

Boris Segelstein Interview

January 16, 2000

Boris, what was your name at birth?

My name at birth was Eliezer Dov, a Hebrew name.

Can you spell that for me?

E, well, in Hebrew, I don't know. It's E-L-I-E-Z-E-R. Dov, D-O-V.

Okay. When were you born?

I was born on December the 22nd, 1921, and ...

And in what city?

In a village by the name of Nizhniye Veretski.

What was the total population of this city?

Total population was about 3,000 people.

What was the Jewish population?

I would say around 500, give or take 10 or 20.

And what do you know about the circumstances of your birth?

I know that, at that time, we had no hospital in our town.

Were you born at home?

I must have been born at home. And it was with the help of a midwife, I'm sure. That was the style at that time.

What were your parents' names?

My father's name was David, David Altman.

And can you spell that for me?

David? D-A-V-I-D. Altman. A-L-T-M-A-N. My mother's name was Malkeh Segelstein. Now the reason I'm named after the mother, my mother, was because our parents were married only in the Jewish tradition, not in ... not officially. So I was some ... I guess I'm somewhat of a bastard.

[Laughing] How did your parents meet?

That I don't know. [laughing]

Describe your mother's role in the household.

A housewife. She was a housewife. She didn't, she didn't have a job outside of the house.

What was your father's occupation?

My father was a shoemaker.

Describe the members of your family. Oh, you know what? You said your father was a shoemaker. Did he have a shop? Did he work out of the house?

He worked out of the house. His workbench was located in the kitchen, which served as a kitchen, a den, a bedroom and a dining room. [Laughing]

Describe the members of your family, their names, ages and relationships to you.

My ... one of my brother's name was Hersch Leib. He was about two, two years younger than I. After Hersch Leib, was Mordechai. He was about five years older, younger than I. After Mordechai, came Moishe. He was born in, in, in 1929. The youngest brother was Zalman. He was born in about 1933 or '34. I don't remember exactly.

And what year were you born?

In '21.

And how old were your parents, about, when you were born?

Oh, I would say in the early 20s.

Did you have grandparents?

Yes. I had grandparents.

What were their names?

Grandfather's name was Chaim Jonah. I don't know his age. Grandmother's name was Chana Rivkah.

Was this on your father's side or your mother's side?

Maternal grandparents.

And your paternal grandparents, you didn't know?

I didn't know. They, they ... when I was born, they were no longer alive. Well, my paternal grandfather was no longer alive. My paternal grandmother was in Palestine at that time.

Wow! So did your maternal grandparents live near you?

I would say about three kilometers from our home.

What kind of work did they do?

My grandfather was a mason, a bricklayer. He, he was something like a building contractor, like your father ... well, your father was not a ... your father was a builder. He was a building contractor. And that, that was his, his trade.

How often did you see them?

I lived with them most of my life. I started living with them when I was about three or four years old. And they raised me, actually.

And what are your fondest memories of your grandparents?

Fondest memories of my grandmother was she was a very affectionate woman. She gave me lots of love. I remember on *Shabbas* afternoons when the stove was still warm, she used to sit on the stove with me and regale me with stories from the First World War. Because Veretski was a battleground between the Russian and the Austrian and German forces. And it was fascinating. I was fascinated. She was a very interesting story ... fascinating storyteller. And as far as my grandfather was concerned, he was kind of a reserved person. Not very, not, not ... he didn't say much. But I knew he loved me because every time he came back from a job in a different town, he always brought me a present. Always brought me something. I remember once, I must have been about five, four or five years old, I walked into a neighbor's house and the neighbor's boy was a friend of mine. And I

saw he had a toy violin. Well, it was a primitive affair. It was just a board with a few strings, wires attached to it. And I was jealous and I came back to my grandfather. I started crying. "I want a violin." I cried and cried. Grandfather didn't say a word. He went outside, took a hatchet, piece of wood and carved out a violin for me. It looked almost exactly like the real thing. I remember this as if it happened yesterday. And I also remember when I said goodbye to him on my way to the Hungarian labor battalion. It was in the synagogue. The first time I saw him break down in tears.

What kind of neighborhood did you live in?

I don't know what you mean about, by what kind of neighborhood. It was ...

Well, were there houses?

It was in a village. There were houses. Most, most people lived in houses. In fact, I don't think there were any apartment buildings in our town.

Were the houses close to one another?

Yes. There were houses close to one another. Right.

And were you, like suburban of a city or was this just a small village?

Grandfather's dwelling was like on an outskirts of the village. While my parents' dwelling was, uh, I would call it in an urban area. [laughing]

What was the inside of the home you lived in like?

Grandfather's or parents'?

Well, you can tell me about both.

Okay. Grandfather lived in a house with three rooms. Two rooms and a kitchen. And it was a detached kitchen, which served as a *sukkah* on *Sukkos*. So it was quite comfortable. While I didn't have a private room for myself, I, nevertheless, had a bed for myself. A bed that I, I was the only one that occupied. Whereas, my parents would ... at the time I was born, we lived in a rented little house. And we had two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. Later on, I don't know, must have been, I must have been about eight or nine years old, my parents bought a, a part of a duplex. They had two rooms. One room served as a living area for the family, for six people, our parents and four children. The other room was reserved for the goat. The goat had privacy. [Laughing] The rest of us were ... and, so there were three beds for six people.

Did you have electricity?

There were no ... there was no electricity in our town.

Did you have indoor plumbing or running water?

No indoor plumbing or running water in our town. There were wells and river, a river.

How did the laundry get done?

The old fashioned way, by the river. And also at home and used to have like a, a tub, and boil water, warm it up, and hand... It was washed by hand.

How did you bathe?

Once a week at the *mikvah*. That was the extent of our keeping clean.

And ... and ...

We used to wash every morning. I used to walk ... we used to ... we lived right, very close to the river. Just across the street was the river. I used to go to the river. Undress, half-naked, and wash myself in the morning.

Now did you have an outhouse?

We had latrines, outhouses. Well, yeah, outhouses, right.

So your parents, in the end, owned half a duplex, and your grandparents owned their home.

Right.

Did they own any other land?

My parents had a large garden where they grew vegetables. Potatoes, corn, beans, peas, all kinds of vegetables. And so did my grandparents. Enough, enough vegetables to sustain us all year.

Did you take vacations?

No. No. I didn't take vacations.

And what kinds of foods did you eat?

Well, the bread was the staple. Vegetables, we had enough vegetables to eat. As far as meat, we ate meat only on Friday evening and Saturday at, for, at noon, for the meal at

noon. And as far as fruit is concerned, my grandfather had apple trees, pear trees and plum trees. So we had enough fruit for the summer, and we preserved fruit for the winter.

What were your favorite things to eat?

My favorite things were sweets. Chocolate. [Laughing]

[Laughing] What language was spoken at home?

We spoke Yiddish at home.

What other languages did you speak?

I spoke Czech. We spoke Czech among our friends.

Were your parents involved in anything political?

No, my parents were not involved in anything political.

You know, I think I asked you where you were born and in what city, but I don't recall. Did you say it was Czechoslovakia?

It was situated in a province called sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, which was part of Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1939.

Okay. Okay. Describe the schools you attended?

Well, first, does that include *cheder*?

Every school you went to, yes. Public, Jewish or private.

Well, I was enrolled into *cheder* when I was five years old. And that ...

How many attended school with you?

I would say about 20, 25.

How many grades in the same room?

