

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ADAMS TEMS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Marian Salkin

Date: April 1, 1981

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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AT - Adam Tems [interviewee]

MS - Marian Salkin [interviewer]

Date: April 1, 1981

Tape one, side one:

MS: This is the interview with Mr. Adam Tems. Please tell me where you were born, Mr. Tems, and when, and a little about your family.

AT: I was born 11 December, 1911, those are my papers. Actually, I was born 18 July, 1911. The reason why I was registered so late is because between July and December, we had three times a change in nationalities. The township register was established in December when the Polish nation started to exist. This was when I was registered, so in my papers I am 11 December, 1911.

MS: That's interesting. Do you want to tell us a little about your family? In what city were you born?

AT: I was born in Łódź. At this time it was Poland already. When I was born, it was Germany, and I explained it was [unclear] during the war of course. This was the years of the war. It changed the [unclear] position from one to another. My family was a typical Jewish family, mother, father, myself and two sisters. Between me and my younger sister was a difference of six years of age and we wouldn't be considered the high class. I would say we were an average *balbatishe* [Yiddish: decent] sort of family. We belonged to a Conservative synagogue, which maybe was a transition between the Orthodox and the Conservative here in the United States, or maybe a compromise. It was in a sense the type of synagogue where you did not have professional cantors or a professional rabbi, although the principal of the school was an ordained rabbi, but everybody else was not a professional. The cantor was not a professional. Any Jew could be a cantor if he was learned. My father happened to be trained as a rabbi, but he never was exercising his ability because he had to take over the business of his father and he tried to provide us with education, like every Jewish family. Mother tried to ingrain in us in terms of Jewish ethics, we were ahead of time and we were-- we didn't have any gripes, just all our miseries were our parents were [unclear], you don't know it this kind of love.

MS: [Laughs] That was not the popular theory in those days. The second question is, what was your life before the war or before your life was changed by the Nazi victories in Europe?

AT: Well, the traditional life before the war was, is when a child of three years would start with kindergarten [unclear] because we had obligatory schools of seven years and up. If you wish, you could go to a private school, which was a *Gymnasium*. There were-- I was sent to a school which would prepare you for *Gymnasium*, which was like a high school and two years of college here in the United States. I was in this school up to five. At five I had my exams and I was accepted to the class 1. In other words, I skipped

A, B, C, what was on the level of the kindergarten, because I had this in school. And from there on I started the basic studies for what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a trainman.

MS: A trainman?

AT: Yes, I was fascinated with trains, locomotives especially, but my parents had the desire that I would be a [unclear]. I was the only son, I had two sisters, so later on, I compromised and I went for engineering.

MS: What universities did you attend?

AT: The University of Warsaw, it was a polytechnic. Here's also a little story. I-- when I graduated from the *Gymnasium* and I applied to the university, I had the exams and I was not accepted. One of the professors on the committee had with me a cup of tea and said, "You did not fail because you did not know the subjects. You failed because you were born on the wrong end. If you want to convert, you may have it easier. If you want the hard way, go to this-and-this school and after this-and-this school, it will be two years and they will allow one year, so you will lose only two years, but they will not have any other choice but to accept you." [unclear] Because in our country it was *numerus clausus*, which is the Latin expression for "selected quantity," but practically it was a *numerus*.

MS: *Numerus*.

AT: So I went the long way in my-- this way I got my dual discipline, mechanical engineering and electrical engineering, which maybe was my salvation, I don't know. But I graduated. But I never reached the point of the professional diploma because the agreement was, the course was sponsored by the government and I should have gone for 18 months to the Polytechnic Institute of the government, but it was already filled, so I was postponed from one year to another year, until 1939. The war started, so it was too late.

MS: Poland, of course has a fantastic reputation for antisemitism.

AT: Well, antisemitism in Poland was our daily fare.

MS: Yes. You didn't mention and I wanted you to, other than the fact that you said you were at the wrong end. Obviously he meant that being Jewish you were-- you could not get into the...

AT: Yes, Polish antisemitism, as a matter of fact, was a part of our upbringing. We knew this-- we are persecuted from time to time, we witnessed pogroms, and from time to time every year we have witnessed perils where it was not organized by the government, it was spontaneous. At the university I had good friends and I was always told when not to show up because, "Today we will beat up the Jews."

MS: A demonstration against the Jews today?

AT: And most of the time we didn't have a place where to sit, so we had to stand in the corner and the provost would come in and he would only count the fellows where are sitting. Standing by, he wouldn't count, so I never could go to the end of the trimester because you were missing so many and so many hours, although I was there. However, I never lost the lectures. If I couldn't show up because Jews were best to stay [unclear] I could have from friends, gentile friends the lectures. And I was also spending a tremendous

amount of time in the laboratories, so the practical experiences of the lectures was more helpful than sometimes the lectures. [long pause]

MS: Did any men in your family serve in the national Army?

AT: No. I was the only-- I was-- my father was during, my father was during the first war as a purser, and my grandfather was a purser. In the Polish Army, I was the only one.

MS: What is a purser?

AT: A purser, he would provide for the particular section of the Army he would provide everything what was necessary to-- for their existence, food and clothing and whatever.

MS: But he was considered as being a part of the Army?

AT: Part of the Army...

MS: I see. And you yourself were inducted into the Polish Army?

AT: I was inducted into the Polish Army and because I graduated *Gymnasium* so automatically I had to go to the, you know, the officer's school.

MS: And did you receive...

AT: I only made the platoon leader. I didn't make the fine rank of a staff sergeant because I was declared as unfit for hierarchy. I was rebelling, I didn't want to sing the derogatory songs about Jews and this is what led me into the cooler for about 16 times, each time three days.

MS: They saw that you weren't participating and so...

AT: "Why don't you sing?" I said, "I don't want to sing songs which are derogatory to Jews. I am Jewish. If you don't like it send me home, but don't force me to sing anti-Jewish songs." "Well, this is the Army, this is an order and if you disobey an order, this is rebellion and you can be shot. You can be shot today." [unclear] says, "Do it." So I spent 16 times in court and I didn't sing.

