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Bernhard Storch oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 8, 2008

Bernhard Storch (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: First of all, give me your name and spell it for me, please.

Bernhard Storch: Bernhard, that's first name. B-e-r-n-h-a-r-d. Storch, S-t-o-r-c-h.

MH: And they call you Ben?

BS: Ben, yes.

MH: And your address, please?

BS:

MH: And your phone number?

BS:

MH: And your date of birth?

BS: November 10, 1922.

MH: So you are how old?

BS: I'll be almost—in November, I'll be eighty-six.

MH: Okay. Your story is very different from any of the other people I've spoken with, 'cause you weren't in the American Army.

BS: Correct. Correct.

MH: Tell me, how does this all start?

BS: How all this started? It's a long way, it's a long story, but I will make it as short as possible, but it should be accurate. In 1939, unfortunately—I had to interrupt my education in 1937.

MH: Where were you?

BS: I was in Poland, city Bochnia, B-o-c-h-n-i-a. Bochnia is about eighteen miles south of Kraków. That's the area there. When the war broke out, I was apprenticed—the reason for my apprenticing actually so early was that I lost my father. My father was a World War I veteran with three medals; as a matter of fact, I have a picture of him with me, not because I had it with me. The reason I have that photo is because his twin brother came to the United States in 1923. They served together in the Russian Army from 1912 to 1919. My father was wounded, and he spent almost a whole year recuperating in Bochnia in one of the hospitals there, and that's how he also met his future wife. That's my mother. She was volunteering, nursing, working as a nurse there, helping the soldiers, and that's how they met. Two years later, they married, and they had six children, all boys. The oldest was born in 1920, and unfortunately, he passed away in 1933, through an accident—

Ruth Storch: (inaudible)

BS: (to RS) Okay, you can close. Thank you.

—because of an accident. In Poland and in Europe, there were mostly sleds and horses in small towns during the winter. He took a ride, and somehow he fell off the sled and hurt his back. Was the medicine right? I don't know. Were the doctors correct? I don't know. But he really got sick from it, and eventually they discovered that he's got tuberculosis. Now, there were other children; they had three other children; nobody got sick except him, so I don't think that that was the kind of disease, which they diagnosed, that he had.

After that—okay. That's the reason for me to be in Upper Silesia, which was about 135 kilometers from home, because I was apprenticing with my uncle. The city's name is Chorzów, which is C-h-o-r-z-o-w, Chorzów. It's only three kilometers from the German border.

MH: You were apprenticing as what?

BS: I was apprenticing as a custom tailor. That was my profession later, because over here I became a designer of ladies' clothes. And that was the beginning of 1948, just 1948. When the war broke out, of course, I was there. Nobody expected a war in Poland at that particular time, believe it or not. My uncle, his wife, and a little baby, which is about a year and a half old, went on vacation, and they went on vacation in my area, because that area was recreational stuff, you know, recreational facilities with rivers and everything else. Besides, he had his parents also living there, and my mother, and there was my mother's sister also. So, they spent the time there in Bochnia when the war broke out.

In 1939, October 1934—it's 1939. I heard commotion on the street, and I also heard loud bangs, you know, but the commotion was that there were six soldiers: six German soldiers were parading through the street. Supposedly, they got caught on the border, or whatever it is. Still, that was still no war going on. Came September 1, 1939, the whole thing started overnight. It started about middle of the night, really, around two or three o'clock in the morning, perhaps four, I don't know: bombing and everything. They did not drop any bombs in our area, but they dropped bombs around the area, for some reason. I know the reason: because they had a lot of coal mines there and steel mines there, so probably they didn't want to destroy that.

So, there was nothing for me to do. I decided myself that the best way for me is to go back home, which is 130 miles away; and of course, it's quiet there, because it's away from the German border; and because the army, the very strong Polish Army; it's very

strong, and they're gonna be there. They're gonna be there, no question about it. Unfortunately, it didn't develop like that. I called up the station, the railroad station, which was only ten miles away in city Katowice, and this is the capital for that region, for the Silesian Region, Upper Silesian Region, Katowice. I called, and they said there is a train going around one o'clock, situation permitting. They did not guarantee that it will go. But I was glad, and I took a trolley car from our house; it's a ten mile ride. And, sure enough, the train left at one o'clock.

Supposedly—we were supposed to have been three hours to Kraków. Unfortunately, it took us almost two and a half days to get to Kraków, because of the bombing and strafing of the train. A lot of people got killed already, then.

MH: On the train that you were on?

BS: On the train which I was on. Lucky, I was not. I did not—I came out without my little suitcase, which I took, because I had clothes at home, so I didn't bother to take much. I didn't know how I was going and what's gonna happen. I lost that, but I was fine. I came to Kraków, and that's it. That's the last stop. The train, the passenger train, didn't go any farther.

Just, my intuition says, "Go ahead, and take another train," whatever it is, when the locomotive faces that direction. I could have gone a different direction, but I was lucky. I jumped on another passenger train, a regular train; actually, they were transporting military items there, too, but the soldiers didn't care. If you come in, fine. But there were no covers, so you were outside. And lucky enough, it went through my hometown. It was not far, just eighteen miles away, but it took a long time, because again, they had problems with the artillery from the planes. But we made it: we made it middle of the night on May third. That's when I arrived, in the middle of the night on May third.

I walked from the station. It was only about three-quarters of a mile away from my home, from the station, so I walked there. At that time, everybody was still asleep: middle of the night. My mother almost fainted, because she did not know what's happened to me. There was no way I could communicate with her; there were no lines. There were no communications. I could have called her from my hometown, in the morning, but you couldn't call anything after that, so it was tough. I arrive home. When I arrive home, was middle of the night, and after breakfast, my mother tells me that my Uncle Sam, my Uncle David, and Uncle Max—those are three brothers of my mother—they decided to move west from here, and perhaps to the river. It's only twenty-one miles to the river, and perhaps that river would stop the army, German Army. Didn't work out that way.

We went there, and the Germans were also close, so we just continued. We continued. There were fourteen people on this horse and wagon, big horses. They eventually—eventually, twelve days later, we wind up in the city of Lvov. City Lvov is on the western part. There's quite a—maybe, I don't know, 150, maybe 200 kilometers from the—

(phone rings) My wife. Okay.

MH: Is it okay? You want to get it?

BS: No, I want to hang up. No, she got it. I don't know why it took her so long. (laughs) She probably left it in the kitchen.

Anyway, we came to Lvov.

MH: That's L-v-o-v?

BS: Right now, it's L-v-o-v, yes, but before it used to be L-w-o-w. That's Polish. This has changed, you know, from L-v-o-v. L'viv, it's spelled now, because that's the Ukrainian way. That city is in the Ukraine.

So, we came to Lvov, and of course, [it was] a strange city and everything else. We were not the only refugees there, and it was very hard, but the Jewish community was working very nicely, and they were able to supply us with—what they do is they donated empty apartments, donated through the organization, donated an empty apartment. There was no furniture, there was nothing like that. So, we had this apartment: my uncle, his wife, myself, and one of my cousins, and that's it. Later, somebody else came in. We were there, living in that thing. Eventually, we were able to get little jobs or something like that to make some money. We had a profession, so we were able to do that.

And then, all of a sudden, in May 1940—actually, it's before the Russians were registering people, whoever wants to go home, and that was February. That was in February of 1940, February of 1940. They were registering people: if you are willing to go home, the Germans will let you, and you will get a pass. Of course, that was a bluff. That was a bluff. It was not the reason they were taking the numbers. They were taking the numbers only to find out where people are living, because they had absolutely no idea where people are living. And sure enough, in May of 1940, they came from one house to

the other, one building to the other, and they knew exactly. They knocked on the door and asked us politely, “Take whatever you can and follow us,” and they took us to trucks.

MH: These are Russians or Germans?

BS: The Russians. That’s the Russians. The Germans never arrived to Lvov, because they—meanwhile, after they made that nonaggression pact with the Germans, the Russians, there was a boundary, and they took that and they took something else, White Russia [Belarus] and those cities. So, that was strictly the Russians, Russian KBG [*sic*], the NKVD; that was the secret police. They asked us to come down, and we did. And then, to the trucks; they put us on top of trucks. And then, they took us not to a railroad station, but to a secluded railroad place, you know, stop. Sixty people to a wagon, and they were regular cattle wagons: the same wagon on which people went to concentration camps. That’s exactly what we had.

MH: The 40 by 8s?

BS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s what we had. There was no sitting facilities or something like that, and fifty people. They gave us some kind of a pot to clean ourselves up. And that was it. We were riding for about a day and a half. Nobody told us anything, the door would not open. A day and a half later, the door opened, and the train stopped. There was nothing to see, because it’s the middle of everything. They fed us with some food, which they had, some bread, dry bread, and some soup; whatever they had, they fed us. They fed us with that, and after about an hour and a half or two, we proceeded again. And that continues like that. From that place on, they stop every few hours and they did give us food—breakfast, lunch, whatever—until we arrived three weeks later in central Siberia.

MH: Three weeks?

BS: Three weeks later.

MH: In a cattle car?

BS: In a cattle car. Yeah, three weeks in a cattle car. Three weeks in a cattle car, with mosquitoes and all kind of stuff. Three weeks. Finally, we arrived at a place. Absolutely nothing to see, except huge, huge trees and dilapidated homes. They were like single-family homes, you know, the European style. I don’t remember if it was straw on the top

of the roof or wood, I don't remember that, but it was sort of like that. There was no electricity in this place, no electricity at all. There was no running water. There was no heating provided, except a wood-burning stove with a hot plate. And of course, you know, you couldn't cook because you didn't have what to cook on it.

MH: Right. No pots, no pans, no dishes.

BS: No pots, no dishes, no nothing, because you had a cafeteria to go. Each one had an allotment to go there. There were six families in that little place, in that little place. People were sleeping even with the kitchen: two people, single, which they didn't have any children. There were some children; some family had children. Our family did not have any children. There were some people with children, and some people were my age. As a matter of fact, we were together in the army in a different division, because he went later. So, there were people like myself there, young people. There were lawyers and there were doctors and there were everything else. Everybody else who ever was in Lvov, they took like that.

MH: All Jews?

BS: No, no Jews. That was not only for Jews: all people which belonged to the other side of the border. In other words, secretly, they told us that we are German spies, because we are German spies. Can you imagine? We are German spies. The territory was still Polish when we were there, okay, because they came under—I don't remember exactly, the seventeenth or the eighteenth, and we were there. I don't remember exactly. Fourteenth, or thirteenth or fourteenth, we were there in Lvov, in Lvov. And we were there. We were living there. We did not ask for anything, and we were there. And yet, we were tried as spies without a trial, just accused of being a spy, because we came from the other side of the border. And that was the reason we were there.

So, the first night—for the first day, they didn't do anything with us, because it came like by the end of the day, so we stayed over on the train till morning. Then, in morning, they assigned everybody that was assigned to one of those houses, six families, no matter what. If you were a stranger, that's fine. We had two or three different families—we had three different families. One was from Zamość; the other one was from Mielec. And then there was a Christian—they were all Jews, as it happens to be, but the Christian couple, man and wife. He was some kind of a professor, this guy. (inaudible) So, there were two of them, and they had to sleep in the kitchen, because there was no room left because everybody first, they took the apartment they gave with children. I considered myself together with the other one, because I was only sixteen then. That was that.

The following day, they put everybody—they asked everybody, especially men; they asked everybody to come out in the square there. It was not a real square, but you know, outside. The commander came out; it was a KGB commander. I remember the name; it sounds like vodka, but it's not. Smirnov was his name. And he had a couple more assistants of his, and that was it. There were soldiers which were guarding; there were soldiers which took us to go and cut the trees down when time came, and so on. The only thing is we did not have any abusing thing. They did not abuse us physically. Nobody was pushed; nobody was kicked in the behind, because you didn't produce something like that. If you didn't produce, they had something for it: they cut down the food, you know, and that was the whole thing. You're working for the food. You didn't get anything, just the food. So, of course, everybody had that. That was the only thing.

That was continued like that. I was working on the trees. They told us how to do it. They had a foreman there, a Russian, and he told us how to get a tree down. They're huge trees, really huge trees. There were two people with a tree. There was nothing electric going on. The whole labor was manual.

MH: Axes or saws?

BS: Saws. Saws and axes, that's it, but no electric saws. That was out; that was not there. So, we were doing that. We were doing that for about half a year. Then, things changed for the better. Things changed for the better. Supposedly, they found out that we are not really German spies, so things eased up. They didn't let us out from there, but they did let us go out to the city on a pass, but you had to report the same day to the commander that you came back. So, that was the thing. And once you were out, you were able to see the newspapers and everything; we didn't get any newspaper. We didn't get any radio; there was nothing there. We were completely secluded.

MH: What city are you in?

BS: There was not a city.

MH: I mean, the city that you said you could go to.

BS: The city Yoshkar-Ola. Yoshkar-Ola would have been the capital city of that region. But you had to take the train. First you had to take a draisine. A draisine was one single electric—a car, which took the people to the train, which was about fifteen miles or so away from that particular spot.

MH: And this is in Siberia.

BS: This is in Siberia, in central Siberia. Yoshkar-Ola is Marian [Mari El] Republic, not far; it's about 300 kilometers from the Ural Mountains. No European people there: the people were Marians there. They very seldom—just the leadership spoke Russian, and the rest did not; they spoke their own language. The people were very strange, for one reason. They were fine, they were scared. They were scared. They didn't know who we are, and we didn't know who they were. There was no language; we couldn't communicate with them. I spoke Russian, I picked up right away, and I was very good. You know, as a kid you pick up [languages]. They have no problem. But we couldn't speak to them. And I even speak up—later, I picked up the Marian language. Once you know a few words, then they open up their hearts to you. They did not have anything, either, but what they had is they had land. On the land, they were putting potatoes and carrots and whatever it is. Even so, the spring was very short there, because the winter started in October, and it dropped to about 65 below.

MH: Nice.