In *cheder*? There were no grades in the *cheder*. There were no such thing as grades.

So how old was the youngest and how old was the oldest in *cheder*?

Well, I had eight years of *cheder*. So, I guess when I started at five ...

There were 13 year olds?

13 years old when I stopped going to *cheder*.

But there were 13 year olds and five-year-olds in the same class?

And five year olds ... right. In the same room.

What were the teachers like?

The Jewish, the Hebrew, the *cheder* teachers? Some were nice. Others were not.

[Laughing] And ...

Capital [sic – means corporal] punishment was involved at that time, especially by the *cheder* teachers. Okay?

Okay.

I don't remember ever having been beaten.

Uh-huh.

Doesn't mean to say I was an angel.

Right.

I don't know. I guess I was lucky. [laughing]

But there were others who were the subject of corporal punishment?

Corporal punishment, right.

[Laughing] And so after *cheder* ...

I was six when I enrolled in the elementary school - Czech elementary school.

Yes.

The teachers were incredibly decent, friendly and tolerant, compassionate people. They were, they were professionals. They were dedicated professionals. I loved the teachers. We all loved the teachers. And that I attribute ... to that I attribute the fact that most of us excelled in our ed- ... in academically.

Wow. What were your favorite subjects?

My favorite subject ... my very favorite subject was history. After that, was skiing. [Laughing] We did that from school.

That's great. So, as far as history, did you study mostly Czech history or was it European or what?

No. No. We studied, we studied Czech history in detail, of course.

Yes.

And we got a sort of a general overview of world and ancient history.

Yes.

History of Egypt ... of ancient Egypt, ancient Rome and ancient Greek. Even in elementary school.

How far did you go in school?

I had eight years of schooling. I attended five years of elementary and three years of junior high.

And when you left school, was that as far as the school went or ...

That was as far as the school went, yeah.

What did you do for fun as a youngster?

For fun?

Yeah.

Well, I developed a taste for literature when I was quite young. As soon as I learned how to read, I started reading. And that was due to, to an aunt of mine who was there and helped my grandparents raise me. She used to teach ... read to me at bedtime. And that instilled a desire in reading. And I was, I was a, a fanatic reader. I used to read ... after going to bed, I used to read at a candlelight or by a kerosene lamp. Sports was also my favorites. Like skiing in the winter. It was ... we had snow. We had mountains. We were surrounded by mountains. And we had snow from about October to April. Deep snow. So skiing was like a natural. I used to go to school on skis. We used to go to ski from school also, as part of the curriculum.

[Laughing]

And then soccer was my favorite summer sport. And hiking in the mountains. We did a lot of hiking in the mountains. And swimming, volleyball, and ping-pong.

Did you have any hobbies?

Hobbies? Let's see. No, I don't remember any particular hobbies. I didn't smoke a pipe at that time so I ... [Laughing]

[Laughing]

I didn't play golf. [Laughing]

[Laughing] Did you belong to any organizations, any youth groups?

Oh yes. Yes. I belonged to a Zionist organization, ever since I remember. The name of the group was Betar, revisionist faction of Zionism.

Since you mentioned that you belonged to a Zionist group, did you ever get letters from your paternal grandmother from Palestine?

No. No. My paternal grandmother from Palestine never corresponded with any of us. And that includes my father. And this I don't understand to this day. Why she left. She left my father at a tender, a young, tender, young age and departed to Palestine. It was, I think, moti-, she was motivated by her religious feelings. She wanted to die in Jerusalem. But why she left father at that age with his sister, I don't know.

How old was he?

He was about, I don't know, about ten years old.

How did you get along with your parents?

Very well. Very well.

Were they strict or permissive?

More or less permissive.

Were you ever rebellious?

Not that I remember. No. No. There was ... I had no reason to be rebellious.

Were there issues ... ?

I was, I was, I was not ... I did not accept their philosophies as far as religion was concerned. Orthodoxy. But, I did not rebel. They knew my, my, my, well, not ideology. They knew that I wasn't going to, to turn out to be a rabbi. While they didn't like it, they, they didn't voice any objections. They didn't like me to ski. They didn't like me to play soccer. It was not something a nice Jewish boy should do. But they didn't object. They didn't bar me from those things.

Were there other issues that created tension?

Well, not tension. Rather, unhappiness. Let me put it that way. I used to come home on Saturday, *Shabbas*, to visit my parents. And I was asked whether I ... Saturday afternoon whether I said the *Pirkei Avos*, whatever it was. So I said, "Yes, I did it at my grandfather's." And when I came back to grandparents, they asked me the same question. I said, "I did it at home." Once in a while, they got together and discovered the lie.
[laughing]

[Laughing]

But it was rather amusing. I was never penalized or anything like that.

Was there a *shul*?

I was just, I was just criticized. There were several *shuls* in our town. In fact, I remember, one, two, there were three *shuls*. The Friday night services were performed at my grandfather's home by people that lived in that area. And for [unclear], also people got together at my grandfather's home.

What values or standards were most important to your parents?

Most important to my parents were, of course, values, were decency, honesty and faith, belief. Faith in God. Practicing religious rituals, to some extent. My father was not a, what you call a fundamentalist, religious-wise. He was rather modern. Considered modern at that time, in that place. My grandfather was more religiously inclined, but he was also not a fanatic.

How ...

And my grandfather also ... the same, the same values prevailed all over in the whole Jewish community.

How did these values affect your daily life?

To some extent, some extent, there was a conflict between secularism and religion. I used to read secular books mostly, while my, my parents and grandparents would have liked me to delve more into religious literature. So that was, well, it was ... it was conflicting. It was a conflict. But, again, there was no vehement ... there were no vehement arguments about it. I guess they, they accepted what they couldn't change. They accepted the inevitable and that's it. As far as literature, that I mentioned, I read a great deal of Yiddish. I started reading in Yiddish. I read the ... most of the works of the Jewish Mark Twain, Sholem Aleichem. And then I started reading in Czech.

How well were Jews accepted by the general community? Did you experience any antisemitism, and can you give any examples?

There was some antisemitism among the indigenous population, which was Ukrainian stock. Called Ruthenians. But it was kind of dormant. It wasn't ... it didn't manifest itself. Czechs, the Czech people, I never heard any anti-Jewish or anti-anything from the Czech people. They were very tolerant. Very benign, cultured and good-hearted, decent people. There were ... let's see, that was under the Czech regime. Under the Hungarian regime, when Hungarians occupied our town in March of 1939, some of the antisemitism that was dormant raised its ugly head, on the part of the Ruthenians.

You know, we've gone back and forth a little bit, and we blended into some of the questions that I have in front of me, so it's going to sound like I'm taking off in a totally different direction now. Did your family keep kosher?

Definitely. Definitely.

How did your family celebrate *Shabbat* and holidays?

We went to services on Friday evening. We had the traditional Friday evening meal and the services at home. And we went to synagogue on Saturday, again, the traditional meal with the prayer, all the prayers. And then *Shalosh Seudot, Seudot*, the same also according to the religious rituals. Everything was done in religious way. And *Havdalah*, the same thing.

Did anyone lay *tefillin* in the morning?

Yes. Yeah, laid *tefillin* in the morning.

Everybody?

Including me after I was 13, for a while.

Which holidays which most important?

I liked ... I loved *Pesach* because, well, for many things. It was a beautiful holiday. I liked to see grandfather in his white, what do you call it?

