

Abraham Herman

Transcription of tape recorded on 15 March 1989

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Abraham Herman (b. 16 February 1931. d. April 1989)

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Ben Hefgott: You went to school in 1942 didn't you?

Abe Herman: Of course I was at school in '42.

Ben: Until what time did you go to school in Munkacs?

Abe Herman: I think in 1943 we stopped. Sometime in '43.

Ben: And what happened then?

Abe: We went to school until the schools were closing down. What happened was, at first the times were reduced to half times. They needed the schools for hospitals. And then they needed all of it for hospitals. In other words, at first they reduced the timescale.

Ben: Did you move into a ghetto at all in Munkacs?

Abe: Yes - we had a ghetto at last. Yes.

Ben: What year did you have to move into the ghetto?

Abe: It was '44.

Ben: And after '44, you still lived in your own home?

Abe: More or less. Yes.

Ben: And life was more or less normal under the Hungarians?

Abe: Hardly normal. No. They were very antisemitic. Even at school there was fighting all the time between the Jews and the goyim.

Ben: Was your first language always Hungarian, or was it Czech?

Abe: Well at first it was Czech....it had to be Czech....the Hungarians took over the country in

1939.

Ben: So when you went to school you were already learning Hungarian.

Abe: Yes but I started off with Czech,

Ben: What year did you start learning Hungarian?

Abe: '38.

Ben: Do you speak Hungarian better than you speak Czech?

Abe: Yes

Ben: Or have you forgotten your Czech?

Abe: I've forgotten everything by now. But I should think my Hungarian is better than Czech.....I would say. I haven't been practising anything. My Hungarian is poor and my Czech is poor. My German is still better than all, because I still did German - I remember I stopped doing Hungarian and other things.

Ben: You learned German at school already?

Abe: I learned in school before - already in the Czech school I learned German, and later in the Hungarian school I also learned German.

Ben: And what language did you speak at home?

Abe: Well my father spoke Yiddish and my mother spoke Hungarian, and my mother would read Hungarian books.

Ben: Could you speak Yiddish when you were....

Abe: Oh yes.

Ben: Yiddish was all around you wasn't it?

Abe: Yes.

Ben: Because in Munkacs

Abe: Yes, everyone speaks Yiddish.

Ben: And how is your Yiddish today? Have you forgotten a lot of Yiddish as well?

Abe: I must have forgotten a lot.

Ben: But you could converse in Yiddish if you had to.

Abe: Of course.

Ben: And you understand Yiddish.

Abe: Of course. Look it's only 50 or so years. That's not so long. You don't forget in half a century.

Ben: So you would say you remember Yiddish better than you remember Czech or Hungarian?

Abe: Not Hungarian. I still speak Hungarian better because I had a few years of Hungarian uninterrupted.

Ben: So Abe, when were you ordered to move into the ghetto? Were you ordered by the Germans or were you ordered by the Hungarians to move into the ghetto?

Abe: Well, the Germans.

Ben: Because as long as the Hungarians were running the show, however antisemitic they were, they left you alone didn't they?

Abe: Well I wouldn't consider the Hungarians as "however antisemitic they left you alone." They were very nationalistic - the Hungarians.

Ben: They treated the Jews badly as well?

Abe: Oh yes.

Ben: How about the local population? How did they respond to you?

Abe: The local population was 50% Jews. Then the rest would be - depending on which point of time.

Ben: The local population was incited against the Jews? Was it a spontaneous.....?

Abe: No! Spontaneous ...nothing! It was all being... they all did it in the same old way - they were quite experienced....when it came to Munkacz - they were very well-organized.

Ben: They were all interested in making money out of the Jews. Get as much money out of the Jews.

Abe: Oh yes. They were all taking all the money, yes. The money - that was important. People were giving their diamond rings, I remember, for a piece of bread - a slice of bread. This was in the ghetto. There was rationing and all sorts of things. But we were all right. We had a bit of food. We were lucky. We were farmers of sorts. We had a brick factory, and there was land, and there was corn, potatoes, sunflower seeds. You know - we had these things. And we had fruit - plum trees...

Ben: You still made use of it yourself?

Abe: Yes. We did.

Ben: So when were you ordered to move into a ghetto? And was the ghetto a closed or open ghetto?

Abe: At first it was enclosed - part of Munkacs was cut off . Our house was inside it. They just cut off part of Munkacs and: all right, this is the Jewish et (?) and finished. So we shared the loft full of food with whoever was staying in our house and the rats. We had lots of rats going up to the loft. We collected a lot. We had a lot...of corn. Look, I mean what could you do with it? If you don't take it home, the army or the police come and take it away and give you a piece of paper: "Here you are" - You know what happened. They had a maximalisch, a minimalisch - maximum and minimum prices - so they gave you the maximum price prescribed - which was nothing of course. You know what food was like. It was very scarce.

Ben: When did they actually decide to deport the Jews from Munkacz? And they deported them all to Auschwitz didn't they?

Abe: Yes. Birkenau. Birchenshof-Birkenau. I think it was May (1944).

Ben: And that was really the beginning. Because in a way, up to then, none of you experienced - although you experienced antisemitism from the Hungarians - but there were no round-ups before that.

Abe: Oh there were shootings going on almost every night.

Ben: By the Hungarians?

Abe: Yes. Some Jews had their beards pulled out, some got shot. There was always something going wrong. There were pogroms.

Ben's wife: What was the population of Munkacs?

Abe: Munkacs had (a population of) about 30,000. 50% (were Jewish.) 15,000. *[Was it a prosperous community?]* Muncacz had - the Jewish population - 60% had no visible means of existence. That means if you went to the shul, you had lots of hands stretching out in front of you.

Ben: It was a very impoverished area all around.

Abe: I remember there was a Jewish street where the houses were like cottages, butting right onto the pavement. And I remember the smells of the houses, because those houses didn't have modern toilets.... the toilets would have to be emptied often. It was very difficult - existence wasn't pleasant - the standard wasn't adequate. Jews lived in an oppressed state. Constantly oppressed was the impression I got, and you've got to realise that I was a young boy. I didn't know anything else. Therefore, this was normal for me. If you know nothing else....So therefore our existence - we inherited a brick factory together with our auntie and uncle - and there wasn't any money from it, but we did have land there and therefore we could cultivate - my father did.

Ben's wife: How many were there in your family?

Abe: Four.....3 boys & a girl...The eldest brother, Zruli, is in America.

Ben: Was he also sent to Auschwitz?

Abe: Yes, a part of Auschwitz.

Ben: So all of you were sent to Auschwitz?

Abe: Yes. We went to Auschwitz.

Ben: In May 1944.

Abe: Yes.

Ben's wife: Together with your parents?

Abe: Yes.

Ben: So what happened when you arrived in Auschwitz?

Abe: Well, we lost our mother straight away. And I was together with my father. We went to a farm.

Ben: You were separated from David & from your older brother?

Abe: Yes. That's right.

Ben: They separated you in Auschwitz?

Abe: Yes. That's right. David said he was a carpenter, or something or other. He was already working a little in carpentry - furniture-making - so his skill was that of something. And I said: "Zug bedestruchsen." As soon as I arrived there, a Polish fellow tells me: "Zug bedestruchsen". What that means (Marilyn) is: Say that you're 18. He was a Polish fellow. Polish Jewish. A thin boy. He must have been around 20, or 21, or 22. And he said: Zug bedestruchsen. I remember: he said it in Yiddish. How else could you say it? You're coming from places where you speak Hungarian, and he speaks Polish. I mean he knows how we converse.....So I said I was 18. I didn't look it, but then there you are. What can you say? That's what I said. And what do you do? Farming. Farmer.

Ben: So they sent you and your father to do farming.

Abe: We went to a farm. There were no other farms. This was the only one. This was really the only farm. In Birchas-hof Birkenau. What happened was that many of the boys in the camp were helping with the unloading of the transports. *[When you say boys, you're talking about teenagers?]* Many of those working in that camp. Birchas-hof - that means a management - organisation - in German - a flowery way of describing some management of a sort. So it was a farming management of sorts. It was called Birchas-hof Birkenau. So we had cows there. But I wasn't doing that. I was cleaning the barracks. There were two barracks: I cleaned one, there was another boy who cleaned the other.

Ben: So you became a stubendith.

Abe: That's what I was. Yes. But then I also cleaned often boots, and put...

Ben: And at that stage were you separated from your father?

Abe: No, it was in the same place, the same camp.

Ben: So he used to go out to work, but you stayed behind.....

Abe: He went into the farm, cleaning out the cowsheds and milking the cows.

Ben: And you stayed behind being a stubendit.

Abe: Yes.

Ben: And so you worked directly under the blockestor.(?)

