

# Jack Mandelbaum Interview

## September 23, 1999

(unintelligible) what your name was at birth.

**My Hebrew name was Jonah. And in Polish it was Janek.**

And where were you born?

**I was born in, actually I was born in Gdansk, which is, used to be called Danzig. And we lived in Poland in a place called Gdynia, which was the Polish port. And I lived there 'til the beginning of World War II with my father, my mother, and my older sister, she was three years older, and my brother was five years younger. And my father was fairly successful. He had a company called Ocean and it was a fish cannery. And employed many people and we sent different products all over Europe from Gdynia. Before the war started I was going to public school versus most Jewish kids who were going to Jewish schools because they were living in a large Jewish center. Gdynia had a very, very small Jewish population so they had no Jewish schools. Public school was basically like going to a Catholic school. And Gdynia didn't have a Synagogue. People, during the holidays, only met in somebody's apartment for Services and, and things like that so...**

So there was no...

**So there, the Jewish community in Gdynia was totally integrated into the Polish society. People spoke Polish at home versus Jewish and so on.**

But still as a Jew growing up in that kind of environment was it difficult to remain, to keep your Jewish identity?

**Well, people did, I would say, at a minimum...I knew very little about Judaism 'til the time when I was twelve years old and they decided that I would be *Bar Mitzvah*. So they hired a tutor, about six months before the war broke out, they hired a tutor to teach me some of the Hebrew alphabet and some of the prayers. And then just before the war broke out this tutor disappeared and that was the extent of my entire Jewish education.**

So your parents weren't religious?

**No.**

Not at all?

**No.**

But did they celebrate, you know, the major Jewish holidays?

**I don't remember. I only remember like, for Passover, that my mother would take me to the shirt maker to make new shirts and the shoemaker to make shoes and to tailor to make my suits because very few people really bought ready-made clothes in the store, because most of it was really junk. So there was a lot of craftsmen so people, if you needed something you, if you needed a suit you went to a tailor. You bought the material and you bought the findings and things like that so, that's how it was done. And then when we were on school vacations and that, in 1939, and our vacations were extended, because everyone knew that the war was coming, and we were probably no more than twelve miles from the German border. So my father was afraid that our city, which was a very important Polish port, would be bombed. And so he decided to send us inland to a small community where his father lived. It was near Kielce. The name of the place called Dzialoszyce. And my mother, brother, sister, and I were put on a train, my father stayed behind to take care of our apartment and the business. And everybody felt that this was a temporary situation and the war would be over and we would be reunited again and we wound up in this town of Dzialoszyce that had seven thousand five hundred Jews, and two thousand five hundred Catholics. So when we got off the train my grandfather, who was a Orthodox Jew in black *caftan* and a beard and the little cap, Hasidic cap, was shocked, that I would come off the train in short pants and the little suspenders and he told my mother that, he lamented actually, that he would live to see the day where his grandson is going without a cap.**

But didn't he know that your dad...

**He knew but he maybe he didn't want to know, until it, until it stared him in the face, where he could see that.**

So obviously you guys didn't visit frequently?

**No, I never met my grandfather before. This was the first time, you know. I never knew my grandfather.**

Why?

**Because in Poland if you lived four hundred miles apart, it wasn't like in the United States where you went to visit. Some people lived their entire life within a ten mile radius, and never went anyplace. So it wasn't, maybe people would visit from village to village and so on but, the only time we had visitors were people who came to visit us, and that was my mother's aunt, because our city was a famous place. In**

addition to being a port, it was also a resort. We had terrific beaches, 'cause we were right on the Baltic Sea. From my house, I could walk to the beach within ten minutes. So, and we had mountains. So we had an aunt who would come to visit, or an uncle. These were young people, but the older people, you know, obviously they were concerned about *kashrut*, and traveling, and so on, so it wasn't, I never... My grandmother died in 1935, and I never got to meet her, my grandmother on my father's side. And she... and then by the time I met my grandfather in 1939 he had remarried, so it was his second wife. So we stayed there, I would say, about three months, and then my mother decided to live in another town, small town, called Sławków, where her older brother lived. And also it's the place where she was born, where my mother was born. So she felt she would be more comfortable there. And so we moved over there. Meantime, my sister, who was fifteen years old... We had an aunt, my father's younger sister, who expected a child. And they had some kind of partnership in a flour mill, not far from Działoszyce called Słomniki. And this aunt told my mother that my sister should come to live with them, and when the baby comes she can help out with the baby. And... that they owned a flour mill, and during the war if you owned a flour mill nobody will go hungry. And my mother agreed. And meantime, during the time we were in Działoszyce, we received a postcard from my father that he was in Stutthof concentration camp. And we had absolutely no idea what a concentration camp was, why he was there, you know, why he wouldn't come to be with us.

You hadn't heard any stories yet about what was happening?

