were to come back to my hometown.

BS: Do you know where you were taken to in Russia?

EM: I was told, but I forgot.

BS: You don't remember.

EM: No.

BS: And then you were taken back to your old town, where?

EM: Hometown? Moisei.

BS: Moisei. And when was that?

EM: In '45.

BS: After the war ended?

EM: Yes, yes, yes, of course.

BS: All right, and then where did you go, in '45?

EM: Then I, someday, that I remember already, going some way, with the HIAS or some ORT organization, American organization, made camps. And we went to in Cluj, Flossenbug, where we were then in the Agudah, UNRRA³ got the provision.

BS: And how long were you at Cluj in the camp?

EM: We, till they start to leave for Israel. We left, then the, the whole camp suddenly disappeared.

BS: In 1963?

EM: Not '63. In around I would say for-, the year I don't remember, but I think around between '40, around '48.

BS: Around '48.

EM: Yeah. The whole camp suddenly disappeared. Everybody, everybody left us. We were only 10, 10, 10 people there. Three, most of them. They left us, and we didn't know where to go!

BS: And where did you go?

EM: Nowheres. We didn't know where to go. What the hell happened with

³UNRRA – United Nations Relief and Rehab Administration, 1943 – 1949.

the people? They disappeared.

BS: Just stood there.

EM: Just stood there.

BS: When did you go to Arad?

EM: No, then came another guy, and he said, "Today you are under our supervision." And that was no, no, not [unclear].

BS: Ah, and you were under his supervision.

EM: Under their supervision. And they were called orphanages. They were called homes of, without parents.

BS: Orphanage.

EM: So if you didn't, orphanage, yeah.

BS: This was around 1948?

EM: Yes. And I stood till '54.

BS: And in 1954 what happened?

EM: In this van we were moved from one orphanage to another orphanage. Then we were moved, I was moved, only-- my sister and my brother was in Cluj also.

BS: Was this a Jewish orphanage?

EM: No. No more. Only the first one, yes. Till '48 I, of that year was with the Jewish supervision, religious.

BS: And after that it was...

EM: After that we were in the government.

BS: Christian, Muslim, Jewish...

EM: [unclear].

BS: Yes.

EM: Some of them were deported, were moved to Russia because they had family there. I have two, I know two sets of twins who went to Russia.

BS: And then what happened? You left?

EM: No, then we were deported to a, yes, we, I, and my brother-- then my brother and my sister, were big. So they went, they went on their own. And me and my brother, we stood in the orphanage till the, my brother and my sister helped us, every day used to come to give me food. Extra food, in the orphanage. She, every morning before she went to work, my sister used to come to my place and bring us food.

BS: What did she bring?

EM: Meat.

BS: Meat?

EM: Chicken, chickens.

BS: Chicken?

EM: See, every day...

BS: Milk? Milk?

EM: Milk, or, bread and chicken.

BS: Bread and chicken.

EM: Yeah, yeah. Every morning. I think that they didn't like that idea. The school didn't like it.

BS: Why do you say that?

EM: I got in one day, they tried to take us to another, another city. And they couldn't-- this I know already. They couldn't get me to another city.

BS: You said no?

EM: Not no. We run away.

BS: And where did you run to?

EM: We run away. We ran to my sister's. And my sister came. She made big noise. So, one day there came a police and they took us by force. We were afraid of the police. So, we moved to Turda.

BS: That's when you went to Turda.

EM: Yes. In Turda.

BS: In an orphanage.

EM: Orphanage. And we couldn't get in touch with my sister, half a year. And we didn't know how to get in touch with my sister. My sister told us later that she tried, she went to the school and nobody want to tell her where we are. Well, me and my brother, we got used to this, to this kind of treatment, that they didn't want to let us go to *shul*. We used to go to *shul* in the morning, ran away to go to *shul*. So they a, so one day, we went and we look in Turda, we went to look for a friend. And the friend took us in and he gave us food and he let us to come to synagogue.

BS: To *daven*.

EM: To *daven*. We enjoyed that too, that morning, to go in *shul*. So, they notified the sister where we are. Right away my sister came down. Right away. And we were beaten, we didn't like that. We had a lot of fights there. We was the only Jew there.

BS: Did they feed you well?

EM: Where?

BS: At the orphanage at Turda?

EM: No, there was a, we, now I understand that if you don't speak up you don't get nothing. We didn't speak up for ourselves, so the boys were beating us every day. Every day like a schedule.

BS: Until?

