

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MAX MANDEL

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Elizabeth Geggel

Date: January 24, 1983

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027



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MM- Max Mandel<sup>1</sup> [interviewee]

EG - Elizabeth Geggel [interviewer]

Date: January 24, 1983

*Tape one, side one:*

EG: Today is January 24. This is Elizabeth Geggel interviewing Mr. Max Mandel. Mr. Mandel, could you tell me where you were born, and when, and a little bit about your family?

MM: I was born in 1918. At the time when I was born, it was Hungary.

EG: Yes. What was the name of the city?

MM: The city was, at that time, Varad.

EG: How do you spell that? I have to write it down so we get it straight in the notes. Would you spell it for me please?

MM: W-A-R-A-D. [W would have been pronounced as an English V]

EG: [unclear] Varad. Okay.

MM: That's not important, Varad. Because, as a matter of fact, it was in the paper last week - exactly my city.

EG: Yes?

MM: Because similar, the same city had in Romania, what kind of lifestyle is now, because both Communist countries, Romania and Hungary.

EG: So your city was at the border...

MM: Both Communist countries, and this city was important because it was a border.

EG: The border between Hungary and Romania?

MM: The border between Hungary and Romania, you know. And they put it up, what kind of lifestyle is now between the two Communist countries, you know.

EG: Yes, that is interesting. That's another, that's another problem. How large a city is this, about how many people?

MM: About 80 was that time, about 80,000.

EG: And how many Jewish people, do you know?

MM: Oh, around, more than a half.

EG: About 40,000?

MM: About 40,000 Jews.

EG: That many?

MM: That time.

EG: Were there mostly Orthodox Jewish people?

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<sup>1</sup>Mr. Mandel's personal history sheet indicates some other names such as Ibolya and Aladar; the researcher might want to look at the interview for Ibolya Mandel (not yet transcribed) to investigate if there is a relation.

MM: Most of them were Orthodox Jews.

EG: What was your life like before the war, or before life was changed by the Nazis?

MM: It wasn't a bad life. It was a pretty good life, not just for Jewish people, I mean for the whole country.

EG: Yes, how many children were you in your family?

MM: Oh, we had seven, seven children.

EG: And where do you fit in? Were you...

MM: I was the second.

EG: The second oldest?

MM: Oh, no, the second youngest. It was two girls in Krakow.

EG: Your mother had her hands full.

MM: Yes.

EG: But it's a nice, big family. What, what kind of work did your father do?

MM: He was working in a lawyer's office, as a bookkeeper.

EG: In the law office?

MM: In the law office.

EG: Yes. Was it a Jewish lawyer?

MM: It was a Jewish lawyer.

EG: Was it that Jewish people worked mostly for Jews?

MM: No.

EG: But it happened to be a Jewish lawyer.

MM: It just happened to be a Jewish lawyer, but was people working there who were not only Jewish.

EG: Yes. And what kind of a school did you go to? A sectarian school?

MM: No. Public school.

EG: Public school. With Jewish and Gentiles?

MM: And Gentiles together.

EG: What-- did you experience any antisemitism before the Nazis?

MM: Yes. [unclear]

EG: In what way?

MM: Well, most college students, who was against Jews, and they was active as anti-Semites. It happened not only in Romania; its happened in all European countries.

EG: Yes, yes, I know.

MM: Most, in European countries before the Nazis.

EG: And this is why the Nazis had a lot of help from the local population.

MM: Right.

EG: So when you went to school when you were a young student, did any antisemitism, did anything happen to you, based on antisemitism? And did the children in school, the Gentiles...?

MM: Yes, its happened. Its happened in many breakouts from students.  
EG: I mean, even in elementary school, too.  
MM: Even in elementary school too.  
EG: And the teachers, too?  
MM: No, just, you know, between the students, because of antisemitism.  
EG: Did you have religious education separately, or in the public school by the Jewish teachers?  
MM: No, I had religious education separately.  
EG: After school, after the public school?  
MM: Yes.  
EG: So, at that time, was there a separation of church and state in Romania?  
MM: Yes.  
EG: Yes? Hungary.  
MM: Hungary, yes.  
EG: Did your family belong to a Jewish organization, or to a synagogue?  
MM: Yes.  
EG: Which, a synagogue?  
MM: A synagogue.  
EG: Did your...  
MM: My parents was very religious.  
EG: I see, yeah. Did your, did your father have to serve in the army in Hungary?  
MM: My father didn't serve in the army because at that time, what I remember, he was already too old for it.  
EG: I see. When I...  
MM: In that situation.  
EG: Yeah. And you don't know before?  
MM: I don't know before.  
EG: And in general, do you remember if Jewish men served in the Hungarian Army?  
MM: Oh yes, yes, sure.  
EG: Can you tell me a little bit about your daily life before the Nazis came? Like, you know, when, when you were a young boy and you went to school there?  
MM: Well, I can't tell too much because that's in school years, I don't remember too much, because we moved to many places.  
EG: So when you were a young school boy, do you remember how your life was at that time?  
MM: Which way?  
EG: What kind of ...?  
MM: Good life or bad life?  
EG: Yes, and how the relationship was between the Jewish children and the

gentile children outside of school. Did you play with them?

