Ruth: Today is February 4, 2011. We are very pleased to be in the home of Sam Silbiger, who has agreed to be interviewed for the Esther and Herbert Taylor oral history project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum. Doing the interview is John Kent. Thank you both very much. Let us start.

John: Let us start at the beginning with your name, your original name, and where and when you were born.

Sam: I was born October 27, 1923 in Oswiecim [Poland]. My great-grandparents lived over there before my birth for over 400, almost 500 years. I find this out just from the cemetery.

When I was over there [about] 15 and a half years ago in Poland, I went to the Registrar’s office to ask for my birth certificate. She took out a book and she looked over it. I said, “My name is Silbiger, Haber.” She looked [and said], “There’s no such a thing. Nobody was living back there.” We looked over that. My daughter was with me. She had a camera. She was looking and nothing [was] there. Later I said, “How about look for my father? Natan Haber Silbiger.” No such thing. Later, she said, how about [we] look for my mother, Eva Holzer. She looked over the [book for] Eva Holzer. She found Eva Holzer. Her birthday was . . . I have the birth certificate. She made [a copy of] the birth certificate. This is the only one that I have.

[There was] no one [else’s] birth certificate I could get.

[The Polish archivist] said the Germans throw out all the Jewish names and throw away [the records]. It is not true because my brother-in-law [Maurycey Bodner], who died maybe

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1 Oswiecim [German: Auschwitz; Yiddish: Oshptzin] is a town in southern Poland located 31 miles (50 kilometers) west of Krakow and 178 miles (286 kilometers) from Warsaw. Located at the confluence of Poland’s main river Vistula and its tributary Sola, Oswiecim had been a market town since the 1200s, known for its arable land and a medieval castle that still stands today. Before WWI, it was part of the Austrian Empire in an area known as Galicia. The city had been home to a thriving Jewish community since the mid-sixteenth century.
twenty years ago—tomorrow will be when my sister died. They were in Israel—was the first guy after the war in Oswiecim. He was the [head of the Oswiecim Jewish community after the war] over there and he knew lots of people. He was going through the city [records] and took out my sister’s birth certificate. The birth certificates [at that] time were still there. Nobody took out all the Jewish papers of who was living over there [during the war]. The Polish government did [later].

Both of my grandparents lived in Oswiecim, not even 500 yards away one from the other. They both had farms. They both had drive-ins. The drive-in was not like today. Drive-ins were . . . You have a big place, where you can put people to sleep [and] you can feed them. You have a big [unintelligible; 3:46]. You have a stable, where you could put horses. This was the drive-in. [It was] not like today. Today, you come with a car. They was coming from the mountains with the horses. They could [only] go as fast as like 8 or 10 kilometers [5 or 6 miles], because you get tired and horses get tired, too. They [would] come on Wednesday. They slept overnight and Thursday morning they were going to the market . . .

Both [set of grandparents] also had brick factories. I do not remember exactly . . . in 1850 or 1860, they built in Oswiecim an army camp.² Until this time, there was no army camp. The army camp was light artillery and with horses [cavalry]. Everything was with horses and also foot soldiers. This was the [Oswiecim army camp]. I still remember when people were coming to us—officers who were living over there next to the army camp—to buy bricks from us, [which we would] deliver with horses to them. [The bricks were used to] build for them houses. Maybe even German [houses] were living in the houses. They had villas. I do not know. I was a little boy.

I was going to seventh grade school and also to cheder after the school.³ This was a Jewish school, [where you would] learn a little Hebrew. I had three siblings: a sister, Mirka, was born in 1925; Lorka was born in 1927; and Tshime was born on April 18, 1929. Also we had a

² The Germans later used the former military barracks on the eastern outskirts of town as the site for the concentration and death camp that became known as Auschwitz-Birkenau. In 1940, forced labor was used to build a new subdivision to house Auschwitz guards and staff. Polish residents of several districts were forced to abandon their houses, as the Germans wanted to keep the area around the camp empty. Expulsions of local Polish residents took place in two stages, in 1940 and 1941. Most of the Polish population was forcibly moved to displaced person camps and the area inhabited by ethnic Germans, many of who worked in the concentration camp.

³ A cheder [Hebrew: room] was a Jewish religious elementary school for boys. Religious classes were usually held in a room attached to a synagogue or in the private home of a teacher called a ‘melamed.’ It was traditional for boys to start cheder at three or five years old, learning to read Hebrew from a primer and studying the Book of Leviticus. Girls did not attend cheder.
cousin. Her mother died by Caesarean and no nanny could keep her because she was crying all the time. My mother took her in and was feeding her with her breast. This child was always with us, so we were five kids.

We had also a maid. I have a picture somewhere from the maid. We had a fellow [who was] taking care of the horse. In the wintertime, [there] was snow. We had nice snow. We had special sleds [that was pulled by] the horse. On the top [were bells]. It was a pleasure to be living over there.

Things got . . . I was born in Oswiecim. I can show you . . .

Interview pauses; then resumes

Ruth: Will you show the picture?

Sam: This is the house where my grand-grand-grandparents lived. Points to various points in the image> This was the drive-in. Here was the big room where they had tables with benches and some chairs. [The room] was a wide one. On this side was living my oldest uncle. His name was Rolf Silbiger. The second brother, my Uncle Mendel, was living first downtown. When his wife died, he moved in with [my] Grandmother and was living on the bottom [floor]. On this side, we were living on the top [floor]. My grandmother had all three sons with her. The girls [her daughters] went out of the house.

On March 5, 1941, I went to a work camp. On April 1, [Oswiecim] was Judenrein. Everyone who was Jewish had to take a suitcase and they put them on the railroad. They took them to Sosnowiec and Bedzin.

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4 The Germans conquered Oswiecim on September 3, 1939. The town was renamed Auschwitz and incorporated into Germany. German soldiers, accompanied by ethnic Germans [German: Volksdeutsche], began attacking the Jews and plundering their property. In the first days of the German occupation, one of the synagogues was burned down. The great synagogue was destroyed on November 29, 1939. Decrees against the Jews restricted their mobility and confiscated their property, and throughout 1940 they were concentrated in an open quarter of the city. Jews were required to wear armbands, surrender their businesses, and work in forced labor units. Hundreds were deported to forced labor camps. The Germans created a 34 member Judenrat [German: Jewish Council] headed by Josef Gross to enforce their discriminatory decrees. Deportations to forced labor camps began in 1940 and conditions in the town continued to deteriorate as Jews from neighboring areas were concentrated in Oswiecim.

5 In March and April 1941, all the remaining Jews in Oswiecim were expelled to ghettos in other cities. In just seven days, around 5,000 Oswiecim Jews were sent to Bedzin, Chrzanow, and Sosnowiec. During the deportation, the Jews were allowed to bring some of their belongings. Some rented wagons upon which they loaded their possessions. After the deportations, the Jewish community of Oswiecim ceased to exist.
Oswiecim was probably maybe 8,000 people or something. I cannot tell you exactly because I was too young. I was not interested. I had to go to school. First I learned Polish, history, geography and everything else. In the afternoon, I had to [learn] Hebrew [at cheder].

We had the brick factory and we had the farm. In Oswiecim, also there was a kibbutzim, where Jews that wanted to go to Israel [learned] how to work. Lots of them was working . . .

**Ruth:** Which organization was in charge of the kibbutzim? Was it Betar?

**Sam:** Lots of them. Most of them was Betar. My father was the President from Brit Al’Hiar. There was Betar, Betar Sohar, and Betar Hiar. I was in Betar. My two sisters, Mirka and Lorka, belonged to Betar also. We had a uniform.

When it was holidays and we [went] to schul [Yiddish: synagogue], everyone had new shoes and nice new suits, like navy [sailor suits]. Both sisters had long hair [that was so long]

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6 Before the war, about 31,000 Jews lived in the southern Polish city of Sosnowiec. After occupying Sosnowiec on September 4, 1939, the Germans began persecuting the Jewish population. The process of isolating Sosnowiec’s Jews began in 1939 with resettling Jews and Poles so that a ghetto was created. In late October 1939, forced labor was introduced for all Jews under the age of 55 and Sosnowiec became a slave labor pool for the Germans. The first Sosnowiec Jews were sent to the labor camps in October 1940 and until August 1942 there were periodic transports from Sosnowiec to various labor camps. The first series of deportation of Jews from Sosnowiec to Auschwitz-Birkenau was between May and August 1942. Most of the first deportees were “useless eaters” (children, the elderly, the sick, the unemployed) who were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau starting on May 10, 1942. Even as the Germans shipped some Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau, they brought in others to be new workers. Between August 1942 and March 1943, there were three major roundups and another wave of around 2,000 Sosnowiec Jews were transported to labor camps. The resettlement of Sosnowiec’s Jews was completed by March 1943. Deportations resumed in May and June of 1943 and the final liquidation of the ghetto began on August 1, 1943. The total number of Jews sent from Sosnowiec (and its neighboring ghetto in Bedzin) to Auschwitz-Birkenau was close to 30,000.

7 Bedzin [Polish: Będzin] is a city in southern Poland. Until World War II, Bedzin had a vibrant Jewish community. According to the 1921 census, the town had a Jewish community consisting of 17,298 people, or 62.1 percent of the total population. In the summer of 1943, most of the Jews of Bedzin were deported to Auschwitz.

8 ‘Kibbutz’ means ‘gathering’ or ‘clustering’ in Hebrew. It is a collective community in Israel traditionally based on agriculture. They began as utopian communities that combined socialism and Zionism. Across Europe during the interwar years, kibbutzim trained Zionists skills that would be useful for immigrating to Israel.

9 On the eve of World War II, there were between 20 and 30 synagogues and a wide variety of Jewish organizations. In the Jewish community itself, various religious and political groups continued to vie for control, with traditional Jews playing the most prominent role in Oswiecim, followed by the Zionists. Zionism came to Oswiecim in 1898 and had a significant influence on Jewish social life in the town.

10 The Betar Movement is a revisionist Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 in Riga, Latvia by Vladimir Jabotinsky. It was one of the most militant and nationalistic of the Jewish youth movements in Europe. Chapters sprung up across Europe.
you could sit on it. This was every year for springtime, for Passover, and also for Shavuot—the same thing.

**John:** What was life like before Hitler came into power, when you were a child?

**Sam:** Before, I was going to school.

**John:** How much did the Jewish and the Polish people interact? What was the attitude before the German influence came in?

**Sam:** We were living not in town. [We lived just outside of town], two kilometers (1.2 miles) before town. At that time, there were 8,000 Jews and 9,000 Poles. Together, it was something like 17,000. It was not large. Over there [where my grandparents house was], around us was not one Jew. [Town and other Jews were] two kilometers away. We were living just between Polack.

Everyone was our friend. Not everyone, because [there] was also antisemitism. They always was talking before Passover. They said, “Do not let the children out because the Jews taking blood from the children.” All kinds of social things. We did not .

We knew people was stealing. Everywhere was stealing. My father knew who was stealing. He said, “Please watch over my stuff,” so they would not steal. He did not told them, “I know you are a thief,” because a thief watched over you. That is what they do. He told me this. I did not have to deal with such things.

Across from us was a family. Their daughter knew how to sew. My mother had a sewing machine. She was also sewing dresses for my sisters, for my cousin. We was all together. Everyone was friends. We played together. We played soccer together. Other sports we did not play, but they played in the school—boys with the ball against the other ones with the basket or

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11 Passover [Hebrew: *Pesach*] celebrates the anniversary of Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days.

12 *Shavuot* is the Hebrew word for “weeks” and refers to the Jewish festival marking the giving of the *Torah* by G-d at Mount Sinai. It occurs at the completion of the seven-week counting period between Passover and Shavuot.

13 On the eve of World War II there were about 8,000 Jews in Oswiecim—over half of the population of approximately 12,000.

14 During the interwar period, Jewish citizens of Oswiecim were involved in almost all areas of political, social, and cultural life. The Town Council had strong Jewish representation, including the deputy mayor, and Jews and Christians worked together in numerous charitable and patriotic organizations. In the years between the World Wars, Jews and non-Jews knew one another as neighbors, business associates, and friends. While these years were largely peaceful, Jews were the victims of quotas that limited their participation in educational and professional life, and antisemitism intensified during times of economic strain and political tumult.

15 Throughout history, bizarre blood libel accusations have been leveled against Jews—often around the time of Easter and Passover. The accusations typically accused Jews of kidnapping a Christian child who was then murdered and his or her blood used for ritual purposes. The accusations often led to violent attacks against Jewish communities.
girls with the basketball. It was not like here with the football too much. Soccer was the most [popular] thing.

In the wintertime when it snowed, we had long [underwear] on. You could just see the nose [because we were so fully covered]—nothing else. The street was a two-way with the horse wagons to go. From the other side was probably five feet deep where the water was going down. When the snow come down, sometimes you missed it and you dropped in. You had a hard time to go out. I noticed everything.

In the school sometimes, we fight the boys against the girls. Sometimes the Polack said against the Jews, “Parszywi Zydzi” [Polish: scabby Jews], like you got all kinds of [scabs or sores] not healing . . . That’s what they said. I cannot tell you in English. I do not have a Polish [dictionary]. That’s what it was. Sometimes they tried to . . . In town [there] was a promenade. By the promenade was a Catholic gymnasium [high school]. The Jews was walking like in Jerusalem with the [beards], with the long hair . . . I [had] short hair. My father was shaved. My old uncles from the aunts [and] brothers . . . they had long beards. All of them did.

**John:** What was your understanding of what the difference was between Jews and Christians or Catholics? What was the difference?

**Sam:** They had two churches they were going to. They would listen to what the preacher said. [It is like] the same thing today what you have got with Muslims . . . The preacher knows everything. Nobody [else] knows anything. Those dumb people . . . They do everything [the preacher said]. Most of [the Poles in our town were] not educated. Later they started to educate the people. We had a Jewish school, [but the public school was] for Polack and Jews together. I was going to cheder, a Hebrew school.

