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Isak Federman Interview
October 4, 1999

October 4th, 1999, and I'm interviewing Isak Federman for the MCHE portrait project. So, Mr. Federman, what was your name at birth?

What was my name – what?

Did it change your birth…birthname?

No!

Were you born with Isak Federman?

Yes!

When were you born?

March 14, 1922.

Where were you born?

In Poland…in a little town Wolbron, w-o-l-b-r-o-n [more correctly, Wolbrom]**.**

You've done this before. What was the population of the city?

10-12,000 I don't remember exactly.

What about the Jewish population?

About half of it.

Half of it?

Yeah.

What do you know about your birth. Were you born at home or in a hospital?

Probably at home.

Probably at home. Any brother and sisters?

I had two sisters and a younger brother.

And…Did they survive?

No…no one survived.

What were your parents' names?

My mother's name was Rachel. My father's name was Baruch.

Okay…How did your parents meet?

I don't know that.

What about your mom and the household… did she have an occupation or was she a housewife? Not just a housewife… but

No… She was both, occupation and a housewife. My father died when I was nine months old. So, she was left with two older sisters of mine… and myself. So, she had three kids to take care of. So, she was pretty much busy.

So, what did she do, what was her occupation?

We had a little old shirt factory…..that she rented.

Was it a factory that your father started and she just took over?

Yes. She took over when he died.

Was it, were there any other family members in it…. or just your mom?

Just our mother. We were little kids.

Now let's see….your were nine months old when he died and your sisters were older, how much older?

Two years each older.

One was two years older and one was four years older. Were you close with them?

Very close, sure.

And you were the little baby of the family?

Yes.

Did you have grandparents?

I remember just my grandmother…

Maternal?

Yeah, and evidently my grandparents died before I came along.

Did your have grandmother live near you?

She lived with us.

Oh, lived with you!! Did she help raise you while your mother worked?

Yes, Yes.

Okay. And what kind of neighborhood did you live in?

There was all Jewish.

All Jewish?

Most of it….and the other synagogue.

And, and the school you went to was it right there?

Not too far, just a few blocks.

Was it a street like you would think of….not as modern, I know as here, but with trees and yards and things like that?

No. No, it was pretty much like in the city with a square….there were no trees to speak of except in the square. Not where we lived, there was no yard.

Did you have a house or did you live in an… apartment?

We lived in an apartment.

And what was your home like? Did you have electricity?

Sure!

And indoor plumbing?

No, there was no plumbing yet.

No plumbing.

Later on there was, when I wasn't home anymore.

And how many rooms were in the house…in the apartment?

Four rooms.

Did you…?

One was the factory.

Oh, the factory was right in your home?

With a bunch of sewing machines, and cutting tables, stuff like that.

Did your sisters grow up to help with that?

Sure! When they became a little older they helped. Yes.

Did you help in it or were you old enough?

I wasn't old enough. I went away when I was 14, from home.

Okay, we'll get back to that. And did you share a bedroom….did you all sleep together?

We all slept in one bedroom.

One bed or more than one bed?

No…we had a couple of beds.

And your mom slept in there too or just the kids?

No….my mother slept in one bed and the two girls slept in the bed and I slept on a couch.

And where did you put your grandmother?

Our grandmother was in next room.

And how did the laundry get done?

I don't know.

You didn't help so…that's not something you wouldn't even think about?

No.

Was your family well off or….compared to everybody else there?

Medium. Middle-class.

Medium… Middle class? Did you have people who worked for you in your house?

We had about three people that mother employed.

You mean…..worked in the factory?

Yes.

Did you have anybody who worked in your home….like for you personally?

No.

Did you take vacations?

No.

What kind of foods did you eat?

I'll go back to vacation. We used to go on… on like *khol-ha-moyd* [Hebrew with Yiddish pronunciation: the intermediate days between the first and second parts of Passover and *Sukkot*] We'd go visit some uncles and aunts in different little towns.

And how would you get there?

On a bus.

Okay. And so a little food. Did your mom cook or did your grandmother cook?

Most of the time my grandmother cooked. But later on…..my grandmother died when I was little kid too…so she took over everything.

And, and what kind of foods did you have….did you eat….different from this…or from what you eat now or…?

I still eat the same food.

Like what…

[unclear]

Like beef and stuff like that?

Sure! Chicken mostly.

So, it wasn't really that different?

No.

Your were middle-glass so you didn't… and you never went hungry?

No, we were hungry. We would have like to have a little cake or something like that.

Sure, everybody does. What was your favorite thing to eat?

***Shabbat. Shabbat* was our favorite Friday night was…our favorite dinner.**

What language did you speak at home?

Mostly Yiddish, Jewish.

And did you speak other languages?

We spoke Polish.

But, not really in the home?

Not at home….no.

So, you speak Polish. Do you still speak Polish?

Sure

And Yiddish?

Yes.

And English…. What else, anything else?

A little bit of Hebrew.

And was your mother involved in anything political?

I'm sure she was, but I don't know.

Did you know anything about your Dad? What do you remember about your Dad….or what was told to you about your Dad?

Nothing… Well, he was in the Army in the First World War. He caught a cold evidently, and he died from pneumonia

And you were nine months old, that's what you said?

I was nine months old. That was in '23.

Now tell me about the school you attended?

I went to two schools. I started… when I was three, I remember the school that I went, which it was a Yiddish school. You know, a Hebrew school, not that such you stayed there all day practically.

At three years old….was that typical?

Yes.

Wow, okay.

At seven we started in public school which was Polish school.

And what happened to your Yiddish education, your Jewish education?

I… I kept going after school like we already go here.

Like Hebrew school now? Did all of your friends start school at three years old?

Sure, boys anyway, not girls.

Boys, yeah. Could you have gone to a Jewish school at seven. Were there other schools then?

No. They were but they were not in my little town.

What were the teachers like at that Jewish school?

Great.

Great?

Great.

At the public school?

Not so good.

Was there discrimination?

Sure.

In what way?