**No. This was about a month after we arrived, after the war broke out, that we received this postcard that, that he was. A month after the war broke out...**

And your Dad didn't suspect anything that when he sent you on, that something might happen to the Jews?

**No, no one, no one knew because basically I found out fifty-one years later that he was arrested on September 14<sup>th</sup> 1939, among four hundred people. They were not Jews. They were mostly Poles and some Jews because there weren't many Jews in the community, so these were people. And they had targeted what you would call the intelligentsia in the community. And they were teachers, they were some priests, they were some school principals, they were lawyers, they were doctors, they were some people who worked in the government and... There was a list of four hundred people. I found all this, this documentation, after the war, and, and he died in this camp before liberation, which was in late 1944.**

So he was in that camp the whole time?

**He was in that one camp in the whole time.**

And was that a labor camp?

Oh, yeah, it was a horrible camp. And the camp was really built for about five, six thousand people and then, there's a list that shows how many people, they had eight thousand, then they had twenty thousand, then towards the end of the war they had sent a lot of Jews to this camp from Lithuania and from Hungary. And eventually the camp had, like, forty-four thousand people. So, it, he held out, but I understand they had a horrible typhus epidemic towards the end of the war because the camp was so overcrowded and I don't know what happened.

So they didn't have gas chambers there?

They had a small gas chamber, yes, they did, they did. Because they had a gas chamber that in fact it's still standing there. Sometimes they would bring political prisoners, and, with execution orders, and they would take them to the gas chamber, or they would take some, maybe somebody that they wanted to just do away with and they had the gas chamber that's, maybe it looked like it held maybe, forty-five, fifty people. So they did have a gas chamber. And they had a crematorium. So the camp is actually in, still, in probably the best preserved condition today. So. Anyway, so after my father put us on the train, I never got to see my father again and after my sister went to live with the aunt, I never got to see her again, because what happened is, the town where my uncle lived, Slawkow, wound up in the Third Reich. Poland was divided. Part of Poland became the Third Reich. A part became the occupied zone, so my sister wound up in the occupied zone, my mother, brother, and I wound up in the Third Reich. So we couldn't go see her again. And we were in Slawkow from December of 1939 'til June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942, when they had the expulsion. During that time, the Nazis... Slawkow was, like many Jewish community, was run by a Jewish council. They called it the *Judenrat*. And if the Nazis needed something they always went to the *Judenrat*. They said to *Judenrat*, "We need three hundred people tomorrow morning for snow removal." Or, "We need a hundred and fifty people to work on a bridge," or "We need so many people to work in the forest." And this *Judenrat* had to deliver the people. And actually the *Judenrat* was almost, like, held hostage because they were always threatened with execution if they did not comply with the order. And so, and these were mostly people fifteen years and older, 'cause I was not even thirteen. However, there was an opportunity. Because we had lost everything. When my father put the baggage on... to send to us, nothing ever arrived. You know, people were just, whether they stole it, or whether it was destroyed in... in bombing, or something, we never. Nothing ever arrived. So we were really desperate for funds. My uncle, my mother's older brother, they were a very, very poor family. They had very little. They had five children of their own. They had a small business, but they couldn't help us, so I was the only one that I felt could do something. And what I did was, I substituted for people who were called to do the work, and if they didn't want to go, they paid me to go for them. You understand? Because the Nazis only wanted two hundred people. They didn't care if two hundred people showed up, everything was OK. So, so there were some people obviously who were still in good financial condition, they didn't want to go, so I substituted. So the entire time, from... January of 1940 'til June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942, I was employed in what you would call forced

labor. And I wound up being a... electrician's helper. And I asked the, the foreman to get me a document that I worked for the mayor. At that time we worked on his villa, rewiring his villa. The villa was confiscated from a Polish doctor, and they had surface wiring on the walls, and he didn't like that so he wanted everything buried, hidden inside the wall. Well, the walls were made of stone, and so I stood on a stepladder with a chisel and a hammer and I was cutting a groove into the stone so we could lay the... hide the conduit and the wires inside, and then we put mortar over it and then it was painted over and so on. So this was the kind of work I was doing. Another time I was working on digging a, a water cistern, I worked on that. I worked on snow removal, all, all kinds of things, on, on bridges. And that went on 'til June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942. And the reason I wanted the document, the Germans would, from time to time, block off a street and they would conduct a raid for able-bodied people. And these people were caught in the street. And they were put on a truck and sent deep into Germany and they were never heard from again. And I was afraid that I would be caught up in one of these raids and I would not come home and my mother was already stressed-out to the limit because she didn't know what happened to her husband. She didn't know what happened to her daughter because she, my sister, went to live in another place and now I felt, you know, if something happened to me that she's gonna lose it. So I felt very responsible and that's why I wanted some kind of document that if I got caught in a raid maybe I could get away but it... So on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the Nazis surrounded the Jewish ghetto. It was not a wired ghetto but they made sure that all the Jews lived in one area, so we lived in this area and they surrounded it, about, I don't know, four, five o'clock in the morning and started knocking on the doors, "Everybody out. Five minutes out." And meantime, there was a lot of screaming and yelling and crying and shootings and all kinds of hysteria going on. And we got out and, from the house, and they took us to the village square and they, they, there were about nine hundred people, the entire Jewish population. And then they marched us to a local brewery. There must have been maybe a half a mile, maybe three quarters of a mile from this village square. This brewery was surrounded by a high brick wall and as we came in, there was an SS man who started separating the people to the left and to the right, and of course we didn't know it, what he was doing, and he put me with my mother and brother to one side. And I took out this document and I showed it to him. He grabbed me and put me to the other side. Because I thought with this document maybe he would let the, my family go. Meantime he took me to the other side and, and that was the last time I saw my mother and my brother. So, then a few hours later I was in, on a truck with some other men, and I was sent to a concentration camp, the first concentration camp.

