

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

LOUIE MERMELSTEIN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Rebecca Korntreger

Date: May 1, 1984

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Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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LM - Louie Mermelstein [interviewee]

RK - Rebecca Korntreger [interviewer]

Date: May 1, 1984

Tape one, side one:

RK: This is Becky Korntreger interviewing Louie Mermelstein, May 5-- May 1, 1984. Okay, we're going to start with these questions. Please tell me when and where you were born and something about your family.

LM: I was born in Klascanovo¹, Mukachevo, Czechoslovakia [German]. I was, I was born May 12, 1927.

RK: Something about your family.

LM: I was one of eight children. I am the second oldest. My oldest sister was Lily, younger than me was Shirley.² Then I had a brother Shalom, and a sister Malka and a sister Malia, and a brother Yedle and a sister Shaindel. My father was a kosher butcher and my grandfather was a kosher butcher and we had a kosher butcher shop. We delivered meat in Mukachevo.

RK: What was your life like before the war?

LM: Before the war I was going to school and I was going to *cheder* [Jewish religious school] until 1940 when the Hungarians came in and made, start making life miserable for the Jewish people.

RK: Did you have any incidents that affected your family personally?

LM: Yes, because we were not allowed to slaughter kosher meat. We had to do the slaughtering during the night, *begneyve* [stealthily].

RK: So it was potentially dangerous?

LM: It was very dangerous to do and then they took my father away to a slave labor camp and I had to continue to do the chores and to help making a living for mother and the children. At the age of 13 or 14 that's what I had to do and my sister Lily was also helping to do that.

RK: What year was that?

LM: 1940, that's when the Hungarians came in.

RK: And when did the Nazis actually -- were they as bad as the Nazis?

LM: Well, the Hungarians took orders from the German Nazis. They were both Nazis, but the Hungarian Nazis took orders from the German Nazis. And as the time went on it got worse all the time. We had to wear the yellow star. All the Jews had to wear the yellow star when going out in the street. All the rights were taken away from

¹Klascanovo - possibly Kliachanovo, a town near Munkács, also called Chervenovo, part of Subcarpathian region. Alternate spellings Klyachanovo [Ukr], Kličanovo [Slov], Klacsanó [Hun].

²See also two interviews with his sister Lillian Taus, an interview with his sister Shirley Don, and two interviews with his brother-in-law Sam Don all by the Gratz College Oral History Archive.

the Jewish people. They called, they had what they called *Judenfragen*, the Jewish question. People were asking why are the Jews allowed to be doctors, why are the Jews allowed to be lawyers or policemen or go to the army. Instead of Jewish people going to the army they would go to slave labor camps.

RK: And where was that?

LM: Well, they took them to Hungary and to all over the Ukraine, to slave labor camps. Even as boys, we were young, and the gentile boys they went for training for the army and the Jewish boys had to go with shovels diggings ditches to learn how to become a slave -- later.

RK: Was your family involved in any Jewish organizational life before all this, before the bad times?

LM: My father wanted to emigrate to Israel. He belonged to *Chalutzim*. He learned the modern Hebrew language and always wanted to leave to Israel with the family, but unsuccessfully. He couldn't do it and we were caught in the middle.

RK: Were you stopped by the forces or what really kept you from going?

LM: Well, the first of all, the family was too big.

RK: So it was difficult.

LM: So it was difficult. And then when they came they took away my father to a slave labor camp, everything stopped we couldn't do nothing no more.

RK: Once the father was gone...

LM: ...was gone, we couldn't do nothing no more, so everything was...

RK: How did you manage to support yourself?

LM: Well, we were smuggling, actually what we were doing was smuggling. We would go at night we would buy like small animals like veal, calves or sheep and in the middle of the night we would have a *shochet* [ritual slaughterer] come in, he would slaughter them. And some place, in a hideout we would do that to make kosher meat for the people and then until morning everything was distributed and that's how we made a living. We would do that a few times a week, but in order to smuggle the meat to the customers we would have to carry it in a bag on bicycles and we would put like meat in the bottom and green peas on the top and that's how we delivered orders. All the children took part in this venture. We would finish up the meat and package it up and the children would deliver it to the customers and that's how we made a living.

RK: Now, what would have happened if, G-d forbid, you were caught?

LM: It happened, we were caught a few times. We were arrested, then we underpaid them with money and we were let out, but we had to do it.