[Whispering] *Kitl. Kitl.*

***Kitl.* And he looked like a, like a prophet of old. It was very inspiring. I liked the services. I liked the story of the exodus from Egypt. The miracles. I liked the glass of wine that I will, was able to drink. And then I liked *Sukkot* also. Those were the two holidays ... my two favorite holidays.**

Other than services in your grandfather's house, was there an erected *shul* for the community or not?

There were three erected *shuls* for the community.

And did you go to these for high holidays or ...

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Of course. One *shul* was for the more orthodox. One *shul* was for the less orthodox. And the third one was attended by single adults.

Did you celebrate any secular holidays?

We celebrated the birthday of our president, Masaryk, on March the 7th. We celebrated the Czech 4th of July on October the 28th. And ... that was about it.

What kind of Jewish cultural activities took place in your town? Was there a Yiddish theater? Was there music, literature?

The single adults, they were always putting on a show, stage show, on Purim and on Hanukkah. As far as culture adults, you mean Jewish culture or general culture?

Jewish culture.

Jewish culture. We had an orchestra consisting of one violinist and one drummer. [Laughing]

[Laughing] Pretty elaborate!

At weddings, of course, they played. The violinist was a talented person. He never read a note of music at all, but he was very good in remembering songs and he played very nicely. As far as the drummer is concerned, you could hear him from one end of town to the other. [Laughing] The poor violinist didn't have a chance. [Laughing]

[Laughing] That's great!

That was the new Jewish music.

Were there any artists?

Artists? No. Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. There was one. In fact, a friend of mine, was very good at drawing. He produced some fabulous, fascinating drawings. And I was also good at drawing. In fact, one of my drawings wound up in Prague in an exhibition.

Wow! Did you go to Prague to see it?

No.

Oh.

Couldn't afford it.

What impact did the secular cultural, culture have on your life?

Great impact. Great impact.

Were your parents more concerned about maintaining Jewish identity or fitting in?

They were more concerned about maintaining Jewish identity. Definitely.

Were you encouraged to develop relationships with all people or just Jews?

I was encouraged, especially by my teachers, to develop good relations with all peoples.

Were you or your family interested in secular culture, secular art or music or philosophy?

I was. My family wasn't.

And in what way were you?

In what way? As I said, I was interested in literature, in reading, especially fiction, history and astronomy.

Did you read Czech authors?

I read, I read Czech authors like Kafka. And I read mostly Russian authors like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov and those. I read some English authors, like Somerset Maugham and Charles Dickens. And others that I don't ... whose name I don't remember. And we had ... sometimes we, we were treated to a movie. Even though we had no electricity, the movies were shown and run, ran, by generators. And we were also treated

to concerts, especially choral music from that, that, traveling, traveling troupes that came, visited our town from larger cities.

How did Zionism affect you and the Jewish community?

I was indoctrinated. And, I was really ... I believed in Zionism. And what was your next question? Judaism?

And you, you said you belonged to a Zionist club.

Yeah.

And you said which one already, too, so we've already done this portion. What was your occupation before the war?

I was about ... was between 15 and 16 when I started learning tailoring. I was apprenticed to a tailor for three years. That was my occupation.

And, so you were an apprentice for three years before the war, and that was it. Or did you have your own tailor shop?

I never had my own tailor shop. I was too young to have my tailor shop.

Did you enjoy it?

To some extent, I did. It was creative because it was not the kind of tailoring that tailors do here. It was not alterations. It was all custom tailoring. New, new clothing.

You have in your notes here about how you got into tailoring. Do you want to read from that at all?

All right. In 1937, at the age of...

[Whispering] Louder.

[reading from his memoir] At the age of 15 or 16, I was apprenticed to a custom tailor for a three year training period. It was there that I was introduced to the quest for excellence. Ready-made clothing was not available in Veretski. Therefore, everyone, everyone's apparel was custom made. As the clients of my employer were mostly government officials and others that were well off, the emphasis was on absolute quality and workmanship. Standard of workmanship. Although I received no wages for the three-year period, I was tipped every time I delivered the garment to a customer. While this didn't make me fabulously wealthy, it did come in handy. Frankly, I wasn't very excited about learning tailoring. The idea didn't exactly appeal to me. To be cooped up inside a shop six days a

week, 11 to 12 hours each day, didn't occur to me to be the ideal life. The only other choice open for me in Veretski was shoe making trade, which I considered even less alluring, as it, as this required the taking of measurements of ill-smelling feet. Later in my tenure, I improved my condition by taking Sundays off, to the chagrin of the boss. And that gave me Saturdays and Sundays off. In the beginning, work was drudgery as at the beginning, the beginning process was very slow. A great deal of my time was taken up by cleaning the shop and running errands for the employer, as well as for the salaried help. After about two years, however, when I learned to make pants and vests, I experienced a sense of accomplishment. The work ceased to be tedious. At the end of my apprenticeship, I was able to make jackets up to the sewing of, to the sewing in of sleeves, which gave me a sense of creativity.

How many people worked in the shop?

About four.

Did you work with mostly Jews or non-Jews?

All Jews.

And...

Armful.

And did you sell to Jews or Jews and Gentiles?

Jews and Gentiles.

Okay. How did you spend your spare time?

We ... well, as I said, we played soccer in the summer. We skied in the winter. We used to get together, socializing among ourselves, boys and girls. We used to ...

So you had friends of the opposite sex?

Yeah. We used to sing a lot. We used to get together and sing songs in harmony. We used to discuss literature and just joke around. Those sort of things.

I guess I'm supposed to ask this. Were you married before the war?

No. No.

[Tape Pauses]

Testing. Testing.

[Tape Pauses]

In describing your community, would you like to add anything or your environment?

Yeah. Let me give you a detailed description of our place. [reading from his memoir] Ours was a picturesque, pristine country with a majestic, with majestic mountains, some of which were snow capped, snow capped all through the year. Crystal clear water in the rivers and streams. Lush green meadows and dense forests covering large areas. The air was fresh and invigorating. As to the climate, the winters were quite cold, with deep snow covering the ground from about November to about April. A season of fun from which most of my pleasant memories emanate, such as sledding, skiing and riding to school on skis. May was the month of Renaissance, when nature emerged from slumber and burst out in a brilliant display of color. I can still recall the intoxicating fragrance of the lily of the valley that grew on the meadows and of the lilac blooming in front of the homes on the main street. I liked the smell of freshly plowed earth, of the grass and of the freshly cut hay later in the summer. I didn't even mind the smell of horse manure....

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...or cow dung in the streets. The summers were also delightful. Warm, but not hot. Cool at night, with good sleeping weather. Daytime temperatures were somewhere between...in the lower 60s, in the lower to mid 60s. When ... Fahrenheit. On the rare occasions when it got up to 70, 75, it was considered a ... it was considered a heat wave. Life in ...

[Tape cuts out]

[reading from his memoir] Ruthenian, of Ukrainian stock, made up the majority of the population. Most of them were farmers. While some of them were well off, quite a few lived in poverty. Some raised cattle, although not on a very large scale as in the US. One of them, quite wealthy, owned a large department store, a tavern and restaurant. Another, also well to do, owned a tavern. One had a butcher shop and one was a blacksmith. Only a small number of the Ruthenians lived among, along the main street. The rest lived along the side streets. Most of them were dressed in garments of homespun, coarse material. The Jewish people comprised the largest minority of the town, most of them ... most of whom lived along Main Street. As to occupations, one was a wealthy farmer in possession of extensive acreage of ground, of land. One was a banker, also quite wealthy. And one was a lawyer. A number of Jews were small merchants. While not fabulously wealthy, they were well off compared to many of us. Most of them were craftsmen, such as tailors, shoemakers, butchers, carpenters, tinsmiths, masons and one baker. There was also a Jewish doctor and one dentist. We had a Jewish chamber orchestra consisting, that I, that I was talk, that I told you about already.