I want to get back to your life in the city you grew up. Teeny-tiny Jewish population, right?

Uh-huh.

Did you feel a lot of antisemitism?

**When I was growing up I, I didn't know anything about antisemitism.**

Really?

**I, I knew absolutely nothing. I had...**

So, in school you were never...

**In school...**

cajoled?

**No I was, what in school we had one in my class, we had one boy who was Greek Orthodox and I was Jewish. And when they had, like, Catechism, when they were teaching Catechism, we were, we were, we could excuse ourselves, and go into the yard.**

And nobody made fun of you or..?

**Or we could stay, and we always stayed. We always stayed. So I grew up knowing more about Catholicism when I was boy than I knew about Judaism. So, because, unlike in the United States where you change classes, in, in Poland before the war you never changed classes. You stayed in the same class but the teachers were rotated. So you never had the kind of chaos that goes on in American schools in the hallways and so on, 'cause you were always in class. And you went out, if, if you were caught in the hallway, you were taken to the principal's office, so you were always in your class unless you wanted to go to the bathroom.**

Seems like a good method.

**Yeah.**

Purely retrospect.

**Well, yeah. But what it was, my life as a boy was fantastic. I had my own bicycle. I entered bicycle races around the, there was a place called Skwer Kościuszki, which is a beautiful landscaped area not far from the beach. And we would race around there and we had, we would go to the beach in the summertime. I collected stamps because there were many foreign consulates in our city, so we used to go around with boys and go around and even, I remember that during the Christmas season we had the, the, the Catholic boys had built little mangers, you know, the little houses, and they hung these mangers from a strap on their chest and inside they had lit, they had lit little candles and, you know, I was going around with them and we were singing carols from door to door. So, I was involved whatever everybody else was doing, and so I had what I would call, probably, as good a childhood as a, as a boy could have. I had nice clothes, I had nice boots.**

So you were like upper, upper middle class?

**Yeah, I had nice boots. My mother was always elegantly dressed and, in fact this created some problems for her in Slawkow because in the small villages the, the, the, the women would dress like *babushkas*, you know, with, they hardly put on any makeup and so on and my mother was always very elegant. I remember, as today, her wearing, you know, like bell-bottom knit pants in the summertime with little sailor tops, knit tops, and, you know, always wore hose and, and high-heeled shoes and so on, so when we came to Slawkow obviously she still, whatever clothes she had, and the women, over there, were highly critical because they say, “Look, she don’t know what happened to her husband, she doesn’t know what happened to her daughter. Look how she’s dressed up.” ‘Cause, obviously they lived in a type of lifestyle that you’re supposed to wear sackcloth and ashes if you didn’t know what happened. But, obviously she suffered, suffered a lot internally but, she was used to a certain lifestyle and she continued to wear the kind of clothes that she felt she would look her best.**

Now, did you live in a house, or apartment?

**No, we lived in an apartment. We had one floor of the building.**

So, was it pretty decent in size?

**Yeah, it, well, not by today’s standards because, you know, when you’re a little boy you think your apartment is huge and we had two bedrooms and a dining room and a, a bathroom and kitchen. And it’s probably no more than about eleven, twelve hundred square feet. It was a, for Poland it was a, a, and it was in the most prominent spot in the city so, the location was fantastic. My father in, in, in I think in eight years moved five times. I have all the addresses where we lived so, he kept moving up and up and up.**

So each move was an improvement?

**Each move was an improvement, yeah, so.**

Now, did your Mom have any help, did she have servants?

**Yeah, we had a full-time housekeeper.**

Oh really?

