

# Abraham Flekier Interview

## October 17, 1999

The first question that they ask is what was your name when you were born?

**Same thing.**

Same.

**No problem.**

Was it Abraham or just Abe?

**Abraham.**

Abraham Flekier?

**Abe it was here because ...**

Uh-huh. Okay. And where were you born?

**You want the name of the town?**

Uh-huh.

**I was there two years ago. B-I-O ... no. B-I-A-L-O-B-R-Z-E-G-I, Poland.**

How do you say that?

**To me it's easy.**

Yeah.

**Białobrzegi. [laughing]**

Okay. Oh, boy! Okay. And was that a big town or small?

**Small town. Outside of Warsaw.**

Okay. Do you know ... were you born at home or in a hospital?

**No. We didn't have a hospital there. At home. Like they say in Yiddish, on a *laylekh*. That's on a sheet.**

Okay. [laughing] Okay. And what were your parents' names?

**My father's name was Eziel. My mother's name was Chaya.**

That's Lara's middle name...

**Yeah?**

...is Chaya. That's my grandmother's name.

**And, let me see, you want her last name?**

Okay. Yeah.

**G-A-S-S-E-R.**

Okay.

**Some people in Kansas City with that name, but I never ...**

I know them.

**... never talked to them.**

Okay. And did your parents have kind of traditional roles in the home? Did your mom stay home and cook, and your dad ...

**Of course. Yeah, like ... mom was a real homebody, you know. I mean, taking care of five boys.**

Oy! Were you the youngest or the oldest?

**No. I'm the middle.**

The middle. Okay. And what did your father do?

**My father was a tailor.**

Oh.

**And he helped with the, with the farmers, you know, over there. And it was, as far as ... average over there, you know. I mean, we didn't starve. We weren't rich. But average was all right, yeah. To raise five kids and go to school and eat on time and all that. And, of course, as a tailor, we all were dressed nice. So it wasn't that bad.**

Okay. What were your brothers' names?

**Oh, yeah. I've got now my, my little grandson. The first born. So we named him Jacob. That was my oldest brother's name. And David lives here, lives here in Kansas City. You know my brother, David? And then it was Chaim and Shalom. S-H-A-L-O-M.**

Okay. So it was Jacob, David, Chaim and Shalom. And you were in the middle?

**Yeah. I was in the middle, yeah.**

Okay. And what kind of neighborhood did you live in? Was it kind of a village or ...

**No. The neighborhood was like, every town had a town square. And I lived right on the square. When you came into town you made a left turn and it was right there.**

Did you live above the tailor shop?

**No. It was in the same place.**

Um-hmm. Oh. Okay.

**It was, over there, they didn't have a shop. It's, you know, they had their machines. They had part was for the, for the tailor working, and the rest was for the house.**

Okay. And what was the inside of your home like?

**The inside? Well, I took, I took her with me and I showed her the place. It's still there like it was.**

Really?

**Except they even had a color television in my place. And they had, what it was a nice oven to keep warm. And they had what they call a sheet that was, had heat inside. For the oven. And made out of brick. So in the winter, it was a nice place to sit. When I was a little, I was a kid, I used to sleep on it. It was nice and warm.**

Okay.

**The winter's there were awful hard, cold, you know.**

Did you ever go on vacations?

**Yeah, with the school, you know. And we used to go to the rivers and the forests, only with the kids out of school.**

Okay. And what kind of foods did you eat?

**What kind of, mostly Jewish food, you know. Gefilte fish and *challah*. That was the big deal, you know. At least once a week. And strudel and, you know, the good things.**

What did you eat on *Shabbat*?

**Well, that's ... on *Shabbat* we ate, especially, you know, like Friday night. It was the wine, and the *challah*, and the fish, and the chicken.**

And the chicken. Okay. Okay. Growing up were you aware of what your family's political affiliations were?

**Oh yeah, because we still had radio. Of course, my, my mother used to take the paper religiously. And believe me, a lot of people couldn't afford it. And it was 10 cents a paper, but she had to have that. So she read the paper, and she was up on all these things. So sometimes she used to tell me what's happening and what's going to happen. Of course, I figured she don't know nothing. She knew all right! I didn't know nothing.**

Okay. What kind of schools did you go to?

**Schools were very good schools because the schools were government schools. In fact, they were Catholic. That was the only school in town. So I went to a Catholic school. And they talking about religion in school, I knew what it was. Because we always had like ... well, it was a class of 25 - 30 kids, right? So used to be three or four Jewish kids in a class. So we had to stand up, and they did their Catholic, whatever, crap. We just stood there. We didn't say anything. But it, the worst part of it was, that's why I'm so against this stuff right now. I can tell why. There was never a time when you left school that some of them didn't recognize me right away and they started fighting me because I, I didn't say the prayer. Because I wouldn't, they knew right away I was Jewish. So the worst part of it was when school was over, we always had to fight because kids would attack you because of that prayer in school. And imagine that all the kids would make the sign of the cross, you know, and we stood there. Of course, we weren't supposed to say it. But still, you know, the kids are mean, you know. And they see you're different. You're different.**

Did anyone ever stick up for you?

**Not really because all the Jewish kids kind of stuck together.**

Oh, boy. Okay.

**So when they talking about the religions in school, [unclear].**

Did the teachers ever stop, stop the fighting?

**If it was in class, of course. But outside, of course, they couldn't control.**

What were your favorite subjects?

**It's funny. History. And we read American history. In the third grade, mind you, they already taught you American history and geography. And besides the regular, you know, arithmetic and the language. But this was my, my favorite, yeah.**

Okay. Okay. And what did you do for fun?

**For fun? Like here they have school yards and they have neighborhood yards for kids to play. We didn't have that because every piece of ground over there is, you know, private and holy, you know. So we used to get chased from place to place to place, and sometimes we'd play soccer, you know. And sometimes we'd break the electric wire and they would go after us and take our caps off. We had military kind of a cap. Everybody had to wear a uniform. And the caps in those days was a fancy thing, you know, with a visor, with a band and they cost \$2. That's a lot of money. So then my father had to go pay them off to get my cap back. But still we played anyplace we could there was a spot. But there was no such thing as for kids to go and play.**

Okay. Did you wear a *kippah* or *tzitzit*?

