

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ARNOLD J. MILLER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Nora Levin

Date: April 21, 1985

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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AM - Arnold J. Miller [interviewee]

NL - Nora Levin [interviewer]

Date: April 21, 1985¹

Tape one, side one:

NL: ...interview with Mr. Arnold Miller, being interviewed in connection with the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, April 21, 1985. Mr. Miller, would you be good enough to tell us what armed forces unit you were with just before you got to Ebensee?

AM: Okay I was with the 245th Combat Engineers of the Third Army, United States Army. And when the war ended, we were stationed, we were in Böcklabruck [Vöcklabruck], Austria.

NL: Can you spell that, please?

AM: B-O-C-K, with an umlaut over the "O", L-A-B-R-U-K, which is a station on the railroad line leading to Linz. When the war ended, we chose lots to see who would get the next day off, and I won. I...

NL: This was April...

AM: This was May.

NL: May 8?

AM: May 8 I believe it was, May 7 or May 8. And I heard about a concentration camp that was up in the Alps at Ebensee. Ebensee is a lake, a beautiful lake in the Alps. ²

NL: How did you hear about this camp?

AM: Some other soldier told me about it. And so I hitched a ride up there, and I came, now I imagine maybe it was the day after it was liberated. Everybody was still there.

NL: Who had liberated it?

AM: American soldiers, but I'm not sure what outfit. But we were about as far forward in Austria as any soldiers, practically. We had, my outfit had built the bridge linking Germany with Austria, allowing the soldiers to go over. So the camp, I mean, as you approach the camp, there were these walking skeletons, crawling, walking, falling. You know, and, in their pajamas type. Emaciated skeletons. And somehow I met a Jewish doctor who was a camp doctor. He had been captured, taken in Poland, and the, they used him as a camp doctor to sign death certificates and all that. So he offered to show me around the camp. And...

NL: He spoke some English?

AM: He spoke, I don't know whether he spoke Yiddish or Hebrew. He had been...

NL: You understood each of those.

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

²KZ Ebensee, Austria. A subcamp of Gusen, established November 1943.

AM: Yeah. He had spent some time in Israel before coming back to Poland and he was picked up by the Nazis. And, Yiddish probably. And he showed me first the crematoria. There were two ovens, and there was a room right off, right near the crematoria, stacked full with bodies. They were still there. And, stacked full of bodies. And, like, stacked like cord wood. I remember an American Major, I don't know what outfit he was from, was looking at it, and he [pause]

NL: Stop for a moment.

AM: Yeah. [tape off then on] [unclear] like anything. [shaky voice] That is, he took me outside, and he showed me a, like a mass grave, full of, filled with bones. Then he took me around to the barracks and he says, "This barracks was composed all of Jews." There were all kinds of people there, maybe 20,000 people, I don't know. All kinds. In fact, there was a banner over the entrance to the camp that said, "*Salutos nos liberatos!*" In Spanish. Where they got these Spaniards I don't know, but anyhow they were all kinds of people. And, but I think the majority were Jews. And, I went inside the barracks, and I said, "*Shalom, chaverim.*" ["Hello friends."] [pause]

NL: Oh my. We'll stop. [tape off then on]

AM: When they heard those words, they got all excited. Here was an American soldier, speaking...

NL: A Jew.

AM: [weepy] A Jew. So they all crowded around me. And they were all eager to tell their stories. This one showed me his Auschwitz...

NL: Number.

AM: Numbers and this one said, "*Ich bin geblieben der letster foon mein transport.*" ["I was the last one left from my transport."] And, each one was eager to tell me his story.

NL: You were there alone?

AM: Yeah.

NL: The only American soldier? And this made you...

AM: Well, there were other American soldiers around the place, not many...

NL: But from your...

AM: No, just me.

NL: This Engineers' Unit.

AM: I was the only one there.

NL: The only one there, yes.

AM: And, I imagine I must have been the first one they identified as a Jew.

NL: Sure.

AM: There were obviously American soldiers there preceding me, but maybe I was the first one they knew was a Jew. And they, this one, they asked me for cigarettes. They asked for anything to eat and this and that. Well, whatever I had I gave them.

NL: What was the American Army doing? Is, were they beginning to feed these people or provide them with medical care?