Abe: Well no. I was luckier there. I think my father helped there. When we went there there were some kapos - very nasty ones. *[Were they German?]* Yes. *[Criminals]* Yes. One was Otto. He was a real criminal. He was a murderer. He must have murdered at least one a week there - beating him to death - giving him twelve lashes - and from him they didn't last long. So my father must have spoken to one of the fellows - one of these kapos - one of them was nice - and I was there, and this kapo - a very tall fellow - 6'6" or thereabouts - and he told this Otto that if he does anything to me he'll kill him.

Ben: So he took a liking to you?

Abe: The tall fellow? My father told him to look after me.

Ben: And was he also a German?

Abe: Yes. He was not one of the nasty ones. They're not all nasty. There was only one very nasty kapo - a German kapo, and that was Otto. He was doing all the beatings - you know, during appell (?) He was always doing it - people were really shuddering. In any case so he kept away from me that time. Afterwards. In other words, it did work. And he looked after me - the tall fellow. He told me his story: he was robbing a bank, so he said, on a motorbike, and they were chasing the robbers, and he said: "Over there! Over there!" So they didn't believe him. They arrested him. They knew. He was trying to mislead them. They got him.

Ben: And as a shtubendit were you able to get some extra food?

Abe: Yes they brought me extra food. First of all this kapo, the German one liked me, he gave me extra food. And then there were the Polish boys, Jewish, who would go and work on transports. They'd bring some extra food back. Often it was green - you know, penicillin or whatever - but it doesn't matter - it was still good enough. And of course they gave me - I said yes. So I gave some to my father, and my father was buying mitzvahs, was giving it to the rebbe. Because the rebbe wouldn't eat other food.

Ben: The rebbe was with you as well?

Abe: Yes, there was a rebbe.

Ben: Did the rebbe survive?

Abe: No. How could he survive? *[What do you mean he was buying mitzvahs?]* I kept the food for my father. You see food was in very great shortage. I would get a bit extra, put it aside, and give it to my father. And my father was giving it to the rebbe who wasn't eating the ordinary food because it wasn't kosher. He ate the bread. *[But he didn't have the soup]* That's right, & he didn't have the salami. *[How old was he?]* He was 40, I should think.

Ben: As long as he could, he simply did not eat any soup? You don't remember him eating any soup at all?

Abe: No - he didn't eat soup. Therefore all that happened was: I remember my father gave

him the food. And of course, my father wasn't eating it and was also getting weaker. You see, you needed every ounce of whatever goes to assist you.

Ben: So how long were you in Auschwitz?

Abe: I was there til December or January.... From Auschwitz, I was marching.

Ben: So you were the last lot to be evacuated. The big march. Now that was some time around 14th January.

Abe: Something like that. I know we were near enough last, because the snow was already trampled down and either side of the road, there were dead people. You know what happened. We were marching - I believe there were about 30,000 people - round about that - I remember I was told the number at that time, approximately.

Ben: Before we go to the march, can you remember the sort of things that happened in Auschwitz whilst you were there? You were all the time in the same barrack were you?

Abe: The same barrack. But we go about a little bit, now and then. What happened was, I told you this tall fellow, this tall kapo - criminal - now he's a nice fellow, and there were also Germans. I remember it was the season when fruit was ripening. So the Germans wanted some fruit. So this fellow, the German, came and said: look I'll be able to climb trees and pick fruit for them. I remember he asked me whether I can do it, and I said, "Oh yes". I was quite agile, and able to climb the trees. So you know: plums, apples, whatever. So I remember we went with a horse, a German guard with a gun, there was this German kapo, and me. And we had lots of baskets. So we went and I picked fruit for them. *[For the kapos? In Auschwitz?]* They wanted it, and while I was there I would eat it as well. And of course, they had all they wanted. But of course the fruit was then brought back to all the other nasty SSs. You see, that was just the guards that were coming with us....That was in [the summer of] '44.

Marilyn: You said you did some translation for somebody?

Abe: That's nothing. Yes, then there was a Hungarian guard, I remember, and he had some German-speaking girlfriend - he asked me would I write a letter in German for him. I said: You write it in Hungarian, and I'll write it in German. I had learned German, I told you, before the war. I started German, I think I must have been about 5 or 6, I started to

learn German - at school. And my father spoke German, and I was writing the Gothic German.....the reason I was doing the old-fashioned German was because my father knew the old-fashioned German. Of course I learned it at school as well, it doesn't make any difference. In those days, it was still that kind of world.

Ben's wife: You were saying before about the farm, and they had cows in it. Presumably this was to provide food for the German guards.

Abe: Yes - whoever wanted it.....(?)

Ben: So what else can you remember during this time when you were in Auschwitz?

Abe: Oh yes, I remember: they were going into the crematorium. *[You remember that?]* Oh yes, they were going in and I was watching and watching, and nobody ever came out. I just watched them going in and in, and nobody came out.

Ben: Were there ever any selections from your block?

Abe: Yes, they kept doing that again and again and again Yes they were doing that.

Ben: But you were protected by the kapo in the block?

Abe: Yes

Ben: And your father also managed to

Abe: My father was much older...but he was getting weaker and weaker *[in Auschwitz?]* Yes...the shortage of food was having effect on him. He was over 50.

Ben: So when they finally evacuated the remainder of those who were in Auschwitz, were you together with your father at the time?

Abe: No. Not any more. He died before.

Ben: You were with him when he died?

Abe: Well no. He was taken to hospital from Birchenshof-Birkenau, and you know what that means?

Ben: Yes. And you never saw him again?

Abe: No. But he was writing notes for two weeks. And then they stopped, finished.

Ben: You couldn't go & visit him there? You didn't see him? You couldn't get near the....

Abe: No, but I did get notes. For two weeks I got notes.

Ben: Can you remember what he was saying?

Abe: Well...he did say something - it's very difficult to remember....but he knew he was going to die - there were no secrets - there was nothing you could do about it.

Ben: And actually nothing really happened to him? He wasn't beaten or anything? It was simply a matter of undernourishment and over-exhaustion?

Abe: Well.....undernourishment, and him getting weaker and weaker and dying. Of course now and then you get beaten. Of course you get hit. I remember I got hit once with the butt of a gun. It sent me staggering - it took me quite a while to regain my [consciousness.]

Ben: How old was your father at the time?

Abe: He was 55.

Ben: So at that age it was very difficult really....and on the farm he obviously had to work very hard. They worked him very hard.

Abe: Of course. You see, farmwork is physical work of a type. You can last a long time...

Ben: If you've got enough food to eat. But he didn't have any food so

Abe: When I gave it to him he didn't make use of it. But the truth is, he would have never never survived the march. It's inconceivable. Nobody of his age, or half his age, survived the march.

Ben: I heard something about this march. Can you tell me?

Abe: Yes, it was interesting. I was surprised. Horses, and carriages. The horses were all geared up, and carriages were filled with machinery.....any machinery - the Germans were going to make use of it. In any case, they didn't want to leave it there. And people were dying - they were being shot. The march was as follows: it appears that from those who got to that stage, nobody seemed to have died the first three days. After three days they started to die. They started to give up. They started being shot. People sat down. The people especially behind - last - they were shooting. Whenever somebody sat down, you could hear after a certain time the shot. Which means it told me how near I was to the end of the convoy. And we had to push and pull those carriages uphill and downhill. We were getting weaker and weaker.

Ben: And there was a frost and the cold.

Abe: And they were shouting and shouting: "Los! Los! Aufgang! Aufgang!" And they were whipping us. And if you happened to be at the edge, invariably you would get hit, and one hit with those whips would have beaten you enough, you would not get up anymore. Therefore the difference between life and death - the value of one and the other - wasn't so great.

Ben: When you went on the march, did you team up with anybody? Or were you alone?

Abe: No I didn't team up. I only teamed up with my brother. There was no possibility of any.....(?)

Ben: At that stage you met with your brother?

Abe: No no - this was much much later. Many months later.

Ben: So tell me, when you were on the march as such, were you simply alone - just on your own?

Abe: No I was friendly with a doctor. There was a doctor - he was quite chubby - he was quite comfortable. He had pills keeping him going.

Ben: Was he Hungarian?

Abe: Yes, & I was friendly with him.

Ben: So you were with him. And was he much older than you?

Abe: He looked like 50 or so.

Ben: Really! So for him this must have been also very exhausting. Did he survive?

Abe: Did he survive? No.

Ben: He also fell by the wayside?

Abe: I'm the only one who survived. I'm the only one who survived Berchenshof-Birkenau.
I'm the only one.

Ben: The only one who survived - what - not the march as such?

Abe: In total at the end of the war, I was the only one who survived who was at that camp.

Ben: So how long were you on this march and where did you finish up?

