

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MARCEL ROWEN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Elizabeth Geggel

Date: February 1, 1983

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MR - Marcel Rowen [interviewee]

EG - Elizabeth Geggel [interviewer]

Date: February 1, 1983

Tape one, side one:

EG: Mr. Rowen, could you just tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your family?

MR: I was born February 15, 1925, in Leipzig, Germany. My parents manufactured male, men's and ladies' suits and we had a very, very nice, beautiful life in Germany, you know, went out with my mom to the café, we went to the operetta, we went everywhere and we did everything. And things looked good.

EG: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

MR: No, I was an only child.

EG: An only child. Did your parents feel comfortable in their, in Germany at that time? Apparently yes, as you said.

MR: Up to a certain point. My mother passed away, unfortunately, she died. She had cancer, at age 33, in March 1933. Of course after Hitler came to power in 1933, by 1936, 1937 we felt somewhat of antisemitism, but as a youngster at age 12, or 13, I really don't recall in my town and in my neighborhood and I affiliated with the, there was only one Jewish boyfriend that I had that, who is in Israel today. We were friends, like, we played with, as children. We played soccer and we ran together and went on a bicycle together, and one boy joined the Hitler youth. And I says, "Aren't you afraid to walk with a Jew?" He says, "No," he says, "Well, what Jew?" I says, "You're my friend."

EG: Mmm hmm. Did you go to a regular school? Public school?

MR: According to the law, one day we received a letter from the school where the teacher wrote to my dad that, the year was 1933, he said, "I'm very, very sorry to hear about passing that your wife passed away. And we're also very, very sorry to advise you that your son no longer can attend the school due to the laws that have been passed, and I feel very, very sad about it and I don't approve of it, but there's nothing I could do." And of course we have to go into an all-Jewish school.

EG: How old were you then?

MR: 1933, I was, what eight years old?

EG: You were eight years old. Yes. Did your family belong to a Jewish organization or to a Jewish congregation?

MR: Well we belonged to a Jewish congregation. We, well, we never missed a holiday. We walked to *shul* many, many miles. My grandfather was religious. We had an eight-room apartment. In Germany an eight-room apartment was quite a nice apartment at the time. And we had two kitchens, one kosher kitchen and one not-so-kosher kitchen.

EG: [chuckles]

MR: And when I didn't feel like eating, you come into the grandmom's and get a nice kosher meal. Because I didn't like what in the other kitchen what was served. My, the people were afraid to come to the store, to enter the store through the front. We had a, we had a, an *hinterhof*, which is a...

EG: A back entrance.

MR: Back entrance of the, the store, as you get into the apartment house. There was a little door, and through the front you didn't see any customers come in. The Germans were afraid to come in. But everybody came in through the side door. And business up till 1938, it wasn't bad. They...

EG: Until the...

MR: Yeah, when...

EG: Until November '38.

MR: Right, they didn't. All the employees that we had were all Germans, all the tailors were Germans, and we, the people didn't want to come in through the front, so they came in through the side.

EG: Up to '38.

MR: Up to '38.

EG: Did your father serve in the German army [unclear]?

MR: My father was a prisoner of war during the First World War. And he spent four years in France, in Richebourg. Richebourg is not too far from Toulouse.

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: He wanted to learn the restaurant business, and he spoke English fluently, and he spoke French like a Frenchman when he came out of there. One of the, an uncle that we had served in the Austrian army under Franz Joseph at a time when he was killed in combat on the Russian front. My grandfather was a sergeant under Franz Joseph. He was *Tyroller Kaiserjäger* [a rifleman in the Kaiser's army]. Oh, what else can I tell you.

EG: So, so, "*der Dank des Vaterlandes ist Dir gewiss.*"¹

MR: Of course we didn't do, we didn't, we had Polish passports...

EG: Yeah.

MR: Due to the fact that...

EG: You moved?

MR: We had Polish passports. My grandfather came to Munich in 1893, from Galicia, which was at the time Austria.

EG: But you lived in Leipzig.

MR: Yeah, from Leipzig, my grandfather moved from Leipzig to, from Munich to Leipzig.

EG: I see, but at that time, you were born in West Germany.

MR: I was born in Leipzig.

EG: Yeah, but at the time you were born it was Germany.

¹Your fatherland owes you a debt of gratitude.

MR: That was Germany, yes. I'm going back to 1893.

EG: Oh, oh, oh.

MR: And then, later on, after we have to get the First World War, when Austria lost the war...

EG: Yeah.

MR: Then that became part of Poland. When it became part of Poland we had Polish passports. We never renewed the Polish passports, but we had passports, and that, when 19-, on October the 9-, 28th, 1928, when the foreign minister Beck from Poland, he came up with an edict that if you had not been to Poland in certain, that was just an excuse to get rid of the Jews in Germany...

EG: Yeah.

MR: And he said if you have not been to Poland over a period of time that you would have to leave. And that's when it started, October...

EG: Nineteen thirt-...

MR: ...twenty-eighth, 1928 went to...

EG: Well, let me get to, when you were born, in 1925, Leipzig was Poland?

MR: No, no, no. Leipzig wasn't. Leipzig was Germany.

EG: Yeah.

MR: This was the heart of Germany.

EG: Yeah, that's what I thought.

MR: Well, yeah, yeah. My father came to Munich, he was three years old, in 1896. I'm starting with my grandfather when he came. When he came to Germany, my father was three years old.

EG: Oh, I see. So, from way back then they had Polish passports.

MR: Way from, way back then they had Polish passports.

EG: And then 1938 they went, the Germans went back to that?

MR: Nineteen thirty-, 1938 a policeman came to the door and he said, "We are checking your pass ports, the validity of your passports, and you will be back within an hour." He, another two minutes or three minutes I was ready to go to s-, ready to go, was ready for school, but they caught me right before school, and everybody went. My father had just a payroll from the, was like, I think it was on a Friday. He had a payroll in his pocket, a couple of hundred German marks or whatever, and we left everything. We didn't have a suitcase. We didn't have anything at all. We just walked out just for a check for the passport. We went to the police station and there were big buses there, said *Vernugungsfahrt* [joy ride].