MS: You said you were inducted into the Army in 1939?

AT: No. This was already the war. Prior to it, I was-- after I was graduated from school I went to the Army for a year, 13 months.

MS: I see. Then...

AT: I was in the Reserve when the war started.

MS: I see. So when the Germans invaded Poland...

AT: ...I was already in the Army, the Engineering Corps.

MS: In the Engineering Corps, at the time of the invasion.

AT: And I was taken PW the 3rd of September.

MS: And the war started on the first?

AT: Right. When the Germans started to select the Jews out from the crowd in the temporary combat, I decided that this is not giving me any great hopes and I, I disappeared.

MS: Tell us about that, Mr. Tems.

AT: I went through the woods and fields to the first-- it was a peasant's land, a farm and I bought some clothes and I buried my military garb and I walked in nights and I came home. And I was the 10th of September already home.

MS: Back in Łódź?

AT: In Łódź.

MS: With your family at that time.

AT: Yes, yes.

MS: Your family was still there?

AT: Yes.

MS: Now, what happened to you and your family during the weeks following the German invasion? Of course, you gave us some idea when you got back...

AT: ...well, the 15th of September, the Gestapo waked me up because a neighbor decided to advise the Germans. He was what you called a *Volksdeutsche*. In other words he was a Polish citizen from German origin. He felt at this time his allegiance should belong to the Germans and he advises I'm a Polish officer, not a big one, but as someone [unclear] and if I'm at home I must be spying. So the Gestapo picked me up, and my father went to a client of mine who was also of German origin for whom I maintained his factory, and when he told him I was picked up by the Gestapo, he went right away to the Gestapo and convinced them that I am not a dangerous individual as I always had an excellent record in living together with everybody. As a matter of fact, he proved that I helped a neighbor of ours, whose husband and son ran away to Germany before the war was started. You remember, before the war started we had two years of constant war with Germany. They wouldn't sell us parts for the machinery that we had from Germany. We wouldn't sell them iron, pig iron or...

MS: In a sense, it was an embargo?

AT: Sort of, right, sort of, so it was already hanging in the air and the propaganda in Germany was already [unclear] and it was a prelude to the war. So the Gestapo did not harm me.

MS: But did they let you free?

AT: No, they did not. They transferred me to a sort of concentration camp that was a transitional camp, and over there it was the first time that I have seen or lived through what extermination could be and what extermination is.

MS: What was the name of the camp?

AT: Radogost. In Polish it was Radogoszcz.

MS: Was that the name of the community or just the camp?

AT: This was the name of the community and it was a factory of bricks and on this compound they have accumulated close to 13, 000 Jews.

MS: Were your-- let's just backtrack a moment. When you were taken into custody by the Gestapo, what about your family, what happened to them at that time?

AT: They remained in their...

MS: In their home?

AT: At this time they did not start yet the segregation. It was only later, in 1940, in January, February, when they started to transfer all the Jews from the city of Łódź into the ghetto.

MS: So your family then remained in Łódź...

AT: ...until they started to-- as a matter of fact, when I was released from Radogoszcz-- and I was released because the President of the ghetto requested my release with a few other people-- I went direct to the ghetto. At this time I met my parents.

MS: Oh I see. So when you were released from the first...

AT: From Radogoszcz...

MS: You went...

AT: To the ghetto.

MS: In Łódź?

AT: In Łódź.

MS: And there you were reunited with your family. Did you receive any help of any kind during this time from non-Jews? Apparently not.

AT: Well, I had a business and so long the ghetto was open, where the people could walk in and out, and most of my help was Gentile. I had visits from my foreman, he was coming in. And mostly he was interested in getting the list of the customers that we had so he could follow up, and he may as well have it instead of somebody else. Although this was also a short condition because later on the Germans had taken over every business, because Łódź was declared a German city, Litzmannstadt.

MS: But there was never, then, any chance or any opportunity of the non-Jews that you had associated with all during your life up to this point of in any way helping to get you out of the ghetto or to...

AT: In my case, no.

MS: Take you into their homes or protect you in any way...

AT: ...in my case, no. [long pause]

MS: When you were ordered to go to the ghetto to work, which ghetto was it? I think you answered that.

AT: It was Łódź.

MS: Did most of your community go to the same place?

AT: Well, the entire Jewish population from Łódź was transferred to this ghetto. It was the poorest section of Łódź. It was called Baluti. This section was not renowned to be even equipped to handle the amount of people that they have pushed in, not from the sanitary point of view and not from the habitat point of view. It was the most dirty part of Łódź.

MS: So the living conditions had to have been horrendous?

AT: Right.

MS: Was the ghetto still open so that you could go out to work early on?

AT: In the beginning, in the transition, when the transfers were coming in beyond the center, they could not make the barbed wire fence around it because they did not want to scare the population. They don't want to create a panic, on the assumption that, "We are going to rebuild this section to make it more modern. This is where you will be unharmed and you will live in peace." This is what it was.

MS: It was presented as a protective situation.

AT: Precisely. This is why I said in the beginning-- this question is always directed to us, "How could you go like sheep to the slaughter?" There were several stages and this was the first stage. They would isolate the entire group of Jews in a place where they could control what is coming in, what is coming out, and the amount what is coming in to survive, and the amount of calories of food that you would obtain were being reduced, reduced, reduced until the bare minimum and at this time people started to develop their own inventiveness, how to create the food and what type of food to have.

MS: After the ghetto was closed, were you able to have contact with the outside?

AT: Only on two occasions we had contact with the outside, which was not in the frame of being in the ghetto. We had twice visitors from the outside, from the workers' group, Polish Socialist Party, and they told us, "We are preparing the uprising and we would like you to help us and we will help you." And since I had a military background, I was in charge of special projects. I was present on those two meetings and we reserved our answer until the time when we will see if we have enough food and armament so we could stage anything which would remotely look like resistance. So when the first transport of arms arrived, we had two revolvers, quite old, and the ammunition was not fit for those revolvers.