Abe: Well what happened.....Before the marches started there were 80 Poles in the camp - 80 - and they were soldiers originally. Now, so they were marching out the Poles - marching them out, because after all they were going to march elsewhere the Jews. So who was going where nobody knew. So they marched out the Poles, and they were marching and marching..... in a certain direction of woods, of trees. Lots of forests.....(?) I think they must have been marching for about three quarters of an hour or thereabouts. And then, all of a sudden, I heard shots, and the kapo - my tall kapo, said: "Kaput!"

Ben: This is the Poles? They killed all the 80 Poles?

Abe: They shot all the Poles. They went in the direction of the wood, they marched them there, and like soldiers they marched them out, and they shot them. Which is perhaps better than the Jews who were expected to be marched to the crematoria and be gassed there. We didn't know what was going to happen. So that is how all the Poles(?)...they got rid of from that camp.

Then there were still the Germans - the kapos. There were I think about six - maybe eight Germans - they were kapos mostly in charge, and I forget now the colourful decorations they had. They all had something or other which meant something or

other. You know, there were the bank robbers, the criminals - you know everything meant something, depending what you were. *[You mean the triangles they wore? The colours?]* That's right, the colour, and this. Now the Germans went to the front. Fr...sh (?) Frei Fr....sh(?)

Ben: Who was there left to guard you?

Abe: The soldiers. The German and Hungarian soldiers. In other words, the Poles were shot, the Germans to help fight the war effort, and then there were left the Jews, and you know....

Ben: So how long were you on the march and where did you finish up?

Abe: We were marching for two weeks. At that time, all the horses were dead - had to be shot. The horses couldn't march any more either. They can't go on forever.

Ben: They just didn't have fodder.

Abe: They couldn't do it any more. They need food. The horses were dead. People couldn't push anymore.

Ben: When you left there were 30,000. After two weeks how many were left?

Abe: There were 30,000, but not all the 30,000 came from the same camp. My camp only had a few hundred. My camp only originally had round about 400 or so. They reduced the numbers though....(?) Poles. The German kapos were very few. Two weeks later, you wanted to know how many there were from our camp....Oh we had already split ourselves from the main group, because the main group were going ahead, and we had to keep up with the farm animals...horses (not the cows) which were keeping up with the agricultural machinery we helped push. So of course people were getting weaker and weaker. I should think we must have been 150-200 people - 2 weeks.

Ben: So what happened when you got to a certain place?

Abe: Eventually we reached a stage, and then we were to go by train from then on. Now they all left. The ones in front, they'd left us behind long ago, because they didn't have the pushing around of farming equipment. Therefore it was only our camp. And our camp had originally 400 people only. And if you take away the Poles, and you take

away the Germans, so you're left with 300. Now the 300 had been whittled down, over 2 weeks, I should think to about 150 or 100. By half, in two weeks. It's not surprising because: no food, no escape, no resistance....(?) In any case, we did eventually get to Buchenwald.

Ben: You arrived by train to Buchenwald?

Abe: Buchenwald. Yes....probably around about 100, although I don't really remember.....

Ben: That was in February.

Abe: Yes, I don't really remember if a hundred....to be honest, because they were dying as we arrived. As we arrived in Buchenwald, they were dying there. In fact, one whole group of our group of one train - we were two carriages - one whole lot went to the crematorium.

Ben: In Buchenwald?

Abe: They were practically dead already.

Ben: Yes, because in Buchenwald, they did not use the crematorium.

Abe: No, no - they were dying. They were dying. All the dead were going to the crematorium.

Ben: I see. They were dead, yes.

Abe: Only the dead, yes. In other words, I remember they were putting them to one side there because they were no longer which reduced it. And then I went on from Buchenwald to other transports. From Buchenwald I then went on to another camp where I met my brother. That was in Breslav, Tseit, Rabak. It was inside Germany - inside the industrial coalmine area.

Ben: David was not far away.

Abe: No he was in Tseit. As I got there, that's where I met him.

Ben: Some of the other boys were there as well. So that must have been February. That's

when they said they sent that group. So were you with David together?

Abe: Then I met David there, from then on, we stayed together. But in Tseitz we were bombed and all that, and we went to other marches. From David's place, we were marching towards Tereisenstadt.

Ben: So you finished up in Teresenstadt.

Abe: Yes.

Ben: And you arrived with David.

Abe: No, I arrived with David (?) and before leaving Tseitz, I remember I stole carrots, and it kept us going: half a carrot for me, half a carrot for my brother, and it makes all the difference between whether you live a few days longer or not - whether you make it or not.

Ben: So you were together there with Harry Balsam, and with Harry Spiro.

Abe: Yes, whoever was there.

Ben: They were there as well. I remember talking to David....do you remember them from there?

Abe: No.

Ben: So you were liberated in Teresenstadt.

Abe: In Teresenstadt. Yes. We were marching - a lot of marching from Tseitz on...same as my brother.

Ben: Again a lot of people died.

Abe: Oh yes. And I remember, on two occasions I stole carrots from the kitchen to keep me going. Yes: now what happened was, the journey by train was interesting: the one to Buchenwald, because it was open- topped, open trucks.

Ben: Coal. Used for coal a lot.

Abe: Yes, and it was winter, very cold (- Poland (?)) - and there was no food, and we were shovelled to' and fro' by guards - Hungarian guards, for two weeks - two or three weeks. Imagine that. They were Hungarian guards.

Ben: They were no better to you than the Nazis.

Abe: Well, they were no better than any. But what was good was in the last place where we stopped before getting into open-topped trains, the doctor told you I had with me. So people were risking their lives trying to go to the kitchen and grab some food - because we were about to leave and all that. So I ask him: "Look, there seems to be a risk of people getting shot." Then he says: "Get a few carrots if you can." I did. So while I was in the open-topped train it was the carrots which kept us alive - kept me alive. You see? Now, and of course, people were dying every day. As people were dying, either they were shot at the last minute because they lost their reason, or whatever. The Germans were just sitting higher up one side - one end and the other end, one...with guns, there was nothing we could do in any case, and when somebody lost his conscious....*[End side A of cassette]*

[Side B of cassette:]

Now the situation here was different. The guards had to account for the people under his care. So therefore they had to shoot them and leave the dead there. At first it was very crowded, standing room only. Slowly the dead were being piled up side by side. And there was one interesting story which I shall never forget, but I'll say it again, Marilyn. You all must have heard it, but I'll say it again. In Munkacs there was a coal merchant, two brothers - very primitive - uneducated - but they were carrying the sacks of coal, delivering, and the coal was being dragged by one or two horses and a cart. So the two boys were quite tough. Early twenties. You know, strong. And all of a sudden there's a commotion. The commotion was that one of the brothers had died, and the other brother cut off a bit of his side and was eating it.

Ben: That was on the train?

Abe: On the train, yes.

Ben: Were they Polish? Hungarian?

Abe: No they were Munkacs, from my home town. Now it sort of shook me, because I thought they would be the last ones to last out. They were clearly the strongest ones, because they had the hardest of lives. But they didn't have the carrots I had. You

understand? I had carrots - clearly they helped me keep going. And all of a sudden, one of the brothers (of the coal) stands up and: "Sfasi benacht gerheim Shabbes meal " - I forget now Yiddish - "I'm going home Friday night for Shabbes meal". And he was standing up as if nobody was on the train as if walking on top of people. And there was a Hungarian guard cruelly pointed his gun and shot him at close range.

Ben: He must have already been out of his mind.

Abe: He was out of his mind, yes. In other words, that is it. That's as far as he could go. It was quite anexperience.....that.

Ben: Tell me, what happened when you arrived in Teresenstadt? How was it that David came to England in 1946 and you came in 1947 and you finished up in Germany? What happened to you when you were liberated? Where did you go?

Abe: First of all we went to Prague. I think I went to Munkacs, also searching for family and all that.

Ben: When you got back to Munkacz, was there anybody there?

Abe: Yes, I found Zruli, my eldest brother, there.

Ben: He was there already?

Abe: Yes.

Ben: Where was he liberated?

Abe: He was liberated in Auschwitz. He stayed behind. What happened was....

Ben: He must have been sick.

Abe: He was sick, yes, and he thought he was staying behind to be shot. But it so happens that they didn't shoot that group.

Ben: No, they all stayed there ten days, and nobody was there. But a lot of them died.

Abe: Yes lots of them died. But the point is, he managed to get liberated like that.

Ben's wife: So does that mean that he was there from the time that you all went together and he stayed there all the time?

Ben: No, you see, what happened: it happened very often like this, where people who looked like they were already finished, because they couldn't get away from that place, somehow they survived, and those who were the more able-bodied who were taken away - they had to go through such tough times, such rigour, that they (?).....By not going away and staying in the hospital, the only thing he had to do was to survive 10 days, and a lot of them actually couldn't.....At the end there were a few people left, and they were liberated. So they were liberated a lot earlier. So Abe had to go through another five months of torture, and his brother was already liberated on the 27th January. Now that is what happened. And as soon as he was liberated he had to wait a little while because Munkacz was not liberated yet, and then when Munkacz was liberated, he was one of the early ones who arrived there. Am I correct?