**No. No. Because, like I said, I went to a Catholic school. And I always didn't want to look ... They showed off anyway because we didn't pray like them. So I, to wear this, you can imagine! And we are on top of your, you know, they unite. So I did not.**

What kinds of organizations did you belong to?

**Well, organizations, you wouldn't ... you'd be surprised. They had a very good Zionist organization. I was not old enough because you have to be at least 12 or 14 year old. But my two older brothers, you know, David and, they were in it already. You know, with the uniform, with the, with the ... everything was to go to Palestine, you know, in those days. And there was a *kibbutz*. And some kids from other towns came to our town. From our town, they went to the other towns. And you'd be surprised that there was, hard life, because they had to work. And there was not too many jobs. So what do you think they worked? They were cutting trees. They were cutting wood. They were hauling water. And they only made a dollar a day. That was a big deal. But all of them together, and they lived in one room. And they ate out of, you know. And they got along fine.**

Okay. Did your parents belong to the Zionist organization?

**Well, yeah. Like everybody else did.**

Okay. Okay. How did you get along with your parents?

**Well, with my mother very good, because she was a saint. You know, with five boys, and... But with my father, you had to know to handle him. He was always nervous and he was always - a kid would be under his elbow, you know, pushing him aside. Don't bother him. Because he had to work hard. And my oldest brothers were already helping with him. So, but the youngest, you know, he shoved me off to *cheder*. In *cheder*, they kept you there like from 8:00 till 12:00 at the regular school, and from that school you went home, and ate, and you went to *cheder*.**

Oh. So the Catholic school was only in the morning.

**Only in the morning, yeah, and sometimes in afternoon because there were also shifts because the building wasn't big enough for all of us.**

Okay.

**But whatever, the rest of the time was spent at *cheder*.**

Was there only one *cheder*? Everyone went to the same one?

**Oh, no, no, no. There was quite a few. But we were the closest to the house.**

Okay. Were some more religious than others?

**Oh yeah. Yeah. But mostly were religious. Over in the *cheder*, you had to wear the *tzitzit* and you had to wear the *yarmulke* in the hall mostly. And then, of course... if you had grandparents, I had, they would test you when you came home, if you learned anything. And if you did, they always used to give you something, you know. If they liked what you did, you know.**

Okay.

**This I remember because I was at that age then. I was still in *cheder* and I was still in school. I was still, you know, like I only went through the fourth grade. The fourth grade when the war broke out.**

Okay.

**And everybody was released out, you know, the war broke out in September, right?**

I think.

**September 1st. And September is when the school starts.**

That's right.

**So the war didn't last too long, you know, over there.**

Yeah.

**It came right through. And we ... I pretended like I had no idea what's going on. Took my books and went to school. Well, the principal came out. Actually, he was our neighbor, he lived right across the street. And he said, "I hate to tell you this, but you can't come here no more." So that was the end of school.**

Was that for all the kids or just the Jewish...

**Only the Jewish kids.**

All the Jewish kids.

**Yeah. So he told me I have to take the books and go off. And that was the end of my education right there. And, in fact, my little two brothers, my mother taught them at home. In fact, when I went to concentration, he already knew how to write a letter for what he learned from his mother.**

I see.

**And he was only six years old.**

Um-hmm. That's amazing. Okay. What values were most important to your parents?

**Values was how to take care of family. That was the most important thing. That you had to eat, you had food. You had roof over your head. And you had, and your kids were raised right and they went to the right school and the right, you know. That was the values, like, more than here because you always had to have a book. And here they go play more sports than anything else. Over there we didn't have that. Like, we didn't have a basketball court. We didn't have, because, it took space. And space, instead of playing, you made a classroom out of it.**

Okay. And what was religious life like? Did you go to *shul* every Saturday?

**Well, some people did that almost every day and they wore the different clothes. Except at my house we didn't have that. Like I said, my mother was, was reading the paper**

everyday. She was, no matter if she knew... Affection, she wrote letters to every relative they had in America because most of the people over there, the older ones, you know, were illiterate. They couldn't read or write. So I remember still some addresses that she was writing to America and I was collecting the stamps when they came back. Yeah, I remember one of those American stamps. And the stamp was only 5 cents. [laughing]

Oh. So did you have a lot of relatives?

**We didn't have any relatives. The neighbors.**

The neighbors.

**But they didn't know how to write.**

Ah-hah. So your mom was very well educated?

**Very well. In fact, she was teaching when she was ... before she was married, I guess. And, like I said, and she kept up with the news. So if you wanted to know anything, she would tell you.**

Okay.

**And when the Germans came in, she spoke perfect German. In fact, they took her as a Ger-, for a German and we started getting worried because the Polacks would point her out as a Jew, you know. And when they came in, they loved her to death. You imagine! But because, they took my little brother - he was six years old and he had a military cap like. They put the swastika on it. And then they, you know, because he was German. They didn't ask any questions. But they, but this outfit left. Of course, we took off all that thing because you don't want to get caught in a lie like that. So somebody else came. But one time, they traveled through town and my little brother, with his cap, they recognized him. And they jumped off the truck and they came into our house. And that was on Rosh Hashanah, I believe it was. So my mother had like, these were guys who were nice to her, you know. She made a spread for them, you know, and they sat down. I still remember as a kid when this guy took off his revolver, you know, wrapped it in a rag, you know, and laid it on the table. And, and my cousin was over to our house. And for some reason he says, "He's a Jew, isn't he?" So my mother says, "Yeah. He's a Jew, but here we don't know any difference. We're all alike." He says, "Well, did you hear, did you hear the speech the Führer made this week what he was going to do with all the Jews?" And that was on, right in the beginning, you know. But, like I said, she told him, "We don't know about this stuff anymore yet."**

Oy. Was it a religious community? Did most of the ...