EG: Yeah.

MR: *Vernugungsfahrt* is what, a joy ride of some, a pleasure trip of some kind.

EG: Yeah.

MR: And that was the beginning of the end. A pleasure trip.

EG: And where did they take you?

MR: Zbaszyn [Poland] over the Lanti-Katowice area into Poland. The SS was on the top of the roof with machine guns and the railroad was heavily guarded. And we never saw our home again.

EG: They only looked at this ancient passport? They didn't look at your birth certificate?

MR: No. They took everybody. They rounded up everybody that had Polish passports. Every Jew that had Polish passports in Germany, you know, they rounded up in October 28th, 192-, 1938.

EG: I didn't know that.

MR: Yeah.

EG: What happened to the people who had German passports?

MR: That is a good question. Very good question. I don't know.

EG: Maybe they got them a little later.

MR: Maybe they got them a little later. Yes. And now, my uncle, he was not home at the time, so he must have come home the next morning. And they arrested him and they shipped him to Oranienburg Sachsenhausen.

EG: Yeah.

MR: And he did not survive Oranienburg. A very interesting story just came to my mind. One of the, not the youngest, the next to the youngest brother, the one who died in Oranienburg, his name was Herman. The other one was Ignatz, Igan, and he had a store. Everybody was in the men's clothing business. And he had a store in München, 21 Schwangauerstrasse, and called *Der Moderne Herr* [The Modern Man]. On the second floor there was a German soldier. There was a driver to a general. One of my uncles managed to get away from Germany in 1933 and lived in Paris. And they made arrangements to escape to Switzerland. My uncle already was in Switzerland at the time, and they made arrangements. They paid somebody for him to take him from Paris into Switzerland, illegally.

EG: Yes.

MR: Here this driver risked his life to save a Jew. I wish I knew who he was, because I would like to go there, even he didn't survive, he didn't make it, I would have liked to thank him. He dressed, my uncle into-- he was a good-looking, very good-looking man, very attractive man-- he dressed him into a German uniform. And he drove him in a staff car, in a German staff car into Paris. From Paris the arrangements were made to have him go to Switzerland, smuggled into Switzerland. Within 20 or 25 yards of the Swiss border, a French policeman sold him out to the Germans, and they shot him a few yards away from the Swiss border. Here a German risked his life and the French policeman sold him out to the Gestapo.

EG: Hmm.

MR: You didn't hear these stories too often, do you?

EG: No. How did you find out about that? Who told you, since...

MR: My uncle, my uncle that was in Switzerland at the time, he got the information and he managed, and we had family in Newark, New Jersey, an attorney that arranged passage for my uncle to the United States.

EG: Yes.

MR: That was right after the war, immediately after the war.

EG: Yeah. Hmm. Really, there is no end to all these happenings, all these, many variations of the same thing, and somehow we have to really...

MR: The experiences are mostly, you know, basically the same, but the stories are different.

EG: Yeah. They sure are. Well, were you and your father together when they took you away from Leipzig?

MR: Yes, my, at the time it was my grandfather. He was age 73 and he was, he could jump over three chairs holding onto the dining room table. He was in beautiful, beautiful physical condition. And so was my dad, and so was I. And the Polish border guard would not let us in, and we were in a no-man's land between countries for, I think, it was 48 hours. It was raining. It was cold. And my grandpop couldn't stand up any more and he finally sat down and that's where he caught a cold and he had pneumonia and less than a year later he died.

EG: Hmm.

MR: Would have lived another 10 years maybe. And then we, the Polish government finally permitted everybody to come in, into Poland, and there was a refugee camp there was Zbaszyn. And from there on people were allowed...

EG: ...how...

MR: ...to go where they wanted to go and in that particular case, in our particular case my father came from Tarnów, that's where he was born. And there were some cousins there and that's where we finally went to, Tarnów.

EG: This place where the camp was, how do you spell that?

MR: Zbaszyn?

EG: Yeah.

MR: It's a Polish spelling and I don't know how to spell the Polish.

EG: Well how would you spell it in English?

MR: I don't know, S-Z-B-O-N-C-H-I-N, I would say is...

EG: Yes.

MR: I stand to be corrected.

EG: O-N...

MR: Zbaszyn. [unclear], you know, where...

EG: Yeah. Yeah. Near, where is that?

MR: That's, I would say it's not too far from Katowice, Katowice, today is, I think, Poland.

EG: Yeah, how long were you there?

MR: Days.

EG: But together with your father?

MR: Together with my father, and together with my grandfather.

EG: Grandfather.

MR: Yeah. And we went to Poland. And we came there on a Saturday...

EG: Was, how many people were there with you, all together?

MR: Oh, hundreds of people, hundreds. It could have been thousands, but...

EG: Yeah.

MR: You know, at least, in that particular camp must have been maybe five, six, 700, educated guess, I don't know.

EG: But you only stayed there a short time.

MR: Couple, yeah, till, you know, people stayed there longer if they didn't have any place to go.

EG: Yeah. But you went into Poland.

MR: But we went to, by train we went to Tarnów. Tarnów was a small town of...

EG: Could you take any money with you? How did...

MR: It was his payroll, a couple hundred German marks that he had with him, luckily, otherwise there was nothing.

EG: So you could pay for the train fare to Tarnów.

MR: I don't, I think the train fare was paid for by the Polish government or by whomever. I don't remember, or maybe my father paid for it. I don't know.

EG: But, and then in Tarnów? Did you find a [unclear]?

