

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JACK WEISS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

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| Interviewer: | Stanley Richman |
| Date:        | July 1, 1985    |

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JW - Jack Weiss [interviewee]  
SR - Stanley Richman [interviewer]  
UI - Unidentified Individual  
Date: July 1, 1985

*Tape one, side one:*

SR: This is side one, Jack's background. We will start now. Jack. Start from the beginning again, Jack. You were born in...

JW: I born in Czechoslovakia. The city was Ungvár<sup>1</sup> in Hungarian and Užhorod it was in Czech. And they took me to a *lager*.

SR: Now wait a minute. Start with your —let me ask some questions, Jack, okay?

JW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SR: Tell me a little bit about your family. You were born...

JW: I born...

SR: September 10, 1915?

JW: 1915, yeah.

SR: Tell me about your family.

JW: My sister, we, was two brothers. My older brother was a doctor, a dentist. He got killed. They killed him in Russia, the Germans. Other, two sisters, they went out to America in 1939. And after the war other three sisters they come to America, in 194-...

SR: How about your parents?

JW: My parents was killed in concentration camp. My sister, with two children and her husband. And...

SR: Des-, yeah...

JW: And I...

SR: Describe, well, Jack, I want...

JW: Yeah?

SR: I want to kind of keep it in a format.

JW: Right.

SR: What was your life like before the war?

JW: Well before the war was a, I have a good life. A good life. My family was okay.

SR: What did they do? What was their subsistence?

JW: They, we have a grocery business, grocery store. I was in the army, Czechoslovakia and Hungarian. In Czechoslovakian was very good in the army. I was a manager in a canteen, in business, very big. I had about 20,000 soldiers to feed and I was something very important. And after when I come home from the Czechoslovakia Army

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<sup>1</sup>Birthplace listed as Jovus on personal history form.

they took me, they, the Hungarian took me to Debrecen, to Hungarian Army. And from the Hungarian Army...

SR: Well before that, did you experience, or did your family experience antisemitism before the Nazis came, in Czechoslovakia?

JW: No. No, no, no, no such thing. No, it was nothing.

SR: How was your relationship with the non-Jewish people?

JW: Very good. We were, we have very good relationship.

SR: Did you belong to any Jewish organizations or a synagogue?

JW: Oh yes. We belong to a synagogue. In 1939, I supposed to go to Israel with other two boys. Before I went in the camp we started to run away. But they don't let us go from Budapest to Israel. They said the England soldiers shooting on the ships, you know, on the, when they are going toward Israel. So they said, "It's not too good to go at this time but maybe later." They stop us, not to go. There was a organization...

SR: Who stopped you? Who stopped you?

JW: This was a organization in Budapest who transfer the Jews to Israel. Was a offer. I forgot now what the name is. It's a organization who took Jews and sent to Israel, but not any time. Certain times they stopped. You know what I'm talking about?

SR: Yes.

JW: They don't let them. They say, "You, if you go now you get killed." You see?

SR: Okay. When the Germans first took over the Sudetenland, were you, was your town in the Sudetenland?

JW: No. No, the Hungarian...

SR: Yeah, did the Hungarians take over then too or when they partitioned Czechoslovakia after Munich?

JW: They...

SR: Because that's when the Hungarians took over.

JW: They took over in 1939.

SR: How many Jews lived in your town, your city?

JW: Well, see, what I said before, it's, we was in cities maybe 2,000 families. I don't know. It was a big city, you know. And our, like, and we're talking about minimum and maybe it was there 150 families, Jews. And I don't know how many Christians like 1,000. It was outside from the city. It was a, maybe a half an hour ride with a bike to the city.

SR: Was it a highly organized Jewish community?

JW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was a nice Jewish community. My father was very religious. He read the Torah in Saturday; I never could play soccer. [chuckles] Religious, very religious. In fact, he was here in 1915 in this country, in Philadelphia, and he went back to the country because he said, "Philadelphia is not very religious Jews. Is more in

New York.” And he thought to bring out the whole family but he changed his mind. He come back to Czechoslovakia.

SR: When the Germans first took over Czechoslovakia, did anything special happen or when the Hungarians took over?

JW: Well...

SR: Now tell me about when the Hungarians and the Germans took over.

JW: Yeah. When the Hungarians come in they was very, very tough. But they work with the Germans. They come in the store, they took clothes, grocery, and they walked out. I had a sister in Czechoslovakia. They took away her husband before us. And he left his wife and two children. That was my sister. And she have two children, two children. To bring between Slovakia to, and my town, I have to have a passport. So was somebody there and he arrange me a passport to bring my sister to mine city, with the children. And I went there and naturally I risked my life. The reason was if they catch me in the train, the Germans or the Hungarians, they take us away, away us. But God was with us and she come to mine town and we hide her. We hide her in a factory what makes flowers. You know, sleep there. They off-, the police they have, they was not so rough. They liked us, the Hungarians. But we was very nice to them. We give them food. We give them certain things you know. So they always said, “Hide at a good place that we should not find them.” But every night what—another police then to look. And they let us know when they go to look for Jews who don’t belong there. In this city was a lot of Jews who don’t belong there. They run away from one, from Czechoslovak-, to Slovakia, not Czech, from Slovakia to a Hungarian side. You got me?

SR: Yes. Mmm hmm [affirmative].