**Yeah. It was. We had one synagogue. It was a small town.**

Okay.

So everybody went to the same synagogue. But they also had *shtiebelekh*, they called it. [Unclear], they called us the *shtiebelekh*. What's his name? Margolies called us the *shtiebel* synagogues.

Yeah.

And he didn't like that, because over there you didn't have to have a rabbi. Everybody knew the, the, the law and knew what happened. So we had small, like for instance, my father was in the, what they called the *Gemilas*, the *Gemilas Chasad*. He was an officer there. We had a group that organized a bank to give loans without interest, but they also had to have guarantees other people would sign. And we, I remember that was connected with the American Joint Distribution Committee. And when somebody opened up a business and go as much as \$100. That was a lot of money to start you off with. And they would pay back like \$5, \$2 a week. My father would, two days a week, not the days, the evenings, he was the secretary there. Write out the tickets and all. In Yiddish, mind you. All of this. And had meetings who should get it, who shouldn't get it, and how to collect the money because if they didn't pay, the guarantor was, paid for it because they had to come up with the signatures. And that, and then, believe me, that helped. As far as I remember, it helped out a lot of people. You know, if somebody needed to get into a new apartment, you have to come up with three months rent or six months rent or whatever they... If they didn't have any money, they might as well live outside. So they came up with this loan and they paid it back.

So the Jews took care of the Jews?

Yeah. So we, like I was saying, my father was like this all the time that I remember. He worked the off hours there. And we had our own little synagogue for these people.

Okay.

And when it came, like *Pesach*, some people had no money to buy *matzah*. And I remember, you take a big basket, you know, in those days they had a big one, put it on his shoulder, and with a friend of his and they go from house to house and everybody would give *matzah*. He came home and he had 30, 40 pounds and that was for the, for the poor people.

Okay.

But he, they, they always did this. Always.

Were you friends with people that weren't Jewish?

**Oh, yeah. I've had, I was, in school, my neighbors. So, yeah, we were friends. But, when it came, and the guys, you know, had their group and we had our group, but we lived next door, so we were, went together that way.**

Okay. Okay. When did you first start to hear or know about the Nazis?

**Well, like I told you, my mother used to tell us this, because she read the paper. And, but as kids, especially I was what? Ten years old?**

Yeah, you said 11 or 10.

**Eleven? But these things never bothered me. It was just, get a team together, go out and play soccer. And she would always tell us what can happen and it's going to happen. She told us, not only told us, but she taught us how to mend socks, how to fix your shirt, how to wash it. And I looked at her in a kind of crazy way. I said, "What on earth are you talking about? I'm not going to do that!" She says, "One of these days I won't be here. And if I won't be here, you should know how to do this yourself because if you don't, you're going to die." And that's exactly what happened.**

Did you ...

**And they took me away from home. In fact, she ran after the truck when they took me. And all I wanted for her is to leave because I knew she was going to get hit. Because she saw me, but I was already on the truck. She was trying to grab me. And the Germans were already standing there with their rifles. And she kept screaming that she wouldn't see me no more. And I told her to go home and that's the last time I ever saw her.**

Okay.

**And she was right. Never saw her again.**

Now the paper she was reading was a Polish paper?

**Polish paper. And the *Jewish Forward*. They had it in New York.**

Was it in Yiddish or ...

**Yiddish.**

It was in Yiddish. Were the articles in there...?

**It was a free press, mind you. But that was all before the war, before... When the Nazis came there was no more Jewish papers. It was Polish papers. But also under the Nazis.**

Okay. Now you said that you remember going to school when you were ten. It was in September and the man, the headmaster, told you to go home, or the principal told you to go home. Okay. How soon after that did you see any Nazis?

**I saw them right away. The first day. Except there was, there wasn't a house yet. There was no ghetto yet. Till they, it took time for this to get organized. But before then we were still running free, you know. But we, then they, they, they cut off the streets. Like, for instance, on this side, you cannot go. On the south, you cannot go. The north, you cannot go. But then that's really, you know, a small ring like. And then whenever they caught you outside the perimeter, you were shot right on the spot. There was no question. And this I remember well because, like I said, I was still young and my buddy next door, his father was raising horses, beautiful horses and I was hanging around with him because I loved him. And he would ride horses without a saddle or anything. I saw him gallop down the street. The best. And that how he got shot.**

The father or the boy?

**The boy!**

The boy.

**My friend. Because the horses could go across the creek. There was pasture for the cows, you know, for everybody. So, of course, they couldn't feed the horse at home. So he took that horse and rode him all the way out to that little creek and then he gave me a with, you know, a twig and he went across and he stayed all day eating the grass. But the Germans saw, finally saw it. And I noticed he opened up his revolver. I said, "Oh, my God! He is going to say that he crossed the creek." He didn't. And he started running and he shot him right here, and he fell almost into the creek. And then he went into, across the street there was a shoemaker, my cousin. And they asked for a belt or a strap, tied around his legs and pulled him out of that creek. He got some, two people and buried a hole right there. So when I went back there two years ago, I saw that spot. I saw a lot of spots like that. That boy was buried right there. And he was my age, about 10, 11.**

Were you wearing yellow stars by then, or ...

**We wore the arm band with the, you know, star. And it was funny because at the time, I was not a grown-up. I snuck by. I didn't wear it. But we had little Polish kids in the neighborhood and they learned the word *Jude*. Although in Polish, it's *Zyd*, but in German, it's *Jude*. And he saw me without it and saw a German go by, he started hollering. So I had to start wearing it because the kids would give it away.**

How did the Nazis publicize their laws? Did they put signs up or ...

**There's always laws. And the laws, what in every town had a place where they hung the news out. And they always said, "If you don't follow these orders you're going to be shot." And that was holy.**

Did the mayor or the government of the town try and support the Jews at all?