Abe: Yes, of course. And of course, then we stayed in Munkacs awhile, and we went to see our place where we used to live, and the mayor of the town occupied it. He lived in a flat. We had built ourselves a building - a new building with three flats and a shop in the centre of the town. And clearly the flats were vacant, and the new Russian mayor took a liking to it and he occupied it. So we went there, to say hello, and....what do you do? And he told us: "If you know what is good for you, you will leave here. No. 1: you cannot take on the mayor of the town, and no. 2: in any case, he was right. So we left.

Marilyn: What about when you went into the flat to get your possessions?

Abe: Yes we left some things. But those weren't important. We had a few bits and pieces.

Marilyn: And he kept what he wanted.

Abe: Yes, he took what he wanted. That's not important.

Ben: At that stage all the possessions were already cleared out and they wouldn't have left anything behind.

Abe: No, what happened, I had hidden things before the war, and there was a little window which was opening onto a small area - courtyard if you like, and I could get through because I was little, and nobody else could. And I was there to go and see the place. So we told him: "Look, we've got something there, hidden."

Ben: You told him?

Abe: Yes, of course. How else can we go in?

Ben: Was it there?

Abe: Look, I buried it, so....

Ben: You knew where it was. What happened when you recovered it? Did he confiscate it?

Abe: He took away the gold watch, my grandfather's, the gold watch and a big gold chain. That's all he wanted and the rest - he didn't want the rest.

Ben: So you were lucky - at least he was decent enough to share it with you! In other cases, you know this was terrible, in other cases, the fact that somebody had some possession meant that they killed him, because that was the one way that they could take it all away.

Abe: The point is, he was mayor, and he was in a different position, a different category, and clearly there were no issues really which mattered compared to what we'd gone through.

Marilyn: What else did you recover?

Abe: Look the point is, if he had hung on to the diamond rings, he could have got himself shot.

Marilyn: You had diamond rings?

Abe: If he had gone after those things. So he knew what to go after. He took....it was an old gold watch.

Ben: So Abe, you took his advice obviously when he told you to disappear.

Abe: Yes, my elder brother took the jewellery, and I went back to Prague, and over there, what did I do? And he said he was stopped at the frontier, and they searched him, and they found it. So he said: they opened up the matchbox and there were diamond rings and whatever, and they told him: "Well? Do you want to make an issue of it, or

do you want to go?"

Marilyn: Didn't they take David away?

Abe: Different places, different parts of the world, different parts of history, a different time. What happened was: many people got caught up - many of our boys, thinking they were Russian, thinking they were Germans - you know - behind barbed wire. A lot happened.

Ben: And they sent them to Russia.

Abe: Well some were sent to Russia, but he wasn't. In any case, he was sort of recognized pretty quickly that he managed....you know

Ben: But Abe, how was it that, when you were liberated with David, that you came back without David? Why didn't David come back with you?

Abe: In Prague, lots of things happened. I was very young, and I was offered schooling in Prague already. You see, many of our boys were older. Many were heading straight for Israel, and others were smugglers, and who knows what was going on. They were planning their lives, and all that. And I was stopped on the train by somebody who turned out to be Tomas Geig Maseryk's advisor, and he advised me to go to school, where they would look after me, and I was very pleased to go there, because I was just of the age. In fact, there were only two of us who were of the right age. The others pretended to be the right age. You know what I mean? So when I was the right age, I spent six months there, and was given proper food, and having lessons, and we were going on excursions - you know - six months, and then we could go wherever we wanted to. And the Czechs then thought we should go to Israel. At that time it was against England. You know the story. So I spent six months at that special school near Prague, in a place called Stijine, which is now an international conference centre, and at that time it was the place near Rischthoven -?.... centre, and it was full with paintings all stacked up to be taken to the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad. And I spent six months there, and then I went to Germany. Now have I left out any parts which you think are of interest to you?

Ben's wife: What happened to your sister? You said that you all went together to Auschwitz, and then your mother was.....

Abe: Yes, my mother was killed pretty quickly, yes.

Ben's wife: And what happened to your sister? So she was on her own then?

Abe: Well, she was on her own, yes. Somewhere else.....

Ben: Well, she must have been sent away much earlier than you from Auschwitz.

Abe: Well look, everybody was sent somewhere else, I mean, there were lots of people there.

Marilyn: She was taken as a prostitute.

Abe (shocked): How do you know?

Marilyn: She told me.

Ben: You see, it is difficult to think today, to believe that such things happened then. And here you have a family. And you say to yourself: "Look, how was it that you weren't together?" But what happens, before you realise, your mother is taken away - you can't even shout anymore but she's gone already. Then you are together with your brothers. Then before you realise, your brother has been sent somewhere else - you don't know you see, because we were completely disorientated. So everybody then was for himself. It's amazing how it works, but you can't normally contemplate such....when you live a normal life, you care for your family, you care for your children, the children care for the parents, and here, suddenly out of the blue, within a very short time, you are completely deprived of any feelings or any humanity that you have. It is important to talk about something like this, you see, because a lot of people simply cannot understand: how is it possible that you were together and then you're not together? Because everybody thinks that you can make a choice. You can decide what to do. But you can't. But even then you could make a choice. But even then you could make a choice, and you say: Look, I want to go with my mother, but you didn't know where your mother was going or where you were going.

Abe: You see, I was going together with my father for the simple reason we both said farming. You understand? And there was just one lot of people went to farming. Just a few - a handful.

Ben's wife: What were the living conditions like on the farm?

Abe: Well, it was a farm of a sort because there were cows, and there was wheat, and there was sugar beet. And the sugar beet were dug in trenches for the winter.

Ben: *So that gave you an opportunity to steal some of them.*

Abe: I neverremember having eaten sugar beet. I don't remember.

Ben: *Because we now use the word: "stealing", but really what we used to call it was "organize". Nobody ever talked in terms of stealing.*

Abe: So in other words, I don't remember, although I was on the farm and there was lots of sugar beet, I remember it was all being buried and used for winter eating, and whatever.

Ben: *Didn't they have kolrabis as well? They were very tasty.*

Abe: Yes I know those. Yes.

Ben's wife: *Did you live then in a sort of barracks and sleep in bunks like ...?*

Abe: Oh, there was a long single-storey barrack, yes, and there were two barracks as I said in my camp, and each one had 200 people, and they were in bunks in four lots - four lots of bunks. First of all there were big square bunks - 6' by 6', or 8' by 8' - I forget. Supposing they were 8 by 8, so that's four people on each level, and then there were one level, two levels, three levels, four levels. In other words we had about 16 people in one tier. So there were about 200 about in that camp, which is quite crowded. It was a hutted-type construction [*A wooden construction?*] Yes. I remember I was there in Birchenshof Birkenau at Christmas. Especially I remember it because what happened: we were bombed. We were bombed. Apparently one of the English planes wanted to get rid of some bombs, and dropped them, and it managed to hit some of our camp, and a dog died. So we asked for the dog as it was Christmas. And we were cooking the soup, and cooking and cooking and cooking and cooking and cooking - hours and hours - the meat wasn't getting soft enough - I could never eat it. In other words, I was trying chew it. I couldn't. We all of us couldn't. It was an old animal. Nobody could eat it. I know I couldn't. I remember specifically that I couldn't. I don't remember whether the other people could or couldn't. I couldn't swallow it, I couldn't do anything. In any case, in the winter, by that time there was no more food left anymore. By that time, things had changed....

Ben: The Russians were just a few miles away.

Abe: That's right, yes, and we could hear the shooting.

Ben: So did you feel that at any time whilst you were on your own, that your life was in any way endangered? Were you at any point where you thought: I can't take it anymore?

Abe: Oh many times. Many times. I was with my brother - many times....Yes, and how! We were pushing each other. Of course!

Ben: Would you say that was the worst part - that last trip to Teresenstadt, when you were with David - when everybody was falling at the wayside?

Abe: The largest deaths in numbers were in the cold march, or in fact, the open-topped train.

Ben: Did you have any friends with you? I know you told me earlier that you more or less were alone, but did you know anybody there from your home town who you remember just couldn't take it and just fell.....

Abe: They all died. They all died. They all died.

Marilyn: Did you tell them about when you and David were eating grass?

Abe: That's part of it, when we were marching towards Teresenstadt, yes we were eating grass. I was eating potato peels.

Ben: That was a luxury!

Abe: I know, and it used to give me stomach ache, I remember.

Ben: Potato peel was a luxury. People gave almost anything to have potato peels.

Marilyn: And then you wanted to sit down.

Abe: Of course, if you've got stomach ache

Marilyn: And you and David kept each other going.