RK: And how would you describe the relations between Jews and non-Jews before the Nazi period?

LM: Before the Nazi period it was not bad, we did business with the non-Jews because in the business we were in we bought the live animals from the non-Jews in order -- and then they would also buy meat off of us because some of the meat was not --

like half of the meat was kosher and half of the meat wasn't kosher so the gentile people would buy meat off us, too. So I would say that the relations were not very bad with the non-Jews at that time.

RK: You wouldn't think that. There wasn't a lot of antisemitism or that sort of thing involving you or...?

LM: Not till 1943 when the hate mongers, the Germans put the. They were, they were writing in papers to hate Jews, not to let Jews do this and not to let the Jews, the Jews do that. The *goyim* [non-Jews] got on band, got on the same bandwagon.

RK: Yeah, but before that period...

LM: ...before that period...

RK: ...you didn't find that?

LM: Didn't find too much of antisemitism there.

RK: Okay. Could you describe what happened to you and your family at the time of the Munich pact which took place in September 1938?

LM: It didn't affect us because we were in Czechoslovakia at that time. The part where we, where I was born and where my people lived was the Carpathians and the Hungarians didn't come in till 1940, and that's when it started getting bad for us.

RK: What were your experiences when Germany occupied all of Czechoslovakia?

LM: It felt that we're getting choked. There was no way out. Our elders were telling us to have faith in God that it will never happen. We knew what was happening to the Polish Jews and what was happening to the German Jews.

RK: To what extent did you know?

LM: We only knew that antisemitism was very bad, but we didn't know actually until 1942 that people were taken away actually were murdered. The Jewish people were taken away to Lublin, that's the first time we heard. My grandmother lived in Bratislava and she was taken away to Lublin with my aunts and uncles from my mother's side and they perished some place in the fields of, of camps of Lublin.

RK: Did you become part of the protectorate of Bohemia Moravia or Slovakia?

LM: No, the Hungarian occupation army occupied that part of Czechoslovakia. And the Hungarian army cooperated with the Germans a hundred percent.

RK: But what part did the Czechoslovakians play?

LM: The Czechoslovakians, I believe they capit-, they capitulated and the Hungarians occupied Munkács³ and vicinity.

RK: What are your impressions of the role of the Jewish Council during the first year or two of the Nazi occupation?

LM: They, they did not have any effect at all. All were, they were telling us to have faith in God and only God could help.

RK: But it didn't scare you or it didn't worry you?

³The Hungarian name for Mukachevo. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

LM: It worried us, it worried us all, but me being as young as I was, I just felt that something no good is going on.

RK: But you weren't sure exactly what.

LM: I wasn't sure exactly what was going on but I knew something bad is going on for the Jewish people.

RK: Did you have any significant contacts with non-Jews and were they helpful or not?

LM: On occasion I had contact with non-Jews that were helpful. On occasions I had contact with some of them that were not helpful. They were harmful.

RK: Do you want to tell more specifics?

LM: Yes. In 1944 when the Nazis came and took away all my family to a ghetto, which was at that time in Munkács a brick factory. They made a ghetto out of the brick factory. One day, a day after Pesach 1944, the Germans and Hungarian gendarmes marched in and gathered everybody to the synagogue, children, old men, sick, everybody had to gather into the synagogue. And they were telling us that they are taking us to work, to labor camps, taking us to labor, Germany is at war and they need workers. I started figuring out for myself that if they did, if they needed workers, why are they taking the old people and why are taking the young children, why don't they leave them home and just take the able-bodied people. That's when I figured out and I told my father and mother, "I am not going," and I ran off to the woods. I was hiding out in the woods, in the mountains, like this I was hiding out for four weeks and at night I would come out and some of the non-Jews, they would give me food. In the meantime, two of my uncles, these were my father's two brothers also had the same idea, not to go. They also hid in the woods and we, the three of us, were wandering between the Gentiles, that were friendly, and in the woods because it was the summertime so we were all right in. We knew what was happening. We found out what was happening through our gentile friends, that our people are being shipped to concentration camps. A few times I tried to send, to take them some food over there or send food to them, but I was not successful to do that.

RK: Who were you sending food to?

LM: To my parents and the children, so I could never reach them because it was guarded, they were all guarded and they...

RK: At that point, what camp were they at?

LM: At that point, they were in a ghetto, in a ghetto in Munkács, a brick factory, where they gathered all the Jews from a 25 mile...