**Not at all, because they became, they used the Polish police, the Polish Blues, so called. They were already under the Germans. The mayor, the... all under the Germans. And, of course, most of them stayed. I know they probably got paid. In the war, they had guns too, you know, because the Germans let them use it. And so a lot of times they were looking for smugglers mostly. And they reported them to the Germans. They had a German police station and they had a Polish police station. So ...**

Okay.

**Two of them.**

What discussions about the Nazis was there at home? You've mentioned your mom kind of thought she knew what was going on. What was your dad's response?

**Because nobody believed. They really didn't believe. Not, unless you read and kept up with the news. But she believed, everything get worse. And my father used to say, "Oh! Don't go talk like that anymore." But she says, "That's exactly what's going to happen." She made out little knapsacks, what you see babies wearing today, the kids, for everybody in the house when we were still together. And what do you think you had in there? Some things that will keep you alive, you know. Like cubes of sugar, something like that and something to wear and everybody had his name on it because with, they, they knew you could do it tomorrow morning. That's it. They take everybody out. And that's all you could take. So this is what everybody had lined up.**

So you were restricted to one area?

**One area.**

How else was your life affected? You couldn't go to school anymore.

**Couldn't go to school. You could not walk down the street without worrying somebody can shoot you. Somebody's going to hit you. But as a kid I got by. I started working for the Germans. And what do you think? They let me ride a bike when they needed some things, you know. So they let me use their bike, get on the bike and get out there, bring it to them. And for this I got along. And I, we used to get something to eat, you know all that kind of stuff. But we had the Jewish *Gemeine*. That was the Jewish... city council. They didn't want any Jew to cross the borders because they were told by them, by the Germans, that you, you responsible, you know. So, many times a Jewish president seen me on the bicycle.**

And I was on the outside, and I didn't care because they, they sent me. And he hit me across the face. "You should not go over there." I said, "What do you want from me?" I says, "The policeman, he sent me." "Okay, you shouldn't go on the other side." And I told him. I said, "I don't want to go there because my own Jewish policemen," what did they call them... The city councilman. He'd catch me and he'd give it to me. And I, and my father told them too. He said, "What do you want from him? That's how we eat now." He organizes over there whatever he can because there were so many places I could go they wouldn't let us in again anymore. So as a kid you got away.

What were your older brothers doing?

My older brothers, see my father was in this the Jewish *Gemeine*. So they made a deal with the Germans that they, the Germans came in every morning and they said they need 150 Jews, 200. So they would appoint these Jews who would go to work that day. This way they didn't have to work everyday like that. See the next day somebody else. So my father was organizing. So the first thing he did, he took my older brothers under each arm and he went out with them first so nobody would complain that he takes my son but he doesn't take his son. So my, David, my older brother, they used to start complaining. "What are you doing over there? If you wouldn't be there, I wouldn't worry about [unclear]. And in the winter, they didn't have no snow plows. So we had to take the snow off the highways because the Germans had to have it clean. And, like I said, had to do it ourself. But they were there. But lately, David says, "I ain't going no more. I don't care. You do what you like. And they can scream at you." So my father says, "Okay." He didn't want to go. "You don't want to go, go home." So this way, when they didn't show up with as many as they asked for, they would go out and start grabbing people from anywhere. So some guy would have to go almost every day. This way they had organized, so not every day the same people.

Did they shutdown the businesses, the Jewish businesses?

Yes. Not only shutdown the businesses, they had to give the, the merchandise to them. Of course, they didn't. So they ended up making all kinds of ... you know, breaking in. Not breaking in. They go in with a few policemen. If they caught you, they'd kill you. And, of course, they'd take it out, take it away. The worst part was the shoemakers. They had leather. Rolled leather was like gold, because of what they had they were going to have to have boots. And if they caught you with this leather, I'm telling you. You could repair shoes. But to make a good shoe, you have to make it out of new leather. And new leather is not only was expensive, it was nowhere to be seen. So most of the people, they buried it. So you can imagine when they caught with it, and there was a lot of people that would say, "I see you hiding that stuff." They go for a piece of leather, they'd report you.

Did any non-Jewish people help you at all?

Well, the laws started changing every day. Not only they didn't help you but if you did help, they said that you're going to get the same sentence as the Jew would. So that gave them a good excuse. Stay away from me. I'll stay away from you. Although, my mother had good friends and all that. And she, I guess she could have gone to the farm or... underground. There would have been some of them that would keep her, you know. But she had a little boy, two actually. Of course, couldn't leave them.

What kind of communication did you have with the outside world?

None whatsoever. It was always "The Russians are coming" because that was the closest thing. But everything turned out to be a lie. Did you see the movie, what's his name?

Robin Williams?

**Robin Williams.**

I haven't seen it yet.

Go see it.

Okay.

And that's exactly what it was. And they called him Jacob the Liar because he came in with these ideas what's, what's happening. The Russians already so many miles from here and they're coming this way. He heard it on the radio when they took him into the German office. Heard about the, on the German radio what was happening on the front. So it was legitimate. He told everybody. So everybody felt that he had a radio but the radio was against the law. Anytime they catch you with a radio, they kill you. So everybody, "He's got the radio. He knows the news." So sometimes he had to come up with the news and had, had no idea what it was all about and it was a lie because he had to tell them something. So that's why they, the name of the movie is, what it's name? The *liagner*, the liar. Jacob the Liar.

So there really was a person?

Yeah.

Yeah.

But he had to tell them. But then what do you tell them? First of all, he had ... he couldn't hear the radio all the time. So he said, "What is going to tell them, that we're going to get killed?" So he always tell them something that's going to be nice. And the fact is, I remember hearing so many people, "So just believe everything already." And they said one thing, if you're going to tell me that we're going to get killed tomorrow, we'd believe

**you. But if you're going to tell me the Russians or the Americans are coming in tomorrow, forget it. You're a liar. Don't talk. This is ... that movie will tell you the whole story.**

You had mentioned that some of your neighbors had relatives in, in America.

**Yeah.**

Did any of them try and leave and go to America?