MR: Well we found something very interesting. Tarnów is a small town of approximately 60-, at the time about 60,000 people. Out of the 60,000 people, 30,000 people were Jews. And coming from Germany and seeing something that was rather exciting; we came there on a Saturday night before *Shabbas* came to an end, and the windows were open, and the people were singing, and there were the Orthodox Jews with the beards and the *peyes* [sidelocks] and the *shtreimels* [a fur hat worn by some Orthodox Jewish men] and the *bekeshas* [a black coat worn by some Orthodox Jewish men] and the whole *schmear* [slang for everything] there, and they were dancing and it was something like to come to a totally, come into a different world, you know, it was something, really something totally different there. Like if, you take a trip, you go on a, it wasn't a vacation, but you, you know, it's different culture and something, something that we didn't see that in Germany. I had never seen anything like it.

EG: Yeah. So there, at that time, they could live as Jews.

MR: They could live as Jews, but it didn't last very long, because that was...

EG: Not very much longer, yeah.

MR: They, the Germans knew that they, they knew they wanted to liquidate the Ger- the Jews, and they shipped us into Germany [Mr. Rowen means Poland] in 1938.

They knew quite well that they're gonna be there in 1939. It didn't take long to go into, it took them what, eight days to invade Poland?

EG: Yeah, right...

MR: And then the Germans came into Poland and these weren't the Germans any more that I remembered as a child. It was something totally different.

EG: This was but a year later, in '39...

MR: Yeah.

EG: ...when they marched in.

MR: Was one year later. I, the Germans that I remember were kind of nice people and here all of a sudden they started to, to murder people.

EG: How--, at that time that the Germans marched into Poland, you lived in a regular apartment there in Tarnów?

MR: We lived with, in a, I lived with relatives. My father lived in sort of a, some kind of a community type of housing.

EG: Mmm hmm. And how was it? What happened when the Germans marched in? What happened to you then?

MR: It didn't take long before they started kidnapping people off the street and sent them to slave labor camps. And it didn't take long before they made a ghetto, and the ghetto became smaller and smaller. And they took everybody off the streets on trucks and put them into the, they got a hold of me. I was about 15, and to a stone quarry in Nowy Sacz. And I wasn't able to do that kind of work. You know it's...

EG: Yeah.

MR: Carry big stones around in wheel barrows and things like that. And they shipped me back into the ghetto. And like I said they made the ghetto smaller and smaller and smaller. And my father had a cousin, and he was the *Vorstand* [director] from *Judenrat*...

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: And unfortunately I never liked the man, but, he maybe contributing to his effort maybe it I survived, we bought time, let's put it that way. He collaborated with the Germans. I've been trying to find out, I didn't want to ask his surviving family what happened to him, but I have a feeling if he, if he didn't die a normal death I think maybe somebody would have assassinated him.

EG: Mmm hmm. Somebody. Who?

MR: Well, he, he determined, he helped to, he helped to take, to liquidate the Tarnów Ghetto. His name was Edward Volkman.

EG: He decided who should go?

MR: Pardon me?

EG: He had to decide who should go next?

MR: Not really, he assisted. He assisted the Germans. In other words the Germans said we want 2,000 people to be shipped out, and he had his ghetto police and he made sure that the Germans got 3,000 people.

EG: You mean, if somebody assassinated him, it was a Jewish person?

MR: Yes, yes, yes. Perhaps maybe I would have volunteered too. I don't know.

EG: And what happened to you and your father, and your grandfather?

MR: My grandfather died by the year after we got into Tarnów, like I said before...

EG: Yes, yes.

MR: ...of pneumonia. He was buried there. And I worked, I had different jobs, *Eisenbahn, Aubbesserungswerk*, work where they repaired locomotives and railroad cars and things like that and there were some, there was a Poli-, a fellow, German that, his name was Redlakovski, from Tarnów. He knew somebody in the Polish underground and he brought me milk every day and he brought me bread every day and he told me exactly how to get to his house if things got rough.

EG: Was he...

MR: He would hide me. He would put me up.

EG: Was he a Gentile?

MR: Gentile, he was, yes. But he saved a Jewish girl, and as far as I know, he, he saved her. Last time I heard she was pregnant. I don't know. But I never, I never made it into, I wanted to go to his house, but I never made it. And one time they, the Germans they were lining up, up in the market place, it's called the *Rynek*, and there was a massacre that was unbelievable. And they just, they killed thousands and thousands of people. And it was a rainy day.

EG: Were you there too?

MR: Yeah, I was there at the time. Yes. I was one of the last ones to leave the ghetto, due to the fact that the relative of mine was a *Vorstander*, you know...

EG: Yeah, yeah.

MR: The *Judenrat*, *Älteste*, whatever you called it. And every time there was a what they called a *wysiedlenie* [Polish: deportation], in Polish, *Aussiedlung* [German: deportation], when they took people away, he got our name off the list. So my father and I, we were the very, very, very last that left Tarnów, the ghetto in Tarnów. Oh like I was saying, it was a rainy day at the time, and from the *Rynek*, from the market place, it was up on high grounds and the street below you could see the blood, the water mixed with the blood was running down. It was just, everything, the streets were red with blood from the people. And the very, one of the very last days when we were about to leave the ghetto, there was a liquidation of the ghetto, people were hiding in cellars and were, but from, from one, from, whenever the Germans picked up the Jews out of the ghetto they figured, what the heck, we're not gonna, if we don't get him this time we'll get them the next time. And like I said before, the ghetto became smaller and smaller and smaller, you know, and

there was really no place to hide any more, and the people that were hiding, sooner or later they got them and the last day they, I'll never forget it because we were just only about a couple hundred yards away, they were rounding up little children, and they machine-gunned them down. And then, from there, we went to another camp and then we finally, our final destination was Oswiecim, which is...

EG: Auschwitz.

MR: Auschwitz.

EG: Yes.

MR: There was a transit camp on the way, and with the bands, and, you know, they had a way of doing this. Very well-organized. Like they-, like somebody wrote the script for a movie, you know, they, they...

EG: Only it wasn't a movie. But somebody wrote the script. Were you still together with your father then, on the way to Auschwitz?