RK: Radius.

LM: Radius.

RK: And they shipped them all to that ghetto.

LM: ...and they shipped them all there and they gathered them all there and they kept them all there for about four weeks. And then they put them on cattle cars and

they shipped them to Auschwitz -- children, old men, a lot of them died on the way, a lot of them died before they got on the train.

RK: Were you able to keep contact once they left?

LM: No, I was, no way, I had no contact with them after, after that, but I heard rumors and I heard things were getting worse every day, and then I didn't hear nothing from them. And as I was in the woods for about four to six weeks, in the dirt, not being able to getting washed and wrong kind of foods, I was infected with lice and I couldn't stand it. That's when I decided I got to do something about this. I can't just continue living like this. These two friends of mine, who were Gentile, gave me an idea. One of the, these friends, Nicole was his name, he had a nephew and his nephew was my age. I told him to give me his papers. I become him. I got all his identification papers and I told him I would leave and I would go about 50 miles away to a different city, Uzhhorod, and I would become him. The story goes like this here. This boy, who went to school with me, his name was Sobo Lazlo [phonetic]. I became Sobo Lazlo. Sobo Lazlo had a stepsister in Uzhhorod which she didn't see for years. I went to pass as her brother. When I went to town to Uzhhorod I introduced myself as her brother. She didn't know the difference.

RK: She really didn't see him a long time.

LM: That's right, she didn't know the difference and she helped me to get a job at a butcher's because she worked for a wealthy family, and I told her I'm her brother, Lazlo, and I'm a butcher and I'm looking for a job because I can't stand it over there with Mother anymore. So she found me a job and I worked in Uzhhorod as a butcher. I got paid 25 *pengos* which was Hungarian money, a week, plus room and board. I had to forget my identity as Lou Mermelstein, I became Sobo Lazlo. I lived with the family, with the butcher, I paid there, I slept there, I worked there. After a while I started feeling like one, I'm one of them. And I thought to myself of my two uncles that I left behind in the woods. I thought that nobody would recognize me anymore now. On Sunday, when I'm off from work, I'll take a ride down to see what they're doing. I take a train, I ride down there and I find them and I told them what's happening, because I promised them that if I find a place maybe I'll get them a job too, but I didn't want them to think that I forgot about them, but I didn't find a job for them. I stood with them during the night in the woods. Early in the morning, I went and I took a train back to my job. On the way I met up with one of the Gentiles who recognized me as Jewish and he gave me out to the police. I begged him not to, but he wanted to show off and he gave me out to the police that he knows for sure that I'm Jewish because about two years ago we were in the hospital together on typhoid fever and I don't know what he had out of it, but that's what he did. After getting beat up from the gendarmes and the police, I had to confess that I'm Jewish. That's when they put me to jail and they brought over my employer to jail, too.

RK: Oh my God.

LM: And they accused him of hiding me out, that he knew that I was Jewish and I paid him to hide me out, which he didn't know that I was Jewish and he paid me money actually to do work for him.

RK: So was he punished because of that?

LM: Well, they kept him in jail for about nine hours and then the police was convinced that he didn't know that I was Jewish and I was actually worked for him and I showed him papers that I'm not Jewish and he says that he knew that my sister worked there and there and everything checked out, but it didn't check out that I wasn't the right brother so they let him out. They kept me in jail there for about a week. After a week, they caught six more people, Jewish people that were hiding out in the vicinity, and they took us. And all the Jews from Uzhhorod were all gone already to Auschwitz. There were no more Jews there, only the few that were hiding out, like me, so the police, the gendarmes, take us from Uzhhorod to another city called Miskolc...

RK: What's the name of that city.

LM: Miskolc, it's about 50 miles away from Uzhhorod. They thought that there was still a transport of Jews there and they're going to catch up and send us six with the other transport to Auschwitz. Luckily, when we got there the transport left, so they kept us in that jail for a week. When they transferred us one jail to the other we were chained. They also -- over there they caught a woman with two children who were hiding out. One of the children was three years old and one was one and a half-years old, two little boys. In Miskolc they caught another six or seven who were hiding out so we were already 12 and here they want to take us to another city. They think that over there is still a transport of Jews going to Auschwitz and that place was called Monor, it was also Hungary, Monor. In Monor they caught a few more Jews, also they were waiting for us. The transport left and they caught a few more Jews and altogether we were already 30 that they caught here and there. So from Monor they sent us to Budapest. They thought that in Budapest there's going to be a transport going to Auschwitz, but at that time Wallenberg was getting active and he wouldn't let any transports out of Budapest. That was around, I say that should have been around end of July of '44. In Budapest as we were marching we weren't chained anymore because there was 30 of us, so we had like police in the front and police in the back of us. I could have escaped very easily between the crowds of the people, but because I hold one of the babies I couldn't escape with the baby.

