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Israel I. Cohen oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, December 29, 2008

Israel I. Cohen (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Michael Hirsh: You talk to children in schools about it?

Israel Cohen: I do all the time, yeah. Public schools and Jewish schools.

MH: Okay. Let me start: Your name is Israel I. Cohen, C-o-h-e-n?

IC: Yes.

MH: ...What is your date of birth?

IC: You're not going to get my identity?

MH: No, I'm not. I'm not trying to check your identity. What year were you born?

IC: I was born in twenty-six [1926], maybe, but because of the Germans, I had to change my year of birth.

MH: On April 25, 1945, you knew already that the Americans were coming?

IC: Already for weeks, already could see the sky was lit as in the daytime with these rockets and so on. And you could hear these bombs falling around, and the artillery was flying over the head.

MH: So what were the inmates of the camp saying?

IC: They hoped that they will be liberated, but the Germans had other plans for them—for us.

MH: Did you know what the Germans' plans were, or did you think the Germans would just leave?

IC: No, the Germans made us leave, came back. They wanted to evacuate the whole camp and take them with them. Already once we were in the ghetto, Łódź, and the Russians were there and the Germans took us away. We know already that it is, so we tried to hide to stay there.

MH: Kaufering IV was—what'd they call it, *Krankenlager*? The sick camp?

IC: No, it was really a working *lager*. I tell you one thing: If you want to know about Kaufering, there is a German publication which I took—you know, which I got it from them, and I took some pictures from them. And if I'm in the office, I can give you the address or the e-mail, to the email address.

MH: Okay, Well, just tell me what was going on with you the last couple of days.

IC: Last couple days, well, our group of young boys, Hassidim, you know, and we decided—I said, "I'm not going to go anymore, and I have enough," and so we were hiding. In the beginning, we were hiding in a (inaudible). In the last two months, it was a sick camp, because there were so many epidemics, typhoid fever, and the other sickness, dysentery. So these people with dysentery, you'd talk to them, and they just expired, you know?

MH: Right.

IC: And so, we hid. We didn't care about the consequences, that we get these contagions. We were hiding there in the tents that the Germans wouldn't come in. But they did come in.

MH: And they didn't find you?

IC: No, we were saved by an alarm, like a (inaudible) alarm that means that the Americans were near, and the Germans run away.

MH: How long did you have to hide before you heard the Americans getting close?

IC: The Americans were very close, but we were hiding through the whole day, the whole night. And then, the next day, we didn't see the Germans. We thought the Germans left, and then the Germans came back, and they evacuated the rest of the people and put them on truck, these people that couldn't move. They put them on the trucks. And we were on the trucks. I was on the truck already three times, but we didn't have—I weighed about seventy pounds when I was liberated. We didn't have no strength, and I was skin and bones. But we tried—I know not how the energy was working, you know?

MH: How did you get off the trucks?

IC: We rolled down.

MH: You just rolled down. And the Germans didn't see you?

IC: No, they were busy with other people.

MH: If they had seen you, they would've shot you.

IC: Sure. Or they would have put us back on the truck.

MH: Yeah.

IC: Or they would've clubbed us to death.

MH: Is there a point where you're so exhausted, you're no longer afraid?

IC: We were still afraid. You see, we didn't want to give the Germans the satisfaction that they gave—this was kind of a rebellion. We didn't want them to think they could do with us what they want.

MH: So, you rolled off the trucks, and the trucks—

IC: And we go back the same place, and then they caught us again. Then we hid, and I turned off the lights so there wouldn't be lights at night. So, they came in and ask, "Anybody there? Anybody there?" I guess they were afraid to go in in the dark, and so they left. And we waited the whole night.

MH: So, that's the night of April 27th.

IC: Twenty-six to twenty-seven, yeah.

MH: Then the sun comes up in the morning, and now what?