They discriminated. They beat us once in a while.

Beat you?

Oh sure.

They call you names?

They call us name…sure.

And what if children called you names, did they do anything about it?

No.

What were your favorite subjects at school?

Mostly geography and history.

And did you graduate… or you left home?

I left home. I got out at seventh grade….public school.

And how far did it go…did school go?

The seventh grade.

So even if you wanted to go…..?

You had to go to the high school which was out of the city. So I went away to a, to a Yeshiva.

So that when you talked about when you went away at 14?

Yeah.

So, you went to a Yeshiva where is that?

To Bedzin.

You'll have to spell that.

B-e-d-z-i-n. And I was there a year then I went to Lodz, which is a bigger city. And that is L-o-d-z.

Yeah, I know. The one that you went to in Bedzin?

Bedzin.

What kind of school is that. How long could you have gone there?

You could go there until….as long as you wanted to.

So why did you change?

Because I wanted…I had an uncle in Lodz, and I wanted to do a little work on the side to make some money. So, in Bedzin they didn't have any opportunity.

So how old did you go into Lodz….till you were how old?

Seventeen almost.

What happened after that?

The war broke out.

What, what did you plan to do?

I was planning to leave to go to Israel, to Palestine. But my parents didn't buy that program.

And… Did you have a profession in mind?

I wanted to be a journalist.

Ah. Did you want to… I guess you would have just done it….you wouldn't have gone to school, you would have just done that?

Yes.

Okay. Let's go back to before you went away to school. What did you do for fun?

I belonged different organizations in the Zionist movement.

What did they do?

We had meetings, like we do here. We played, and we sang, and we had speakers and tried to get us where we would know what's going on in our little world. The CNN wasn't available.

Did you go to parties…things like that?

No. We had our own parties, really.

Well, that's what I mean, parties, just that…

Boys and girls….but this was not too wild taken, especially in the way I was brought up.

Are you pretty orthodox?

Pretty orthodox, yeah.

Did you….would you danced? Or would that have not even come up?

Not even come up….no.

So you belonged to a Zionist organization…did you have any hobbies?

Nothing…no didn't have time for that.

And when you were a teenager, when you had gone away to school…

I was away from home.

Right, did you have any spare time, or were you?

I worked at night. I had spare time to make myself a little living.

In Lodz?

In Lodz.

And what did you do?

I worked at a fabric warehouse where they were manufacturing fabric and, and I did packing.

Did you have friends of the opposite sex?

A little bit, yes… in Lodz I did.

And how did you meet those people?

At work and another thing we did was we used to eat on a different day in a different home. So, the people who invited you to eat usually had the daughter.

Were also fixing you up. Come have dinner and meet my daughter. Well, when you went away to school did you stay in people's homes or was there dormitories?

No, we stayed… there were… almost like a dormitory wasn't quit as well done as in the United States, but that's where we'd sleep.

Did you date at all?

No.

Did they do that kind of thing?

Yes, they did. I had a girlfriend when I came back after Lodz before I got captured. I had a girlfriend, but I was already seventeen so...

What happened to her?

Died. She was murdered.

Did you get along with your mom?

Oh, wonderful.

Was she strict?

She was demanding that we do the right thing, but such thing as strict. She, my mother was probably 40 years old in those days that I can remember, before the Holocaust. She, when, when my father died she must have been 30 years old, and she had three children and she would not get married… She was a very beautiful girl, lady. My, my older sister looks just her. I don't know if you remember Shelly? She lives in California, but anyway and she would not get married.

Your oldest daughter looks just like her, you said your older sister?

No, my oldest daughter, looks just like her. And she would not get married because she didn't want us to have a stepfather. Until we got a little bigger. I was already 10-11 years old and my sisters were older when she remarried.

Oh, she did remarry?

She finally did remarry and that's where I had my second brother… I mean my youngest brother.

Did you like him, the man that she married?

He was great, he was just like… like a father could be and I didn't know what a father is, because I never had one.

He died also in the war and the younger brother died also in the war. And how long, let's see you were eleven when they got married?

10 or 11.

10 or 11. And, how. how long until they had your little brother?

Evidently immediately because my stepfather had no children. His wife died at birth. So, it must have been immediately a year or two later, because he was a little kid when I left.

You didn't take his name? Your father's name was Federman?

No. No.

And what was his name?

Kalisc. K-a-l-i-s-c. Kalisc

And does he have any family or descendants that you know of?

They all gone. I tried to find them. He came from a town where Maria Devinki comes from.

Did she know him?

She knew him.

How did he meet her, how did they meet your mom……?

He had a brother in their town. So, we use to go there, but I never met Maria. But she knew these people, which was my uncle's step-uncle.

Right. So now we're going to go into values and religion. What values or standards were important to your mom?

Her values were that we get a good education, you know, Jewishly, in public school or whatever.

It was never a consideration that you would marry somebody not Jewish?

No.

And was that pretty much the way it was for the people in your community?

I remember one person in our town, and you know we had 6-7,000 Jews in Wolbrom, and I remembered there was one person that was inter-married. But that was out of the ordinary.

Were they accepted in Jewish community?

No. They didn't participate in the Jewish community at all.

Must have been really something different?

It was different.

I wish it was something more strange today. So how did these values affect your daily life that you told me?

You just had them all your life, all through your life. You had those values that was really taught at home by my mother.

So, Judaism was a daily practice for you?

Oh sure!

You always had Shabbat..?

We always had Shabbat regardless of the circumstances. *Yontif* [Hebrew with Yiddish pronunciation: *yom-tov,* "holiday"] we celebrated all the time.

What, what about your sisters, the same for them?

Yes.

Did they go to school?

They went to Beit Yakov [Bays Yakov] they call it, they went to a Jewish… girl school.

Till seventh grade?

Till seventh grade. Then they went to that too, even as teenagers.

Oh, was that typical?

Most of them yeah. If they were orthodox, real orthodox and most were.