RK: Whose baby?

LM: A mother that was caught with a three year old and year and a half-year old. I carried one of the babies, I carried the little one, to help her out because -- so after a few days in Budapest in jail, they put us together again and they send us to a concentration camp in Hungary. The place was called Sárvár, S-A-R-V-A-R.

RK: Okay.

LM: Okay. There was a silk factory. An abandoned silk factory, was turned into a concentration camp where they gathered all the Jews that they didn't catch up with from all over Hungary, and they were gathered together there. We were there in that camp for four weeks. They gathered together 2,000 of us from all over the country that escaped and were caught. Here we thought already that -- we heard that the war was not going so good for the Germans that we would be liberated there. We had hoped we would be liberated there and the war is going to be over. All of a sudden, one day we see the SS come and they round us up all and the trains were waiting, cattle cars are waiting and they load us all into trains, 2,000 of us.

RK: Oh my God!

LM: And we're going in the direction of Auschwitz. I didn't know until about the middle of the way. There were engineers with us and they saying which way we are passing, what towns we were passing they told us we're were going through Sárvár, [unclear] and we're going towards Poland. We're going towards Auschwitz. For three days and two nights we were traveling without food, without water, people under us, there were at least 100 people in each car. There were people under me dying of thirst, it was hot, it was end of, end of July, beginning of August. People were dying. I didn't know what to do, but luckily, I got myself close to the window of the cattle car so I had a little air, people were making under themselves, no facilities, and here I am 17 years old walking on dead corpses. Once, an early morning, nice and bright...

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

LM: ... I went through all this and I wouldn't let them take me to Auschwitz. I had to take a chance. I had a screwdriver wrapped around my leg and I started taking off the barbed wire which was nailed to the little window. And I took the -- little by little I took the barbed wire off, nobody was disturbing me because they're all, those people were all half dead. There were some people there, they were engineers, they asked me what kind of occupation I had and I told them I was a butcher. They said, "Oh, the place where we are going they need butchers there, what are you doing jumping out you're going to get killed!" I said, "They're going to kill us all. If they take us on a trip for three days and two nights on a trip and don't give us water and don't give us food, they don't care for us, they're going to kill us." I said, "I'm going to jump out." First I tried my head to put through the window and I seen the head fits. I knew if my head fit my body would fit. Little by little I crawl out of the window and I swing around between the two cars where the bumpers are. Here I'm outside already outside the car, and I'm traveling on the outside [unclear] was the speed of about 50 or 60 miles an hour and I'm planning how to jump off and not to get hurt. As the car, as the train is moving, nobody bothered me, I'm outside already, as the train goes up like a little bit on a hill and there's a grassy valley in the bottom, I just took enough courage and jumped off. The train left, I don't know if they shot after me or not. I just remained off and the train left. Never heard of the train and I got stumped. I didn't know what happened. Once I got up I started figuring out where am I? Where did I come from? What happened here? I figured I'm back. And then I said, "Oh, thank God, I'm free! I'm free, there's a deathtrap in there in that car. Thank God I'm free." So here I have to make a plan, what am I doing from here? What do I do? I'm here in a strange place, what do I do here? I see a farmer tending his cows on a pasture. So I walked to the man and I said, "I know how to speak the Slovakian language" and I says to him, "I'm looking for a job on a farm." I says, "I don't want to get paid much," I says, "As long as I get room and board I'll be happy." I made up a story that I worked on a different farm in another village and my owner was beating me. I ran away and I'm looking for another job. Then the man says, "Oh, I'm a small farmer, I can't give you a job, but in the village there's a bigger farmer you might go to him. He might give you a job." Friendly he was. I says, "Where is he, what's his name?" He says, "There's two men walking over there on the highway, walk to those two men and tell them same thing you told me and they will direct you." I walk over to the two men, they happen to be -- one was the manager of the station, of the train, railroad station. The other one was a helper, his helper. I go over to them and I greet them, "Good morning," in Slovakian and I told them I'm looking for a job with some farmer because the other farmer that I worked for was beating me and I couldn't work for him anymore. He says, "Don't tell me no stories," he said. "I'm the chief of the railroad station and I know that a transport of Jews just left for Auschwitz and you jumped off."