**Yeah, she didn’t stay with us, ‘cause she came every morning. She came very early because people used to deliver the milk to our house. It was still hot from the, from the cows. It came in two buckets, you know, it came to the door and you could see... Yeah, I was a very curious kid so I, I noticed everything that went on, but I**

remember things that most people wouldn't. I remember especially things in Sławkow because Sławkow was, like, another planet for me. If I had lived in Sławkow I probably wouldn't have observed as much, but when I came to that town, to Działoszyce and Sławkow, it was like I was on a different world so I, I, I remember distinctly a lot of things about these small communities. What they did was so highly different than what we did at home, okay?

Yeah, for instance?

For instance, they didn't have indoor plumbing, okay?

Now did you already have electricity?

Oh, of course, electricity, we had elevators.

So you had everything?

Yeah because Gdynia was a modern city. It, it was, it, it, they started building it in 1922. You go there, you'll see gorgeous buildings, even today. They are sixty-five, seventy years old, so obviously they're not as nice as they were in 1935 and 1936 when I was growing up. For instance you said, they, they took the, they took the *cholent* to the baker, which I had never seen in a small town. Okay, I noticed that. I noticed when my uncle was washing his face, they used, they had what they called a *Wasserträger*, which means a water carrier, would bring the water to the house. That was, they paid them for that.

So they didn't have running water?

They had no running water. So I remember where he would grab a mouthful of water and he would spit the water out into his hands and then wash his face. Yeah, that was typically what people did. You know, there was no running water, so they would take a mouthful and then they washed their face. He took me to the *mikvah* one time and I remember being in the *mikvah*. My uncle took me there and I refused to go the second time because it was awful. Obviously, the women had gone in the morning and then the men went in the afternoon. And they never changed the water, and by the time the men came it looked like a thick layer of junk on top of the water and so I mean, but that was, to other people that was normal, to me that was awful. So, I noticed these things. I, but in Gdynia, my life was not so much different as young people would have in the United States today.

Well, now you were twelve years old.

Yeah.

Were you, did they have organizations that youths were involved in?



They, I remember that they had an organization called the *Betar* and the Gordon[sic Gordonia], and I liked the Gordon uniform because it was gray and had a blue scarf, they were like scout uniforms and I remember that I had joined the Gordon organization, which was a right-wing organization. I knew nothing about it, but I liked the uniform so I joined that group. Also, in Gdynia, before the war, they had what they call *Hachshara*, and those were for young Polish men who were planning to immigrate to Israel, then Palestine. So they came to Gdynia and were learning how to catch fish. So there was a school for these people who came to Gdynia specifically to learn, because they needed a trade before they went to Israel. So there were many these kinds of schools throughout Poland for young Zionist men who were immigrating so they would come to Israel with a trade. And a lot of people, you know, today, people think that all of Poland was Orthodox. But people, younger generations, were moving away from that lifestyle and just like in America, you know, the Jewish community was much more religious sixty, seventy years ago and lived in more confined areas than today. Well, in, in Europe, if the Jewish community had been there you would have seen a large, large percentage of young people who would have also integrated into the Polish society because they were no longer wanting to accept this kind of lifestyle. I asked my uncle, "How come my father moved away from his father's lifestyle?" And he said, it happened when my father was drafted into the army and sent to the Baltic, that after he was in the army he decided that he wanted to live in that area, and start a business. So he had moved away. You couldn't live in Gdynia and wear the kind of clothing that they wore in Krakow or in Warsaw or in Lodz, or Bialystok, or places like that because there were so few Jews you would look like you just landed from the Mars. Well, so, it was totally different and I, I remember my father kept in touch with his father because I remember that he used to send to my grandfather like, clothing for *caftans* for Passover. He would send... In Poland, when you wanted to make a suit you basically went to a textile store and you bought like three yards of material, or three meters, and this was a package deal. It had stiffening, it had lining, it had buttons, it had tapes, all kinds of things that you needed. And then you took that package to a tailor and the tailor made the suit. So he used to send him two or three of these packages for Passover so he could have something new, and my grandfather used to send to us big bottles of goose fat. He was afraid that maybe we wouldn't have any goose fat so he would send goose fat for Passover. So, but actually I do not remember us celebrating the holiday, at all. We might have, but I don't remember.

And, did you keep kosher?

**I don't remember.**

And, so Yom Kippur, you have no recollection?

**Yom Kippur, is a very interesting thing that happened on Yom Kippur. People would meet in somebody's apartment to have Yom Kippur services. And I remember distinctly that I was reading from a *machzor* that was Hebrew and Polish, like we have Hebrew and English, they have Hebrew and Polish. And it came to the section where it says, "Who shall live and who shall die, who shall die by**

fire, by plague, by water...,” there was this text. And I remember that I asked my father what that meant. I couldn’t understand what that meant. Of course, you know, later on I realized, you know, what that meant. But I, I remember distinctly, so that’s the only time I remember being in a environment where people prayed, at one time. Yeah, so it’s just totally different life.

Now, your mother’s parents?

