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Aron Warren Interview

January 25, 2000

What was your name at birth?

Aron Warschawski.

Okay. Spell that.

Spell it did you say?

Uh-huh.

W-A-R-S-C-H-A-W-S-K-I.

Okay. And where were you born?

In Bedzin, Poland.

Okay. And do you know the circumstances of your birth? Were you born in the house?

Yes, I was born in a house.

Okay. And what were your parents' names?

My mama's name was Miriam and my dad was Abraham.

Okay. And what did your dad do for a living?

He used to be a shoemaker, at the beginning. In later years, he went to sell real estate.

Uh-huh. Okay. And your mom, mom stayed home?

She was a housewife, yeah. She had a lot of kids at home.

How many kids were at home?

Nine.

Nine kids? Okay.

[Tape breaks off then comes back.]

There were nine children at home.

Um hmm. Yes.

Okay. What were there names?

Oh, my gosh! That's something now. Maybe I can do it. One of them was ... oldest was Izak - Issac, then was Benjamin, Morrie, there was a sister, Regina, and there was ... how many have I got?

I think four.

Then, wait a minute, Regina and then there was John, then Gusty, me - Aron, and my sister. There was another sister, Laya - Leah.

Okay. Wasn't there another brother? Two older brothers?

There were five brothers.

Five brothers. Okay. Do you remember what your neighborhood was like? Did you live in a house, an apartment?

No. An apartment.

Okay. Were you considered middle income, lower income?

Just middle.

Middle income.

You survived.

Okay. So you lived in an apartment.

Um-hmm.

How many rooms were in the apartment?

Two.

Two?

One really big room and one of them was a smaller one with a kitchen. That was about it.

Okay. So there were nine kids and two parents and everybody lived in the apartment?

Right.

So, what were the sleeping arrangements?

Well, then, and later, yes, some of them got married, you know. So, eventually, they were moving out.

But growing up.

Well, it was a little rough but we didn't know any better. So, you do the best you can with what you've got.

Yeah. So I'm curious, like to sleep. How did you ...

There's two in a bed.

Two in the bed. So you had several beds?

Several beds, sure. And we had an outhouse.

Yeah. That was always ...

Everybody had one of those. Everybody had one of those. And that was...

What kind of school did you go to?

Public school. It was a Jewish school.

Oh, it was?

Strictly Jewish kids.

But it was a public school?

It was funded by the Jewish Federation and also by the, by the city. There were too much trouble that you couldn't get along with the, the non-Jews. There's too many fights with the Jews. We build our own and it was all Jews.

So you remember just a lot of antisemitism growing up in your town?

Oh, sure. The day I was born. Sure, sure - lot of antisemitism.

So when you went to school, were you taught Hebrew, as well?

No. No. We had, I think we had one hour of Hebrew-Jewish, Jewish and Hebrew. The rest was Polish because we lived in Poland.

I see.

Oh, yeah, we just ... it was all Jews.

Now what year, did we get what year you were born in?

I was born in 1922.

1922. Okay. All right. So how old were you when the war broke out?

I was 17.

You were 17. Okay. So you went, now when you went to school, was it, you stayed in that school until you were how old?

Seven years. You go seven years.

You were like five or six when you started?

After seven.

You go in when you're seven?

You start when you are 7 and you go 7 years. That's 14. I graduated at 14.

Okay. And then normally after you leave the school ...

Go get a job.

Okay. Most people didn't go on to college?

Some of them did. Yes.

Yeah.

The wealthier people went to college. Very few but some of them did go to college. Sure.

So now as a young boy going to school, what kind of social life did you have?

Well, we belonged to Jewish organizations.

Uh-huh. Such as ...

Zionist - Zionist organizations. We had good times. We had meetings, and then on Friday night and Saturday and Sunday they had dances, jumping around, like children do, ordinary children. We enjoyed it. We went on hikes, you know. We had a good time.

Did you feel strongly about Palestine?

Awful. Everybody. We had *Aliyah*, people going all the time.

Really?

Youngsters did. Sure.

They were just going to visit? Nobody was going to live ...

No. To stay. Some to move to live. Some of them were American. They've got some friends over there still alive that left before the war.

Now, did you personally have a desire to ...

I would have gone myself if I had the chance. Sure I would have but I don't think the parents would have let me.

Why?

You know the way it was. They wanted to hold onto the children as much as they can.

Yeah.

As long as they can.

Yeah.

I would have gone. Sure.

Now when you were in, when you were in school, did you have a favorite subject?

No.

No?

Learning, reading and writing and arithmetic.

And then you went to Hebrew school, as well?

That was the same thing. No. Yeah, we went to *Cheder*.

Okay.

Yeah, over the weekend most of the time. Sunday, Sunday we went to *Cheder*. Yeah. Teach you how to Hebrew.

And *Shabbat* at your house was a big deal?