JW: So they looked all over. So the kids, the two kids, they was hiding under the bed. And when the police come in, we put them in a garden with corns. You know, the corns? And they hide in the corns there when the police went away. And they know it already it’s night time, day time. You say the names, the police, they know where to go. You was trained for this here. But they could survive with the sister if she want to. But she, when they took away the parents she said, “I want to go with my parents.” My sister, with the children. “What’s gonna be with my parents, that’s gonna with me, with the children.” And they take her away and they went to Auschwitz and they got killed, the mother and father and the sister and two children. And my brother was a doctor. He was in the certain *lagers*. You know, the *lagers*. You know what I’m talking about, *lagers*? The *lagers* means...

SR: No, tell me.

JW: The camp.

SR: Camp, yeah. Mmm hmm [affirmative].

JW: A doctor. But he got sick. And somebody told me what he saw. They took away to Kiev in a big hospital. And there was 250 people what they are Jews, with a few gentile people, like they got sick too there, not in the *lager*, the—they were sick people.

Sick people they was there, too. And they, after six months you were there, they put on fire the whole hospital. They burned down about 500 people there. And most, 90% was Jews. That was in Kiev.

SR: Jack, we'll get back a little bit.

JW: Yeah.

SR: Did you receive, during all this experience, any help from non-Jews? How was the Czechoslovakian, the, your neighbors?

JW: Very good.

SR: When the Hungarians and the Nazis came in did they help you in any way?

JW: The Gentiles?

SR: Yes, the Gentiles.

JW: There was no time. You see, they took me before when they, where my parents went to. They took me first. They took me first and I left my parents there. And they, when they went, when they took the parents they took three sisters. But they was very young. So they put in to the camp to work. And this way the American come to—they took over the city in Germany and this way they survived—three sisters. I had six sisters but three sisters, they escaped in 1939 to America. You understand me what I'm talking about?

SR: Yes, yes. Describe now in detail. You were sent to a work camp.

JW: Oh God.

SR: Where was that?

JW: This was in, still in Czechoslovakia. My job, our job was very, very, we was 200 people there. And we had a Hungarian officer. And we, every morning we got up 6:00 in the morning and we went to work, till 5:00. And our work was to make streets. We had hammers and we take the stones and we put in highways. This was about three, four months. Very, very tough. After they took us to Poland.

SR: Who took you to Poland?

JW: They...

SR: The Hungarians?

JW: The Hungarians, yeah. And there was the all the streets bombed, in the, it was there was a war there.

SR: What year was this, Jack?

JW: In 1940, '40, '41, '40, between '40 and '41. And there...

SR: Where in Poland? Do you remember?

JW: Lemberg, that's between, Czechoslovakia to Poland is like here to Canada. You know what I'm talking about?

SR: Yeah.

JW: So we went up, up, up. And we had very hard time there. W— they was very rough. Not so much rough our officer, but they come, they give him a hard time, the Germans tell him the orders out, what to do with us. You see the Germans give order out

for the Hungarian, what they supposed to work and where we were to work. And for any little things, they punish you. How they punish you? They don't give you to eat. They lock you up for a day, some days two days. Who was a good worker got another piece of bread. Like I was a very good strong man and I, you know, they give me another piece of bread. Was very, very tough. Well, we come to a point in 1942— this was Pinsk Minsk.<sup>2</sup> This was Belorusskii<sup>3</sup> there. And we were there for a long, long time. And somehow I got to the officer, to the big officer. And he give me a job to— he had two horses with a wagon. And mine job was, we had to go around with a, go around in the city like pick up bread. I was very lucky. He liked me very much, that officer. He was about 75 years old, Hungarian. And he have many Jewish friends. And he says, "I do my duty. I don't want to punish you boys here. You're all too nice boys." He was very nice to us. In fact, he told us to do something what maybe we get killed in a short time. So what I did, what he did, he said, "Jack," I sleep with them. "We were always afraid." I talk Russia, I talk Hungarian, and I talk a little Germany, too. Jewish is similar with German.

SR: Right.

JW: He was afraid for his own skin, so he tried to take somebody who talked different way, you know, like Hungarians they just Hungarian to Jews. Not no Jewish, no Russia, no Hungarian. No, just Hungarian. I talked...

SR: Which was it, was the group that you were with, were they mainly Hungarian Jews? Czechoslovakian Jews?

JW: They was Hungarian Jews and Czechoslovakia Jews. This was mixed. This was, I would say 70% was Slova-, American, what do you call it, Czechoslovakia Jewish, and 35%, 30% was Hungarian Jews. They don't talk nothing, just Hungarian. The Jews from Czechoslovakia, they talk different ways, you know, yeah. You don't put everything in that. You take out certain things, right?

SR: No.

JW: No?

SR: No. What, as you speak it's in.

JW: Yeah. Now, when we come into Minsk he says to us, the officer, "Jack, you have to do something for yourself, help yourself." This was a Hungarian officer that was 75 years old. He felt, they take us away from him and they put him on different camp. And by taking away he felt that they take us to Auschwitz. And he give me a hint to do something. Now he was afraid. There was underground Russia guerrillas. So he says— he don't come up with a fact what to do, but he give me something to think about it, to escape from the camp. So one night the Russia guerrillas shot down a airplane. And I tried to get there. There where the plane falls down was all Russia underground guerrillas. You know what guerrillas means?