MS: What you're saying is they came in, the Polish Socialist Worker's Party...

AT: Two representatives...

MS: ...came in and they wanted...

AT: To organize...

MS: Within the ghetto a resistance movement against, of course, the Germans?

AT: Right.

MS: And then they were able to supply you with two pistols?

AT: This is what they supplied. And it was of course, a joke. At this time, we decided that this looks like it is rigged and they want only to create a situation where the Germans would walk in innocent and liquidate us, and we said we will not be a part of it because we are too weak.

MS: Very interesting. How did your families support themselves within the ghetto during this time when the rations were periodically decreased? How were you able to obtain food, if at all, other than...

AT: We had received food, so much and so much *per capita*. We had food cards and we were entitled to so much and so much bread, so much and so much potatoes and other things, so much and so much meat. And most of the time we didn't know what sort

of meat it is. And then we would find out that those are horses and sometimes it was too small for a horse so we assumed it must be dogs, but when you are hungry, obviously your palate is more liberal.

MS: Less distinguished, yes.

AT: And they invented this, here is something that has to be written about the inventiveness of the Jewish mother.

MS: Please tell me.

AT: This was something unbelievable: that they could create from vegetables, from the peels, peeled potatoes. Of course, we had kitchens, where they would boil soups for the people working in the shops. The ghetto in Łódź was maybe one of the better...

MS: Organized?

AT: Organized ghettos because we were producing for the German government. We had metal factories, we had shoe factories, we had tailor factories, we had furniture factories, we had electrical engineer factories. As a matter of fact, we-- in the last years of the ghetto, we started to build a factory, which would [unclear] the bullets for the machine guns. We built a tremendous factory and the machinery started to arrive. We had quite an extensive industrial organization.

MS: Did you work in this particular phase of...

AT: ...well, I was working closer to the administrative end of the ghetto. Jokingly I was called this-- I am working in the fire department and so I was sent wherever a fire was to get going because of my skills, maybe because the President knew me since I was born, and...

MS: Excuse me, would you please tell us who the head of the ghetto was?

AT: The head of the ghetto was a fellow named Rumkowski¹ and he did not have any friends whatsoever, because, he was not a stable individual. Many, many people not knowing him would imply that he was outright the worst enemy what the Jews ever had. It was not so.

MS: There was very much written about this. I'm sure you are aware.

AT: Well, yes. This was written by people what they really didn't know him. They didn't know how the Germans operated. They were not close to them. I was dealing with the Germans every day. It was not a issue of what he will do, what his initiative will be. The issue was when will he do what he was told as he has to do? Now, the broader population didn't realize this: we are in the hands of the stooge.

[Tape one, side one ended.]

¹Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877 – 1944) became chairman of the *Judenrat* in the Łódź ghetto. (YadVashem)

Tape one, side two:

AT: So the Jews would imply that this is Rumkowski's idea. Rumkowski couldn't make any suggestions...

MS: Decisions?

AT: Any decisions. He was simply a stooge because the Germans did not operate directly. The Germans operated all the time. If they would use ethnic differentials, ethnic differences to implement their laws. For instance, I never was in a concentration camp, where a Jew would be my immediate supervisor. It was a Polak, it was a Ukrainian, it was a Lithuanian, it was a German which was a criminal. Once only my supervisor was a German, a political German, but mostly they were using people of extremes, so as they would have a willing tool in their hands. So to say this head of the ghetto could make a decision that is naïve. Those are statements made by people quite inert or jealous because being where he was, he was eating better than everybody else, so here you have the jealousy. But Jews didn't have the rights to make any decision. Yes, they wouldn't say-- if they would say, for instance, "I want to eliminate today from the ghetto all the children from the day they are born until 12 years old," this is it. If he would start from here, or even start from here, this they didn't bother. This is what they allowed him. But he didn't have any other choice. He had to deliver. Or if he would say, "Today I would like to eliminate this hospital because we need this building for this-and-this enterprise." So he would transfer the sick people into another building. "No, we cannot use this building and since you don't have any building, we will take them to another hospital outside of the ghetto." It was a lie, because they were loaded into trucks, where the pipe was going into the trucks, and when they arrived they were dead.

MS: Gassing...

AT: Right. Later on, when they needed a building and it was a hospital, and they wanted to eliminate it-- when the war was going badly for them in the East-- they didn't even try politics with us. They went in with brute force and they would throw the children out from the third floor right into the truck downstairs. At this time they didn't have to play the games or politics. They had the Jews already on their knees. They were so weak they couldn't even walk straight. And one of your question is: "Did it change your whole philosophy, religion or what-have-you?" It happens so that I was downstairs and when one of the children would fall by the truck I would have to pick up this child and put it on the truck. Next to me was an Orthodox Jew. He asked me, "Do you still believe in God?" So I can honestly-- I was the sinner-- you were maybe a sinner, a bigger sinner, I don't know. But this little child? What could he answer? He couldn't answer.

MS: Of course.

AT: So to throw allegations that he was a good President or a bad President, this is naïve and I have seen people behaving maybe a little bit beyond what they had to do, only to escape, because eventually he would be the next in line. This is a part of the survival

kit what he had. This was basically wrong, so if he would say we are the “chosen,” I don’t know if we are the “chosen,” because we behaved like primate animals in order to survive the next day.

MS: How were you able to escape the selections for deportation out of the, out of the camp?

AT: From the ghetto ...

MS: Rather, from the ghetto.

AT: From the ghetto I was able to escape because I had created a shop to manufacture switch gears with children from 10-12.

MS: That were working in your factory.

AT: In my shop. And those were the children what they wanted to eliminate about six months earlier, but since we made a shop out of them we had an excuse and the Germans didn’t particular control because they figured if not today they will go out tomorrow, so what’s wrong. What we did in this shop we built benches in such fashion that the little boy he would have on his feet a sort of a stepping board and he would stand up over there and since you would wear a smock the German who would come in for inspection wouldn’t see where his hip is and being in the ghetto everybody was, had his face like a old man. He wouldn’t dare to come in it because he was afraid that he would get lice. This was the part...