Oh, yeah. It was a big day on *Shabbat*. Sure. Friday night it started and nobody rode any... we didn't have nothing to ride on anyway [laughing], but we went to *shul*. We went to *shul* Saturday morning, came home at noon. My parents took a nap and we ran around - kids as usual, playing outside. A normal life.

Yeah. So on Friday, was your mom getting ready all day for *Shabbat*?

Oh yeah. Sure. Friday night we have a big dinner and Saturday we came home from the services and had another dinner.

What about the other Jewish holidays?

Oh, we observed them all. Sure.

So, were you considered Orthodox?

Orthodox, very much so.

Really?

Sure.

Hmm. And did you, was there a big synagogue in the community?

Synagogues - a dime a dozen.

Really?

Sure. We had two big ones. And they were ... the rest of them were just small ones. [Unclear] got together and, let's see, 20 or 30 of them in our room and they had their own. There must have been 30 or 40 in the town where I was born.

Well, how many Jews would you say that lived there?

There were between 45 and 50,000.

Out of a population of how many?

Of about 20,000 non-Jews.

So you were the vast majority.

That's right. That's right.

Oh, I didn't realize that.

Yeah. It came, it came Friday night, everything closed up. On Saturday you couldn't buy a thing. All the Jewish owners, and they were closed.

So, spell the name of the town.

B-E-D-Z-I-N.

Uh-huh. Wow! So, okay. So you went to school. Wait. First, I want to talk about, was there a lot of Jewish theater?

Theater, not, not, not that much. We had a couple of movie houses, regular movie. They brought in movies, I guess, mostly from the States. There wasn't, well, once in awhile we had a little, a little Yiddish theater going on in the synagogues performing.

And had you ever been out of your town before?

Oh, yes. I was - sure. I worked out of town.

You did?

Yeah. I worked about 14 kilometers from the city called Katowice, which was a nice town. I worked there for, until 1939 - til the Germans marched in and occupied this part right away.

Yeah. Now going back to your home life, was your mom a good cook?

Oh, yeah. Sure. All moms are good cooks.

All moms are good cooks [laughing]. Anything favorite that she made that stood out in your mind?

Maybe the *cholent*, and the *kugel*, you know all that kind of ...

The potato *kugel*.

Sounds good.

Okay. Okay. So, you went to school and then you were out of school when you were 17. But now did you work while you were in school, or no?

Yeah. In the afternoon I went down, there was an electrical wholesale house down below where we lived. I monkeyed around over there. I used to go down and work for a couple of hours and helped them out. That's how I learned the business.

I see. So, you were always industrious?

I did like. I did like. I didn't want to be a tailor. No way!

Yeah. Well, now was there anybody in the family who was a tailor?

No, just, just John is all.

Yeah. Just, yeah.

That's about all.

And your family was very musical?

Everybody. They either played music or they were singing. Everybody had music.

So, did you play an instrument?

No. I played a trumpet when I was in school for about two or three years, and then I dropped it.

Yeah.

But we all sang. You know everybody could sing in my family.

Yeah. Wasn't your dad, was he involved in the synagogue?

Yes. He was a, he was a... how would you say it? He was a *Ba'al Tefillah*.

Okay. What's that?

Well, like a cantor. He could perform the services. He's very good.

Uh huh.

And that's what he did.

He spent a lot of time at the synagogue?

Oh, yes, at the synagogue. Yes.

So he was real involved in the Jewish community?

Um-hmm. Oh, yes. Sure. He was well-known.

He was well-known?

Oh, sure. Everybody knew him.

And, what was his name?

Abraham.

Abraham. Okay. So how did, now he died before the war?

No. He died during the war. My dad passed away I think in 19-, I was gone already and I was in camp, '42 or '43 before my two sisters, Gusty and Ann and Leah ... they lived with three girls before they were sent away to camp.

But he was at home when he died?

He was at home. And he was lucky he had a burial. They buried him.

So, what, do you know what he died of? Did they know?

Malnutrition, I guess. There was nothing, there was nothing available.

Yeah. How old was he?

I would say my dad must have been about 55.

And your mom, when did she die?

Mom died in 1935. She had a heart attack. I was 13 years old.

I see.

So, the older sisters raised us kids.

Yeah. So that must have been, I mean your mom died and so how was the oldest?

The oldest was married already.

Okay. And the youngest?

The youngest was, wait a minute. She was born in '20 - seven years old.

So seven years old. So, your sisters took over?

They took over. Gusty especially - she was already grown. And Regina was a big girl already. And they took care of the rest of us small... the youngsters.

So, they ran the household?

Um-hmm.

Okay. Did you get along with your parents?

I had no choice.

Were they very strict?

Oh, my dad was always strict.

Really? So you didn't want to get in trouble with him?

No. No. I did get in trouble once in awhile. He let me have it too.

What would he do?