SR: Yes.

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<sup>2</sup>Pinsk is a city in the region of Minsk in Belarus.

<sup>3</sup>Belorusskii is the Russian word for Belarussian.

JW: And you see, they was fighting the Germans.

SR: Right.

JW: They was fighting the Hungarians. So he says to me, "Do what you want to do, you know."

SR: Who said this? The...

JW: The officer.

SR: The German, the Hungarian officer?

JW: Officer, yeah. So what I did, I took all the strong boys, 25 boys from the camp. And I took two, three wagons with two wagon with horses, all right? And they give me four officers four soldiers, Hungarians, to get there, to the, where the plane fall down. And there was Russia there. It was Russia camp.

SR: Well why were you being sent to the plane?

JW: To remain there, and not to come back.

SR: Oh I see.

JW: Okay?

SR: Right.

JW: We—he felt that we go there we're not coming back. And he don't want to say that, "You go escape and stay there." He give me something...

SR: An order.

JW: An order to do. Now how you can get there? We had connection with the Russia girls, with the partisans, through, there was women there who used to go around and find out, like spies. And one night I got together, I, she come in the office there and just to walk in there with me the officer there. And she talked to him. But it don't mean nothing and when I went on with her she says, "Are you staying here?" I said, "No, we are going to go away." She said, "I can help you." This woman. She have automatic but you don't see nothing. [Unclear].

SR: Right.

JW: And she made connection to get there. Otherwise we could never get there. We don't know where to go either. But she said this, "A officer will come talk to you, before you get there. You go there." This was talking like a week, the whole week was, we tried to organize. So the officer come to me and talk to me, it's a Russia officer, a Jewish fellow, tall fellow, very strong and very tough. And he says, "You should, 200 Jews, you should kill the officer." And there was about 18 soldiers who watch us, who take care of, took us to work. Watch what I'm doing. "200 Jews could kill 18 Hungarians and the officers, too." And I says, "No way. We cannot do it." The reason there was a lot of sick people there who could never fight, number one, and we have no guns either. We have no guns to kill them. So the second choice was to take out the strong boys who can fight, and escape there. Well, we, all arrangements we make and we went there to a little city. And from the city the Russia soldiers, the Russia underground, was not far. So we make up, they're coming in twelve o'clock there. And we have to take away the 25 Jews from the

four soldiers the pistols and the guns. Otherwise they shoot, right? So we're laying on the floor there. By the way, about twelve o'clock we want to go home. We could never find, we was looking for this place and we never could find it. I says to the— I was the organizer— I says to the soldiers, "We go back, you get killed. We have to sleep here over, sleep over night." You could get killed, but if they don't know us where we are, we could get killed.

SR: Sure, yeah.

JW: But we had that girl and she make all the connections. So what happened, about twelve o'clock they come in four Russia partisans. I got scared from them. They have also marching gun and beards, you know, strong. And when they make a signal, we all the 25 Jews fall in, took away the guns from the four officers, I mean soldiers, the Hungarian soldiers. We took away all their guns and what they have. They have grenades, too. And we told them, "Don't worry. We're going home, but you cannot fight back. There is 25, 30 guerrillas there." There was just four there. Now, they got us. Now we have to walk in a woods. They know the highways. Once you go away 10 feet the other way, you remain there. There is a water called, it's like if you go there you can't take out your leg. That's a certain...

SR: Quicksand, it's like quicksand, like mud.

JW: Quicksand, quicksand, yeah mud.

SR: Yeah, quicksand, right.

JW: Yeah, so he said this, "If you want to leave you have to follow us out." And we walked there five hours to get in the woods there where they was hiding. They have a camp there, too. We get there. The big officer Russia says to us, "What for you come here?" And we said, "We want eye for eye. We want to fight them. Our parents are killed and we are fighting the Germans." He don't believe us, the Russia officer. He went and put us in a basement. A basement, this was not a basement. It was a, like a separate place, all us 25 Jews. They feed us, and they, he says that we have to prove yourself who you are. And, who send us here? So I said this girl. I know the name. And she was [pause] very knowing there. The fact, the was a officer there in the group, in the camp there in the Russia partisans. And when I mention her name, she— we stayed there about two days, and that second, that third day— she come in and she said, "*Davai*<sup>4</sup>, (Come out and go fight.)" She got, let us out. We was afraid we'll get killed there by the Russians too. The reason was they don't believe nobody. You know, they're thinking we was, why we come here? We come here to fight. Now we went after the two days they give us to every 10 people, 10 partisans, they give me a bag with grenades. No gun. They said, "If you go, if you kill a German, you have a gun."

SR: I see.

JW: You know what I'm talking about now?

SR: Yes, mmm hmm [affirmative].

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<sup>4</sup>*davai* – Russian for "Let's go".

JW: That was very, very tough there. And we, this way we [unclear]. And to every 10 people they put in like two men. And we were there at least six months, about.

SR: Well so you were, were you through, did you go through a Russian winter?

JW: Yeah, yeah.

SR: I see. Well of course...