AM: They were beginning to.

NL: They were beginning to.

AM: One thing, I think the Red Cross was on beginning to bring in stuff. But all around the camp they had these living skeletons. And then, this doctor says, told me, when you've got these barracks, these tiers, that they had, he said in the morning, the guards would come around and if they saw somebody was too weak to get up, they would step on his head, crush him, choke him, take his belt off and choke him to death, and he would have to sign a certificate that the person died, you know, of normal causes or something like that. Then I walked out. I walked towards the lake, the beautiful lake there. And a young boy, maybe 16, joined me, a Jewish boy. And he was telling me how his kid brother was taken by some of the Nazis, thrown up in the air, and shot. You know, that, as a sport.

NL: A sport.

AM: Yeah. And...

NL: Was he an inmate in the prison?

AM: Yeah. Yeah.

NL: And how did he survive as a youngster?

AM: I don't know. I don't know.

NL: Were the Jews put to work in this particular camp?

AM: Yes. This was a death camp in the sense that this was the end of the road. You, when you came to this camp you were worked to death. There was no exit from this camp. And, what they were doing is making cement, from the rocks. And I, this was what they called a daughter camp of Mauthausen.

NL: I was going to ask if it was near Mauthausen. Because that of course was the end of the road indeed. The quarries at Mauthausen. Oh, there were quarries at Ebensee too?

AM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

NL: Were there any women, that you saw?

AM: I didn't see any women.

NL: This was apparently an all man's camp.

AM: I didn't see any women. But later on, this was...

NL: We have a little cotton here, yes.

AM: Oh...

NL: There's a Kleenex, that's it.

AM: Later on, while I was still in Austria, I went down to another lake called Attersee. Attersee, beautiful lake.

NL: How do you spell that?

AM: A-T-T-E-R-S-E-E. And, there on the shores of this lake I came across a women's work camp, mainly Jews, Jewish women.

NL: I never heard of it.

AM: And there was a sign there, "Off Limits to American Troops." But I went in anyhow. And I met one of the women from the camp. She was apparently one of the leaders. And...

NL: A Jewish woman?

AM: A Jewish woman. We were talking Hebrew together. She spoke beautiful Hebrew.

NL: Where had she been from?

AM: Poland.

NL: Poland.

AM: Yes.

NL: And...

AM: From all the...

NL: The camp was still...

AM: Yeah, yeah.

NL: Up in existence.

AM: Up, yeah. And it was off limits to American soldiers. And I was having this conversation with her, and she's telling me like she planned to go to Israel, and an American guard, MP, came over, and he said, "What are you doing here, soldier? You see the sign? Off limits." So I had to leave.

NL: What was the American Army unit doing? Were they planning a transition for these inmates? Do you know what their condition was?

AM: I think they were beginning to ship them out. But this was too early. And they didn't have...

NL: This was just a few days...

AM: ...any plans, really.

NL: ...after liberation.

AM: Yeah, right.

NL: What else did you see there? Women also in terrible condition?

AM: No, I guess the women were not in terrible--I only saw a few but--they didn't seem to be in terrible condition.

NL: Not as bad as at Ebensee.

AM: This was a work camp. Oh, Ebensee was, as I say, a death camp.

NL: But this other camp, Attersee, was apparently a less...

AM: Yeah.

NL: ...horrifying place?

AM: Yeah, this woman I talked to was in good condition.

NL: Was she w--how long did you stay at Ebensee? Just an hour or so in the camp?

AM: Yeah, yeah.

NL: Do you have any other impressions? What else did this doctor...

AM: Well, as I, when I left the camp and I went towards the lake, a German farmer called me over, and he complained that one of the inmates had left the camp and had taken some milk from his cow. And I, being an American soldier, representing the law, he wanted me to do something about it. [laughs]

NL: What did you tell him?

AM: [pause]

NL: Oh my.

AM: Forget it.

NL: Did you speak to any of the townspeople about their knowledge of the camp?

AM: No. No I didn't.

NL: No.

AM: No.

NL: No. And in, as far as you...

AM: I talked to other Germans. Not in the immediate area about it. They claimed they really didn't know how bad, not in the immediate area.