BS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And snow—I mean, it's terrible snow. And the wind—thank God we did not have too much wind, otherwise you would have been not able to do anything. So, thank God for that.

So, we continued there. We continued there until—as a matter of fact, we were even allowed—after this thing here, I was even allowed to send a card to my mother. They said, “Yes, but you're not supposed to have revealed where you are.”

MH: And your mother was where?

BS: My mother was still in Bochnia.

MH: Okay.

BS: My mother was by herself. I was the only one from the four kids which went, because I was the oldest. The other—the youngest was seven years old. My mother stayed with the children. Nobody expected; we would have known that [if she] would have taken another wagon or something. We would have gone. Nobody thought that it's gonna be what happened, really. She had three children. My aunt had also three

children, so she didn't go, either. Of course, my grandparents didn't go. And there were another bunch of families. They had about 100 people in that city which were related one way or the other. Some went to Israel before the tragedy, and some stayed there. The way I understand, nobody—nobody—came alive from the entire group of people, the entire group of people. So, it was just—really, it was my mother's intuition. She must—I don't know. I guess it's God's will; that's the only thing which I can think. She sent me, and I made it through that ordeal.

We were fourteen people there on that wagon, back and forth. One of my uncles, which was an accountant before the war in Poland—actually, in Upper Silesia there. He was fluent in German and Polish. Again, you know, a younger guy he picked up was a Russian, so the Russian right away didn't let him go, didn't let him go to Siberia. They put a special mark on him, and he stayed. From time to time, we were able to get, like, letters or something like that, brought only from the occupied territory, not from over the border. So, my uncle sent us letters. In one letter, secretly, in Yiddish and whatever—I did not read the letter, but my uncle did. He said, "I wish I would have been with you," because they already saw that something will not be kosher between Germany and Russia. They already saw that. Of course, unfortunately, he and a five year old boy and his wife did not make it.

The five year old boy is a tragic event, what happened to him. My aunt—they had friends, and they paid the friends a lot of money to take that little boy as a Christian child and save him, and when they will come back—when they will come back, or anybody of the family. There were agreements, signed agreements, and everything. This bastard took the money, and she called the police. "There's a Jewish child here." The Germans found him. He was such an adorable little kid, six years old with blond hair. He didn't even look like a Jewish guy, because the father was blond and blue-eyed, and the mother the same thing. Unfortunately, that's what happened. I found this thing out later, after the war, what happened to this child.

MH: So, now you're in Upper—you're in Siberia.

BS: In Siberia. We were there—

MH: What happens next to you?

BS: Next thing: We stayed there till the war broke out between Germany and Russia. That was June 1941. A couple months later, the United States stepped in, made agreement, a non-aggression agreement, with Russia; and so did Britain, and so did—at that time, they had a Polish government in exile. General [Władysław] Sikorski, he took

over the military stuff, and he was a general before the war, actually. So, he was the man, the highest position, which he had, and they made him the commander-in-chief of the Polish Army and that's it.¹ They did not have any presidency or something like that. He was the signer of that one agreement that all Polish citizens, regardless who they were²—because there were a lot of Jewish; there were about 130,000. I wish there would be more, but 130,000. Only people—they took only people which came from the other side of the border: that's why it was so little. The locals they did not take, because they automatically became citizens. Automatically, in the territory, as soon as the Russians put their foot down, everybody was a Russian citizen.

The younger guys they took to the army, right to the Russian Army, a couple of them which I knew here. Unfortunately, one of them passed away just now, but that's what happened with him. They took him to the army because he was from that area, from the occupied area, and they considered themselves citizens. We were outsiders, so they didn't. That's the reason there were only 130,000—at my estimation, it was probably even less than that, but that was my estimation, 130,000 which I saw. But, yeah, that was in 1941, and about November, in about November, the army started to organize.³ The first division they started in November and they concluded, I think, the [last] two divisions in March of 1942, 1942. That was the 5th and the 6th [Polish Infantry] Divisions.

MH: Of the—?

BS: Polish army.

MH: —Polish army. Okay.

BS: Of the Polish army. Those two divisions, the 5th and the 6th, were under the command of General Władysław—oh, what the hell is his name? It will come to me.

¹Sikorski was the commander-in-chief of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, which was first organized in France after the fall of Poland in 1939. After the Battle of France, he evacuated many Polish troops to Britain, forming the Polish I Corps in the West.

²The Sikorski-Mayski Agreement (1941), which released Storch and the other Polish prisoners being held in the Soviet Union; it also negated the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of neutrality between Germany and the Soviet Union.

³The Polish Armed Forces in the East, also known as Anders' Army, parts of which eventually became the Polish II Corps.

MH: Okay.

BS: Anders, General Anders. General Anders. As a matter of fact, I have a book from him somewhere. General Anders was a general before the war, and he served on that front. He became a prisoner of war with many thousands of other Polish soldiers that [were] caught and became prisoners of war. As a matter of fact, General Anders and, later, General [Zygmunt] Berling, which became the leader of the 1st Polish Division.⁴ Both of those guys, including some (inaudible), are the high officers. They were all in Katyn Forest, you know; that's a labor camp. I don't know if you remember, if you know the story about the Katyn Forest. Okay, can I tell you right now?

MH: Sure.

BS: Okay. Katyn Forest was not far away, really, from Smolensk, which is like central Byelorussia; and not far away from Poland, really, when you count the miles, except it was in an area, a forested area. What happened is that they caught the prisoners, about four thousand of them, maybe four thousand or five thousand prisoners. Only officers; soldiers they didn't put there. Soldiers they sent away to regular labor camps. Only high officers, including doctors. Among them, there were over seven hundred Jews there, because every Jew who was a doctor or lawyer immediately was an officer. They started with lieutenants, and they didn't go higher than a captain, really. So, all those people were arrested for the Katyn Forest, down there. There were other camps, also. There were three camps: Buzuluk; another one with K, I forgot the name; and the most famous is that Katyn Forest. We did not know then what happened to those people. We knew only that—oh, yeah.

So, because the Russians had something in their mind, they let Anders out, and they let my general out with quite a few other—not so much generals, but high officers—out from the jail and they put them on educations. Altogether, close to 500 people: 490-some people like that, 495. The Russians had something in mind already then, creation [of] something. They knew how many people they had. Unfortunately, somebody messed up—according to later; we can see it now. Not before; you can see it now. Somebody later—I mean, before that—and they blamed Stalin—not Stalin, but the NKVD then blamed that guy, Lavrentiy Beria.

MH: Beria, yeah.

⁴Of the Polish First Army, which was formed in the Soviet Union in 1944 and operated under the Red Army: most of the soldiers were deported Poles, while a large percentage of the officers were Soviets.

BS: Yeah. They blamed him, and supposedly he disobeyed the order or he made a mistake that they started shooting all those officers, and they shot them in 1940. We could not believe, after we found out. We knew the officers in Poland, but we had a problem. When we were organizing—and the 5th and the 6th Division, those people Anders knew, Sikorski knew the people which were there. And all of a sudden, everybody's coming in. Where are those people? So, after those two divisions were organized, Sikorski and Anders started to make a fuss. He said, "What's the matter with those people? We don't have enough officers. Where are those officers?" And they were giving their names and everything. Unfortunately, the Russians did not come through. He said, "Oh, they're probably in a different camp," or something like that. They just did not want to admit anything. But the fact is, in 1940, those people were shot. There were close to eleven thousand high officers, people who were shot.

MH: Eleven thousand?

BS: Eleven thousand.

MH: Okay.

BS: Eleven thousand, altogether from the different camps. That's what the story tells us. We did not know. So, that was it. As luck gets it, when I—I will come back to that later, how I got that. As luck gets it, when we came back from our first assignment, we stayed stationed there. The territory was just taken away from the Germans about ten days ago prior to that, our arriving. We stationed there for recuperation and for the resupplying from our attack twenty kilometers away. When January came, January came 1944, a delegation from each unit were delegated to come and see—you know, the Russians opened up this camp—and go see what the Germans did. You know what I mean.

MH: Yeah.

BS: So we went, and the parade was parading and everything else. My lieutenant found one of his—it was just from the names on the wall, which they stated that he died in that camp, and he was from a school. He was a lieutenant from a school like West Point here. He was the commander of the thing. So, that's what happened to those officers. And because of that, a drift ran up when they had these two divisions. Those two divisions went in 1942. There was only one thing with those two divisions: They had a quarter are Jewish soldiers, because they wanted to take out—first of all, the majority were Poles, and they wanted to take out as many Poles as possible. Each soldier which had a family—you know, a mother or somebody left, or a wife or whatever—was allowed to go

together with the soldiers. So, those soldiers eventually, in 1942, were able to go out to Iran. From Iran they went to Palestine; from Palestine they went to England, and of course they fought on the Western Front.⁵

Among the people, a very famous one, Menachem Begin. He was only about two hundred kilometers from my camp, and he was able to get out from there. But he dropped his uniform when he came to Israel. He dropped the uniform and he became what he became.⁶ There were a couple of other good people there. There was, as a matter of fact, my professor of religion, because he was a professor. He was a soldier; you know, in Poland, everybody served, Jews or not. And he was a high officer, because of his professorship. So, he was also; he was together with me in the camp, actually, and he was able to get out because of his rank and of his name and whatever it is. He survived; eventually he stayed in Palestine.

MH: How long do you stay in Siberia?

BS: In Siberia, we stayed until we got freed from them after they think, you know. That was in 1941. November 1941, we were free. November 1941, we were free. We had absolutely no maps, no nothing. We had absolutely no idea where to go, but we were free. They did not—we had a piece of paper, and that's it, from the government. We didn't pay for any transportation whatsoever to go.

So, we went. We went, and we went on the Volga [River]. We found out that there's a German republic on the Volga.⁷ You know, you try to get to your own people, and we knew that that's a very good republic there. They did very well. The name of it is—the main city is Engels. Engels is on the Volga, and it's between Saratov and Kuybyshev, closer to Saratov than Kuybyshev. That's the capital city, Engels. It was named simply German Republic, that's all. In Russia you had all kind of republics, if there were enough people. There were about a million and a half people living in that area there. So, we went there.

⁵These were the divisions of the Anders Army. Once they got to Iran they were under British authority and eventually joined the Polish Armed Forces in the West. Most of the Jewish soldiers deserted in Palestine.

⁶Prime Minister of Israel from 1977 to 1983.

⁷The Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic; the land is now part of Saratov Oblast.

When we arrived there—it took us a while with the train, and then with a ship and all kind of stuff, but we got there. When we got there, there wasn't a soul in the city, not one single soul. The reason for it was because the Russians suspected them of being [spies] and reporting to the Germans. We didn't know where Engels is. If you don't have a map, you really don't know. It happens to be that Engels was only two hundred kilometers from Stalingrad. (laughs) You know. So, that was the reason that they also got them resettled [in 1941], and they got them resettled all over, in Kazakhstan—those Germans, I mean. So, we saw that.

Of course, we went to the headquarters there: we have to sleep over. Even so, we didn't have any children, but we have to sleep over somewhere. They didn't mind; they said, "Take any house you want, but of course you cannot stay here because it's a restricted area." He said, "Why don't you go back to Kuybyshev?" Kuybyshev, you know, is a big city not far away. So, we proceeded to that, and in Kuybyshev, they did designate a village where we can go, and they did assign us a house and everything else. And jobs were available in my profession, no problem, so we got the jobs there. And we stayed there, but it was a horrible place. It was a house which was made from cow manure and lime, cow manure and lime. We had no idea, you know, and it was already full. When it's raining, the stink developed gases, and the gases came in. We had no idea. Maybe that's why this house was empty, I don't know.

So, myself and my brother-in-law—my uncle. My uncle went to work, and one night we come and everybody was asleep all day. They had absolutely no idea what's going on. If we wouldn't have come in, they would have all died there, and we had no idea. You have to have the windows open, because—but nobody told us that. So, thank God. We called up the ambulance, the Russian ambulance came, they took the people to the hospital, and got everybody recuperated from it.

MH: From just the stink from the house?

BS: It's not the stink.

MH: It's gas?

BS: Gas, a regular gas. We had no idea. It's a regular gas, and it was choking them. So, that was the end of it. We didn't want to stay there any longer, so we tried to get to a warmer place. Uzbekistan was the warmer place. So, we traveled again, mostly transport plane. They did not give you any provision. If you wanted to eat, you had to go—wherever they stopped, you had to go outside and actually beg for the food. Or, if you have two shirts, you trade one in. Anything, they took anything, the farmers. We didn't

have any money, because there was no money there. We didn't have it. So, whatever we had we traded so we came.

We came—eventually, after ten days, we came to Uzbekistan, in Tashkent. Tashkent was so full of people, immigrants: people from the eastern part of Russia and Ukraine and White Russia. They all went there. Unfortunately, no room to sleep. Everybody was sleeping on the floor, on the streets. Somehow—I don't know how it happened—they sent us to a farm away, about three hundred kilometers away, closer to the Iranian borders. Not to Namangan, you know, that area there. Kin Kolkhoz was the farm; that's the name, Kin Kolkhoz. *Kolkhoz* is a farm, *Kin* is the name. And again, those were Uzbeks. Uzbeks did not speak Russian, again. They hated the Russians with passion, so they didn't speak any Russian. But their leader always spoke Russian, you know, not a lot but spoke. There was also no room, but he had a big office, so he did allow us to sleep in one of the offices. There were no beds there, of course, so they had some, like, extra doors: we put the doors on the floor and put some straw, you know, and covered up with some kind of fabric. And that was our sleeping facility, and we slept there.

Then, a couple of months later, I registered to the Anders Army and moved over there. (inaudible), a couple of miles away. So, I registered to the army there, to get into the thing, and I got admitted, okay, and they had a quota. That's it, and they just told me—they even cut my hair. They told me that they will let me know, they will send me a message; there were no telephones, but they'll send me a message. They never did. They moved out, the division moved out. 2nd Division moved out from there, and they never did.