Abe: Of course, yes.

Ben: How long did you march from Zeitz to Teresenstadt? That must have been a few weeks. Two weeks? Three weeks?

Abe: Time factor again. Oh yes. We started off by train. After....I think it was two days or so - two or three days, they bombed, and then we went on foot.

Ben: To go further, what made you leave the school in Prague and go to Germany after the war?

Abe: In Prague, first of all I was finishing that six-month course that was coming to an end. And the idea was at that time, Jews, young people like us, would go to Israel to give the British a headache. After all(?)....were clearly, our friends, which at that time they were - let's be practical about it - and we were to go to Germany from where we were to go to Israel. We were to be met by people who were organizers of kibbutzim, and of course we went one night towards the frontier. In fact the teachers from the Czech school came across with us to Germany to make sure we don't go astray. Do you understand that? In other words, they were looking after us.

Marilyn: Did you tell them that it was a special school for survivors, wasn't it?

Abe: You mean near Prague? It was a special school, yes. A special school.

Ben's wife: When you were in Zeitz, how long were you there for?

Abe: I think it was a matter of a few weeks....three to four weeks.

Ben's wife: What were the conditions there? You lived in barracks as well?

Abe: Well, the conditions in Zeitz, that was entirely different to what I was used to before. Zeitz was an industrial complex where they were manufacturing ...(?)...German...(?)

Ben: Optical instruments.

Abe: ...(?).... Zeitz was an interesting situation. That was meant to be a big industrial complex where, when I entered there, when I was there, it was being bombed day and night by the British. And the pipes were big enough for people to walk in them - 6 feet

diameter pipes. *[What sort of pipes?]* Pipes for coal or coke or oil. And it was necessary for the German war effort, because, number one, we were manufacturing browncoal - coke of sorts, and margarine, and fuel - oil, by-products. And there were meant to be about fifty or sixty thousand people working there. Prisoners of war, that is. Therefore I saw for the first time, having been in Zeitz for the first time, I saw American soldiers, British soldiers, Russian soldiers....

Ben: French, Norwegians, everybody.

Abe: That's right, for the first time I saw soldiers other than...

Ben's wife: You mean as prisoners of war.

Abe: That's right.

Ben: All working as slave labour.

Abe: Not as slave labour. Well, they were, but in reality, the Jews were clearly slave labour. They were getting some sort of rations.

Ben's wife: They were getting - what - Red Cross parcels or....?

Abe: Yes, whatever.

Ben's wife: They were treated differently.

Abe: That's right.

Ben's wife: Very conspicuously.

Abe: That's right.

Ben: They weren't starving.

Abe: That's right. They were treated differently - they were different people.

Ben: Did they live together with you or were they segregated?

Abe: No no. Separately. You could have 10,000 of this group, 10,000 of that group.

Ben's wife: And what sort of work were you doing?

Abe: (Excitedly) Well mainly tidying up. It was being bombed. They were reconstructing them and they started one day the machines go, and during the night the whole thing is turned upside-down. That was the time when you had a thousand bombers, and a thousand bombers descending on a factory like that which is....you know.....you get a square mile of machinery just like that.

Ben: How did you feel when the bombing took place?

Abe: I was enjoying it! That is interesting. That was one of the most interesting things. For the first time I was enjoying things. I remember, already in Berchenshof-Birkenau, they sent in some bombs, and one German got killed or whatever. I enjoyed it. I felt no fear. They were shouting about and going towhat's it called now - the German word for it? I forget. You know, to hide, and all that. It was magnificent - fantastic! For the first time I was in a different world. I remember, we were marching and all of a sudden three aeroplanes appeared. So the German soldiers were hiding under the trees. I enjoyed it! I wasn't in a hurry to hide. They were not pursuing us in any case.

Ben: Abe, when you got to Germany after the war, where did you stay? Also in a kinderheim?

Abe: No, in Germany I was in Neu Freimann. Neu Freimann, that was near Munchen. This was a small...like Watford outside London....

Ben: Was Zruli with you at the time, or Willy Frischman?

Abe: Willy Frischman, I met in London.

Marilyn: Dad, did you tell them how people behaved when you were on the marches?

Abe: Oh yes, that was very interesting. I remember when we were marching through German villages and all that, and they were throwing bottles, and glass and breaking it for us, and we were tearing our legs on the glass - pieces. And then I remember when we marched through the Czech areas, they were risking their lives to give us a piece of bread

Ben: So there was a complete change from the Germans to the Czechs. The Germans threw bottles at you and wanted to hit you, whereas the Czechs wanted to help you.

Abe: The glass was broken.

Ben's wife: What sort of footwear were you wearing?

Abe: Nothing. We had bits of rags tied up around the feet. What else could you do?

Ben: So the Germans, when you were walking, were not sympathetic at all.

Abe: Sympathetic? They were breaking glass....

Marilyn: What about the Czech woman who handed youran over.

Abe: Yes, she ran across the road and handed me a piece of bread, and she was hit over the head with the butt of a gun for it by a German soldier.

Marilyn: Because when they threw the bread, there was such a scramble, wasn't there?

Abe: Oh yes.

Ben: The guards who were taking you towards Czechoslovakia and subsequently to Teresenstadt, were they young guards or old guards?

Abe: Old. Old. The young ones were fighting. In fact, many of them were Hungarians. They were old.

Ben: So the old ones were no better than the young ones.

Abe: Well the old ones ...(?).. just shooting.....

Ben: So how did you come to England? Was it because of David?

Abe: Well David was here, and so I put down my name to come here.

Marilyn: Tell them about the woman who gave you violin lessons.

Abe: Oh yes. In Germany, I used to get lots of lessons. I had lots of rations.....there was the

Inra. There was Harita. ("Charity" - Czech). Una, of course. What else was there? There was one other. I forget now. In Czechoslovakia, first of all, we were getting lots of food. But that wasn't the point. What you wanted was Germany. When I was in Germany afterwards. In Germany I attended lessons, and the more lessons I attended, the more rations I got. There there was the Joint. Joint A La Maine (laughs) - do you remember the song? There was the Joint. There was the - let's see now...I forget. In any case, I was attending lessons, learning Hebrew. I got rations for that. Being at the Joint, I got rations for that. And I was attending other schools as well. German schools. Music college, and I was getting rations for that as well. So that everything was rationed - money had no value - so I was paying for all of my lessons in food. You know, tuna fish, there was....lovely chocolates I remember we got from the Americans - the American side. I got that, I remember. And in any case, we got generally plenty of food. And I was paying with that for my lessons, so they were very pleased to give me lessons(?) So I learned violin, piano, German, French, English, whatever. And I was just the right age. I was still fourteen.

Marilyn: The violin teacher.....?

Abe: I had a violin teacher as well, yes.

Ben: So who was dealing with you when you came to England. Was it Ruth Thelna?

Abe: No, it was Friedman.

Ben: Friedman. Ginger Friedman?

Abe: No not Ginger Friedman. Ginger Friedman was lecturing in literature.

Ben: Yes. But he took care of you did he? Ginger Friedman? Or was it the other Friedman - Oscar Friedman?

Abe: Oscar Friedman.

Ben: Oscar Friedman. Did he interview you? Did he talk to you?

Abe: On the whole, I didn't like Friedman.

Ben: Why?

Abe: I think he was not a nice fellow. I remember he was opening my letters. I received a letter - he invited me into his office....

Ben: So to whom were you responsible at Bloomsbury at the time other than Oscar Friedman?

Ben's wife: Did you tell Abe that the dossier is available if he wanted?

Abe: Dossier for what?

Ben's wife: You know they had some archives at the CBF, and they've sorted them through, and so that the people's files, the people who came over with the CBF, their files are available for them to purchase - copies - if they wish. And it has to be by request of the person involved. They won't go and give it to anybody else, but if you want it, then you can get at it. There's a fee of £20 or something.

Abe: Friedman wanted me to become a piano tuner.

Ben: Really?!

Ben's wife: Did you say how long it took from Munkacs - you were sent straight to Auschwitz? How long did that journey take?

Abe: It took about three (?) days I should think.

Ben's wife: Two days. I don't know how far it is.

Ben: Well it's not far, you see, because Munkacs is not far from the Carpathian mountains, and the Carpathian mountains are very very near - along the range of mountains towards Auschwitz.

Ben's wife: And how long were you sent there? That was a march as well?

Abe: No. Train.

Ben's wife: In cattle trucks as well?

Abe: Well, cattle trucks, yes, but - it was closed.

Ben: So Friedman wanted you to be a piano tuner? He did it with everybody! When I met Oscar Friedman and he asked me what would you like to do, and I said well I'd like to go to school, so he said to me: "We brought you here not to go to school. We want you to go to work. Right away that was his attitude.