MS: He didn’t want to be contaminated by the Jews.

AT: Right, so he would only stay in the door and he would see about everybody-- well we are speaking about [unclear] five, six, so he would assume that we are-- that those are grown-up people. And those kids survived until the ghetto was eliminated and they went to Auschwitz after in the same week I arrived. I had certain, I would say, advantages in the ghetto to say I was involved in programs which helped the ghetto and the industrial aspect of the ghetto. So the administrative aspect of the ghetto, I built for instance the machinery to make, to make bread or to-- we had to make-- because we had dysentery and typhoid, we had everything, so we decided to make our own bread. And for this we had bread machines. Nobody had the strength to...

MS: Certainly.

AT: the dough.

MS: Were there any activities that you were aware of that took place in the ghetto itself, I mean as far as schooling for the children...

AT: ...oh yes.

MS: ...cultural activities for the adults.

AT: Oh yes, yes.

MS: Anything...

AT: This is something, this is something which is unbelievable. This is something, this is something which is so uplifting and you couldn’t help it. You had to have respect for the genetic characteristic of Jewry. You couldn’t help it. [long pause] In

the ghetto, children graduating from *Gymnasium* and they obtained *Matura*. *Matura* means this was equal to the second year of college here in the United States. I was teaching Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering to future technicians. And whom did I have over there? Children which they didn't have even elementary school, so I had to translate this to their language. In other words if they didn't know the theoretical aspect, they have seen the physical aspect. I had to build instruments for them which they could do, touch, and see working, where the needle goes: "This is a red mark when it comes up to this point." He didn't even know if this is a six or this is a nine. I say, "Do you see the red mark here? This is where it has to go." It was beyond him. "If it doesn't reach the red line it's no good either." And they were magnificent. They were terrific. And [unclear] we also had simultaneously the professional teachers, and here the ego complex started to enter.

MS: Take over, yes.

AT: For instance, during a class of mine where I had those students which barely could write and read, I was criticized [unclear] because instead of teaching them A,B,C and two and two is four, I'm teaching them to look on a red dot or something else and I said to him, "Two and two may not allow him to survive, but if he knows when it reaches this red mark, this item is good and he will deliver this item, maybe he will get for this item 500 mark, and 500 mark he will get 500 bones for food. If you feel that this is wrong maybe we should have a meeting to find out who is mature, you or me." So, the pettiness existed, but also the greatness. You could see, you could see there are ray of hopes. You could see the inventiveness of the individual, sometimes morbid. For instance, I was responsible for the food stamps, and I had to control of the food stamps issued every week in tune with the population, because we had a tremendous amount of exits every day. We had diarrhea, we had typhoid, we had malnutrition. You name it and we had it. So from time to time I would go for a spot check to see if this home is in order. I could walk into a home and I could see under the bed is a dead body. Why? Because the longer they had the dead body home, they would get the cards, because the cemetery did not report that fast because they were overloaded with work. What do you do in a case like that? It is pathetic that they do something like this. So will you go to the administration and say, yes, "I discovered over there a dead body?" No. So when I saw this, "I will have to take you off the list to reduce with one person, and let's forget it, I'm sorry, I cannot do it." Or, I will postpone my paper work with another two weeks because I was so overloaded with paper work. Other people would do this by the book.

MS: Every death had to be reported, and this would change the amount of food that that particular family unit was entitled to?

AT: Right. So, if you couldn't lose-- I didn't lose. They respected that we are here for a short duration of time because we will all die or eventually sent somewhere else and then finished off because we knew that we are sent to an extermination camp. I didn't take my situation so seriously like other people did. Maybe some people would say this,

“Rumkowski thought that he is the King of the Jews,” and they called him the “King of the Jews,” which is not fair. But so I was witness when he was crying, when the children were sent away because he was the principal of an orphanage from before the war and I know that this was a genuine interest with him, and this is when I came up with the idea that, “I will make a shop where we will build switches for the electrical motors and we will make it from those children.” He said, “Do whatever you can. Don’t let those children out,” because it would be a tragedy for him. As a matter of fact, the fellow who was his right hand-- Mr. Jakvotch [phonetic], here in the U.S. he was Jacobs-- he just passed away two weeks ago. He had a lot of [unclear] because he was dealing with the Germans. He was dressed properly, better than anybody else, and the Germans said, “See, he has everything.” But what they don’t understand is that in his quiet and unassuming way, by creating those places of work maybe he saved a lot of Jews and maybe the biggest amount of Jews which survived was from the Ghetto of Łódź. Because we were industrious and because we had tried to prove to the Germans that we can be a vital part of their economy, and those people which are telling you that they have sabotaged the war and sabotaged this, this is a lot of fairy tales, because no individual could create any worthwhile sabotage so as to stop this immense machinery.

MS: Did you have communication with the outside world or events through newspapers or radio?

AT: No. I had radio and I did listen to the BBC. Although it was not allowed, but I had a radio in the ghetto and I also had a radio in the concentration camp, where I was repairing radios for the Germans and I was always keeping a radio for myself until I had another radio to repair so I could know what’s going on in the outside world. And I was listening to the BBC. Otherwise you did not have. I had, several occasions, I was sent out of the ghetto to several villages where they had working crews to repair the equipment, but I was constantly supervised by an SS man, and the only thing that I could do was to discuss the matter of the problem with this machine or with this machine or with this problem or the other problem, and eventually I could see somebody and somebody would give me a wink with the eye and I would come back sometimes, “Yeah, I’ve seen your son,” or “I’ve seen your daughter and this is it, he’s alive.” But we didn’t have any outside communication. We knew that the outside world is as bleak to us as the Germans. For instance, in the beginning we had every night, we had [unclear] for Polaks coming in and the Germans stay hidden, they would let them in and if the Jews would come closer to fight off, you understand, they would be killed. This was for us provocations where until we ganged up on them, we didn’t let them in, and [unclear] started in the ghetto because this was on the outskirts of the center. They were passing by it and nobody knew what was going on.