How do you consider yourself: BIAV [Beth Israel Abraham and Voliner] orthodox, KI [Kehilath Israel] orthodox, or Chabad orthodox?

Me personally?

As you grew up?

As I grew up, it was BIAV.

Did your synagogues have a *mekhitse* [Hebrew with Yiddish pronunciation: the wall or curtain that separated the men's and women's section's in Orthodox synagogues]?

Oh, sure.

Were the Jews accepted in the community?

You mean with the Gentile people?

Uh huh.

No. There was always some friction, but there were business associates. Because they did business with Jews because they were manufacturing in world, but it was not a very, it's not like Kansas City… no.

Did you have experiences of antisemitism yourself?

At my hometown? Certainly.

Give me a couple of examples?

On the way home they called you names… and… fights and all that stuff.

And at your school you said…Anything happen while you were away at school…?

You mean antisemitic things?

In Lodz? Yeah, uh huh.

Sure, there were things, but this was a bigger town it wasn't as tight as… my little town where I come from.

Let's say you were in Lodz… You could go to school, you could go to stores and really never come in contact with non-Jews? Was it pretty self-contained at this time….?

No. You came in contact with non-Jews in Lodz quite a bit. But it wasn't this, it was antisemitic…Polish people were naturally were antisemitic, but it was a little different than you were closed in a small little town.

Right, right. Like, describing your Jewish education, I think you did that for me. So you family kept kosher of course?

Of course. There was no other way.

It wasn't difficult to get kosher food… Like kosher meat?

There were a lot more butcher shops in my town than in Kansas City.

I'm sure there is no contest. Did you celebrate any secular holidays? Polish holidays? National holidays?

In school we did because we were involved in… in the secular stuff – yes.

But when you went away to school did you? Was it just not…..like 4th of July, everybody celebrates the 4th of July, did they do anything like that?

They had something like that.

But you didn't do that.

No.

Any kind of Jewish cultural activities in your town – like Yiddish theatre anything like that?

No. In Lodz there was.

But Lodz was too small?

They had a few….they'd bring in a theatre once or twice a year. They would play those….things like that…..

Like traveling…?

Traveling, yeah.

What impact did the secular culture have on your life? Like were you…..was it difficult for you to maintain your Jewish identity?

No.

Okay. Was your mother interested in any secular activities, like music or anything like that?

Oh, yeah. She was very active, my mother.

Like, like what?

I don't really remember, but she was always doing some things, and she was very much involved in the community.

In the secular community as well?

A little bit in the secular but mostly in the Jewish community.

How did Zionism affect you in the Jewish community?

What do you mean? How did it affect me?

Did, did it…when you said you wanted to go to Israel?

That's the reason.

And was that a general feeling in your community or just…?

Not necessarily but some of us did. I wanted to go to Israel to Palestine because I knew there was pioneering going on and there was something different than just what we had… And Israel, possibly Palestine is going to be a Jewish state sometime.

Now did you… there were national Zionist clubs, did yours….was yours the thing you belonged to were they national?

***Ha-Noar Ha-Tzioni*. Yes, it was a national thing.**

And what was that again?

Ha-Noar Ha-Tzioni

You were seventeen when the war broke out?

Uh huh.

So, the only work you did was, you were going to school and you were working in the fabric industry? And then… So, let's go onto the next part…… When and how did you first become aware of the Nazi presence?

Well, when I was in Lodz in '39, I kept receiving letters from my mother asking me to come home. We were beginning to know all in, and over Poland that there was friction going on between Poland and Germany. So, the third letter I received asking me to come home was in August 1939 and she insisted that I immediately take a train and get on a train and come

home because there's a threat of the war coming on. So, we were beginning to see that there was something going to happen immediately, so I went home. I was home in August of '39.

How far from your hometown was Lodz?

Oh, a light trip on the train.

So, you went home, and what happened when you went home?

I was home about 6-7 weeks and the war broke out.

And was something going on there…the same type of thing going on in Lodz was going on in your hometown?

Sure.

And were the Polish people becoming bolder in their antisemitic actions toward you?

Well, they were telling us is that Hitler is going to get the Jews and we finally going get rid of the Jews…whenever they had an opportunity. They didn't realize that they going to have problems to.

Right. So how did you react to that?

We fought and yelled at them back.

Did you stay inside more? Did you avoid them more?

No.

It didn't really affect your life at that time?

No.

Do you remember the first day of the occupation?

I remember it vividly.

Well, tell me about it.

You see I came home…I was home about 6 weeks and Friday morning, September 1, 1939, the war broke out and we lived about 80-90 kilometers from the German border, we were in southern Poland. So, the war broke out Friday and Monday the Germans came in…the Army came in and occupied our little town.

How did they come in? Did they come in marching in a parade or…down streets…?

No. They came in with tanks and armor and bicvc…motorcycles and trucks. No, they were not having a parade, they came in then us known that they were occupying us.

What was the Polish people's reaction?

The same, they didn't…they had…they did more things to the Jews than to the Poles, but that just happened a couple three days later.

But the Poles weren't excited to have the German come in and…..cause they were going to get rid of the Jews?

No, they were not to excited because they knew that they losing the war. That the Polish army was being defeated.

And how did you feel about that?

We knew there was problems coming up.

And were you afraid?

Sure, we were afraid, very much so.

What, what were your impressions and those of your family upon seeing the Nazi?

Well, the Nazis came in…the first thing they did in our little town is they…found some lady, we didn't even know who she was, and they shot her in the square.

In front of everybody?

In front of everybody….telling us somehow, announcing that she was a spy, and then they, on Wednesday, they gathered up all the men folks from 16 years up, in the square again…

And you?

And I was in it too. My younger sister happened to see me in that bunch and she flirted with a Nazi and she got me out that.

Oh my gosh.

They took all these other people to Zawiercie, to a little other town, and marched by foot maybe 20 some kilometers and it was hot, in September it was still hot. And they didn't kill anybody immediately, but they tortured them. And, and then they let them go back home.

My next question was…how did you know, but they went back and told what happened.