My mother’s parents were very Orthodox, too, but the children, most of... were not. My grandmother on my mother’s side. Incidentally, on my father’s side, there were three brothers and two sisters. And only one survived, my uncle Sigmund. On my mother’s side, there were ten children. And nine had lived, I just discovered recently, that one little girl died when she was five years old. My mother never men-... mentioned that child, so there were nine that had lived and of the nine, there were two sets of twins. One set was born in 1908 and one set was born in 1910. And of these four adults, I knew three. The reason I knew them as, as I said before, they used to come and visit us. But not like an American visit, where they came for three days, or five days. This one aunt, in particular, she used to come during the time they called *Swieto Morza*, which is the holiday of the sea. It’s a big celebration in Poland. She’d stay ‘til the next year.

No kidding?

Yeah.

“Til the next year?

Yeah, she’d stay a whole year. She didn’t have a job, she didn’t work.

She wasn’t married?

No, she wasn’t married, she was single and, and she was, she was one of the twins and...

And your dad didn’t care?

No. Why would he care? And after the war... It wasn’t like here, it was totally different, you know. There was very close families. She’d go to the beach every day. She just had a lot of fun.

But you only had two bedrooms.

Yeah, but she slept in the living room, you know, so. But, you know, she was there. She enjoyed being with my mother, and this is the only aunt from these nine children, of course they were, most of them were married, that survived, and I

**brought her to Kansas City in 1952. And she died. She died, she died about, oh, fifteen years ago.**

She never married?

**No, she was married. She married in the ghetto, yeah. She married in the ghetto. So, maybe you knew her. Did you know Helen Posnanski?**

Yes, when did she pass away?

**It was her mother. Well, Helen lives in Van Nuys, California. But her mother was, yeah, that was mother. Yeah, that was her mother, yeah.**

So, now, so were you close at all with your mother's parents, or they live far away, too?

**No, they lived in Lodz. Also far away.**

Okay, so you really didn't...

**Well, I knew, I knew my, my grandfather came to visit us one time. I have an image, an image of him in my head and he came to visit us.**

And he was religious?

**He was religious.**

So did he wear religious...?

**He had a beard. He had a black *caftan* and a funny hat, you know, these little caps with the small bill so he, he, he was, they were all religious. The younger generation tended, tended more to move away, especially in the big cities. So...**

Now, your family wasn't religious. Did you talk about Palestine, were you Zionists in any way?

**Not really, not that I remember, you know. Maybe the adults. Of course I remember that we had people who came to our house at night for tea and dessert and they would sit around the table and play cards, and have discussions in, in our apartment. It was heated with coal. The coal was inserted into a tile oven that went from floor to ceiling and was maybe three foot square on two sides. 'Cause usually it was in a corner so two sides with the walls and two sides, and then when the coals got hot you'd close the, the little door. It was an iron door. You close that door and then the tiles heated up. In Gdynia in the wintertime it was brutally cold, because it was right on the ocean. And so I remember we really hated to go to bed, it was so cold. So my mother used to take the down bedspreads and she would hold them against the tile oven 'til they heated up. And then we were in our pajamas. We**

**jumped in bed and she'd cover us with the warm, with the warm down bedspread, okay? And that's how we used to jump in bed in the wintertime. But I used to sneak out sometimes, listen to the people's conversation and, and so on when they were playing cards. They didn't even know that I was around, but I would do it. But, I was very mischievous when I was a boy.**

But your family had such a wonderful life growing up...

**They did.**

..and they were perfectly content. There was no desire for them to leave, probably.

**Well, actually my father wanted to leave.**

Where did he want to go?

**He had the opportunity to go to Australia before the war, and he wanted to go. The... the situation was where the Australian government would allow you, the men, to come, establish residence for six months, and then they could send for their family, okay? And my father really wanted to go. My father was very astute. Politically, he knew what was going on, you know. He had been in the military. He was in a port city, we were right on the German border, so he knew what was going on. And my mother said she didn't want to be separated for six months, so he decided not to go. But, obviously, everything would have been totally different. And, you have to remember, America did not hold a lot of promise for people who had made a good living in Poland. Why would they abandon a good living to go to a strange country, where they didn't know the language, they didn't have any relatives... And many people immigrated to America who were really desperate before the war. They were looking for maybe a better way of life. But people who were middle class were not looking to run away. So, so that was the reason a lot of people didn't leave.**

Okay, we've got twenty minutes before we have to stop.

**Okay.**

So let's talk about after the war now. God, this is so interesting I wish we had more time.

**Well, we can finish up another time.**

Okay, tell me, after the war you were liberated.