The Polack did not have . . . We did not have electricity where we lived. In downtown Oswiecim, they start to have electricity. There were no cars. We had a little radio [with a head set]. My father liked to know the news. We [the kids] did not use it because maybe you could break it and get a whipping. Everyone was afraid. It was not like it is here [where] you cannot touch a child. Over there, [if you misbehaved] you got a whipping.

One time, we went in the wintertime for a walk with our maid. We were together with Mirka and the maid. One time, we saw on the [frozen] water people ice-skating. By them, by the lake, people had holes [where] they were taking out water. The boys [would] go running fast and
[slide on the ice]. I did something like this and I went to far. [I] hit the ice and the ice started to
break. They got me out. The maid said, “Okay, we have to go home.”

My grandmother had over there where the people . . . eating or something, like a
restaurant. They had a big iron oven in the corner. It was almost red it was so hot. We came over
there. The maid took clothes from me and they dry over there. One time, my sister said she’s
hungry. She slipped out and went up stairs. We lived upstairs. My mother said, “Where’s
Shmilek? What are you doing over there?” [My sister said] “He’s to dry his clothes.” My mother
got wild. She went down over there. First, the maid came. She did not do nothing, just slapped
[her across the face]. [Her face] was full of blood. [My mother] was strong. She took me
upstairs. She took [off] all the clothes I still had on me. We had a table where we ate in the
kitchen. We had [a whip] for the horses. The end was harder and broken up. She was whipping
me with it and I was dancing Cossacks on the table.16 I did not say a word. I did not go anymore
[on the ice]. This was to teach me, “You do not do it next time.”

I was going to school. I had some friends over there. They said, “Okay, come on. We’ll
go look around. We’ll have a good time.” They was showing this, looking at [unintelligible; video 1, clip 2, 2:01]. One fellow who was driving with the horses the bricks to deliver saw me
walking around.

My mother went also to [a conference at the school one evening]. The teacher said,
“Yeah, he is very good, just he doesn’t do [his work]. He should do better.” My mother came
home and she [told my] father the same thing. My father was in the Austrian Army.17 His belt
was so big, so wide—probably two inches wide. We did not have electricity; just kerosene
lamps. He went over to the bed. I did not know he got the belt or something with him. He said,
“Shmilek.” He called me Shmilek. He said, “Come here. Bring your rucksack.” I bring
everything. He said, “Okay, give me first . . .” what you wrote letters on. [The notebook] had
bent up corners. [I had bent up the corners until it looked like an animal’s ears.] He said, “Why

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16 Cossacks were a group of predominantly East Slavic-speaking people who became known as members of
democratic, self-governing, semi-military communities, predominantly located in Eastern and Southern Ukraine and
in Southern Russia. Here, Sam is referring to the Hopak, a Ukrainian folk dance originating as a male dance among
the Zaporozhian Cossacks. The Hopak is an energetic choreographed dance that include jumps, spins, and squatting
sequences.

17 The area Sam grew up in had once been part of Austria-Hungary. Austria-Hungary, also known as the Austro-
Hungarian Empire, was a constitutional union of the Empire of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary that existed
from 1867 to 1918, when it collapsed as a result of defeat in World War I. Austria-Hungary was one of the Central
Powers in World War I.
you have such [bent up corners] in the book?” Later, he told me to take the book and start to write. I wrote . . . He took the belt. He was whipping me like hell. I never had such a whipping.

The next morning, I went [to school] with my ass beaten up. I could not sit on it. I went to school. I did not say another word. From this time, I was the best student. I do not like to show off, [but] I was the best mathematics [student] in the school. When we went to school, we had a plate. It [had] ten different lines. It [had beads] on it [an abacus]. You could move them . . . I do not know what you call it . . . My father said to me, “If you do not know when I wake you up at night how much is seven times seven or eight times five, you get a whipping.” I knew it from this time.

**John:** Was that the usual way in Jewish families that children were disciplined or motivated?

**Sam:** If your father looked at you, you would make in your pants! I will tell you something else. After the war, first I was in Irgun.\(^{18}\) I went to Israel. I was fighting over there. I was wounded [and] was discharged. I was still a year in Israel working and [then] came back to Germany, back to my father. I was with my father one time. It was Sunday lunchtime. We ate dinner. We do not eat lunch in Germany. Here too, we eat dinner [a big meal] at lunchtime. After the dinner, I make with the hand . . . my father gave me a slap [on the back of the head]. I was twenty-nine years [old]. I did not say not a word. He said, “Listen. If I talk to you, you listen. I am still your father.” I was twenty-nine years [old]. After the war, after concentration camps . . . I still said not a word. He was my father. The people was different. [It was] not like here [with] the children talking back to their parents. If my father looked at me, it was enough. You should know what is going on. [It was] the same way with my mother. They knew.

I remember one time, it was before the holidays. My mother was baking a cake. It was not like [now where kitchen appliances are] electric. Everything was made by hand. Coffee we ground by hand. We bought pepper. You had to smash it. It was different. She was making a cake. She put in one container just the egg yolks. In the other, she put just the [egg whites]. In the white yolks, she was making snow. In the egg yolk, she put some sugar and some other things. She was working. My older sister, Mirka, said, “Momma, let me do it.” Everyone was looking around in the evening. There was no [television] and nothing to read [because] it was a little

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\(^{18}\) *Irgun* was a Zionist paramilitary group that operated in Mandated Palestine between 1931 and 1948. It was an offshoot of an earlier and larger paramilitary organization called Haganah. Both organizations were founded on Revisionist Zionism, founded by Ze’ev Jabotinsky, and believed that every Jew had the right to enter Palestine, only active retaliation would deter the Arabs, and only Jewish armed forces would ensure the Jewish state. Most of the *Irgun* members were absorbed into the Israel Defense Forces upon the establishment of the State of Israel.
dark. [Mirka] was [stirring and stirring]. She bumped it one time and everything fell on the floor. [My mother] gave her a slap. My gosh, blood [flowed] right away. Later my mother was . . . I seen everything. Right away [Mirka] left everything. She was looking for her tooth.

We had a break . . . We had land. I had one aunt. She was living in Krakow [Poland]. This was already a big town. Oswiecim was a tiny one. [In Krakow, you had streetcars, you had autos, everything. They had two boys. One time, they sent one boy—the older one—to visit the farm]. Later, when they were supposed to come pick him up . . . we were sitting over there. We were playing outside. We were running around. We made our own pickles [from] cucumbers that you did not want. We baked our own bread. The bread was so big it was like a wheel from a car. [My cousin] said, “Shmilek, bring me a slice of bread.” A slice of bread was probably a pound. [He said,] “Put some butter on it.” Butter was not like you buy here. It was straight from the cow, from the cream. You [would churn it]. We made [butter] too. [My aunt] looked at him and said, “Those are not my children.”

When I was [visiting them] in Krakow, she made coffee . . . with a little bit . . . white. I would not drink it. She said, “Please drink. We will go over there and buy you a watermelon.” At this time, a watermelon in Poland was something [special]. Oranges was something [special]. You could have apples, pears, plums . . . [But watermelon or oranges] was not [something common].

**John:** How much knowledge did you have about life in the rest of Europe? How much news was coming in?

**Sam:** I was studying. We had Polish history in school also. In Polish history, [the borders] were changing from time to time, different . . . In 1791 or 1792 or 1793, they took Poland apart. I knew this. There was a part to Austria, a part to Russia, a part to Germany. In 1793, [the country of Poland] was over. [The area we were in was] Galicia. Galicia went to Austria. Maybe 12 or 13 kilometers (seven or eight miles) from us was triangle. All three countries’

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19 Krakow [Polish: Kraków, sometimes also Cracow] is the second largest city in Poland, situated on the Vistula River. The city is one of the oldest in Poland and dates back to the seventh century.
20 The 1793 Partition of Poland was the second of three territorial divisions of Poland, perpetrated by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, by which Poland's size was progressively reduced until, after the final partition in 1795, the state of Poland ceased to exist.
21 Galicia was a political and geographical region between present-day Poland and Ukraine. Once a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the historical region disappeared from the European map after World War I. By the start of World War II in 1939, western Galicia was occupied by the Germans and eastern Galicia was occupied by the Soviet Union. Today, the east part of former Galicia is part of the Ukraine, while the western part belongs to Poland.
[borders came] together. It was like this. <draws on floor with finger> This is Poland. Here was Russia. Here was Germany. Here was Austria. There was no Poland. They spoke Polish at home. Probably when they were in the army, was also Polish . . . or Austrian.

**John:** Did you feel your identity was more Polish or Jewish, or half and half?

**Sam:** We was living over there not in town, before the town. I was just with the Polacks all the time. We spoke in school Polish. I heard my father [speak] to my mother in German. My father’s [side of the family] came sometime in the 1800’s from Berlin [Germany]. [It was] like today with Jews moving from Israel, moving everywhere [around the world]. They were everywhere after the war. They were not staying in one place. Jews go where they can make a better living and better education for their children. It was the same thing for them.

Also the Holzers . . . My grandparents on my mother’s side were the Holzers. I was here maybe about ten years ago at a bar mitzvah.22 One fellow [I played cards with] and they had together a bar mitzvah. The other fellow [had the name] Holzer. I said, “Holzer?” he said, “Yeah, my grandparents came from Berlin [Germany].” Probably I have . . . I know the children. I know the one son. I know the wife. The wife is now older. She came [to the United States] with the Holocaust survivors. I said, “Hello.” She does not know anything. She is from Poland. She was not [a] Silbiger.

**John:** When did you learn about Hitler and the changes in Germany in 1933? When did the news get to your area?

**Sam:** We knew . . . I can tell you another thing. Poland was also [divided]. This was a part from Poland next to Germany. You had a river. It’s like in Atlanta. You go across Johnson Ferry Road23 [over the Chattahoochee River].24 One side is Fulton County [and] from the other side, it is Cobb County.25 Over there were two towns.26 One side was Biala [Poland]. It was

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22 A bar mitzvah [Hebrew: son of commandment] is rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on tefillin, and may be counted to the minyan quorum for public worship. He celebrates the bar mitzvah by being called up to the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday.

23 Johnson Ferry Road is a major thoroughfare running north from Atlanta, Georgia over the Chattahoochee River and into Marietta, Georgia.

24 The Chattahoochee River is about 430 miles (690 km) long. The river originates in the Blue Ridge Mountains in northeastern Georgia and winds down through the state to form the southern half of the Georgia-Alabama border, as well as a portion of the Florida border.

25 Fulton County and Cobb County are in the north-central portion of the state of Georgia. Atlanta is the county seat of Fulton County; while Cobb County is home to a large portion of the suburban metropolitan area.
Like we have Georgia . . . This side was Bielsko [Poland]. They spoke mostly German. They spoke Polish and German.

I had over there an uncle. He had a restaurant. One time came a fellow. He was eating. He ordered this, ordered this, ordered some drinks . . . He was sitting by the door. When somebody came in, it was not like here, where they give you a ticket or a bill to pay. He was sitting by the door. The fellow wanted to go outside. He said, “How about to pay this bill?” He said, “I will not pay.” He said, “If you will not pay, you will not go outside.” He said, “I will not pay you.” He said, “If you go out, I will kill you.” He killed him. At this time it was maybe 1936 or 1937. There was a pogrom in Bielsko. What happened to my uncle and to my aunt, I do not know. That’s what I knew. I knew Germany . . .

Ruth: Sam, this man did not want to pay your uncle because they were Jews?
Sam: Yes, because they were Jews. His name was Norman. I forgot what was her name.
John: How much of that kind of hostility towards Jews was there in your area? Did the kids at school beat you up or anything like that?
Sam: In the school, you had . . . Most of them were very religious. On Saturday, you did not see one Jew smoke a cigarette, or not one Jew riding a wagon with the horses, or do some other things. No one was cooking. They had [all the meals for Saturday] on Friday cooked up. They had special containers or plates to put the food.

You had probably 20 different [Jewish] organizations [in Oswiecim]. In the organizations, my father was a representative. The other was Communist. The other one was religious . . . [There were] 20 different [Jewish] groups. Some families, when they came [together] in the evening and started talking politics, they would fight each other. This was by the [assimilated Jewish] people who shaved themselves. My father was in the Army. He shaved himself.

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26 Sam is referring to Bielsko-Biała [Polish: Bielsko-Biała], a city in southern Poland. Historically, the city is situated on the border of Upper Silesia and Lesser Poland. Bielsko and Biała were two separate municipalities until 1951. Bielsko, the older and richer settlement, was founded as early as the 11th century. It was a part of Austrian Silesia and developed under the strong influence of Austrian and German culture. Biala developed as a village on the right bank of the Biala River, a tributary of the Vistula River, which runs through the center of the unified city today. Biala was located in Galicia, where Poles enjoyed a great deal of cultural autonomy.

27 An increase in antisemitic propaganda and sentiments in the 1930s led to anti-Jewish riots in Biala in 1937. By September 1939, Germany had occupied the entire area and both towns.

28 Shabbat (Hebrew) or Shabbos (Yiddish) is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays. Shabbat observance entails refraining from work activities, often with great rigor, and engaging in restful activities to honor the day. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday night and is ushered in by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. It is closed the following evening with the recitation of the havdalah blessing.
They did not have time to look for. . . These people were very poor. You did not have very rich people. They were looking how to make a living, how to put the kids to school. Later, when they got [to be] 14 or 15, they had to work. It was not like here, [where kids are in school until they are] 18 or 21.