Yes. That was the beginning of the war.

Did you hear… Do you remember hearing any discussion about the Nazi in your home or around with your people?

The problem we had… the problem that we had is that we were told, my mother even was telling us that the Germans were liberators in the First World War, and that my father….my stepfather was telling us. This is going to go away. It's not going happen…that's bad because the Germans are cultured people and its not going to be near what they all….those are rumors. We didn't believe what they had in mind.

Were there any people in your community who did believe and left before it happened?

No. There was some people that ran away to the East, some friends of mine in fact. They went to the Russian part and then they came back because the Russians weren't too good either, but some people went and stayed with the Russians and did okay, eventually.

Did your parents take any response…any actions in response to the Nazi occupation? Did they do anything themselves?

No. I don't remember.

So, my question is here….Were you persecuted…..

By the Nazis?

Yes?

Certainly.

In what way?

They….we had curfews, especially the Jews. In the beginning they had them for everybody. We had to be home at 8:00 in the evening. If you didn't, they captured you and beat you up and sometimes they shot some people.

Did they make you…did they put you into a ghetto or did they…?

No, not in my town. We were not in a ghetto.

And did you remember the April 1933 boycott?

You mean the Nazis…when Hitler came to power….sure.

Were there book burnings in your town?

No.

Now, let's see you said they came in September and when were you taken?

I was taken December.

Did you hear about *Kristallnacht*?

We heard about, because they was some German-Jews that came to town that were pushed out of Germany. So, we knew about *Kristallnacht* yes, we did.

And Nuremberg race laws…did you hear about those?

Yes.

And was there ever a point where your parents said… "wait a minute, this has gone…this is not what we thought it was gonna be"?

They had no opportunity to leave.

Did you where a Jewish star…a yellow star?

Sure. We wore an armband.

An armband. Were you kept from going into public places?

Yeah. They separated us between the Polish people and Jewish people. Not exactly a ghetto, but somehow we…they stopped us from going to the movie theatre and stuff like that.

Now you were in school there, but did they stopped the children from going to school? Like you went to the public school….were the Jewish children not allowed….?

I don't remember that. I don't think so. You see I was, I left pretty early. The whole thing started quite a bit later. You see I was captured in '39.

Right. Did any non-Jews help you at all?

Yeah.

In what ways?

I had a very good friend that I went to see him in 1990 but he died only just about a few months before we got there. And they helped us. He was supporting me quite a bit. He was a neighbor.

In your, in your neighborhood…was he your age?

Yes. Janek.

In what ways did he help you?

Whatever he could. Whenever I had some problems. He could get by easier than I could. He helped me.

Let's see. This says, "what were your rescuer's names". I guess it's this person, his name is Janek?

Janek, yeah.

And, what happened to him after the war?

Well, he died in 1990, so he survived the war.

What was his occupation? Do you know?

He was a farmer.

So, after the war you found him again?

Yes.

But you'd never seen him?

No. I never… I saw his kids.

Did they come here?

No. We went there.

In 1990?

In 1990. They remembered their father telling, telling them about me.

Had you found him before 1990?

Oh yeah, we corresponded with him.

That's what I was asking.

Oh sure. I wrote over there right from the beginning…right after the war when we came here.

And he was still in the same place?

Still in the same place. Nothing happened to him. His family was fine.

So, then the next part was you were departed to a concentration camp, and I don't know where go here you tell me? Jean said that… Jean Zeldin said that you were picked up at seventeen, tell me about that.

I was sent to… my mother sent me to get some groceries, some sugar and butter. And on the way I ran into a bunch of Nazis with machine guns stopped me and pushed and beat the hell out of me and pushed me on a truck. And that was it. I never seen…I didn't bring the sugar home.

For you to go to the grocery store….was that a dangerous thing to do?

No.

You had done that before and nothing happened to you?

Sure. It was just one of those freak things.

So, they put you on a truck and that it was, that was the last you'd seen your family.

Yes.

Never heard from them again?

Never heard from them again. I heard from my mother once, because this Janek's mother… I was in a camp in [unclear] we don't want to talk about the camps…

No, we don't…

But this is a good things….and I wanted to write a letter home to tell my parents where I was, and there's no way…the Germans….we could not use mail or postage or anything. And I had a Polish foreman that I kind of told him what I want to do and he said, "you now you are dangering my life."

A Polish what?

He was a…you know…charge of a particular department…what do you call them.

Like a *Kapo*…that kind of thing?

No. He was working in an airplane factory. He was a foreman.

Oh, foreman. I didn't understand… yeah go ahead.

So, it was during a break…I was working the night shift, and I told him that I'd really do anything to write a letter home. My parents were still home. My family was still home. And he said, "give me the address and tell me what to write, and you write the note and I'll put it in the envelope and mail it for you." And he said, "give me an address of a Polish person." It was Janek's mother that I send the letter to. And when she received the letter, she went upstairs to my mother and told her. And my mother wrote back to that foreman, and that's how the only communication I ever had.

What did she tell you… in the letter? Okay.

Can you imagine if you send your kid to get sugar and how you feel and he's captured? Well?

No… No. She must have been thrilled to hear you were even alive.

Yeah. Yeah.

And when was this still 1939…no…no…it would have been 1940?

Yes.

And how did you know that your family was gone?

Well, they was… they didn't…That they were gone? I never found out really.

So, you….because you never heard from them….or you just assume there…?

When the war ended, I wound up in the British hospital…in a British field hospital, an army hospital. They captured me and some [unclear] near Bremen. And I mean the British came in and I had typhus, and I didn't really know what was going on anymore. I had so much high fever. So, a couple friends of mine *schlepped* me out to a water pump. They were trying to pour water on me possibly…they didn't know what my problem was. That's when the tank came in. I saw the tank. I never remember anything since. They, they found me still under that pump, the British. The…Red Cross… and they took me on the….in one of those trucks….put me to a hospital…in a field hospital. I was there about 6-7 weeks. And that's were I met the Doctor Bloomfield. A Jewish captain in a British Army, from England, from Manchester. By the way, we looked him up, when I found him after the war. We went to visit him with the, with the [unclear], Mel and Lori Mallin…

Oh, how wonderful.