Yeah. Go ahead.

Okay. That's good. [reading from his memoir] Czechs comprised the next ethnic group in numbers. Those were the government administrators, *gendarmes*, border guards and school teachers. There was also one Czech butcher, a judge and a prison warden. There lived several Hungarians in Veretski. One was a physician who was seldom sober. In fact, he died before his time of an alcohol-related illness. One pharmacist, the only one in town. One blacksmith and one chimney sweep. We had a solitary gypsy who had lost his wanderlust. He lived in an old, broken down shack at the edge of town. When he wasn't busy cleaning outhouses, he played the violin to augment his pitiful earnings.

[Tape Pauses]

... of the Nazi presence?

[reading from his memoir] That was in 1933 when Hitler assumed power. We had sense of foreboding. While no one could possibly foresee the catastrophe that ensued, it was clear from the ideas he promulgated in his book, *Mein Kampf*, as well as his harangues. We felt uneasy. It was obvious that he hated Jews, gypsies, colored, homosexuals, socialists and handicapped. Nor did he display any great affection for the Slavs.

[Tape Pauses]

Fine. Right where you were.

Okay. [reading from his memoir] They too were considered subhuman race. The Slavs too were considered a subhuman race. Before he came to power, he and his followers were seen as innocuous lunatic fringe. No one in his right mind would have expected that Hitler could turn so many millions of his countrymen into bloodthirsty savages. The Germans were considered a civilized people. It was deemed infeasible that a nation that produced so many luminaries in the fields of science, literature and art could sink into the unfathomable depths of depravity which so many of them did. Hitler openly declared his aim to rule the world, and we knew if he wasn't stopped, Czechoslovakia would be one of the first victims. However, in our naiveté, we were firmly convinced that our friends would not allow the realization of these dreams. Besides, we were well equipped militarily, our defense industry providing us with abundance of modern armaments of the latest vintage and our borders with Germany were well fortified. We were part of a so-called small *entente*, being bound in defense treaties with Yugoslavia and Romania. We also had an understanding with Britain and France, which we believed provided that they would come to our aid and, if our security was threatened. Our friendly relations with the Soviet Union, the ancient enmity between Russia and Germany, plus the fact that the two ideologies were so antithetical, led us to count on the help from that quarter as well. And so, we were lulled into what later turned out to be a false sense of security.

[Tape Pauses]

[reading from his memoir] **In 1938, when Austria was occupied without a shot being fired, in fact, most Austrians were delirious about it. Soon after that, Hitler turned his attention, his irredentist attention to Czechoslovakia. He demanded the cession by Czechoslovakia of the Sudeten province [Sudentenland], which was inhabited by an ethnic German majority. In case of refusal, he declared there would be war. This was a region bordering Germany where we had the strongest fortifications, without which we would be completely vulnerable. The demand was naturally rejected, even though by this time, our country was almost completely surrounded. To the north, west and south was Germany. To the south, Hungary. Northeast, Poland. We only had one small stretch of border with a friendly country, like Romania, in the east. Poland, although a Slav nation, was also our enemy. The Polish nobility, which wielded the power of Poland, in Poland, harbored resentment towards the Czechs because our country was too democratic to suit their taste. Hungary, with its nobility and Fascist system of government, was more to their liking. Besides, Poland coveted part of Czech territory, which was inhabited by a few Poles. However, we still clung to our faith in our friends, Britain and France, until late in 1938 when the sun began to set. That was when Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister at the time, negotiated away the Sudeten [Sudenteland], handing it over to Hitler on a silver platter in exchange for a worthless promise of peace, which turned out in a short time to be a fraud. The Czech delegation was being humiliated by being kept in the hall and ushered in to the negotiating interior only to sign the agreement concluded by the delegations of France, England and *Herr* Hitler. Thus, our loyal friends sold us out. When Chamberlain returned to England after completion of this infamous, treacherous act, he got off the plane, waving a piece of paper and declaring, I quote, "Peace in our time," to the rapturous cheers of those present. Later, when Britain became embroiled in the war, Winston Churchill made the following remark, alluding to that episode. And I quote, "We had a choice between shame and war. We chose shame, and we have war."**

[Tape Pauses]

How did you become aware of the Nazi presence first?

The news of the emergence of the Nazi regime, ideology, their hatred of Jews, their ambition to, their ambition to persecute the Jewish people, was brought to us by the media- the newspaper and the radio.

Okay. And, so was your community occupied by Nazis or was it occupied by a friendly power to the Nazis first?

It was part of Czechoslovakia.

Right. But who came in to occupy? Was it ... was it the Germans?

In 19-, in March of 1939, when Germans occupied Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, our province was occupied by the Hungarian forces.

I see. And do you remember the first day of the occupation?

I certainly do. I remember the first day of the occupation. It was a very traumatic experience because I loved the Czechs. I loved the Czech regime. It was a very benign, democratic, humanitarian rule and government. And it was a sad, sad time.

So what happened exactly? What happened? Did trucks roll in? What happened?

Trucks rolled in. The army marched in. And they took over all the offices and all the government establishments.

And how many days previous to this had the Czech Army fled?

About two days previous to this.

And was there anyone that came in in between to persecute Jews?

In between the two days, several Ukrainian thugs came in to town. They were under the impression that our province was going to be part of a larger Ukraine. I had the impression that that, that's what they were promised by Hitler while he promised the same province to the Hungarians. [laughing] And they came in with a list of several prominent Jewish people who were supposed to be murdered, executed.

Where do you suppose they got their list?

I have no idea. I have no idea. Maybe from some of the local population.

And what do you suppose happened to the Ukrainians in between so that they're here for a couple of days, and that's it.

They didn't have time to carry out their design, because the Hungarians came in.

Professional army?

Rounded them up. Rounded them up. Took them out to the border, to the Polish border, which was 12 kilometers from Veretski, and machine-gunned them down.

Were there ... what was the constitution of the Hungarian Army? Were there, were there Jewish people in the army too?

At that time, there were still Jewish people serving in the Hungarian Army. That was in 1939. And in late 1940, Jewish people were excluded from the army and, instead, recruited into labor battalions.

So the Hungarians weren't necessarily antisemitic when they came in to Hungary, into Czechoslovakia?

Well, well, there were no antisemitic actions ...

I see.

... on the part of the Hungarians. There were antisemites. But there were also decent Hungarians. I met many decent Hungarians in my interaction with them.

And what discussions about the Nazis do you remember having at home, before the war?

Well, of course, there was a sense of foreboding, sort of a sense of doom. But, the consoling mood was that, well, we have been prosecuted for 2,000 years. Some of us have been massacred. And some of us have been expelled from countries. Still, we managed to survive and we will muddle through this, this calamity also. And the hope was that sooner or later, the German, the German might will be crushed.

What was the first indication that it wasn't going to be this easy?

The first indication was when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941.

I mean, personally. In your community.

Well, that was, that was what, what ...

So the news of Germany invading the Soviet Union ...

The Soviet Union. Not just invading, but inflicting crushing defeats upon the Russian Army, which was shocking because in our image, Russia was a great might. The Russian Army was invincible, in our opinion.