The reason was that Stalin didn't want to have anything to do with it, because first of all, Sikorski started to make force. "Where are those officers? We need officers, and we don't have them. Where are they?" And Stalin said—he never told them the truth. The truth only came out when [Mikhail] Gorbachev took over, and by the end of his term, he told them—he opened up the file, everything; you can read it. I didn't read, but you can open up the file and they admitted that the Russians did that thing here. So, there was a drift between those two factions, between that and that. They moved those two divisions, and Stalin said, "No more, no more."

General Berling, which at that time was a full colonel, he was the chief of staff of the 5th Division, decided—and he was not a communist or something like that. He was not a communist at all. Born in Kraków, and he was not Jewish. Berling sounds Jewish, but he was not. He was not; [he was] a Christian. He decided to stay there, and there were a couple of other people. The other people were political, some of them, like Wanda Wasilewska, which was a big writer in Poland, a very known writer, but she was on the left.

They started to organize the military—but the soldiers were not on the left, just the top leadership there. And they started to organize, with the blessing of Stalin, the division. The division was the 1st Infantry Division, and they named it Tadeusz Kościuszko. That's Kościuszko, you know, the big—

MH: Yes.

BS: —Polish hero. And that was it. We started as a division, and the division at that time, when it was completed—it was completed in September. There were 12,500 people.

MH: These are all Poles?

BS: All Poles and Jews, everybody which was living in Poland, even Ukrainian.

MH: Right. So, there's twelve thousand?

BS: Twelve and a half thousand in the 1st Division.

MH: In the 1st Division. And this is Polish Army Division?

BS: Strictly Polish Army.

MH: Attached to the Russian Army.

BS: Attached to the Russian, White Russian front. We had the White Russian front from here all the way down to Warsaw, and from Warsaw all the way down through Berlin.

MH: Okay. So, at what point—they give you rifles and—?

BS: Everything.

MH: And uniforms?

BS: Uniforms, I will describe to you. We got uniforms. They were a little bit shabby. I don't know where those uniforms were made. We didn't get the shoes in the beginning, because there was no shoes. There was a shortage of shoes, can you imagine? So, everybody was wearing the shoes which [they] came with. I had boots, custom made boots; one of the Jewish guys was a shoemaker when I was free already, so I made him pants and he made me shoes. So, it's a good trade, and the shoes did last, did last for a couple of months, because you know in the army you go in the territory, which we were. It was not pretty, you know what I mean? Water and everything else.

Eventually, they went, but we received shoes. We received in winter. Shoes are only good, you know, in the spring and up to the fall. Later, you cannot wear leather there. We had different shoes, which were strictly for winter when the rain stopped. If the rain is there, forget about it. It was wool, pressed wool, animal wool. They pressed it: they pressed it about three-quarters of an inch thick like that. They didn't have leather soles or something. Everything is from one piece, no seam. I don't know how they make them. No seam, one piece, and they were so warm. You have no idea. And that's why the Russian Army won the war from the Germans, because of the shoes, because the Germans froze. Yeah, they had a lot of casualties: they froze to death.

MH: Froze their feet off.

BS: So, we had that.

MH: At what point does this army begin to come back into Poland?

BS: Well, let me—yeah. So, we started. We started—the organization started in May. I was there and I was taken to the 2nd Infantry Regiment, infantry regiment, and I was assigned to the—God, what's the name of this thing? Mortar, 82 mortar.

MH: 82mm mortars.

BS: Mortars, exactly. 82mm. I was assigned to that. They had three guys do it, and they had three different parts. Each one carries their own parts. My part was something like twenty kilograms, because I was the shortest guy, so I had the least one.

MH: You're carrying what, the base plate or the legs?

BS: No, not even the legs. The legs are even higher. No, it was the tube.

MH: The tube, okay.

BS: Twenty kilograms or something. No, altogether the plate was the highest one. I think it was like thirty-two kilograms, and with that, you still had to have your automatic gun and everything else. So, we started with that in May, and started right away to mortar company and everything, started to practice with everything.

MH: This is nineteen forty—?

BS: This is 1943.

MH: Forty-three [1943].

BS: Nineteen forty-three, yeah. Nineteen forty-three.

MH: Do you know, at this point, what the Germans, what the Nazis, had done to the Jews?

BS: Zero.

MH: And you know nothing about the camps?

BS: Nothing about the camps, nothing about the camps, nothing. My mother could not say anything, because when I received the postal card from my mother—two of them I received; I wish I had 'em. Two of them I received, and she simply said—she asked me if I wanted anything, and she stated simply, writing in Polish, that everybody's okay, there were no ghettos yet. The ghettos started in 1942; in August, actually, it started. And, you know, that everything is still okay, everybody's fine, we're living fine, and she asked me if she can send me a package. I said, "No, I have—" I was starving. "I have everything here," because I knew they would not let it through. They would not let it through, and if I would send—if I would tell her on that card, "Send me this and that,"

that card would have never reached my mother. So, I didn't say. "No, I'm doing fine; we have everything." Yeah. So, we had no idea about the camps at all. Nothing, nothing. So, we started with the thing and practicing everything.

In June, I was recommended for the non-commission academy, you know, academy. I didn't go out; it was right in the field. We didn't have any buildings, just huts, huts in the forest, because the Germans were driving back and forth from there. So, we had to hide everything there. Near the Oka River—that's a big river, Oka, which flows through there and goes through Moscow and everything else. It's right there, right on the Oka. When we went washing in the morning, six o'clock in the morning, [we went] to the Oka River. Bodies were floating on the Oka River and everything, because—as a matter of fact, the Russians set up like a hospital, a field hospital, and the guys, the doctors, were practicing. They were catching the bodies. No, seriously. They were bringing the bodies there and they were teaching them how to operate on this, how to take this out and that out.

MH: On the dead bodies.

BS: On the dead bodies, yeah. On the dead bodies, not on the live ones; we did not have any live ones. On the dead bodies they were doing it. I saw it myself. I saw it myself. We stayed there until July. July was the swearing-in ceremony, with a big, big thing with the flags decorated from the United States and Britain and France and Czechoslovakia, because Czechoslovakia was also under the occupation and friendly to the East and to the West. Romania was not there, because they were not friendly yet. Czechoslovakia and Poland, and Poland has its eagle. And with a priest which [performed] the swearing-in ceremony, you know. Poland's a Catholic country, so we had a priest. The Jews didn't stay for that; they were there, but they didn't do anything. We had a chaplain. We had a young chaplain; the name was Herschel Szłada. He came from city Lublin, just from Lublin: a young fellow. And we had him till October, till October 12, 1943. That was our first engagement against the German army, because we moved out from there.

From the swearing-in ceremony we went home, again practice until September first. On September first, we started out on foot with the army. The whole division started out on foot. And, of course, if you have the jeep you go with the jeep. At that time we had the American trucks, because we got them from the United States, Lend-Lease, and we had the big Studebakers, Studebakers and Buicks, big ones. Big ones, and they were pulling the cannon because at that time—at that time, you know, everything was still horses, except the artillery, heavy artillery. The heavy artillery, 122, had to have those big trucks. But we, as infantry—I was still in the infantry, so I had no problem. I had to ride with a jeep or something like that, because I was a sergeant. We had a couple jeeps. One of the squads—what do you call them? They go and spot—the spotters. The spotters had a jeep, the telephone company had a jeep, and the officers and non-officers had jeeps. So, that was going on like that.

We got to the front line and set up, and sat there for two weeks. Nothing happened, so we're just observing everything. Finally, on the twelfth, on the twelfth of October 1943, we got this assignment in that one particular area. It was a very bad area as far as the territory: it was marshland. That's, you know—those marshlands go all the way down to Poland to Gdańsk, believe it or not. Those marshlands go over. Yeah, those were bad marshlands. We couldn't use any heavy tanks, we couldn't use tanks; we had tanks, but we couldn't use them. We were assigned one territory. What's the name of that division? I forgot the division which was assigned to Russia. 42nd Division, and the other one is two hundred-something, Russian division. One was on the right, one was on the left, we were in the middle, and each one had their own territory to grab.

We had orders to, if possible, to go over the seven kilometers. Unfortunately, we didn't. We took our assignment correctly. We were supposed to have three hills, you know, everybody has a hill. Three hills, you remember hills? In Vietnam they had hills. We had hills, three hills, so we took the hills. We took the hills, we took three rivers, crossed the three rivers and everything else, advanced five kilometers. My 2nd Regiment advanced five kilometers. The other one advanced three, the next one advanced two. We suffered tremendous losses, but when you're attacking you always lose more people.

MH: Right. And you're facing German artillery?

BS: German artillery, yeah.

MH: And planes?

BS: And planes and everything else. I mean, we were also—the Russian planes were also flying there, but meanwhile, we were getting hit left and right through the night and everything else. We had casualties: we had over three thousand casualties in only two and a half days.

MH: Were you hit?

BS: No. I was not hit at all during the entire war. I was not hit. I got it in Berlin, a shrapnel sting, but they did not penetrate. They penetrated the uniform, it damaged my uniform, but I had wadding. Being a tailor, you know, when we stayed on the other side of Warsaw in 1944, I had time to make myself a uniform because it was a post between September and January; there was a post. And I had good contacts, and I made myself a

uniform, and my commanding officer a uniform, with cotton inside, because I hated to carry the coat, so that was warm. I had to find the fabric from a dead soldier, from a—not a uniform, but from coats: got a couple of coats and got a uniform.

So, that was my first assignment. I lost twenty-four people. I lost twenty-four people in my unit. The regiment itself lost over nine hundred people, casualties—the regiment, mind you. There was almost nothing left from the regiment. Nine hundred people were wounded and all kind of stuff. Dead, 526 from the thing, from the entire division, 526. Among them, after, I found out—you don't know that till later—I found out that we lost that chaplain of ours, so we got stuck without a chaplain. But everybody knew.

You know, I was pretty good with religion, and I knew the stuff. I even had my tefillin with me. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. In Polish Army you could practice your religion; they didn't stop you. The Russians didn't stop you. The gentiles had no problem. Every morning and every night they had a prayer. Nobody bothered them; it was allowed. Nobody bothered them. And the guys, the Jewish guys like myself, you know, because of my father's death, I knew. I was fresh from Hebrew school at that time, so I knew Hebrew. So, whatever we could; you know, you didn't go through the entire stuff. Whatever you could, you said, and you were happy with that.

So, we continued like that. At the end, we moved out the way I mentioned to you, twenty kilometers through a forest, twenty kilometers from Katyn. By January 1945, the whole division was equipped again, full with soldiers and everything, and a second division joined us. So, we had already two divisions then.

MH: When did—was the first camp liberated?

BS: I'm coming. The first camp was liberated in July.

MH: Of—?

BS: The first one—

MH: Of forty-four [1944]?

BS: July of forty-four [1944], yeah. The very first one, actually—well, we went, actually, we crossed over to the Polish border in June, through Kowal, Kowal, and then the other

way to Lublin. So, we crossed already in June, but we found ourselves in July in a territory—not a territory, really; it’s a village. It’s a forestry village of Sobibór. Now, Sobibór—you know, we had no idea what Sobibór is. We would have never found it. But there was this one guy telling us that down there, about five kilometers away in the forest, there is a camp. And you couldn’t know where that thing is. He said, “Follow the railroad track, and it’s gonna bring you.” So, he brought us, and there was a little stop and there were signs, Sobibór. No idea what Sobibór is. But the guy just simply said, “They were killing Jews there, and Russian soldiers.”

MH: Who told you this?

BS: This guy, this Polish guy.

MH: A Polish guy. Sobibór, S-o-b-i-b-o-r?

BS: Yeah, S-o-b-i-b-o-r, Sobibór. Yeah. Again, that’s a Polish person [who] told us that: down there, follow the tracks down there, you’re gonna go about five miles. You will see there’s a forest there, and there was a camp. Now the Jews are buried there. They had the Jewish people there, strictly Jewish people there; they did not have any Christians in Sobibór, ’cause that was an early camp. There were no—they couldn’t burn the people in crematoriums. There were no crematoriums in Sobibór. There were no crematoriums there. Those people, unfortunately, were only shot, shot to death with a special firing squad there, and buried. Later, they started to burn them in the graves. They buried them there.

MH: So, you got—your unit went to Sobibór.

BS: We went through Sobibór, and we went there [to the camp].

MH: Tell me what you see.

BS: Just little trees. There was nothing there except little trees planted. There were no camp things at all. What happened is October 12 or 13, 1943—this I know from reading, and I met a couple people which were there in Sobibór. It was a regular camp, a big camp, really one of the first ones, before Majdanek. They also had prisoners of war, Russian prisoners. Lately, they took prisoners of war. It was not long being there. I think it started in late 1942, and it was built actually by the Jewish people. You know, they hired the Jewish people to build this thing. They didn’t get paid, you know, they’re

prisoners. And the Polish guys and whatever it is, and they built that camp there. In the beginning, were only Jews there in Sobibór; and the Jews from Holland were also brought to Sobibór, and from other European countries. All told which people died there—there are many statements how many died, but the closest was something like eight hundred thousand-plus.⁸

MH: Died.

BS: Died there.

MH: When you got there, you said nothing was there.

BS: Nothing was there.

MH: Were the railroad tracks still there?

BS: The railroad track was there, and the sign “Sobibór” was there, and that was it.

MH: Empty fields?

BS: Empty field, because that railroad track, believe it or not, was not made specifically for the Jews. That railroad track was made for the forest trees, but then the Germans confiscated the place because there was nothing there, nobody could see anything. It was great. Farmers were still there, farmers were still there. So, that’s what it was. And what they did, the Germans did, to hide the evidence: they planted trees on it. They’re huge, huge now, even. They planted those trees. I don’t know, I suppose they removed the trees.

MH: Did you dig for bodies? Did you—

BS: No. We had no idea of it then, about concentration camps, and as a soldier it just was not our job.

⁸BS is thinking of Treblinka, where over 800,000 prisoners were killed. At Sobibór, estimates are 200,000 to 250,000.

MH: And you were still moving.