And we went to Manchester, we were in England, we went to the car and talked to Manchester. But anyway, so when I got out of the….a couple months later… they treated me…and I was back in shape, pretty much, they put me back together. So, I came…Dr. Bloomfield was transferred to the Pacific because the war was still going on in Japan. And he left me a note telling me he was going, but he wrote to his wife and she'll send me some stuff to put me together, and that if I get transferred the Army will have my address

wherever I go…they'll know where and they'll ship that stuff…whatever she sends me. So, a soldier came in and he happened to been a Jewish soldier, I was lucky, and he said where do you want to go, you're out, we're discharging you here, your history. Where do you want to go? First, we got to go someplace and get you some clothes, because I had nothing. I was in a pair of pajamas.

(Showing Isak a picture) Is this you at liberation?

This is a British nurse, soldier and this is me in the hospital.

Gosh, and you kept this picture?

Yeah, Ann throw it out, that's why I almost killed her [laughter].

Because of the woman in here? [Laughter].

So, he took me into several places and…see here…this is Art and me in Wolbrom (looking at picture).

Oh Gosh! You look good.

So, I said….let me see….H took me into a German house and they asked the guy…to the lady he said "where's your husband," and she said he's in a Russian, prisoner in Russian, POW. This was terrible, he said, "Let me see a picture in it," and she showed me….he was a big, tall guy…and I say, "let's get out of here. We can't use he clothes."

Looking to get the clothes from… [Laughter]

We came to some clothes on. We found the place where the guy was my size.

And just took the clothes?

Sure. Why not.

Sure.

They took everything I had. So, I said show me a map. I don't where we're at or where we're going and I saw Bergen-Belsen was about 75-80 kilometers. I said I'd been there and that's where I'd like to go. So, he took me. He says, "it's a good thing it's under 100 kilometers because I can only go up to 100 kilometers if it's over we putting you on the train. They won't let me go that far….the Army, the British Army. So, he took me to Bergen-Belsen.

Well, let's, let me go back, maybe I missed this. You were in a British field camp, OK…

OK… So he took me to Bergen-Belsen, because I escaped from Bergen-Belsen…during… before the end of the war. I was shot right here (showing Ann)…I was shot in my [unclear] and over here, but I survived. When I came to Bergen-Belsen…the camp that used to be there…they burned down because they was terrible….and the people that they set-up a displaced person camp was in the….where the German Army used to be and there was decent buildings and that's why they made a, the displaced person's camp. I came in there…they had an office….the people who were running it…the JDC was there, the Joint Distribution Committee. And they made you register in the book, you know we had no computers that time, but everything was done, but they did a heck of good job. You had to register your name, your parents' name, your country where you coming from, your city and then they had a complete record of you. They did that all over Europe. And they had somehow by wire they were getting these things together where you could find out where anybody in your family is alive. And sure enough, after several trips to that office I found out that my whole family was murdered. Nobody was around.

Did your mother have sisters or brothers, like…?

Sure.

Everyone?

Everyone is gone, except one cousin that lives in Brooklyn…In Long Island now…he used to be in Brooklyn….that he came to this country the same way like I did…after the war. He's the only relative that I have alive all over the world.

Do you communicate with him?

Oh, yeah! Most of the time he's a pain. (laughter) I can't get him off the phone. But he's a good kid…a good guy.

Okay, so you went the displaced person's camp and then what happened? What happened in the displaced person's camp?

That's…I was….I had a real good friend of mine who has died since… that we were the last months in the camps…we were together, and that was Ann's brother.

You met him in the camp?

Yeah, I met him in the camp.

In the displaced person's camp?

No. In camp, camp.

Oh, in that camp. So, Ann's brother, and then what?

And I had another friend that was a friend of his that was a buddy of mine in the camps…the last few camps you didn't…you weren't able to stay to together too long, and that's how I met Ann.

And did you meet her in a displaced person's camp or…?

I met Ann in Bergen-Belsen, in the displaced person's camp.

Oh, you mean…

She came there from Czechoslovakia. Her brother brought her there when her sister…because they went home to Bedzin and there was nobody there.

So, when you…did you just happen to see him….her brother with the…?

Yeah sure.

So, he said this is my sister Ann?

Yeah…he said I want you to meet my sister. She was a nice-looking little kid and I haven't been able to get rid of her since.

She's pretty cute… and most of the time she's a pain? [Laughter]

(End of Tape 1, Side 1. Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2)

The Isak Federman interview…

(Laughter) So he…John introduced me to his sister…and this was Ann and we became, you know pretty friendly, and she hung around ever since. I met her sister…she Ann has a sister and I met the other brother and then we were there a few weeks. And I decided that I wanted to go to America. In order to go to America we better move to the British…to the American zone. So, I talked them into to go with me…and we moved on to Bad Nauheim which was a nice small town never was bombed and the JDC had an office over there which is the Joint Distribution Committee, and we became involved in that community. There were maybe a couple of hundred displaced persons, people there. And we decided to fix up the synagogue, which I said before. And I met a gentleman from Kansas City, his name was Sal Firestone, he was… the Firestone who use to own the Jewish Chronicle and he helped us get the material… whatever was necessary to get to fix up the synagogue. I already tried to become a President of a congregation, even then.

What was the name of this synagogue?

There was no name…I don't remember.

Displaced Person's Synagogue.

Yeah…I don't remember.

Tell me about the living conditions when you were there?

We lived in a hotel and the JDC took care of the bills…and they had what they called the Yiddish house. A Jewish home over there was a nice building downtown…and there you went to get your coupons for the food and the restaurants and whatever you needed to feed you. And they gave us a few marcs once in a while and we were living like people again.

Were there any Jewish people living there that were able to live there throughout the war?