**Well, that was only before the war. When the war started, forget it. That's... And some of them didn't want to go. Like I ... do you know the Gutovitzes?**

Um-hmm.

**He was my uncle. My mother and their mother are sisters.**

Oh, okay.

**So, my uncle had a brother in Kansas City and my uncle over there was well off. When I mean well off, they, they ate good, they lived in a nice place, they wore good clothes. So he was talking about, "Ah, in America. What the hell has he got in America?" He says, "Sure, he's starving over there." Of course, he run all kinds of lies that he's Truman's friend. [laughing] But he, he used to have a little furniture store on 15th Street and he was telling him... In fact, I remember as a kid that the, "What is that?" I came over here, there were [unclear]. I came, he had a, I remember when I came here the first time, I went over there because my mother wrote the letters. So I went in there. In the store they had this little pot bellied stove to heat it and he would feed me Campbell's soup from that stove. Ah, I used to vomit. I couldn't eat that stuff no more. And he thought, you know, he just came over. So finally his kid's told him, leave him a[lone]. So I made an excuse one time. It's Friday night. I have to go over to the... End of Friday night. So then my brother came after I did. So he showed up here. Same thing.**

[Tape ends and then interview resumes.]

**... on Friday. The next Friday we didn't show up. And that was it.**

That's funny.

**He think saw me buy a shirt. Why couldn't you get a new shirt? You know, it cost 25 cents. A new shirt cost \$2, \$3. Ah, well in America he's already spending money. I think I remember everybody [unclear], that's nuts. You... Well, and these were old timers, you know. And he would figure it. Come on over here. So now I'm single. Well, you know, wherever I worked I made enough money to eat and to buy clothes anyway. So, and the old man didn't like it.**

That's funny.

**Oh, and I got new shoes.**

So the Nazis put you in this one area. What happened next?

**People were dying, starving. Of course, they wouldn't let anything in. And the only thing that went out is people would sell good... the gold, the clothes, the, the furniture. That's how they would live. But in the meantime, that they take so many cities, towns. They cleared all together and they put them in one town instead of having 20 towns around here, to make one town. And the empty come over here. These people were dying. You see people with swollen feet and starving, actually starving. And then, of course, in the summer they wouldn't allow the Jewish people that didn't have a house or a stove, so they cooked outside, you know. That was it. They came up with a new law - could not cook outside. So, if you couldn't cook, what could you eat? So my mother, whatever we ate, she always had some people, spoonful anybody come over. But there was something. You never heard of air conditioning. [Laughing] It got so hot and she was cooking 24 hours. And I was a snotty little kid and I told her, "Why are you helping these people?" She says, "Do you know if I don't let them in they don't eat?" She understood that. I didn't. And then I figure out what it was.**

So people were living outside, or did they share your home?

**As much as they could. The rest of them lived outside. If they had a public building. In fact, I went to see the building now. Oh, it was like an old theater, you know. A thousand people would crowd in it and everybody had his spot.**

And so then did they start deporting people?

**And then when everything was already organized, every town had its day. Like, for instance, we didn't have a railroad, but ten miles there was a railroad. So everybody marched, the whole town, one day, to that railroad. And everybody got on the railroad right straight for Treblinka. And that's how they did with every town. And the ghetto in Warsaw had the biggest concentration. So they did it for months and months until they emptied the whole thing.**

So ... but you said that you were deported before your mom.

**I wasn't deported. I was caught and they sent me to a factory to work.**

Oh.

**That was not deportation. It was, they needed labor. So they took ... they started there because up until then I didn't think they would take me. But then they realized, they said**

**by 1950 I'll make a perfect, you know, worker because they were going to teach me over there. So they started grabbing kids. And then still when they got me I didn't think of ... I thought they were going to let me go home tonight. That was it. And after a few days, I found out they took the whole town away. There was no place to go home. And some of the kids ran away back but they got shot right away. Of course, they, they caught them.**

So where did they take ... they took you to a factory or ...

**Yeah.**

To work? What kind of work?

**I went to Radom. It was about 30 miles. No about 20 miles. And it was an ammunition factory. We were making these 45 guns, hand guns, and we made rifles and bicycles, big, big, big, big bikes. And they made, they made a tent outside the factory. Barracks with barbed wire closed it out. Then they made the Jewish police work inside, and outside they kept... oh, Russian, Ukrainian soldiers. You know, they told them, "Become Nazis or you'll know it."**

And how long were you there?

**Three years.**

Okay. What was happening to your brothers and your parents?

**Like I said, they took them away.**

They took them.

**One day. And then I find I've got nobody because I used to get whatever through a Polack sneak in a letter. First they'd sneak in some clothes. I left everything at home then they brought me... and after that day that's it. But we still didn't believe where they went. I thought they went to Russia, they went everywhere. That was it.**

So were you ... and where did you go from the factory?

**From the factory?**

**Yeah.**

**We stayed until the Russians started moving westward. I think they were already bombing and we heard the Russians are coming and the Germans were really getting back. So they ... from Poland we started walking all the way to Auschwitz. And Auschwitz had everybody. And over there, they started looking for people to go to work in Germany. So**

that's when the selections came in. In Auschwitz, who could work or who couldn't work - and that was right there where most of the kids still friends. I lost them all there because Mengele was there, and he pointed out who can stay and who cannot stay. If stayed you could still live a few more days. If you got on the trucks, they send you right away with the next train to Germany.

So you were about 13 at that time?