IC: Now the sun comes up, it was already—we were not sleeping, you know. Some people wanted to celebrate already, and I said, "No, we can't celebrate until the Americans come. Don't celebrate. Don't show that we are alive here." And so, we had a guard outside so that would see. One of the boys was outside, and then he told us it's not good. The Germans came back and they came with dogs and so on. They came and we're hiding again; we were hiding under *schmates* [rags]—how do you call it?

MH: *Schmates*. I understand.

IC: And other people were hiding in the straw. And then they came in, and then we heard shots and shots and shots. And then they came in, and our luck—one of the people which were hiding in the back by the window got up, and they wanted to shoot him, but the gun—how do you call it?

MH: Jammed.

IC: Jammed. He said, "Come out," but they all run out of the window. And behind the window, there were ditches, which they dug in case they want to shoot us, to put us in the ditches. So, they run out, they couldn't find him. But some of them were shot, and we heard them afterwards, like moaning and so on. And then they came back again, and then they left. And they came back again and moving the straw. And then went out again, and they opened up the little bit, the rags, and I thought it was full of fire and smoke. And then we crawled out from the door, and there was a pile of corpses, and we lie down on the corpses.

MH: They burned a lot of the barracks.

IC: They must have. All the barracks, except two.

MH: And you were in one of the two they didn't burn.

IC: Yeah. Either they didn't have gasoline or they're in a hurry. And they burned down also the piles of corpses, put lots of gasoline on them. But here, they didn't have all—they were running, and so we were hiding on these things. Two hours later, the Americans came.

MH: So, you were very lucky you were in a place that didn't get burned.

IC: Yeah, sure. I put it on providence. It was something that was—something happened that we were supposed to be saved, in spite everything.

MH: Despite everything. So, you were probably nineteen years old then.

IC: Yeah.

MH: You waited two more hours, laying in the pile of corpses?

IC: Yeah. And then I gave up almost, lying there, and I see that the Americans are still not here, and I said, “We can’t go at another time to hide and run around.” We’re not able to do it, and so my friends encouraged me again. They said, “Now, you told me in Auschwitz we should not give up, never give up,” and then in the last minute, so we lay down and the Americans came in later.

MH: When was the last time you’d had anything to eat, or drink?

IC: We were eating some raw potatoes, and this was terrible. Afterwards, I got dysentery from it. And we didn’t eat for the three days, we almost didn’t eat anything.

MH: Tell me about the Americans arriving. Do you hear them coming?

IC: Afterwards, when it was more calm, a little, we went into the kitchen. There was a kitchen which was standing still because it was made of bricks, and they couldn’t burn it down. So, we were lying down, and people were hiding still in the kitchen. And then someone came in and said, “Jews, we are free. The Americans are here.” And I had trouble to get up, and then my strength—I was running, I was doing. But now when the Americans came in, I was ready. I was running, but by nerve, not by my strength. But then my strength left me, and I went down. The Americans came in, the soldiers with the tanks, and they gave us boxes of chocolate and wine and those kind of things.

MH: The person who said, “Jews, we are free,” they said it in Yiddish?

IC: In Yiddish, “*Yuden zeinen frei*,” the Americans are—it was *Pesach Sheini* and I said, “It’s *Pesach Sheini*?” It’s like Passover, a second Passover. We are liberated the same day.

MH: Say the phrase again? “Jews, we are free”? Say it in Yiddish?

IC: *Yuden zeinen frei*.

MH: Okay. Where were you exactly when the first American got to you?

IC: I was in the kitchen, hiding in the kitchen.

MH: And what happened?

IC: Then some people brought in some flour and they put on the oven, and we baked the flour like matzos, and I said, "It's like *Pesach, Pesach Sheini*." Then we started to eat something and the Americans came in, and then we went down. We went out to meet the Americans.

MH: Did the Americans carry you out?

IC: No, no.

MH: You were able to walk.

IC: Able to walk still, yeah.

MH: Do you remember the soldier you first saw?

IC: Yeah, I remember the soldiers. I remember the uniforms, but not the faces so much.