BS: We were moving. We were moving. We were there and didn't spend more than half an hour. There was nobody to talk to. There was nobody. Not more than a half an hour.

MH: Except that this Polish peasant told you they were killing Jews there.

BS: We would never have found it. They were killing Jews. That's all. That was the end of it. We would have never found that place. So, from there, we were going to Lublin, because that was our object. Straight from there, the following day, we came to Lublin. It was not in Lublin itself, it was before Lublin. It was like two miles away from Lublin. There was a camp, also without our knowledge. There was a camp. We came to this camp, and there was nobody there.

MH: Which camp was this?

BS: Majdanek.

MH: Majdanek.

BS: Majdanek. Majdanek. That camp was a huge camp; it still is, still today. I never went back to that camp, even though I was stationed about seventy kilometers away from it, because my regiment was stationed [there] after the war.

MH: What did you see in Majdanek?

BS: This camp was complete, complete. The doors were not even locked: the doors were open, and there was no lock on the door. We didn't have to break in or anything. We just walked in, drove in with the artillery through it. At that time, I was already in artillery. I switched to artillery in November of 1943, and I was in charge of one of those howitzer cannons, 122mm howitzer cannon. In Majdanek itself, what did I see? First of all, we went in and saw the gas chambers. There was still nobody told us what it is. We had no idea. We thought it was a factory. We saw the gas chamber, but the gas chamber didn't look like anything special.

MH: What did it look like?

BS: Well, first of all, it was brick, brick everything. There were about six of them. They had benches on the side, but there were no marks, no nothing. I couldn't see even any blood on the floor. But there was a skylight, you know, in the ceiling, and these skylights actually were for the SS guys to check, or whoever was in charge of it, to check if the people were really dead. It looks as if they're going to a shower. It says "*Bad und Desinfektion*," that sign was saying. "*Bad und Desinfektion*," that means taking a bath in sanitary confine. So, everybody was thinking they're going there, except for the people there which knew about it. Nobody knew, nobody knew. So, they went in there, and there were steel doors—I remember this—heavy steel doors. And I remember the skylight, and I remember the shower heads and the benches. There was no light, no electricity inside, and it was dark. With the skylights, of course, light came in.

MH: You walked into them?

BS: Yeah, we walked in. Nothing was locked. And there were six of them or something like that. A quarter mile farther down the road were the crematoriums.

MH: Now, were there any SS, any—?

BS: I'll come to that.

MH: Okay. Sorry.

BS: So, we went through this crematorium there. There were also six crematoriums. I thought it was seven, but it was only six. It turned out to be only six. And in the crematorium, of course, you saw—and still, nobody was there to tell us anything. But we saw some parts of human bodies, like bones and everything, so we started to think about it. We said, "It couldn't be." You see, in Poland, even in Poland they did not cremate any people, because the Catholics don't cremate people. You know what I mean? So, nobody thought. We said, "What the hell is going on here?" Finally, somebody from the outside showed up, and he told us that this is a death camp.

MH: Who was this person that told you?

BS: A lieutenant, one of the lieutenants. This is a death camp. Nobody told us before to be prepared for it.

MH: How old are you?

BS: At that point, I was about twenty-one, twenty years old, about twenty years. Yeah, twenty years, twenty years. Maybe a little bit older.

MH: And nobody prepared you for what—?

BS: No, zero. I can't figure this out. I can't figure out that, and I also cannot figure out here in the United States that our soldiers have the same problem. Nobody told them.

MH: Nobody told them.

BS: Yeah, nobody told them. What the hell? And they knew about it. In Majdanek, they knew about it. The government knew about it. But I was there before maybe the government knew about it, sort of, but officially the government knew. That was 1944. All the camps were liberated 1945. Those two camps, Sobibór and Majdanek, was liberated in 1944. The rest were liberated later. Treblinka—

MH: When you got to Majdanek, again, no people?

BS: No people, except six SS people, which did not have any time to escape. They were hiding.

MH: Where'd you find them?

BS: In one of the—somehow, in one of the barracks or something like that. But they had no idea. They were hiding, and they couldn't escape. What happened in Majdanek, it is very hard to figure out the Germans altogether. I'm not talking Germans, you know, soldiers or something like that, because they have nothing to do. They have a rifle and he goes and shoots. But the upper class, what they did is they transported from every (inaudible) camps people, like they transported people when Sobibór was demolished, took everyone who ever was alive, still alive. They didn't send them home, they sent them to Majdanek. When the Russian Army and our army was approaching Majdanek,

they sent them out to Auschwitz, all the people from Majdanek which were alive. Jewish people were sent to Auschwitz. Some of them survived, and some of—I met people which were in Majdanek, and they survived. From Majdanek they went to a different camp.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: —the mentality that says, “We have to move these people to kill them somewhere else.”

BS: To kill them somewhere else, but to kill them. But to kill them, but to kill them. All those people in Auschwitz were supposed to have been killed, but there was a time that the Germans couldn't do it.

MH: So, they moved them from Auschwitz to Buchenwald.

BS: Yeah, to Buchenwald, to Sachsenhausen, the last camp which I will tell you about. From Sachsenhausen they sent them to Bergen-Belsen, to all different camps: to Austria to that camp, to the Czechoslovakian camp. They sent them away from the Russians to the West. That was the politics of them, and I cannot figure out. So, what happened is there were soldiers, German soldiers, which fell in our hands because they did not have any transportation. The transportation was strictly designed for the Jews. The Jews are the priority. Now, it's mind-boggling. Usually, you try to save your people first. The Jews will die of the gas. No, for the Germans, for the Nazis, that was the main subject. The Jews have to be destroyed. So, that's the reason we couldn't find anything in Poland, nothing in Poland.

MH: What did you do with those six SS?

BS: Oh, they reported them. I mean, it was not my job to arrest them. And they were after the war—a year after the war they were hung, all six of them. They were two Polish collaborators, which were probably the Polish collaborators; they were probably half Nazis, half Germans which were living there. They were all hung: this I found out after the war, that they were hung.

MH: So, now you've been to Sobibór and Majdanek.

BS: We went to Sobibór, we went to Majdanek, and we're going straight. In 1944, we wind up—in August 1944, we came to a town by the name of Praga Warszawska, which is on the right bank of River Vistula, right across Warsaw, and we stopped there. Why we stopped, I don't know. In my estimation, if we would have proceeded, I think Warsaw would have been liberated right then and there, honest to God, because they were on the run. It's true that we had an awful lot of casualties; we really had an awful lot of casualties. So did the Germans. The Russians had an awful lot of casualties, that's true. The supply line—we were overextended, also. The supply line was way in the back, and we were way in the front. I understand all those things, but I think, I really think, at this point it would have been more important to go straight ahead over the river. We would have made it; we really would have made it.

One town was taken by our 3rd Division, but they couldn't hold it, they could not hold it, and it was on the other side. That was on the other side of the river already, but they couldn't hold it because the pressure was too much. I also volunteered to go across, and I volunteered because there were nine other people and the reason why they volunteered me—they volunteered me. You know, in the army you don't raise your hand. "You and you and you, then." (laughs) And because I knew the language, you know. We were supposed to have gone over the river and catch a German and bring him home and ask him questions. It is not so easy to go over Vistula River: it's a very wide river, especially when they have big fortifications and everything.

But we volunteered, and were supposed to have gone. Unfortunately, there was an attack on our 2nd Regiment, and my cannon was the number two battery which supported the 2nd Regiment. So, we had to go. There were only nine people, including my captain, with this thing here. You know, that was the last day. The following day we were supposed to have crossed. I think that was a blessing. I don't think we would have made it, honest to God. No way you can make it. No way you can make it. I lost two guys from the—one of them was in my camp, as a matter of fact, and his brother. His brother was in a different camp, but then when everything smoothed down, softened out, he was able to rejoin his parents. That was his older brother; he got killed. He got killed going over that river there, and the other one lost a leg. Young guy, you know. The guy with the leg was my age; the other one was two years older than him.

So, that was the end of Majdanek. What we saw there, again, is horrible things, because there you had this oven and you had the bones and you had the everything. Then you go back to the side, and you see that huge mountain of ash, and you don't think that that is ash. One thing which struck me, myself, is when I was walking through the grounds. You know, there's grass when we are walking through the grounds. And our shoes are black shoes. All of a sudden, the shoes became white—white! And we look at this ash and it was white. That ash was white, light grayish white. For some reason, we couldn't figure out what it is. What happened is, we were told later, that the dust which we had on our shoes actually came from that, because when the winter came and the wind was

blowing, it was not secured. So, the wind was blowing. Not only that, it was fertilizing the fields there. The grass was so gorgeous, because it was fed with bone meal, and the vegetation and everything. There was this garden; the commandant had a beautiful garden there. Everything was—

MH: Fertilized.

BS: Yeah, fertilized. And then, you know, going back to the other side, we saw the magazines—I mean, storage rooms, with clothing. First came the suitcases. The suitcases had the names on it, believe it or not. Why did they keep the suitcases? I don't know. Then they had utensils. Then they had the utensils, little pots or whatever, because they ask them—they're going on a farm, so they took that. They were actually urging them to take something like that, because they're deceiving [the Jews]. They didn't want to be alarming people. That's what I think. So, they took that and they did that. Little children—my God, those little dolls. It was horrible sight, really.

We were pretty hard soldiers to that point. We knew what's going on. Every one of them, the Jews—we were only nine Jewish guys in our battery. The battery consisted of eighty-eight people, and the rest were Christians. We had a couple of Ukrainian guys, born in Poland and everything else. We had a couple guys from White Russia, same thing. You know, playing like us, talking Polish. Of course, they were also talking like we talk in Jewish: they were talking Ukrainian and singing Ukrainian songs and everything else. But it was absolutely horrible. It was absolutely horrible.

MH: What other rooms did they have? They had the suitcases, they had the utensils.

BS: The suitcases, and then of course, of course, and they had the clothing, men's and ladies'. Then they had the shoes; the shoes were sorted out. They had eyeglasses, you know, all kind of stuff from people which they took away. And they had these shoes. The shoes were sorted out. The same shoes came from Majdanek to our Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. In the museum, I saw them: they're laying on the ground. When I saw those shoes, they were neatly sorted out—men's, women's, and children—and they were in a big storage room. The doors were not locked doors; they were wire, like—

MH: Like mesh.

BS: Mesh wire, right, and that was the doors. You could see everything. Besides, they were open, the doors were open; you could have gone in and take a picture.

MH: Thousands of pairs?

BS: (whispers) Thousands of pairs. Thousands of pairs.

MH: How big is the room with the shoes?

BS: Huge. Huge room. It's a storage—it's like a warehouse. It's a warehouse. It's not like a regular room, like this thing here. A warehouse, construction warehouse, with open screen so you can see.

MH: When you see this, what thoughts go through your head then?

BS: That's—especially in my head and the other guys, because they left—they had families with them in Russia and everything else. In my head, I said, "My God, I hope my brother's shoes are not there, my mother's dress is not there, my grandmother's is not there, and my uncles' and my aunts' and everything else, and my grandfather." That's what went [through my head]. I hope. Can they be—? I hope they're not from me. And believe it or not, my mother went to a camp, which is not far away from there, according to the witnesses. I don't have yet—to this day, I don't have the facts yet. But from the witnesses, I know that she went to a small camp, at which over four hundred thousand people died, by the name of Belzec. Remember Bessarabia, you know about that stuff? The Orthodox rabbis there, that was an Orthodox town, and they created a camp there. They created a camp there, and that's what I was told, that the people from my area went to that. And this is according to the history books, when you read; [the books] also tell you the same.

MH: Your area, though, would have been closer to Auschwitz.

BS: No, it was not. Well, it would have been, but it is also—when you're to the other side, it's almost the same direction. But Auschwitz could not take everybody. Majdanek was not completed yet. Belzec was completed right after Sobibor, so that's why. And it was not a big camp. They did not—it's the same thing again. They were practicing in Belzec: they were practicing with the gas. They had the gas chamber, but they did not have any crematoriums. Again, they did not. It was absolutely awful. I learned it through the books, as the books are writing. They put so many people, and they put the lime and everything else on top of those people. They put so many people in that when came the hot water, the thing started to grow up. They had to take the bodies out and put

it in a different grave. Who did it? I don't know. The bodies were overflowing, because there were too many bodies in this thing here. It was fermenting, like bread.

Later, because I found out later that my mother could have been there, my aunt could have been there. According to the witness, my three brothers went to Auschwitz, and I know that from one of the girls, which was a very close girl to my—I know the family and everything else, Schneider, and I met her after the war, right in Bochnia. She just came from Auschwitz, wouldn't recognize the girl. No hair, no nothing, you know. She just came.

MH: So—

BS: Majdanek, yeah.

MH: Majdanek, how much time do you spend in Majdanek? It sounds like you spend more than in Sobibór.

BS: About forty-five minutes.

MH: That's it?

BS: That's it. That's it. There was no time to think. You went here, you went there, and you make a U-turn and go out.

MH: Was there time to cry?

BS: Oh, yeah, we did. We cried. First of all, I said Kaddish. We had nine boys, and I didn't care. I'm pretty sure there were some more Jewish guys there, with a different unit or something. I said Kaddish, yeah. I knew Kaddish from heart; I didn't need a book for that. Yeah, I said Kaddish. The gentile guys knelt on the floor and prayed themselves. No problem with that. Oh, yeah, we did. That was the first thing which we did, really, on that big pile of bushes, of ash. That's where we said our prayers. Yeah, the tears came to our eyes. Believe it or not, that's the first time in my life.

MH: First time?

BS: First time, yeah. First time during the war—

MH: During the war.

BS: —because there were plenty of times to cry in the war, right? But I didn't. This is the first time during the war. I saw so many gravesites in Russia. You know, you have no idea what was going on in Russia, because they did not have any concentration camps there, but they only—killings, killings in ravines, one after another in that area where I was.

MH: That's the Einsatzgruppen.

BS: Einsatzgruppen. One after another.