Yeah, something like that. The fact is I went through the selection. So everybody, I could see in single line file and everybody was trying to look good or whatever. And I don't know. I was a kid. Still had a shirt that I washed it out. In fact I went to - they had a swimming pool who were still on the station coming in, and they had a swimming pool, and they let us go swimming. And it was July. It was hot. And it was stinky, you know, coming out of the cars. And I went in there. And, of course, I could swim. Some them didn't know how. They drowned. To see water, you know. And the Germans were laughing. I got out of that pool and then they went through the selection. The selection, everybody had to go through it. And the funny part about it ... there was a guy in the same line. He was a barber. He clipped a little of my hair, pinched my cheeks, made me look lively. And, like I said, this guy had his [unclear]. He stood me right in front of the, and you came up to his face, and... You came up to his face, he would just point. Left, right, left, right, right. So he, they did all that. Sometimes just, he went to, which side the good side go on today. But, so, he comes up to me, he says, he looks at me. "How old are you?" I said, "16. I'm only 16." He looks and he reaches over, and so help me God, and he feels my muscle and at the time I already had worked pretty good. He puts me with the big guys. And my brother was already in the other side. I says, "Okay." And then I see the truck with all the youngsters in the truck going for the crematorium and they were screaming. They left fathers, mothers, brothers, friends. The guards were starting to beat them down when they got up. But that was Hitler. I never saw him anymore.

But at that point, one of your brothers was with you?

Yeah, he was with me all the time.

Okay.

And we got back on the train and went off to Germany.

About what year was this?

'44.

'44?

**Because in '44 they started clearing up most of Europe. But the only place was Germany was still under the Germans.**

Okay. Okay. You want to take a break for a few minutes?

**If it's all right. Take a drink of water.**

Okay.

**You want something to drink?**

No, I'm fine. Thanks.

[Interview stops and then resumes.]

**I go to ... they take the Jewry. In fact this one is in Czechoslovakia. From Czechoslovakia, went to the southern Germany to Stuttgart. That was funny because we had no idea where we were going. Finally, we came to Germany. In Poland we worked in ammunition factories. In, in Germany they didn't have that anymore. So we worked at the quarries. The quarries, believe me, there's nothing you can eat from a rock and a lot of them died. I gotta tell you this story. When I got there, like I said I was still [unclear] and they took me to these quarries, so I could last maybe a month the most, 'cause they put you on the ground with these jackhammers and vest. Most of them died right away. TB because it killed their lungs. So I said to myself, "What the hell! I'm not going to work over there." But every morning they start you off sending half the people. Just don't show up. You hide under the barrel there. But after that, you had to report, because you see you want to get the food whatever. And by the inside there were Jewish policeman. And so I come in. To them it was a big joke. Everybody, "He didn't go to work." I said, "That's right. I didn't go to work." I says, "Do what you like. I don't want to go back to the quarry." So everybody hits me with a hat. They make you stand against the wall like this. You talk Jewish guys. See like this.**

Uh-huh.

**You stayed a couple hours. And then like I said everybody comes in. They knew you were guilty of something, bull. So finally, they were talking and I couldn't make it out. The German that was in charge of the work details had to come in take the report from the man [unclear]. Miller. And everybody, when you saw Miller, there was death. So I said to myself, "If Miller comes in," and, of course, they are going to tell him what I did, that's it. So I said to myself, "What am I going to do?" And it was summer '44. And I'm standing by the window. [Unclear] the window and the barracks are on these stilts, you know. So when I hear the report from the guards in the front, "Eat! Miller's coming on a bicycle." So I says to myself, "I'm not going to wait for him to come in and find out what I did." I jumped through that window, under the barrack, in all over the place and I find the one**

thing, the latrine barrack. They aren't going to look there to back. Sure enough he went. I had to report his go. I had to come out. So I came in. Same thing, another beating. Some of these guys had I met up with after the war. And sure enough, put through to another detail. Otherwise I would... so this story, I never forget, this was introduction to Germany. And the funny part you go through what they call a delousing. They clean, they give you a shower and they shave you in front of a woman. They had men do that. Men and, woman prisoners do that, mostly Russians. But think about it. So after that I had to, another year to go through it, too. April [unclear].

Now which of your brothers was with you?

**David.**

David? He was with you the whole time?

The whole time. But they didn't know that because you were always lined up in the same line. So when they took these and cut you off here, I was still with him.

Okay. Where were you when you were freed?

Oh, I came out of Dachau. They put us in a train going south and that night the [unclear] bombed... The whole station. We were sitting in the cars except we had barbed wire open cars. They lit up the sky like daytime and they were bombing. The car actually jumped the tracks. All night. The fact is they build the stadium where they had the 1972 Olympics on that spot. And from there, I don't know where they got 'em, they [unclear] a locomotives. Still got to get it... Got all the prisoners in and they were go taking us to south to the Tyrol, to the mountains and over there they were going to get them. So they put us in the train. In a whole week, we didn't make a hundred miles because the, the planes came, the Americans. We got bombed on the tracks and they were bombing the train and we lost a lot of people there too. And, finally, I remember the guy came out, had a speech, he says, "We can't go any farther. You behave, be nice, we not going to fight anymore. We're going to hang out the white flag." And I thought the Russians. And he says, "And if you think it's going to be better when they come, you're prisoners, you know. You go to their jails." I believe them... I believe it. Right away they let us out twice a day from the train. But to get out of the train on a track is still about six feet from the ground. I couldn't get out. It was too high, too hard. I fell on those rocks. And then we didn't get fast enough back in. Standing there with a rifle. And finally we had 50 people in one car and they had four people inside, guards, with the machine guns. So looking out of the train, through the cracks, there was the highway, oh about 50 yards from the railroad tracks. And I look and all of a sudden I see a different uniform, different car, Jeep. And I noticed the guards inside were taking razor blades taking off the insignias. And I went crazy. And, everybody said, "Shut him up! Shut him up!" Because, you know... But, and they thought, you know, they go. So the Germans, they wasn't paying attention at all to us. They was too busy taking off [unclear] whatever. Finally, I looked at him and I said, "You

tell him I saw something over there.” I saw Russians. I had no idea, American. He says, “Tell them.” He says, “No. You didn’t see Russians.” I said, “Who was it then?” He says, “Americans.” Better yet. And he says, “You be- behave. Everything is going to be all right.” Sure enough they came with their tanks out the highway and they saw [tape cuts out]. [Unclear] And they didn’t know who was inside. They took their tanks right over there the first two cars got blasted from the Americans. So we tore the doors open and we started running towards the highway. And the Germans were so stupid. They didn’t come out. They stayed in the car. And then the, the Americans came and they looked at thousands and thousands of us, running. He says, “Where are the Germans?” All of a sudden I remembered, said they’re in the car. So they came ... all of a sudden everybody went the bunch of us, “You go this side,” and they went for the track. So, but I mean... And they said, “You’re a kid for them to come out.” Well, he told them to come out with their hands out first. So they threw themselves on the, on the rocks. Like falling wood, they fall out. They told them to put their faces to the ground and if anybody lifted up his head and they had, we had five hundred more. Got a woman from the other side because we had no idea where the woman [unclear].