JW: The winter, what we did, they bring, we went to a farmers there, Russia people. And they help us. They help out the guerrillas. They, we have certain people they help us. What they help? With food, with clothes. I had two shirts. So, I went around there and I find a good fellow, he give me a shirt or pants. But what he did, he helped us. He give us bags to cover our legs in the snow. It was very bad snow there, very big snow. So sometimes we was working in such a snow and we have to be covered up. Now clothes, shirts, we never change every week or every day. Maybe once in three months. And some people just, some fellows died there in the camp what they never could take it. It was very, very tough. But they was chasing us, the Germans. A couple nights we was in a basement. A couple nights we went on the roofs, on the, in hay, you know, they have a hay in the farmers, you know?

SR: For the boys.

JW: Well, yeah. And it was very, very tough. We never figured we'll survive there. You know, never sure. But what happened, we were sick, too, a couple times. They give us medicine there. And it's not your normal life there like...

SR: You were living off the land. You were a partisan.

JW: Yeah, yeah.

SR: Now, this lasted what, six months, till when, Jack?

JW: This was a year and a half, very tough.

SR: For 18 months you were with the partisans?

JW: Yes, yeah, about 18 months. And from the 25 people got killed about 10, in fighting with the Germans. Every month was one less and less and less. And you have to be a good fighter, otherwise you could never survive either, you know. You have to know how to fight. I was a soldier. I know how to fight. But some people was no soldiers. And which one was no soldiers was very, very tough. Like when I went for food they let us, they told us we can go bring four, five breads in another little village there from the camp where we was. So I have a horse and wagon and an automatic. And when we cross the street come two Germans. One side one, the other one, with automatics. And they want to know where we're going. And I have another two boys there. We have the jackets. Under the jackets we have the automatics. Before they start to talk, they have the guns in the hands, in hand. We took the automatics. I push my gun, I put in 72 bullets in one German. And my other friend, the same thing. And we killed the two Germans and we run away. We could not run too far, otherwise they catch us again. But we went in the woods. And they, the other day we was in a water for 10, 12 hours. And they were shooting in the woods with guns, with all kind of things what to shoot there to get us. But they never could get us.

We was to here to water that was three days, we give, pull down in that time. We survived. We went out from there to the...

SR: In other words, for you to hide you hid in the water, just above with your head...

JW: Yeah.

SR: Above the water.

JW: In the water, yeah. And it was cold, pretty c-, it was, you know.

SR: And this was— you were with the same guerrilla group, all...

JW: Guerrilla group. We all...

SR: It was the same group?

JW: Oh yeah, all the time.

SR: And this was where, in Belorussia?

JW: Pinska Minsk...

SR: Near Pinska Minsk.

JW: That's called Belorusskiĭ. And it was very, very tough.

SR: Did you come into contact with any Jews in the villages?

JW: No, no, no, no, no, no. No we had...

SR: Oh you...

JW: We had one there, two Jews in the camp with us.

SR: But not when you went into the different villages? Were there any Jews remaining there?

JW: Yeah. Yeah was. I'll tell you what happened. I'll tell you what happened. In that time, was one family and they was locked, they was not locked up. They was in a basement. They are afraid to get out. And nobody know from them. When we went to, for food, to the farmers there, he says, "You want to see one Jewish family here in the basement? They're hiding there." The farmer. I said, "Yes." But I was afraid to, in a way I was afraid to. I don't believe him. It could be the Germans too, you know.

SR: Sure.

JW: So I said, "No, I'm not go in." We have to, every move you give you have to know where, you know. So he says to me, "Don't afraid. I'm helping you. I'm your kind of man. I'm helping you." So what happened, the first night I never went. But the other *nachal'nik* [commanding officer] said, "What he says you can go there. The second time you go there." I went there. Was there four girls and a mother was hiding. And the father was killed already. They took him away. Now they told me that there was two Jewish boys, Polish boys. They was supposed to be hanged. And they went with a sign in their hand that, "This is the Jews should be killed," you know in a sign. And when they come to, they took three German— this is the story she told me— and they took her in the field to kill her, to bury them, to shot them and bury them. But they was so strong, the two Jews they have to grave by himself, his place. You know what I'm talking about now?

SR: Dig the grave.

JW: Dig it.

SR: Dig the grave up.

JW: Yeah. So while they dig the grave with a...

SR: Shovel.

JW: Shovel, [unclear] is head of one, and one the other one. And they escaped. Yeah. They was very, very efficient Jews, partisans too. This was the Polish Jews. Born in Czechoslovakia. They was born there. And they was in the papers, too. They was looking for them for years. They was two very big, smart –

[Tape one, side one ended.]

*Tape one, side two:*

JW: ...kill Germans, to fight the Germans. We went out to look for them. So what we did? Let's see here is a bridge and five, and two miles another bridge. A bridge means, you know, with water and everything.

SR: Sure, yes.

JW: Yeah, so what was our, they was, to put in a bomb here, and a bomb here. In the middle, when they come in the middle the two bridges, to blow up. This way they remain...

SR: Jack, with, if any of you or any of the Jewish partisans were caught by the Nazis, what happened to you? Did you hear stories if any were caught?

JW: Oh yeah, yeah. I had a friend from my city. They shot him on the place. When they caught them they shot them. They don't play around with them. When they shot, when they— would not, if somebody, they took him, when they saw him they shot him right away. This is what happened. I had a, the name was Ackerman. A very nice fellow. He was, from he used to live like five miles. And he went in nighttime for bread. And I beg him, "Don't go. You'll get killed." He said, "No, I'm hungry. I cannot take it anymore." I was not, I was afraid to go. To walk it was very bad. To go with a wagon was easier you know.