**John:** Was there a difference in the standard of living between Jews and non-Jews?

**Sam:** [The standard of living was] better by Jews, always better.

**John:** Was there any attitude about that?

**Sam:** We had kosher meat. The kosher meat you had to pay probably two zlotys [Polish dollars] for a pound or kilo. [The meat] was not kosher [that came] from the back. It was *treif* [Yiddish: non-kosher]. Something was wrong with the cow. They would sell it for cheap. It was like 50 [cents per pound]. It was probably four times lower. They said always a Jew was supposed to have a chicken or a goose for Saturday. The Polacks [a derogatory term for Polish people] . . . Like you see sometimes, they go to McDonald’s and pick up a sandwich.²⁹ On Friday evening, every Jew was sitting at the table. Everyone had nicely done food. On Saturday, they had *schul* most of the time. They would put Friday[’s prepared meal] in the oven and take it out Saturday.

We also had a farm. In springtime, we also had lima beans. Later, when [the plant] would come up, they would go up. We had [crops of lima beans] already from year to year. They’d get broken, so we’d throw it away and [plant] a new one. We’d put it maybe one and a half feet in the ground so it could hold. It was growing sometimes nine or ten feet tall. Later, you was [picking] fresh ones—not dried ones. When there was fresh ones, we brought them to the stores. They was selling. On Friday, we took out from the bushes and in the evening cleaned it up and brought them to the stores, how many they wanted. People with money would buy. This was the best thing you could do.

**John:** When did you notice that things were starting to change in the 1930s?

**Sam:** The children [were] not . . . The parents . . . When the war broke out, I was not even 16. I was the oldest one. I had to listen to what my parents said. I did not know nothing by the newspaper. I did not see a newspaper. We did not have newspapers. They had some downtown. I remember people were looking over there . . . We just . . .

**John:** Were people aware of what was changing in Germany?

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²⁹ McDonald’s is an American fast food company, founded in 1940.
Sam: I do not think [so]. Maybe around 1937, lots of people who were before . . . My ex-brother-in-law was . . . I do not know if he was born in Germany or his parents went to Germany [after he was born]. Later, they when Hitler came to power, they said, “All Polacks . . .” They did not have . . . In Germany, you had to have . . . You could not get citizenship. Those [people of Polish descent or nationality were told.] “Goodbye.” They were coming to Poland. Later, they took him to the army. Later, after the war, I knew. Before, I was in a small town. We did not know. Maybe in the big towns [they knew]. We belonged to organizations, but in the organizations we were just [talking about and interested in going to] Israel, what to do, how to work, how to go over there, how to fight.

John: Was there no warning that a war was about to start?

Sam: Maybe my father knew something. I think children were . . . I was not even 16. War broke out September 1, 1939. [My sixteenth birthday] was almost two months later. October 27 was 57 days later.

John: What do you remember when the war actually started? Where were you? What did you know?

Sam: This was Friday morning. We got up. We wanted to go to school. We lived maybe between three and four hundred yards away from [the army camp]. <Holds picture of his grandparent’s home up off camera > This was the building. Behind the building was a place where the soldiers were coming over a bridge. First, was an army camp. Behind the army camp was a street where two trucks could go by [at the same time]. Later was the Sola River. This [side] was just big and smaller rocks. On the side where we lived were bushes and a [pasture] where they had cows. Everyone would bring them over there. They had to pay . . . I do not know what they had to pay for them to eat grass.

30 On October 27, 1938 the Germans began arresting 17,000 Jews with Polish citizenship who had been living in Germany and began deporting them to Poland. The Polish authorities placed the majority of the Jews in the border town of Zbaszyn and forbade them from leaving in the hope that the large number of Jews near the border would pressure the Germans into beginning negotiations to allow them back into Germany. The negotiations ended in January 1939. Friends and family in Poland had already taken in some Jews, while other deportees were permitted to return to Germany to wind up their affairs, and then return to Poland.

31 World War II officially began in Europe when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France responded by declaring war on Germany on September 3. Within a month, Poland was defeated by a combination of German and Soviet forces and was partitioned between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

32 The Sola [Polish: Soła] is a river in southern Poland, a right tributary of the Vistula River. The Sola originates in the Western Beskids mountain range near the border with Slovakia. The river passes to the east of the town of Oswiecism and the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.
They were also bringing over there sometimes the soldiers [to do] exercises. They were making exercises by our house, in the street, and everywhere else. The officers were very rough, I can tell you. I saw everyone . . . They gave them just soup, plain bread, no salami, no butter. Maybe sometimes they gave them a little bit of marmalade. [The soldiers] were strong.

**John:** When did the war actually come to your area?

**Sam:** Friday morning they started. My father was in the army. He figured out where they were coming from. He figured out from Germany, they’d have to come over Sola—first to the army camp and later over the Sola. He said, “If this will be, the Polish army will stop the Germans by the Sola.” They did not do it. We saw Saturday afternoon how the officers were going in uniform with [their hats] in [their hands] running. This was not officers and no army was there. Elsewhere, they fooled around with girls and whatever they could get away with . . . This was Friday afternoon.

On Saturday, my father said, “Listen. Okay. We take now our horse with the wagon and put mostly what we have . . .” It was summertime. September first is summertime. You do not need to have lots of clothes, just the most important things. He got lots of friends that was buying from him the bricks. [When you have] lived over there 400 years, you’ve got all kinds of friends. He said, “Okay. We go to Polanka [Poland].”³³ [My father] was looking just through the air [and] how far away the cannons [could hit]. We went to Polanka. We went over to some guy. He said, “Okay you stay here. You put over there in the stable. We’ll put . . . You stay over there. We have hay and everything.” We had something to eat.

We were over there Sunday morning. Everything was quiet. My mother said to my father, “Listen, I’ll take the maid and we’ll go over there. We are women.” My mother was very [tough] like me. She was not afraid.

I’ll tell you something else [about my mother]. In 1920, [my mother’s family] had a drive-in. People was coming and eating over there. There were lots of pogroms. She had guns. My mother did. She was together with her mother and father. They were old people. They could not do nothing. They came over there to the building . . . They tried to break in. She shot a few times—one in the window. Later, they went to the other window and she shoot. They went round

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³³ Polanka is a village in southern Poland. It is 65 kilometers (40 miles) east of Oswiecim and 22 kilometers (14 miles) south of Krakow.
and round [the building trying to come in the windows]. She shot the different windows. Nobody came in.

I’ll tell you something else [about my mother]. In the summertime, they had dances over there. They came—boys and girls—and they were dancing. You know boys will [become possessive and say,] “This is my girl.” They start to fighting. She did not do too much. She picked up one by one head and the other by his head and [knocked them together]. She’d pick up a 100 kilogram (220 pound) bag of flour like it was nothing . . . At this time, people had to be strong. If not, they could not live. She had to be strong. I have cousins over there on my mother’s side. The youngest boys went to the Sola. They were picking up rocks [to see] who picked up the heaviest one.

When I was still in camp . . . First, I was in a work camp, not concentration camp. I was probably three years just in a work camp. The concentration camp came to us. They came from Auschwitz-Birkenau to us in two buses.34 This was on Sunday. One was taking my name and one was tick-tick-tick [tattooing my arm].35 After this, we received a number. We received a uniform. This time on was a concentration camp. Until this time, we were working.

I was from a farm. I knew how to take a shovel in the hand and how to take a spade in the hand. In the springtime, we trimmed the trees. In Poland, they did not burn it up. You would [cut and stack] it by the fence so in the wintertime [you had wood] to make warm in the house. I knew how to take an ax. That’s the reason I was strong. I was skinny, [but] strong.

**John:** Go back to when your family went to that stable in the neighboring town. How long did you all stay in that stable?

**Sam:** No, we came . . . The stable was on September 1 [1939]. This was on September 3. [We stayed] September the first, second and third. On Sunday, my mother and the maid went to our house to take a look. We had a cow there and we had chickens. [We wondered] what was going

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34 Auschwitz-Birkenau was a network of camps built and operated by Germany just outside the Polish town of Oswiecim during World War II. It is estimated that the SS and police deported at a minimum 1.3 million people (approximately 1.1 million of which were Jews) to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex between 1940 and 1945. Camp authorities murdered 1.1 million of these prisoners.

35 During the Holocaust, concentration camp prisoners received tattoos only at one location: the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex. Tattooing was introduced at Auschwitz in the autumn of 1941 for Soviet prisoners of war. In March 1942, tattoos were used to identify prisoners at Auschwitz II (Birkenau). By the spring of 1943, the SS authorities throughout the entire Auschwitz complex adopted the practice of tattooing almost all previously registered and newly arrived prisoners, including female prisoners. Prisoners were given tattoos on their forearms of their camp serial number, which was also sewn onto their uniforms. Only prisoners selected for work were registered and given serial numbers; those that were sent directly to the gas chambers were not registered or given tattoos.
on. She was not afraid. She was a woman. She was not afraid. She [saw] everything was quiet, so they came back to us and we [went] back home. We went over there.

One or a few days later, they called up to take all the guns. Who[ever] had guns [had] to bring [their guns to surrender them] in the city. My father had a big one from the army. He [had] ammunition. They had over there an outside toilet for three people to sit down and over there was a place for the men to [urinate]. In the wintertime, they were taking the [waste] to put on the yard [as fertilizer]. Everything was growing. I picked it up, wrapped it up nicely, and dumped it in the toilet. I was [in Poland] fifteen years ago. I did not look.

We built the house in 1934. There were maybe 12 steps in the house going [to the landing before turning and going] onto the roof. Over there was a fence in back. To go outside, was down maybe three yards. We made like a shack. It was close up. This was the Sukkot. The roof we put on hinges. With our chains, we pulled it up—the whole roof—and put a top on it.

**John:** After your family went back home again, what happened next?

**Sam:** After a few days, they called us first to bring the guns. They started taking people. They said, “Come into town by the main office where the rabbi was in the center of the city’s Jewish community. The chairman came. They picked him up to clean up the street. For what[ever] they needed, they was taking Jews. I was still [not yet] 16 years [old]. I was not there. Everyone was doing, cleaning up because it was shortly before winter. You had to pick up the potatoes from the fields and everything. There was no school, nothing. Children were sitting at home. Maybe a year later . . . in 1940, they called up people to the camp to build the autobahn.

**John:** For a year life was fairly normal?

**Sam:** We were children. I did not know nothing. Children do not have nothing to do. I was just 16 years old. I did not know nothing.

**John:** Were there any actual signs of war, like combat or bombing, in your area?

**Sam:** No, no combat. They took over right away. That was all. The people had to do what they said. There were lots of Polish people that went over there. They said, “You know, I know something,” to the police. [They would say,] “He’s got this and this. They were probably hiding

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36 Sukkot is one of the Harvest Festivals. It is seven days long and comes after the ingathering of the yearly harvest. It celebrates G-d’s bounty in nature and G-d’s protection, symbolized by the fragile booths in which the Israelites dwelt in the wilderness. During Sukkot Jews eat and live in such booths, which gives the festival its name and character.
some suit or some material or something.” All the richest ones had everything ironed at that time. All the rich ones were over there.

**John:** Were there any restrictions yet on Jewish people and what you could do, or curfews?

**Sam:** Yes. Nobody could go outside. When it started to get dark, nobody outside. Later they put for Jews to put [on] an armband with a blue star. First they said not to walk on the sidewalk, just in the middle of the street. Later they put also . . . They had yellow . . .

<interview is interrupted then resumes>

**John:** You still went to school and your parents still worked?

**Sam:** No more school. We were around the parents, all of them just sitting and talking. Old people was probably talking politics. [For] the children, they would give you something to read. Everyone tried to [stay] occupied. In the summertime, we went outside to the yard. Before, we were taking people to work. We were working, helping. What the Germans did . . . They had the army camp first. Later you had to bring over food or something. They came not with trucks. [The Germans] came with wagons and horses. In the springtime, the Germans said who[ever has] got land to put some seed in the land for potatoes or something. Before the war, Germans were very slim. They did not have enough to eat. I was going out in the morning. I brought to the guy [who] came with the wagon with horses. Later he was going around with horses and he was doing it.

**John:** Do you remember what your expectations were at that time? Was there fear? Was there optimism?

**Sam:** We were children. [We] did not know nothing. My father told us, “Just listen to what they are telling you.” That is all they were telling us. [They said,] “Always be polite. Never talk back.” I never talked back to my father. I never talked back to anyone who was talking to me. He knew better than me because I was too young. You wore a smirk . . . Some children in the wintertime, [would get a runny nose]. You did not have tissues. You would [wipe your nose on your sleeve]. I’m telling you what I did.

**John:** What started to change after a year?

**Sam:** In 1940, they were taking people to build the autobahn. They took lots of young people. All my cousins who were older than me. I and my cousin, who is now in Florida, were the youngest boys. Everyone who was already over 18 was going to work. They were taking [people over 18]. They took my father also.
When my father was over there, we put stuff in the ground. The Polack went to the German Commandant. They said, “Over there is a Jew and I know he is no good,” and these kind of things, “and we would like to take the land from him and put them together with the Jews.” My mother received a paper. Somebody came with a paper. It was not the post office. I do not remember a post office. We never got letters. There were no letters.

My mother still had the papers where my father was in the Austrian Army. [She] went with my uncle’s second wife to the police station. They showed them to the officer. My mother spoke perfect German. [She] said, “Listen, my husband has five children. It’s just dumb Polacks trying to do like this, to throw us off. He was with the German Army on the French front. He was also on the Alpine front.” All the papers were there. They said a polite, “Go. Don’t talk nothing.”

We was still making beans to have to eat. We had clothes and all kinds of things we exchanged for a chicken or something like this. She cooked the chicken for a whole week for the whole people. They took the skin from the neck. They took potatoes with a little meat mixed together to make like salami. They cooked this and made a soup. The soup was really tasteful from the chicken. They put some beans, some carrots, and everything. It’s how we lived. They made one from this, one from this . . . They knew how to do it . . . It was not like we got a chicken and we would eat the chicken then have nothing tomorrow. I do the same thing. If it will be a month with bad weather, I am thank G-d already. That’s what I learned from my parents.