MM: Yes, yes, but, you know, I was...

EG: Or did you have mostly Jewish friends?

MM: Mostly Jewish friends, right.

EG: It was safer?

MM: It was safer.

EG: So by the time the Nazis came, you were already 20 years old, right?

MM: It was 1943.

EG: 1943? They came to Hungary?

MM: Yes, 1943.

EG: So you were...?

MM: As a matter of fact, it was, it was '43 when Hungarian government took the Jews for a labor camp, which ones would work.

EG: At that time you were 25. What did you, what were you doing before they took you?

MM: Well, I was in the army at that time. In other words, I was with the army as a laborer.

EG: With the Hungarian Army?

MM: Yes, the Hungarian Army, in the labor camp. So the army took me with the German Nazis for labor, for the labor work, you know, to Ukraine.

EG: And were there--did they separate the Jewish soldiers from the others?

MM: Yeah, yeah, they separated them.

EG: Well, did they take gentile Hungarian soldiers in the labor corps too?

MM: Not, not that I knew of, that they took Hungarian soldiers to the labor camp. Only Jews.

EG: So, where you were, where you were, there were only Jewish Hungarian soldiers?

MM: Yes.

EG: And your, and the Germans took you?

MM: Hungarian government took us to labor camp, to work on the highways, things like that.

EG: The Hungarian government took you?

MM: The Hungarian government, because was pressed from the German government.

EG: What year did the Germans invade Hungary?

MM: 194-- end of '44.

EG: 1944. So this was already, they already had their influence there but they hadn't really invaded it yet.

MM: Right, right.

EG: And how long were you in that labor camp?

MM: Since 1944 and 194-- beginning of 1945.

EG: In 1943, the Hungarian government took you to the labor camp to the Ukraine?

MM: Ukraine.

EG: Yes. And then how long were you there in that labor camp?

MM: 19-- beginning 1945. Let's see, February, March.

EG: At that time the war was almost over?

MM: The war was over in 1945 May, right.

EG: Yes. So, and after the labor camp, were you anywhere else before the end of the war?

MM: Yes. Then they took us Mauthausen.

EG: To Mauthausen.

MM: The, the Hungarian government took us. I mean soldiers, Hungarian soldiers, took us to Mauthausen, with German, no SS...

EG: Yes, at the end of the war, they took you there. And how long were you there-- until the end of the war then?

MM: Until the end of the war.

EG: Do you want to tell me something about your experience there in the concentration camp?

MM: Well, on the way, until we reach Mauthausen, we went on a group-- let's see, 5,000 group at a time. It was about four, five groups, I guess, 25,000 - 30,000 people. I was in the third group. Before we reached Mauthausen, the first two groups was completely destroyed. Killed, completely killed on a field. Completely. We had to wait until they cleared out the bodies, so when we reached that field, already was cleaned. But we saw still many bodies on the field, because they can't clear. Then come, from who, probably from the top of the German government, that not to kill any more from the group. So then we got the green light to go into Mauthausen. That why I was lucky that I was in the third group.

EG: You sure were. But it must have been very...

MM: First two groups, they kill completely, completely. 10,000 people, 5,000 at a time, in group.

EG: Yes. And you, you knew about that by the time you got there?

MM: We know it, because we saw it. We know the group beginning who, not every 5,000 people, but some people we know, who was in the first group. That's it. We don't see anymore. We saw bodies, you know, when we passed this line, you know.

EG: You must have been very scared.

MM: So, when we arrived in Mauthausen were there already not from Hungarian country-- from other countries. Let's see, I'm not sure, Yugoslavian people, Czechoslovakian people, from other countries, Polish people, in Mauthausen. So after we arrived there, a few days later, comes the rest of them, from Hungarian group.

EG: How were you transported-- in what vehicles, or did you walk?

MM: No, we walked.

EG: On the whole way?

MM: Yes, the whole way.

EG: How many miles is this?

MM: How many miles? Could be 50, 60 miles.