SR: Yeah.

JW: And he walked in nighttime and they caught him and they shot him right there on the spot.

SR: Jack, okay, we're this, now what happened after the partisans?

JW: What happened? When they— when in 1945...

SR: Well, you were with the partisans how long? Till...

JW: To about, from 1942 to '44, something...

SR: Forty -four. Okay, now what happened...

JW: Something like this.

SR: Next? 1944, what happened next?

JW: Forty-five. That time, they went, this section took over Russia, soldiers.

SR: The Russians took, won it back?

JW: Took over the...

SR: The area.

JW: Area. So what they did, they took us, not everybody. But they took me and another five. We left about 12 boys there. And they took us to Moscow. And they said they put in us to school to be a *nachal'nik* [supervisor]. A *nachal'nik* means like a manager in a big factory. And...

SR: A manager.

JW: A manager, yeah, a manager, to work, yeah, and to remain in Russia. I'll never forget. They took us in a very, very cold—it was in January, very cold—and they

put us, the three, we're with no heat. The Russians. And we was free. We was free. The Russians, you know, they give us to eat. Not—I, was, you know, was not happy. We want a shower. We were, we was not took a shower for days, for months. We have lice, louse, you know, it's a bad...

SR: You were lousy and dirty.

JW: Yeah, dirty, yeah. So what they did, in their, in this camp where we was, was Russia soldiers, too. Why? Some escaped and they put in them with us. You know what I'm talking, escaped from the army and...

SR: Yeah.

JW: Yeah. So they said to us, they give us a *tush*, you know, we walk into a big place and they pour us out from this water. They give me a hot bath. And I, when we come there they put out the spigot, you know, cold, ice water. We was running to the walls and hide not to get cold. And we started to scream. This was worse by the Germans [chuckles]. They don't know no [unclear] *chuchmes* [Yiddish for joke], you know, they—. Anyway, they stopped the water and we went out from there and every night for a week they're waking up 1:00. And they say to me, "Now tell me what you did at home." The Russians. "Who was your father? Who was your mother? What they did? Or, what kind of people they was?" You know, or if we was against Communists. And this is not one night. That was maybe a, every night, every week. And I have to say the same story every night. Otherwise...

SR: Why do you think they were doing that?

JW: They want to know with who they're dealing. To get a job, they want to know what kind of people we, or we be against them or we hate them. There is the Russian, or, they have to know who with they're dealing. They don't trust nobody. They don't trust nobody. So what happened? Over there for the two months and working very hard too, they took us to work on the station there. You know, in the station the train station. And they have gloves to pick up the big thing where the train goes. I call it...

SR: The rails, rails.

JW: The rails. So my glove got stick to mine hand through cold water. To take off the glove remained on my hand the glove. You know what...

SR: Frozen stiff?

JW: Yeah.

SR: It was just frozen to your hand.

JW: Very, very bad. So they said, "Okay, we have a job for you." And I, my thought was, *I want to go home to my family*. I am not sure they're living but I dream with my sisters. My parents I don't know. Well, I dreamed I have sisters there left over. So, what happened? Months and months we was there, till 1945, end of '45, something like this. Not exactly. I don't know exactly. And they one day come in like the hostages, like here. They left us about five in one time. And he says, "You go home." Now where we come...

SR: Was the war over?

JW: The war was over, not o—, there was over from Russia.

SR: Yes. Where?

JW: But deep in Slovakia was not over. So I come to mine town and with a letter. They should give me there a job, a good job. And they give me, I had a big thing what I did there and how many Germans we killed and how good soldiers we was. They give very good recommendations to...

SR: How, did you have any difficulty getting from Moscow to your village?

JW: Was, it takes maybe a week with a big, not a train, a regular train. Like the cows we put in in such wagons.

SR: Yes.

JW: It was difficult. There was no food either there, you know. This was not so very pleasant. So when I come home to the town, I look for my friends. I don't find nobody. But I find a cousin, in town. And after a week I was in town. The Jews helped me. They give me to eat. I slept by one guy, a fellow, a friend I know. And the cousin keep me there for a while and for two days later, three or four days later I went to report myself to the office there with a letter to get a job.

SR: What happened, well describe when you came back. Was there any sort of Jewish community or...

JW: Well...

SR: Who was in the city?

JW: No, no, no, no. Just was there a, maybe 20 Jews in the city. I'm not talking about my, the village was nobody. Mine, like out from the city. Was nobody. But in the city was maybe 20 Jews.

SR: Left of how many? About how many Jews were there before?

JW: Oh, there was maybe 10,000. It was a big city there and, oh yeah, a very big city. 10,000, maybe more, maybe 20,000.<sup>5</sup>

SR: And they were all...

JW: All gone.

SR: All gone.

JW: Was no, all gone. Was 20 or 25, all young boys. You don't see an old person there in the city. And what they, the 20 people left over, they was hiding in the woods around there. Was not, from camp they come home. From camp that time was nobody home when I come. You know what I'm talking?

SR: Yeah.