MR: We went to Auschwitz, now, I'd like to make a statement at this particular point. I think, with all the records, with all the tapes that are being taped right now, with all the books that have been written about the Holocaust, I think that I am the only survivor that was picked for the gas chambers *twice*, not once, a miracle. It seems that *ribonn shel olam* [Hebrew: lord of the world], God wanted me, wants me to, wanted me to live. And I'm here to tell about it. And I will tell the story how it happened that I was picked twice for the gas chambers, and I'm here today to tell the story.

EG: Eh, I'd like to have this uninterrupted, so I'd like to turn the tape at this point.

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

[Long pause on tape recording before interview continues].

MR: Okay. On the, after we left the transit camp, after we left the Tarnów, the ghetto in Tarnów, we went to a transit camp but I don't remember the name. It slipped my mind. I wouldn't remember it either. We, the stories have been told before. We went into cattle cars, and one on top of the other and no place to go to the bathroom. And it was just one great big mess. All that time I was looking for little windows. I was looking for any place what would be possible to get out of there. There was no place. It was impossible to escape. I always had in mind to escape somehow, and I always knew that I, somebody's gonna do something to me. I was mentally prepared to jump, and I said if I'm gonna die I'm gonna take a German with me. That was all through, all through the concentration camps where I had made up my mind that if I'm gonna die I'm gonna take a German with me. So if everybody would have thought the same way, I don't think there would have been any Germans left. Anyway, we arrived in, in Auschwitz and as the story comes to my mind and it was told, it was told to me by somebody that I befriended, I'd worked at a detail called the Canadians.² And I was very fortunate to be a part of that group. And that sort of saved my life in Auschwitz, and I'll come to that later. And he was telling me that one day they unloaded the cars and they brought in from ghettos dead bodies to be burned in the crematoriums. These people already were dead. They were transports of not people that were alive from the ghettos, dead people. And there was a little boy still alive. He could have been five, six years old. He was on top of the dead bodies, and he was crying. He was begging for his life. And the German came there and he shot him. It's a very sad story. A horrifying, very, very, very sad story. I didn't see it, but it's authentic. It's reputable. We arrived in Auschwitz, and we didn't know who Mr. Mengele were at the time, but I'm sure I met him.

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: And so did everybody else and there were big, long trucks and they had a platform with little ridges on it where you could walk, and everybody thought that you're going on the truck. You didn't have to walk and you go someplace nice, maybe. And the other group, people were lining up and here was a doctor, and he separated the people. Now, we really did not know. We knew it's not gonna be, it's not gonna be a country club. We knew it was some kind of a camp, but we really did not know the extent and the horrors. Once we were inmates in there, we found out very fast. As I was sitting here, I had a little book here where I, at age 10, I ran 60 yards at eight point four. I was very active in sports and I was fast, and I could run. I was an excellent runner. And the reason I'm mentioning

²Mr. Rowen is referring to the labor detail that sorted confiscated articles. The Nazis kept confiscated Jewish property in warehouses. The prisoners referred to these warehouses as "Canada". See image <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa8638> of prisoners sorting articles and the description of Auschwitz's "Canada", www.ushmm.org accessed 12/18/24.

it is because my, this is the first time that I was picked for the gas chamber. And I was about to get on the truck. And I didn't know where the truck is going, and I didn't know where the other people were going. But I saw that my father did not go on the truck, and that my father went into line. He was picked to be with the other people. And at that particular time I made up my mind maybe God above, He gave me a little push, that Marcel, that wasn't Marcel, this was Marzel, that was, "Marzel Rauchwerk, you're not gonna go on the truck." The SS with fixed bayonets formed a dividing line between the people to go to gas chambers, which, you know, we found out that was for the gas chambers. And the other ones it was supposed to go to Birkenau to the quarantine. I took off like it was, my life did depend on it. And I ran as fast as I ever ran, and I broke through the, I broke through the guards. And I sort of disappeared amongst hundreds, maybe thousands of people. But what happened, they were lining them up, and I remember, I think it was in rows of 10s. And it was endless. For one reason or the other, I was the 11th. I wasn't the 10th, because I...

EG: Because you ran.

MR: ...ran through into the middle already they were lined up. And a German came with a fixed bayonet and he says, he starts screaming in German, "Don't you know how to count to 10?" And he stabbed me with a bayonet. He stabbed me in the arm and he stabbed me in the backside. And I was bleeding, bleeding pretty bad. And when it was time to line up to have our arms tattooed, and my number by way is 161575. Usually if you research the numbers, you can very well pin down where the people came from, about the approximate time when they have arrived in Auschwitz. It's, the whole thing is scientific, and with the help of the computers today, you know, it's made so much easier. Anyway, I found my dad and I was very, very happy that I did find him. We were very, very close, since my mother died. He tried to be a mother and he tried to be a father. And it reminds me of another little story which we will come to a little later. And then of course we went to a sort of a first-class bathroom, you know, where, no heat, and where they shave you from top to bottom, and you're in a couple of minutes or so with lukewarm water almost cold, no towels, and they give you a pair of pants and a jacket. And I think maybe I got a hot hat and they got the *klumpen*. The *klumpen* is a pair of wooden shoes like the Dutch are used to wearing, and my feet became infected. I had a *phlegmona*, I had an infection, you know. I had problems from those shoes. You wanted to take them off, but then you'd be walking on snow. It was in winter time, and in winter time in Poland it's rather cold.

EG: Yes. Yes.

MR: And you stand outside. You come out of the, without drying yourself off, and you're still a little bit wet, and you stand outside and you shiver and you catch pneumonia. So, that was the beginning of the exterminating people, and the next day we were carrying stones for non-productive work. From one place, and the same person took the same stone and brought it back. That was in Birkenau. And then there was the guards

with the dogs, and if you wanted to look for a little smaller stone, if you didn't get hit by the Germans, the dog got you. So it was, just the beginning of exterminating. There was nothing there really to, not to make use of labor or anything...