EG: What time of year was it?

MM: What time?

EG: Yes, was it cold?

MM: Oh, it was cold. It was rainy. It was cold. It was bad. At the beginning like February, March it was, you know, still cold.

EG: And you had to walk all the time, day and night.

MM: We had to walk day and night, day and night. They, the Hungarian soldiers, they changed, you know. But we had to keep going, so if somebody can't make it, they shoot them down. Because they can't make it, they would shoot. Who could make it, lived, can't make it, they shoot him down. If you can't walk anymore, you know, that's it. They're finished.

EG: Did they, did they feed you at all on the way?

MM: Well, we had some soup on the way. We stopped for maybe 20 minutes, 25 minutes. They have some cold soup. That's what we got.

EG: So by the time you got there, you must have been all exhausted.

MM: By the time we all arrived there, we all was almost completely died from exhaustion.

EG: When you were there, did you have to work there or did they just keep you there?

MM: No, when we were in Mauthausen, we went in a barracks, which barracks was mud in the floor. Everything, you know, was a big, wood walls, everything, you know. Whatever we had, let's see, we took with us some blankets.

EG: You could take that?

MM: If we could carry it. But most people can't carry anymore and they dropped on the way, you know. But some people who still, feel a little more stronger, you know. They could get it in the barracks, they could use it, the blankets. But we can't walk there anymore. We just stayed in...

EG: Did you have a blanket?

MM: At that time I still, when I arrived, I still had a blanket. But I wasn't completely in my mind. So probably somebody took it from me, you know, so I was without a blanket, like, many hundreds were without blankets. So I was laying down there on the mud. You know, it wasn't until the war was ended in 1945, May. Exactly, I know exactly the date, 1945 May, when we heard the war is over. That time was German SS around the block, and when we heard that war is over, they just disappeared.

EG: They disappeared?

MM: The SS soldiers, the German SS soldiers.

EG: They all disappeared?

MM: They all disappeared. What happened with them, we don't know. Then we come out from the barracks, who could. Most of them died there because starvation, because of the health, because of the sickness, you know. But who could get out from the barrack, and they left, wherever they could.

EG: They just walked away?

MM: They just walked away.

EG: What happened? Where did you go?

MM: Well, most of people who could, first of all, they went in the hospital.

EG: Yeah, but who took you? You were in the middle of nowhere.

MM: The middle of nowhere, the wilderness. We were in middle of wilderness. So, people who went there by wagons, horse wagons or cars or trucks, climb up, you know...

EG: They just went out in the street and...

MM: On the street.

EG: They were hitchhiking?

MM: They were hitchhiking.

EG: Were you able to do that, or were you too sick?

MM: When I-- what happened with me, that I climbed up on a truck. They saw that I have to go in the hospital and they take me in the hospital.

EG: What language did the people there speak?

MM: German.

EG: And could you speak German?

MM: A few words I picked up, a few words of German at that time. So...

EG: So could you make yourself understood?

MM: Yeah. So they took me. I'm not sure what the name was the hospital. They took me in the hospital. So I was in the hospital that time, maybe two weeks, three weeks in the hospital. So they cured me in the hospital. They feed me in the hospital there. So they said, "You're cured, you could go now. If you wish to go home in Hungary, you could go." So, I forget where I started. Somehow I'm going to reach Hungary, you know.

EG: You were far away.

MM: Yes.

EG: Was there anybody else there with you in that hospital that you knew-- any other people...?

MM: Not, not from my country. And that hospital was plenty sickness people, but not from my country.

EG: Nobody else from Mauthausen went there?

MM: No.

EG: So you were left all on your own, and started out to go to Hungary. Just how, and did you have any money?

MM: No, I didn't have no money.

EG: Nobody gave you any money?

MM: No.

EG: Did they give you any clothes?

MM: Well, in the hospital, I don't know how, they somehow arranged to have some kind of clothes to move on.

EG: How did you feel being in this German hospital when the Germans did all these things to you before?

MM: Well, it was like, after, when the war is over, they have different opinion of the whole situation. So it looked like they help us.

EG: They did? So you weren't scared of them in the hospital?

MM: No, I wasn't scared of them after that.

EG: It must have been very difficult to switch so quickly.

MM: So I tried to move on and get back to my country from Germany.

EG: And were you successful?

MM: Well it took me, let's see, it was, let's see two months after the war is over until I reached my country, on train, on trucks, on cars.

EG: But with no money, how did you manage? How did you eat?

MM: Meantime, when I went out from the hospital, I meet somebody. You know, a few days later, I meet somebody who was with me on Mauthausen.