NL: Other Germans, in Austria? Or in Germany itself.

AM: No, in Austria.

NL: In Austria.

AM: And they told...

NL: Did you believe them, Mr. Miller?

AM: These particular people I believed. I think they heard rumors, but they found it hard to believe.

NL: They were how far from the camp?

AM: That I don't recall, but a good number of miles.

NL: So you returned to your unit.

AM: Mmm hmm.

NL: And did your unit then have any responsibility for the Ebensee camp after that?

AM: No. No.

NL: You moved...

AM: It didn't initially either.

NL: It didn't initially either.

AM: I just went up on my own.

NL: You just went up on your own. And did you report this to the, to some of the men?

AM: No, I assumed it was being taken over by the...

NL: You assumed it was...

AM: ...proper authorities.

NL: Now, toward the end of the war, had you heard any reports, rumors, about the existence of concentration...

AM: Oh yeah! In fact...

NL: ...or death camps...

AM: I had written home...

NL: Then?

AM: ...and some of my stuff was published.

NL: When did you hear? Did, could you approximate?

AM: Before the war ended, we were going through, our Third Army had been sent down into Bavaria because they heard that the--that Hitler was gonna make a last stand in the Alps, in Ber-, in around Berchtesgaden. And we were sent down there to prevent that.

NL: Would this be in '44 or '45?

AM: This was in '45, but it was probably April.

NL: So, very close to the end.

AM: Close to the end. And we were in a small town called Moose in Bavaria and somebody told me they had a Russian nobody could understand. He spoke German, but they couldn't under-, so they brought him to me, because I...

NL: You know Russian?

AM: No, German.

NL: Oh German, uh huh.

AM: So this Russian, dressed in the most outlandish costume like track shoes and nothing seemed to fit, you know, it was clothes scattered from all...

NL: Makeshift?

AM: Makeshift clothes. He came over and he spoke good Russian. He told me, I took, good German rather. He told me that he had just escaped from Dachau.

NL: My.

AM: He had escaped from Dachau. He was a Russian soldier who had been captured in Stalingrad.

NL: He was not Jewish?

AM: No. He was originally a sailor, spent most of his time in Vladivostok. But he was in the Russian Army and captured at Stalingrad and he'd been in many concentration camps. He had been in Auschwitz, and he said he had shoveled the ashes from the crematoria in Auschwitz. And he told me, he figured that maybe six million people had lost their lives in concentration camps. And this was before the war was all over, before the figure of six million was being brooded about. And I remember I wrote home about it, and the person I wrote to had my letters published.

NL: Where were they published?

AM: In the Yeshivah College *Commentator*, one of them anyhow.

NL: I see. That's interesting. Did this Russian soldier tell you about other Russian prisoners of war and their fate?

AM: No. No.

NL: Because I understand some four million of them perished in camps.

AM: No. Yeah.

NL: A tremendous...

AM: Yeah.

NL: ...number.

AM: No, he didn't.

NL: Did he tell you about the treatment...

AM: Yeah. Oh yeah.

NL: He received?

AM: He wanted only one thing. He wanted us to give him a rifle so he could kill Germans. That's all he was looking for, wanted to. And there was one particular camp commandant. I forget the name, maybe Wagner or something. We were, well, he wanted to find him and do something about, to him.

NL: I hope he found his vengeance.

AM: So...

NL: At the same time, obviously, he could survive.

AM: Yeah.

NL: Did he say that any of the Russians, oh, the Russian prisoners of war were themselves gassed?

AM: Were gassed?

NL: Were they gassed?

AM: No, I never heard him mention that. He didn't talk about...

NL: But he was used as a shoveler of the ashes.

AM: Oh, he told me that so many Jews perished in Auschwitz that he was, he told me about that.

NL: So that was the first actual, factual confirmation or factual news you had about a fate of Jews.

AM: Yeah, what he told me. Oh, I knew...

NL: Or...

AM: About it before, from my readings.

NL: How did you, what...

AM: Readings.

NL: Did you read, may I ask?

AM: Well...

NL: *Stars and Stripes*? Was there anything in *Stars and Stripes* about what was going on?

AM: No, this was I think before the camps were being liberated. This was before.

NL: How...

AM: Just at the time they were first being liberated.