All right. So, now you're beginning to understand the strength of the German Army. But, at the ... but at the same time, what physically, personally, at home ... what was the first change that you noticed?

The first change was when, under the pressure from Germany, Hungarian government decided to pacify, to mollify the Germans by delivering some Jews to the German machine. And, that was, what, two months after the invasion of the Soviet Union. And several of the

Jewish people of our town were taken away, and I will read the part in my memoir that deals with this. Is that okay?

Okay.

[Tape Pauses]

[reading from his memoir] So, as I said, the Hungarians, in compliance with German demands, seized a number of Jewish men, women and children to deport them to the Ukraine, to the Ukraine, and hand them over to the German death squads. My father was one of the victims. I will never forget that scene. On that day, as I arrived home from grandfather's, I found father gone and mother in tears. When I inquired about the whereabouts of father, I was told that the *gendarmes* took him away. An inordinate rage welled up in me. I was overcome by a sense of despair and helplessness. As I moved mechanically towards the door, to do what, I don't know, mother barred the way, afraid of losing me too. I nevertheless got out and hastened to the *gendarme* station where the people were held inside a wooden, a tall wooden fence. Soon, they were loaded on the bus to take them to the train station. By the time mother and my brothers were there, the bus was surrounded by armed soldiers. Somehow Morris, my brother, who was then 12, sneaked into the bus and sat on father's lap, crying. Responding to mother's tearful pleas, a *gendarme* who seemed to be a decent person, got Morris off the bus. As I was approaching the bus in a state of stupefaction, I was hit over the head with a rifle butt and ordered to leave. I was in such a state of shock that I felt no pain at all. I watched father sitting on the bus. The look on his face was an image that has been haunting me ever since. He looked utterly alone, in a daze, bewildered. There is a sense of guilt smoldering in me for not having made an effort to join him. Somehow I feel that I have abandoned him. A large crowd was gathered outside and I noticed many of the Ruthenian women crying. After the deportation, a rumor circulated that the people were lined up in front of a ditch, made to undress and gunned down. At that time I thought it a false rumor. But now I know better. The murderers didn't even allow them the luxury to die with dignity. [no longer reading] After a while, one of my friends that was among those that were taken away, escaped and somehow found his way back into the town. And he is still alive. He survived.

What did he say about it? Did he witness anything?

He, he escaped soon after they were delivered into an open field. He didn't wait. He didn't have time. He, he, he escaped too soon to see what, what the result, what their fate was. So he didn't know.

And what happened to your ... did your grandfather go with this bus as well?

Well, here is the story of my grandfather.

Yes.

[reading from his memoir] After the bus left, I went back to grandfather to find him standing on the verandah, dressed in his Sabbath garb, as if ready for a religious ritual. He was grim faced, silent, pale and had an almost defiant look on his face. I wondered, and still do, whether his faith in a merciful God was still unshakable in the face of this horrible reality, and whether he still believed, as he always used to say, that things happen for the best. *Gam zu l'tovah*, he used to say in Hebrew. I felt then that if there was a God, he was either a cruel God or asleep. And, in view of the evidence of man's inhumanity to man manifest to this day, my views haven't changed much.

[Tape Pauses]

What happened to you?

In the fall of 1941, I was inducted into the Hungarian labor battalion.

And what did the labor battalion do?

I'll ... I'll tell you everything that happened at the first few moments. First, we were in the synagogue with my grandfather.

Yes.

The day before I was scheduled to depart, I went over ...

You were given notice that you had ...

Oh, sure.

Like how much notice did you have?

I don't know. Several weeks.

Yes.

I went over to grandfather's to say good-bye.

Like a normal drafting into a military service?

Right. Right. I was ... went over to my grandfather's to say good-bye, and for the first time that I witnessed him breaking down in tears. And this is a moment I haven't forgotten. I'll never forget until the day I die. I said good-bye to my mom. None of us said a word. But her eyes spoke volumes. The expression in her eyes, there ... the, the, the anguish that

I see in her eyes, I, I still see it today. It is always in front of me. As if she had a premonition that that was the last time that we're, that we were going to see each other. Okay. Then, next day, I, I rode to ... I rode on a, on a cart to the train. The train ride took about 24 hours, into ... deep into Hungary. [reading from his memoir] Upon arrival in Szolnok, a town in Hungary, there were many of us. We were met by a soldier and proceeded on the run, carrying our heavy trunks. For four miles, through unpaved streets, up to our knees in dust, accompanied by the soldier's shouts, to the army base while all through the route, people, roused by, by the commotion, opened the windows and were laughing, thoroughly enjoying themselves. They found this very amusing. Our initiation started in earnest when we arrived at the base. We were lined up, and a sergeant, a little man with a big voice, delivered the welcoming address. His words were, I quote, "Israel, about face. I don't want to see... I don't want to look in your ugly mugs. You sucked Hungarian blood. You seduced Hungarian girls. And now you will pay." The speech over, we were led into a building to undergo what turned out to be perfunctory medical examinations. As we reached the door, a soldier standing there ordered each of us to bend down and, I quote, "Kiss the Hungarian threshold." As we did so, he amused himself by trampling on our heads with his boots. The next day, we were shipped to a permanent station in another town, where we started our tenure, during which time we served in different locations in Hungary and in Transylvania, which was then under Hungarian rule. We engaged in hard physical labor on a meager diet. The fare consisted of mostly cabbage, occasional small quantities of beef, beans and potatoes. Each of us received a pound of bread every two days. The substantial cooked food was usually in the bottom of this cauldron. The food on top was kind of thin, so the stratagem was to be at the end of the line. This didn't work for me, as I am a non-aggressor by nature. The bread was supposed to last two days. I devoured it the first day, so that on the second day, I was plagued by hunger pangs. To get into the end of the chow line for seconds was strictly forbidden, forbidden, forbidden. Any remnants left in the kettle were dumped into the trash. The cooking and serving were done by soldiers.

Exactly what work did you do? You said it was hard labor, but you didn't say what kind of work.

We built roads. We built fortifications, trenches. I assume that they expected, sooner or later, the Soviet Army is going to find its, its backbone and start advancing, so they built fortifications, even in Hungary, especially in Ukraine where we were later shipped. We built barracks for ourselves, as well as for the army.

What kind of barracks did you live in?

In a wooden, like a wooden shed. Wooden sheds. Something like prefabricated, like barns.

Did you have to wear a uniform?

We wore civilian clothes, a yellow band on the left arm and a military cap.

Now did the yellow band, did that mean that you were a Jewish person?

Jewish.

I see.

Jewish.

Okay. And, how long did you do this? What happened at the conclusion of the work, or ... for the army?

This ... I served in the, in the labor battalion from late 1941 till May of 1944, when I escaped. And after two weeks of hiding out, was liberated by the Soviet Army.

And when you were liberated ... the war wasn't over when you were liberated.

No. No.

So what happened?

I promptly joined the Soviet Army and after, after some, after some, some hours of interrogation, they finally accepted me. First I told them I was Jewish, and that didn't work out very well, because there was some antisemitism that I encountered. Then I decided I'm going to say I'm from Czechoslovakia. I wasn't going to mention that I was Jewish. That they accepted. They seemed to like the Czechs. And that's when I was, that's when I was, when I was made to feel more comfortable.

Okay. So, and then you became a Russian soldier. But what happened to your family? Was anyone in your family ever deported to a concentration camp?

In ... well, in ... at that time, I was in the Ukraine. I was not home. I found out later ...