EM: Until, also fortunately, we, there was a Jewish cop there, a policeman, see? And we told to them this case. We talked. He came up and he made a report to the police station. And since then they looked at us differently.

But it didn't last only one year. The whole thing. At the end of the year, they moved us to a village five kilometers away from a small town.

BS: When you were at the orphanages in Turda and in Cluj, did you go to school at all?

EM: Yes, there was school.

BS: And what did you learn in school?

EM: In school we learned the sixth grade, what do you want?

BS: Tell me what?

EM: Geometry, and then, in Turda, and, no, and in Cluj we went only to the third grade like teaching you like this. They, at that time I remember I went to school I was six years. I was still yet I think from, no, at that time was no more, that time was the change between the leadership in the organization. But, that time was about the time when the Jewish, the most of the people disappeared from the schools, and the government took over. So we went to school and we learned, ABC, not only that. ABC we learned, and voluntarily we wanted to learn religion, what do you call...

BS: Alef-beys.

EM: ABC, alef-beys, voluntarily.

BS: Now where, where did you get your religious training.

EM: Yeah, but that was...

BS: But where did you get your religious training?

EM: No, we went ourselves to the synagogue.

BS: To the *cheder*?

EM: To synagogue.

UI: To *shul*.

BS: To *shul*.

EM: We went on our own. We used to go away from the orphanage and go to the *cheder*.

BS: I understand what you mean. Now, you were in Turda in the orphanage?

EM: Yes.

BS: How did you get out of that?

EM: We didn't get out. At the end of the summer, they came, another two, I don't remember who, but two big guys, and they put us on the bus, and they disappeared. And they took me to near Aiud. Sâncraiu it's called, Sâncraiu.

BS: And how do you spell that?

EM: S-A- but with the letter on top, right. M-K-R-A-, eh, R-A-I. That was a village, a very small hamlet away from a vill-, away from Aiud.

BS: Near Aiud.

EM: Aiud, yeah. And funny it was that this was divided by, by a river,

unpassable. So we was there like in a jail. We couldn't go out. We couldn't go nowhere. We couldn't run away from there. Because the big river was dividing the city from the orphanage.

BS: Do you know the name of the river?

EM: Yeah. Mur-. I...

BS: Starting with an M?

EM: I don't think, I think it's Mureș⁴, but I don't know one, because...

BS: All right.

EM: There was called one Mamufa [phonetic], Mureș. So I don't remember was the same Mureș or different.

BS: What was life like in Sâncraiu?

EM: Sâncraiu? We learned half a day, and half a day work, and farm. The school had received from the government three acres of land, and we had to farm that, and make a living from that land. So, half a day we farmed, and half a day we learned. So, half a year we tried to go to get in contact with the Jewish community, the way I used to do every place, where I could. No way. They did not gave us permission to leave. Although, other kids, other boys were allowed to go to the town. And they were given permission and fee to travel the boat to pass the river.

BS: Why wouldn't they give you permission to leave?

EM: Because I was a Jew. They knew that I'm gonna go to the Jewish, because there was no explanation why they moved me here.

BS: And so, what happened?

EM: So, one time by mistake, or something, they're not noticing what the, that I am a Jew, I was the only Jew and my brother. They gave me a permission to go in the town, after half a year. I remember. So, when I passed the first thing I wanted to look if there is a *mezuzah* somewhere in the door. And I knew where is a *mezuzah*, that is to be a Jew. So we looked in the town. We spent the whole day in the town to look for a *mezuzah*. That was a carnival day, Sunday night. So, till we found somewhere a *mezuzah* and we knocked on the door, and we said we're Jews and we want to get acquainted. So, he was a guy and he says, "I'm gonna give you recommendation to another Jew." So in that day we got acquainted with two or three Jews. I didn't say nothing. I kept that secret. We kept together the secret the whole time. After one year, they got caught us. They caught us. But we were already, we knew the tricks how to pass the river.

BS: How did you? What was the trick?

EM: The trick was, there was a passageway, for the third time we, I tried to bribe the driver of the boat. They give you a piece of meat, what I took from the kitchen somewhere or [unclear], and I gave him. And he was a good boy and he

⁴ Mureș is the county in Romania in which Sâncraiu is located.

let me pass. And sometimes there, some places was, the river is a little shorter. And we saw passing, passing with the wagons. And we noticed that passage. So we used that method also. One Pesach was-- we knew it's Pesach in April. We did not know that changing what time in March or April. So we went in March or April. And, to, that night we didn't want to eat bread. So we run away, 10 o'clock at night, to eat matzah. And we took our clothing up over our heads and we passed the river like that. So we had an appointment because they said they'll Passover in one week, one month later. So, we came back, about 12 o'clock at night. And we walked five kilometers. Five kilometers back, we had a light, a paper, and to see our way where they showed, where there was a map. But they caught us.