I didn't find any…no, but there were some that came back that were scattered some other places that moved back…but German Jews, a few of them that we met. And we stayed in Bad Nauheim several months. Then at Christmas of 1945 we heard on the radio that President Truman spoke to the nation, to the American people over Christmas…and he announced that he's gonna to ask Congress to let the hundred thousand displaced persons come in – in 1946. I spoke to my friends…and my Ann and her sister and brother and I told them that we need to go as soon as they open up. We need to go and register so we could go to the United States. They made fun out of me. They said, "you not going to go to the United States. They not going to do it." I said, "Well, we're going to try anyway."

They didn't believe you? They didn't believe it was going to happen?

No. That's right. So, we in March…they opened up the American Consul in a bombed out building in Frankfurt, which was a train ride for a couple hours from Bad Nauheim, and I got Ann and her *mishpokhe* to go to register. We registered and that's where I met Jack Mandelbaum. At the consul in Frankfurt. We still friend from all those years. But it was not playing to get it to go to the United States, and to go to Kansas City and all that stuff, but it so happened by chance that it all happened. That he came through on the same ship that we did…and he came at the same time to Kansas City from New York. We met again in Kansas City.

So, did you go to Kansas City because Sal Firestone?

No. We not…there was a person from Philadelphia, he was a social workers for the HIAS. And when we got off the ship…you know the JDC takes care all over the world, they had nothing to do with the United States. They drop you on the ship then you come to the United States then you become you become a HIAS person. And the HIAS had people take ten of us in a room in a hotel in New York and they said we are to go to Kansas City. They said why? They said well, it's a nice city. You going to Americanize much nicer, and faster in Kansas City and that's a good town. We sent some people there before the war and everything worked out fine.

These were not people from Kansas City?

No. And that's…we got on the train and we go to Kansas City.

So, who were those ten people?

They were…the Jack Meddlebaum, Isak and Ann, Augusta Volopsky and her husband David, he died since. There was, Izzy… no… Janek Mittelman, he was on that ten. There's an Eric Meddlebaum, he had a brother that died since, a Bob Mandelbaum and Jack's uncle, Sigmund Mandelbaum. Those were the ten that came to Kansas City.

So, were you sorry you didn't go to Israel?

No. No, I wasn't…I mean it turned out…that's fine, if I'd went to Israel it would have been fine too.

How long were you on the ship?

Nine days.

And what were the conditions on the ship?

It was not the Queen Elizabeth. It was OK.

Were you down…in the bottom part?

Oh sure. It was a freight ship that was converted into… for the Army that they transported military people during the war. It was OK, it was fine.

You didn't get sick or anything like that?

Ann did. Most of the people did, but I didn't.

So, you went from…where did you leave from…where did you get on the boat?

Bremer.

So, you went to England first?

No. Bremerhaven.

Oh yeah, Bremerhaven. Sorry. Then you went to New York?

Went to New York.

How long were you in New York?

We came to New York Monday and we left Wednesday.

And then how did you get to Kansas City?

On the train.

How long did it take you?

It took…overnight we went to Chicago and then we transferred from Chicago. In Chicago we couldn't find anybody who could speak Polish, German or Yiddish. They announced over the microphone to get somebody that speaks Polish or German. And they found some person…they had to transfer us to another station. In Chicago they have two different stations…the Polk Street station. They took us over there and overnight we came to Kansas City Friday morning.

And where did you go, where did you…?

Ester Levens, do you know her?

I don't.

She's the lady now that's involved in some political deals. Great lady! She was social worker for a Jewish family service. She came down to the station to pick us up.

And where did she take you? To her house?

No. She took us…she couldn't speak Yi… anything either, except English. She took us…she divided…there were several cars. There was not ten of us, but 5 or 6 of us…the other bunch came Monday…a couple three days later. She took Aron and I, two boys, she took to 43rd & Montgall and they had a place…there was a family that lived over there…and they took us in, the two of us, the two boys. It's amazing…that I was in D.C. this week, Tuesday and Wednesday, in Silver Spring. I spoke Wednesday and there was gentleman, in Silver Spring… publishes a Chronicle like, we have the Jewish Chronicle…he has several papers, a very successful guy. And somehow he heard from somebody that I will be speaking at the Rotary Club in Silver Spring. It's a big long story about that…because I took a gentleman here, a Lloyd Ketchem to the United States Holocaust Museum. On the way back I got $25,000 bucks from him for FTHE.

You're kidding?

Yep, this week. So, I walk into this place and there's a guy who walks over to me and he says, "Isak, do you remember me?" And I say, "Ester, I remember you." He was a son of the people that Aron and I stayed with and he heard that I'm coming and I hadn't seen him since.

Oh no!

He been in Washington, D.C. ever since. And I ran into him this week.

Small world.

A small world. So that's where they…Ester took us down there. We stayed overnight. When I started the… my presentation at this luncheon and he brought he wife and his son and the daughter-in-law and they stayed for the luncheon, there were about 80-90 people there. Some of them were from Congress, cause my friend's son just retired from Congress. So, I started out with…I said when we came to Kansas City, and the lady that took us down to Mr. Gerecht is his name. And his brother, by the way gave us $100,000 a few years ago. I got him to give us $100,000 bucks. I said but this gentleman's parents took us in…they were so wonderful to us. But they had a porch were we, Aron and I slept together, that's Ann's brother. We slept together and the temperature must have been 120 degrees. We slept together in the bed, the two of us. We got up we were so wet that when we got out on the street that Aron said to me, "which way is Bedzin?" He was ready to go back, they were all roaring. (laughter) So anyway, we… we stayed with Mr. And Mrs. Gerecht and we had breakfast there every morning and we slept. She got us a fan. And it was wonderful.

So, what did you think when you came here?

American's great! Wonderful regardless of what… you know we had a tough time, but this was a heaven. A little warm.

A little warm… So, you came to Kansas… Now what about the English? How did you learn English?

No English.

Well you have English now, well you know your accent not is really not that thick.