Take a good belt and bend over [laughing]. It's normal.

He couldn't go to jail for that in Poland?

Oh, no! My God no. Over here lock 'em up for you for life [laughing].

[laughing] Were you a troublemaker?

Yes. I was a trouble kid. I liked to run around all the time, just a troublemaker.

Yeah. [laughing] You liked the action?

Oh, yeah, I always liked the action. Running on bicycles, here and there. I was never home.

Okay. Describe to me, you experienced a lot of antisemitism, even in a town where you were the vast majority.

That's right. There's certain neighborhood you walk out.

Yeah. What happened?

There were Christians living. Dirty names, dirty Jews, Christ killer and all that kind of stuff. And sometimes you had pretty good fights too. The beauty about it, people didn't have guns like over here. Here they shoot you. Over there you fight it out with your fists.

You had a chance.

Sure. Sure.

Did it make you feel like you were, you know, sub-human because you've experience so much antisemitism?

No. We didn't know any better. We didn't know any better. It was normal. I figured this is the way it is. That's Poland for you. Sure.

So, overall you, of course, you didn't know any better, but did you... you had a good childhood?

Oh, yes.

You liked pretty much where you lived?

That's right. But we didn't pay attention to them. We had a fight here and there. So what! Kids like to fight anyway. So I didn't...

So it was, you just didn't... did you ever feel like you were in danger being surrounded by people who ...

No. We were never in danger. In this particular time, we were the majority. We weren't afraid of them.

Now were most of the Jews in you town Orthodox?

I would say 95 percent.

Oh, my gosh!

Oh, sure. Sure.

So, did most of them wear the hats and the beards and the ...

Hats and the beards and the whole business.

Well, what about you?

We weren't real strictly Orthodox. We were Orthodox but not strictly. No. My dad was a modern man. He went to the synagogue. He went in the morning and in evening. Did his deal but we weren't, we weren't fanatics.

Well, were you looked down upon if you weren't an Orthodox Jew, if you were like a ...

Well, no, not particularly. No. We had different kind of people there. I mean you lived your life the way you want and nobody pay attention to you.

Okay. So, all right. So you go through school, public school...

Uh-huh.

... and then you got a job.

Sure.

A full-time job?

Um-hmm.

And you were working in the electrical business?

Well, it was, it was electrical store making chandeliers and were selling electrical parts.

And this was outside of your town?

They had a place in Bedzin, then outside – one of 'em out of town. So I went back and forth.

So how long did it take you? Did you go on foot?

No, no, no, no. We had a streetcar and on the train. It was about 14 kilometers. We had a train you had a pass and you ride.

Okay. So, did you still live at home when you were working out of town?

Oh, sure. Sure. I came home in the evening. I left in the morning and came home in the evening.

Okay. So now did you date a lot? Did you have girlfriends or ...

I had a girlfriend but that, I didn't, it wasn't ...

It wasn't special?

Nothing special, just somebody keep, spend a little time.

So, when you guys went, when you went out, what did you do on a date?

Well, we sat around, we talked. Usually we had a good time at organizations. The Zionist organization gave us everything. Dances, we had music, we had a lot of fun. Sometimes we went to get ice cream and maybe a cookie or whatever.

Yeah, cookie or whatever [laughing].

If you had any money.

Yeah. So you say, would you say the majority of the Jews were middle income who lived in your town?

Middle and lower income.

Okay. So just a tiny, tiny percentage were upper?

Yes. Right. That's right. The guys owned the businesses and whatever.

Yeah. They were the people with the money.

Um-hmm.

Okay. You enjoyed being in the electrical business because ...

Oh, I loved it all. As a matter of fact, when I came to Kansas City ...

Yeah.

... in 1946, I wanted to go into the electrical business but I couldn't speak the language. So the guy told me, "Well, when you learn English come back. I'll find something for you." And then, in the meantime, I got hooked up with something else and I had to make a living. I couldn't wait. I had to draw checks so I went to work.

Yeah. Yeah.

That's about it.

So, now when you were in Poland when you were working in the electrical business, were they Jewish people?

Oh, yeah. Sure. Sure. Jewish owned it. The Christians wouldn't hire a Jew.

Really?

No way could you get a job and work for a Christian outfit.

Golly!

Discrimination widely open. You could never get a job work for Christian outfit.

God, that's amazing.

Um-hmm.

Amazing. Hmm. Okay. Let's see, is there anything about your childhood or, you know, growing up that you want to talk about?

No. Nothing special.

Okay. Okay. So, we... you're working in the electrical business about, now you were 17 so what year was that?

14. That's not it. 14.

Oh, you were 14? You were through with school at 14?

At age 14. Yes. That was, let's see, about '36, 1936. And I worked there until 1939. In '39, the Nazis worked then. That was the end of everything.

Did you have any inkling? Did your family understand what was happening in Europe at that time and with the Nazis coming in what might happen to the Jews?