Yes?

...after liberation, that my mother and three of my brothers were shipped off to concentration camp. I think it was either Mauthausen or ... no, first it was Auschwitz, where my mother and my youngest brother were taken off ... were ... after being taken off from the train, were sent to the gas chamber right away. And the two remaining brothers were shipped to Mauthausen. And the older one of the two died there of dysentery, starvation and dysentery. The younger survived. He is ... he lives now in Florida. He is alive.

So you were liberated, really, in Hungary by the Russians.

In Ukraine. In Ukraine.

In the Ukraine.

Right.

Where did you go after you, after you joined the Russian Army? What ... where did you go?

Well, I ... I took part in the offensives.

Were you fed well?

Fortunately ... what?

Were you fed well in that army?

Yeah. I was fed well and I was treated well. I ... fortunately, I served in a division that only took part in the fight on, on offensives. We were on ... when there was ... during the periods of trench warfare, we served in the back, in the background. In the reserve. We were only activated when we had to attack. So, we went through Romania, which at that time was already out of the war. The Germans cleared out.

Yes.

And we got ... we went through Hungary. There were several fierce fights in Hungary, especially the fight for Budapest, which was very, very difficult fight. The Germans were entrenched in the ruins of Budapest, and the casualties were quite high on both sides.

You know, when we talked before, you said you could speak ... you spoke Yiddish at home and you spoke Czechoslovakian. Did anyone speak Hungarian there? Was there a mixture of ethnicities?

Well, see, sub-Carpathian Ruthenia used to be ruled by Hungary before the First World War. So my parents schooling was Hungarian. So they spoke Hungarian. In fact, when they wanted to talk, say to each other something so that we wouldn't understand, they said it in Hungarian.

At the ... where were you at the conclusion of the war?

At the conclusion of the war, I was in Austria. And at the end of the war, it was a moment I'll never forget. When we met the American Army. It was in an open field. All of a sudden, we were there and we knew something was going to happen, but we didn't know what. All of a sudden, there is, there is a, a whole bunch of people, soldiers, coming towards us. And we didn't know what ... then somebody said, "Hey, those are

Americans!" This was a historic moment. It is hard to describe the feeling when this happened. I'm standing there among the other soldiers when an American serviceman comes over to me, shakes hands, whips out a notebook from his pocket and reads in Russian. He says, "Greetings Soviet Union," to me. I'll never forget that.

You could speak Russian by then too?

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. I learned Russian in school, when I was in elementary school yet.

Okay.

And I ... because I had ... I didn't know a word of English. It turned out that that serviceman spoke German. So we conversed in German.

Okay. So the war is over now. Where did you go?

The war is over, and we stayed in a place in Austria until July, until the middle of July, when I was discharged.

With your unit. Yeah.

Yeah, with my unit. We were just hanging out. Doing absolutely nothing. Sunbathing, swimming, things like that. Socializing with the civilian population. Because I spoke German too.

Right.

So, I had no problem. And in July, I was discharged. Took a train. Went to Budapest. Stayed there for several days. I don't exactly, know exactly where I stayed. I was still in uniform. And then, from Budapest, I took a train and I went to Brno, a town in Czechoslovakia, the second largest city in Czechoslovakia. I stayed there in army barracks for, I don't know, a week or so. And then took a train to sub-Carpathian Ruthenia to visit my hometown. I stopped in a town 60 kilometers from Veretski, Munkács, Mukacevo it was called in Czechoslovak. And Munkács in Hungarian. And there I met several of my compatriots and my surviving brother. And one day, from there, we traveled to our hometown.

Is this when you found out what happened to your family, when you ...

Yes, when I met my brother. That's when I found out. So we traveled to, to my hometown. The sight that met us was extremely depressing. We walked through the main, main street where Jewish people lived. It looked like a ghost town. Empty homes. No doors, no windows. Dark inside. Streets were ... homes from where you used to hear laughter, children playing, crying. Quiet, silent as in a cemetery. Very depressing. We stayed

overnight in a barn by a peasant, by a Ukrainian peasant. Next day, we left back to Munkács. I was so depressed, so devastated, that I started drinking to bury my sorrow. So, we stayed in Munkács over another, I don't know, few months. And we decided to leave, now that the Soviet Union annexed that part. We decided to leave. My friends, my brother and me. We left to, we stopped in Budapest. And outside of the city, there was a *kibbutz* called [unclear], and we stayed there for a while. Intention, our intention was to ultimately emigrate to Palestine, what was called Palestine then. So in preparation, we lived on a *kibbutz*. From there, we were transported to Vienna in a DP camp. Stayed there for several weeks.

What was the name of the DP camp?

I don't remember.

Okay.

From there, we traveled to another DP camp in the Austrian Alps called Bad Gastein where we stayed for several months. In December of 1945, we were transported to Italy. And also in Italy we stayed in a DP camp in Como. Have you ever heard of Como?

Yes.

It's a beautiful place near the Swiss, Swiss border. From there we were taken to Rome. Cinecittà was called the place. It was the Italian Hollywood. And we stayed there for several months. Then we were transported to a city named Bari on the Adriatic where we formed a *kibbutz*. About 60 of us, living in a villa, in the suburb.

When and how did you meet your wife?

Met my wife in Como. After we arrived in Italy, I saw her standing in line for food, and I decided I'm going to try my luck. [Laughing] So I can establish some kind of relationship with her. She looked pretty, young, and so I approached her, and we got to know each other. And fell in love, and ...

Describe our wedding. Where was it?

The wedding was in Bari in the *kibbutz*.

Did you have guests?

Oh yeah. We had guests. We had ... the mayor of Bari was an Italian Jew. He came out. He came out, and he brought several of his friends. It was a double wedding. Two couples were wed at the same time.

Who officiated?

I don't really remember. I think there was a rabbi there, also a survivor.

Was there food and music?

Food. Not music, no. It was not, it was not one of those weddings that you see here in the US.

Where did you want to live after the war? You already said you wanted to go to Palestine.

Yeah. I was having a dilemma. I was in a dilemma. I was always infused with the idea of Zionism. Way back, you know. And I had a brother in Palestine. I found out that I had a brother in Palestine. But then I found out that I had a brother here too. That my youngest brother had come out here with a youth group.

I thought you went to Como together with your brother.

No. My brother, we went to Vienna together, with my brother.

Yes.

From there, he was taken with a youth group to Germany. And from there, he went, he emigrated to the US.

I see.

In short order.

And which brother went to Palestine?

I had a brother who also served in the Hungarian labor camp who was, before the end of the war, he was liberated by the Yugoslav partisans. And from there, he emigrated to Palestine.

So how did you end up in America?

Well, like I said, I had a brother here too.

Yeah.

But my most important consideration, most important attraction, to the U.S. was that the aunt that served as my surrogate mother, lived here. The aunt, and the uncle, who I loved very much.

And how did you travel here from Europe?

We came by boat. From Naples to New York.

And what was your first impression upon arriving here?

It was overwhelming, overwhelming experience. It was an over ...

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

Did you go through Ellis Island?

No, we didn't go through Ellis Island. We were ... I don't know what, what ... I don't where we stopped, the boat ... how do you say? Anchored. I don't remember where the boat anchored. It was at a dock, some kind of a dock I remember.

Where did you, where ... you don't know where you passed through Customs, through Immigration?

We were, as we ... in fact, customs agents came up to the boat, perfunctorily checked our luggage and that's it. Let us go.