**John:** Your mother was able to keep your land from being taken away?

**Sam:** No. They brought my father back in 1941, probably in January or February. My father sent me to some people far away that he’d known for a long time. They were making business. He knew the lady when they were young and going to school. I do not know if they were going to school. The Polacks was not educated. They did not know nothing. Not all of them was going to school. They put me over there, not in a stable, just where they had straw [stored]. It was cold like hell. They brought me something to eat over there. I was over there two days. I said, “No. I’m going home.” I went. There was German [occupied areas] I went through.

Later they said everyone who was 17 . . . I was almost 17 and a half. I was 17 in 1940. On March 5, I came with a little luggage, with one pair [of shoes] on my feet and one in my

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37 The Italian Front or Alpine Front was a series of battles at the border between Austria-Hungary and Italy, fought between 1915 and 1918 in World War I.
luggage, and some socks, and some long johns. They took us all to the station. From the station, we were going to the mountains, to Saybusch. The name of the company [labor brigade] was Bautrupp-Saybusch. This means a company that was building everything. Bauen means ‘building’ [in German].

We had over there SS, the ones that had black uniforms, and one that looked like he had [a cape], not a uniform. We called him a guar. In Hebrew, it means ‘preacher.’ We gave everyone a different name. When we were working and he had a good day, he was good. When there was something wrong on the front or he did not have a good day, he was beating us. For those who did not know how to work, they came right away with them.

The Germans brought people from Hungary and Romania and taught them how to be farmers. They annexed a piece from Poland [that included] Oswiecim. They changed Oswiecim in 1940. They came in two buses from Germany. [Their prisoner uniforms had] black and green triangles. They were murderers or homosexuals or something like this. From this time, it was [called] ‘Auschwitz.’ What they were doing over there, nobody knew.

When they annexed the piece of Poland to Germany, 100 Polish families . . . They came with a truck. They put 90 Polish families on the truck and they took them to the Russian

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38 Bautrupp is German for “construction crew.” It is not clear where the work camp Sam was sent to was, but other survivors mention being part of labor brigades sent there as well. It was likely part of a German ethnic cleansing operation called Aktion Saybusch or Operation Saybusch. This was the mass expulsion of 18,000 to 20,000 ethnic Poles from the territory of Zywiciel County in Polish Silesia, which was conducted by the Wehrmacht and German police during the German occupation of Poland. The purpose was to create space for German colonists from across Eastern Europe. Aktion Saybusch lasted from September to December 1940. Some 3,200 ethnic Germans were brought in to replace the forcibly expelled Poles. The German police surrounded Polish towns and individual farms and ordered the Poles out. They had 20 minutes to collect their things and could only take clothing and food. They had to leave anything of value behind. They were marched or trucked to distribution centers to be resettled. The abandoned houses were cleaned and washed by forced laborers, mostly Jews, and some remaining Poles, who had been deemed racially acceptable. Then new Germans farms used slave labor, most of them Jews. Many of the German settlers were unhappy with their new humble housing so it seems reasonable that new homes would need to be built to accommodate them. This type of resettlement continued throughout the war and some 50,000 Poles were driven from their homes and land so that ethnic Germans could take their place.

39 The Germans conquered Oswiecim on September 3, 1939. The town was renamed Auschwitz and incorporated into Germany.

40 After 1939 and with some variation from camp to camp, the categories of prisoners were easily identified by a marking system combining a colored inverted triangle with lettering. The badges sewn onto prisoner uniforms enabled SS guards to identify the alleged grounds for incarceration. Criminals were marked with green inverted triangles; political prisoners with red; "asocials" (including Roma, conformists, vagrants, and other groups) with black or—in the case of Roma in some camps—brown triangles. Homosexuals were identified with pink triangles and Jehovah's Witnesses with purple ones. Non-German prisoners were identified by the first letter of the German name for their home country, which was sewn onto their badge. The two triangles forming the Jewish star badge would both be yellow unless the Jewish prisoner was included in one of the other prisoner categories. A Jewish political prisoner, for example, would be identified with a yellow triangle beneath a red triangle.
occupied [part of Poland].\footnote{Henry is referring here to Poles that were expelled from occupied territories during Aktion Saybusch or Operation Saybusch. Polish residents of Oswiecim were also expelled, however, when the Germans decided to use former military barracks on the eastern outskirts of town as the site for the concentration and death camp that became known as Auschwitz. In 1940, forced labor was used to build a new subdivision to house Auschwitz guards and staff. Polish residents of several districts were forced to abandon their houses, as the Germans wanted to keep the area around the camp empty. Expulsions of local Polish residents took place in two stages, in 1940 and 1941. Most of the Polish population was forcibly moved to displaced person camps and the area inhabited by ethnic Germans, many of who worked in the concentration camp.} I do not know what they did. Maybe they killed them. I cannot tell you. I do not know. They [gave the land to] one German [what had once belonged to] ten Polish families and all the old ones can work on it.

It was not all good houses. People had lived there a long time and they did not have an oven inside. They had a fire or something. Those houses were knocked down with a good house [built] for the German. He was living over there. If not, we made the foundation. They gave us plans [to build] the foundation. They brought from Sweden ready-made, prefabricated houses. We had two Germans from Romania carpenters. They did not know to read. They were carpenters, but probably helpers.

I was at this time 18 years old. In the springtime by the brick factory, you had to fix it. You always had something to do. My father took the people before they started making bricks to fix it. After school, I was happy sometimes [not to have to] go to Hebrew school. I would just come over there to see how to do it. This was helpful for me. I knew how to do it. You kept [the information] in your head, if those go this way or this way. We were building the houses.

One time before Christmas, we built those houses. Those two Germans got vacation to go to their families for Christmas. The SS man came to us and said, “Boys, would you like to go to work cleaning streets or would you like to go build their houses?”\footnote{The SS or Schutzstaffel was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. It began at the end of 1920 as a small, permanent guard unit known as the “Saal-Schutz” made up of Nazi Party volunteers to provide security for party meetings in Munich. Later, in 1925, Heinrich Himmler joined the unit, which had by then been reformed and renamed the “Schutz-Staffel.” Under Himmler’s leadership, it grew from a small paramilitary formation to one of the largest and most powerful organizations in the Third Reich. Under Himmler’s command, it was responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during World War II. After World War II, like the Nazi Party, it was declared a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal and banned in Germany.} We said, “We’ll go better to build the houses.” We did not tell them [that it was] because when you worked on the street and passed the SS to clean up their cars, they would whip you. When the Wehrmacht came by, it was not so bad. Some of them were bad apples so the other one had to be a bad apple too. I was working with them. Some of them were young boys [and] they were sweet. They did not say nothing. They were good boys too.
John: What kind of living situation was it? Were you living in barracks or a house in the labor camp?

Sam: We lived in a house. My brother-in-law was over us. We received food from the SS. They gave us food. We got clothing. I do not know where the clothing [came from]. It was old clothing. Maybe even from the concentration camp or other places. They got a cart for buying bread. My brother-in-law went to a bakery that was a Polack’s. He gave him [a loaf to put] under his undershirt. Under your shirt, you could get out a loaf extra. You can do . . . You have to know how to talk to people. That’s what it is. We were in camp. We still had from home some money. We bought . . . One was collecting pennies . . . They bought eggs. We cooked eggs. They brought boiled eggs. This happened also. You tried to help yourself however you can.

John: Which of your family members were with you at that time or were you alone?

Sam: I was alone at this time.

John: The rest of your family was still back home?

Sam: No. My father was not home. My sisters were home. My cousin was at a different camp.

My cousin was in Germany on the autobahn. This was occupied Poland, annexed to Germany. When the war broke out against Russia [in 1941], those farmers . . . We were on the border of Czechoslovakia and Poland. It was [unintelligible town name sounds like “Swaldin”], in the mountains. Over there were German border police. They all were from Hungary, from Romania, from everywhere. The war [between Germany and the Soviet Union] broke out on Saturday, June 22, [1941]. We finished our job, put everything nicely. We came back to our camp. We had a cook from the Polish Army with an oven making food for all of us. With this, we warmed up water, washed clothes, and cleaned up with hot water.

43 Organisation Todt was a civil and military engineering group named after its founder, Fritz Todt, an engineer and senior Nazi figure. The organization was responsible for a huge range of large-scale construction projects including military factories and fortifications both in pre-World War II Germany and in Nazi Germany and its occupied territories from France to the Soviet Union during the war. One of its primary responsibilities was building the Autobahn (highway) network in Germany. It became notorious for using forced labor. About 1.4 million laborers worked for Todt, among them concentration camp prisoners, prisoners-of-war and compulsory laborers from occupied countries. Many did not survive.

44 Under the codename Operation “Barbarossa,” Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, in the largest German military operation of World War II. Although the Soviet Union had been Germany’s ally in the war against Poland, the destruction of the Soviet Union and conquest of territory in the East had long been one of Hitler’s proclaimed goals. The attack on the Soviet Union marked a turning point in both the history of World War II and the Holocaust.
One time over where we were working we saw a fire far away. We did not have no fire. Those son-of-a-bitches made a fire. I am always the first one. I ran. We had hills. I was the first one to the top. I was going to get warmer. I was running fast and they came over there. I was the first one there. I still do not believe [today] I had so much power. The wood we were taking two people had a hard time to carry up . . . a tree. They were building from one side [of the hill] to the end to end. I was pulling such a tree. I do not know from where I got such power.

**Ruth:** Your mother.

**Sam:** I still . . . In this house, no one cuts the grass, no one cuts the bushes . . . I was doing the work. We had a swimming pool. The last five years we do not use because we do not swim, so I do not care.

**John:** What was the fire?

**Sam:** The fire . . . When we pulled everything apart so the wood should get much harder because . . . put one line between others so you go around . . . When we took everything apart, our SS man came. He said, “Es ist verfluchte hunde. Es ist meine Juden. Du berührst keinen anderen. Das sind meine Juden.” [German: These cursed dogs are my Jews. You do not touch another one. These are my Jews.] [He said.] “Those are my Jews . . . Du hund! [German: You dog!] . . . Don’t touch my dog. I should kill you, du Zigeuner [German] . . . you gypsy.” The gypsies were from Hungary and Romania. They knew what they were.

**John:** You were valuable to them.

**Sam:** Yes, I was valuable because I was working. All of [us were] working, so they were happy with us.

**John:** Was this around summer of 1943?

**Sam:** I think this could be 1942 . . . We [were going] from village to village.

**John:** Was there any Russian presence in that area or was it strictly German?

**Sam:** No. This was [after the] war [between the Russians and Germans] had started. Later, we heard how the Germans were going to advance. Not far away, we went over [to] the railroad to pick up [lumber or supplies] from the railcar and put on the trucks to bring to the place where we were building those walls. We [saw] army transports passing by. We also saw transports going back . . . knocked down . . . all kinds . . .
John: Did you consider the Russians to be the enemy or friends? What was the attitude towards Russians?

Sam: We did not have nothing to do [with the Russians]. This was far away, maybe 500 miles or more from [the front]. We were almost by Germany in Galicia. Galicia is long. [At one end is] Oswiecim [and] Krakow and [at the other end is] Lwow, Lemberg . . . Galicia [is all the way] over to Lemberg.45 This was once [part of] Austria.

John: When you heard that Germany was attacking and advancing towards Russia, what did you think about that?

Sam: We did not have radios. We did not have newspapers. We were just in the morning waking up, washing up . . . I did not shave myself at this time because I was 17 years old. I do not remember when I started to shave myself. We ate and went to work. We were sometimes in the morning walking six or seven kilometers to work because the camp was [over] here and the place [where we were building] was far away. We had to walk. In the evening when we came home, there was [no] electricity, no radio [and] no papers. When we ate, we went to bed. We made ourselves beds. We put beds [together that had] one row, two row, three row [stacked above each other].

In the evening, they were singing Jewish songs. When I came to camp, I did not know almost [any] Yiddish.46 I just heard sometimes what the parents . . . I talk to my wife in German. My daughter said, “I know what you’re talking about!” [Actually] she knows just a few words and does not know what’s going on. That’s what it is. I did not know it. Later, I knew it. I was singing Jewish songs [in Yiddish]. When I was in Betar, we were singing Hebrew songs, not [Yiddish]. Here we were singing [in Yiddish] because there were people from all kinds of places.

<interview pauses, then resumes>

John: Did you have any close friends during that period?

Sam: The first time, I had my sister. Mirka came to camp. We had from my mother’s family a second or third cousin from Germany. He was a wrestler. [His name was] Taube. I do not know

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45 Lwow [Polish: Lwów; German: Lemberg; Ukrainian: Lviv] was once a Polish town in the southeastern Poland. It is approximately 350 kilometers (220 miles) east of Krakow, Poland. Since World War II, it has been known as ‘Lwiv’ and is a city in western Ukraine. Formerly the capital of the historic region of Galicia, Lwow has switched between many countries as a result of war and occupation. In 1772, Galicia became part of the Hapsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire and Lwow was known as Lemberg. The city remained under Austrian control until World War I.

46 Yiddish is the common historical language of Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. It is heavily Germanic based but uses the Hebrew alphabet. The language was spoken or understood as a common tongue for many European Jews up until the middle of the twentieth century.
how Mirka came to camp. Later, Lorka came to camp. They were in the kitchen, so I was not worrying about [getting enough] food. When you’ve got somebody in the kitchen, they can always give you something. Later on, we got . . . Before we were in Bedzin—in our town, people were sent to Bedzin and Sosnowiec . . . When this was [made] Judenrein, we got my father also in the camp.

My father spoke perfect German and was the Commandant. They had [a storage space filled with] glass for the windows, locks for the doors, for everything, cement . . . The SS man gave my father the keys over this. One time came a big inspector. He came with an older guy. He was in the SR. The SR had brown uniforms with the [armbands]. He also spoke Polish. He came to my father with a bottle, a liter of gasoline. He spoke to my father in Polish because he knew he was Polish. He said, “Herr Silbiger, I have here a bottle, a liter of Benzin [German: gasoline]. If I bring over, you can bring me a loaf of bread?” My father said, “Okay, I will try.” He got it. He gave it to him right away. We got it because we were trying to help each other. You work [and] live with people . . . They knew him.