NL: Ah, that's in...

AM: Because he escaped from Dachau. It means he had been in Dachau, and Dachau...

NL: But in '43, '44, where were you serving in the army? Where were you in '43?

AM: In '43 I was in the United States.

NL: You were here?

AM: Yeah.

NL: And '44?

AM: In four, I went overseas in '44.

NL: While you were here in the United States did you have any...

AM: I recall, I believe so.

NL: News?

AM: I believe I knew.

NL: You knew.

AM: Yeah.

NL: From some reports [unclear].

AM: Newspapers, everything.

NL: Some magazines carried articles.

AM: Oh yeah. Oh sure.

NL: And in '44 you were in Germany? In western Europe, and France?

AM: Christmas day we went to France. We landed in France, and we were sent up to the Siegfried line shortly after that. And shortly after that we went into Germany.

NL: Went into Germany. Besides these Germans you mentioned who said they knew nothing about the existence of the camps, were there any other non-Jews, civilians, Germans or otherwise you spoke to in Europe about this phenomenon?

AM: About the phenomenon, no. But I came across some Russians, and others, who somehow were wandering around, escaped from some place.

NL: Yes.

AM: And one of them asked me if I had any guns. He wanted a gun.

NL: Also to shoot Germans?

AM: I think for self protection.

NL: For self protection.

AM: And I...

NL: And I guess...

AM: Gave him one that didn't work. [laughs] I gave him a little pistol I had that didn't work.

NL: Was there, besides the Major who was obviously overwrought by what he saw at Ebensee, were there any other non-Jewish American soldiers who were deeply affected by these reports?

AM: I really, well, I don't think any of them saw what I saw. I happened to get the day off. And the rest were working, and I am, unless later on sometime they came across a concentration camp. I don't know.

NL: And you didn't have occasion to speak to them about what you saw particularly?

AM: I probably did but I don't recall specifically.

NL: You don't remember. Did you hear of any other soldiers in units that liberated other camps that you'd like to comment on?

AM: No.

NL: And how long did you stay in the Ebensee area?

AM: Maybe another week, then we moved back. We compiled the Army of Occupation in Germany in Bavaria.

NL: In Germany. Do you want to say a little about that experience?

AM: Well, we were stationed in Bavaria, near the Chiemsee. The Chiemsee is a beautiful, like there was a river that entered into the Chiemsee called Altenmarkt, I mean Alz [pronounced "Altz"], the Alz River. And this town where I stayed was Altenmarkt on Alz. I was living in a farmhouse. And, oh--before we moved back, let me say this. Before we moved back I was still in this Vöcklabruck, that I mentioned first. It was on the railroad line, and there was a big field facing the house where I was living. One mor-, and the Germans were coming in to surrender by the hundreds, by the thousands. And they were assembled in this area and then taken away by a train to Dachau. Because they had a stockade or some place at Dachau.

NL: German prisoners of...

AM: Yeah. It was just...

NL: ...Americans?

AM: I think it was Dachau. I'm not sure.

NL: Mmm.

AM: There's some stockade there. One morning I got up early and looked out, and I saw a group of off-, apparently officers near the...

NL: German officers?

AM: German officers standing there by themselves, nobody around.

NL: Mmm.

AM: They were apparently coming to surrender very early, and there was nobody there to keep an eye on them. So I said to myself, "Well I'm gonna, they probably still have their pistols on them. I'm gonna get some souvenirs." So I went down, and I always carried my rifle with me. I went down, and I approached them. As I approached them, I saw one had the skull and, was an officer that had the skull and crossbones on his hat,

which meant S.S. So as I approached, he turned his back to me. So I said, “*Du, kehr herum.*” [“You turn around!”] And he turns around and he says in English, “What do you want?” So I says, “S.S.?” He says haughtily, “Major *Ungarischer Waffen S.S.*” [Major Hungarian Armored S.S.]

NL: *Ungarischer Waffen...*

AM: And he’s fighting S.S.

NL: Hungarian...

AM: So I...

NL: ...Unit.

AM: Yeah, and proudly, a Major. So I says, “*Du Mörder! Du Schweinehund!*” [You murderer, you pig dog.] And he didn’t bat an eye.

NL: He didn’t.