Abe: What happened was: I came here in '47. Now we didn't see eye to eye from the start. I had in mind of studying. Not only did I have in mind of studying. Even in Paris, they wanted me to study there. They were going to pay for me for everything, all studies, anything I wanted to do. In Paris they wanted me to study, but I came to England because Uncle David was here.....and I was going to him, and he was going to torpedo anything. You see, what happened was, in those days there was Bunns Court. Bunns Court. You know Bunns Court? Yes? Bunns Court School in Kent. Ashford. Now, so when I arrived, I arrived at the time where at the end of the year the school was to be closed down. Now it was inconceivable that I would pass O Levels in a few months. Where others were taking O Levels like Irving Bunsell, Sevek Finkelstein....

Ben: They were taking it later. Not in '47.

Abe: In '48. It doesn't matter.

Ben: '48 - '49.

Abe: '48 - '49. OK they were taking them in '48, but they had arrived in England in '45 or '46, which means they were ahead of me considerably. As far as English goes, I had to start from the beginning. Very beginning. Now that pleased Friedman very much because I was going to be proved the dunce he wanted me to be, and his general attitude was such that I didn't like him. Now the problem arose when I took my O Levels - I didn't take it in Bunns Court - [No, you took it at Plastow] Plastow of course - I had a year's study - [It was '49] No - '48 [No, you came in '48] I came in '47 [No to Plastow] '49. I had a year's time to study. Now what happened was, what hurt him was that Savak Finkelstein and Samuel Oliner had failed their O levels, and he had selected them for studies.

End of tape

Abraham Herman, 1984 or 1985

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Abraham Herman 1984 or 85

Middle of interview

So.....escape or resistance just wasn't there. We went like sheep before the elders. The elders went like sheep before....It wasn't in the nature of those Jews who had lived in ghettos for hundreds of years to offer any sort of resistance or any excuse to their protectors for chasing them out of their area.

What of Western Europe? The Jews from there where they were more assimilated?

Oh yes, they went also to the concentration camps, and the gas chambers. They were wiped out just like all the others.

But they, you could say, weren't as conditioned to not wishing to cause problems....

No, they were not conditioned like that. They were educated, advanced, they were professors, they were teachers, they were lawyers, but they vanished all the same. Well, it was a matter of: there was always somebody who knew they were Jewish even if they didn't look it. Even if they didn't behave it....they didn't look anything like it, and they would tell of them in order to gain some advantage: property or other advantage. Jews had long lost their positions in public service or professions in Germany. Therefore there was this gradual selecting the Jew for the purpose.

What kept you going mentally?

Ah! What kept me going mentally? Oh - the war will end and then everything will be fine, and one day I'll have enough bread, butter and milk, and that was the food I looked to as being well off, I remember. Bread and butter and milk.

But that the war will end was with you from the beginning of Auschwitz?

Yes, that the war would end - that was with me. The question was only: will I still be alive when the war would end? I wasn't sure about that. But if I keep alive long enough, the war will end and I'll still be there. And then there was this hate built up, and this thing which couldn't really be understood. These monsters

in jackboots. And of course these alsations, murderers, and so on. They were sadists.

Did you ever think: Why are they doing this to me as a Jew?

Well, I was a Jew and this was happening to Jews.

No, the reason I ask is that you've read. You've been through a fairly good, more advanced education than the normal Jew from where you were.

No, different education.

Did it not make you think, and start wondering and considering....

I was not of an age that I would plan and think things. And I quite enjoyed a book of Jules Verne at that time. That was my age.

So is it fair to say that the feeling was: This is my lot. I must bear it?

That was our lot. That was our lot. We were selected. After all, I was labelled. No escape, nowhere.

The actual tattoo, did it affect you psychologically at all?

Did it affect me psychologically. It affected me only in that there was no way of - I could no longer escape. Because it had entered my mind, and I could have made attempts, because I was in situations where I could have escaped, but I didn't know in which direction. I did discuss it with Peter, I remember.....He said there's no way. I'm in the middle of things. Right in the middle. If you get through this wire, which is easy enough..because we did get out.....but you'll not get through further. There were wires within wires within wires within wires. There's no way. At least not from there, and with this tattoo, I'd be recognized anywhere. Yes, the only other thing I had was prison uniform. Not a very good thing to cover it with.

Now I mentioned already there was a big turnover of people. People surviving a very short time - two to three months really, mainly because of lack of food, or simply being beaten to death. But mostly I watched them come back and walk with swollen feet. That is something which happens to people who don't eat

enough of the right kinds of food. The Russians seemed to be advancing, and time had really come for evacuation, or staying behind. Whatever one could do. We were in Birchashof farm complex, and the Germans decided they were going to save the machinery and take it to Germany with their horses, carts. And many soldiers with dogs. And it was winter, December, 1944 - middle of December.....late December.....or maybe even the beginning of 1945. The very beginning.

Now there were 30 Poles. They liked to think they were soldiers. They were lined up and they marched out. Where they marched to, I don't know. Since the Polish historians were given no information about this place at Birchashof Birkenau, I think they were marched out and shot like soldiers. The Germans would do that sort of thing. Now the Germans who were at the camp - they were allowed to go free. They were allowed to join the armies, or anything. And the Jews were going to go to other concentration camps - going to Germany - or who knows where. So there was a long line of people, about four or six abreast....I remember it was about six.....and that line must have been miles long because they had been evacuated from other camps at the same time. Only we were at the end of the line because we had these carriages, horses, carts, pushing. And we were marching, starting to push it. Now it appears that the Russians were advancing pretty quickly, so we were going days and nights [*24 hours a day?*] Oh yes. And anybody who couldn't keep up just sat down and he was shot. There were soldiers at the back who would shoot them. Nobody could escape. Everytime somebody sat down you would hear a shot after, as we passed. And in any case, as we were at the back, there were other convoys, transports in front of us, who had marched before us, half a mile or so, and the sides were littered with dead prisoners shot all along the line. Every group had the responsibility to shoot people who couldn't keep up. Now that was known as a death march.

Now they didn't realise that the horses cannot go for 24 hours a day, but they wanted not only that. While we were marching, walking, the soldiers would take it in turn to sit on the carts and have their sleep. As we were pushing uphill - there was a track - there was a road once upon a time there, but it was an old track - we had to push the carts uphill, and there were always the Germans with their truncheons: "Los! Los! Aufgang! Los! Los! Los!", and hitting, always hitting - some of them were just hitting in any case for no reason at all, that if you went outside of the line, you had a very good chance of being hit, and one hit of that on the head, you'd fall down, you'd stumble, you'd stay there, you wouldn't get up anymore. In any case, many people couldn't keep up so they just sat down, they just gave up. What's the point in struggling? I'll only have to do

the same thing in half an hour, or an hour, or two hours, or tomorrow. Therefore a life wasn't worth very much. There was very little to hang onto. There seemed to be no life, no future, nothing visible. You could see those lines of hundreds and thousands of people just shot on the sides of the march. I believe the total march must have been about 20 or 30,000. And after three days there were no more horses. The horses had been shot long ago because they couldn't go. They couldn't hold up the transport - we had to evacuate. You couldn't push the carts either [*Who?*] The prisoners couldn't. They'd already killed and shot so many it didn't matter.

The?...was abandoned, and I think there must have been about - more than 50% in three days - more than 50 - I would venture to say as many as 70% of the group were killed in three days only. Of what was there. And we were supposed to be the fittest of those who survived. Then we got onto a train - open train - squeezed about - I think - 75 of us in each one, and we stayed there for another few days....travelled a little bit, and stayed there. We had about 10% of those who started up two weeks earlier. In other words, we were on this transport for two weeks in total. About 10% survived, and we got to Buchenwald.

Was Peter still with you?

No, as I said the German prisoners remained in Birchashof Birkenau. Some joined the army - the fighting, and others were left to go free. These were no longer with us. We were no longer in Birchashof Birkenau. Birchashof Birkenau disappeared. So about 10% survived. Even on the cattle...on the trucks, people were just dying, and from my home town fewer and fewer were still alive - daily, on the open truck - some died of starvation, some died - they went mad.

Now I'm going to give you an episode which sticks out in my mind. Now where I come from there were two brothers. They were hardy people - they were selling coal. I was a little boy but they were big boys compared to me - they must have been 19 or 20 - and to carry coal in sacks to sell - so they were really used to hardship. There were two brothers, and they were with me on one of these open truck-carriages - railway carriages. After a number of days - since the total travel was only about two weeks - without food - all we had was snow for water - one of the brothers died. Then all of a sudden, somebody saw the other brother eating the flesh of his brother. And then he was pointed out:

“Look what’s happening! Look what’s happening!” And this person all of a sudden stood up - we were all huddled together in an open carriage - stood up as if to walk on all of them: “I’m going home for Shabbes! I’m going home for Shabbes!” As if to walk over the people, as if nobody was there. And the guard shot him. Others died, but more calmly. Just fell asleep and they never woke up. But that was something which....it’s not that he was shot - that he was “going home”, that his mind had gone. That he had eaten of his brother.