Next to it was a church. The girl that was working [for] the SS cooking was going to church. She told my sister, Mirka, how to play cards. [Mirka] said, “You tell all kinds of jokes over there. You can just play cards.” She was smart. She was talking to the girl, always making good . . . [She] never said bad . . . Use your [head or brains].

**John:** What did he do with the gasoline?

**Sam:** I do not know what my father . . . Just I know that’s what my father was selling. When we were in a different camp, we could not do such things. We could not get nothing. We were in the camp. On the block were six rooms. There was a Lageraltester [German: camp elder or leader], Stubenaltester [German: room elder or leader], Baracke Altester [German: barrack elder or leader], and Room Altester [German: room elder or leader]. Everyone got [food] when you came in from work. You got a portion of bread with marmalade or something like this and they gave you soup. That’s all. That was our food for all day. [If] you eat everything today, tomorrow you will not have [any]thing.

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47 Sam is referring to the Sturmbteilung, also known as the “Storm Troopers,” “Brown Shirts,” or “SA,” which was the paramilitary of the Nazi Party commanded by Ernst Röhm [German: Röhm] and responsible for helping Adolf Hitler rise to power in Germany in the 1920’s and early 1930’s. By 1934, tensions within the party saw Heinrich Himmler and the SS (Schutzstaffel) replace Rohm and the Sturmbteilung’s position as the dominant organization within the Nazi Party.
In the back was a big place, probably larger than Cumberland Mall. There were 55,000 people working over there. There were offices. There were places where they were making from coal, clothing in Bedzin . . . all kinds [of things]. I was in the group [doing] construction, making bunkers. First, we were making small bunkers. When the Americans came [and bombed the area], they [were flattened] like the carpet. You did not see nothing [except] a hole. Later, we were making them [with walls that were] three meters [ten feet] thick. I was working checking the cement was strong enough that they gave me. It was not like today. [We had] larger stones, [then] smaller, smaller . . . mixed together. You put [your stones in]. It was going [down the line with] one from [each person added in]. Everyone had to put his [stones in the mix]. You’d put it over there in the machine. The machine mixed it and made the cement. I was taking two . . . When it came to us, [we would] put the cement in railroad cars. It was closed so [the cement] would not get wet. I picketed up one [bucket of] cement [in one hand] and [another bucket in] the other. The other ones [could only] take one bucket. The SS men saw that. By working, I did not get beaten. One time I got beaten. This was [at] the [camp] before the last camp.

John: What happened?
Sam: This was in Bergen-Elster. This was already in 1945. I cannot tell you if [the guard] was Russian or Hungarian. We were making the mountain room where they were building [V-1 and V-2 rockets]. In the mountain, they put fabric . . .

48 Cumberland Mall is a large shopping center that features a wide variety of stores and restaurants. It is located in Atlanta, Georgia near the suburbs of Smyrna and Vinings.
49 Berga-Elster, also known by the code name “Schwalbe V” (Swallow V), was a sub-camp of Buchenwald. It was the site of a synthetic fuel factory, which grew in importance as Germany’s fuel reserves sank as a result of Allied air attacks. The largest group of prisoners there were Jews from all over Europe, although some were American POWs. Most of them worked in the tunnels where they cleared and removed the debris from air raids. The work was very hard and dangerous. The prisoners preferred being sent to work in the quarry or laying rails over the tunnel work. Death resulted from shootings, disease, starvation, physical abuse and work accidents. The camp was liquidated on April 11, 1945 when the remaining prisoners were marched toward Theresienstadt. Over 1,000 prisoners died during the 160-mile kilometer march through snowstorms and over high mountain passes.
50 The ‘V weapons’ were the V1 and V2 rockets that were used by Germany at the end of World War II. They were the world’s first cruise missiles. They were first developed and built at Peenemunde, a remote island in the Baltic Sea, but when the Allies bombed that site the production was moved underground inside Germany out of reach of Allied bombers. Although Nazi scientists did the research and development, the actual work assembling the rockets was done by slave labor under murderous conditions at the Dora-Mittelbau-Nordhausen complex, where tunnels had been drilled into the mountains. Although tunnels had also been drilled into the mountains at Berga-Elster, no V rockets were built there. London and southern England was the premier target of the V-1, with nearly 8,000 falling there from June to October 1944. The Germans launched 9,521 V-1s in total at England killing nearly 23,000 people. The first V-2 attacks were launched against Paris and London on September 8, 1944. Nearly 1,000 V-2s fell
**John:** A tunnel?

**Sam:** No, in the mountain, they took out the rock, they made a hole and blew it up. We took away the rocks when they pulled it up. They built [V-1 and V-2 rockets]. That was the rockets going against England.

This was the worst camp. [There were] big louse. Next to us was an army [prisoner of war] camp. We saw American soldiers go to work. In the morning, they were okay. In the evening, they did not have a stretcher. They took two pieces of wood and tied it with rope on both sides. They put [the soldier] on it. This was a dead Jewish prisoner.

**John:** You said you were beaten that one time?

**Sam:** Yes, I was beaten. My father . . . When I was in Annaberg, they were building still a [foundation] for one barrack.\(^{51}\) My father was laying the bricks. At one point came a SS inspection. Himmler was also there. He was passing by over there and he saw an older fellow. Maybe he was looking at him. He came to him and was beating me like hell. I did not know about it because I was working in another place. In the evening, they told me he was in the jail. He said, “I will not shoot him. Send him to Auschwitz,” to the Lageraltester, a German Jewish [man]. They sent him not to Auschwitz-Birkenau. They sent him to Blechhammer.\(^{52}\) This was the last camp . . . with the big . . .

I was working with Geise building barracks. We put the walls [up and then] the ceiling was piece-by-piece boards. This is very hard to nail. I was nailing it. He could not do it. Twice

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\(^{51}\) After the German invasion of Poland, the Annaberg area was annexed to Germany and the town was given the German name ‘Annaberg’ (‘St. Anne’s Mountain.’) Today it is back in Poland again and is called ‘Gora Swietej Anny.’ Annaberg was part of a string of camps in Upper Silesia built after 1940 that were placed along the length of the proposed German autobahn (highway) into Poland. The Jews sent to Annaberg and the other camps in the system originally helped to build the new highway. The SS Organisation Schmelt ran the camps. Later the camps used slave labor to in armament production. They manufactured barracks, clothing, and other war material.

\(^{52}\) Blechhammer was a sub-camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was the second largest sub-camp after Monowitz and was established in April 1, 1944. Initially there were about 3,000 men and 200 women in the camp. The prisoners were put to work constructing chemical factories. In the following months, over 1,000 Jewish prisoners were also sent there to work. The barracks were severely overcrowded and the prisoners were treated brutally. Clothing and food was inadequate. Selections for the weakened and sick were conducted and they were sent back to Auschwitz-Birkenau to be murdered. Some of the prisoners were put to work building a synthetic gasoline factory while others in units of 100 to 200 did heavy construction work: excavating foundations, building roads and structures and transporting building materials. The prisoners worked from dawn to dusk. After the factory was bombed they were put to work hauling out the dud bombs, during which many were killed. On January 21, 1945 the prisoners were marched out of the camp as the Russians drew near and were driven on foot to Gross-Rosen concentration camp. The journey took ten days. Those who could not keep up were shot. An estimated 800 prisoners were executed in this way on the march.
he gave me a sandwich—a Polack. He was a *Volksdeutsche* 53—because I was doing, I was working.

**John:** How did you get in trouble the one time? You said you got beat up or punished?

**Sam:** Sometimes, on Sunday, we did not work. If the German officers or guards had a good day—if it was quiet on the Russian border or everything was okay—it was all right. But if something was going bad for the Germans, they took us to the big yard in camp, where in the morning, we was standing in groups—30, 40, or 60 groups. He sent all of [the prisoners] into the big yard on all fours and [made us] walk around. They were taking the *Peitschen* [German: whip] and knocking down. My father said, “Just go in the middle.” I learned from my father because he went through plenty. He was . . . maybe 45. He said, “When you are next on the run, you’ll get morning beatings. If you are far away . . .” I got some beatings. That’s all. That was when [events] on the front things were very bad. They went crazy. They did not know what to do. They were taking it out on somebody.

On the job, one time the SS saw something or he was just a bad soldier. The foreman would hit me. He’d say, “Okay. I think I’ve beaten [you enough] for them.” Catching the brunt of it.

*Kapos* were no good.54 I did not have to deal with [*kapos*] because I was with my father. My father had lots of friends over there [from] before the war. Some of them were butchers. They were working. We would buy kosher food [from them].55 People remembered you how you were. It’s good to have friends everywhere. In the army, or in jail, everywhere if you have friends, it’s okay. [Then there is] one helping the other.

I was in the army. I can tell you this was the best [time] in my whole life because we was one for each other. In Israel, everyone must go into the army. I was over there last year with

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53 *Volksdeutsche* is a term the German government used beginning in the twentieth century to describe Germans living or born outside of Germany, regardless of citizenship. The term was also applied to Poles with German ancestry or relatives.

54 To assist in managing the large communities within concentration or labor camps, German authorities installed a hierarchy of administrative units under their control. A *kapo* was a prisoner in a concentration camp who was assigned by the SS guards to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks in the camp. *Kapos* were generally criminals. The *kapo* system minimized costs by allowing the camps to function with fewer SS personnel. It was designed to turn victim against victim, as the *kapos* were pitted against their fellow prisoners in order to maintain the favor of their SS guards.

55 Kosher/Kashrut is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food that may be consumed according to *halakhah* (Jewish law) is termed ‘kosher’ in English. Kosher refers to Jewish laws that dictate how food is prepared or served and which kinds of foods or animals can be eaten. In a kosher kitchen and home, meat and dairy are kept separate, so a separate sets of dishes, cookware, and serving ware are needed. Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law is called ‘treif.’
a fellow who was [in the army with me] 40 years ago. His granddaughter was 17 when I was over there. [She] said, “I am now 17. Next year, I will go to the army.” [She was] happy.

John: Going back to 1943, what did you know about the camps and the actual Holocaust at that point?

Sam: The concentration camps? I knew already. My mother went in 1943 when [the Jews from] Oswiecim [that had been sent to Sosnowiec and Bedzin] . . . When Sosnowiec and Bedzin were [made] Judenrein, they were taken to concentration camps. I knew this already.

Sam: Before it was Judenrein, we had an SS man. His [Adam’s apple] was a big one. We did not call them by their names. We called them “Herr” or “Officer.” We did not say nothing [to them]. They talked to us. We called him “Gurgle.” A chicken has also a gurgle. For 100 grams of coffee, you could go on vacation. You know what was a vacation? On Friday evening, he would make you a piece of paper [a pass]. You would go into Sosnowiec and on Sunday you came back. I was going. I was sitting by myself and everyone . . . I did not talk to nobody. Nobody knew I am a . . . They was doing anything. Even the SS did not know.

One [man] who was with me was from Holland. He was from a very rich [family] in Holland. One was a wrestler—very well known in Holland. From the start, I saw them always tear up everything. One morning, he came every morning to work with us. The SS did not touch him because they told him . . . You have to know . . .

John: He could bribe them? He had money?

Sam: I do not know. Probably someone told him . . . could be the SS man who was taking care of my group. Probably he was paid. This was almost at the end, not at the start. The Holland Jews were in very bad shape—the workers.56

John: How long did the period in the labor camp last for you? When did you get sent away from there?

Sam: How long from start until the end?

John: You said you were in a labor camp for about three years altogether?

56 The Germans invaded the Netherlands in May 1940. In January 1941, all Jews in the Netherlands were required to register themselves as Jews. A total of 159,806 persons registered, including 19,561 persons born of mixed marriages. The total included some 25,000 Jewish refugees from the German Reich. Between 1942 and 1944, the Germans and their Dutch collaborators deported 107,000 Jews. Only 5,200 survived. Most were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau or Sobibor, where they were murdered. Two-thirds of the 25,000-30,000 Dutch Jews who went into hiding managed to survive. In all, less than 25 percent of Dutch Jewry survived the Holocaust.
Sam: No. First, from March 1, 1941 until probably 1943, until we came on the German territory, not what was occupied or annexed. Probably about a year later came the SS on the two buses from Auschwitz-Birkenau. They put up two tables and one was taking my name and the other was punching [tattooing] the numbers [on my arm]. This was the concentration camp. This was when we got the numbers and the uniform.

John: What season was it? Winter? Summer?

Sam: Not winter. I think this was probably 1943. This was probably September or August.

John: What number were you given?

Sam: 1-7-8-5-5-0 <shows tattoo on left forearm to camera>

John: I can look it up. I have a book that lists when everybody came there.

Sam: Yes, please tell me. I cannot remember [when it was], just I know how it was. From this point, [we had] no more civilian clothing. Everything was just . . .

John: Did you know at the time why there were two separate tables and two separate lines? Was that a selection?\(^{57}\)

Sam: No, not a selection. We were all in a work camp [already]. It was not a selection like in Auschwitz-Birkenau. I did not know this. I did not go through something like that. We were all workers. We were all productive.

John: Where were you sent after you got the numbers?

Sam: Blechhammer. First we came to Annaberg.\(^ {58}\) This was the first camp, where my father was beaten so. After this, they sent us to Blechhammer. My group was taking apart the barracks where the people were working on the autobahn. We took apart the barracks so nothing got broken so they could use it again. We took it apart perfectly, put it on the railroad car, and went further. When we were further, we still clean it up, make it look nice so [we all] looked like human beings, so nobody recognized [a camp with slave laborers] was over there. We were doing more places. We were not just doing one. They were taking [us] to work. When we cannot walk [there], they took us in the morning in a truck and took us to work.

John: Can you describe what that camp looked like and how it was constructed?

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\(^{57}\) Selection (German: *Selektion*) is the term the Nazi regime used to describe the process of choosing victims for the gas chambers in the extermination camps by separating them from those considered fit to work.