MS: Were you aware of any underground activities in the ghetto itself that might have--

AT: No, not, not at all. We had bull sessions and we would do this and we would do this. It was jokingly called a “Jewish [unclear].” I don’t know if you know Yiddish. In Yiddish it is *er shlugt zich mit zeine gedanken*.²

MS: Hit yourself with your thoughts.

AT: Right. We saw that everything we intended to invent was already invented, and it is not practical.

MS: And so there was absolutely no possibility of resistance to the Nazi oppression in the camps. To what extent did the Poles help the Nazis persecute Jews? Were you aware of any Poles who helped hide Jews or smuggled food or goods that helped them survive?

AT: Personally, I do not know. But I’ve heard from other people that they did. If this is any indication, I would say the peasant who allowed me to change my military [unclear], he helped me. And I paid him handsomely with the money that didn’t belong to me. I would say, yes. But basically, I did not see in the ghetto any help from the outside. As a matter of fact, a relative of mine was in the type of business where every day he was taken outside of the ghetto and he would supervise a rag factory, which would convert the rag into a loose sort of cotton to rework or to fill in some vests for the armies going to the Eastern front. And they had connections with the Germans, and they would bring in some medicaments, which we did not have in the ghetto. But if they had this in a legal way or in a covert way, I don’t know. But maybe they had more occasions. When I was outside of the ghetto I was in the middle between two SS...

MS: Guards.

AT: Guards and I barely could breathe.

MS: So it didn’t work to your advantage in any way whatsoever. When you were deported from the ghetto to a concentration camp, which camp did you go to?

AT: Auschwitz was the first step.

MS: And was your family...

AT: The entire family.

MS: The entire family was deported at one time. Tell me about your experience in Auschwitz. How long were you-- when did you get there?

AT: I was in Auschwitz-- actually I was in Birkenau which was next to Auschwitz, I was two weeks. After two weeks I was sent to Dachau for quarantine of 10 days. From Dachau I was sent to Freichenden [phonetic] which was 20 kilometers south of Braunschweig. This was a part of the Neuengamme complex of concentration camps.

MS: How much time did you spend then?

AT: I was taken out from the ghetto the 27th of October in 1944 and two weeks in Birkenau and I was in the maintenance crew. Because of my technical skills I was designated to a maintenance crew in Braunschweig, which was a manufacturer of trucks [unclear] for tanks.

²Yiddish: He slugs me with my thoughts.

MS: It was a labor camp later on, I remember.

AT: And over there we did not have any [unclear].

MS: It was not a killing...

AT: Well, it was a killing because the supervisor of the camp, the *kapo*, was a criminal and if he wouldn't kill one or two people a day, he wouldn't be worthwhile to be there and since my German was a little bit more fluent and I tried to convey to the supervisor of the factory, he's a doctor [unclear] that actually, they are tools, why don't you look at those people like tools, not Jews, and stop beating them up, maybe they would produce better.

MS: Do you remember the answer to that?

AT: "Oh, yes," he said, "you are right. I don't see any reason why they should be treated like that." And he called in this supervisor, but being German, he said, "Adam told me that you are beating up the people. People are tools, why are you beating them up?" So he helped one side, but I made myself enemy, he was waiting only to get his hands on me and since I had access to everything that the Germans couldn't get. I have made many friends by repairing everything what needed a bolt and a nut, and a [unclear], you name it, so I had enemies and I had friends and among those camps the movement was so big, this-- on any given time, no matter where I would land, I would have somebody who would know me from a previous experience. For instance, one fellow I helped to escape from camp because the camp was close to this village and he noticed over there he could-- he was a German, so he could hide, and he was caught. But being a hardened criminal, he never told on me how he escaped [unclear]. So they threw him out to another camp and here I'm coming in and I'm being transferred from one camp to another and he saw me and he had a big hug for me and everybody was looking in amazement, "What's going on here?" He said, "He's alright," and nobody attacked me because the usual routine is when you are transferred from one camp to another camp, everybody tried to establish who's the boss here and who would be the first one, and he would be liquidated because they had to make their mark, and they would get a package of cigarettes from everybody what they would [unclear].

MS: Were you separated from your family?

AT: Oh yes, in Auschwitz.

MS: In Auschwitz. Did your parents and your...

AT: No one survived.

MS: No one survived from your family?

AT: No, I was the only survivor.

MS: Were you aware of this at the time?

AT: I was aware, because here again, accidents. The fellow who picked me up from the train was a hardened criminal and he was also a deputy from the ghetto in Łódź.

MS: He was the what?

AT: He was a deputy...

MS: ...oh, the deputy. I see.

AT: ... he was the [unclear] from Łódź and here he is in the crew, which is picking up all the newcomers into Auschwitz, and when he saw me, he grabbed my arm. It was-- I couldn't see because it was sunny and I was-- for seven days I was in a cattle car, so until I got used to this, he said, "Don't you recognize me, I am this-and-this fellow, what happened?" I was called one day, that the cable was burning on this-and-this particular street because the ice is melting. "Why don't you go look what it is?" So we basically knew what was wrong because everybody was stealing behind the converter, the meter, the electricity to heat houses because we didn't have any coal, we didn't have any fire, nothing. So I came in and I saw what he was doing, I said, "Look, I cannot pressure you," because he wants to have warmer-- "Why do you have to have so warm that you have to walk naked?" I realized that he wanted to survive, so, "Go to this-and-this fellow who made this device and tell him to reduce to one third and tell him that I told you so." "How do you know that he made it?" I said, "I know who made it," because we knew. So he went to him and changed the item and it was working beautifully. It turned out that he was a smuggler, he was a criminal and he was brought into the ghetto from prison and he was taken by my behavior because I didn't behave like I would be executive, I behaved like a human being. And he said, "You don't talk like you're Rumkowski's man." "I'm not Rumkowski's man, I'm my own man. I want to survive, you want to survive, so we have to help each other." So he grabbed me...

[Tape one, side two ended.]