**After the war, after the war, I was in a camp called Dörnhau, the last camp. And we had a horrible typhus epidemic and many people were dying and we woke up May the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945. And the Nazi flag was not flying and the guards were gone, so some of us short-circuited the electric wires. And actually, the typhus epidemic was, in a**

way, a blessing for those of us who survived, because almost a week or ten days before the war ended the guards never came into the camp. They were afraid of the typhus. So we were not working at that camp at the end of the war. We were just milling around trying to scrounge something to eat. And people were dying in droves, laying in their bunks. Sometimes they were dead for several days before somebody would bother to take them out. And, so May the 7<sup>th</sup> we...

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

...oh, abandoned the military vehicles, armaments, motorcycles, bicycles, where the Nazis just left everything and took off. Well, this was even before the Russians came into our camp. So we just spotted a military wagon with two horses, and this friend of mine and I jumped on that wagon and we took off. Of course we didn't know where we were going but we, after about two hours of riding on that wagon, we came across a woman's concentration camp. And we drove in the wagon and the horses disappeared, we don't know what happened to them and we made some, we established some friendships and later, the Russians came in. And, it was a stupid thing, you know I was eighteen years old, it was stupid thing to do because we were behind the escaping Nazis and we were ahead of the advancing Russians so we were, we could have got killed from both sides. But I guess maybe I was destined to live, so nothing happened. And, and then in the area where we were liberated it's called Silesia. And the German population had escaped and left everything behind because they were terrified of the Russians. So they didn't want to be in the area where the Russians were advancing so they wanted to, they were all moving towards the American zone, and the French zone, or the British zone, because they, they knew what they had done, what the Nazis had done, to the Russians and the Russians were fairly primitive. So, when they came into a German city, they were ransacking the city, they were raping the women, so they wanted to run away. So, they ran away and they left everything. So those of us who were liberated, we would usually move into these empty homes, and we found food and clothing and preserves and stuff like that. So we'd live in the home in this, in... We met some of the girls in the woman, woman's concentration camp and, like, two boys and two girls or three boys and three girls would move into a house and set up housekeeping and, you know, was a very platonic relationships. We'd, you know, these girls were very young, some of them were fifteen, sixteen years old, I was eighteen years old. And we set up housekeeping, 'til the house got dirty and then we moved into another house, so...

So now, so were you in a Displaced Persons camp at some point?

Later on, I decided...

How long?

Well, several months we lived...

From house to house?

**From house to house. And we also used several months to try, I went back to Poland a couple times. Was horrible to travel in those days because a lot of the trains, you know, they had been bombed out, and the only way, and bridges were still down, so you could take a train to a certain point and you had to go across a bombed-out bridge to the other side, and then maybe walk a few miles and then catch another train, so, just searching for my family. And then I decided that I didn't want to live in the Russian zone, so I went to the American zone. In American zone, I registered in a Displaced Persons camp called Zeilsheim. But I never lived in Zeilsheim. I lived in a private home. It was a very nice suburb of small private homes. The UNRRA, the United Nations relief organization, gave us uniforms that were dyed navy. American uniforms. They were dyed navy, because we didn't have much clothes. And so we used these uniforms... we felt very chic in those uniforms. Meantime, the civilian Germans, they, they thought maybe we were some kind of special forces, they were very afraid of us and so we... I walked up to this house and, I said, "I, I must have a room." I didn't ask, if they... "I must have a room." And I said, "Look, if you give me a room, I will bring you food." Because we had plenty of food and the German civilians really didn't have a lot of food. So I had a room in this family. I still remember the name of the street and, it was on *Pfaffenwiese* 23, had this room. And in this room was a woman about thirty years old with a boy who was about five, and her mother. To me, she was like an old lady. She was probably no more than fifty, okay? And the husband was still not back from the service. I don't know if he ever came back, but anyway that was the situation. Was a nice suburb. So, I had the room and they, they did my laundry, they shined my shoes, they washed the linens while I lived there. And I kept bringing them food. Meantime, I heard that my uncle Sigmund was alive, and so I went to Munich. He was in, in Landsberg Displaced Persons camp. So I came over there and he's living what was former SS barracks in double bunk beds. You know, like a long hallway. A big open room, and he's living there, and, and he didn't... he wanted me to come live with him. "You're crazy." I said, "I am not going to stay in this condition. I have a beautiful room. I have somebody who's taking care of me. I'm not gonna stay here." I said, "You should come and live with me." He said, "No, no, I want to go to Palestine," okay? I said, "Okay." And I left. Ten days later, here comes my uncle, you know, so we live together. Then, one day, my friend that was liberated with me, was going to the American Consulate in Frankfurt, which was just like a streetcar ride away. You could go by streetcar. We had to walk a couple miles before we could get to streetcar. He wanted to, he had an aunt in Montreal. So I went with him and he wanted to go to Canada. Of course, we didn't know the proximity of America and Canada and they told him, "Look, we can only take care of people who want to go to America, not Canada." And meantime I'm talking to a Jewish WAC, who was originally from Berlin, who immigrated to America and now came back with the occupation forces, to Frankfurt, as an interpreter. And I said, "I would love to go to America." So she said, "Maybe you can." And so she registered me to go and at that time, of course, we didn't know that Truman had asked Congress, it's a long story, but Truman**