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<sup>5</sup>Jewish virtual library indicates that there were 25,000 Jews in the Užhorod and surrounding areas. "On Passover (April 21–23) 1944, all the Jews of Uzhgorod and the surroundings (25,000 persons) were concentrated in a ghetto located outside the city (in a brick factory and a lumber yard), and three weeks later all were deported to Auschwitz." <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/uzhgorod>

JW: One was maybe a laborer hide them there for two years and maybe another one like, you know, they was spread. And this cousin give me clothes, he give me a little money. And this way I started to get together. I was about 90 pounds when I come home. I could not walk either. You know, and sick. I went to a doctor. The fact, there was a doctor by the train when we come in. He said, "Don't eat hot bread. Don't eat too much bread. Otherwise you'll die." Well our stomachs was so shrunked that we could never eat nothing. He said, "Juice and water. No meat. Light, very, very light." Now, you believe me, when they come home, from my friends two died when they were home already? Why?

SR: Because of overeating?

JW: Overeating. Not overeat-...

SR: Their stomach burst?

JW: The stomach never could take it.

SR: Couldn't take it.

JW: I had a friend there, a officer. He went in the building. In the morning he never got up. Thirty-two years old. He was a big officer in the, there with us too, and by the partisans. And it was, in that last week there, on the loudspeaker, "Don't eat too much." There was a Jewish doctor there. And they tried to talk to everybody to watch what they're eating. Otherwise the stomach have a not...

SR: Can't hold the food.

JW: You can't, the food, yeah. Now when we, I come home, I ask everybody if my sister living. Nobody know it. Nobody know it. But one group, every day when I have time I went to the airport, to the train station, to find out maybe if somebody comes if ask if my sister is living. One day...

SR: So you knew that your parents and your brother were gone.

JW: We, no, I don't know, but I assume they're gone. I don't know if my sister is gone. I, in my mind I was dreaming that they're living but I was not sure. I felt the reason that maybe they remain was they was very young. And the young people they don't kill. They put them to work.

SR: I see.

JW: If somebody, if they were married— by the way, they, sisters are married in, to the city where they was. And when they was, they have all numbers. They're all here, all numbers. They're, one name is Agie [phonetic], Helen, and Matilda.

SR: Okay, those were three. You said you were seven.

JW: We was six.

SR: Six.

JW: And three come in...

SR: Four girls and two boys?

JW: No, we was seven, right. Two boys. One boy was a doctor.

SR: And he was killed.

JW: Killed, in Kiev. And my parents was killed. And one sister with two children was killed there too, with the parents.

SR: And you had three sisters who were rescued. So you were looking for your other sister.

JW: No, no, no, no, no, no. When they took her away, in 1939, my parents had, we had here uncles in Philadelphia. And we said, "If you go to Prague, and you stay in Prague. Prague is Czechoslovakia. If you stay there a couple months maybe you get papers from Czechoslovakia to Prague. And this way you go to America." So two sisters, they left in 1939. This was okay. They have a feeling that, we heard that there is Jews in Slovakia they're killing there, like our brother-in-law got killed. So we know next we come. So two sisters run away to Prague. The third sister left with the last train to Prague. That time I was in a soldier in the army in Czechoslovakia. Was almost. My sister, I never knew, and once this sister comes to visit me in the army. And she said, "Jack, I'm going to America. I'm going to Prague. And from Prague I get a, to America." Well my two sisters was here already before in the country. So she was staying there I know a couple months and with no papers, somehow they help with that and they, she come to America. I don't think she had papers. In fact, I want to go to America with her. I could leave the army there and go with my sister, but I was afraid for my parents. They said if everybody runs away from the family they kill their parents. And I felt guilty if I go home, if I don't go home I could maybe help them home. And there at home was left three sisters and my mother and father. And I always felt if I go to America in 19-, this was in 1939, I be not very, I thought it's not the right way to do. If I die let me die with my parents. And that's the reason I went through this whole thing. I could go, too. They let me out. If I go to the army and I say my sister is here, I was scheduled anyway to go home, to Hungaria from the Czech Army. So there really was no problem with the Czechs.

SR: You stayed for your parents.

JW: For parents, yeah. I felt I'm strong and I know my brother is not home either. And it's just three younger sisters much younger than I am. So I'll go home and help. But I help a lot when I come home. I went to work. I make money, but not for long.

SR: Jack, you were waiting, to get back to the sequence, you were waiting for your sister. You kept looking for your sister.

JW: Yeah, waiting for the sister. So one girl tells me, it's a group, 25 girls, and she mentioned the names too who with they are together. And they was from mine town about four girls. They say they're leaving. And they're leaving, when I heard this here, what a happy person I was. I went right away and I took out two rooms, two big apartments. And well I expect 25 girls. These 25 girls, they have no homes. They have really no homes. They have, they don't know where they're coming. And I had friends there, they helped me a little bit. And we organized for the 25 girls coming in the house. And they was staying there. We have flour there. We bring bread. But we watch the same thing. The doctor come there all the time to say, "Don't eat too much." They bring, we buy a case of juices and