\(^{58}\) Annaberg was part of a string of camps in Upper Silesia built after 1940 that were placed along the length of the proposed German *autobahn* (highway) into Poland. The Jews sent to Annaberg and the other camps in the system originally helped to build the new highway. The SS Organisation Schmelt ran the camps. Later the camps used slave labor to in armament production. They manufactured barracks, clothing, and other war material.
Sam: My camp?
John: Yes. What did it look like? How big was it?
Sam: Probably there were 5,000 people or more.

In 1945, [just before] Oswiecim was liberated—they said on the 27th—they took those prisoners on a [death march] to us. They came to Blechhammer. They came all this [way] frozen. I do not know what happened on the way because I did not get to [interact with] them. They put them in the old place. They were building a larger camp.

Later, we left on January 27 or February 1 or somewhere [around then]. We went too. They went together with us. The [prisoners took up the] whole street. On both sides were the SS. They did not have enough men so they were [guarding us with the help of the prisoners who had] the green numbers. The green numbers were the kapos or they were working in the camp because they do not let them outside. Also they gave them the guns. When someone was walking and could not walk, go on the side, and sat down or something, [they killed them]. They had one or two horse and wagons. If someone was [dead on the road side], they [threw them in the wagon]. I do not know what they did with them.

Four or five years ago, a lady called me [and asked if] I remembered or knew such and such name. She said, “He is from Beldzin.” I said, “Yes, I knew lots of Beldzins. I had lots of friends. We were working together.” I asked her how old he was. [She said], “When he was over there, he was probably 50 or 57.” [I said,] “I don’t think so. He wouldn’t have made it.” She asked if I was on the death march. I said, “Yes.” We were walking. I was with my father on the death march. I was in the middle [of the column] because when they started to hit you, they hit you on the side. Everything you have to learn.

John: What condition were you in?
Sam: I was working.
John: How healthy were you? Were you skinny? Were you sick? Were you hurt?

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59 The SS began evacuating Auschwitz and its satellite camps in mid-January 1945 as Soviet forces approached the Auschwitz camp complex. Nearly 60,000 prisoners were forced to march west from the Auschwitz camp system. Thousands had been killed in the camps in the days before these death marches began. Tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly Jews, were forced to march to the city of Wodzislaw in the western part of Upper Silesia. SS guards shot anyone who fell behind or could not continue. Prisoners also suffered from the cold weather, starvation, and exposure on these marches. More than 15,000 died during the death marches from Auschwitz. On January 27, 1945, the Soviet army entered Auschwitz and liberated more than 7,000 remaining prisoners, who were mostly ill and dying.
Sam: When I was liberated, you could count all my bones from the top to the bottom. I was liberated. I did not know I was liberated. I was in a place where the German officers were going shooting. We came over there. There was a bed so we were sleeping over there. On May 5 . . .

The last camp was Dachau. On April 27 or 28, in Dachau, they came with a train with wagons—not the boxcars; wagons for people. They put us on this, and closed the doors, and we were off. One time, the Americans came and [bombed] the railroad. We could not go farther. We had to wait until they fixed the railroad. They fixed it and we [went] farther. It broke down [again].

We had to stay in [unintelligible, sounds like “hook,” 11:38:33] homes with the Red Cross. They started to give them food. We were over there. We did not eat nothing. This was already in 1945. One time, they seen a red triangle. They said, “What you are? Polish or you are Jewish?” [We told them.] “We are Polish [and] Jewish.” [They said.] “You don’t get nothing.” Everyone who was not Polish or Jewish received [food]. When I came here to America and they came to me to [donate] to the Red Cross, I said, “Listen. I shouldn’t give you another thing.” [They said.] “It’s not the [International] Red Cross. This is the American Red Cross.” I give them plenty.

John: The Red Cross would not give food to the Jewish prisoners?

Sam: Yes. They would not give nothing to us. They was giving to . . . because we were together . . . kapos, preachers, homosexuals, everything was over there. I did not see no Germans.

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60 Established on March 22, 1933, Dachau was the first concentration camp established by the Nazi regime. It was located in southern Germany near the town of Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich. Dachau became a model for other concentration camps and was used as a training center for SS guards. Originally, it was a camp for criminals, political prisoners, and other opponents of the Nazi regime. In 1938, in the aftermath of Kristallnacht, the Jewish population rose to 10,000, although most were eventually released after agreeing to emigrate from Germany. Over 188,000 prisoners passed through Dachau between 1933 and 1945. Prisoners at Dachau were used as forced laborers and thousands were literally worked to death. Between 1940 and 1945, at least 28,000 died there as a result of the harsh, overcrowded conditions, medical experiments, and executions. There was a crematorium at Dachau, but the sick or weakened prisoners who were murdered were sent to the Hartheim “euthanasia” killing center near Linz, Austria. Toward the end of the war, around 7,000 mostly Jewish prisoners were sent on a death march from Dachau to Tegernsee far to the south. When American troops liberated the camp on April 29, 1945, they found thousands of dead and dying prisoners as well as more than 30 railroad cars filled with decomposing bodies that had been brought to Dachau and abandoned.

61 During the war, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was not allowed into concentration camps like Dachau. However, the German Red Cross was. While the ICRC tried to work with the German Red Cross to help camp prisoners, the German Red Cross itself was under Nazi control and obstructed many attempts of the ICRC to help concentration camp inmates. In the last days of the war, ICRC delegates were able to take advantage of the chaos within the Nazi regime and were able to go inside the camps at Turckheim, Dachau and Mauthausen for the first time, but by then could only offer limited help to the survivors.
John: Was that the German Red Cross?

Sam: European. You can believe me like I sit here.

John: Going back to the end of January 1945 when you were all marched away, where did you first go?

Sam: We went walking. We came to Gross-Rosen. It was also a camp. I did not know I had four or five cousins over there. They were over there in camp with those people who were building the autobahn. They [sent] them to Gross-Rosen. They were working there and they put them over there. They were working probably some other places. Not one of them are alive. I did not have a chance to talk to them. No one could talk when I was in camp. We did not want to talk because we wanted to forget we were there. Now with time, I have remembered everything.

John: What did Gross-Rosen look like?

Sam: Gross-Rosen was the old camp. They [were] building a new camp. When the Germans started moving back from Russia—the Russians were behind them—they started building camps in [Germany]. They thought maybe they could stop them [from crossing] the water or a river [into Germany]. Just the Russians [kept coming]. They could not do it. First, they broke into our camp [so the Germans] started building a new camp by us. They were over there two nights. We had to go farther.

This probably was January 1 or 2 when we moved from Blechhammer. There was a big building. Wood was over there. This was already in February. It was raining. There was snow and water. The old camp was on the hill. This one was down [the hill] and the crematorium was down somewhere. In the morning, you’d see how they [took] the dead prisoners on the stretchers by the feet and [were] pulling [them]. They had to go next to the fence. I saw one time it was slippery. The prisoner who was holding the dead body, stepped out and tried to catch him. He caught the [electric] wire and [died] too.

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62 Gross-Rosen was opened in May 1940 in a quarry near the village of Gross-Rosen. It eventually grew to control a whole network of sub-camps, which included Markstadt and Funfteichen. By 1944 there were about 110,000 prisoners in the system. About half the prisoners were political prisoners but there were also Polish and Russian prisoners-of-war. The living and working conditions were brutal. The rations were a slice of bread and watery soup each day. The prisoners slept on straw sacks that teemed with lice. It was classified as a Category III camp, or the most severe treatment classification. As the war neared its end, conditions grew even worse as evacuation transports arrived from the east swelling the camp to near bursting. The death rate skyrocketed and bodies were piled up outside the barracks. In January 1945 the camp population was evacuated ahead of the Russians. Some of the prisoners were packed tightly into open freight cars. Others were marched out on foot. Over half of the prisoners died on the death marches in the final days of the war. The Russians liberated gross-Rosen on February 13, 1945.
Over there we got just one time eat. We were there three days with nothing to eat. They came with the open [railcar] wagons. They put us [in cramped together]. On the end [railcar] was sitting the SS men. We were sitting in [the other cars]. They were taking us to Buchenwald.

[On the way] to Buchenwald was Weimer. When we were in Weimar, we saw a thousand American planes flying one by one [in a formation] like you see the birds flying south in the fall. Not one was dropping [bombs]. [They were] just [flying]. Then at one time, they started dropping. The SS men jumped up from their truck but they left us in the truck. They went to the station and [were] hiding. They did not drop [bombs] on us. Maybe they [saw we were prisoners]. The whole of Weimar you saw later [the ruins of buildings] hanging . . . The houses got busted down. Just all of them were hanging . . . a bathtub or something. We had to wait over there two days until they fixed the railroad. The railroad was again busted. [The Allies were] doing a good job.

I remember when I was in Blechhammer, the first time, they dropped [bombs]. When they came the second time, was exactly in the same holes, one by one. It was a small bunker and the Germans did not want to let in . . . not just Jews, the Polacks what was working, or Czechs—just Germans.

John:  What were you feeling during that phase?

Sam:  Nothing. You cannot [feel or think] nothing because you do not know nothing. You have to do what they tell you. [It is like when] you are in the army. You cannot do nothing. You have to listen.

When we [were] on the train—this was already in April—going down to the Austrian border . . . over there is Mittenwald\(^63\) and a river named Isar.\(^64\) This was in the mountains. You have just rocks, nothing else. On the train was the Commandant over the SS and over us. With him was his wife. He had a Kalfaktor.\(^65\) A Kalfaktor is someone the SS men had to [shine their shoes and] make everything ready for them. He overheard how [the Commandant’s] wife said to her husband. “You see what’s going on? How about you do like you didn’t receive the order? You see, tomorrow it’s probably over. Maybe this will be good for you by the Americans.”

\(^{63}\) Mittenwald was a labor camp near the town of Mittenwald, Germany. It seems to have been part of the Dachau concentration camps system. It became a Displaced Persons (DP) camp after the war.

\(^{64}\) The Isar is a river in Tyrol, Austria and Bavaria, Germany. Its source is in the Karwendel range of the Alps in Tyrol; it enters Germany near Mittenwald, and flows through Bad Tölz, Munich, and Landshut before reaching the Danube near Deggendorf.

\(^{65}\) Kalfaktoren [German: orderlies] were prisoners who acted as domestic or medical assistants. They typically were responsible for stoking ovens and fireplaces and other household or building maintenance duties.
That’s what he heard. They brought us over there to the Isar in Mittenwald by the water. Around every few yards was a machine gun. In Dachau, they did not have already a crematorium. They could not use it. They did not have [electric fences]. They wanted to bring us all over and shoot [us] over there.

Interview pauses, then resumes>

I still remember the SS man—I [could still] recognize him—was standing with a rifle, had on a backpack and went over there where we laid down. We laid down on the stones by the water. This was in the evening. We [did not get anything] to eat. Everyone laid down to sleep. I was with my father. We [were] huddled together. In the morning, we woke up and saw all the people walking. We were walking. One time, I saw the rifle [on the ground], and uniform laying [on the ground]. They took and threw away the guns and threw away the uniforms, even their backpacks. They had with them civilian clothing. They threw down their uniforms and they would break away. We started walking. We saw all these prisoners walking one way and another way. They do not know why nobody touched them. We passed a little bridge by the street they had tried to blow up. My father said, “Where to? We’re going back and forth.”

The Germans tried to make good. They cooked some soup with bacon and [it] was very [fatty]. On the train, we had no food, nothing. Everyone was hungry. What you are given, you just eat. You took the soup. We got diarrhea. What they gave you [went right through you].

I do not know how come, [but] we [saw] a place to go up. We went up. This was a place where the Germans [had been] shooting. We lay down. We looked over. We did not find nothing. One time, came an American over there. They had food. They had lots of food always with them. They [also gave us fatty] food, like Spam with cheeses and everything. I remember it like that with cheese. We ate it. Later, this was still worse. We got sick.

Maybe two days later again someone came up and said, “Go over there.” [He] spoke a little English [mixed with] a little German. The American said, “Over there is the army camp.

66 There was a crematorium at Dachau that served to dispose of corpses from the concentration camp, but by the end of 1944, their capacity was no longer enough to cremate the scores of dead from the camp. Upon liberating the camp at the end of April 1945, American soldiers came across countless corpses piled up in the crematorium.

67 After liberation, camp survivors faced a long and difficult road to recovery. Well-meaning soldiers, volunteers or locals without proper medical training often gave survivors foods that made their conditions worse. Eating foods that were too rich or complex for survivors’ bodies to handle could exasperate years of malnutrition and starvation, resulting in sickness or death.

68 Spam is a brand of canned precooked meat products introduced by Hormel Foods Corporation in 1937. Spam gained international popularity after it was used by the United States military during World War II.
Over there are doctors and lots of . . .” We went down. We threw away our uniforms and stuff. They gave us a SS shirt—a brown one—and some pants that fell down. We looked funny. You could see . . . just like a skeleton walking in something, everything hanging off . . . They cooked over there. My father said, “I am so sick. I cannot go nothing.” They gave us charcoal. We ate the charcoal. I got better right away but my father was still not [better].

We were over there a week or two. People got the food and they went up and threw the plate down. It was crazy. The stench . . . They took us from over there to Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Garmish [had been] an SS camp. There was all the people healthy, playing . . . Lots of Hungarians . . . [Sandor] Nemes from Hungary . . . was a player . . . [for the] Maccabi [sports club in] Budapest [Hungary]. They were playing. We could hardly walk. They took my father right away to a sanatorium because he was very sick. I was in Garmish for a few weeks. They said they were going to make a camp for SS prisoners and they took us to Landsberg, I was in Landsberg.