asked Congress to allow 250,000 refugees to come to America. The Congress didn't want to. They allowed, on the first group, 47,000. And I registered and she asked me if I was the only survivor and I said, "Yes." I was afraid that, 'cause I heard that they only wanted young people to go. Of course, my uncle is seventeen years older than I, so I said I'm the only survivor. So sure enough, a, a few weeks later, I get a telegram from the American Consulate that I have a visa and I can go to America. Well, now I go back to the consulate and I put on a performance like, I could have gotten an Oscar for that performance. Crying, yelling, screaming. "I want to go, but I can't. I just found the only living relative." You know? And I said, "I am not going to abandon my relative." I said, "I have nobody else except my uncle, this and this," you know? It's just, you should have seen that scene. And, you know, we were, we were con people after concentration camp. We knew every trick that there was to know. So I was able to wrangle a visa for my uncle, and we came together to the United States on the second ship to arrive in America after the war. It was the S.S. Marine Perch. We left on the, on the June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1946, and we arrived on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1946, in New York.

So you arrive in New York, that had to be quite a...

**In New York, we were then interviewed by the Joint Distribution Committee.**

Now, were they going through Ellis Island at that point?

No, Ellis Island was closed. So, we were, we came late at night. By the time they processed us, was night, they put us on a bus. They took us to this hotel. The next day we were being interviewed as to where we wanted to live. And, they, they gave us choices, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and so on. What they were really trying to do is scatter the people so no one community would, would have too much of a burden. 'Cause these communities, at that time, had to sign... When Truman allowed the people to come in, he didn't want the people dumped in America, so he made these different societies guarantee that the refugees would not become a public charge for five years, 'til they became citizen. And these communities had to guarantee the well-being of the refugee for five years. So technically, if some guy didn't want to work, they had to support him, okay? It never happened, but technically, they had the responsibility. So when, when they, offered us the choices, all I said to this person was, "I want to go to a community that's not too big and not too small." So he said, "Kansas City." Well, I never heard the name Kansas City, so I asked him, "Why?" He told me that in 1937, 1938, they had sent certain refugees from Germany to Kansas City. This was before the war. And I asked him, "Why, why is it?" He said, "Must be a good place." So I said, "Why?" He says, "We never heard from them." So must be a good place. So that's how, that's how I came to Kansas... So they put us on a train, they gave us five dollars, each. We took the train from New York to Chicago. In Chicago you had to train, change train stations. There was a train station called Dearborn and another one LaSalle. I don't know which to which. But anyway we changed train stations, and we came to Kansas City. And in Kansas City they picked us up at the

**Union Station and put us in a hotel. I was with my uncle. And we lived in the hotel a short time because only a few days later I... I found a job at Rose Mercantile, the company that I later acquired.**

Which was what kind of company?

**It was a dry goods wholesale house and I, I worked there almost ten years when the owner died and I...**

You bought it?

**I bought it. I had an opportunity to buy it and I wound up owning the company, you know, that I eventually ran 'til 1970. Then I sold the company to Volume Shoe Corporation. And then in 1985, I bought the company back, from Volume Shoe Corporation. So, but there is a, a cute story about my uncle. He was having a difficult time in learning English. So one night, he wakes me up, and he says, "You know, so many people are dying in America, wouldn't it be nice if they left me their language? They don't need it anymore."**

That is adorable. Now, you came, you established yourself. How long were you here before you met your first wife?

**I was married September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1948.**

So it was only a couple of years.

**Couple of years later. And my, and Sharon was born in 1950 and then Mark was born in '6... in 1953. Then Barry was born in 1960 and John was born, '61, actually twenty months later than, than Barry, so.**

And, so, so moving here, I mean, just real quickly, your impression of Kansas City and, and Kansas City obviously has been good to you?

**Mean my impression?**

Yeah.

**About the Jewish community, or the community in general?**

Yeah, I'm curious. The Jewish community, when you arrived here were they...