MH: That's how my grandparents—

BS: Yeah, Einsatzgruppen. That's it. Yeah, my grandparents, the same thing. My grandparents died because they took the older people. There were fifteen hundred people, which they took, and I didn't know that till after the war. They took the fifteen hundred people. Four hundred were Christians which were helping the Jews. And they took them not far away, seven kilometers out, and I know the town. I know the forest there; I used to pick berries, believe it or not, berries and mushrooms. I used to pick berries and mushrooms there. It's not the kind of berries we have here; they were wild berries, you know. Oh, beautiful, beautiful. Berries were growing there like crazy. Those berries were going to Germany, as a matter of fact, in my time, exporting them, I was told.

And sure enough, yes, my grandmother and my grandfather are buried there, plus other ones, my uncle, which was also his age. And my uncle was a tailor where my uncle—the one which I was apprenticing—was apprenticing with him. He was the main tailor for Kaiser Franz Joseph. Kaiser Franz Joseph was the leader of the Austrian government in World War I for many years, and he loved Jews. He was the main tailor for them. He was not residing at home; he was right where the King lived and doing all the designing of his clothes. Very, very elegant man, you know. He had a white beard. David Letterfield was his name. White beard, very elegant, nice and clean. And after the war, he was just a military tailor, just for the officers, not soldiers.

MH: So, to come back: you leave Majdanek.

BS: We leave Majdanek.

MH: And you go where?

BS: Going to Lublin. That's the town we're taking. We're taking Lublin. Horrible massacre, but we take Lublin and proceed. That was July 23, 1944.

MH: Forty-four [1944].

BS: That was 1944. I don't remember the day.

(to RS) What?

RS: Can I offer you something to drink? A cup of coffee, something cold?

MH: Something cold would be great.

BS: We have the cherry. Would you like a cherry soda, or apple juice? Diet soda?

MH: Diet soda would be great. Thank you very much.

BS: Yes, and for me, too, Ruth.

RS: For you, too? Okay.

BS: Yes, please.

MH: So, you take Lublin.

BS: We take Lublin. A massacre, yes. We take Lublin and proceed to many towns in between, and finally we wind up, in August, late August, we wind up in a little village. It's not a village, it's a city. It's actually the territory of Warsaw; Praga Warszawska, it's called. We occupy there. We lost a lot of people, an awful lot of people. We lost so many people that the soldiers, which usually don't do that, had to go during the—and didn't care; we didn't care because it was August, very hot, and because of the illnesses that can develop, even the Germans were buried. Even the Germans were buried. But from every unit—it was not my job, but we had to do it. Scoop them up, put them on the wagon or on the truck, and then the truck came to the—(whispers) awful lot of them. Awful lot of people, awful. Germans had a lot of—we didn't have any horses at that point, but the Germans still had horses. There were horses in between.

So, that was the cleaning area, and we stayed there. We stayed there, and that was sort of like (inaudible) here, and there of course we have always—always there were attacks, like Modlin and Demblin and all those little towns. Germans would cross the river and they were attacking. But they didn't succeed, but we had to work. It's constantly on alert. We had to work. That thing here continued till the seventeenth of September. We were notified before that that we were to move on, on the seventeenth in the night, and we moved out on the seventeenth. When you cross the river there, you arrive in Warsaw, right there. There's no other way. You go across to Warsaw. So, we went to Warsaw; of course, Warsaw was completely demolished.

MH: The ghetto's been liquidated.

BS: The ghetto was liquidated before that. The whole city, the whole city was [demolished], because of the uprising. The ghetto uprising was 1943 in April, and then their own uprising was in 1944 in August. We were across the street, and we couldn't go because of the political reasons. I'm telling you, in my estimation, we could have taken Warsaw, and it probably would have saved a lot of people. Probably would have saved a lot of people. But, as I said, the politicians said, "We are overextended; the supply line's too far," which, you know, factored. It's fact, yeah. It is supply. But I think once the—

(to RS) Thank you.

MH: Thank you very much.

BS: Would you like a cookie or something?

MH: No, I'm good, thank you.

BS: So, we were overextended, that's true. We were extended. But I still think that we would be able to go. I really think we would have (inaudible).

MH: So, once you finally get to Warsaw and the city's demolished, and you're still moving.

BS: We're moving towards the western part of Poland, and we're moving through—crossing a couple of rivers—Warta, you know, another one, and that's the end of the Odra River, which crosses—

MH: You don't go south toward Kraków?

BS: No. No, we never went to Kraków. Kraków was the Ukrainian, for the Ukrainian army. As a matter of fact, the same division—the same army which took—the division which took Auschwitz liberated my city. They came from Lvov.

MH: Right, it's only eighteen miles.

BS: Yeah, yeah. And they came from this side.

MH: I've been to Warsaw, I've been to Kraków, and I've been to Częstochowa.

BS: Częstochowa, of course. Katowice and Chorzów is not far away from Częstochowa, going farther to the east.

MH: And I've been to Auschwitz.

BS: Yeah, sure.

MH: Okay, so now where do you go?

BS: So, now we're going—that takes us to a small town of Chelmno. Chelmno.

MH: C-h-e-l-m-n-o.

BS: Exactly. Chelmno. And again, you know, you probably read about Chelmno. There was no concentration camp as such; they did not have any structures. They confiscated a couple of buildings there from that Polish prince, which they had, but the situation was there. You know, that's all after the facts I found out.

MH: Chelmno was not a camp?

BS: It was a camp, a destruction camp, but differently done. Chelmno was the first one where the Jews—strictly Jews—were destroyed in Poland. And that was, believe it or not, on the sixth of December—you know the date sixth of December. Pearl Harbor Day.

MH: Yeah.

BS: All right. Sixth of December 1940—1941 I think.

MH: Forty-one [1941].

BS: Forty-one [1941]. That camp was established in Chelmno. Very primitive: there was no camp. This is a horrible story, really, because they were bringing the people and they were settling them in church. There's a church which is still there, it is still—I saw the church myself. It's still there. They were settling them there, going to church. They undressed them in church, they undressed them, and then—it was sort of like a bus, picked them up, and they walked straight from the church to the bus, in the back, seventy-five people at each time.

MH: Oh, these are the gas vans.

BS: The gas vans. That's how they were destroyed, with the gas vans. We couldn't find anything. People were pointing down there, not far away, about ten, fifteen minutes—or miles, or kilometers, whatever it is—and we drove through it, and the same thing. It was just the graves which were there. They were destroying—they destroyed over three hundred and fifty thousand people from the area there, from the Pomeranian side.

MH: But you didn't find—

BS: Nothing.

MH: —the storage buildings?

BS: I did not find any storage buildings.

MH: Okay.

BS: But the regular building was standing. There was no bombardment, nothing was destroyed. The only thing that we found, really, is the cemetery: some bones and everything else that was exposed, not burned. What they did is, again, they did not have any crematoriums, so first they would bury the people, and then they were burning the people and burying them again. It's horrible, a horrible story. But it was nothing that—people were just dead, you know. They were glad the Jews were out, to tell you the truth, so they were able to take their homes away from them.

MH: The Poles were never real fond of the Jews.

BS: They were never fond. There were good Poles and everything else, but they were never fond of the Jews. It also, you know, depends on the area. In my area, where I came from in my area, the city of Bochnia, there were twenty thousand people and there were only about two and a half thousand Jews there. We were living there in that city, God, since—the cemetery is there from the 1600s or something. So long we were living there, the Jews. We were brought there by a king, King Kazimierz.⁹ He brought the Jews over from Germany first, then from all sides. And I was going to a Catholic school, a public school, all Catholic school. We were ninety-nine boys. There were two kids with peyes. Nobody minded it. And yet, there were cities—different cities—which were, you know, like forty percent or thirty-five percent or something, there were more Jews. That's where the anti-Semitic stuff showed up. Here, you were sort of living together. You were not in a ghetto, there was no ghetto in Bochnia, because you were always—here was a Jewish family, there was a Christian family, and so forth and so on.

⁹Kazimierz III, the Great, who ruled Poland from 1333 to 1370 and was particularly friendly to Jews.

On my street, the first house was a Jewish house. The guy was dealing with coal, you know, and everything; there was no gas at that time, so they were using coal for cooking and everything. The name was Karp. His house I passed because when you went through the railroad station, you had to pass his house, make a left, and come to my little street, and the third street was my street. I mean, the third house was my house. Then from him was a gentile house, and then another gentile house, then my house, and then another gentile house, and so on and so on. In other cities, it was the same thing. And we did not have—the kids were going together to school, walking to school. Never, never did I have any anti-Semitic slurs or kicking. I was not a big boy, I was one of the short kids, but never, never did I have that. Honest to God, I cannot say a lie. But, yes, there was anti-Semitism in Poland. It will be there as long as they're gonna live.

MH: Yeah.

BS: As long as they're—that's in their blood.

MH: It's in the blood. What struck me—we went by bus from Kraków to Auschwitz, and you go through—Oświęcim?

BS: Oświęcim, that's the city. That's the town.

MH: Oświęcim is, what, two miles from the camp at Auschwitz?

BS: That's it.

MH: The people didn't know anything.

BS: Nothing.

MH: They didn't—they see the trains going in full, coming out empty. They know nothing.

BS: I had this—

MH: They smelled the smell. Nothing.

BS: The people in Sobibór and Majdanek knew it, and they were pointing fingers. “That’s where it is! Those guys did it!”

MH: Right. But Oświęcim, nothing.

BS: Nothing. You know, I had the same thing. I was interviewing Germans in Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen. Sachsenhausen is a big camp. It’s still there, you know, like a museum now. They didn’t destroy anything; the buildings are there. I don’t know what they’re doing there in those buildings now, but the buildings are there. There’s a museum there. Here on the other side of the street in Oranienburg, it’s a very elegant city. Nothing was destroyed in Oranienburg. Why in hell didn’t they drop a couple bombs there, on the roads, on the train roads? But here they took them not with the railroad: they took them with cars.

So, I was interviewing a couple of those German guys, and they say, “We have gone in the woods, we have gone in the woods.” They knew there was a camp, but they had no idea what was going on in the camp. I said, “How can you not know? So many cars are coming in. How many cars do you see going out to the hospital or anything else? Nobody’s going out. How can you not know what was going on there?” That was the answer of the German people; that was the answer of some Polish people there, especially Oświęcim. There, they denied it; in the east, they did not hesitate. They pointed. “There are Jews, dead, and that’s for Jews,” they said. Even so, in Majdanek there were over five hundred priests killed down there, and the Polish intelligentsia with professors, with teachers and everything, sent to Majdanek.

MH: So, where do you go next? When do you get from Poland into Germany?

BS: Into Germany? Right after we cross—we leave Chelmno, about a couple miles away. We crossed at the first city, a very nice city. Złotów is the name, Złotów, and that’s the first German city which we took.

MH: Złotów?

BS: Złotów, Z-l-o-t-o-w. It will be on the map, on the Polish map, because right now it belongs to Poland. So, that city we take, and from there we’re starting to fight all around through the Pomeranian thing. And in between there was a breakthrough, a tank breakthrough, and my cannon under my direction was able to shut down two of those

target tanks, and they did. The other guys did, too, and we got quite a few of them. It was a breakthrough, because that area there already is close to Baltic [Sea], and the soldiers tried to get as close and then they got picked up: they were picked up by the German marines. That's what they thought. Nobody really—not too many got away, really. So, the fights are going. They're bitter fights, bitter fights all over the place. This is a cities and forested area, and then not far away you have the river, Oder River, and then you have the Baltic and everything else. We wind up closer to Baltic than to the Oder in the beginning.

MH: Close to the Baltic?

BS: Yes, close to the Baltic. Then—do you know, that thing continued till the sixteenth. On the fifteenth, we leave our position—

MH: Fifteenth of?

BS: Of April.

MH: Nineteen—?

BS: Nineteen forty-five.

MH: Forty-five [1945], okay.

BS: Fifteenth of April, we leave our position. Our last position was near Paulsdorf [Pawłowice], which is—it's a village thing, but it's a big village thing. We moved; the announcements were made that we're starting a new offensive tomorrow, middle of the night, so we moved. We moved to a forest on the other side of the River Oder.

MH: They want you to take Berlin.

BS: Oh, yeah, yeah. We have to cross the river first, so we crossed the river, with a big—you know, forty thousand artillery shell—artillery cannons firing. The night was like day, honest to God. By seven o'clock, my battery was across the river—on pontoons, of course, trucks and pontoons. Everything was on pontoons. There was not one single bridge there. Everything was gone. So, that thing continues, and continues till the

nineteenth—I remember the dates—till the nineteenth of April, and we come to that city, Oranienburg. And the city of Oranienburg is only thirty-five miles from Berlin. Thirty-five miles from Berlin, okay? It took another couple of days. I think on the twenty-first or the twenty-second, we were already on the outskirts of Berlin. Oranienburg is actually, as I say, you think half an hour, and you're right there in the city. With the autobahn it's even faster, because the autobahn goes that way.

We're starting in Berlin, we're starting the attack in Berlin, but there are a couple of obstacles yet. We have to still cross one of the canals we had to cross there, and then another river; I forgot the name of the river. River Spree, we have to cross that. And, eventually, we did this thing—under fire, under fire. I thought I'm gonna get killed, honest to God. They were shooting left and right, and the shells were landing left and right in the water. But it didn't hit us, though we had casualties.

MH: When do you get to Sachsenhausen?

BS: I'm sorry, the fifteenth—when do I get to—nineteenth of April.

MH: Nineteenth of April.

BS: Nineteenth. And I didn't tell you what I saw in Sachsenhausen.

MH: No, that's what I want to hear.

BS: Yeah, because I'm going straight ahead to Berlin. So, we're gonna come back to that Berlin section, to the rivers we crossed. Sachsenhausen: Sachsenhausen is a big city, and the camp itself is beautiful, really, from the outside and inside. You would have never dreamed that people are destroyed there. At Sachsenhausen, according—which I found out later—was built together with Dachau—they started a little bit later than Dachau, they started, and they finished in 1943—1933.