Tape two, side one:

AT: So he said you will go in block number 10 because over there is a friend of mine and you will not be sent to any other work but where he will find out what it is. In the close of his connections, I went to Vechelde, which was in comparison to any other camp, a rest home.

MS: And what is the name of this camp again?

AT: Vechelde.

MS: Can you just spell that?

AT: Yes, V-E-C-H-E-L-D-E. It was about 20 kilometers southwest of Braunschweig.

MS: And then you remained...

AT: This was a part of the [unclear] manufacturing compound and I remained over there until they started to evacuate and the Germans told us we have to run away from the American bandits [unclear]. They tried to save us from the American bandits.

MS: How long then did you stay in-- up until the time that the Americans were advancing?

AT: Until December 1945, in December 1944. In December 1944 we started to move around from one camp to another camp until the 2nd of May. We arrived to Veldering [phonetic - possibly Wöbbelin]³ which was in the northeastern-- northwestern part of Germany and this was a part of the Ravensbrück compound. This was a different district. Ravensbrück was a concentration camp which was working for the Siemens-Schukert Company, which was an electrical company supplying the government and from over there, the Swedish Ambassador removed close to about, I think, 2,000 Jewish women to Sweden⁴.

MS: In a life-saving operation?

AT: Right, right, as a matter of fact, we were told that we are going to Sweden also. We did not.

MS: Do you have any idea how this-- the saving of these women happened, I mean, under what political aegis?

AT: ...the Swedish government was supplying the Germans with ball-bearings when the American and the English Air Force bombed out the German factories and from what I have heard, this was a part of a deal, this-- they were saved, they would get out, and at this time the German-- the intelligent part of the German Nazi hierarchy, they knew already that they lost the war and they tried to create a face-saving operation.

³The enunciation of this camp is difficult to hear. Mr. Tems may be identifying Wöbbelin, a Neuengamme subcamp not far from Ravensbrück.

⁴Mr. Tems is probably referring to Count Folk Bernadotte, head of the Swedish Red Cross, who negotiated the transfer of the last 14,000 women in the Ravensbrück camp, including 2,000 Jews, to Sweden in 1945. Source: https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206061.pdf Retrieved October 25, 2024.

MS: I see. What other nationalities of people did you-- even non-Jews, did you find in the camps?

AT: We had everybody [unclear], we had English, we had Americans, we Canadians, we had Hungarians, Rumanians, we had Russians.

MS: Prisoners of war [unclear]?

AT: We had Russian prisoners of war, but we also had Russians in concentration camps and the reason why they were in concentration camps is maybe because they tried to escape or he did something. And talking about Russian prisoners of war, I made myself a good reputation that I can pinpoint the network where the damage is done and go with a crew to repair and install the electric part. And a Russian young boy was assigned to my crew and he said, "I will not work with Adam, he is Jewish," so I said to him, "Why are you working by yourself and you notice they are trying to destroy your *Marxische Rusiya*, your homeland and you don't want to work with me? Because I'm Jewish, I was under the impression that Communists have equal rights for everybody." He said, "For everybody, but not for Jews."

MS: How true that turned out to be!

AT: Later on I will come to it and I will tell you how I decided not to go to the East, and after the war, after the Germans capitulated I was picked to pull out from the POW's the SS men, and on my right side when they were walking by, there were two Russian officers talking among themselves Russian. I understood a little bit because I've heard Russian [unclear] and on this side I had always a English or an American or a French, American or a Frenchman with an Englishman listening to my-- and I would pull out the SS people for further interrogation. Later on one of those Russians, when he was alone, he said in Yiddish to me, "Are you Yiddish?" I said, "Yes." [And he said], "Me too. Which part of Europe are you?" I said, "Łódź, Poland." He said, "Don't go back. If you think that Russia is a heaven for Jews, forget it. If you have a chance, go west as far as you can, and if somebody is alive, you will do him a favor because if I wouldn't have a family in Russia, I wouldn't return to Russia, so don't do that."

MS: And this was a Jewish Russian?

AT: This was a Jewish Russian spy. He said the other fellow is also Jewish, they were political [unclear].

MS: An amazing story, amazing story!

AT: Well, we have more amazing stories.

MS: Well, I wish you would relate to us...

AT: ...who was, who was do you think was the first American soldier whom I had met in Veldering [phonetic - possibly Wöbbelin]⁵?

MS: I wouldn't know, Mr. Tems.

AT: It was a cousin of mine. I didn't know him and he didn't know me. He was in the 9th Airborne. And at this time, I was two days hidden in an unfinished building, you

⁵See footnote 3.

know, because I didn't know what the Germans will do with us. I did not believe they will...

MS: Did you break away before liberation? Were you able to break out?

AT: No, I was in the concentration camp until the last moment.

MS: Because the statement you just made about...

AT: But I was hidden in a building, which was actually a morgue, because I was afraid. Because I heard machine guns and I have seen one camp liquidating. If I would go that way, I would be dead, but I was told [unclear] I survived, so I felt going through this misery and being killed now would be ridiculous. So I only left this place when I saw a jeep with a white star with soldiers with-- from the [unclear] which were not German. I said to my friend who is in Sweden now, "I think that we are saved." And I went out and all of a sudden a fellow came over. I was one of the few walking around and he says, "Yiddish?" I said, "Yes," and he said, "But don't say anything," because he was in the 9th Airborne and they were not known obviously for love to Jews and I said to him, "Could you send a letter to my aunt? She's in New York. I have an uncle over there." He said, "Yes, write the letter and I will be tomorrow night to pick up this letter." He arrived the next day and he had [unclear] and he said, "What is your name?" and I said Tems. He said, "And what is the name of your uncle?" I said, "Hymie Tems." "And what is the name of your aunt?" I said, "She is Gerst [phonetic], Helen Gerst." He didn't say anything. He said, "Write a letter and I will send it to your aunt." And then he came and picked up the letter and said, "I am Hymie's son." [long pause]

MS: Such coincidences are almost unbelievable!

AT: So what would you like to say, miracles? You can't. Accidents? You can't.

MS: Where did you go from that point on, I mean if your cousin was there...