We went to the Jewish Community Center. We lived in the area not too far and they had, they had… they had teacher, they had classes. It was an organization…I don't remember the name of it… the lady was Mrs. Brock… was the head of it, and they taught us English, how to read and write. We went twice a week, or three times sometimes for night school. And we learned English.

And so was this an easy adjustment for you…learning English?

No, it was tough.

What was the hardest part?

The hardest was to understand people even when you could speak already. It was tough understanding.

Did you come across any discrimination?

In the United States? No.

Nobody said "Oh these people…"

I had no problem at all. I started travelling, when I was here…a couple of years I started a business and I traveled in the Dakotas. I hardly ever had that problem.

You say you started a business a couple of years…what did you do in those two years?

I had a job.

Doing what?

This Sal Firestone lived here…in Kansas City 34th & Paseo over there in the apartment building…on the east side.

What did you do? What kind of job?

He worked for…he was a salesman on the road. He was selling living room furniture, you know. He got me a job to work in a plant like that.

And then you started your own company?

Then I started, a couple of years later, my own company.

How did you do? What was you're…. What's the company?

I sold it since, a long time ago.

What was it?

Superior Upholster Furniture Company. We manufactured living room furniture, and we sold to wholesale to furniture stores…jobbers and stuff like that.

How did you start your own business? Two years, barely speaking English, how did you start your own company?

I worked for a gentleman by the name of Moses Berger. I don't whether you know him. He's still alive.

Actually, I do think I know who that is.

At one point I made that little mistake in a shipment and I…and he just yelled at me and told me I should have stayed in Europe.

A Jewish man?

A Jewish man. I never tell that story, but you asked me and I tell you. But I went in the bathroom and I cried because he insulted me. And it was something like a $5.00 mistake. And I went into the bathroom and I cried and I said, "Wait a minute Isak, what are you doing?" So, I went outside and I said, "Mr. Berger, I'd like to see you in your office." And he said, "what do you want." I said, "I want to talk to you, I'm not going to speak to you in front of everybody and insult you." We went in the office and I said, "Mary, that was his secretary, make my check, because I'm leaving." I says, "Mr. Berger, I'm not taking any abuse in America from anybody. I came to this beautiful country, and nobody is going abuse me, I'm out of here." He said, "Your wife is pregnant, she works?"

We need to get back to the marriage, but go ahead…

I said I'm out of here…and I went home. And I came home and we lived at 2937 and Olive…… And Ann said, "What are you doing home?" I said, "I quit. I'm unemployed now." We saved up about $3,000 in two years, that was a lot of money in that time. And Ann worked, she worked for Brandon Puritz. She was a seamstress. She was just quick, because this was in August and Shelly was born in November. So, she just quick and I had sympathy for her and I came home too. We started the factory. I called her brother, and I said…he was driving the truck…I said, "You want to go in business?" Come over to my house…over here we lived 2937 Olive Way…we had a room and board. In those days apartments were very hard to get. You couldn't get an apartment, it was tough. And we lived with some other people. We started a business.

Did you start in the apartment?

No. We rented a place down on 6th & Delaware. It's not even there anymore, because the traffic way is over there.

So, did working for your….was it your uncle in Lodz….did that help you with what you were doing?

Sure. Sure. But it was different environment, different kind of business.

How did you know how to make furniture?

I didn't…I hired somebody, but I worked there for a couple of years, and I picked up some stuff.

So how long did you have that business?

Twenty-six years.

Then you sold it?

I sold it.

Then what did you do?

Then I started another business.

Which was?

Which was a fabric business. I was back to my original business. And I sold it three years ago and now I'm in another business.

And now what are you doing now?

Capitol Management. Do you know David Goodman?

I don't.

Well, he's my partner. The young guy your age.

Well, that's nice. So tell me….. Tell me quickly about… let's see… tell me quickly about the marriage? All of a sudden Ann's pregnant.

So, well…she got married before.

Good. That's good.

We lived…I lived with Mrs. Gerecht and Mr. Gerecht he worked for the Palace Clothing Company. And they lived with another lady and her sister on Tracy, on 34th and Tracy and we would were getting together in the evening after work and the Jewish family service took beautiful care of us. Although… We… the Jewish Social Service they call it in those days. I got a job immediately; Ann got a job immediately. So, we didn't need very much assistance anymore, we were set; we were making a living. Getting a check for $20-30 a week. That was big stuff, big stuff.

Oh, big money yeah.

So, there was a Rabbi that lived on 42nd & Chestnut. And he was the Rabbi of 39th & Montgall synagogue. You don't remember that. There was a real orthodox synagogue on 39th & Montgall. His name was Rabbi T. Bernstern. You know, I come from an environment from Yeshiva and all that stuff. And Mrs. Gerecht told me I need to meet this Rabbi. So, I went over to see him, he was a young rabbi…was a couple, three years older than I was. He's still in Florida, in Miami. He was writing a children's book in those days and I helped him at night to look up some things. He wrote a Jewish book…translated it into English later. So, I got very acquainted with him…actually he was the one that proposed to Ann.

For you? Or…

For me. And he says when are you going to get married, Yiddish to me. What are you *shlepping* around with that girl. And I said call her up and tell her and set the date. So he did.

So romantic!

She loved it. He called her up and said when do you want to get married? He got it set up and we got married on September 22, 1946… In.. on… in here in Kansas City.

When did you know you wanted to marry her? When he told you?

When he told me. I didn't pay any attention to this whole business.

OK, let me ask, there's a few more things here. So, you talk about your experiences quite a bit?

Not much, not much…well, a little bit yeah, a little bit. We hardly ever talked to our kids until later when they grew up a little bit.

Did they ask about it?

Yeah, Our…my girls…they all asked about it. Forget it, you don't want to know. So, Art went to a leadership training deal in Starlight, Pennsylvania…in one of those deals and Elie Wiesel came there. You know, that must have been 30 years ago. Maybe…yeah about that time. He was a teenager and that's when he really came home and started digging… Art …and Art can dig.