You mean during the war?

Yeah.

You mean like Auschwitz you're talking about?

Yeah.

That didn't come 'til later.

Yeah. I know that didn't come until later. Okay. So, describe when the Nazis came to power and they came into Poland and they came into your hometown, what happened?

At the beginning, the first week or two, there was, they were well-behaved. They didn't bother us at all.

So, you were never concerned at that point?

No. At the, well, we knew because we listened to the radio. We knew what Hitler had wrote *Mein Kampf*, I mean, you knew he was coming.

Right.

But the SS came in about a month later and they started burning the houses, killing people in the streets. It was a massacre. The SS did that.

Right.

The plain soldier kept on marching somewhere else. Wherever the hell they were going.

Right.

And that was the end of it.

And so, did you, was your family, you know, they had to have been worried.

There was nothing you can do about it. Everybody was worried. What can you do? They pulled out old people. They were killing them and hanging them. The youngsters, started putting them into camps.

Uh-huh. So when the Nazis came, your parents were already, they were gone. Right?

No. No. No. No.

They were still ...

My dad was still alive, I mean... My dad lived til about 1943.

Oh, yeah. That's right. He lived til 1943. So how did he avoid being taken to the camps?

Well, there were still a few Jews in our hometown.

Yeah.

And my three sisters were home. All four of them lived together. They managed, I guess, they were working because I wasn't home. I was gone already.

Uh-huh. Somehow he managed not to be...

They managed somehow to get by and he passed away in 1943.

Uh-huh. So when were your sisters taken?

They were, they would go in 1943 they send them to camp. All three of them.

Okay. So it was after he passed away?

That's the final, the last of the Jews. They cleaned up the town. There was no more Jews in Bedzin, in Bedzin.

In 19-, when?

In 1943.

Whew! Wow!

There not a one left.

Not one left, out of how many thousands?

About 45, 50,000. The older never had a chance. They just ...

Some of them must have gone into hiding.

Very few. There were a few. Where can you hide? The Poles, a lot of Poles were with the Germans. They pointed out, "There's a Jew. There's a Jew." And the Germans went and got them. They helped them.

Now when they came in did they make the Jews put the Star of David on?

Oh, yeah.

They did?

Sure. Sure.

So, you remember that?

You had to wear the Star of David.

How did that make you feel?

What can you do? How does it make you feel? This is the law and that's what you do. You do all, if you don't they have ways of taking care of you. Once in awhile, you pulled it off, you know, if you had to go into a Christian neighborhood to do something. But you could have gotten death penalty for that. You took a chance.

Yeah. Well, were you scared, were you scared a lot during this time?

I don't think so. I didn't have enough sense to be scared.

Uh-huh.

You've got to do. This is it.

Yeah. Do you remember any non-Jews who tried to help?

I don't remember any. Not, none that I know of.

In your community?

No. There wasn't any. I don't think there were a dozen of them. There might have been but... I wouldn't trust them.

Really?

No.

So, growing up, do you ever remember meeting any non-Jews in your community that were nice to you?

Oh, yeah, sure. A lot of them. When I worked in that store the Christians came in, buying merchandise. They were nice to me. There were never any problems with them. We got along, but once in a while you've got, antisemites started trouble, especially in the late 30s. They used to tell you, "You just wait. Hitler is coming." They waited for him.

So, in your hometown, the Jews lived totally separate from the Christian people?

Yeah. Sort of, sort of a ghetto. Yes.

How many churches would you say were there?

Churches? Well, there was about two but the churches were big. It holds a thousand, two thousand people.

So the churches were bigger than the synagogues ...

Oh, sure.

... even, though, there were so many more Jews?

Sure. They built big churches. I think there were two or three.

Yeah.

They used to come Christmas time, Christmas Eve, we had to close up the gates in the front of all the churches or whatever, they said, "Jews are the Christ killers."

Oh, because you were afraid? The community was afraid that they would come in and hurt you.

Sure. We wouldn't go outside because they were mad. "The Jews, the Christ killers" they called us.

Even though you were the vast majority?

That's right. It doesn't make any difference. Now we are minority and they still call us Christ killers. Now no the Jews in Poland, but they still say the Jews killed Christ. That's going to go on forever. They've been taught from way back from generations and this is it. It's a disease.

Do you have any desire to go back to Poland?

I do want to go back. I was there in 1945 after the war. That's when I found my two sisters.

They were in the hometown?

They were, no, a few miles away. I had a hard time finding them but I found them. But I, I like to go one more time to see what's going on over there.

Really?

I like to go to visit my, the grave of my mother.

Do you think it's still there?

Yeah. My sister, Ann, was there and she saw it. So I'd like to go.

So do you think you'll ever, ever do it?

I probably will. I'm still in good shape. I'll probably go one of these days.

Do you think - is your wife interested in going?