Now we arrived in Buchenwald a starved little boy, and others. We get food there, and it seems to be a bit better than the others, but everyday I see people pulling carts - skeletons - dead people - to the crematoria to burn - all the time they’re pulling them, pulling them. Therefore this event of people dying there like flies seems to be an occurrence wherever we were. However I’m told: “Look, you’re a young boy, you’re under 16, you can stay here in the children’s ward. And you will be all right.” I said: “No, I’m 18.”

Who said this?

Well, some people in Buchenwald.

Inmates?

Yes. I said: “No, I’m 18 and I want to go to work.” I didn’t want to stay in that place. I thought to myself: If I work, I’m all right. If I don’t work, I’m useless and we die. So after - I think I stayed there about a couple of weeks or so - I was healthier when I left Buchenwald than when I had arrived there. Because we did have regular food. And not only that, the person who was serving the food, seeing I need a little bit extra, he gave me the extra little bit.sort of a ladle - he just gave me the bit which had a bit of meat in it. These are these little perks which made the difference between people surviving or not.

So then, from Buchenwald, after all I said I was 18, and people of that age were taken to a place called Ramsdorf by railway. We were now inside Germany. Ramsdorf is near Tseitz, which is a big town or city, and there was a big factory - Braunco (brown coal?) factory: with oil, and margarine, and who knows, which were needed for the war effort, and the British knew it, because they bombed it day and night. But there were 30,000 prisoners, and for the first time, I saw American prisoners, British prisoners, Russian prisoners, any and all captured, all there, trying to work, trying to put the factory - rebuild the factory after it had been bombed. And the bombs kept falling almost any time.

Eventually it was rebuilt in what was an operation of half a day, and it was smashed to smithereens again (*laughing*). It's obvious it was a two mile square industrial complex. The pipes which were about five feet in diameter which were buried under the ground - after the bombing, they all came up (*laughing*). And of course many of our people also got killed in the bombing and all that. But it didn't matter. Here was something - at least we were dying for something! (*Laughing*). It's not for nothing any more! In any case I spent the rest of the time to try, with 30,000 others to repair the factory, to help the German war effort.

Now to my surprise, as I arrived there I found that my brother was in this camp (he's now in England). He was there, and he was supposed to have been there, and he was helping in carpentry, doing a little bit in the carpentry shop. But since it was being bombed day and night it didn't really make any difference what you were earmarked for. All you had to do is whatever you could. Pull the pipes out, and the German engineers cabbng in new pipes all the time. So this cleared the path and all that. But the point is, he was there. That is important. And now we were two together. And I don't know exactly how long I was there, but not very long. It must have been about three months, which was pretty long.....

How did you find out that your brother was there?

Well, we asked. As soon as I arrived at a new camp, I asked: "Is anybody there? Is anybody there? Is anybody there?" And eventually somebody said: "Oh yes, your brother is there." Of course we met. And that was Ramsdorf, in Germany. So there they did give us food simply because there we were doing a useful job.....so to speak, but not very much of it. People still kept dying all the time. There were always the musulman. The musulman is the person who was skin and bone.

How did your situation in Ramsdorf compare with the British and American POWs?

Yes, in those places there were actually American soldiers, and British soldiers, and other soldiers working as well, in Ramsdorf. But we were not together. They were looked after better. We were Jews in a different camp, and they were non-Jews in a different camp. They were given the better food, they looked obviously - they were demoralised, but they seem to have been fed well. But

there's no comparison. The Russians seemed to be more demoralised, I noticed, but even they were fed better than we were. We were the down-trodden, quite clearly.

Now about three months later or so, the allies were advancing. Now again, we were being evacuated, so they put us in a train, and they were going inward towards Germany. After about one or two days, not going very fast - we were not priority transport. Perhaps before getting onto this train an important event has taken place. We were told we were going to be evacuated, and I saw people were running to the kitchen to find some food for the journey. I also ran to the kitchen, and I found, and I took, three carrots, and I ran away. But others managed to get shot for their troubles. I did get away with three carrots. Much clearly faster. In other words, as we started off the next journey, I had three carrots.

Now, we were put on the trains after - I think - one or two days. Their locomotive was bombed, the train stopped. The train came to a sudden halt, and as the aeroplanes came and our guards were frightened, they ran away. And many of us, prisoners, started to run away into the woods, only to be rounded up by local Germans - old people and young people, and most of those running into the woods - not knowing where to go - they were all shot by the local people, local Hitler Jugend. All young people were taught how to handle guns in Germany. Therefore I don't think anybody will have escaped that.

After that we had to walk, and we were walking ...I think a couple of weeks ...maybe even longer - through German towns and villages, and most of our shoes had long worn out. Some had rags. We did stop now and then, for a bit of soup, and I had carrot which helped. We walk - we had nothing to eat....(?)

They didn't shoot the prisoners in the towns, but as soon as we got a certain distance from a small town or a village, we'd stop, and those they thought unable to continue were shot. Or they would just take a group of people and shoot them in any case because they wanted to reduce some of the guards. Some of the guards wanted to go away. Some said they wanted to go to the front to fight, others who had other reasons. So since there were too few guards, they reduced the number of people in the march.

Now I remember my brother was eating grass - sometimes you snatch a bit of grass or a potato peel which you found on the wayside, and he'd get a stomach ache and he'd want to sit down. So I would drag him along. Then I would want

to give up, I did the same thing, so he would drag me along. But on the whole, these three carrots I think saved our lives, because it gave us the extra little bit at the beginning when we rationed it, it kept us going for a little bit. Just a little bit made all the difference. So that was a little treasure, the carrots, in that transport, in particular while we were still in the open carriage before we were bombed. It did keep us.

Now, as we passed the German towns, German women and children would throw bottles. They would break on the path - we didn't have shoes - so that we should walk on it and cut ourselves, and they would shout abuse and do all sorts of things. And we must have looked a sight! It was a long time, when you look at it from the point of view of starvation, for how long you can survive, it was a long time. Most of us shouldn't have made it by then already. So again our numbers were being depleted. From Ramsdorf, we started a large number - I think there were a couple of thousand to start off. We just filled, I remember, the train - two thousand, and as we were marching I remember we reduced - I believe about 200 arrived in Teresenstadt finally.

Now as we entered the Czech, all of a sudden there was a change. There was no more glass being thrown, but people throw pieces of bread, and they speak Czech, and the German soldiers happen to shoot anybody who throws bread or who brings and all that. But some of the women risked their lives - Czech woman ran across - pushed a piece of bread in my hand and ran off. I managed to get my piece of bread, because when they threw bread, there was a scramble for it and nobody had it. And they want to give to somebody in particular. So I remember a woman ran across at the risk of her (life) and she had been hit, I remember, for her troubles, by the guard.

And here they had orders not to shoot anymore. We were now on Czech territory at that time, it was after the war. Because - I remember - for what reason exactly that's not important - how would I know the reason? I was told the reason afterwards - after the war. But the point is: there was no more shooting going on and we were going slower, and eventually we ended up at Teresenstadt. But people still kept dying, because it doesn't end at a certain point of time. People got used to not eating. They couldn't take food anymore. And when they got food, a little bit of food, you got typhoid. You died of it.

So now we were in Teresenstadt, and we knew now that the war was nearing an end. It's only a matter of time before the shooting around, and one day we saw

the first Russian motorcyclist, and that was the end of the war. And we weren't allowed to go out straight away, but as soon as we heard there were no more Germans, so some of us found a hole to climb out of Teresenstadt, and there were strawberries there. Some of us had some strawberries. And a Russian soldier came and ordered me back - ordered us - there were others as well. I followed the others. And there were a few others who managed to go out and get some food and then eat the wrong food and they died of it. So the mortality rate was generally very very high. Therefore it doesn't surprise me that they haven't got anybody else from Birchashof Birkenau. And if those Germans who were left behind were sent to the front, which I think happened to them, they wouldn't have survived. Probably the Russian advance would have just treated them like all the others there.

Have you been back to Auschwitz?

No!!! A pilgrimage to that place? You must be joking! I know some people go.....Good heavens! No, no. I've left it behind.

And of course, after the war, I was a little bit more privileged than most others who survived, because I still was very young, and I was given the opportunity to do more or less whatever I wanted. Yes, France offered me scholarships, and would I study there? I was the only person from that part who spoke French as well, and German. I could have gone to America, I could have gone to Israel, because I was very young and I didn't have to wait for the quota. In those days, Britain controlled the entry to Israel - they allowed 1,500. But because of my age, I could have gone there.

Why choose Britain?