EG: No.

MR: ...it was just to kill people.

EG: Was your father at that same, Birkenau?

MR: Yeah, we were together.

EG: Yeah.

MR: We were together, and we were together, and then we, and the quarantine usually was like three months. And we were together in Block 10. Oh, one, one day they picked me to, this is not the second time for the gas chamber, but they picked me to go to coal mines in Brunau. And I remember the only people that came back from the coal mine, we used to call them the *Muselmänner*.³

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: They came back and they were skeletons, and they came back to die at Auschwitz. They came back to the gas chambers. So, I was picked, and I, the *Lagerältester* which is the fellow in charge-- he was a Gentile, I think he could have been part German, part Polish, or whatever, but he spoke German fluently, and he also spoke Polish, he was a political prisoner. And then I came, I went to him and I spoke to him in German and I started to cry. And I said, "Look. I don't want to leave my dad. I don't want to go."

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: And he said, "You have to go. They got your name and everything down." I said, "But I don't want to go and leave my father." And I started to cry, like a baby. And he says, "All right." So, if I were to go into Brunau I would have come back as a *Muselmänn*. It didn't take long. An order came from Berlin. They were picking every tenth, every tenth man to...

EG: What year was it about?

MR: Pardon me?

EG: What year was that about?

MR: That, 1946.

EG: Six? After the war?

MR: Oh no, no, 1943.

EG: Forty-three.

MR: 1943.

EG: Yeah.

MR: The end of '43, beginning of '44.

EG: Yes.

³*Muselmänner* - term used by prisoners in Nazi concentration camps to describe people who were suffering from exhaustion and starvation, resigned to their impending deaths.

MR: The Germans came into the barrack, the *Blockältester*, *Blockältester*, [unclear]. The young punk, I hate to say it, he was Jewish. And he was from Lodz. And he should have gone to the gas chambers. I hate to say that, but, he tortured, he tortured the people, and talking about the father that is concerned for his child, even under the, in the worst circumstances, punishment for no reason, for something, he picked one out of every bunk. There were like six in the bunk. They were three high, 18, six in the bottom, six in the middle, six in the top, and he picked me to, for five lashes. He enjoyed giving out lashes. He liked to, looked at it like, there was no German there, there was nobody there. He didn't have to do it to save his life. He didn't have to do it to show off. He didn't, and he did it, he did it. I think he was sadistic or God knows what. He wasn't older than maybe 18 or 19 years old. And he picked me for the, for the lashes. And here my father cried out, "This is, this is my son. You leave him alone." He says, "I'll take the lashes." And before I knew what happened my father went there and he took the lashes. And I'll never forget it. This is what a parent will do for a child. It shakes me up more than anything else. Right after that, with all the labor and what we had to do, the Germans came in and they really cleaned out the camp and they really picked for the gas chambers. And they picked, my father had a slight hernia, and they figured that was enough to put him in the gas chamber. And they picked me for the gas chamber, because I was a little kid and I was skinny. I was always skinny. I was always active and I was running. I was like a wire. I was, you know, I could endure things like, but I was skinny. I wasn't built, you know, for physical, heavy labor or whatever. Anyway they picked me to go to the gas chambers. How did they pick me? The barrack was, the barrack was originally designed for horses. On the side of the barrack there was a stove that was, it went from one end to the other. And the Germans were standing on top of the stove. And when he called you over, to have your number written down to go to the gas chambers, you jumped across that stove and I was about the fourth or the fifth to have the number written down. Once your number is written down, you are cooked. You're finished. You've had it. You're dead. I dashed in between the bunks and there was a bucket. God put a bucket of sand there. They used the sand, when the oven got hot, they used to cement it, they made a cement there and they, they patched up the stove. I got ahold of the bucket of sand, and I turned it over because I knew they're gonna search the barracks. They did search the barracks. And we were all in the nude. In the wintertime it's nice and cold. We're on the floor there, shivering, and I took the sand and I tried to build like a barrier there so I figure if he's gonna look I says let him go see the sand.

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: I wasn't the only *khokhem* [Yiddish: smart guy] there, *Ober khokhem* [other smart guy] that tried to do this. There was somebody else that did it too. He was next to me. And he tells me that I should go out, and I tell him, "You go out." He tells me, "You go out." I says, "You go out." So we both were sitting there. Everybody was out. They emptied out the place and then they said in German, "We're gonna search this place, and

we're gonna break everything apart and we're gonna just," you know, they knew that people were hiding. I wasn't the only one that, I don't know how many. There weren't that many, but there were a few. And here the German officer is under the bunk looking, he sees something, or he sees somebody. I see him, and I thought for sure he saw me. And I see a gun pointing at me. And he's hollering in German, "You come out. And if you don't come out, I'm gonna kill ya. I'm gonna shoot you." So, I knew already what the score was, you know? I think of a bullet is, it's a little nicer than going to the gas chambers.

Chub dich in bud [Yiddish: go to hell]. I says, "Go ahead you want to shoot," I didn't say anything. I says, "I'm prepared to die." So I say *shema*, you know, shoot and finish, let's get it over with. I hear a shot. And I'm still alive. He didn't see me. He saw the other guy. He's right next to me. He looked over to see and he saw the other guy. He injured him. He didn't kill him. He pulled him out. They broke up the whole bunk, bunk, all the boards, everything, fell on top of me. He pulled out the other guy. After everybody came in, I crawled out from underneath the boards and my father was taken away already to the barrack next door. Already the rations that came for the people, this *blockältester*, this guy from Lodz already, he kept the bread, and he kept the whatchyamacall, so the little bread that I had and the little soup that I had I took to my father. Oh, before he went, before he went to the, no they did not take him away. They called the numbers later and then the one, the numbers were called they took them away later. My father made a prediction. It became an [unclear] at the time. He said, "You will get out of this alive. And you will meet my brother." The one who was in Switzerland. There was no way that he had known. "You will meet him," and he says, "*Er ist ein guter Junge*," "he's a very good, very good natured man." And he said to me, "Don't ever go into partnership with anybody."