Lottie would go too. But... I don't know. It depends.

Would you want to take your family with you? Your kids?

If they want to go, I'll have to take them. That would be nice. You didn't go, did you?

I've never been. I think I have an interest but this ... it'd be a very difficult trip to do with my mother because you know what she is like.

Yes. I know that. She's better off staying right here.

I think she's better. She talks about it, but...

I want to go to Auschwitz. I want to go to Birkenau.

Really?

Sure. I want to see what it's like.

Now you were in both those camps?

No. I wasn't. I was about 20 miles away from there.

Okay. So which camps were you in?

Oh, seven of them.

Were they mostly labor camps?

Oh, sure. All labor camps.

They were all labor camps?

Um-hmm.

Well, what was the last camp you were in?

The last camp was by Buchenwald.

Okay. Buchenwald was your last one.

Yes, and not exactly a small town from there. Langenstein. We were working in the mountains. There were ammunition factories in the mountains. That was the last one. That's where I was liberated in 1945.

And so how many years were you in the camps?

Four.

Four years. Okay. All right. When you were ... let's talk about liberation. How old were you when you were liberated?

Let's see, I was 24.

Now, what kind of condition were you in?

I wasn't in too good of condition. I weighed about 90 pounds.

Wow.

I was picked up by the uh, the American army put me in the hospital. They spent about two months putting me back in condition and I came out all right.

The day of liberation, did you... did you feel that something was going to happen? Did you guys have a warning that you were going to be liberated?

Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, we could hear. We knew that the Germans were shaky.

Were they running away?

Yeah. They were all running and there was a lot of bombing and you could hear guns being on the outside, shouting, the army's coming and going. The day came and the Seventh Army came and they knocked the wall down. I didn't, I said, "Who are these guys people?" I didn't know who they were. I never saw an American soldier. I thought it was a bunch of new Nazis again.

Gosh. Really?

Yeah. They brought in some food and a lot of people died from starvation. Just ate too much. They overate. They shouldn't have, you know, it's one of those things.

How did you feel on day of liberation? Were you just so ...

It was heaven on earth. Well, you were all worn out. You didn't have the strength to enjoy it. We all looked like we were 100 years old. You couldn't hardly walk. Life was going out of you. There was nothing left of you.

And how would you say... What kept you alive during, you know, all those years in the camps? I mean, what kept you going?

Well, they gave you one meal a day and I stole a little here, stole a little there, break into the kitchen. You do the best you can. Organize and then... And I happened to be lucky because I worked with some civilians. Actually, I was a lineman for two years and they were pretty good to me. Czech Christ- Czech Christians and even some good Germans. Sometimes they would bring a piece of bread, bring a potato or something, whatever they got left over. Just to, just to survive.

Would you say like mentally and emotionally when ...

Didn't even think about.

Really?

Didn't even...what could you do? I knew there was going to be a day where we were going to make it but you didn't know when.

What about your faith in God? Did you ever question that?

Yes. I didn't know what to say, believe me. We used to ask, "Where's God?" Got a lot of, that's why a lot of us are, a lot of them are atheists that don't believe. And I can't blame them.

And what about you today? Do you still have faith in God?

Yeah, I do. Yes. I do. I go to the synagogue. I take the kids. I enjoy the service. I just go along with it. I can't get too excited about it. I'm not going to be a rabbi. That's for sure. It's the thing to do.

It's the thing to do?

Especially when you have a family. You want to give them the chance to make up their own mind.

Even though you question God and even your religion, you question Judaism, you still felt strongly about passing it on and practicing?

Oh, sure. Sure. Absolutely.

That never ...

Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm proud what I am. My God, after, after this massacre, my God, yes. Be proud what you are. Sure. You observe the holidays just like I did before the war, and the kids come over and you got everything, it's normal life. They can make up their own mind when they grow up. I have no complaints.

Okay. So now, after the war, you were liberated and you're strong enough, at some point, to go back to your hometown.

Yes. I went back.

Now, what was that like, going back?

Well, I came in and I, there weren't any Jews. Nobody to talk to. I couldn't figure out what happened. So I met a lady over there. She was sort of related to me and she said she thought she saw my three sisters, two sisters. I said, "Where were they?" She said, "I don't know." They moved to Silesia. I went to the little town and I found out all kinds of Jews from my hometown that told me, "There they are." And I found them and I brought them back to the western side, to the American zone. See that was occupied by Russia then. We had a hard time crossing that border. The Russians wouldn't let us go.

Really? Why not?

They didn't want you to go. That's all. You had to have a special passport. They wanted people to be there. But I made it and I brought them over to the American zone and we lived there about a year. Then we arranged to come to the U.S..

Now, ok, so all three of you, did you live in a ...

Camp?

... a Displaced Persons camp?

Yes. We lived in ...

All three of you?