AT: ...I was waiting. I was waiting. He was transferred to another operation another theater and I was kept over there and [unclear] in the hospital to find out if I had any legal diseases and besides my inability to [unclear]-- decent food [unclear]...

MS: Naturally.

AT: [unclear]

MS: So you stayed within the American....

AT: ...so I stayed with the American compound and later I was transferred to a transit camp, and when I told them I would like to go West-- "Where you would like to go?"-- I said, "I can go to England," he said, "No, England is for English," so I said, "I will wait here until I can go to the United States where I have family." So he said, "Here you cannot stay, you have to go." I wanted to go to Luxemburg because I had made friends with a gentile fellow who got to Luxemburg, who survived also. But he said, "You don't have any connections in Luxemburg, so all what we can do is transfer you to Belgium." I said, "Fine, let's go to Belgium. Fine, I want out, I want out of Germany." So I went to Belgium and I was in Belgium five years. My papers arrived and I arrived in United States in 1950.

MS: Well, with family in the United States, why would it have taken so long?

AT: Quotas, quotas.

MS: You had to come-- even though you had family to ...

AT: ...right, right.

MS: ...to vouch for you and produce the necessary affidavits?

AT: Right.

MS: It still took that length of time. Amazing.

AT: The laws in the United States are quite, for some people, very inflexible, because look what happened to the 5,000⁶ people on the boat from Germany that nobody wanted to...

MS: The St. Louis.

AT: ...to accept. And finally were sent back to Germany, which gives only Hitler a signal, "You can do with the Jews anything you want, nobody wants them."

MS: Exactly. He had that signal very early on.

AT: Right. So I had to wait until my quota, when I arrived in 1950, the 24th of October. Since then, October is a very important month in my life. The 24th of October, Ariana was born, the 24th of October I arrived in the United States, and the 27th of October I started my journey into camps. People do ask me many, many times, especially the gentile people, "What do you believe with your religion regard?" Well, I may have special interpretation because the difference between our religion and your religion is that we don't see God. We have an expression of God. You have a picture of Jesus Christ and you have a picture of the mother, and you have other pictures so you have a certain physical object, but if he's located somewhere upstairs or somewhere else, I am not too sure, but I do have worked out a theory which fits my mentality, and it fits maybe the story of my life. And I say, actually, you with yourself have your God, with you. It is the heritage that you are leaving behind you. This is God, and if you do live according to the Ten Commandments, you really cannot go wrong. But hell or heaven, of course, we are going to-- all to going to heaven because hell is right here.

MS: Unfortunately, you've been that route once in your lifetime.

AT: We are now in the midst of a Holocaust. The Holocaust didn't finish actually. It is an ongoing process.

MS: In what sense, Mr. Tems?

AT: In any sense, in any sense. It is an ongoing process. You had accumulated on your fingertips an enormous force which is capable of annihilating the world thousand times over. And this is in hands of people which are not necessarily mentally reliable. In another year or two, Qaddafi⁷ will have also the hydrogen bomb and what do you think this will do to the world? The United States is now, shall we say, the Angel of Israel? The

⁶937 passengers were on the *MS St. Louis*, mostly Jewish. 28 could disembark; 907 were returned to the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands and France.

⁷Qaddafi - Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi, Libyan dictator since 1969.

United States will not have any qualms to substitute 3,000,000 Jews in Israel or 100,000,000 clients under Sadat⁸ or anybody else who will be able to unify a new market. Let's face it. And the Jewry here in the United States which claims that they have such enormous force to sway the outcome in one way or another way, they are in for a big surprise. Those are the cynical, practical aspects of the future. The mental level around the fears here or somewhere else are really not up to the level of even being close to the immense force that the scientists have given them. Here you have an idiot who wants to influence a girl what happened to play the youngest prostitute in the history of the United States and he fell in love with her and she refused to acknowledge this, so he wanted to show what sort of man he is so he buys two guns and shoots the President of the United States.⁹ Clergy had and has always [unclear] this anti-Jewish feeling.

MS: Oh, for centuries.

AT: Right. And even now you will find people who say God doesn't listen to Jewish prayers.

MS: Yes, you put it into a very, very different perspective when you say the Holocaust is still going on and when you consider what you have just said about the Arabs and the Christians.

AT: I look at the entire world as one big, immense number of concentration camps. It may sound paranoid to you, but this is the way how I see. Maybe I will gain more guns and I will kill him. You show me one country which is in peace with another country. France was pulled out from the depths of insanity so many times by the United States and each time they came around and they stabbed the United States in the back it's because for them it is "Vive La France." The English speaking nation-- England, whenever they can, they will pull the rug from under the United States because they still think that this English-speaking England is the destiny of the nations of the whole world. This is something [unclear] when the English Empire-- this is the survival instinct among the animals, so this is the difference, they are using white gloves or they are using no gloves at all. They are destroying each other. China will explode an atomic bomb and six months later you will have an acid rain here in the United States, so what is the difference. The method is only changed. Amazingly, you are exposed to a curse of destruction which one nation is creating more rapidly than other nations, less rapidly...

MS: But all of mankind is involved in this type of a Holocaust.

AT: ...precisely, precisely.

MS: Whereas, what we have just gone through is primarily...

AT: It is only a token, what is 6,000,000 Jews-- the Roman Empire disintegrated and was much bigger. The Greek Empire disintegrated and was much bigger. On a lesser scale, go back to the 1900's, the earlier years of the Ottoman Empire, when they pulverized

⁸Sadat - Muhammad Anwar al- Sadat, 1918 – 1981, former president of Egypt.

⁹ John Hinckley, Jr. attempted to assassinate U. S. President Ronald Reagan in 1981 to gain attention of actress Jodie Foster.

the Armenians, Musa Dagh¹⁰ in 90 days. What is the difference? Fifty years later you have Hitler's Holocaust, so later on the Russians have exterminated very close to 27 million different ethnic groups and nobody even knows about it. They have placed entire villages to Siberia and they are doing this constantly and yet they do have the gall to request preferred nation treatment. Those are things going on. Look what is going on with the Indonesians, Thailand, Vietnam, look what was going on in Bangladesh, look what is going on with the Baha'is¹¹.