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: Then his number was called and they took him to the barracks next door. And that's when I took my bread and my rations, you know I, and then that was the end of my dad. And then I got a break in Auschwitz. Oh, before the break, I worked in a potato bunker. And I got caught stealing pot-, I got caught stealing potatoes.

EG: After you got out of this barracks, where did you go?

MR: Pardon me?

EG: Where did you go that they didn't catch you again, out of those barracks?

MR: [unclear] out the details. See, the selections came, the selections could be once a month or two times a month.

EG: Oh, I see.

MR: You know, as long as you were wor-, as long they didn't, they gave, between the piece of bread and a piece of soup, if they did not take you away, you survived. But the problem was, they did take you away. They did send you away to different places. And they did come and make selections and pick people to die in the gas chambers. But in the meantime, you know, you survived. If you were working in some kind of a, some kind of job.

EG: So you found another place to keep busy.

MR: I got a place to keep busy. We were unloading potatoes.

EG: Yeah.

MR: I got caught stealing potatoes, and I got beat up again by another, by another Jew. But he did it in front of the Germans, and he didn't, he told me, he says, "Holler, holler, scream, scream." And I screamed and I hollered. He didn't hit me too hard. He was pretty decent about it. Then the Germans got ahold of me. He says, "Why did you steal the potatoes?" I says, "I was hungry."

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: So they gave me soup, and they wouldn't let me stop eating. And I had to eat and eat, and I couldn't eat any more. He says, "Eat!" Eat, you know, I said I was hungry he's gonna eat this soup till I was practically throwing up. The same place in the potato bunker, thousands and thousands of people were standing in line, because there was one missing. Who was missing? It was me. I decided to take a nap in the bunker. I was hiding in the bunker and I was tired and I took a nap. And here was *Appell*. It was time to go back into the camp. And one person was missing. Well, the same guy that beat me up before and beat me up again, I got a good, good, good beating that time. The fellow that was in charge of that potato detail-- the reason I, that, the way I remember that, to get in the potato detail was a big deal. And the *kapo*, the *kapo* is the foreman there that was in charge of the potato detail, he knew a fellow from my hometown in Germany who was a member of the detail, the detail called the Canadians⁴. I don't if any survivors were Canadians, maybe there were, maybe there were not. The Canadians there was a, the most glorified and the best job that you can have in Auschwitz, with just about every privilege that a prisoner can have. They were unloading the railroad cars. They were collecting the luggage. They were sorting the luggage. They worked like coolies, like slaves. But they never went hungry. And there was all the food you can eat, and the detail, the Canadian detail were not taken away in the camps, and other camps. They were not being selected to go to the gas chambers. So, suits were made to measure, hats were made to measure. We picked out the best shoes we could get. We had the best underwear we could get. We were not allowed to open up canned goods. And I found a, there a canned goods one time and I put it in a bucket of water and a German caught me and I got five lashes on the *tuchus* [Yiddish: buttocks] because I had a can of sardines. That was against the rule. The Canadian detail, I was in charge, I had a very good job. I was in charge of burning documents. And it was just unbelievable. I had a lot of time to look at these documents. And there was, the iron cross first class and there were, just, just unbelievable type of papers that people had. Money, we were not allowed to keep any kind of money, but when people left, they left from, was a gathering point. And people came, they came from Belgium, they came from Holland, they came from Greece, and they came from Poland, and they came from France, wherever the Germans...

⁴See footnote 2.

EG: Yes.

MR: ...went, that's where...

EG: Where they came from.

MR: They came from.

EG: Yes.

MR: When we sorted some of this clothing and there were like the stars on the clothing, and all this clothing went to, went to the Germans. We managed to put the stars of David into the packages. We, when we found gold, we were supposed to turn it in, we buried it. When we found American dollars or any kind of foreign currency, we, if I didn't burn it I buried it. And, tape coming to an end here?

EG: Pardon me?

MR: The tape is coming to an end?

EG: No, it's still running.

MR: And there was an uprising. I'm sure it has been documented, where the *Sonderkommando*, the *Sonderkommando* were the people that manned the crematoriums, for the crematorium 1, 2, 3, and 4 as I remember it. Because I worked very, very close to one. I could see, I could see the Germans with the Zyklon gas or whatever, put it in on the top there. And I, one time I saw the girls, they were all completely nude. They were walked into the gas chambers. There was an uprising where the *Sonderkommando* they knew they're not gonna get out, and they're gonna be killed. There was no way for them to survive, and they, they, they, there was an uprising.

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: There was a, you know, they, they killed somebody there and they took the Germans hostage and, and they fought. They were very, very brave and they fought like the, like the partisan in the Warsaw Ghetto, under different circumstances. And they, they just didn't want to, couldn't put up with it any longer.

EG: Yeah, well.

MR: And then finally as the Russians, I think, were approaching the camps, I know the, Hitler knew that we had to do something-...

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

MR: That they would have to liquidate because the Russians, I think, were on their way, and we were gathered one day and we went in a train. And we went to, all the way from Auschwitz to Oranienburg Sachsenhausen. And we didn't last very long in Sachsenhausen, and we took another train ride. And this time we went to Dachau.

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: So it was a nice round trip. It wasn't the main camp at Dachau, it was, I couldn't think of the name, it's coming to me, Kaufering. It's somewhere in Bavaria. It's not too far. It can't be too far, because where I was in a death march to Munich, I made it, thank God. I was at camp and there were some German civilians near. And I worked as an apprentice in a ghetto, in the railroad there I did a little carpentry work. I was put to work to do some carpentry work and these German civilians, they were from, I think from Weimar, if I'm not mistaken. They managed to, there was nothing to eat there. Everybody was starving, and they managed to bring a piece, every day I got a piece of bread from a different guy, from different people I got a piece of bread and some soup that was left over. But these were not guards, these were not, these were German civilians. And so it sort of kept me, kept me alive there. People were eating potato peelings out of garbage cans, and it was at the time already towards the end where the Germans didn't have anything to eat...