[Side conversation about an observer's concern about Abe's shortness of breath. Tape resumes, though he still seems short of breath.]

Okay. So where did you go right then? Where did the Americans take you?

It’s a good story. Like I said the tanks were coming down the highway and in the meantime, the woman attacked guards. They poked their eyes out with needles and then the men lay down, face down and we took their weapons. But they couldn’t, I could hardly walk. Anyway I says, “There is about so many thousands of us. How they going to feed us?” But to feed us then would kill each other. So I said, “What are they going to do?” Then I started to believe in America right away. You know what they did? They took us on a long highway. On both sides lined us up on the shoulders, and then they came up with two by four trucks. And these trucks had everything. Mostly cartons with... and they start serving us from both sides. Before I knew it I was up to here in food. And the Jews were telling us, “Gee. You haven’t had anything to eat here. You wait.” I said, “Oh, my God!” Then I had a problem because I couldn’t read the stuff. I didn’t know what was in the... I opened up everything, you were right what I didn’t... and box, and box and box. And the order came in to take over the houses. So we walked in the house about 10:00 at night and I remember it was snowing the 28th of April. It was snowing. And, uh, I got in that house. It was nice and warm. The Germans were gone. We were taking cows and horses, they had everything. And we stayed there about a month. Finally, the Germans showed up little by little. It was two little girls on the picture on the wall. Her son was in Russia on the front. And everything we needed they took care of us. The old lady was cooking. And we stayed there. Finally, came to ... they put us in DP camp. It was about 20 – 30 miles, from all over the place, you know. We stayed there quite awhile and then I started working. The American soldiers, I used to hang around them. Lived there. They put a uniform on me. They had me like American soldier, but I wasn’t. And then I went to this town in the

[unclear] and I see trouble over there because in the beginning we could do everything. You know the American could and the German police didn't have any jurisdiction. So finally had a *Frau* doctor, Jew, a Jewish women. She came out of concentration camp too and she was kind of getting with the youngsters, you know. She was taking care of us. And every time I got in jail she took me out. And finally she says, "Abraham, you want go America, right?" "Yeah." "You will never make it because this goes on your record." And I says, "Okay. Send me to America." She took me by the arm to help me to the American Consulate in Frankfurt and we started talking. Of course, she spoke good English. Everybody respect that. She was very educated woman. And she says, "You going to register but don't go get in no trouble." And it took about three months. She put me on a boat to America.

Really.

**That was it.**

And your brother was with you?

No.

No?

**No, he went ... he was still there going underground, Palestine. They were recruiting, the Brigade [probably a reference to the Jewish Brigade] came, and they [unclear] and they were training these guys. Gave them weapons or whatever they could take from each other. He stayed there a few more months and then he came with me.**

Okay. At that time, did you have any idea what happened to your family?

**Yeah, I can't [unclear] already. That's why I didn't care what's going to happen. Said, "You want to go to America, go America." Take me to New York, I want to go back.**

How did you... Were you and your brother the only survivors?

**Yeah.**

Just you and your brother? How did you find out what happened to your family? Was it through the Red Cross or ...

**No, we already knew what these evacuation meant. When they took a town, went straight to Treblinka. At that time before they took them to Auschwitz, because then Treblinka was built for that. In fact all the Warsaw Ghetto went to Treblinka.**

Okay. So you came to, you came to the United States?

**Yeah, in '47.**

...and to New York in '47. And how long were you in New York?

**Oh, about three months. I didn't like it. That's why they gave me the map.**

Really.

**And they showed me ... Yeah, that looks all right. I didn't know it was by smoke. I says, "Give me some, good size." "Well, you like it over there." Those days we're talking about nobody bombed Kansas City.**

Sure. What did you do while you were in New York? Did you work?

**No. They put me through school and they had all kinds of people helping us, how to dress, how to talk, how to eat, how to... and they took us in a store, got us dressed. A hat, a [unclear], be gone. And then I left to airport and came to [unclear] here.**

And what did you do when you were in Kansas City?

**In Kansas City, first they put me in Paseo High School. But through the winter. And then somebody put me, okay, night school. Night school I started to work and put me in a house, some old lady, I remember. It cost about five dollars a week on 51st and Paseo. Nice house. The old lady didn't let me bring any food in it because she was afraid. I said, "Don't worry about it." But to go to the restaurant, I had no money because I had to buy a loaf of bread and a pound of salami. You put it in the dresser. And she ... "Abie!" Bring your food down." Okay. So I stayed there. But it was across the street from the school so I have to wait till the break and then I moved out and moved some place else. Then I went on my own and I started working and I made out pretty good, pretty good. If I needed anything I'm on - what's the name of that street - 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> Street, they used to have the Jewish organization over there. And I used to go and I had a guy who used to watch over me see that I didn't get into trouble. Got a job for Barney Goodman.**

Really? What were you doing?