soups and they, for a while they eat nothing just soup and juices and certain things. No bread. Otherwise, you have to get a little bit more settled, you know. And every week was a couple girls left me. They find a cousin in one town where they belonged, and another town. And we had there a restaurant, I'm telling you. And the main was a mother, mine older sister, the one Helen. She was cooking and buy clothes for the girls there. We had money. We let I give to mine sister money and I was the father for the 25 girls. And we, every week a couple girls left. Somebody come and they took her—cousins and nephews and somebody. But not old people, all young. They went like, another city they know somebody, a friend, they went to these people and they keep them there a year or two years or they went to I don't know, in different ways they tried to go. They all tried to go to Czechoslovakia. The reason was in this section there was Russia there, Porto Partskirus [phonetic]. Was, there was more Russian than the Czech. They took over, the Russian, there. So we was afraid from the Russian. So every week somebody went into Slovakia, the other way, to be safe more. They, we was not sure we'll be safe with the Russians either there. We hope, but we was not very, you know, we were afraid. So what happened? They give me a big factory to run. And this factory was a big, what makes flours, you know, it's how you call it, a, you know, they make from the wheat flour.

SR: Flowers to wear or...

JW: Flour to...

SR: Flowers you eat? You use to...

JW: You eat, eat.

SR: Oh a mill, flour mill.

JW: Flour mill. And from there I helped who I could. They was a Russia factory, you know. And they pay me very good. But I was not happy there either. And what I did, I send my sisters to Karlsbad from there, to the Czechs, too. And by the way well, they were there about three months and we get organized a little bit, give her clothes and a little money. And I give them money and we went nighttime through the border. In fact this was not legal either. We could, a lot of people got killed by the border. If you have luck you went through. If no luck you were shot. You know what I mean? Or they don't, you find a nice officer. They maybe send them back. But was not so 100%...

SR: Who were the officers, the Russians?

JW: The Slovakia. They don't let you in. They was Russia, I think and it's a border, you know.

SR: Yeah.

JW: Now you could go away through the woods through. Sometimes it was not so good. But when I went, when I left they shoot after us and the guy who was driving the car got hit. And we survived. There was four or five boys there. And we could get killed there, too—home already. You know, we could never go out from Russia so easy. And the longer you wait it was harder. So, it was not so good in Russia either, only my home. And my home, and I never went to my home. I was not interested. I heard my neighbor took it

over the store and the, oh, we have a little farmer there. They took away from everything on us, so. And they took over the house. It was empty, you know [pause] and everything. So we really, we come to Czechoslovakia and in Czechoslovakia...

UI: How are you? How's everything going?

JW: In Czechoslovakia we write a letter to our sisters and to our uncles and to send the passports. Now we worked there. My sister worked in a store and I worked in a store. We tried to come back. It was nothing, we come to Czechoslovakia we have more money. And day by day we lived, you know. And people, our Jews alone helped each other, our boys.

SR: Jack, let me ask a question. You come from a religious family...

JW: Yes.

SR: You said your...

JW: Yes.

SR: Were you religious as a boy?

JW: Yeah, not so religious. My father was very religious. I liked soccer. I never could play soccer Saturday.

SR: Well were you religious? Were did you go...

JW: I went to synagogue every morning...

SR: Synagogue every...

JW: And at night time, yeah, on Shabbos. And I, my father, every Saturday afternoon I have to tell what I learned for the whole week from the *Gemora* and a certain *Chumash*. My, we was, my parents was very, very religious and they, we was not rich but we was very fine. My mother used to Friday night get the people who were poor for dinner. If the rabbi come to our, in the village there—not the village, in the city—they come to us. Was strictly kosher. My father had a little money. He bought a *Sefer Torah*. In the city he read the Torah Shabbos. And Yom Kippur he *davened* in, what do you call it, the *Musaf*, you know. You know, he was very religious. He knew that very good the, he had the Torah very, I wish I...

SR: Knowledgeable, right.

JW: Yeah.

SR: Yeah.

JW: I wish I had 25% what he knows.

SR: Have you been religious since this experience? The, one of the boys, Elie Wiesel, became—whose father was very religious—became a total atheist. He said, “God couldn’t permit something like that.”

JW: Yeah, well, let me tell you something what happened. We was screaming and crying, “How come God can see, to see how much the Jews go through in lifetime?” And we ask ourselves 100 times, “Where is God?” We believe in God, right? You know I believe in God now, too, okay? And we was crying. And there was boys they have Bible to pray and we pray at nighttime. And we did, nothing helped us. You know what I’m

talking about? We come home. Some people don't, who was religious is not religious, believing there is no God. That's what they said. But when I come here I always believe in God, even now, too. I, when I come here in this country— I help a lot of people there too, with money— if every I, everybody who knows me, *Hadassah* here, the, all the organizations now, too [unclear] thank God. But, I help now to everybody here, too. But it's not the point. When I come here this country, I was looking to keep Shabbos. And I went to mine aunt and my aunt, she said, "Jack, why you want to?" First they ask, my name was Eugene. She said, "No Eugene is a long name. Yankel. You should be Jack." And I want to go to a butcher store to work for the Jewish butchers is closed here Shabbos. And he, she says, "No, this doesn't look very good a butcher here, to be a butcher." You better go in a different business. Now I was a businessman at home, but not in this line. So I went to a Famous Delicatessen and there I got the first job, Fourth and Bainbridge.

SR: Famous, sure.

JW: Yeah, and I don't tell you how much I got paid, you know. At that time was not too much things. But I was not looking. I was single. And I worked myself up. And it was not so easy.