He said, "What should I do? Should I report you or should I let you go?" I says, "Mister, you can do anything you want with me as long as I'm off the train already, as long as I'm here. You can do anything you want with me," I say, "I'm here and you can do anything you want with me." He said, "You come with me." We walked together and he takes me to his house. So, as we come into his house he tells his wife I'm here. A young man of about 34 years old and his wife puts a pitcher of milk on the table with a fresh cake and says, "Eat, wash around and eat." I didn't eat for three days. I became -- try to become friends with the man, I told him I'm in your hands, do whatever you want. Luckily, I jumped in a very friendly territory. There were Jewish people protected, some Jewish people were protected by the Wallenberg-- Raoul Wallenberg, he gave passes to the Jewish people so the Germans don't touch them. He takes me over to this big farmer and this big farmer happened to be Jewish so they were discussing what to do with me. He says, "You cannot stay here in this village because I wouldn't give you out, but my partner might." So he says, "Take this road over here and go into the city of Žilina which is 13 miles from here and go to this and this address. There is a Jewish Committee there, and you tell them what happened there and they will give you a paper and you'll be able to function. Don't take a bus, just walk.

RK: Who is this committee?

LM: This Jewish Committee was operated all over in Slovakia. That's what they called the Jewish Committee, and Raoul Wallenberg was giving out papers, Swedish papers he gave out to the people that they were protected by the Swedish government or the Swiss government. I walked over there and I told them what happened and they took me to a doctor, they examined me whether...

RK: All these farms are still in Slovakia?

LM: Yes, oh yeah, that was only -- I jumped 13 miles from Žilina. I was in a village, a little bigger village, they had a train station there, and it was 13 miles from the city of Žilina. The city of Žilina used to be a very active Jewish community with yeshivas and synagogues, but at that time when I jumped off, there were very few Jews there. They were protected by the Wallenberg papers. I didn't know at that time what's happening, but I was just going along with it what they told me to do.

RK: Right.

LM: They placed me with a family and they told me this is where you're going to live. They're going to take care of you, we're going to take care of you and thank God that you jumped off that you're alive and thank God nothing happened to you. Because they checked if anything broke, a broken arm or leg or bruised. It was okay. As I was coming to and I was seeing what's happening, I started thinking that my mother had relatives some place in this vicinity, which was Bratislava, I remembered. I says my grandmother used to live in this vicinity and my mother's sisters and brothers. Maybe they were, maybe they were -- also have these papers, maybe they're alive. I remembered that my grandmother was taken away. Maybe, I said, some of the other

relatives are alive. So they called on the telephone to other cities from this Jewish Committee to find out whether any of the relatives that I'm looking for are alive, are around some place. Here they called Bratislava, the Jewish Committee in Bratislava. I didn't know their family names of the relatives, but I know their first names so I go like this, I says, "I'm looking for my grandmother her name was Rivka Fixler [phonetic] and I'm looking for my *Mima* [Aunt] Yente and I'm looking for my *Feter* [Uncle] Shimon who was supposed to be some place around here, so they were asking me where do they live, what street, and I says, "I don't know where, what street they know, I don't know." I was a little kid, but I know they're some place around here in one of the these towns, whether they're safe, whether they took them away I don't know, because there were only 10 percent of the Jewish people in that vicinity that were left that were protected by the Wallenberg papers. So I was hoping that maybe one of my mother's relatives was between these 10 percent. As I'm talking, as the secretary is talking to the other secretary from Žilina to Bratislava, it happened that my *Feter* Shimon was working for the Jewish Committee there and he happened to be at that time just in there in the office. He was a driver for the office there. And as he was listening on the other side of the phone, I hear he hollers out, "That's my nephew there! That's my-- Oy, that's my nephew there. What happened? How did you get here? What happened to the family? What are you doing?" So I said what happened I told him, "They were taking me. The family is taken away, my mother and my father and everybody was taken away a long time ago, a few months ago. I didn't go, but they caught me and on the way," I says, "I jumped the train and I'm here in Žilina and I'm looking for you. I was hoping maybe I'd find you." "Oh," he says, "Don't worry, stay there, I'm sending someone over for you, stay there." "Uncle Shimon," I said, "Don't worry, you don't have to send nobody for me. Give me your address where you live. Tomorrow morning I'll be in your house." I told the people there and they knew already I'm getting to go to my relatives. So already they, you know, they gave me clothes to look like a *Mensch* [decent human being] and I walked over to Bratislava and I stood with my uncle and my *Mima* Yente.