Originally, they built it for Jews, of course, for German Jews; dissenters, which are dissenting—they don't like Hitler; political prisoners; homosexuals; and of course people which have defects, you know, physical defects; and Gypsies. That was the original stuff. Later, of course, the Jews came in; the Russian prisoners of war came in. I didn't know then, but Stalin had one son which was in the army, and that's a true story.¹⁰ I didn't

¹⁰Yakov Dzhughashvili (1907-1943), who was a junior artillery officer captured at the Battle of Smolensk in 1941. At Sachsenhausen, he ran into an electric fence and a guard

know then, but I read about it. You know, when Stalingrad fell, they caught this Field Marshal [Friedrich] Paulus; that was a German field marshal, an old guy which surrendered the 6th German Army at Stalingrad. They caught him, and he survived; they took him to prison and everything, and he was there in Russia for quite a few years; eventually, they let him go out and he came back. But they wanted to trade him. Stalin wanted to trade him for his oldest son—no, Stalin didn't want. Germans wanted to, Germans wanted to trade him for letting out Paulus. Stalin refused, and he died there, in Sachsenhausen.

MH: So, how do you—you get to Sachsenhausen. It's just on the route to Berlin?

BS: Yeah. Well, it is in—on the route to Berlin.

MH: What do you see there?

BS: In Sachsenhausen? Let me describe to you Sachsenhausen. Sachsenhausen is a big camp. We took one section. This is the first time which we liberated human beings, really. You can call it human beings, but they hardly could walk. The section which I came across were mostly women. I spoke at that time German, I spoke Yiddish, and I spoke Polish, of course, and I spoke German. People knew those languages. Whoever was there knew. So, I threw those languages out, because everybody was trying, and everybody was in no condition to show their faces. First of all, they didn't know who we are. Our uniforms were different than the Russian uniforms or the German uniforms, so they really didn't know. They know we are soldiers and everything else, and we talk. The other one didn't talk; we talked. So, eventually we find out, and I started to talk with them.

MH: And there's a big fence you have to break through?

BS: We don't have to break anything, just a big door, big doors. You know, you open up the door. We didn't have to break nothing.

MH: No resistance?

shot him several times, but it is unclear whether he was trying to escape or commit suicide, and whether he was still alive when the guard shot him.

BS: No resistance at all. Again, we caught two German SS people, and even so, at that time it was already against the law to do anything. But two of my guys got rid of them: they just shot them. It was too horrible to see, because when we got there, people were still hanging on the hooks. They had special hooks where they hung the people. Yeah.

MH: Tell me about this.

BS: Yeah. People were hanging on the hooks.

MH: Outside?

BS: Outside, in the camp.

MH: I mean, in the camp, but—

BS: Yeah, in the camp.

MH: Not inside buildings?

BS: Not inside buildings, on the walls, on the side walls—in view. You could see it.

MH: They were hanging people on hooks.

BS: Yeah, there were a couple of people still hanging when we were there. I don't know if they were our kind or they were German kind or what. I have no idea. They were hanging there, and then there were a couple bodies were still laying, which were shot. They had a special place for that. That was the casualties, what we saw. There were two crematoriums there, because people which got enough work, you know, and they couldn't survive anymore. They had a big hospital there, I want you to know, a huge hospital. It's not a tall building, [but] it's huge, like an infirmary. You know, they were healing people, but people were dying also. Whoever died, they didn't bury. There was no room to bury, because they wouldn't go outside the door to show the Germans what's going on. So, those people were put through the crematoriums. Those people were put to the crematoriums.

MH: Do the crematoriums have big chimneys?

BS: They have chimneys, big chimneys, but chimneys wouldn't bother, because in Europe they had a lot of big chimneys, all factories, because they were coal. Everything was heated with coal. Of course, over here they have gas now, down there, but in Poland before the war, in my city, we had a factory there which—and I remember the name; it's the same name which [is] my uncle's name, Minc. This guy opened up the door before the holidays, to the Christians and to the Jews, especially the Jews, because Pesach you have to change the dishes. You open the door to the people; you took anything which you wanted for free, completely free. And he had a chimney, a huge chimney, the same thing what you saw in Majdanek or Auschwitz. Nobody would think. I mean, I'm telling you, in Majdanek from the outside didn't look sinister at all, honest to God. It looked like a factory, perhaps military compartment or anything else. It didn't look to us, because we didn't know what is going on, did not look to us. It was nothing sinister. From the outside, right from the grounds of Majdanek, if people had a chance to live, they saw Lublin. Can you imagine? The four, six-story building; they were not very tall there. I don't think they were more than six, but you still saw those buildings. So, it didn't look any sinister; you couldn't suspect.

MH: So, when you come into Sachsenhausen, you drive in?

BS: We drive in. We drive in, because the artillery drives. We were ahead of the infantry.

MH: Okay, you drive in. I mean, what's the first moment you see bodies hanging on walls?

BS: A little bit farther. That came when we stopped the cars and started to walk.

MH: And what—

BS: Before we see people, before we see people and we talk to the people. In the beginning, it was very hard to talk, but it took a couple of minutes to talk to the people. Some of them were talking Yiddish, and some of them were talking German, and some were talking Polish, and some of them were from France, but they understood German also. So, there was no problem. Mostly the women which were there actually were from Hungary, mostly were from Hungary. Most of them were Hungarian. But all Hungarians were able—they did not speak Yiddish, the Hungarians, but they spoke German. All those girls spoke German. All women [were] in very bad condition. They were crying uncontrollable and everything else. What we do? What we do is we have a kitchen, so—

we didn't have too much food, thank God we didn't have too much food, but water we had, and that's very, very important. So, we distribute something like that, and we assure them not to worry. "You are free now, don't worry about it, and there will be other people coming in. We, unfortunately, cannot stay here, but there will be other people coming in and they will take over. They will take care of you, not to worry." Just assure the people, that's it.

MH: Do you move any of the bodies that are hanging on the walls, hanging on the hooks?

BS: No.

MH: You just didn't—

BS: We didn't move them. We did not remove anything.

MH: I know this is a hard question to ask you.

BS: We did not remove.

MH: The bodies are hanging from hooks?

BS: From the hooks.

MH: In their shoulders? Their throats?

BS: From their throats, the throats.

MH: Men and women, or you can't even tell?

BS: Just men.

MH: Just men.

BS: Just men.

MH: Naked?

BS: Two bodies. No, not naked, not naked. But we wouldn't remove it; we would not do that, because we cannot put our hands on top of the thing. It's not our mission. The other guys, maybe they would do it. The other units which come to clean up stuff. But we wouldn't do it. I saw that.

MH: You see ovens there?

BS: You see two ovens, and on top of the two ovens, and we go through the factories. We go through the factories. The factories are open. You go and they were manufacturing clothes, and they were manufacturing all kind of parts for the military, mostly military stuff, but not only that. Being a tailor, I know that I lost everything. I wanted to take a machine, just a head of the machines. There was the German machine, which I knew; we had one in my place. We had a Singer and we had a Pfaff. Pfaff was a different machine, because they could do different things.

MH: Pfaff is P-f-a-f-f.

BS: P-f-a-f-f, yeah. So, I took this Pfaff, and I'm going back. I took this Pfaff. I said to the guy, "I would like to have this thing here, because when I get home I would like to make a living." So, we took this machine, believe it or not.

MH: A sewing machine.

BS: A sewing machine, yeah. A standard Pfaff, that's all. That's what I wanted, because I knew the machine and I knew how to work with it, and it was a good machine. So, I took it.

MH: From Sachsenhausen.

BS: From Sachsenhausen. I put it on the truck, put it on my big truck. The guys brought it out, put it on the truck. And it was—let me go back to Sachsenhausen. I'll tell you

what happened with that machine after that. So, we go through that thing here, through the thing, and see it. Then there's a huge, huge sort of like a stable, open stable, and it's open, again, with the wire mesh thing from the outside. And there are hundreds and hundreds of rabbits. I'm telling you, there must have been at least six or seven hundred rabbits there.

MH: Rabbits?

BS: Rabbits. White rabbits. They're all pure white with greenish eyes. And they were looking at you, like—I don't know, like a magnet.

MH: For what?

BS: That's what my question was, for what? I never found out for what they were. But beautifully—I mean, you didn't see a spot on those rabbits.

MH: I'm surprised that people didn't try and eat them.

BS: They wouldn't kill them. I don't know for what they were. I never found out. And the camp was already, you know, it's free. It's right now free again. We didn't take the rabbits out. You couldn't open the door, because all of them would go out. But they were fed, beautiful, which I admired—not admired, but I was thinking, “My God, that woman is starving to death, and those rabbits are so fat and so groomed beautifully.” They looked like they were combed nicely, not one single dirty spot on those people—on those rabbits. There were hundreds of them. I never found out what those rabbits did. I talked to people about them and everything. I couldn't find out for what—I mean, they had people which they were doing a job on, and then to find out all kind of things, experiments. So, what is the rabbit doing there? They were live rabbits, unless—I don't know what they were doing, unless they were farming them, which is all possible. They could have been farming them.¹¹

MH: Did you talk to the prisoners?

¹¹They were Angora rabbits, raised at Sachsenhausen and several other concentration camps for their fur, which was used to make clothing for the military. The Wisconsin Historical Society has a photo album and more information about the project: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/feature/angora/>

BS: No, I didn't, because by the time I got there they were gone. They just caught them and killed them. They were not young guys: I saw their faces. They were not young. The one guy, he had already gray hair.

MH: Which is this? This is—

BS: The SS guy.

MH: Oh, the SS guy.

BS: The SS guy, yeah.

MH: What about the Jewish prisoners, the other prisoners? Did you have long conversations?

BS: Long conversation, as long as I was there.

MH: How long were you at Sachsenhausen?

BS: With the women, I was not longer than about—maybe twenty-five or thirty minutes. In Sachsenhausen, altogether we were perhaps an hour and a half, not more than that, really.

MH: Did anybody tell you stories about what had happened?

BS: Nothing. Nothing. The Germans didn't want to say anything on the outside; they didn't know anything. The only thing which I told them, and the other guys the same thing, was—whoever is able to talk to somebody—he says, "Don't worry. You are safe. You are free, you are free, and eventually they will let you go. There will be doctors here," and there were doctors there. "There will be doctors here."

MH: From the Russian Army?

BS: From the Russian Army and from the Polish Army. They had doctors. The Russians had more, because we were special units when they took that stuff. In Oranienburg we knew that we're gonna have people. We were warned in Oranienburg; we knew already about that. But we didn't know the condition of the situation. No, as I said, the women were there. They were very shabbily dressed, and you really couldn't recognize people. Nobody had any hair, and when you take away—especially a woman, when you remove the hair she looks different, completely different than you would think. But there were a lot of them there. There were a couple thousand people. And it was—at this point, and I'm telling you that's what I thought sixty-three years ago. On the ninth of—I was—at this time of the day, I was still in Berlin. Today is what, the eighth?

MH: Today's the eighth.

BS: Okay. Tomorrow is the ninth. When we finish—let me finish with that. You could not, first of all—the only thing was you tried to give them some light. None of us was a doctor or intellectual or something like that; we were just young people. But we saw to this point what was going on. Thousands of people—first of all, you liberated thousands of people, civilians, not counting the land and anything. And everybody was crying, honest to God. Nobody greeted us with flowers because they just couldn't do it. They couldn't do it. They were crying. They were crying. They were very happy. They saw Polish guys and everything else. And it didn't matter where we went in Russia or Poland or even in Germany, in some instances. We did not harm any people, honest to God. It was against the law. But you've been in the Army, you know what's happening with the soldiers, and you cannot.

But, in one instance, honest to God—and I did not tell my wife till last year, honest to God—there was these three Russian guys, young kids, and I'll bet you that was the first time that they ever saw a woman or they laid on a woman. And that was forbidden. You could have killed this guy on the spot. That was the orders, because it was already then said that the Germans are running away because everybody tells them that the people will be raped and killed and all kinds of stuff, and the Russians didn't want to have it and the Polish didn't. Oh, we were very strict. I was that time—and I know it was an area of Pomerania. We fought and fought and fought, and then we came to a certain section where people were living, houses and everything else.

And there, I see three young guys. One is laying on top of the woman, and the woman has a child. One is laying on top of the woman, and two are standing. I had an automatic gun. I took this damn thing out from my thing, I said, "Get off!" in Russian. "Get off or I shoot!" So, the guy said, "What's the matter?" I can't even translate the word, you know. "What's the matter? Are you a zhalkow?" He said "zhalkow," it's in Russian. I don't know the translation on that word. But he said, "What's the matter, zhalkow? That [which] I'm doing?" "Yes! It's against the law; you're not supposed to do that. Leave

that woman alone. She has a baby, she has a little girl.” She had a little girl. He didn’t penetrate, he got off. He got off, put his pants on, and that’s it. And the other two guys run out of hell.

MH: You didn’t shoot them.

BS: Oh, I did not shoot them.

MH: You would have.

BS: I would have, honest to God. I don’t know if I would have killed him, but I would have shot. I really would, because you’re not supposed to do that. And the war is almost over.

MH: Where are you when the war ends?

BS: In Berlin. So, we finished with that Majdanek thing, you know, after all that stuff.

MH: Sachsenhausen.

BS: Sachsenhausen. It was sweet only in one way, that we saw the people, we liberated people. Because up till now, we liberated millions of civilians, you know what I mean? Civilians which had their home, had their farm, had their factory, everything was fine. It was not everything fine, but they were free. They were free, and they could go home. Then, all of a sudden, you come to a camp; you liberate those people which have absolutely nothing, not a penny in the pocket.

MH: Not a pocket.

BS: Not a pocket. No hope at all. They had absolutely no idea if anyone of their families is alive. It’s very traumatic, and it’s traumatic also for people like us. I don’t know about the Russians, but for us, we know each of us, of my guys, all of them had families with them in Siberia, or they have them in Poland. There were a lot of guys of mine which were from Poland. And I will tell you one situation that infringed with that. So, it was very traumatic for us to see that finally, we did something where we liberated people which had absolutely no power of doing anything, because they were taken away, their

dignity was taken away from them and everything else, and they were absolutely nothing. There was nothing. There was no money, no anything.