And, okay. So where did you settle first?

My uncle and aunt waited for us at the dock with their car. They lived in the Bronx, and took us to their home.

How long did you stay in New York?

I stayed in New York 'til, let's see, July of 1953. We lived in the Bronx. We lived with my uncle for several months. Then we landed an apartment. And that's where we lived 'til, 'til we moved to Kansas City.

How did you decide to move to Kansas City?

Well, I came to the U.S. as tailor. That was not my ambition to ... it was not my ambition to stay, remain a tailor for the rest of my life. So I decided to try to learn the art of designing. I took an evening course in New York of designing. And subsequently, after the course was completed, I was looking for a job. The problem was that manufacturers in New York were not interested in novices. They wanted experience. Whereas, in Kansas City, they scraped the bottom of the barrel, so to speak. See, New Yorker people that had jobs would have, would have considered it a crime to, to leave New York. New York was their world. Nobody wanted to move out of New York. But I had no choice. So I decided to take the opportunity and see how it works out.

So there was some kind of opportunity in Kansas City?

Yes. I was contacted with a manufacturer by a tailor that I used to work for in, in Brooklyn. And that's how I landed the job as an assistant designer.

How did you learn English?

I took some ... I took a course of English in Italy in a DP camp. Learned enough to be able to read and understand most of it.

You know, I really didn't ask you, but you, somewhere, had a change of heart. You wanted to go to Palestine, and you ended up coming to the United States. And I know you said that you wanted to be with your aunt and uncle, but was there anything else that changed that?

It's possible that ... a sense of materialism. It's possible that I had a bad experience with some of the people in the DP camps and the corruption that I saw in the DP camps was kind of repelling, you know. And I knew that having no ... having very little greed, having no ambition, I would have had to live in a *kibbutz* in Israel. And I didn't look with equanimity to the prospect of living with some of those people in a *kibbutz* that I knew in Italy.

Okay. So let's fast forward. As an immigrant, describe your experiences. How did you adjust to the new country?

I adjusted very well to the new country. I had no problems.

What was a challenge? Were there big challenges for you?

The only challenge was the ... mastering the art of making a pattern and making it ... and making a success at it.

Did you face any discrimination? What about personal challenges?

Personal challenges? I, there were both positive and negative. I faced some rather unpleasant situations on certain jobs.

Like?

Such as when I was working in New Jersey from 1969 to 1971, in a factory. I was making patterns. There were three of us pattern makers that were refugees, survivors, Jewish refugees. And two Gentiles that worked there. We were much more skilled than the Gentiles.

Yes.

Because we had a background in tailoring as well. And the ... one of the executives, a Jewish man, who used to be a president of a *shul*, he would come in in the morning to the place where we worked, pass by the three of us, not even looking at us. Go over to the Gentiles and say, "Good morning, Sonny. Good morning, Joe." He wouldn't even speak about us. That was very unpleasant. It was ... I couldn't understand how it is possible. I faced hostility, enmity, from Jewish people immigrated here at the beginning of the century. I faced jealousy in the factory where I worked among workers. Jealousy and hostility, which was very unexpected. I could never expect. I know at home the relationship between workers, there was an *esprit de corps*. I don't know whether you know what it is. It was an *esprit de corps*. There was solidarity that I didn't find it here. On the contrary. This was disappointing. I ... I ... I ...

Where did you find the strength to overcome the challenges and barriers? What gave you strength?

What gave me strength? What challenges? What barriers?

These that you're describing right here. That suddenly there was stratification in the Jewish community.

Well, it's a matter of enjoying the good things and accepting the bad things.

Did you talk ...

Without, without rancor. And what, what gave me the strength, mostly, were my children.

Did you talk about your experiences during the war and, if you did, who listened? And if not, why?

I talked of my experiences to Cookie during the war.

Your daughter?

Yeah. In fact, she wrote a report in school. And I talked to David about my experiences.

Your son.

In a perfunctory way. You know, not in detail. As well as Cindy.

Your youngest daughter?

Yeah. I didn't dwell on these experiences. I just mentioned them.

Did you feel as though, in any way, that you tried to bottle up your experiences? Or did you feel as though these were things you could share with your family at least?

Did I feel? I ... I didn't see any purpose in, in sharing my experiences with anybody. I felt that I was not unique. I felt that there were hundreds of thousands of us that had the similar experiences, and there was nothing special about my experiences. And I didn't feel ... I felt that it was stressful to dwell on some of them.

Okay.

On the bad element of the experiences.

How did you meet new friends, and who became your closest friends, and were they fellow survivors?

Well, I met your parents [Michael and Olga Rothstein] in Italy. And we became very close friends. And, then I moved to Kansas ... I had no idea that they lived in Kansas City until I walked down the street, on 31st Street and Main, and I found the person who we used to know in Italy and, by, by accident. And then he told me that your parents lived here.

Who was that that you met?

I forgot his name. Is ... forgot his name.

Someone told me that the detention camp ... the displaced persons camp in Bari was huge.

It was. It was huge.

How many people were there?

I have no idea. I have no idea.

Because I talked to ... there's a Gentile architect in Kansas City who designed the shopping centers here for Ramos Group Architects. He told me he was in the detention ... in the displaced person camp. And I thought it was strictly a place for Jews. But it was a place for all survivors of the war. All kinds of survivors, wasn't it?

Yeah. It was ... initially, it was a place for Yugoslav refugees.

Yes.

Then it was ... it became a, a camp for Jewish survivors.

You talked a little bit about the things that went on in the displaced persons camp. About ...

Corruption?

Corruption.

Corruption ...

I heard stories. I heard stories like this, that the ... that the displaced persons camps would get new clothes shipped to them from the United States.

Yeah.

That the organized crime would take these new clothes and replace them with used clothes and then the people in the displaced persons camps would take the used clothes, sell them and buy new clothes. [Laughing]

Well, that went on. I know about that new clothing articles wound up on the black market.

Yes.

In Italy.

Yes.

And what we got was bloody socks. Bloody, torn socks and bloody things.

So you did get the used things? Exactly from this ...

We didn't take them ... we didn't sell them. I didn't sell them. I just threw them away. You know, I don't know anything about selling them. But that's what it was. The people that served in the ... the Jewish survivors that served in the administration, because, you know, some served in administration, in the food, in the kitchens, in the food distribution. Most of them were corrupt. All that I knew were corrupt.

What did they do?

They stole product, food products, sold them to the Italians. Sugar, flour, butter, things like that. Eggs.

Do you think ... do you think this had something to do with the way they had to survive through the war?

It's possible. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

Okay. Let's move ... let's fast forward again back up to ... were there people who were helpful in getting you settled and finding a job once you got to Kansas City?

People that were helpful. It's hard to remember exactly. But there was ...

Okay. Maybe we've ...

My uncle was instrumental, to some extent, in finding me the first job. I remember the first job I worked as an operator on the sewing machine at a contractor. That contractor was also ... he was a, a naturalized citizen who immigrated here in the earlier part of the century. And I was sewing on a machine, and a bulb burned out. I went over to him and said, "Sir, the bulb burned out. Can I get a new bulb?" And he said, "In Poland, you had bulbs also?"

When did you first become an American citizen?

In I think 19 ... 1955, I believe. I was here in Kansas City.

How significant was that event for you?

That was a, a very important milestone in our lives. And that was a very ... it was a delightful event, of course. You know.

What kinds of hobbies and recreational pleasures have you come to enjoy?