RK: You mean you lived with them then?

LM: Yeah, yeah, I lived with them. They had a daughter, she was eight years old and I tried to keep as normal a life as possible. I even got myself a job as a plumber's helper where they were building the college in the city of Bratislava and we were living there until -- everything looked promising, until the Germans seen, seen they were getting beat. They didn't recognize these papers no more and Jews were being actually caught in the street. They [unclear] we had to wear the yellow star so they recognized who the Jews are and families were taken away. Nobody knew what happened to them, where they are, they were shot in the middle of the street, everything like that. My uncle was not stupid, he knew that something is going to happen. He knew that these papers were only temporary, that something could happen terrible. Besides the job that he had with the Jewish Committee in Bratislava, he was also a caretaker of a coal yard. There was a

coal yard, a vinegar factory in that yard. He was like a superintendent. He had to make sure that the yard is closed, the yard is clean, the factory is closed after the workers leave, that was his job, too. And on the side of the yard he had an apartment and that's where we lived. Now when things were getting bad and it wasn't safe anymore, he went and he made a hideout on the top of the vinegar factory in an attic. He took up there pillows and mattress and covers and food, just in case we have to hide, a place for -- nobody knew, only him. Nobody knew, in the factory, nobody knew that this place there, the attic, existed. Luckily, Rosh Hashanah 1944 we still had services in Bratislava. My uncle was a Cohen, he was *dukhanen*⁴ and we tried to observe Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur the best we could. Fear, yes, we all had fear, what's going to happen because things did not look good at all. One day, I'm on my job, and I was working in that -- they were building a college, I was working as a plumber's helper, my uncle sent a messenger, "Come back right away things are bad." Through crossroads and secret roads I went back to the apartment. My uncle told me, "Things are very bad. We have to hide, we have to disappear." My uncle had a friend, her name was Erigeneni [phonetic] she was a Hungarian woman, she was 40 years old and we trusted her very much. He made up with her that she takes over the apartment, she becomes the superintendent of the factory and the coal yard. She takes everything just like nothing happened. She becomes the superintendent of this yard and we disappear. If they ask her where we are, the Germans took us away. In the meantime, we disappeared and we went up on top in that attic, 10 of us: my uncle, my aunt, their eight year old daughter, the [unclear] and his wife and my uncle's sister-in-law and her sister, altogether we were 10. We disappeared, nobody knew where we are, only this gentile woman, Erigeneni [phonetic]. She said that she's committed to save us and she did. For six months, during the winter...

RK: This is what year already?

LM: This is still 1944.

RK: This is still 1944.

LM: This is still 1944. This is already November, 1944. It's getting cold. The attic was cold like on the outside. We had no facilities. We made facilities. We had a bucket. There were people working in the factory, there were about a dozen people working in the factory every day from eight in the morning to six at night. We were not supposed to budge or move during the day because somebody out there might hear us. But nobody knew the attic existed so we tried to be as quiet as possible during the day. We knew between eight and six, don't move. After six o'clock, Erigeneni [phonetic], our friend, would come to check if the door factory was closed, if the door of the factory was closed. In the meantime, she had a basket with food that she left near the door. In the wintertime six o'clock was dark already and the door, the yard was all fenced around and nobody was in that yard. All the workers left. She was the only one that made sure the

⁴*dukhanen* : recitation of the Priestly blessing by those who claim lineage from the priesthood (*Kohanim*). (*The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews*, David J. Zucker)

factory was locked, and that's how she brought us every day food, and she brought us news to tell us what happened, and what is happening and we were hoping every day that that thing would not last long, but this thing lasted till the liberation. They were bombing the city. Luckily, we were not hit until the last day when the Russians surrounded the city, the factory got hit and bricks were falling on us already from the *Katyushas*⁵ and the bombs [unclear] the coal yard was on fire and we were trapped in the middle.

RK: Oh my God!