MS: Well, when you stop to think of all these countries and all these wars, and all the tumults, it's unbelievable that we've survived. But hopefully there will be a future, how, remains to be seen. Maybe there will be-- something will happen.

AT: I don't know, maybe I'm too pragmatic and too deep in mathematical equations of physical happenings, everything has to be logical, everything has to be dictated by laws of physics, the laws of physics don't allow to be cheated. We understand now more than we did in the past and I think and I strongly believe that the human race is on a destructive course because they do have toys which they don't even realize how strong they are. I worked with those things and I know what they can do. And by reading papers it says we don't have enough of those missiles, I start to wonder where are we? If we wouldn't spend one dime from now on for the next 10 years, Russia will not be in a position to outnumber us with the destructive power, but they don't have to ask permission to do this. We have a Senate, we have a House of Representatives and we have a Senate and we have politicians and everybody has-- so we have to create the atmosphere, how insecure we are, even though we will not even use what we have. This is how immense this power is, but we are creating new people, which may lead us tomorrow which don't know how to spell. Have you heard a discussion between a teenager and a grown up person? "What are you doing Sunday?" "Things, you know." Now, "*Shlog deyn kop en der vant.*"¹² What are things? "You know." I don't know anything. Every sentence has a "you know." But you don't have intelligent dialogue. You get people graduating from school and they don't know how to spell. I went to the wrong school. I started to learn timetables when I was three. I had to read when I was four. When I started to learn about sex, when I was going out with friends, I was 13. Here, they are starting to learn about sex in the kindergarten, but they forget about spelling? So you will excuse me, because I'm cynical maybe, but I'm surprised you are not asking me like everybody else asks me, "If you don't like it here, why don't you go back to Europe?"

MS: You just may be too naively-- you have to hope that somehow there will be a generation that will evolve, that will save us from destruction, that there will be leaders, that will come forth, who are intelligent enough, please God, to save humanity. I mean,

¹⁰Musa Dagh – location of Turkish persecution and later partial rescue of Armenians in 1915.

¹¹Baha'i - a Middle Eastern faith

¹²Yiddish – Hit your head against the wall.

otherwise-- maybe that's one reason why kids feel that they just live for today because they don't know what tomorrow will bring. It is a very, very sad way to look at life.

AT: It is, it is a sad way of looking-- but on the other hand, a nation like the United States, we are going every four years to vote, to vote for a President and at this time you have a choice. A second-rate actor, and a fifth grade Newborn Christian. Why did you have to be born again if the old faith is so good? Why did they have to be born again? If the nation of United States could not have a fellow of the wisdom of Truman statesman, then something is here basically wrong.

MS: Well, I think what you're saying is basically true. It is very difficult to answer that, because certainly you would think that we would have the capacity to have better leaders than we've had, but I think that maybe there is some providence somewhere that's kept us...

[Tape two, side one ended.]

Tape two, side two:

MS: ...that's keeping us from utter destruction, but...

AT: I would say...

MS: ...we must have, yes...

AT: To maintain sanity it would be good if you could have hope, it will change, there's no question about it. And maybe sometimes when I'm in a crowd and we are not talking about serious past and serious problems, you will see me in a different mode. But we are talking about a very morbid page in the history of mankind and [unclear] I show my cynical part of me.

MS: Well, I think that's understandable, really, and this is something that you strongly believe in and shield through a great part of experience and no one can fault you for your feelings. They're yours and you're certainly 100 percent entitled to them and I don't know that anybody can say that you're absolutely wrong or absolutely right.

AT: There are people who will say that I'm absolutely wrong and I can realize why they say it, that I'm completely wrong, because if you don't have any illusions you have a very sad life. But I look at it from a different point of view. This is why I'm so active in the Jewish movements, this is why I'm so active in the ADL. This is why I'm so active in what is going on in the community. If I know this-and-this church is over there and was paid by Arabs and antisemites to distribute maps which are absolutely wrong, false, I will do my best to get an invitation and go there and to tell him that he is a paid liar.

MS: That takes tremendous strength to do that.

AT: And there was a time when I opened my mouth in the lodge where I belong, people will walk out, "He's paranoid, he doesn't know what he's talking." In 1952, when I came back from Japan, I was building several factories of my designs and other designs with money paid by the Federal government, I asked, "What are we doing there, we are building up over there a Goliath, who will compete with us." The fellow with his feet on the table will tell me, "We were on this since 1950, wait until [unclear], they won't even compete with us." And who was it? Kahn¹³, who was the fellow who was the inflation fighter for previous presidents.

MS: What was his name again?

AT: Kahn.

MS: Kahn, an economist in a sense?

AT: The arrogance of those so-called better Americans is scary.

MS: That's really quite a switch because we always think that people of other countries are very arrogant, but we don't see ourselves in the same light.

AT: No, the United States, I think, the United States showed always that they are the rulers of the world and this is why the Europeans didn't like the United States

¹³Possibly Alfred E. Kahn, American economist and political advisor.

tourists and the Japanese didn't like the American tourists. When you speak the language and you hear what they are talking amongst themselves, you hear a different world.

MS: This is very true.

AT: And everybody will tell you this and this, he's-- right, wrong, or in between. I may say the same reason is why they don't like Jews, because they are the show-offs. I call them that they are the creators of the Mink dynasty, spelled M-I-N-K instead of M-I-N-G.

MS: I'm not going to argue that point with you. Mr. Tems, I'm going to have to bring this interview to a conclusion because it is quite late and I do want to thank you very much for your...

AT: Well, I couldn't say that it is my pleasure, however, I hope you accept this as a token of my contribution and I hope that somebody will, from all the stories you are learning, come out with something which may be a contribution for the betterment of the human race, especially of the Jews, for a better Jewish future.

MS: Well, thank you very much and I certainly hope that your wish is answered for all of us.

AT: I hope so.

MS: Thank you very much Mr. Tems.

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