MH: You don't happen to remember what unit he was from, what division?

IC: I think it was the 7th Army.

MH: But was it a tank division, armor?

IC: I guess so.

MH: Okay. The patch on his uniform was a triangle?

IC: (sighs)

MH: I know. I'm asking you a question—I know. It's sixty-three years ago, and I'm asking you a detail like that. I understand. So, what did the Americans do then?

IC: The Americans—the people went out. I couldn't walk, so the Americans took me and a friend of mine. They took a German wagon, for the horses, and they gave us to a farmer nearby that he should take care of us.

MH: They gave you to a German farmer?

IC: Yeah, nearby.

MH: Without American supervision?

IC: Yeah, yeah.

MH: Why would they think a German farmer would take care of you?

IC: The thing is like that. The Germans—after the Americans came in, they all said, “We didn't know.” You could get from them anything that you wanted.

MH: Yeah. “We didn't know. *Nicht Nazi*.” None of them knew.

IC: No, sure. And they were scared. They thought that the Americans are going to do to them what they did to us. They were very scared.

MH: How long did you stay with this farmer?

IC: Overnight.

MH: Overnight.

IC: I had diarrhea the whole night, and my friend, too, and dysentery. We thought we were going to expire there.

MH: Oy.

IC: And then, you know what the first thing was I wanted?

MH: What?

IC: When I came to the farm, they wanted to give me [something] to eat. I said, “No, I don’t want to eat. I need a bath, a hot bath.” I took off my clothes, and the clothes were full of lice. Full, full; they could walk away by themselves. And then I took—the farmer had a tub in the stable, and they put in hot water. My skin was burning from these bites of these lice. But I relaxed so much that afterwards—I’ll tell you one thing: if I see a louse, I’m going to faint. I didn’t see it since then.

MH: The Yiddish word for that moment would be what, *mechaya*?

IC: (laughs) Yeah. But then they come and said, “Eat!” and I ate something. And my friend told me, “Don’t eat. If you eat now, then—”

MH: It’ll go right through you.

IC: And the next day it was Shabbos, and a friend of ours which was looking for us found us, and he was so happy. He somehow got an American ambulance, and they took us to a hospital. They get me to a hospital, a German hospital.

MH: With German doctors or American doctors?

IC: German doctors.

MH: Yeah? That would scare the hell out of me.

IC: Yeah, sure. But Americans came in. There were also some Americans which came in.

MH: How long were you in the hospital?

IC: In this hospital, it was about five, six days. And then somebody died. This was a hospital really for the German wounded, but they gave us a floor. So, they gave us the best service, but they gave us all kind of food which wasn't good for us. And then one died, and people start to think the Germans poisoned him. So they decided—they were already fraternizing, these American doctors, and they took us to Landsberg to a DP [displaced persons] camp, which they made us—put up a new hospital there.

MH: So, the Americans then took care of you.

IC: No, nobody took care of us. In Landsberg, nobody took care of us.

MH: No, I mean at the hospital.

IC: At the hospital, there were no doctors, no nurses. We were left on our own.

MH: Really?

IC: Yeah.

MH: What happens next?

IC: Next, finally, next day—you'll read my book and you'll see a lot of things.¹ Next day—the doctor came only three days later. They gave us breakfast at eleven o'clock the next day, and they get some bread, which was like clay. You could build a house with it. (MH laughs) And it wasn't good. So, finally, the doctor came and put us, put me on a diet with—what's it called?—rice and (inaudible). They called this farina, like Cream of Wheat. So I ate rice and—

MH: Rice and Cream of Wheat.

¹ *Destined to Survive: Uplifting Stories from the Worst of Times*, published in 2001 by Mesorah Publications.

IC: —for about two weeks, and I felt already—for about a half a year, I couldn't look at Cream of Wheat.