LM: We were on the top in the attic. Everyone was running for shelter. We could not run for shelter. All winter long we were bombed and the people ran for shelter. We couldn't run to our shelter because we would have been caught.

RK: Right.

LM: But the last day, a couple of days before the Russians came in, it was unbearable. The roof fell off, it started burning, the building started burning. That's when we decided to evacuate the factory and to get and get mixed in to the bomb shelters within the other people. That's what we did. We had to take a chance. We get caught, we get caught. Luckily, in 24 hours the Russians came in and we were liberated.

RK: So you were liberated by the Russians?

LM: By the Russians.

RK: And that was...?

LM: That was May 8.

RK: That was already next year.

LM: 1945.

RK: May 8, 1945 you were liberated.

LM: Liberated by the Russians in Bratislava. All the 10 of us were okay.

RK: How about while you were in Slovakia, did you have any contact with the so-called working group, did you know of Rabbi Weissmandl?

LM: I didn't, my uncle might have.

RK: Did you know of Gisi Fleischmann and her efforts to ransom Jews?

LM: I've heard stories.

RK: But did you know about it then?

LM: No, I did not know. My uncle and aunt might have known because they were more in contact with these people.

RK: Do you know of any Jews who were in the Czech resistance?

LM: Yes.

RK: Anybody in your family, or friends?

LM: No, just friends.

RK: Friends, do you know anything of their experience?

LM: I know there were a lot of casualties, that I know, because the Russians wouldn't give them any help. A lot, a lot of boys fell because they were on their own and

⁵Soviet rocket launchers

their group didn't have the right kind of weapons. They tried to sabotage the Germans and staff with the resistance.

RK: How about before the truth of Terezin was known, what was said about it by the Nazis, what did they tell the people about it?

LM: I don't know, I was not...

RK: You didn't hear anything about it?

LM: I was not involved, you know, I had my own problems at the time.

RK: Okay.

LM: I could have read because she brought us papers, that woman, that lady, Erigeneni [phonetic], she brought us papers and we read the news every day. I don't remember now.

RK: Okay. When did you first hear about the deportations to Auschwitz and what did you think of those transports? What did they mean to you?

LM: Death.

RK: You realized...

LM: I realized, that's the reason I took my life in my hands and I jumped off the train because it meant -- I knew. I had the feeling, I had the feeling that somebody is trying to kill me, somebody is trying to murder us. Already they took away my mother, my father, the children, and everybody else. I hadn't seen them already...

RK: You suspected right away.

LM: I suspected right away that something no good is going on.

RK: During what period were you able to have contact with the people outside of Czechoslovakia?

LM: Not till after the war.

RK: From the very beginning till after?

LM: Yeah, after the war, after the war I joined the Russians and I worked for the Russian army, and I would go every day to the train station and see people come home, sick people from -- that were liberated and left living in the concentration camps. Some people came from Bergen-Belsen, some came from Auschwitz, and they were try-, everybody was looking for relatives.

RK: Relatives, survivors...

LM: And I was doing the same thing. I went there to the train station and asking people if any of my relatives and my sisters were alive. So after about a month somebody told me that, "Your sisters might be alive in Neustadt-Holstein which is English zone." This is when I got myself together and I went searching. I went all over Germany to look if anybody is alive. I went from camp to camp to check records and then when I got to Neustadt-Holstein that's when I find that my two sisters were alive.

RK: You said that you were able to get the news about the war while...

LM: Yes, yes, yes.

RK: You said that. And you said that you were liberated by the Russians?

LM: By the Russians, right.

RK: Could you describe more the circumstances of how you were liberated How did it happen?

LM: The Russians surrounded the city, and the Germans set everything on fire, and when we went to the bomb shelters, we mingled in between the non-Jews and we thought that the Russians were going to be good, they were friends.

RK: Well, were they?

LM: They were and they were not. Until you did something for them you were a friend and as soon as you didn't do nothing for them you were not a friend.

RK: Did they mistreat you or try to cause you any harm?

LM: No, they wanted me to join them and to go into the army and to go with them wherever they're going. But I'd seen their behavior so I just changed my mind and I left the Russian army and I went over to the American side, American zone, to look for my relatives and sisters.

RK: Did the Russians treat the Jews in a different way than they would treat non-Jews?