AM: Didn’t bat an eye. I imagine there weren’t many people who had ever addressed him like that before.

NL: Mmm!

AM: And I didn’t exactly know what the hell [chuckling] to do with him. And as I was...

NL: You weren’t ordered to do anything.

AM: No, I had no authority. I mean, as I was standing there stand-, glaring at him and, an MP came up and, who’d been assigned to stand guard there. And I said to him, “Keep an eye on this guy,” I said, “he’s an S.S. man.”

NL: Did that man know what S.S. meant?

AM: Ehhh...

NL: Probably not.

AM: Ehhh, so ehh. So, then I went and I got my mad Russian, the Russian I was telling you about. I said, “Mike, come on, I got an S.S. man. Let’s take a look at him. Maybe you’ll recognize him.” So Mike came with me. We went back up there, and he looked at the S.S. man, he said no, he didn’t know him.

NL: Mmm.

AM: So, the guard was there, so we went away.

NL: I hope he was not one of those who was allowed to come into the United States in the ‘50s, to help fight Communism. Did you get a sense that we as an occupation force knew what to do, in the whole...

AM: Well, they were processing...

NL: Denazification process there?

AM: They were processing these people. I think they, of course they were, it was done on a vast scale. So, now that many people slipped through their hands. And I think it depended on the personnel they had available. If there were the Jews there I imagine they did a better job screening these people. If they were just some ordinary officers maybe they weren’t very adept at...

NL: Didn't know what questions to ask probably.

AM: But I guess it was a mixed bag.

NL: And what impressions did you have of the civilian German population?

AM: [sighs] They were saying, "Hitler comes down, *kaput*." But, that's because he was a loser. Had Hitler been a winner as he had been until he--well, he you know.

NL: It would have been thumbs...

AM: [unclear].

NL: ...thumbs up.

AM: And when he was taking over other countries and he was getting butter from this country and you know and on, supplying Germany, he was very popular. But as soon as they saw the dye was cast, then it became, "Hitler's no good. Hitler *kaput*. Thumbs down." But it wasn't simply because Hitler was Hitler and he was such a monster. It was simply because he was a loser.

NL: You saw a good bit of the destruction I guess...

AM: Oh yeah.

NL: In German cities.

AM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

NL: In Bavaria?

AM: Oh yeah.

NL: And, you stayed there for how long, Mr. Miller?

AM: Well I stayed there till August, after the war ended.

NL: '45.

AM: Yeah.

NL: And then you came back...

AM: Came back, yeah.

NL: ...home. Were there any other impressions about this whole dreadful history that you would want to add?

AM: Well, I did a lot of talking with the Germans, because I spoke German.

NL: Yes, please tell us...

AM: And...

NL: ...about those conversations. You spoke specifically about what had happened to Jews?

AM: No. But they were; Germans would say to me, "*Sie reden sehr gut Deutsch*." ["You speak German very well."] I said, "Yeah, *Du bist Deutsch*." ["You are German?"] "*Nein*." "*Du bist in Deutschland geboren?*" ["Were you born in Germany?"] "*Nein*." "*Ich bin Jude*." ["I am a Jew."] "Ahhh! *Du bist Jude*." But not as said in, you know, a terrible antisemitic fashion. It was just kind of a surprise, American *soldier--Jude*.

NL: Did you study German in school?

AM: Yeah.

NL: And what sorts of things did they tell you? What did you ask them? If you remember...

AM: I don't think we discussed these things very much. I didn't have that much of an opportunity. You know there for a while there was a ban on well, what they call fraternizing with the Germans.

NL: Right.

AM: In fact, I was once cautioned because I was seen talking with some Germans.

NL: Mmm hmm.

AM: But, so I really didn't get too much of a chance to discuss it with them.

NL: Yeah. Still a very problematical nation as far as...

AM: Yeah.

NL: ...Jews are concerned, I would say.

AM: Yeah. Well, there was one old gentleman in Altenmarkt who had a villa up on the hill and he had a wonderful library of old, old volumes and everything else. And I got to talking with him. And he had a collection of old things. And then he says to me one day, "*Was Sind Sie*, Protestant or Catholic?" ["Are you Protestant or Catholic?"] So I said, "*Ich bin Jude*." ["I am a Jew."] "Ah! *Ich hab gekauft bei Juden in München und hab liebgehabt zu kaufen bei Juden*." ["Ah, I used to buy from Jews in München and I like to buy from Jews."]