MH: (laughs) Yeah, it's—

IC: These Americans, they send us a box, a package of the Red Cross. They had something, chocolate, and so a friend of mine said, "Let's trade it," and we traded it for a box of meat and fat. And I ate it, and I got sick again. But I felt that I was cleaned out, and the next day, I started to eat slowly, slowly. I put my bread outside the window so from the sun it would get toasted. And so I eat, and then I started to get—to be hungry. I wasn't hungry until then.

MH: You began to put weight back on?

IC: No, not yet.

MH: Not yet.

IC: Not yet, not so fast. Because there wasn't enough food to eat, you see? I was always hungry. I'd eat my bread and I was hungry. I sold my butter and exchanged it for bread. Finally, my friends came and rescued me out of this hospital. They were also at farmers' [homes], and then we eat a lot. The farmers have everything to eat. The German farmers have more than the French farmers, than anybody else.

MH: So, you got fresh eggs.

IC: Fresh eggs and butter. We ate so much. I put on meat, but my feet were not carrying me.

MH: To go back to when the Americans came, did you have any time to talk to an American soldier?

IC: No, no.

MH: None?

IC: I just watched as the Americans came. There was a man—a friend of ours was also the camp, and he was together in a block with thirty French prisoners. And they already at night—when the Germans left, they already started to boil potatoes. They had potatoes, because they took from the kitchen; you know, the kitchen was left. So everyone who came there, you could get how much you wanted, and they were singing.

And then the Germans came in and they put them up all against the wall, and they shot them all point blank. And he was shot, too, went into his face, went in the other side. He faked that he was—he was born in Germany, so he talked to them in German. “Why do you do it?” And so they shot him through, and he had faked it and his mouth open, so a guy said—he told me that he looked—he had golden teeth, and they took pliers and tore out his teeth together with the gums. And I saw him. When I came, he stood there with the gums down and the teeth on the gums. And he was bleeding badly.

MH: And he was rescued?

IC: The Americans came. He told me afterward that the Americans came and told the doctors, “If he doesn’t survive, you are going to be dead.” And so they did all the things to rescue him.

MH: So, just so I’m clear, they didn’t shoot him?

IC: They shot him through the mouth.

MH: Through the mouth, okay. You were in camps for how many years?

IC: From the ghetto—starting in the ghetto, from the end of 1939 to April 27th [1945].

MH: When you come out of it—and you were an Orthodox Jew?

IC: When I came out?

MH: You were an Orthodox Jew?

IC: All the time.

MH: All the time. And now?

IC: Also.

MH: How do you maintain your faith in God when that happens?

IC: Well, I'll tell you one thing. I talk to people, and I talk to *I daven in Aish HaTorah* which is (inaudible) service. I talk to them, and they ask me, "Why did it happen?" and I say, "I don't know, and nobody knows." In the Talmud it says things that happen to other people, the same thing, Rabbi Akiva and the people ask him—*Mosha Rabbeinu* asks, "Why did it happen to him?" and he said, "This is my business. I don't have to tell you, so we don't know. But I say only, if anyone is rescued, he has providence. *Hashem* [God] wanted him to be saved.

I know that someone lately had a video, from the Łódź ghetto and someone that was he was rescued by chance. I got up and I said that you win the lottery, it could be chance. You win twice the lottery, it could be chance. But if you win the lottery seven, eight times in a row, it can't be chance. Seven, eight times I was just before being killed, and I was saved at the last minute. This can't be a chance.

MH: I understand. When did you come to Canada?

IC: Fifty-one [1951].

MH: In fifty-one [1951]. You married before you came, or in Canada?

IC: Afterwards, I wanted to immigrate to Israel, but there was caught up with children, orphaned children in France, an extra bed, and I volunteered to stay with them and help them out. *Madrich*. And then I was working and with them for almost a year, and I got sick. My lungs were already done, you know. I had TB [tuberculosis], so a friend of mine took me to Switzerland and I was there three years in a sanatorium, in (inaudible).

MH: And you got married—?