EG: Oh, I see. So you had a companion.

MM: After a few days later, I met somebody.

EG: I guess you were glad to see somebody you knew?

MM: Yeah. So, he was also from Hungary, but not from my city. But he was also from Hungary, and we went together. He had some friends in Germany, not in that part, but further, a few miles further. He had somebody in Germany, so he said, "Let's go to these people and see what we can do."

EG: Where in Germany was that?

MM: That, that was on the border, German and Austria border.

EG: I see, yeah. Did you find these people?

MM: Yes, he found these people, but he don't find everybody there, what he figured to find.

EG: Gentile German people?

MM: Gentile German people.

EG: And what did they do?

MM: So he wasn't there what he want to find, but he mentioned those people, and they recognized him, those people, so they helped us.

EG: They did?

MM: They helped us. They helped us with food. They helped us get better clothes. And I think they helped us with transportation.

EG: I see. So they helped you on your way to get home. So, after two months then, you got back to your city?

MM: After two, three months, maybe three months, I come home. It was May. It was over, the war. I come home around August.

EG: Yeah. And what did you find?

MM: Find what, my family?

EG: Yeah.

MM: Nobody. Nobody. I even don't find my house. It was occupied where we were living, by gentile people.

EG: Hungarian gentile people?

MM: Hungarian Gentiles.

EG: They just took it, confiscated it?

MM: Yes.

EG: What happened to your family?

MM: They all got killed.

EG: All of them?

MM: All of them.

EG: You were the only one who survived?

MM: At then, the only one who came home, came back. But later, a few months later, it was around November, beginning of the winter, my brother came home. One of my brothers...

EG: He also found his way back home.

MM: He also found his way back from Ukrania [Ukraine]. He also was in Ukrania.

*Tape one, side two:*

EG: Do you know what exactly happened to your parents?

MM: Well, when I left, my parents, they were all living. I mean, seven brothers, I mean, five brothers, two sisters, and both parents. When I came back, no one was living besides this brother who came home. What they said, what I heard from people who was already come back-- that they got killed in Auschwitz.

EG: Yeah, they sent them, and your other brothers and sisters, they sent them all to Auschwitz?

MM: All to Auschwitz.

EG: When you were already in the army during that time?

MM: I was not a soldier, as a laborer in the Hungarian Army.

EG: During that time, later, they sent your parents away. When you were there, as a laborer, could you write to people and get mail? Did you know anything that was going on on the outside?

MM: No, we hear it, what is going on, but we don't get no letters.

EG: So you really had no idea what had happened to any of your family, and they didn't know what happened to you.

MM: No. We don't get no letters, and they don't get no letters from us. No communication. Your parents are dead. Nothing.

EG: Were there people in your city, people your parents' age, were they sent to a ghetto first?

MM: Yes.

EG: But you don't know the details, how long they had to stay there.

MM: No, because I wasn't there.

EG: So when you came back, at first there was nobody, and then your one brother came. So at least one brother was saved.

MM: Yeah, but about four, five months later.

EG: And was there any who helped you get re-established? Was there some Red Cross or something?

MM: Well, no. Beginning we had a Jewish, not Jewish.

EG: Council, or something like that?

MM: Yeah.

EG: A Jewish organization who tried to...

MM: A Jewish organization, yeah, who had information who lives and who doesn't live and things like that. They had an office.

EG: Yeah, I see. And did they help you find a place to live too?

MM: Yeah.

EG: And were you strong enough to work, or what, what did you do?

MM: Well, not right away. It took me another six months until I was strong

enough to find myself in a place to work.

EG: So did you?

MM: Yes, I did.

EG: What kind of work did you do?

MM: Well, before I went in Ukraina, my job was-- I worked in a foundry.

EG: Yes? That's hard work.

MM: Yes. And I went back to it.

EG: You did? That's amazing.

MM: Not for long, but I went back.

EG: Right, did you plan to stay in Hungary or were you interested in other...?

MM: In beginning I was interested in staying, but after I see it change again the whole situation, so I figured better leave before the country.

EG: So how did you go about that?

MM: I, naturally, I wanted to go in Israel. But to go in Israel, you can't go from the country. You have to go out from the country to Austria.

EG: You needed a certificate first?

MM: I needed a certificate. Yeah, but I could get it.

EG: You could get it?

MM: Yeah.

EG: Were there representatives of the Jewish Agency in Austria, not in Hungary?

MM: In Austria, yes, a place.

EG: Now where did you have to apply for this certificate?

MM: On Hungary.

EG: In Hungary?

MM: At the Jewish Agency.