SR: Jack, let me ask this question also. Do you still—they call it the post-trauma— do you still, at night, or certain times go into shock or do memories come back? How do you cope with this now?

JW: I had, beginning I have a tough time. Number one I, at night time my father want to know what I'm doing, always again with my father. I was very close to my father and my parents. Sometime I was dreaming I'm dead. You know, and he gets, get up. Beginning, you know. And the fact what I went through, it was like shocks all the time. In beginning home. Not here so much. In Czechoslovakia, in beginning the first four weeks was very bad. I was like lost. I could never walk. I never could, I was 90 pounds, you know. You can imagine. And some people don't recognize me, how I looked. What can I tell you? It was a tough, tough life. But when I come to Prague it was a little better there. But sometime, you have sometimes here, too. Was times what you dream what your, what you did to your life. By the way, we was, when I was, this is very interesting, when I was in, by the officer, before I went in the partisans group there, I have two horses and wagon. And I used to go, when we used to move to, further to work on the highway, they was sick people. So I used to put it on the sick people, Jews from our camp, put them on the wagon and take them. The officer was very nice to them. It's no question about. I never forget them. I always say, "You live 120." So one day, one night, somehow we have to take a rest and feed the boys. And the people, the 200 people night time, they moved up and they said, "You come back with the wagon with the sick Jews," what they could never walk more. They was half dead. So we stopped there and we give them water but they moved away and in a half an hour, about 10, 15 minutes, I was driving after the company, after the people. And four Ukrainians stopped us. Ukrainians they was worse. They was with the Germans, the Ukrainians. Very, very tough. And they tried to figure out who we are. And

we told them. They see the number from the company. And they see the people who are sick. And I was the driver from the horse and wagon, you know? And I pull up, and they pull up in the side and they say, "Follow us." Then they put us in a big garden there and they took out all the sick Jews and they want to shot them. They said we're spies. They could never walk. Was not spies. But our luck was a officer was worried they be so long. So he come back with two officers, with two soldiers, to look for us. If he is coming 10 minutes later we never exist. They shot us there. You know what I'm talking about?

SR: Yeah.

JW: They was very, the Ukrainians was worse than the Germans.

SR: Jack, do you have children?

JW: Yeah, I have two children, yeah.

SR: And how did they relate to your experiences?

JW: Well they, you see, my wife is from Israel. I marry in Israel in 1958. When she come here she was religious, you know. But according mine lifestyle, she change a little bit, too. Mine children went in Sholomon Schechter school [Solomon Schechter Day School] and then they be in the Akiva [Akiba Hebrew Academy]. They grow up in the Akiva. And they learn. They, we have like records from Washington what they do to the Jews and in Auschwitz. And we all remind them all the time. Like my son, he is a, he just graduated, he's a doctor in dental school. A very good boy. He read the *Sefer Torah* in Temple Israel. He believe in God. And he is talking about it all the time. "And how come you let take you? How come people was not fighting back?" You see what they—he says, what he says, he have, I have a nephew and he says he cannot believe how come the [unclear] kill, that they should fight back. But we had no fight, we have not either a soldier there or fight back or go fight them. We have no guns. We have nothing to fight. We have nothing. With what? You, what you can do? One person to fight there? And they, and from our Jews from our city, a couple times they paid off the Russians not to, the Germans, the Hungarians, not to [unclear]. There was originally Jews, they got together like \$200,000 and pay us off. And two weeks later, again \$200,000. And they took all the money away. And after they took us away. You know, they took the gold away. If anybody had gold, my father had dollars from America that he, the uncles send him, the sisters. So when he was in the not in the train, in the big truck, so he have a pipe. He used to put in \$100 bills in the pipe, to burn. The reason, otherwise he get killed you don't give the money up. He figured the money, maybe he needs the money. He can do something with the money. But they circle around [unclear] in the papers. They have, took everything away. And when he saw this here he put in the pipe and blowing \$100 bills. Not much. Maybe \$500. It was a lot of money at the time. But...

SR: Yeah.

JW: So, my children they believe in God. They can not believe what's happened. They, it's very hard to believe what they see, sometime in the *Holocaust*, in the movie, in the you know, not in the movie or the television. They come all the time to the house. And

it's a, what can I tell you? They're really wondering, *How could it happen, and why? Why?* They ask me [unclear], "Why? Why you did wrong there?" When they were little. Now they naturally they know more why.

SR: They understand.

JW: Yeah, they understand. But I have very good kids. They, one is, my [unclear]. I have two kids. One daughter they got married. She have a baby now. And she marry. And my son he just graduated dental school. He is working already in town. He have a job. And very, very good kids. And they're very good to their parents. And what can I tell you?

SR: Well, Jack...

JW: Yeah.

SR: The tape is out. I really enjoyed this and I want to thank you.

JW: Well you don't put exactly like I say this.

SR: Why not?

JW: Well, I don't know it's very good.

SR: Jack, I think the most important thing is that it came from you and it's your experience. And this is the thoughts and we don't want to dodge. This wasn't where you prepared a speech.

JW: No, I...

SR: It's family.

JW: I, I...

SR: This is a true experience of what happened.

JW: Mr. Richman...

SR: I'm Stan.

JW: Stan, all right. I said to myself, I will not say. I'm not a good speaker. I'm not a...

SR: You were, you did, it was beautifully done.

JW: I don't—.

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