EG: Yeah.

MR: ...themselves. And the bread that we got it was already *farshimelt* [grown moldy], and...

EG: Yes.

MR: You know, it's like...

EG: Moldy.

MR: Yeah.

EG: Yes.

MR: There was molds, green molds on it. We blew at it and it just flew away. And they [unclear], again we saw the bombers there, the British airplanes and we also saw the Germans that had jet planes and they, thank God they could never get them off the ground. They didn't have the fuel for it, they were experimenting with airplanes, the jet planes, before we, I think, before we even had it, before the States had it. And then we went on the death camp, it was a terrible, terrible march towards Munich. And people were falling by the wayside, just couldn't walk and couldn't make it and got shot. And then it's raining and you have a blanket and the next prisoner comes and tries to tear the blanket away from you. And then we finally made it to a camp and the guards sort of thinned out where there was like 30 or 40 or 50, all of a sudden I saw four or five.

EG: Hmm.

MR: And I said to myself, I don't know, I says, "I'm gonna make a break for it." And I made a break for it, and I crawled under the, under the wires and the Germans did not see me. I went in the bunkers with all anti-aircraft car-, guns, and I stayed along the, and I stayed along the highway. And it must have been in the vicinity of Munich somewheres, on the outskirts, on the highway, along the highway. And then I saw a car and I heard, I had English in school in Germany and for a couple of years, and my father tried to talk to me in English, you know...

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: Teach me languages, and I knew it was English. I knew it wasn't German. And I came out and I waved. There was a Jeep. It was American troops, and I just about passed out. And they loaded me on that, put me on the Jeep. They took me to headquarters and from headquarters they put me up with the GIs and I had a nice bath and they fed me, and took me to another company there. And I became a little bit of a mascot and then I decided I'm gonna go liberate a bicycle somewheres. I went to a German farmer and I asked him, "Do you have a bicycle?" He said, "No." On the way out I saw a bicycle and I sat on the bicycle and I drove away. And I wanted to go to Leipzig and see, maybe I'll find somebody. And I got as far as Landshut and here the American army is taking away bicycles [laughs].

EG: [laughs]

MR: And they took my bicycle away. I'm walking the streets, like *fartummelt* [confused], you know.

EG: Yeah.

MR: And here comes a Master Ser-, Staff Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, nice Jewish boy. His name was Johnny Rothberg, from New York. And he's talking to me in German fluently. An American talking German. So, he was a little boy, he had left Berlin when they were little. His father was a representative for Frigidaire. And he came to Germany to sell refrigerators. And this boy, he spoke German like a native, with a Berlin accent. So, what was he doing? He was with counterintelligence. And they had a villa and things really looked up, looked up good. They took me in there, and made me an investigator, a consultant, and things looked pretty good. From then on I wanted to go, my dream was Israel. I wanted to go to Israel. And I wanted to go, I wanted to go fight, and I wanted to join and I did join. And then we were in the camp. We smuggled from Germany over the Brenner Pass...

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: Into, into Italy, no, into Austria, and from Austria into Italy. We walked over the Brenner Pass. And the snow up to the waist deep, you know, and that was the *Haganah*...

EG: When you say, were...

MR: The *Haganah* at the time they organized, you know, and it was transports went to, the British caught all these transports and they sent them to, what's the name, Cyprus.

EG: Cyprus.

MR: Cyprus.

EG: When you say "we," there were some other young men like you doing the same thing?

MR: Oh yeah.

EG: Yeah.

MR: Yeah.

EG: But after all this, weren't you all exhausted and sick, when the Americans picked you up?

MR: Oh, when you eat five pounds of canned pineapple left from the refrigerator, lots of pineapple there. I, we, you know, we love pineapple.

EG: [unclear].

MR: I put on weight real, I put on weight really, these guys were just fantastic. They, you know, and I did anything. I waited on tables, and whatever they wanted me to do, I did it for them, you know, and it was.

EG: [unclear].

MR: I was just happy to stay there...

EG: [unclear].

MR: I had a nice, clean bed. I stayed, I lived with them, and then I ate with them and they treated me, well, like I was a GI, like I was one of their soldiers.

EG: And from there you went...

MR: From there finally I decided, I'm moving to Israel.

EG: You wanted to be [unclear].

MR: I wanted to go to Israel. I could.

EG: And you couldn't have any papers, or did they issue you identification papers or something?

MR: See I had from the United Nations.

EG: Yeah.

MR: ...the, UNRRA.⁵

EG: Yes.

MR: United Nations Relief administration, you had [unclear].

EG: So you got across the borders.

MR: You don't travel, you didn't travel, that's why we went over the Brenner Pass.

EG: Oh.

⁵UNRRA - United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Founded in November 1943 and dissolved in September 1948, to aid the refugees and countries hard hit by World War II.

MR: We went illegal.

EG: Yeah.

MR: I got, we got totally, identifications in Italy.

EG: Oh. From the *Haganah*.

MR: Yeah. My name was Treme or somebody. The guy was like 10 years older than I was. And in my, then, in that particular camp I started to write to Israel, and all my family in Israel said, "Look what you went through. There's a war coming up. We don't want you to come to Israel." I said, "I wanted to go to Israel." And then my aunt, my mother's sister, says, "Do not come to Israel." And then all of a sudden I wrote to the, I wrote to the community in Paris. And in the meantime I found my, found my uncle, and my uncle was in the United States, and here I get one cable after the other, and he's sending money, he's sending cables. He said, "I want you to come here." And this and that, this and that, and I was torn. I didn't know where to go, which way to go, and I wanted to go to Israel. When all my relatives were telling me that, "Go to the United States," you know, "You have a chance there." You know, "Life is hard here and there's another war here. And you're gonna fight and you might get killed." This and that. I says, I didn't care about being killed. I was so pro-Israel. I wanted to, I wanted to go fight for them. I wanted to go die for them. Nothing would have mattered, you know?