Why choose Britain? Well, I think I'd better continue a little bit beyond the war. It's no longer part of this experience. It's different.

So we stayed in Teresenstadt for a few weeks, checking for health and everything. My brother had fallen ill at that time, I said we were together - he got typhoid...?...so I stayed a little bit longer. But eventually we went back to my home town, Munkacs, and there I met my other brother. He had also survived. It appears he was left behind in Auschwitz, because he was ill, he wasn't able to make the transport, and the soldiers who were meant to shoot everybody just ran away. He changed into prison uniform. The Russians must have been very near,

and this sort of thing happened.

We went back first of all to see what was happening. We didn't recognise the place. We had lived in a flat - I did say earlier I was a little bit better off than some others - my parents had in fact built the building, and when I went back to the flat with my elder brother, there was the mayor of the town living in our flat. So he said: "If you know what's good for you, you'll get out of here." And frankly he was right. We were not in a position to challenge him or anything. There were still, after the war, all those communists and others, who had guns. The number of Jews I think had depleted from the area from 25,000 to about 150 or so. Somewhere between 100 to 200 in any case. And I spent there two weeks, and then went back to Prague. I felt more at home with the Czech people than with any - rather like a dog - a dog knows where he's well off. I knew where I was well off.

So I arrived in Prague, and there were many people - refugees, homeless, who survived or who escaped and returned, and there was the Red Cross who'd provided food at one station, and there was the Joint - you heard of the Joint? The Joint Distribution in America. And they provided soup kitchens at another station. And there was still the Christian charity - Harita - which also gave food - in some cases food, in other cases soup, it depends where. Now somebody told me I should go to this station and there was food. And of course there we were given straight away a place where we could sleep. They'd give you an address, you arrived at the station: "Yes you go there". In other words, people were helpful. And at the station straight away we were given food - a sandwich or something I remember, and then somebody says: "You can have more food if you go to the other station."

So I went on a tram, and I say: "I want to go to that station." And a man starts talking to me. He says to me: "Why do you want to go there?" I said: "Well, I understand that I can eat there." So the man says: "Oh, you want to eat." And I spoke to him in German - Czech and German I think. We spoke both....(?)...So he told me: "Well, if you go there, and there are other boys of your age there, and they'll give you plenty of food and you can learn as well. It's a sort of a school. Would you like to go to school?" he said. I said: "Yes. If there's enough food there, yes."

So I go to a place where...an address of a flat in Prague the man gave me, and I gave them a little note which that man had given me - a letter - I can't remember what it was, and he says: "Yes. Hold on. I'm going to arrange that you should

go to that school.” “I’m not going anywhere, because this man said that I can have some food here.” And she goes and prepares me a plate full of food - very nice! Now I knew I was in good hands. And then: would I like to go? I said: yes. So he gave me a ticket - a piece of paper instead of a ticket, and “You can go there.” Now this person I’d bumped into on a tram was the right-hand man of Tomas Geig Maseryk before the war. He was the President of Czechoslovakia. And where I went to, was a place called Stijine which the Baron from Richthoven had used as his administrative centre during the war. And it was a castle. And as soon as I arrived there - of course there were other boys, a few of them younger than me - two or three. The others were older. More Polish. But nevertheless all were younger. But I was still under sixteen. The others may have been seventeen, eighteen some of them. And there we had lessons, food was regular, and we had plenty of exercise, and it was like a little recuperating place. So the place was called Stijine. I understand it’s now an international conference centre. Large grounds, with tennis courts and all that, and it was about sixty miles away from Prague.

Now I stayed there six months, and then we left Czechoslovakia with the intention of going to Israel. Now there were difficulties about going to Israel. Now while I was there, my elder brother had come to England. He was also a young person, and England had taken then I believe about 200 or 300 young people under a certain age: sixteen or eighteen. And meantime, I communicated with him - he was here in England. So he said: “Come to England”. I said: “All right. I’ll come to England.” What difference does it make?

In the meantime I was in Munich. We had left Prague, and I was in Munich, and there were big centres - big camps for displaced persons. Many thousands - tens of thousands of people. And many of them trying to go to America, not knowing where they were going, whether they were too old for any country to want them. And of course I was given rations - being a deported person - and a place to stay, and would I like to study? Oh yes. Why not? I had lessons. And I was also going to music lessons. I joined the Handel’s Conservatorium there. I did very well too! I received the highest marks at the end of the year that anyone had ever achieved there. But I worked very hard. They allowed me to practice there on the piano, and I also learned the violin then. I had French lessons. German I knew, but I had more German.... My German was as good as the German people’s....of that age...unless he was exceptionally bright. And for studying, I had extra rations. Now I had two lots of food, and for two lots of food, I could pay for some of my private lessons in food, to a German music teacher, because

music was not provided as part of the learning. All the other lessons I had free. And I remember I attended Handel's Conservatorium with other Germans. I was writing in Gothic German, and I was keeping up quite well.

Now eventually there was a woman teacher who gave private lessons in exchange for tinned food. It was American tinned food - there was corned beef, there were sardines I remember, and also there was the chocolate. That was important. That I didn't exchange. She invited me to her home, and she had very many musical instruments: violins, and others. So I said: "You have many instruments. Where do you get them from?" She said: "Oh, my nephew was an officer in Poland. Whenever he came home on leave, he always brought me something." And I remember particularly that she showed me: "This is an Amati", and then she mentioned the others. Well you can look up for yourself what an Amati violin is worth. And if you think about it, that there must have been between thirty to forty musical instruments in that room, it will give you some indication what was going on.

What did you think at the time?

Well, after that I left her. I didn't go back to her anymore. I didn't want to know her. (I didn't want a musical (?) instrument. I said, "No, I'm going to England.

So I went down - there was a place who arranged the administration of people leaving. So I said: "Look, I think I should go to England now." People were already waiting a year, three months, six months, nine months. I said: "No, no, I think I can go now." They said: "Come back tomorrow". And a day later - I had spent a year in Germany - various schools - the music school was only one part of it. And I had learned also a bit of Hebrew - I wasn't very good at it, but I really did have special French lessons, and English lessons. I didn't waste my time. The following morning I went back, and they said: "Yes you can leave. How long will it take you to pack?" I said: "Half an hour." And they said: "All right. Well, you can leave on the afternoon train."

So I went to Paris. Through Paris. And there was somebody waiting, it appears, and he gave me some money to stay in a hotel. So I stayed there....two weeks. And there seemed to be no indication that they were sending me on. They said: Well you can study here.

I must have been the first person from that part of the world who actually could converse with them in French. Apart from other languages. And of course I

carried my little violin. And of course they wanted to sponsor me in Paris. I said: No. I've got a brother in England. I want to go there.

So I came to England, I got onto a boat here I remember and?....I was quite sea sick! And it was drizzling - it was miserable weather, I remember when I arrived, and I thought: "So this is England!" There was sunshine in Paris.

So, are there any questions.....?

Yes - In Hungary, when Eichmann came in with his team to start the deportations, he immediately did the standard German thing and set up the Jewish Council [In Budapest, yes] which complied with everything that he wanted, didn't it?

Yes, Eichmann was organized and he used the Jews to their own disadvantage. To their own detriment.

How do you think it was possible for that Jewish Council, which must have know, and had been told....

....what had happened to the Jews. They were powerless - there was nothing they could do. There were many Jewish Councils. They were doing as they were told. They were not negotiating as such. They were just transmitting information as directed and ordered by the SS. They were not a Body who had any powers.

They had the power of doing nothing.

They had the power of doing as they were told, of carrying out orders. Otherwise they'd be shot, singled out, and their families deported straight away to Auschwitz.

I can't really put myself into that position, but the trade they were making there was their own life or....

No, it only looked like it. That may have been how it....eventually just save their own life while they were talking.... But in reality the Germans wanted to get something out of the negotiations and that's why they allowed it. There was nothing there. There was nothing there. The fact that a few Jews were saved -

was neither here nor there. This was an extermination policy and that's exactly what happened.

Do you ever feel like retribution of the Germans?

I was in Germany after the war for one year in Munich. I remember - people were queuing to go to pictures. So I saw somebody go up to the box office saying: "Can I please have my ticket, I have reserved it". Saying it in perfect German. So the person at the cash desk said: "Yes of course, we've reserved it for you." Then I went up to the booking office and I said "Any change of getting in?" in perfect German. "Yes, of course, we have reserved your ticket - young man" - number one. Number two: I was in a tram in Munich and there were women talking, and they said - one told the other: "It was better under Hitler wasn't it?" and the other said: "Yes, much better." It was after the war.

So - what can you do? Oh yes, at that time there was the hate and all that, but that disappeared very quickly. I got engaged and busy in other things. It made no sense - to do what? I consider the whole German race guilty. You can't shoot every one of them - all of them. And even if you shoot every one of them it doesn't end there.