... Bergen-Belsen. Yes. And your dad [Note: who is Aron's brother John] was in the hospital there in Belsen. He was still recuperating. And then he came out we all lived together.

So three of you all lived together? Oh, no - four of you then.

Yes.

My dad and you and ...

And then when we went to the U.S. - we registered - your dad stayed behind with Sonia. And he came about two years later.

Now, why did you decide to come to the U.S.? Why didn't you go to Israel?

In 1945, President Truman made a speech on Christmas Day that they were taking so many displaced person for the United States. Anybody who was interested, register. Nothing to do if I wouldn't have registered. Whoever called me first ... The American Ambassador called us. We went to Frankfurt and they checked us out and six months later we were on our way.

Did you have any desire to go to Israel instead of the States?

I didn't ever thought of anything. It didn't make me, I just wanted to get out of Germany. That's all.

You didn't care where you went but just ...

No, I didn't care.

Really?

But the U.S. came first, I took, I took it.

Okay. So, did they take you first or ...

No. Me. mw and Gusty, my sister, and Ann.

And nobody was married yet, right?

No. Nobody was married.

Okay. So you come to the United States. Tell me about coming ... you came on a boat.

Sure.

What was that like?

Well, it was [laughting], it was all right. Listen, it was an old Navy boat.

Yeah. Had you ever been on a boat before?

No. I've been on a ... no, not a boat like that.

Hadn't taken a cruise or anything?

No. I haven't taken any cruises. No. It was all right. It took nine days.

Nine days?

Nine days on the water.

Okay. What were the accommodations like?

Huh?

What were the accommodations like?

We slept on ... the best we could. It was a Navy boat. See, an old boat [SHOWING PICTURES].

Oh, okay.

It went over with the Navy soldiers.

Oh, oh I didn't realize that.

On the way back, they used it for, which was all right, I think it something like \$60.00 per person. It was good enough. What's the difference? You get out of Germany is the main thing.

Yeah. So you had to come up with the \$60.00?

No, no, no. UJA paid it.

UJA took care of that?

I came up, I'd still be there. Where am I going to get \$60.00?

Somehow, I think you would have gotten it.

Oh, from where?

I know you would have figured it out. So, you land in New York?

We land in New York.

Now, was it Ellis Island at that time?

No. We didn't go to Ellis Island. No. They checked us out on the boat.

On the boat?

On the boat. They came up doctors, I guess, to check all of us out and they let you go.

Okay. So they check you out?

They check you in Germany first, the German Ambassador. The German Consul checks you first. They got nurses and everything else. They check you for your health to make sure that you're healthy. And then they check you again on the boat, I guess. I don't know for what reason, but they check you.

So you came over with your two sisters, right?

Uh-huh.

Anybody else?

Isak, Isak [Federman] came with us.

Okay. Isak was just a friend at that point.

Uh-huh.

And he was dating Ann, your sister?

Ann, that's right.

All right. So you come to New York ...

Um-hmm.

... and then you stay in New York for awhile?

About three days.

Just three days?

That's all.

And they told you that you were coming to Kansas City, or did they give you a choice?

No. There are no choice. They came to us and just said, "Well, you'd be better off if you leave New York. If you live in New York, you won't learn the language. It's a tough life. There's a nice city called Kansas City." I said, "I've never heard of Kansas City. I've heard of San Francisco. I've heard of Chicago." There were 11 of us. Say, "You're going to Kansas City." That's fine.

So, you... no big deal?

What's the big deal? I took my two cents and I was on a train.

Okay. Now when you came to New York, what did, everything had to be so different than what you were used to.

Beautiful. Beautiful.

You felt wonderful?

Oh, sure.

You loved it?

Sure. It's so big and free and plenty of food and a nice hotel. We were resting up. It was wonderful.

So you're only there three or four days?

Maybe three or four days.

And they put you on a train?

On a train and wound up at Union Station in Kansas City.

Okay. And so who ...

I think it took something like 15, 16 hours.

So you come to Kansas City, you don't know English yet.

Not a word.

Not a word? And so who meets you at the Station?

The Joint Distribution Committee came and picked us all up and then ...

Somebody there speak Polish or Yiddish?

Yiddish. They divided us in groups. So I went with the... boys went with ... we had rooms arranged at Jewish homes. We paid so much a month. I forgot how much we paid.

Yeah. But the UJA took care of that for awhile?

Oh, yeah. Sure. For about two weeks. Then I went to work. I believe I went to work about a week later.

So what was your first job?

I worked for Comfort Felt Company making cotton for furniture, mattress manufacture, padding.

And you told them that you wanted to work in an electrical business?

I wanted but it didn't make any difference.

But they didn't anything for you?

No. I just went there. I just ... I had to make a living.

Yeah. So you worked at this place. How were you, since you didn't know the language ...

I spoke Yiddish.

The people there spoke Yiddish?

The owner, Mr. [unclear], the owner was Yidd-, yeah he spoke Jewish.