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: I just wanted to go there. I'm sure everybody. A lot of people felt that way.

EG: Yes.

MR: And anyway, it wasn't meant to go to Israel. I was meant to come to the United States. I never regretted it. I've been to Israel twice.

EG: Yeah.

MR: You know, I couldn't wait to go the first time. It's just a beautiful, wonderful country. But it was, I was just happy to come back here.

EG: So, then you came to the United States, so.

MR: In 1948.

EG: From, from Italy?

MR: Italy.

EG: From Italy.

MR: Yeah.

EG: Through the.

MR: From Italy.

EG: JDC [Joint Distribution Committee]? Or who, who helped you to get here?

MR: Again, the attorney in Newark.

EG: Oh.

MR: I got papers. I got, see, I was in a German quota.

EG: Yes.

MR: Everybody had a lot of problems because most of them were like Polish quotas.

EG: Yeah.

MR: Polish quotas took a very long time.

EG: Yes.

MR: And with connections in Italy, and with connections in Newark, and with the connections maybe in the Senate...

EG: Mmm hmm.

MR: ...my papers came through rather rapidly.

EG: So you, you came directly to your uncle, then?

MR: I came to my uncle.

EG: And then...

MR: And then I'm talking to you.

EG: Well, that is really...

MR: Some story.

EG: Some story.

MR: We put it in, we squeezed it in two tapes?

EG: Well, you really...

MR: All right, it's time for coffee.

EG: You really had a big part in your own survival.

MR: Well, there's a lot of things, we covered it quite superficially. Next time when I really, I don't think I will retire, because I'm not the person who could retire anyway, but one of these days I'm gonna find time to write a book.

EG: Yeah, you should.

MR: Really put it down in sequence and the way it should be written down. This is kinda superficial, but, I would like to do it.

EG: Yeah, you really...

MR: Maybe I could contact the school again, the Catholic school, and in front of the girls, and they were, the nun that was in charge of that project, she said she has never seen the children in her school to sit through an entire period where you could, and I, where you could hear a pin drop to the floor. Because evidently the girls carry on in class, and that, even in Catholic school.

EG: Yeah, but you know, it takes on so much more meaning when you see a live person...

MR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EG: ...tell you these things than when you read them in a book.

MR: Yeah, but I made it, I didn't, the way I presented it, I don't know how can, how anybody can put humor into an experience like this, but I star-, I came on very, I came on, I didn't come strong, I came on very relaxed. And I came on very lightly. And I came on cutting up a little bit.

EG: Yes.

MR: And I came on with a little bit of jokes. But I came on very, very, I made my point very strongly...

EG: Yes.

MR: ...in between, and by the time I finished I had their attention and we didn't have time for question and answers, and that was, the letter that Sister Marie Theresa wrote to me that I'd like to put this on tape. And this is the end, closing of the letter where she said, "Together you and I and countless others must work to rid the world of hatred and to remove the climate in which all men can live together in peace. Thank you very much. Sincerely yours, Sister Marie Theresa." That says it all.

EG: Mmm hmm. It sure does. Well, to the tape we ought to say that you, you were, speaking to, to a class of girls who...

MR: To a class of seniors...

EG: Eh...

MR: Girls, at a senior high school in Philadelphia.

EG: Yeah.

MR: The Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls.

EG: So that, that's very important that non-Jewish people should also hear about this.

MR: That's more important than, see, we know about it.

EG: Yes.

MR: The Germans don't want to know about it. German childrens don't know about it. The kids in high school today don't learn enough about it. And I talk to them, whenever I see a survivor and I talk to him in Yiddish, he forgot Yiddish. If I try to talk to him in Polish, he forgot Polish. Eh, they didn't, most of the people that I meet they don't want to, they don't want to be reminded. They, they want to forget. You can't forget. You cannot forget.

EG: I don't see how one can ever forget.

MR: Oh they don't, all right they don't forget, if anything, they don't like to be reminded.

EG: They don't want to be reminded of it.

MR: They don't like to be reminded.

EG: Yeah.

MR: All of a sudden, all of a sudden they forgot Jewish, that they, you know, they get this look in their eyes that, "*Ich habe schon alles vergessen*," [I forgot everything].

EG: Well, it's very painful to remember, and I do appreciate that you, that you were willing to remember and put all this on tape.

MR: Like I said once before, I don't know how many years I have left. I don't know how many more years the remnants of survivors have left, and I think it's a fantastic

idea to put this on tape and maybe future generations, God knows, 50 or 100 years from now if the tape, maybe you can put that in something more permanent than the tape...

EG: Yeah, it will.

MR: But in, 20 years from now maybe the tape or whatever it's gonna be, this is gonna be outdated, it's gonna be a little toy, maybe.

EG: No, no, it'll be transcribed.

MR: Somewhere's into papers...

EG: Yes.

MR: And, you know.

EG: Yeah, it'll be kept.

MR: We find...

EG: It'll be kept permanently.

MR: We find papers that are thousands and thousands of years old. This might be something that many years from now if somebody is gonna say, "Hey, that, we don't believe. This is impossible." But there's gonna be more than one tape's gonna be transcribed. Hundreds of them.

EG: That's right. Only they won't be able to say that.

MR: So many of...

EG: With all of [unclear].

MR: It never happened, you know, people come up with these statements, it never happened. It's a myth. It's a...

EG: Well, that's why...

MR: Yeah.

EG: ...we want to have these tapes to document that it did happen.

MR: [unclear].

EG: So people should not forget.

MR: Well I'm gonna have some, I'm gonna relax. I'm gonna have some coffee or Sanka.

EG: Thank you very much.

MR: Coffee?

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