John: When did you first realize the war was over?
Sam: We knew right away when the Americans came.
John: After five or six years of war, what was it like for you to realize it had ended?
Sam: We were happy that we were free. We were looking for food. I was not and my father was not . . . such people to go to the German [homes] and threw out . . . We did not do this. We were looking. We looked outside. We saw where the American soldiers were stationed. We went over there where they were throwing everything out. I went over there and picked up bread and a piece of salami. That’s what we ate right after liberation until we came to the camp. This was in Mittenwald.

John: Did you know anything about your mother at that point?

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69 The camp at Garmisch-Partenkirchen is southwest of Munich and was part of the Dachau concentration camp. It was established on December 9, 1944 in the former Sonnenbichel hotel, which had been evacuated for the SS and was used as a hospital for SS members. Prisoners sent to Garmisch-Partenkirchen looked after the SS men. After liberation it was used to nurse ex-prisoners back to life.

70 Sandor Nemes (1899-1977), also known as Alexander Neufeld, was a Hungarian football player and manager. He had a playing career in Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, United States and Yugoslavia, and he represented the national teams of Hungary and Austria.

71 Landsberg am Lech is a town in southwest Bavaria, Germany, about 65 kilometers west of Munich. It housed the second largest displaced persons camp in the American Zone. It was founded in April 1945 in former military barracks. From October 1945 Landsberg functioned as an exclusively Jewish Camp. The population of 5,000 Jewish DPs was chiefly comprised of Russian, Latvian, and Lithuanian survivors.
Sam: I knew my mother and my uncles, all of them . . . were dead already because later we talked about it in camp. We could not do nothing.

John: What did happen to your mother?

Sam: In Auschwitz-Birkenau, some people said they saw her working over there because she was from a farm and they could see if somebody’s hand were delicate or not. She was a strong woman. She was probably not as [tall] as me, [but] she was very strong. Maybe they had some . . . I cannot imagine. I do not know what . . . People said they saw her working with a shovel or [other tools].

John: How did someone know that she did not survive?

Sam: No. Also I know my cousin’s father, his older sister and two more sisters . . . he got a new wife and got also a boy. They went all together.72 My brother did not . . . My mother tried to say to . . . My mother told my brother—He was not very sharp—“Go.” He said, “I don’t want . . . I’ll go with you.” He [had had] enough. In 1943, he was maybe thirteen or fourteen years old. He was always hungry with nothing to eat and getting beaten . . . I cannot tell you what happened to him.

John: You were in a [displaced persons] camp in May or June?73

Sam: I was in a DP camp. First . . . there was not a DP camp in Mittlewald or Garmish. The DP camp was in Landsberg. I was over there all the time in Landsberg in the DP camp. Maybe a half year later, I joined the police. Until 1948, I was in the police. I was [in a sleeper cell].

John: Explain.

72 In 1942 and 1943, the ghetto inhabitants of Bedzin, Chrzanow, and Sosnowiec—including the Jews from Oswiecim—were deported to concentration camps. The majority was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where most were murdered—90 percent of Oswiecim’s Jews perished during the Holocaust.

73 When hostilities ended on May 8, 1945 in Europe, as many as 100,000 Jewish survivors found themselves among the 7,000,000 uprooted and homeless people classified as displaced persons (DPs). In a chaotic six-month period, 6,000,000 non-Jewish DPs, who had been deported to Germany as forced laborers for the Nazis, wandered through Germany and Eastern Europe toward their homelands. The liberated Jews, who were plagued by illness and exhaustion, emerged from concentration camps and hiding places to discover a world in which they had no place. Bereft of home and family, and reluctant to return to their pre-war homelands, these Jews were joined in a matter of months by more than 150,000 other Jews fleeing fierce antisemitism in Poland, Hungary, Romania and Russia. Allied forces established temporary facilities (DP Camps) across Germany, Austria, and Italy to house DPs. From 1945 to 1952, more than 250,000 Jewish displaced persons lived in camps and urban centers in Germany, Austria, and Italy. Allied authorities and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) administered these facilities. Displaced Jews registered with various aid agencies like UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), the IRO (International Refugee Organization), or the British Red Cross’ Central Tracing Bureau (which would later be renamed the International Tracing Service) in the hopes of reconnecting with their families. Eventually, DPs were repatriated to their home countries, reestablished themselves in new countries or immigrated outside of Europe. Most of the DP camps were closed by 1950.
Sam: We were in 21 different countries. Nobody knew me. I did not know who was my boss. Terrorists . . . Underground . . . My father did not know. My sister did not know. I went to Israel. They did not know. When I was in Israel when was wounded, I did not write letters. It was busy.

John: Why did you decide to become a police officer and join them?

Sam: I was [in] the police and we were watching the entrance. This was a [former] army camp. We also had a kitchen [we] were watching [when] they cleaned and inside where the people working. [We also had] warehouses and a hospital. I was standing [guard] by the gate, the hospital or warehouse. We were always two men. [We were] standing three hours, [taking] three hours off, [then standing guard] again three hours [for a total of] six hours. When you have got two guys, you talk [about] all kinds of things. One said, “From which town you are,” or “How many brothers did you have?” One asked me, “What kind of party did you belong to before the war?” I said, “I belonged to Betar.” He said, “I belonged to Betar, too.”

In camp, we also had a megaphone on the top of the electric power pole. Every noontime at one o’clock, you heard the news from Israel, what was going on. They said eight-year [old] Jewish children [were] going against the English with Molotov [cocktails]. They [were] fighting them. I was thinking, “I’m sitting here. I was in Betar before the war. We were just taught how to fight against the English and the Arabs. Over there are eight-year-old children. I am here, 25 or 26 years old and I’m supposed to sit here?” The other [policeman] said, “Listen, here we have a Jewish underground. Its name is Irgun. It is from Betar.” I said, “Okay.” I joined.

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74 A Molotov cocktail, also known as ‘petrol bomb,’ or ‘poor man’s grenade,’ is a generic name for a variety of bottle-based improvised incendiary weapons.

75 In the years preceding Israel’s statehood—particularly from 1944 onward—a series of violent clashes occurred between the different Jewish underground groups and the British. The clashes—known as the Jewish insurgency in Mandatory Palestine—involved paramilitary actions carried out by Jewish underground groups against the British forces and officials in Mandatory Palestine. Tensions between Jewish militant underground organizations and the British mandatory authorities had intensified when the British government published its White Paper of 1939, which outlined new government policies to place further restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchases and declared the intention of giving independence to Palestine, with an Arab majority, within ten years. World War II brought relative calm as Jewish groups focused on immigration and rescue efforts and supported the British in their efforts to defeat Germany. Yet the tensions again escalated into an armed struggle towards the end of the war, when it became clear that the Axis Powers were close to defeat. The armed conflict escalated during the final phase of the World War II, when the Irgun declared a revolt in February 1944. Although the Haganah opposed the Irgun and Lehi’s methods and actions, a period of cooperation between the three underground organizations began in the autumn of 1945. The Haganah concentrated its efforts on attacking British immigration control and carried out anti-British operations in Palestine such as the liberation of interned immigrants from the Atlit detainee camp but refrained from direct confrontation with British forces. Meanwhile, the Irgun and Lehi attacked military and police targets. The conflict with the British lasted until the eruption of the civil war, the termination of the British Mandate for Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948.
In 1948, they called us. First, they brought us to a [former] concentration camp not far away from the Czech border in Germany. They gave us two barracks. They called this a convalescent home. Because we [had been] in concentration camps, we had to [get our strength back]. We ate over there. We had an instructor from Israel. He knew English, he knew German, he knew all kinds of [languages]. He talked to us just in Hebrew. We had machine guns, we had guns, we had pistols. They taught us everything. They taught us how to work and fight. They gave us a [crutch] because if something happened, [we needed to look like] we were convalescents.

**John:** This was in 1948?

**Sam:** This was in 1948 before the war [for Israeli Independence].

**John:** You were in the DP camp for six months?

**Sam:** No. I was there from 1945 until 1948.

**John:** You were there three years?

**Sam:** Yes . . . almost three years. Over there, they taught us how to behave in the army. We learned everything. We learned Hebrew. We learned singing a little bit and made exercises. [We were] walking in the mountains like you walk and fight every few yards another person.

It started . . . in April. In May, they called us. Not far away from Feldafing, was a kibbutz from Elhorn, from Betar. They [took] us over there. I do not remember how [long] . . . a few days. They took us to the railroad. When [we got] to the railroad, they took away my

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76 After the formation of the State of Israel in 1948, war broke out when five Arab nations invaded territory in the former Palestinian mandate immediately following the announcement of independence. Fighting continued until February 1949, when Israel and its neighboring states of Egypt, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Syria agreed to formal armistice lines.

77 Feldafing was the first all-Jewish displaced persons camp and hosted a large and important community of survivors. It was originally a summer camp for Hitler Youth, and was located 20 miles southwest of Munich, Germany in the American zone of occupation. The camp was originally opened on May 1, 1945 to house 3,000 Hungarian Jews, and it housed many non-Jewish concentration camp survivors until July 1945. At that time, the United States Army moved the remaining Jewish survivors of Dachau into the camp. In autumn 1945, the first all-Jewish hospital in the German DP camps was founded at Feldafing. Educational and religious life flourished there. In addition to secular elementary and high schools, the camp’s religious community founded several schools. It also had a rabbinical council that supported its religious office, and an extensive library. Children and adolescents in the camp organized Kibutzim (Zionist communes). Newspapers were published. Theater groups and orchestras entertained camp residents.

78 No information could be found about this kibbutz; however, some 35 training farms were established in post-war Germany. The kibbutzim/kibbutzes were agricultural training communities meant to prepare them for eventual immigration. A large majority of the survivors in Germany and Austria were under the age of 25 and, in many cases, had been active in Zionist movements before the war. For others, immigrating to Palestine was simply the most attractive option available to them. As Britain's stance of restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine under the British Mandate was a contentious issue for the DPs, some of the kibbutz began training for conflict as well.
passport, my ID. They brought people from everywhere. [They were] coming from Czechoslovakia, from Italy, from everywhere. They took us on a boat. We went through the border to Marseille [France]. When we were in Marseille, they put us somewhere to sleep. I do not know where. I do not know the street. Was everything . . . what they were [directing,] we were doing . . .

One time in the evening, they said, “We need two guys.” They took me and another guy. They brought me to the port. They gave me a gun and they gave a gun to the other one. In the port where they were loading the ship . . . You got the ships, you got the place where you can come with trucks and you have your railroad . . . They told us, “Don’t let nobody come from this side.” The other . . . They were afraid. The Arabs were loading the ship. Somewhere they got the news it was going to Israel. They said, “Okay.” They were not taking anymore to work because they could bring a bomb on and explode everything. They told us not to speak Yiddish—just English. We didn’t know [much] English.

The next morning, somebody brought over some food for me and for the other guy. At one point, a French convoy came with a big officer, with some trucks, with war materials in boxes. We started to unload it. We unloaded and they drove away. We loaded it on the ship. They told us still not to speak Yiddish because maybe some Arabs [would overhear us].

Then people started to come over. We went over on the ship too. The next day—I do not remember if it was Tuesday or Wednesday because all the time we were going here or there—around four or five o’clock, the ship started moving. All of us started singing “Hatikvah” and Betar songs. When we came out on the sea, they started building artillery . . . every three yards putting a stand on the ship for a machine gun. We were making ready.

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79 Marseille is a port city in southern France.
80 In 1946, Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6) engaged in covert attempts to slow the surge of Holocaust survivors illegally immigrating to Palestine. In an effort to deter ships from heading to Palestine, SIS began “Operation Embarrass,” a plan to try to prevent Jews getting into Palestine in 1946-1948 using disinformation and propaganda as well as explosive devices placed on ships. In the summer of 1947 and early 1948, the plot led to attacks on five ships in Italian ports. Two were damaged and one was rendered a total loss. Two other explosive devices were found. Although the devices were British, it was assumed Arab groups had used British explosives for the campaign.
81 Hatikvah [Hebrew: hope] is the national anthem of Israel. It was the unofficial national anthem of Israel from its founding in 1948, and was adopted officially in 2004.
82 On April 17, 1948, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 46, which put the responsibility for maintaining “peace and order” on the United Kingdom. It also called upon all persons and organizations in Palestine to stop the entry “of armed bands and fighting personnel, groups and individuals, and weapons and war materials” into Palestine. As a result, British ships attempted to blockade any ships carrying Jews trying to illegally immigrate into Palestine or suspected of carrying weapons.
I had four cousins on the Exodus. I did not know it [at the time]. They came to Haifa [Israel]. In Haifa, the English army came and started fighting. One cousin was wounded. They took the whole ship back to Bergen-Belsen. My cousin died. I was shown the picture where he was buried. Maybe more died. I do not know. I just know [about the one] cousin. It was two sisters with a brother [and another] cousin. They told me this. They still had one brother in Germany. He died also. They all were older than me.

Later, in the daytime they did not let no men on the [deck of] the ship. [It was hard to get] fresh air [below deck]. They let the women [go on deck] because some of the young women were already pregnant. On the top, it looked like a freight ship.

On May 18, [1948] the ship was already by Tel Aviv. [We] went through the blockade. Ben-Gurion [found] out from somewhere that the ship was there. [He] called up the captain, [Monroe Fein]—this was an American [young man]—and told him to go back on the sea because the English were coming in this direction. How fast . . . They went back and two days

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83 The Exodus 1947 was a ship that carried Jews intent on entering Palestine illegally. At the time the British, who had restricted entry, controlled Palestine. Most of the passengers were Holocaust survivors who had no legal immigration certificates to Palestine. The ship left France on July 11, 1947. Following wide media coverage, the British Royal Navy seized the ship and escorted it to the port of Haifa. The passengers were put on three different ships and returned to France. When they got there they refused to get off and went on a hunger strike. The British government refused to back down. Further negotiations resulted in them being sent them to DP camps in Germany. The women and children got off voluntarily but the men had to be removed forcibly. Eventually most of the refugees made it to Palestine via Cyprus, illegal smuggling, or legal immigration after Israel became a nation.