So how did you learn English? Did you go to school to learn?

I went to school. We all went to school at night.

Went to school, okay, to night school.

Went to about three or four years at the Joint Distribution Committee on Linwood Boulevard. Then we went to the [unclear] Temple. We had classes at night. You learned it.

And then you also were studying to be a citizen?

Oh, sure. Became a citizen five years later in 1951.

Yeah. What did that feel like?

It was wonderful.

So that was really ...

I felt like I'm a big wheel now.

Oh, my gosh!

And the rest is history. Here I am 50 some years later.

But then you, uh, you're working and you have this job and you're getting acclimated to this new, new life. Did you think, I mean compared to where you had come from, did you feel this was just an amazing place or ...

I think it was wonderful.

By comparison.

It was, it was a good life. I had a room. I rented me a room. I lived. I got paid Friday. I had a little money on me and I bought whatever I had to have. It was nice. Then I got married in 1947.

So you had been here only ... how long were you here before you got married?

I was here two years.

And how did you meet your wife?

I met Lottie.

And Lottie was an American?

Yeah. She was born here. Well, I live in a house on 44th and Monroe with a lady that Lottie knew. And Lottie had a cousin in Germany she wanted to know if I happened to

have ran into him. It's just like looking for a needle in a haystack. She came by with her father and her mother and I asked her for a date and we went out. Lottie speaks Yiddish. See?

Now when you were growing up, was it mostly Yiddish in your house or Polish combination?

At home? Both.

Both? A combination.

Mostly Jewish and Polish. Yes. So, I went out with Lottie and we dated about a year and then we got married.

And what was ... did Lottie have a job? Was she working?

Lottie worked for the BMA, BMA Insurance Company.

So what was your second job?

I only had one job.

You stayed with that first company? For how long?

Sure, for up til about 1948.

Okay. And then what?

Then I went in business.

For yourself?

Um-hmm. Furniture.

A furniture business?

Um-hmm.

So you were manufacturing, or just ...

Um-hmm. Manufacturing.

Did you buy an existing business?

No. No. We started a new one.

You started from scratch?

We started from scratch with Isak [Federman].

Okay. What prompted you to go into the furniture business?

Well, you see, Isak worked for a furniture company and I had a little knowledge of it too. It didn't take much. When you're young you learn. We went into it.

Right.

I was in it until about 1952.

Okay.

Then I went into the felt business.

You did that by yourself?

Yeah. Me and another partner and a gentleman. An elderly gentleman.

Ok.

And I stayed in until 1959. Then I went into the foam and rubber business. And from there I retired.

Okay, so, so then... All right. And, obviously, you were successful in all your businesses.

Ah, I hope. I never miss any meals.

You looked like you did okay.

Yeah. I did alright. I have no complaints.

Okay. Was there any... you know, here you come to this new country, you don't know English, etc., etc. Any problem adjusting? Was it really hard for you to ...

It was horrible at the beginning.

It was horrible because ...

The language.

Mainly because of language barrier?

Yeah, the language. I don't know about anybody else, I picked it up real fast. I love languages. I went to school, I read, I just, I tried my darnedest to pick up the language.

And besides the job I worked on, all of them spoke English only, except the boss. The boss was in the office. I had nothing to do with him. So I had to learn.

Yeah. You had to learn.

You have to learn. That's all there is to it.

Yeah. You know, after you were liberated and you started this new life and you came to this country, etc., what, mentally and emotionally... I mean it seems to me that you were very, very, obviously, a very strong person.

Yes, I am.

In both areas - physical and emotionally.

Yeah.

So, I mean, cause frequently, you know with my parents being survivors, I always wonder how they were able just to mentally and emotionally keep your sanity.

But there's nothing you could do. You make up your mind if you want to stay alive.

Yeah.

And you do the best you can and just get it out of your mind. Sure, you always think about what happened. You look back at the past. What can you do?

And when you came out of the camps and you went back home, you didn't know what had happened to your whole family yet, did you?

I didn't know a thing. I didn't know a thing. I knew they weren't there. There was nobody there.

And so how many of them perished in the camps?

Five.

Five died in the camps?

Um-hmm. There's only four of us left.

So there are four surviving. There were nine children and four survived. In a lot of families, nobody survived or maybe one or two.

You're young, you're busy, you try to build a life for yourself. What can you do?

It was important that all, everybody, your siblings, everybody came to Kansas City?

Uh-huh. Uh, huh.

So, the last one was the come was my dad, right?

Yeah. He came in '48.

Okay. And so you had... When you were here, most of your friends, for a long time, were they survivors?

All of them. Yeah.

All of them were survivors?

Um-hmm. There were 11 of us came from New York. We hung around each other together. Played a little cards and you know we went together on picnics to Swope Park and we had plenty to do. Besides, you're working 5, 5 ½ days a week.