So, the only thing which we left for those people, which is very important, is hope. Don't give up hope. You are now safe. You will have all the care, you will get all the clothes you need to get, all the food that you need, and you will get all the medication. And they did, they did. I'm telling you, they did: even the same day we left, they did, because the units followed us always to those camps. So, that was a very, very, very strong moment for me, really—and for the other guys, because when I talk for me, I talk for the guys which are dead, too, because they did the same thing. You know what I mean? Not everybody came back. Thousands and thousands did not come back from this dreadful war.

But when I speak, I speak always for myself and for my friends which were with me and all the other soldiers. And when we say prayers, to this day, when I go to a synagogue—which I do—I always say the Prayer for the Dead, regardless of who they were, Jewish or not Jewish. The rabbi once asked me, “How come you're saying?” I said, “Listen, I can say a prayer 365 days, we lost so many people, and there are so many people left in this world right now—they're left, which are laying there, which don't have anybody, which could say one prayer for them. Therefore, I continue to say the prayers.” And it's fine: you can say it for the Jewish or not Jewish, and I do it. The Prayer for the Dead is not really religious; it's something for God and for the people, and that's that.

Part 2 ends; part 3 begins

MH: Okay, continuing with Bernhard Storch. So, the war ends. You're in Berlin.

BS: The war ends, not so easy. It takes us twelve days to end. We're in Berlin, and actually—and it's a fact, it's true—my cannon was shooting on the thirtieth of May. At that time, we didn't know if Hitler is there or not, but we were shooting from the other side.

MH: The thirtieth of May?

BS: No, no, I'm sorry.

MH: Of April.

BS: Thirtieth of April, at the Reich house [Reichstag], yes, where eventually we found out that he indeed was. That doesn't mean that my cannon killed him, because he killed himself. But the destruction was visible, and we fought through that part, close to the gate which they have there. I forget that gate, you know.

MH: Brandenburg?

BS: Yeah, Brandenburg Gate. And we ended up about two and a half miles past the Reichstag. We entered in a part which is Alexanderplatz, and it's not far away from the zoo, you know, that area there. There was the main bank there also, I remember. My stupid soldiers went there and took the money, marks, actually sacks of marks. They took the marks, put them on the ground, and set fire to them. Every one of those marks was worth exactly the same money which was written on after the war, but they burned it. They burned a couple of those sacks. Why they did it, I don't know.

But it took us a long time to get to the end of the war, and at the end, we ended on the second of May, I remember that. Second of May, middle of the night, we ended that war, and the last shot was fired. The last shot, I was told, went to a wine dealer's shop. That was it.

MH: And you go where?

BS: We stay on this position still for one day, get everything together, and we go to one town not far away. It's a suburb of Berlin, Bernau, a small city. Very nice city, Bernau. We're supposed to get permission from the civilians, because there were no big houses, mostly one-family houses. I spoke German, so I was negotiating with the civilians, and I really guaranteed everybody not to worry, everything will be left the way we found it, and none of you will be hurt, none of your children will be hurt. For my part, we took a house there, and she had two beautiful daughters, teenage kids. I said, "I guarantee you, nothing will happen to these children. We are not here for that, we are just here to come to ourselves, and we're gonna leave." And we left, we left from there. That was on the second, and on the third or the fourth, when we came into this town, and on the ninth of May, exactly ninth of May, the division packed up and we went to the train. By train, we left to Poland, and we left to Poland, to (inaudible). (inaudible) is about eighty-five kilometers from Warsaw. It was a military base before that, and the Germans had it also as a military base for themselves, because everything was there. So, my regiment settles there in Poland, and this is the end of the war for me, as far as I was concerned. Thank God, I came out completely intact. It's very hard to believe, honest to God.

MH: I—

BS: I'm telling you, it's very hard to believe.

MH: It's a miracle.

BS: It is a miracle, but the thing is—yes, especially it's a miracle, right, the first time when I went, because we lost so many people. The 2nd Regiment lost almost—I'm telling you—nine hundred casualties. And I was the 2nd Regiment at that time. You know, we lost—I mean, from my company were killed twenty-four people, and there were wounded and everything else. So, it is a miracle. You know, I don't think—I did not do anything extraordinary, honest to God. I never even—just for the infantry, I had to wear a helmet. I didn't even wear a helmet, nothing. I went through the entire war without a coat, just always a jacket, because coat bothered me. Our action was always taken during the night. I was not a good day sleeper. (laughs) In some instances I was walking like a zombie, you know. Some people can't sleep at night, daytime. I had guys in my unit, they just had to close their eyes [and] they're out of it. (laughs) I couldn't do it, unfortunately. I couldn't do it, so I suffered with that. And I made it.

MH: When do you come to the United States?

BS: I came to the United States—well, the trip took a—the process, you know, you have to register and everything else. Let me tell you first when I left Poland. I got discharged from the army in September of 1945. I met Ruth, which I knew as children. How did we know each other? We knew each other because my uncle's wife, which she begged my mother to let me go; she begged my mother to let me go. So, I met my wife. She came from camp also, from Russia, together with her other sister. So I met my wife in September, and we decided to get married in November. We got married in November, November 18, 1945. We married in city of Katowice; that's Upper Silesia there, nice city and everything else.

We were living in Katowice, but I had no intention to stay in Poland. I saw what is going on, even after we came back from Poland. There were a lot of tanks. My troops, which usually were hunting the Germans, went to hunt the bad guys in the forests and in the streets. A few people got killed. We were stationed right close to Lublin; (inaudible) is very close to Lublin. Seven people came from Lublin, came home. They didn't want to even have their houses there; they just came. But the guys which occupied their homes assumed that they came to get the houses, and they didn't want to give it. And I'm telling you, they killed those six men, those five men and one woman.

There was another situation which they attacked people from the forest, so we had to go and hunt them. We had to go and hunt our own guys. We didn't kill everybody, you know, but we arrest them. We arrest them, that's all. And I said, "I don't want to stay one day longer. I did my job"—I volunteered, by the way. I volunteered for the duty. I volunteered three times in a very difficult thing, because of us speaking the language, and because I was young and I was the youngest in the unit, so the older guys know better than the young guys know: not to volunteer. Yeah, and the rest of the guys, really, we were only three guys which didn't have any military duty before. The rest were all veterans from World War I.

One of the guys, which is so sad, really; one of the guys—as I'm talking now, we went hunting. He finally got a pass to go home. He got a pass to go home, and he was living in a small village near Białystok, the other side. So, we let him go. He had a pass and he went. So, he went home, and they killed him. This guy was from the telephone unit. This guy was a prisoner of war of Russia, a young fellow; he was a young fellow, but he was still older than I am. He was not a tall fellow, a little bit like myself, beautiful man. He prayed twice a day, kneeled and prayed twice a day every day, rain or shine, wouldn't miss it.

He came home, and some people from the village accused him of being a communist, because he served in the Polish Army. And they killed him, a Christian. We went to the funeral. It's unbelievable. This guy really took everything, he took a lot of things, because he was from the telephone lines, so he has to go right there where the infantry is, set up his telephone lines, and send them back to my unit for communication. Can you imagine? And he lives through something like that, and he didn't see his parents since who knows when, because he was in the Army. So, last time he could have seen them may be 1938, maybe even before. And they killed him.

MH: So, get me to how you come to the U.S.

BS: I came to the U.S. We got married, and we decided not to stay at all here. In December, we decided to move on. Now, it was not easy to go from Poland to anyplace. We had to go to Germany, Germany or Czechoslovakia. But Germany, you go and you have a better contact. So, we had to go to Germany. We had to go illegally. There were transports, and I had a connection to that. There were transports of Germans resettling, you know, because the Polish guy need good people for them when they come from Russia, so they had to resettle them. They were resettling German guys, which some of them were born in Poland and some of them were whatever, but they were living in Poland. Once they were living in Poland, they were not Germans but they were Polish. But this time, they still had to resettle the Germans, because they needed the room.

So, there were transports going out from Breslau, which is in Upper Silesia there—that's the lower part of Silesia. One of my cousins was in the unit which was involved in putting them on these trains. So, I myself, and Ruth—and, as a matter of fact, his own family, his wife and his daughter; he had a daughter then; not himself—we went with the train. Of course, nobody knew that we're Jewish, because everybody spoke German so there was no problem. And he spoke also perfect German himself, because he was born in Upper Silesia. So, we went with the train, and we landed in Munich. From Munich, we went to a DP [displaced persons] camp, because my wife's cousin, which went through Auschwitz and Buchenwald—he survived those, and he walked from Auschwitz to Buchenwald. He was my age; he just passed away. As a matter of fact, one year younger, but he just passed away a couple months ago. Zimberlis is his name. So, through him—he was able to register us to the camp, to the DP camp.

We were there, and then we found another friend, which were in a bigger DP camp, and they promised us there's gonna be work and everything else, so we went there. It was Bad Reichenhall. Bad Reichenhall is not far away from Berchtesgaden. You know, that's the area there. And that also was a camp, because it was a military installation, German military installation. They had all brick houses, like three- or four-story brick houses, and there were a lot of people. So, we were there. We were there for quite a few months, made friends and everything else, and find out that it's gonna be better in Munich itself, and perhaps we can stay outside the DP camps, you know what I mean?

And through the German Jewish community which was there, we were able to get through them an apartment, and we got an apartment from—Dr. Schroeder was the name. Can't forget it. Dr. Schroeder was his name, and it was on the Kavelierstraße in Munich. It was in the ambassador roads: all the houses were loaned to the ambassadors. He was a doctor, this guy, and he was a Nazi, because I found all the literature that he left. He left the whole house, so we had the house, and we stayed there. Then, of course, our aim was to register. We registered to—you registered always to immigrate, as soon as we came, to immigrate.

MH: To the U.S.

BS: To the U.S. and to Palestine. We had family in the U.S. I had an uncle, which was the twin brother of my father, and my wife had three uncles which lived in St. Louis. So, we thought that eventually—we didn't have any addresses from them. I had an aunt in Palestine—at that time she was in Haifa—and I was corresponding with her through the military post, so she knew everything I was doing through the military post, because I was able to do that. So, I made up my mind, and she urged me also to come to Palestine. But you cannot just come; you have to have the things to get, and whoever came first. And eventually, I was notified—in March—by the United States embassy in Munich that I was accepted, and a visa was given to me. So, we left. We left on the tenth of April

from Bremerhaven. You had to go to another DP camp before that. Before the departure, I had to go to a DP camp in Munich, so I had to go through that DP camp and then, again, before—it was a whole process, took about a month. To Bremen, and from Bremen, we left on the tenth and came to the United States on the twenty-second of April 1947. Nineteen forty-seven.

MH: And settled where?

BS: And settled in—in the beginning, by my uncle. I had never met him before.

MH: In what city, I mean?

BS: Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, yeah. He picked us up from the train. I never met him, but he looked—he was the twin brother, he looked like my father. Close, not a complete closeness. My father was a little bit taller than him.

MH: You didn't speak English?

BS: I did not speak English. My uncle served in the Russian Army, so he knew German, and he married a wife from Russia so she spoke Russian. His wife was from Odessa. They married in the thirties [1930s], and he had three kids: two boys and one girl. He farmed out the boys to go to friends to sleep, and he didn't want that we should sleep in their beds, so he gave us his bedroom in Brooklyn there. We stayed with him for three weeks. He found us a job. His brother-in-law was working for a big manufacturer of men's clothing. At that time, I didn't care men's or ladies', and immediately I got a job as—didn't know the language at all, but in those shops it was very easy.

MH: You were an operator?

BS: No, I was not an operator, because I was already a professional. I knew what to do, so I was a bushel man. (laughs)

MH: A what?

BS: Bushel man.

MH: What's a bushel man?

BS: What is a bushel man? A bushel man is when the garment gets complete, the jacket or the pants or whatever they were doing, if there's some kind of damage on it—something that went wrong—they give it to me to straighten it out. I straighten it out, and it goes then as a full garment, as not a damaged garment. Not ripping, it was not ripped, it was just something was wrong with it. They didn't put the sleeve right. Sometimes they put it upside down, believe it or not. I had one jacket (laughs) which the back went to the front. (laughs) So, I had to do that, something like that. There were three brothers. Big place, big place, by the name—doesn't exist anymore, over the years—(inaudible) Clothes. They had over sixty stores, sixty-three exact stores they had. In New York City the factory was in Long Island City, near Astoria, down there.

So, for three weeks I traveled—for two weeks, because that was on the third week. For two weeks I was traveling with uncle's brother-in-law, because he was working in that place. And later, I was able to provide for my brother-in-law. He didn't have a trade at all, so I was able to provide a job there in the factory. And he was there for a couple years, actually, doing something else, pressing—but pressing only the arms. Each item had a different machine, believe it or not. Even the breast, or the chest: there was a left chest machine, presser, and a right chest presser. They were completely different. It was wonderful. They were producing like crazy, but they also had the instruments of doing so.

MH: When did you become a citizen?

BS: I became a citizen—I registered immediately, of course. I became a citizen, papers and everything, on the six—no, I still have the paper. I think it's the sixth or the second; I don't remember. But I got them in 1952, December 1952.

MH: So, December fifty-two [1952]?

BS: Yes, exactly five years.

MH: You remember the first election you voted in?

BS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I couldn't vote for Truman because he, you know—

MH: You weren't a citizen.

BS: I was not a citizen.

MH: So, it was Eisenhower versus Stevenson.

BS: No, I don't think so. Dewey, wasn't it—

MH: No, Dewey was—

BS: No, Dewey was with Truman. Yeah.

MH: So, Eisenhower versus Stevenson.

BS: And I voted for Stevenson.

MH: I'm shocked. (laughs) Just kidding.

BS: I voted for Stevenson because he was a very intellectual man, and Eisenhower was a military man. Somehow, he still won. Eisenhower won. Eisenhower was a good man and everything else, but somehow, you know, I trusted more a civilian at that particular time.