EG: I see. And why did you have to go to Austria?

MM: To go further.

EG: I see. Yeah.

MM: First, we had to go to Austria, because from Hungary you can't go to Israel. First you have to go to Austria, then apply again further, you know. Also, from a Jewish Agency, you know, then they sent us to Germany. And from Germany then we could go wherever we want to.

EG: I see, yes.

MM: Not necessarily to go Israel. In other words, you could Canada, you could go America, you could go...

EG: Where did you live on your travels? Did you have to go in a group, with a group of people, or could you go on your own?

MM: No, with group.

EG: And who conducted the group?

MM: Also Jewish Agency.

EG: I see. So you went to Austria and then to Germany. Is this right?

MM: Right.

EG: And then, and then what?

MM: Then we stay in Germany of course in a camp. A DP camp. Until we get visa to go wherever we wanted.

EG: Did you have a choice or did you go wherever there was a visa?

MM: I'm not sure that everybody had their choice, but looked like I was the one who had the choice, because I had the visa to Canada, and I had a visa to America. So I chose America.

EG: Good. I'm glad you did.

MM: I'm not sure everybody had that kind of choice.

EG: Did you know anybody here?

MM: My wife was already here in America. She come earlier.

EG: You already were married?

MM: Yeah.

EG: At that time?

MM: Yeah.

EG: And where did you meet your wife?

MM: On the camp.

EG: In Mauthausen or in the DP camp?

MM: In the DP camp.

EG: I see. And there you got married?

MM: We got married there and she came about six months ahead of time. Because she got the visa already, she don't want to waste it. Maybe later on nothing happen. But it did, so she come for six months ahead of time. Then I came to America. Meantime, I am figuring, maybe I come to Canada, because she got some cousins in America already and they fixed it up that I could go to Canada. But in meantime, I applied for America too, you know, and which visa come first, I would go. American visa come first.

EG: Very good. So you, did you come to Philadelphia right away?

MM: Yes, to Philadelphia.

EG: And what year was that?

MM: When the boat-- we traveled by boat-- when the boat arrived, it arrived in Boston. She was living at that time in New York with her cousins. Then we went to New York. Then she had family, an aunt and uncle, in Philadelphia. And this, that's why we came together in Philadelphia. Since then, we living here in Philadelphia.

EG: So that's shortly after you came to America then. You didn't, you didn't settle in New York.

MM: No.

EG: Were your relatives in Philadelphia also from Europe or were they born in America?

MM: No, also from Europe.

EG: But they had come before the war?

MM: Oh, they come way before the war. Long before.

EG: I see.

MM: 1929.

EG: So they were here a long time?

MM: Yes.

EG: Could they help you get settled here?

MM: Yeah, yeah, they helped. They helped a lot.

EG: Did any of the Jewish organizations here help you?

MM: Yes, also yes.

EG: Was it HIAS, the Jewish Family Services?

MM: Wasn't HIAS. What's the name of Jewish [unclear].

EG: It was the Jewish Family Service, probably. [unclear] I mean, to get acclimated here? [unclear - voice in background - "My family helped us."]

MM: The Jewish Welfare Service gave the tickets to come out, so the uncle paid them back later on.

EG: That's the way...

MM: This is it from starting. They have, you know...

EG: Yes, well that's what they were set up to do. So, that's really quite a story.

MM: Maybe I missed a lot of things because I didn't, you know.

EG: Well, you told me a lot and I really appreciate it. It must be hard to talk about it, even after all these years.

MM: Oh, yeah, that's for sure.

EG: Do you have children?

MM: One son, born here.

EG: Do you tell him about it?

MM: [He must show a picture] My son.

EG: Oh, nice-looking young man. What does he do?

MM: He is a clinical psychologist.

EG: So, do you tell him about all these experiences you had?

MM: Well, we told him many things, you know. Maybe we didn't tell him the whole story, you know, but we told him many things what we went through.

EG: Does he want to know? Does it upset him?

MM: Upset him, but he still wants to know what, what really went on.

EG: Well, especially with the field that he is in, he would be certainly, would be...

MM: Especially when he is working now with children, which need really help,

you know. So he is a little bit interested in those things, you know.

EG: Where does he work, here in Philadelphia?

MM: He is working here in Philadelphia. Beck, the name is Beck. You know?

EG: Oh, yes, I know, it is a very good organization. Very good. So you have something to live, to make, not this, you can't really say, to make it worthwhile. But you, at least you survived it, and you made a life for yourself, which is really quite an accomplishment after all these experiences. Well, I thank you very much Mr. Mandel.

MM: You're welcome.