Skiing and soccer. When I was younger, I played soccer, 'til about ... 'til I was about, what, 36, 37. And I used ... I would go ... I would travel to Colorado once a year, every year, to the mountains to ski 'til the end. The last time that I skied was in 1977. And when the children were small, little, I took them along. I took David along and Cookie. And, of course, at that time, the only time that I was free to go with the children was between Christmas and New Year's. Later, when the children left and I had went by myself, I timed it at a time when it wasn't very crowded. January or February. I tried Cindy on skis. We had a little ski area here in Kansas City.

Yeah, I remember.

But she didn't ... she didn't take to it very well. Cindy and Cookie did. I mean, Cookie and David did. But Cindy didn't, so she is the only one that didn't ski.

What, if any, post-war political events have had great significance to you? Like, examples, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam movements, the 60s feminism, the assassinations, and the State of Israel.

The State of Israel was, of course, a highlight. It was an exhilarating time.

Go ahead.

And the first event that, that was inspiring was the ... after we came, was the election of President Truman. I was ... my party affiliations ... as to my party affiliations. I was, and am, a rather loyal Democrat. I don't always approve or agree with officials, politicians, even of the party that I favor. Like Clinton. I don't approve of his character. I don't approve of his intelligence either, to some extent. I, I acknowledge of his accomplishments. I acknowledge his accomplishments. But I don't ... I'm not completely happy with the way he rationalizes sometimes.

So what did you think about the Civil Rights Movement and ...

I was in favor of the Civil Rights Movement.

And Vietnam and the 60s and ...

Vietnam and the 60s and the initial stages of the war, I was in favor. Later on, I realized it's an exercise in futility.

So what did you see it as ... your patriotism as an American initially and then a more rational approach afterwards? [laughing]

Right. Right. I thought it was a waste of lives and I thought it was ... I thought that the South Vietnamese should have been ... should have done the fighting and the blood shedding themselves.

And what did you think about the rise of feminism in the world?

I thought it was encouraging, to some extent. But, as any rise of any ideology of any movement, it ... there could always be excesses. You could always go off in the wrong direction. Such as the Civil Rights Movement, for instance. So much of it is ... such as the Jesse Jackson's actions on behalf of the black youth who were fighting in school who were expelled. Or the, the defense of O.J. Simpson. Or the, the way the ... most blacks were so elated by his acquittal. You know, that troubles me.

How did you feel about the assassinations in the 60s? Were you worried that we were heading toward disaster the way ...

Doom.

Yeah. The way it was in Europe?

Yes. Yes. Yes. I was.

When were your children born?

**David was born on December the 21st, 1949. He is one day older than I am. [Laughs].
Cookie was born on March the 7th, 1958. Cindy was born on July the 21st of 1959.**

In light of our past experience, how did having children affect you? What were your emotions upon having children?

It ... it ... as, what's the name of the actor would say, it made my day. Make my day. It was a happy, happiest occasion in my life. I love children. I always did.

Dirty Harry. [laughing]

Dirty Harry. Right.

Are your children named after family members who perished?

David is named after my father, who perished. Cookie is named Marlene, Malkeh, after my mother. Golda Malkeh after my mother and Lilly's mother. David is David Yakov. David after my father and Yakov after Cookie's father.

After Lilly's father.

After Lilly's father. I'm sorry. And Cindy was named after a family member of Lilly.

Did you talk about your experiences in the war with your children? You've already said yes, you did.

To some extent, yeah.

Have you ever returned to your home since the last time you were there immediately after the war?

Well, I mentioned that when I ... after I was discharged.

I, I mean now.

Since, since my arrival in the U.S., I have never returned.

Any interest?

No interest.

How do your Holocaust memories penetrate your life today?

The images. The images of my parents. Of the suffering, of the humiliation. Can't get rid of them. I can't get rid of them. I accept ... maybe I accept their, their demise in a certain, certain, to a certain degree. But the humiliation, the indignities that they had to go through. It's just, the image of that is never ... has never left me and is never going to.

Are there sounds or smells that make you remember your past experiences? That evoke something from the past?

Well, the smell, as I said, of ... you mean before the war? The smell of fresh-cut hay.

Smells that you [unclear].

The smell of the flowers. And then during the war, the smell of gunpowder.

So if you smell gunpowder today, it reminds you?

That reminds me. Right.

What, other than your parents, are there other images that haunt you?

The love of my grandfather and my grandmother, and my parents. You said what are the other images, other than ... other than my parents, that haunt me? The shame that I felt while I was in the Russian Army, because of the large scale of rape that they committed. Rape, looting and arson.

Did they do this throughout Hungary and Austria as they went through?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I, I, and I had, I interacted with civilians. And when I spoke to a girl that was raped, you know, I was ashamed. And by the same token, I was glad that I, instead of a concentration camp, I was in the Russian Army. But my dignity was ...

Elevated?

... preserved, preservation of my dignity. So, it was a mixed, mixed blessing. What other?

How did the war affect your attitude and practice of religion?

My practice of religion? I don't think it had any ... oh, the war. You mean the fighting, the persecution, what?

Well, I guess the persecution.

Well, I mentioned that.

Yes.

I was ... I was ... I was ... I was questioning, and I still question.

Exactly.

You know...

Did you ever stop believing in God, then? You mentioned that you did when your father was taken. That this wasn't a just world, that, that ...

Right. As I ... well, I had a feeling. I had a, an ambiguity. I, I didn't ... I decided ... I thought that there was no God. Except when I looked in the eyes of my grandparents ... grandchildren. So it's a mixed feeling, again.

So you believe in God now?

Do I believe in God? I don't know. I may be ... well, I'm not, probably, an atheist. I may be an agnostic. I don't know. I don't know. I really don't know. It's ... on the one hand, I feel there must be some intelligent being that created all this. On the other hand, I, I would like to believe in a merciful God, you know. In a God that created people in the image of God with the mercy and the compassion and everything. But I don't see it. I read [unclear]. I like his humor, his ... he says ... and I accept that ... he says, "If people were created in the image of God, that isn't much saying for God." You know, it's a sad commentary. But it, it's evident that that's what it is.

Do you belong to a synagogue or temple?

I belong to Beth Shalom.

Are you active?

No. I'm not active.

What's your favorite Jewish holiday?

My favorite Jewish holiday is Hanukkah.

Why?

Why? Because it is, even though it has a religious undertone, it is a celebration of heroism and courage.

What traditions from before the war have you shared with your family here? Traditions.

Traditions before the war? Well ...

I guess its Jewish traditions.

Oh, Jewish traditions.

I'm guessing.

You mean religiously?

I'm guessing.

Well, I'm trying to instill the values of morality of which the Jewish religion, which the Jewish religion promulgates. Values of compassion and honesty. Values of ... that, that ... of the lives of my ancestors, my parents and grandparents. What else?

To what would you attribute your ability to adjust to a normal life after the war?

I feel it's human nature to cling to life, no matter what.

What does being an American mean to you?

What does being an American mean to you?

To you.

To me. [Laughs] It means the opportunity to live in, in free society. By no means perfect, but free nevertheless. Not to be molested by anybody. And tolerated. And given the opportunity to express my religious beliefs, my political views, etc., etc.

Do most Americans take their freedom for granted?

Definitely.

What are the most important lessons we should learn from the Holocaust?

Well, it's become a cliché. [laughs] Never again. The lesson that I learned from the Holocaust was not to go to the slaughter like a sheep. Resist. No matter what.

[END OF RECORDING]