**Well, they, people really... When we arrived they had what they had called the Benjamin Dispensary, which was on Admiral Boulevard. And you were able to go there, there were doctors and dentists who volunteered, and we were able to, you could go, you could go there. In fact, I had Dr. Kirschenbaum. My teeth were in such bad shape from the malnutrition that he extracted seven teeth after I arrived**



there. And so they, they were, they were a lot of help to the people and also they were able to place people on jobs. And they had a deal, they even bought clothing for people. And they had a deal where they had determined that the minimum wage was like thirty-five dollars a month, and the people... a week, thirty-five dollars a week. And I heard that people who didn't make thirty-five dollars a week, that they would pay the difference to help this person. So I was making twenty-two dollars and fifty cents a week, and I went to talk to them about it and they, they said that they couldn't help me because I chose that job. That they had many jobs that would pay thirty-five dollars a week and more, but since I chose to work for less that they couldn't help me. I said, "Okay." So I, then I moved in with a Jewish family called Ribakoff and this is an aunt of Shirley Levine, and I lived with them, and I paid them eighteen dollars and fifty cents a week for room and board so I had four dollars a week left for car fare, for lunches. And so I was having a hard time and, but eventually, you know, I started going to night school at the Jewish Community Center. So, I think the community did as much as they could. They were, I would say they were really not interested in... They didn't ask a lot of questions, I don't know if they were afraid to ask, I shouldn't say they were not interested but...

About the Holocaust?

**They didn't ask about the Holocaust. And they didn't, and we didn't talk about it, so.**

Interesting. When did you start talking about it?

**Maybe twenty-five years later.**

And so your children, did they ask questions?

**My children, my children didn't ask questions 'til they were almost out of high school.**

Really?

**Yeah. You see, it was different for me than for, for other survivors. I don't know if you know that about eighty-five percent of the survivors are married to other survivors?**

Yes, of course.

**Yeah. And in my case my first wife was a Kansas City girl. We didn't speak Jewish at home, we spoke English at home, and that was not a part of our daily conversation versus survivor to survivor marriages. That was probably breakfast, lunch, and dinner.**

Yeah, exactly. Now did you talk about your past a lot with your wife?

No.

Really?

**No. I started talking about what happened when I was married to my second wife. It was like in 19..., I married her in 19..., let's see, probably 19... 75. And one day we were playing basketball in front of our house and this very nice neighbor came over, who was not Jewish. He was probably twenty years older than I was, and he came over and very seriously said to me, "What kind of sports did you play in concentration camp?" He knew I had been a concentration... and I said to him, "The sport was that the Nazis were trying to kill me and I was trying to stay alive." And I didn't, never discussed it any more, but it, it was the catalyst for me that I started to say, "Oh my gosh, people know nothing what happened in concentration camp. People know nothing about the Holocaust and I started talking about it and then I had invited Isak and Ann Federman to Hawaii where I had a condominium, in Maui, and one day I approached Isak. I said to him, "You know, Isak, nothing is being done in Kansas City about Holocaust education." And I said, "I'm afraid that if you and I don't do something, nothing is going to be done in our community." I said, "We have lovely kids, we, we both, I said, both very fortunate, but I said it's going to be up to you and me to get something going." And so, when we came back, it so happened that I have a wealthy friend in Detroit and they were organizing, they have a very nice Holocaust museum, Detroit, and they had given a dinner for sixteen hundred people. With Senator Dole, Governor Blanchard, Senator Levin...**

It was a fundraiser?

**Huh?**

It was a fundraiser?

**It was like the opening of that museum so we, Isak and I, and Judy Hellman, and the former director of the Federation, I forget, Sol, Sol... Oh, I can't come up with it. Anyway, we flew to Detroit and we went to this dinner.**

And this was in the late 1970s?

**No, no. This was in the '80s.**

In the 80s already?

**Yeah, the 1980s. I proposed this thing to Isak in '84, okay? And this was later and it coincided with the Jewish community's plans to build the Center, okay? So we flew up there to see what they had and then the Center decided to, that they would reserve about five thousand feet in the basement of the building. Well, you know, there was quite, a lot of dissatisfaction that they wanted to put this in, Holocaust Center, in the basement. And, you know, I don't want to go into a lot of that. There**

**was a lot of bad feelings about it and it took years and years, we finally were able to work it out. In meantime, Sol Koenigsberg, that's his name, we had the assurances from Sol Koenigsberg, Isak and I, that we could go out and raise funds for, specifically for, this Holocaust Center. And these, so Isak and I went out and we started. We contributed each, ourselves, and pretty soon we wound up with about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Unfortunately for us, we hadn't set up a separate account for that, so they went to the Jewish Community Center and, except Isak and I set up foundations of our own. And unfortunately, this money was never given to us. And then through a lot of negotiations and so on, we finally got this fifteen hundred square foot space where we are located now, on the first floor, with some rent abatement that came to about twenty thousand dollars, to satisfy the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars that were taken from us. So basically, we were caught in a, you know, to some people said that we should sue them to recover the money, but we didn't want, we felt that we didn't want to create that kind of condition in the community, so.**

I know we have to wind up but real quickly, the lesson from the Holocaust, what do you feel? Is that a statement, here? (Reading) "I am a survivor. I must honor the memory of my murdered family and the other millions of persons who died in the Shoah. I want my life's work to be teaching. I am then able to tell of our history, born against hate, and affirm the hope for a better world. Jack Mandelbaum, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1999." Thank you.