BS: Were you punished?

EM: Yes. At that time, I was caught by the neck. So we said nothing to nobody. But, when we start, they start to realize that I, that I run away to the Jewish community, they punished me not to go, never to the town. So we run away. We went to Turda. Back to Turda, where we knew more Jewish people and we were welcome. And so they gave us food and a few days with them. But they took us back. But the sister also did not know about us only after half a year, when they contacted the sister.

BS: Then what happened?

EM: The sister came right away running. Right away. My brother was in the army, and he couldn't do too much. He just with, by letters.

BS: What army was he in?

EM: He was in the Romanian army. So my sister, she was very interested. She came right away, and, but she couldn't do anything. I mean to take us, she, to take us out, she didn't want. I think she didn't want. She was afraid for herself. She was, and we asked her to take us, to take us home to her. After she married she didn't want to take us. I realized later that she was a slave of the man she married. But she did what she could. I mean, she get us out of the country. She helped me.

BS: And then what happened?

EM: Then ...

UI: Well it's close to the end.

EM: Yeah.

BS: Well, we have plenty of time.

UI: He wants to go home.

BS: Oh yeah, but you have to tell us what happened. You can't leave me in the middle.

UI: [unclear] let's eat and come back.

EM: My bro-...

BS: No, well, let's, no, let's finish we have begun here.

EM: Yeah, okay.

BS: [to UI] Would you like to go eat and come back while we finish here?

UI: No.

EM: Then, then we finished the school. And in this school whenever there's a crime, was no more, the oldest age was 14 years. So we went to get somewhere another school. So they sent us to Cluj, back to Cluj. And I failed the examination. And my brother came down, and he was a party member, so he made a big noise, big mouth, and they accepted us in a trading school.

BS: This, you say he was a party member.

EM: Yeah, Communist Party.

BS: Communist Party member, I see.

EM: Yeah.

BS: What trade school did you go to?

EM: Metallurgical. Metallurgical is a, you know what metallurgical, is...

UI: ...is metalwork.

BS: Metalwork.

EM: And but we didn't want to stay there. So, a rabbi heard about us. Someone mentioned to a rabbi about us. And that rabbi called up my sister and said to take us out.

BS: How old were you then?

EM: 15 years.

BS: So this is around 1956.

EM: Yeah, about that time, '55-- 14, no, 14 they took me out.

BS: All right.

EM: Okay? And they took us out. My brother-in-law came to me. I was very happy that they take us out. And was a little deception. It was deceptive, because I, I wanted to go to my home. And here the rabbi took me, and they send me to another, in another town, where we didn't want to go.

BS: What town?

EM: Arad.

BS: Arad.

EM: So I went to Arad.

BS: To an orphanage.

EM: No. It was called a yeshiva, it was, no, it was by a private man, by a private man.

BS: A yeshiva?

EM: No, it was no yeshiva yet. It was only a *cheder* there. And he paid for a private man to give us food and sleep, boarding, room and board. I stood there, then they, a yeshiva opened up, a yeshiva there, go-, supported by the Jewish Federation. So they took us in the yeshiva for room and board, and we learned there in the yeshiva.

BS: How long were you in the yeshiva?

EM: Till '63.

BS: And then you came to the United States?

EM: Then I came, I went to Belgium one year, where I got a visa to America.

BS: When you were in Belgium, what did you do for that year?

EM: Well there, I was in the yeshiva. I was working for a [unclear] yeshiva. We had no place to sleep, no place to eat, so they con-, they wanted to share something, so they took us in the yeshiva. We get room and board.

BS: Did you go directly from Belgium to the United States?

EM: Yes, yes.

BS: And when you came here, where did you go?

EM: I came there to Rabbi Redz [phonetic] we should have a room and board and a place by someone else.

BS: In Brooklyn?

EM: Yes, in [unclear]. So we went to work. After two weeks we went right away to work.

BS: And what did you do?

EM: I went there to work in a electrical company.

BS: Doing what?

EM: Doing what? I was doing the, making walls and like that.

BS: Assembling?

EM: No, no, no. Construction work.

BS: Oh, construction work, all right.

EM: Yeah. I was that, yeah.

BS: And then you got married?