LM: No, no, they were just rough to everybody. They were just rough to everybody. In fact, when I was working as a butcher for the Russian army, we would go to the best farms and take away their cattle, slaughter them and feed the Russian army and all the farmers would get paid for was a piece of paper saying the Russians took it.

RK: This was their way.

LM: This was their way, just take it away, that's all. Just take it away. It was very, very, very rude. I didn't like their way of behavior towards the people, I mean the farmers. These farmers. One day we went over with a truck to a farmer that had beautiful Holstein cows, milking cows and we took them away from him with a gun, left their water running. We took them away, the farmer was crying, but nothing happened. Just gave him a piece of paper the Russians took it, nothing.

RK: And how long did you remain in Europe after the liberation?

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

RK: This is tape two, interview with Louie Mermelstein, May 1, 1984. Now the question we were talking about was how long did you remain in Europe after the liberation and what were the conditions of your life in those times?

LM: The conditions at the time after liberation was wandering, wandering from one place to the other, looking for relatives, looking for survivors. I even went back one day to my place of birth to Mukachevo. I ran over there and I was there overnight. I didn't like what I'd seen and I returned right back to Bratislava.

RK: What did you see?

LM: I'd seen the old synagogue in Mukachevo was turned into a garage. Jewish life was finished. Couldn't see any future at all to stay there. I had a very cold feeling, unsafe. That's when I decided that I'll either go to Israel or to United States, which one comes first. Then I wandered all over, then I wandered to all over Germany to look for relatives and survivors. I found my sister Lily and her husband Moishe and my sister Shirley. I told them that we all have to go either to Israel or to the United States. In the meantime, somehow I got a hold of a letter of one of my cousins who was serving in the United States Army in Germany. There was a post office box number which the Army had and I -- by luck I was tracking, through this address I was tracking him and I met up with him in Ahlen Germany. I introduced myself as his cousin and he said I shouldn't worry I'm going to America. He wrote a letter to his mother in Woodside, Long Island, let her know that some of the people survived. She sent us affidavits to go to United States, but my cousin, whose name is Harold Weiss, his mother, the sister of my father, wrote a letter to the authorities in Germany that I'm his cousin and I didn't need no affidavits. With this letter I came to the United States. It didn't take more than six weeks and I was, I was here. This is my letter, the letter right here, written in Stuttgart, Harold Weiss who was in the United States army, 31st Triple A Brigade, Operation Detachment stationed in Ettlingen, in the Military Policeman. And with this letter they took me and my Uncle Bob, they put me on the boat, "Marine Perch" and I arrived in the United States.

RK: Do you remember the date?

LM: June 24, 1946.

RK: So you really didn't remain in Europe for very long?

LM: No, I was very uncomfortable in Europe. By this time I found out that none of my relatives, or just some of my relatives were alive. My father was killed just a week before the liberation in Flossenbürg, Germany. He was working all this time in slave labor in a stone mine. A week before liberation the Germans fed all the prisoners with warm bread and about a thousand people died in one day. My father was between those thousand people. One of my *chaverim* [friends], we went to *cheder* [Jewish religious school] together, wrote me a letter. He lived in Israel and he told me if I want to

keep the *yahrzeit* [memorial of someone's death] of my father that he was there when he died. And he told me also that all my younger sisters and brothers were dead -- made it -- and I'll never find any place if they're buried or anything like that. I got a letter here from him. He wrote me from Israel telling me exactly the dates.

RK: You mean the dates of your father's death. Did you find out any more definite information about any other close relatives?

LM: From my father's family, Uncle Mutka survived, the one, he was -- in fact he got liberated in the woods, so did Uncle Bob.

RK: And did they come here too?

LM: And they are also here in the United States. My Uncle Bob lives in Clifton, New Jersey. My uncle Mutka lives in Borough Park, New York. They all have families. My Uncle Mutka has five children, and my Uncle Bob has two children, and by the way, the little girl that was eight years old, was eight years old when we were hiding out on the attics of the vinegar factory, my cousin, she came to this country with her parents. She went through school, she went through college, she got married and she's an English teacher for the city of New York. Her two children also went to college. My Uncle Shimon passed away. My Tante Yente is still alive, in fact she was here yesterday. It's really unbelievable that this all happened. If my Tante Yente wouldn't be here to tell me that it happened, I wouldn't believe myself.

RK: You might not. You feel lucky for being in the United States?

LM: Always felt lucky to be in the United States.

[Tape two side one ended; interview ended.]