But they already knew you were survivors?

Oh sure, oh sure.

Do you have numbers?

No, we don't have numbers. We missed that part.

They asked and you kind of put them off until they were older?

Oh yeah.

Do you talk to the grandchildren, do they ask?

Yeah, yeah.

And your friends, are most of your friends survivors?

No. Most of our friends are regular Americans.

Regular all Americans…And that you met through… how?

Business, synagogue, federations stuff like that.

I really don't have to ask many questions, because you answer them all when you're talking, it's very nice. Now let's see… All your children were born here?

All the children were born here.

Do you think your children differently as children of survivors? Did they feel…did they have any different feelings…not feel like, I don't know any differently at all?

Then other survivors' kids?

No, no. Than, than children of American born children, I mean American born?

I don't…I think they are very much aware of the Holocaust.

Are they involved in The Children of Survivor's organizations?

Art is involved, as you know. My daughter Shelly, in California has been quite involved. In fact, she wrote quite a bit of stuff about it and our daughter in Colorado, Lorie…Lorie teaches Holocaust over there. She… We sent 24 teachers, like we send from here to Washington. We sent 24 from Colorado. Jean sent here one of these luggage things…

Yeah, I know what you're talking about. The… whatever.

…the trunk. She sent her a trunk and she's quite involved, very much involved Jewishly… in the synagogues up there.

Is there ever a time where something reminds you of those days or something in the camps?

I wake up many times at night.

So, you dream about it?

Once in a while.

Are there smells or you'll see something that bring it back to you?

Well we saw Kosovo or something like that…we couldn't…Ann and I both we couldn't face it. We just reminded us of…although it's quite a different situation and I spoke about it then last week…a couple days ago when I was in Silver Spring that it's not…it isn't a comparison to the Holocaust because they had a place to run to…they had no Final Solution and stuff like that. It was terrible, absolutely horrifying – but it was different from the Holocaust.

Do your faith in God helped you?

I think that faith helped me, but I had problems with God.

Tell me about that?

I questioned it a lot, because the way I was brought up…and I questioned…I saw how mistreated we were and how the people they mistreated that were righteous people. There was full of people and I, I had some problems.

And how did you resolve those problems?

I don't think I ever resolved it.

You believe in God?

Yes, I do, but I have problems with him, with her or him or whatever.

Do you think that religion is as much a part of your life now as it was when you were a child?

No, I don't think so. It's not as much, no. It was a lot more…not that's it's bad, not that it's bad. I'm still involved in Jewish things. I'm still with the synagogue. I remember your parents in our synagogue.

Yeah, the old days. Wonderful parents. And do you Shabbat? Still do Shabbat?

We do Shabbat, but not observant, no.

Right, not *shomer*... Right. Are there any special holidays that you did before the war that you shared with your kids?

We do the same…we told them everything that went on and they doing pretty much the same things…that Art, especially Art. And Lorie the same way. Shelly's a little bit….

You know they get out of the house and start their own lives… Do you belong to KI?

Yeah, I always have.

And you're involved?

Yeah. I am a past President over there. The reason we went to KI, the reason we went is because when we first came…that first holiday that came along…we had received a letter from Rabbi Solomon inviting us to come to the synagogue and at that time we had services at the Ivanhoe Temple which is on Linwood Blvd…for the holidays, for the high holidays….sent us tickets, invited us and that's how we became involved. Then Laurie was a real close friend of mine.

Why do you think you were so able to adjust so well to the life here? Start you business after two years. What enabled you to do that.

Because Jean, I was in seventeen camps. And the reason I was in seventeen camps in five some years is because when I realized things were rough, I try to see a way if there's a possibility to go someplace else. Whenever they had an opportunity they needed 50 people that are doing a certain thing, which I didn't know from nothing – I volunteered. It didn't always work, but sometimes it worked and it helped. That's where I really learned to adjust.

You have a pretty good survival instinct?

You had to survive, that's what you had to do. So, this was a piece of cake.

Yeah, the language… So, do you feel like you're an American?

Very much so.

And what does that mean to you, to being an American?

I love it. I love being an American. I love Israel, I've been there eight times, but I live here and I'm a very wonderful citizen.

I need to wrap up here…What are the most important lessons we should learn from the Holocaust?

The most important thing we need to learn is tolerance with other people. Look at people not the way the look, but they way they are and that's the most important thing that I can say anything about what we learn of the Holocaust. That was our problem, is that they didn't tolerate anything.

Well, you are wonderful, thank you so much.

Okay.

I'm gonna stop this.

Go ahead.

In Silver Springs, Maryland, on the 29th of September, I spoke to a group of people in Washington, from Washington D.C. and Silver Springs. And after my 15-minute presentation, there was a question and answer deal going on, and one gentleman got up and he said, "Mr. Federman, what would you do if Adolf Hitler walked in this room right now?" And I said "Number one I'd do, is make sure that the international, the international tribunal gets a hold of him, and they try him the way he should be tried.

However, before he leaves I'd like to tell him a little story. I said you know you tried everything possible to try and kill me. I spent 5 years in different concentration camps. I was beaten. I was shot. I was terribly mistreated. You murder my whole family. My parents, my two sisters, my brother, all my aunts and cousins and uncles. But you know, I survived. And the reason I survived is because evidently God wants me to tell this story. Now let me tell you one more thing. I have a wonderful wife, and a wonderful family. I have great, three children and spouses. And they're all wonderful. Five grandchildren. I have a daughter that lives in California, and daughter in Colorado, and a son in Kansas City, with their families. I have a granddaughter at Brown University. My oldest granddaughter graduated Vasser College. And my youngest granddaughter is possibly going to Yale. And as you can see we living very nicely in America, in spite of you. Now this is my revenge to the Nazis." And you know what, they roared, when I was through with that.

And the beauty of this is you're a great story that there are others just like you.

There are stories like this over, all over… Thank God.

Yeah, yeah. That was a beautiful speech.

I'll give you a copy.