NL: *Liebgehabt*. ["Liked it."]

AM: Yeah. But he was an old, old gentleman, maybe 85 or something like that.

NL: Yeah. Maybe he did...

AM: And then he says, "*Können Sie mirletwas sagen?*" ["Can you tell me something?"] I says, "What?" *Ich habe eine Megillah, a Megillah*, of Esther! The scroll of Esther? ["I have the scroll."]

NL: Yeah!

AM: From a shelf, and he says, "*Was is das?*" ["What is that?"]

NL: Really!?

AM: So I told him what it was.

NL: He collected?

AM: "Ah! *Können Sie das lesen?*" ["Can you read that?"] I said, "Ya." So he asked me to read and I was reading for him and he was overjoyed.

NL: [unclear] [laughs]

AM: I tried to buy it from him, and he wouldn't sell it.

NL: He wouldn't sell it.

AM: I says, "Why don't you want to sell it?" He says he's got ancient Sanskrit, he's got Latin...

NL: Oh.

AM: ...he's got Greek, and he wants Hebrew too.

NL: He was an antiquarian. [chuckles]

AM: And then his wife, an old lady, comes over to me and she says, she asked me if we would, I would be willing to read some poetry with her, German poetry. Ooee! So okay We sit down, and she's got this book of poetry, and it's the story of Joshua and the Scribes and it was okay until the very end. The very end, where Rachav is spared by the Jews because she helped the, hide the two spies, this, the story in the Bible says she was told to hang a scarlet thread in her window. And her, she and the family were spared. In this poem, they were killed.

NL: Oh my. [laughs]

AM: Until then it was all right. Oh, I take a look. I says, "This is not right." She says, "It's not right?" I says, "No!" I said, "Do you have a Bible in the house?" So she comes back with two Bibles, one in Latin, and one in old German script.

NL: Oh my word!

AM: Maybe a 17th century volume.

NL: Oh my.

AM: So I said, "You look at the German script..."

NL: And tell me what it...

AM: And I'll look at the Latin.

NL: Could you read the Latin?

AM: Well be-, I knew the story so I could follow the Latin.

NL: You could follow the Latin. Well, what a revelation to them! [laughs]

AM: So, and I pointed out to her that in the Bible itself that is...

NL: Yeah. Who was the poet, do you remember?

AM: No, but it, the front of the volume had the swastika on it.

NL: Ah!

AM: It was in, it was approved by...

NL: A cleansed version.

AM: Yeah.

NL: Well, well. That's interesting.

AM: There was another incident, not in Germany but in France, near the German, in the province called Lorraine or Lothringen, in German. Lorraine in French, Lothringen in German. We were, before we went through the, we passed through the Siegfried line. Walking up the street in this little town and I see a *mezuzah* on the door. So I stopped and I went in. And I said to the woman in German, because they speak German and French in Lorraine interchangeably. And I said, "Do you know what this is?" She says, "Yes. This is a Jewish object." I said, "How does it get there?" She said, "This house belonged to Jews. When the Nazis came, they fled towards Paris. And I took the thing down." When the Americans came and chased the Nazis away, I put it back up, out of respect to the former owners.

NL: You never knew what happened to the original family?

AM: No.

NL: That's, did you have any experience with French Jews? French speaking Jews or French speaking people?

AM: With French speaking people, yeah.

NL: Yeah.

AM: Not French Jews.

NL: And any impressions about the French that you'd like to share?

AM: No, not really. Not really. I just, we passed through very fast.

NL: You went through very quickly.

AM: Right.

NL: And I guess you didn't meet any Jews in Germany at all?

AM: Jews in Germany? No.

NL: There were, it's estimated about five, six thousand who were hidden, but...

AM: I didn't meet any Jews in Germany.

NL: Yes. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Miller. We deeply appreciate your coming and the Archive will be kept at Gratz, and we'll send you a copy.

AM: Okay.

NL: Thank you.

AM: Thank you very much.

NL: There's just one- [tape off]