EM: No, I left the company after a year. I saw there's no...

BS: No fu-...

EM: No future, so I left.

BS: No *parnusah*.⁵

EM: No, not *parnusah*. *Parnusah*, we didn't know what mean *parnusah*. But, there was no training, training. I didn't see there anyone he wants to teach me.

BS: And did you get training after that?

EM: No. I, all the training I did when I worked for myself.

BS: You learned by yourself.

EM: Yeah, yeah. After two, three failures, two, three companies where I was there, there deceptioned, I didn't, I, my deception was big. Then we, I went on

⁵*parnusah* [Yiddish] – livelihood.

my own. I mean I had no choice anyway. I was fired. I was fired from here, fired from here. I was laid off after the job's finished. After one year or two year after I'm working like that, people thought that I'm a good worker. And they called me in private jobs. So I, that way I came back.

BS: And what do you do now?

EM: Now? Now I do plumbing.

BS: And you have a family.

EM: Yeah, a family, and kids.

BS: And how old are your children?

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

[Long pause at beginning of tape.]

BS: ...children. And everyone is healthy and good?

EM: Yeah, yes. They, I think that you could say generally healthy.

BS: Now we have been talking about the time that you were a little boy...

EM: Yeah.

BS: Till the present.

EM: Yeah.

BS: Is there anything that we have omitted that we should note of?

EM: What do you mean omitted?

BS: Did we forget to say something? Is there something we should have included that we didn't include?

EM: I, as far as the tape...

BS: Yes?

EM: I don't care what is on the tape.

BS: But the tape is important...

EM: [unclear]

BS: Because it's forever.

EM: Yes, yes, yes.

BS: People have to know what happened.

EM: Yes, when you see what is about this, let me explain to you. If I talk to you, I have to give to you, to you personally, you the, you have your own ears, your own judgment, I'm talking to you. What, and to talk to a tape, which will after a year, 10 years or 20 years, with that effect, it is like a drop in the bucket. Maybe that persons is, I, who, after my generation will read the tape, I can't, excuse me. I will stop. I cannot speak to the tape...

BS: No, you're speaking to me.

EM: Right. And I cannot speak to the generation which is coming, because I don't know what the, what that generation wants from me.

BS: Let us not be concerned with...

EM: The tape is [unclear].

BS: What they want in the future generations.

EM: What they want the future, I don't know.

BS: Let's be concerned with what we want.

EM: What you want.

BS: We want.

EM: We want.

BS: You.

EM: I, as for me, what I want is like everybody would want.

BS: So that your children, if they heard the tape when you get it in the mail, they will know what happened to their father.

EM: Yes, yes, they, what happened. I tried, you see, I never speak to the children about these things.

BS: Why not?

EM: Why not?

BS: They have a right to know what happened to their father.

EM: The right to know they have. But I learned, I am starting to learn to answer to what their question is. If they don't put these kind of questions, I don't as-, I don't, I don't have answer. If they gonna ask me, I will answer.

BS: But if you have children who don't know to ask, then you, the...

EM: Yes.

BS: Survivor need to open up...

EM: Yes.

BS: And make the question for them, no?

EM: Yeah. That's okay, but...

BS: Okay.

EM: I, my life experience with, my life experience was the last five year-, six years, I realized that there's no, it is no reason to open for the guide, the mind, if you cannot believe the life. Well, why should I bring a subject which one, if they will have other problems in life? They, what we try to do, we try to put a break, and forget it. But what, how good is this break? We will be forgotten. And so my interest for my children is that they should live in the society, in the coming society, not in my generation. They have to live in their generation. And my story will not help their generation. So therefore, I don't bring the subject, and I'm thinking a lot of things that my teaching to them, should be social teachings, that they should benefit from.

BS: And are they benefitting?

EM: [unclear]. A lot of times I think how to teach them. But the, to go back to the tape, I don't think that the, the, maybe they will benefit. But not main concern, my main point is that to tell them about my past. I try to forget the past myself. I can't, if I could do something to be a really memory, not in a story where they read the book and put it on the side of that, I would do. But I didn't count that my life and my experience, and my technical judgments, that there's such a thing that a person will not forget. People are made to forget. So, I don't know myself what to teach them, something we should not forget. I don't know myself.

BS: So that's a judgment that you as a parent and that I as a parent must each make individually, no?

EM: Yes.

BS: But...

EM: I already gave up, as a person, I gave up already to let the child, to understand the new generation. I gave up. I cannot understand that, the new generation.

[Tape one, side two ended, interview ended.]