Right. And so you... After you married, how soon after you were married did you start to have children?

Let's see. Karen was born two years later.

Okay. So Karen was born in '48?

'49.

'49 and Eddie was ...

Eddie was born in '52.

In '52? And Eddie is a CPA?

Yeah.

And Karen has ...

Karen works in a law office.

Karen has three children?

Yes.

And Ed has ...

Two.

... two children?

Um - hmm.

So Karen is working in a law office now?

Um - hmm.

Is she there full-time?

Um - hmm.

Okay.

She loves it too.

Oh, isn't that great? Is it close to her house?

About five minutes.

Okay. This is going to be one of my shorter interviews. And you always stayed in Kansas City? This was home for you?

That's it.

Yeah. Did um... There's a question here that says how do your Holocaust memories penetrate your life today? Is it, is it something that you think about frequently?

Yes. Always think about it. When you look back ... especially when you get a little older, you look back and you say, "What a shame."

Were there certain images that haunt you that you just can't get out of your mind from time-to-time?

Yes. When I hear a good piece of music like Itzhak Perlman I can cry. It'll take me five minutes I'm crying.

Why?

It breaks my heart because I had a brother that was a violinist. He was a concert violinist in, in, in Poland. And he just, he just didn't survive. In memories, you think about your sisters and brothers, you know, and... What can you do?

He was in the camps, as well?

Yes. I believe he... the way I understand is he went to school for 25 years to study violin. If you could imagine what he must have been or could have been if he would have been over here. But he didn't survive. Sure, you think about it all the time but you have to go on.

What um... After living through something like that, what... after that kind of experience, what do you think we, you know, should learn from it?

Keep your eyes open. Keep your eyes open and watch and make sure it doesn't happen again. Go out and vote. You're supposed to vote. Don't say somebody else is going to vote for you. Be yourself. Do it. Support Israel. This is a, this is a must. Get along.

Don't you feel strongly that survivors should continue to tell their stories?

Sure, absolutely. Absolutely you're supposed to. Plus you've got enough people denying it and you can't, you can't have it. And 20 years from now they say it was - it's not true. You have to have it. It's a must.

Well, when you hear that on the news, like recently, there's something going on where somebody is denying that the Holocaust existed. As a matter of fact, I think there's a trial going on in London.

Yeah, in England, I believe. In England. I believe it's over with if I'm not mistaken. You can't, I mean, there's films, you've got films, you've got pictures, you've got people, you've got soldiers that were there. General Eisenhower and people like this, they spoke. It's on film. So how can they deny it?

Okay.

[TAPE CUT OUT]

You told me about getting married. I want to know about the wedding.

[Laughing] What do you want to know about the wedding?

Were you married in a synagogue?

Yes. I was married at 43rd and Prospect.

And your wife, Lottie, both her parents were alive at that time?

No. Had just, her father passed away the year before. Her mother was alive.

Okay. So, she and her mom planned the wedding?

Um-hmm.

How many people would you say came?

There was about 100, 150 people.

Oh! So you had a ...

Oh, sure. Lottie has a big family here. And then I invited a few friends that I had here in town.

Right. Right.

Yeah. We had about 150 people, I'm sure.

Do you have pictures from the wedding?

A few.

Oh, I'd like to see those.

I've got a few at home.

So was there a honeymoon afterwards? Did you guys go anywhere?

No. We couldn't afford a honeymoon. We had about \$9.00 in the bank [laughing]. We couldn't afford a honeymoon.

Did you have music?

No. No. We didn't have any music.

No music?

No.

So just a the cake, anything?

Well, no. I think Lottie made some delis and stuff like that. Lottie told me the other day that between the whiskey, the drinks, and sandwiches that they spent about \$250.00 for the whole thing. That's a cheap thing for those days.

For 100 to 150 people?

Yes. Yes.

And who married you?

Rabbi Solomon.

Really?

Yeah. That was about \$10.00 there, you know. [laughing] At least.

That was part of the expense.

Sure. It was a lot of money in those days, believe me.

Yeah. Yeah. The Jewish community, when you came to Kansas City, were they real welcoming? Did they participate a lot in...

Oh, yeah, at the beginning. Sure. They helped us. They found us a place to stay and they gave you a few dollars to survive the first two weeks. I didn't need any. I didn't but two weeks later I had no money already. I mean, a lot of people, if they didn't get a job, they helped them out. Nobody, nobody went without eating and having a place to stay. They were, I think they was awful nice. They helped you find a job because I wouldn't know how to go look for a job. We were well taken care of.

Okay. And Lottie, all her friends were Jewish, pretty much?

Oh, yeah. Sure. See Lottie had a big family here, the Izens.

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. When you were in Kansas City, did you experience much antisemitism?

No. Nothing special. I didn't notice any. Nobody said anything to me. Not like in Poland.

Yeah. Okay.

[End of recording]