MH: You became active in the Jewish War Veterans.

BS: I became active in the Jewish War Veterans in 1985, 1985.

MH: So, it was a while.

BS: It was a while, yes. One of my friends, which belonged to the same Jewish center at that time, and he was after me. I said, "But I did not serve in the U.S. Army." "But," he

said, “you can join us as a non-voting member.” I said, “Fine,” so I joined it. But then, it turned out that I voted on everything; they allowed me to do everything.”

MH: And eventually you became the—

BS: I became the State Commander.

MH: State Commander for the State of New York.

BS: There’s nobody else in the United States which had—from people like myself, which came to the United States and served in a different army. As a matter of fact, my uncle was—and he didn’t know, you know. When I started, my uncle, unfortunately, passed away. He was born in 1894, same day which my father, of course. And, of course, he was in poor health, but—today he would have, with the medication which they have and everything else. He would have been alive. He passed away when he was seventy-five.

MH: You and your wife have children?

BS: We have two children. My daughter is the oldest one, and she will be sixty, believe it or not, in November. November 9, she will be sixty years old. Her profession is—she’s a school teacher. Right now she’s more with the administration; it’s a private school, what she does. She specializes in dyslexic children, so that’s why she’s—it’s a high school level. They have junior high school and high school. In Richmond, Virginia.

MH: And your other child?

BS: My son. My son went to—they both went to Vassar College, graduated from Vassar. Later, he came—he went to Duke University for his master’s. He decided to go as a hospital administrator, so he got the degree from Duke as a hospital administrator. He got the job for three years with Mount Sinai in Milwaukee, and he was doing it; but he did not like the business aspect of it, so he went back to law school. He went to law. We told him, “Why don’t you go to law?” (laughs) in the beginning, and he wouldn’t listen. So, he went to law, to Wisconsin Law, because that’s where he was living. He was living in Madison, Wisconsin. He graduated, he got the law degree, and that’s what he is doing now. I mean, not as a lawyer, but he came back east because it was too much snow in Milwaukee and in Madison, so they came both east. They went actually because of the job. And my sister—my daughter-in-law had a sister, and he was in medical school and he finished his degree and he was there in Wisconsin. But that eventually—they want to

go someplace else. There was nobody left there, so they decided to come back east. So, they came east, and became a—~~not~~ hospital administration, but he became the administrative law judge for the New York State Health Department, and that's what he is, the administrative law judge.

MH: How many grandchildren do you have?

BS: We have three grandchildren. My son has two of them; they're both in college now. One is graduating in December, because he took half a year off, from Vassar College; and the other one came ahead of time. She graduated high school one year ahead, and she also is at Vassar. So, they're two children, and the third one is my grandson, my daughter's son, which is born in Vietnam. He's born in Vietnam and my daughter and my son-in-law adopted him. They split; the marriage split a couple years later. I'll tell you, my son-in-law was—I will tell you later. In any event, she adopted this—they adopted the child. At that time, they were living in Forest Hills and my daughter was teaching in New York City. They adopted Robert, and he was only—they adopted him when he was a year old. By the time he got to the States, he was almost two and a half years old, just before the war ended: a couple of weeks later the war ended. He came Christmastime; a couple of weeks later the war ended in Vietnam. And he's doing very well, and he's got a baby now, so we are great-grandparents.

MH: Great-grandparents.

BS: Yeah. The baby's a year and a half old, a little girl, beautiful.

MH: How did the experience you had—certainly, the combat experience is a whole separate thing. But dealing with the Holocaust there and seeing that sort of thing, how does that affect you now?

BS: Well, now it's fine. I did not speak, really, about the stories for—I'm not kidding you—at least twenty-eight years. Did not talk about it. As far as the military, I came out okay, I came out healthy, I wasn't wounded; but my head was not healthy, my heart was not. I was operating regular, going to work the way everybody does, but I had headaches and I had dreams and I had started smoking overnight and all kind of stuff. I did not drink anything, and I did not take any drugs or something like that. But I was affected for quite a few years, and went to psychiatrists and everything. He sent me on vacation, go on vacation, go this and go that.

But eventually, eventually, eventually, I got healed—not from medicine, but mentally, myself. You know, everything cooled down, and then things pop up, this war and that war. So, I really came to myself. Then children came. I had two children, my daughter and my son, and I think—and I stopped smoking, because my son was pushing the smoke away. I used to get up in the middle of the night and smoke. I stopped that. So, I think mentally, the children brought me back to life, really. With the Holocaust, I decided to talk when they opened up the Holocaust Museum here, the Holocaust Museum. I knew the director.

MH: Which one?

BS: The one in Spring Valley [New York], local. There's a local museum here. And I knew the director of it, and he knew my story. He said, "Ben, don't take it with you. Start talking about it, okay? Don't take it with you." And I think that was the smart thing to say: don't take it with you. So, I started to talk. I'm not a speaker or something like that. First, I started to talk like a soldier. I did this and that, whatever, and did good things, and some instances were not so good. But we were in the war and that's what we're supposed to do, and that's what we did. And as far as the education on the Holocaust, to me, it was very important, very important, after the start which I had, and my mind straightened out. So, that's what it is. Thank God I have memory, which I remember as a kid, and I remember as adult. I remember the good things and I remember the bad things. So, I have no problem with that. And I started to talk with adults. First of all, they had lectures at the Holocaust Museum.

RS: (inaudible) are gonna be finished in about ten minutes. (inaudible)

BS: Let it go. The room is clean. I clean it up. I run the vacuum. (laughs)

So, you know, I started to talk. I started to talk, and I don't—

MH: Do you remember an occasion when you were talking to people, or maybe to children, and remember their reaction to the things you were saying?

BS: Yeah. Yeah, I remember. I remember especially adults. When you talk to adults—adults are worse than children. Children take it, you know; but adults, for some reason, they get very upset, especially people which are involved—they were in those camps. "Oh, no, oh, no," and this and that. It all depends to whom I speak. I see the people and that's the way I switch, and I talk to them, whoever there is in the thing. When there are young people, like sixth graders, five graders or four graders, I will not give them the

descriptive thing, you know, with the bodies and this and that. I will not do that, because it will not do any good. When I talk to them, it's all those things which I saw [that] I say, and that's honest truth. All those things which I saw is of hate. And I've been doing it for—the first time—from the beginning, I never hated anything. When I came out after the war, forget about it. I don't want to hate anything, because if I will hate, I will not be able to sleep.

MH: How can you just shed it, though?

BS: I did.

MH: How?

BS: How? I don't know. Don't ask me how. But I just want to have one thing: I want to have peace. I want to have those kids, when they grow up in Germany, they should be peaceful. They should be taught everything what's going on there. You know, I was here in—there's a German school in Westchester, a German school for the diplomats, the children of diplomats are here. Some children are U.S. citizens, which don't have to be German, but if they want to have, you know, for some reason—it's high school. They want to learn the German language for their purpose, whatever it is. They are there.

And I showed them a magazine which is printed by the Jewish War Veterans, and it was about all liberating of camps, G.I. liberation of concentration camps. And I have this magazine because I got a grant from the state, New York State, just for that purpose of teaching. Those magazines are strictly for teaching, and they're given out to teachers. She accepts two hundred and fifty or forty or whatever it is, and she signs for it, because I send those things back to Albany and they should have the record of it, and when we need another one, we will get it. And I talked to this principal from the German school, and she's afraid. She's afraid to show it to the kids, because it's—what do you call it? You can scare them. There's another word for it, just escapes me now. It is too—too horrific.

MH: Terrifying?

BS: Not terrifying; there is a different word for it. But it's too horrific. So, I said to her, "I went to that camp. The American soldiers went to the camp. We're showing the same—those books"—I told her so. "Those books are being shown to the American kids in high school, in regular school." And I look at her. I could not believe it. And she tells me—I didn't want to tell. I didn't want to be rude. I think, "You guys did it."

MH: Yeah.

BS: I didn't want to tell her that, because she's the principal, you know. But you guys did it! It's not me did it; I just went to clean up! That was with the German school.

MH: Have they ever—what finally happened?

BS: Nothing.

MH: They wouldn't do it?

BS: That happened this year, mind you.

MH: And they wouldn't show the kids the books?

BS: No, no. They didn't show the book. They showed the story from Anne Frank and all kind of other—no, I have the book. No, they didn't show it. She saw it, she saw it.

MH: In Germany, they teach the Holocaust.

BS: Oh, absolutely. They also teach over here; they have a big program, as a matter of fact, in Westchester, a big program. I didn't tell the people yet; one of them I told. I didn't tell the people from the Westchester center. It is not a museum, but it's—they have a big program of teaching. I constantly go to high schools from them. Just yesterday, I had two hundred kids in Yonkers, New York, and they were mostly black kids, black, Hispanic, Asiatic kids. It happens to be from that kind of district. They were wonderful, they were absolutely wonderful. I did give the teacher, I asked her, I asked for the thing. "Of course!" So, she's gonna have it and she's gonna hand it out to her own children. And the German kids could not have it.

MH: What do the kids say to you? Do they believe it?

BS: They believe it. Some of them are very innocent questions, you know, comes out. “How can it be?” and this and that. So, I explain to them how it was. Some kids are very naïve and everything, but they believe what we say, they really do.

MH: They don’t doubt you?

BS: They don’t doubt me at all. Some of them ask me completely innocent questions, you know, about the army or something like that. One kid asked me yesterday, and I explained him that in Siberia you don’t get the numbers; did I have a number? I said, “No, we didn’t have a number; the numbers only came from Auschwitz, even not from the different camps, just there. And the numbers were given only to the people, the lucky people, which if they survived, because the people which went to Auschwitz itself, they didn’t get anything. They went straight the way they were.” So, I explained to him slowly, like that. But mostly, there is a very good response. There’s an excellent response from the teachers, excellent response, and they invite me for next year and everything else.

MH: Do you think talking to the kids helps you heal?

BS: It definitely does, definitely does, because I really don’t want to—I see what’s going on, you know, and I don’t want to take it with me. I don’t want to take it with me, because you don’t have to go far. There are so many of our guys [that] are going, our guys here, Christian guys which were in the camps in the American Army, and there are very few of them left already, very few of them left. I have a friend of mine which I will tell you about, and perhaps he can give you an interview. He liberated one camp: he liberated Gunskirchen. Gunskirchen is in Austria; it is part of Mauthausen and so forth and so on.

MH: That’s not Alan Moskin?

BS: Alan Moskin. Do you have him?

MH: Yes. I’m supposed to talk to him, but it got put on hold.

BS: Okay. Put him on hold, because he was at this camp. Alan Moskin was at the camp. Alan Moskin is the one which I recruited for the JWV, and I recruited also—when I found out, I didn’t know. I know Alan Moskin for a long time. How do I know him? Because he’s my niece’s—my married niece is from his family. In other words, Alan Moskin’s

mother and my niece's mother were sisters, okay? They were not related to me by blood, and I know him through her.

And Alan Moskin didn't talk about it either. He didn't talk about it either. And we met on every occasion with my sister, every wedding or something like that. I knew his father, I knew his mother and everything else; they passed away now, but I knew them. But we never talked about this thing during the regular conversation. One day, I brought it up or something like that. I was telling a story about something like that—or I don't know, maybe my niece told him about it—and that's how I recruited him for that. And he's speaking everywhere now, and he became a member of the Jewish War Veterans, which he was not. He's younger than I am, of course, and he was in the 3rd Army. Yeah, he's got a good story there to tell, so that should be good for you to do it.

I knew Eliot Hermon also from here, because we were from the JWV.¹² Right now he lives upstate. Where does he live?

MH: He lives in Middletown, just outside of Middletown.

BS: Outside Middletown, yeah, because the kids live in that area, too. That's why he moved. Do I have another one from the Jewish guys? No, I don't know anybody. I know one, but he was not involved in liberation of camps.

MH: That's what I'm looking for.

BS: I think he is the only one. I had a couple of other guys; unfortunately, they died.

MH: Anything else that I should know?

BS: Anything else what you should know? Well, I think you've got pretty much what you have. I did make the—you know, I did write out my little memoirs. Oh, yeah, I was interviewed by the Steven Spielberg Foundation, so they have the tapes. Now they have all of it there. And also by the Jewish War Veterans, of course; there is a tape from that. Did you ever see the magazine from the Jewish War Veterans which I'm talking about?

¹²Eliot Hermon was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00057.

MH: No.

BS: I'm gonna tell you and I'm gonna show you, and I'm gonna give you one to take home with you. And perhaps you can—some of those guys are still alive, not too many. They are only Jewish guys which were involved. There are a couple of nurses. The nurse is alive, I know that; she lives in Florida now.

MH: What's her name?

BS: But you can find in the book.

MH: There's a nurse that I'm supposed to talk to who was in one of the evac hospitals that came to Dachau.

BS: Maybe that's her. What's her name? I have the magazine. I'll give—that's why I will give you the magazine. But she lives in Florida.

MH: Her name is [Charlotte] Chaney.¹³

BS: Chaney, that's the one which I'm talking about.

MH: I'm gonna talk to her in the next couple of weeks.

BS: Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. She's in that magazine.

MH: Okay.

BS: Chaney, that's the one.

MH: I talked to her on the phone.

¹³Charlotte Chaney was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for her interview is C65-00019.

BS: Good, good. That's the one. Well, that's about all. If you want to know the—I got the decoration a lot from the Polish government. They all came from the Polish government. I did not take them with me because I didn't have them. I had some documents, you know, which I had, and I went—when the regime changed, the government changed, [Lech] Walesa took over. President Walesa took over. I got all medals here, through the Polish embassy. I don't have all of them here because three of them are still at the Museum of the [American Jewish] Military History in Washington, D.C. So, I don't have everything here. Some of them, a couple of them, I have still in this museum there. But I have three which I always wear for Memorial Day.

MH: Do you have them here?

BS: I have them here. I'm gonna show you. They're on the uniform.

End of interview