IC: Yeah, I got married before we left, about fifty-one [1951], July fifty-one [1951].

MH: Okay. Did you have children?

IC: Yeah. Thanks, God.

MH: How many children do you have?

IC: We had five, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Thanks, God, for that.

MH: Okay. A couple more questions: Do you have a picture of yourself from, you know, right after the war?

IC: Not right after the war, but maybe a little bit later, maybe about a month, two months later.

MH: Could I possibly—if I send you an envelope, could I possibly borrow that picture and a current picture of yourself?

IC: It's in my book.

MH: It's in your book, but I can't copy it from your book.

IC: Yeah, sure, you can copy it.

MH: Okay, I'll try.

IC: This asshole who I gave him all the—I didn't write it for the book, you see, but I wrote my memoirs because the people in the camps, they wanted somebody should tell the world what happened, that people should know. And I wrote down in the fifties [1950s] and the sixties [1960s] and the seventies [1970s], and I send it to the Jewish newspapers to publish, and they published it in Toronto and New York and Israel. So,

afterwards, my children told me, “Why don’t you put it in a book?” See, I wrote in Yiddish, really, and then I had it translated in English. I sent it to my friend Herman Wouk. You heard about him?

MH: I know of Herman—*The Caine Mutiny* is one of my favorite books.

IC: Yeah. And I see him every year in Palm Springs. I have to go because of my lungs and my asthma. I have to go to Palm Springs for a month or a few weeks. And I see him, and I asked, “Tell me if it is worth publishing.” So, he said he read it; he read many Holocaust books because of his own books. He said, “Your book is one of the top. If you find a publisher, I write you introduction.” And I sent it to ArtScroll, and they took it right away. He wrote an introduction.

MH: Okay, which I will read as soon as I get the book. Is it okay if I quote from your book?

IC: Sure. ArtScroll doesn’t mind.

MH: Okay. I’ll look—

IC: The name of the book was *Destined to Survive*, published by ArtScroll. They wouldn’t have anything against it.

MH: I will do that. I’ll see about using the photo from the book, and if I can’t, I’ll either call ArtScroll or I’ll call you back.

IC: Yeah, sure.

MH: Well, I thank you very, very much.

IC: What is your phone number?

MH: My phone number is—

IC: Hold on for a second. Hold on for a second.

MH: Do you have e-mail?

IC: Yeah.

MH: What's your email address? I'll send it out.

IC: My email is—I have two emails, one is...

MH: Okay. I'll send you all my information and the name of my book and everything. I'll email it to you.

IC: Okay. Thank you very much.

MH: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

IC: You're welcome.

MH: Happy Hanukkah to you.

IC: Happy Hanukkah to you. *Chodesh* and a good year. And you live where, you live in Florida?

MH: I live in Florida now. I'm originally from Chicago.

IC: Oh, I see.

MH: But we live in Florida. I was in Los Angeles for nineteen years, and now I'm here.

IC: Uh-huh. So, you're retired?

MH: No, no. I write books. I'm not retired. My wife's—

IC: If I wouldn't have had to work, I would have written a sequel to this book, from my time in Canada.

MH: Ah. It would be interesting. Well, I will read your book, and I look forward to it.

IC: My son-in-law, he writes on the Internet. (inaudible) And he wrote before my book was published, I send him a chapter about Hanukkah. He published it on the Internet. He publishes articles every Friday. Anyway, once he put it on there, many editors put it in print, his name. The *Jewish World Review* picked it up, and they published the story about Hanukkah. I got after it over twenty emails from Gentiles, how they were impressed with this book, with the Hanukkah story.

MH: Yes, the Internet is amazing, how you can reach out to people. In fact, that's how I found you.

IC: (laughs) Google search?

MH: Well, I did a search for your name. I knew it was in Toronto, and I came up with the phone number. Thank you very, very much.

IC: You're welcome. Have a good year.

MH: Same to you. Bye-bye.

End of interview