**First cleaning the floor. Always knock on the door when I stop brushing the door. "What do you want?" I said, "I'm just cleaning." I couldn't speak a word of English. So, finally, Barney Goodman calls me. He and his brother was [unclear] in these hotels on Armour Boulevard. Had a lot of them over there. Had 16 hotels there. So the guy, his brother-in-law, he was in charge of all these workers, he says, "You want to go to Arizona?" I says, "Where is Arizona?" I had no idea. "Tucson." I said, "Yeah. I'll go any place." "Friday afternoon I'll send you a ticket with a goy. You open up a shop." They had hotels over there too. He needed help so I was his help. Stayed Santa Rita Hotel. Gorgeous place, and I had the restaurant, the bar, everything. All I had to do was sign. Then, what the heck, he**

paid me a dollar ten or dollar and quarter an hour. But when I live in a hotel, I worked like 16 - 17 hours. What do I care? Because I slept there too. So I was making ... this was 1947 or '48, making... And I put it all in the bank. And I bought some clothes but people gave me clothes over there. I was a novelty there, at the little town. So I remembered ... at the first ... I'm standing there, Yom Kippur. I said, Yom Kippur. It's time I went to *shul*, you know. So I says to the manager, "*Shul*, I got to go." He says, "Right across the street is a reform Temple." I says, "Well, I don't care, it's a *shul*." I go in the Temple, it was Yom Kippur mind you, the guy sitting at the desk smoking cigarettes selling tickets to the school kids who were the University of Arizona. So I paid him whatever. But I went inside and I see the rabbi, bald head, you know standing there with the Torah. I couldn't figure it out. I says, "I don't know." So finally I went back to the hotel and I, I explained to the people there and one couple from Chicago and he says, "Well, you come to the *shul* with me tomorrow. Call when it's time. Orthodox *shul*." So I went with him. And I remember at the services they collect money for Israel. I says, "What can I do?" He says, "How about give a speech?" I said, "What, in English?" He said, "No, Yiddish." I had all kind [unclear] from New York, from Chicago. All the sick people come there for the [unclear] you know. Sure enough I gave them a speech in Yiddish, collected a lot of money. I even gave in a little to the place, and I went home with these people, you know, to eat with them. And the whole town started getting and then they send me ... Barney Goodman called up the manager, he says, "I'm supporting this school over here." Sending some kids over there. Thank 'em. You know, invited me to one of the family picnics, hay rides all because Barney said so. And I stayed there about three months and then I got drafted, to Korea.

*Oy vey!*

I came back and Barney died and I wanted to call. I met his son-in-law and his wife. And I knew his wife here and his daughter.

Uh-huh. So did you become a citizen?

Only, then they drafted me, I went to Korea. Then I find out I can't get my citizenship overseas. So I have to come back to the United States. I came back in '53 and applied and became a citizen.

Okay, now when do you meet Yoheved?

Well, I used to travel. You know, in those days I was making pretty decent money already by myself so I went to the east coast, the west coast, the south. Finally, I had a lot of friends in Israel. I'm going to Israel. That's when I meet Yoheved. Met in Jerusalem.

Okay. When you were first in Kansas City, who were your friends?

I had a guy, a kid, who [UNCLEAR] to me before and I called him up. I said, "What are you doing?" "Well, I'm not a rich American yet." "Come over," he says, "you do what I

**do.” So I came the next day and I said, “I want to go to Kansas City.” So they put me on an airplane and I came over here. I moved in on Linwood and Olive. They had a council house for these kids. So we hang around there, a few of us and we had a kind of old Jewish cook from Germany. They cooked and took care of us. Then I started going to school and then I went on my own, and that was that. I said, “If I get in any trouble, you’re going to find out.”**

Okay. So David and Karen were born in Kansas City?

**No. David is my older brother.**

Oh, but your kids.

**Of course.**

They were born ...

**Oh, yeah. Sure. A lot of years later. I got married in '59 and I came here in '47.**

Okay. Did you talk about what happened to you during the war with your children?

**Not that night, but they came up they needed something for school. Like you, they sit down and ask questions. That’s how they knew.**

What was that?

**Now, they don’t wonder. Not interested.**

How old were they when they first found out?

**Oh, like ... you know a lot of kids started going to the synagogue and, and then they found out, yeah. Then they started asking. People were telling them some about it.**

How do your memories of the Holocaust affect your life now?

**I don’t know how, but there isn’t a day that I don’t see it. I can never forget it. Every moment when I go shave my face, all these things get in front of you. For some, I don’t know why. Just that time. All these things come back to you. Can you figure how, how I made it through? I don’t know. I don’t know.**

Did you ever stop believing in God?

**Oh, yeah. After the war and during the war. Of course, I says, “Who” Why? How? Why?” More so for my little brother. He was six-years-old. And I seen whole families**

**getting wiped out. And when you're talking about saints, believe me, you couldn't go any further than my mother. And the most the time she always cared about people. And she knew what the hell was going on and what was happening.**

Do you believe in God now?

**It's coming back to me. It's coming back, but still not ... you know what I mean? The only thing I, I wanna ask questions. Why?**

Do you belong to Beth Shalom now?

**Yeah.**

Yeah. Okay. What made, what do you think made you able to have a normal life now?

**Well, you look on yourself. What's the options I have here, you know? Either you go bad or you start to, you know, have a regular life. I say, ah, I'll go do that. That doesn't mean a lot of people you come from my background you've got to be bad. Not, not so - because if you think, you figure, is this all right or is this all right, that's all. And then I started meeting a lot of people here in Kansas City. Go to the Center, had a accordion club with a lot of the guys here, I used to start dating. And I figured what the heck? Better this way than just on the outskirts, whatever.**

What does being an American mean to you?

**It means ... of course, I always thinking about that fact. Not that somebody was [unclear]. But, you know, just as kids you understand. And you figure this would be the right way and nobody tells you anything, nobody scares you. You're not afraid of anything. And that's what I noticed right here. I says, "This is it." Because, like I said, where I come from I couldn't say I am Pole, because to them they'll remind you thousand times of your, you're a Zyd. They're always something against you. And the people you were raised with. And over here they hadn't noticed yet. And I even remember, I met some of them and they started to go to the same high school only a few months. Kids came and wait in line to, to meet me because I was an oddball, you know. Everybody wanted to see, they heard about it but [unclear]. Everybody called me Abraham.**

Well, that's it for the questions.

**Okay.**