84 Haifa is the largest city in northern Israel, and the third largest city in the country. It is located on the Mediterranean Sea and is a major seaport.

85 Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp near Hanover in northwest Germany, located between the villages of Bergen and Belsen, that was established in 1935. After liberation, the British burned the barracks of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp as a health precaution. A former German army camp southwest of the town of Bergen near Celle, Germany became a displaced persons (DP) camp for refugees. While the British tried to name it ‘Hohne,’ survivors insisted on referring to it as ‘Bergen-Belsen.’ It was in operation from the summer of 1945 until September 1950. For a time, Bergen-Belsen was the largest Jewish DP camp in Germany, and the only one in the British occupation zone with an exclusively Jewish population. It was the center of Jewish DP political and social activity in the British zone of occupation. The majority of DPs from Bergen-Belsen immigrated to Israel, while many others went to the United States and Canada.

86 David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) was one of the primary founders and the first Prime Minister of Israel. Two weeks after Israel became a state, the Israel Defense Forces were created to succeed Haganah and all other paramilitary organizations were outlawed. This led to conflicts between Ben-Gurion and the Haganah leadership.
later, they called us around seven o’clock in the evening. We were not far away from Israel. Any ship could stay over there and nobody would tell you nothing. It was the Altalena . . .

They called our ship [and said], “You can come here; just not to Tel Aviv [Israel].” Kfar Vitkin is a village not far away from Netanya. Over there were the first Russian people who came in 1860 to Israel. They were all Communists. Those are Ben-Gurion’s people. We did not know. We [just knew we had] come to Israel. Israel [was] made up [of] all kinds of [political] parties. When a ship came to Israel, all would be there. [They took] the people first and dispersed them. [They did not] look for the merchandise or guns that was on the ship; just the people. People [were] most important. When we came to Kfar Vitkin, they called up all the groups. They came over there from far away. Not all of them were staying [in that area]. They were staying farther apart.

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87 The “Altalena Affair” was a violent confrontation that took place in June 1948 between the newly formed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Irgun, a Jewish paramilitary group. Israel was established on May 14, 1948 and on June 1, 1948 an agreement was negotiated between the new government and the Irgun to fold the Irgun into the IDF. Part of the deal was that the Irgun was to cease acquiring arms. The first truce in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war began on June 1, 1948. The Altalena was a cargo ship captained by Monroe Fein, a Jewish American, and was carrying weapons and 940 Irgun fighters. The Israeli government feared that the arrival of a ship full of weapons and fighters would constitute a treaty violation. The sailing was called off by cable but the ship had already left France the day before. The Altalena arrived at Kfar Vitkin on June 20 and waited offshore. Menachem Begin, the head of the Irgun, met the ship and boarded it to greet them. Some of the weapons were offloaded and Begin and the Altalena slipped away to Tel Aviv. Israel wanted the arms turned over to the government and gave Begin a 10-minute ultimatum to do so. Begin failed to respond and a clash ensued. The IDF tried to take the ship by force and the Altalena was shelled. The ship started to burn just off the beach. There were still explosives still aboard, Captain Fein surrendered and told everyone to abandon ship. Some of the men in the water were shot at and killed. Sixteen Irgun fighters and three IDF soldiers were killed. More than 200 Irgun fighters were arrested although they were released a few weeks later. Thereafter, Begin relented and told his men not to escalate the crisis for the good of the new state. The Altalena affair was a turning point in Israeli history although many felt that the government’s actions against the ship were a great injustice. A picture of the burning Altalena may be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Altalena_off_Tel-Aviv_beach.jpg. A year later, the Altalena was refloated, towed out to sea and sunk.

88 Tel Aviv is Israel’s largest metropolitan area and second most populous city, after Jerusalem. Founded by a Jewish community in 1909 on the outskirts of Jaffa, it is located on the Mediterranean coast in central-west Israel.

89 Kfar Vitkin is a village not far away from Netanya. Founded by a Jewish community in 1909 on the outskirts of Jaffa, it is located on the Mediterranean coast in central Israel in 1930.

90 Netanya is a coastal city in northern Israel that was founded in 1929. It is 30 kilometers (19 miles) north of Tel Aviv and 56 kilometers (35 miles) south of Haifa. During the Jewish insurgency in Palestine, the Jewish underground group Irgun launched a number of attacks against British military and police forces in the Netanya area.

91 The first major wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine is known as the First Aliyah and took place between 1882 and 1903. Following a rash of pogroms in Russia, large groups of Eastern European Jewish immigrants came to Palestine in 1881-1882 and founded agricultural settlements called moshavot [Hebrew]—villages based on the principle of private property rather than the communal kibbutz. Most of the first settlers were Zionists with little agricultural experience. They encountered many difficulties, including an inclement climate, disease, crippling Turkish taxation, and Arab opposition. In all, nearly 35,000 Jews came to Palestine during the First Aliyah. Almost half left the country within several years of their arrival, some 15,000 established new rural settlements and the rest moved to towns.
I was again with a group that had to go out . . . the ship. The ship had an opening. [It] could open on the bottom in back. They could not run out with . . . We had five little tanks. They opened up. From Kfar Vitkin . . . people who lived over there with small boats . . . They took us with the boat and took us where we can walk up. We walked up. When we came on the ground, we kissed the ground. This was the first thing.

A little farther away was a truck. We went on the truck from over there to Biet Olim. Bet is [Hebrew for] the house and Olim [Hebrew for] is newcomers [or immigrants]. They brought us over there. They said, “Go take a shower.” We took a shower. They gave us food. We ate and we went to sleep. [I thought,] “Okay. Thank G-d I am in Israel.”

The next morning when we woke up, instead of going to the kitchen . . . everyone was just standing with the newspaper looking. We did not know—not everyone knew Hebrew—what’s going on. They said at night when they took off all the people [from the ship], just 100 people were left to carry the machine guns. They started fighting. Palmach said, “Ben-Gurion, we won’t let you have those guns because when you have those guns you will overthrow the government.92 We take the guns.” They started fighting.

[Menachem] Begin—I saw him on the ship.93 He was the first one who came on the ship—said, “Okay. I’ve got the neshak [Hebrew]. You do not make me . . . I’ll take all the neshak, the war material back. We can talk about it.” He said, “No, it’s already here. We want it. I will go out.” He said, “No, you will not go out.” There were three [guards] standing right behind him with machine guns. He said, “Let’s go to Tel Aviv.” They were going on the way to Tel Aviv.

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92 The Palmach [Hebrew: Strike Force] was the elite fighting force of the Haganah, the underground army of the Yishuv (Jewish community) during the period of the British Mandate of Palestine. It was established in 1941 and by the time it was forcibly disbanded it consisted of over 2,000 men and women. Its members went on to form the backbone of the Israel Defense Forces and were prominent in Israeli politics, literature and culture.

93 Menachem Begin was an Israeli politician, founder of Likud [the Labor party] and the sixth Prime Minister of the State of Israel. Before independence, Begin was the leader of the Zionist militant group Irgun, the Revisionist breakaway from the larger Jewish paramilitary organization Haganah. Begin criticized the Zionist leadership of the Yishuv for being too cooperative with the British and under his leadership the Irgun turned to trying to force the British government to remove their troops from Palestine by armed resistance. David Ben-Gurion openly opposed the Irgun’s independence agenda, which it saw as a challenge to its authority as the representative body of the Jewish community in Palestine. When the 1948 Arab-Israeli war broke out, Irgun fighters joined with Haganah and Lehi to fight the Arab forces. After Israeli independence, Irgun was absorbed into the newly formed Israel Defense Forces.
In Tel Aviv, they had a welcome—this time it was Yitzhak Rabin\textsuperscript{94} . . . At this time, he was just a Lieutenant of a battalion. Ben-Gurion still said, “Give up.” They said, “No, we have our own people.” They started shooting with artillery. They said 27 people got killed over there. Some [British] people told me just 20. I do not know who to believe. In a war, if people got 100, they say ‘76.’ They never tell you . . . I cannot tell you who is right.

I was still in Biet Olim. They came again to Biet Olim. Biet Olim was just a place where newcomers went and later go away. A truck came. We were 65 people in Biet Olim. We went on the truck. We were going to Tel Aviv. We came to Ramat Gan [Israel].\textsuperscript{95} In Ramat Gan, there was a [roadblock] . . . army. They [would not] let us through. They [let] all kinds, civilians [through, but did not] let us through. We were standing over there almost two hours. Our officers said, “Listen, come on the truck. We do not have no one with a gun. We’re not going to fight. I have the people who are supposed to go somewhere to sleep tonight. I take them to Tel Aviv to a row building . . . not finished.” We asked them already for a pass over there. The officer that was over the group called up to Ben-Gurion and they said, “Okay.” They let us go. When we came over there, we saw Tel Aviv. People came in short pants, short sleeves, and black berets. I had just my watch from Germany—nothing else on me. Everything [else] I had, I left on the ship. I have the watch [still today] . . .

My sister-in-law had been in Israel since 1939, before the war. She was in Hadassah\textsuperscript{96} She was nurse in Hadassah. Her husband was from another place. He was a pharmacist. He was also in Hadassah. They got married [in Israel]. They already had one boy—I think a six or seven year old boy—Juron. Today he’s a doctor in Germany. I sent a message. At that time, Tel Aviv was not like today. In 1948, it was maybe 40,000 people. It was small.

\textsuperscript{94} Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995) was an Israeli politician, statesman and general. He served two terms as Prime Minister. In 1995 he was assassinated.

\textsuperscript{95} Ramat Gan is a city in the Tel Aviv District of Israel. It is the home to one of the world’s major diamond exchanges, many high-tech industries and Israel’s tallest building, the Moshe Aviv Tower. It was founded in 1921 as a communal farming settlement (kibbutz) and today has a population of about 150,000.

\textsuperscript{96} Sam is referring to the Hadassah Medical Organization (HMO), a medical and research organization founded by Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America. Hadassah was founded in 1912 and supports health care and medical research, education and youth programs in Israel. In 1913, Hadassah sent two nurses to Palestine to provide pasteurized milk to infants and new mothers, and to eradicate trachoma, an easily cured eye disease, that was robbing thousands of sight. By 1918, Hadassah had sent an entire medical unit, comprised of 45 doctors, nurses, dentists and sanitary workers, to bring American-style medical care to the Middle East. In 1939, Hadassah opened a hospital in Jerusalem, but it was closed in 1948 after Arab attack on a convoy of medical personnel making its way to the hospital and did not reopen until in another location until 1967. Today, HMO is headquartered in Jerusalem, Israel, where it operates two world-class medical and research centers.
[My sister-in-law’s husband] came to me. He went and bought apples. He brought me apples. I said, “Why are you bringing me apples? I want oranges.” He said, “Listen, what’s wrong with you? You can see everywhere lying on the floor pretty oranges. Apples are something we bring from Europe.” I was surprised. When you do not know, you do not know. I talked a little bit with him. I told him hello from his brother-in-law.

In the evening, it started to get dark and we went to bed. We had to get together beds. It was army beds in a basement. We went to sleep. The next morning—this was June 22, 1948—we heard the sound of guns shooting over our heads. [They were] automatic machine guns. When it got quiet, [we heard,] “El ala malili! [Arabic] Hands up!” They said one by one to come out and they will search us. It was not much to search because [we were in] short pants and shoes. They searched us one by one and put us in one line.

**John:** Who was doing this to you?

**Sam:** The Palmach. This was the Israeli Army. [It] was Ben-Gurion’s people. Next to me was the brother of our officer. He said, “Shmilek, I’ve still got my gun.” I said, “Keep [quiet], you mushugga [Yiddish].” Mushugga’s are crazy [people]. We was there and they were running back and forth like crazy. They did not know what to do. They had a small pickup truck. They put us on that truck. We were driving to town. [It was] probably 100 miles. [Going] around the corners, I thought I’d get killed. I never was so afraid driving in a car in the open.

They brought us to **Mahainune. Mahainune** was an English army camp on the outskirts of the sea. They put us in one barrack and they put a machine gun every three yards. In the front, the door was open. In the front, were three machine guns. If somebody . . . We were over there four days. They brought us the best food. We did not want to eat. We were on strike. If somebody wanted to go . . . We ate already. They said, “Okay. What do you want to eat?” If somebody wanted to go to the toilet—the toilets were separate; not with the barracks—three men with automatic weapons went with one man to the toilet and back.

After four days, they called us before a judge and a clerk. The clerk spoke to me in Yiddish. If I hear Hebrew, I did not understand it. He said, “You are Jewish?” I said, “Yes, I am.” [He asked,] “You can fight the Arabs?” [I said,] “Yes.” [He said,] “Join the army.” [I said,] “Okay. What do I have to do?” From there I could not run away. From the army, maybe I could run away. I thought, “Okay.”
They took all 65 of us to Habima [Square]. We were in Habima. One time they came with a bus and [told us] we have to go to Sarona [Israel]. Sarona is by Tel Aviv. Sarona is a village just for Germans, where [Adolf] Eichmann was living over there. There, they were having the initiation, taking the names of all the people going to the army.

Sam: [We went from Habima on] the bus to Sarona. They were singing “Hatikvah.” We did not stay still. We were just running around, laughing, playing around. We did not have shoes. I could not stand on my feet because the sand was so hot, you could bake your feet. Two days later, they called me over there. My number was 9-1-4-3-0 . . .

Sam: <Holding a document> My army number was 91,430. The number from . . . 1-9-9-1-2-2
Ruth: What are you holding?
Sam: Right on the bottom . . . 1-1-1-2-8-2. This is the identification from the Army Reserve.

<John holds the document up to camera>

John: What is that?
Sam: This is my first identification. Silbiger, Shmilek. The ship Altalena . . . June, 20, 1948. This is probably when I received a passport back to Europe.

John: Do you want to show it? <John holds the document up to the camera>
Sam: Do you want something like this? <Holds another document up to the camera> This is the Altalena.

John: Let us continue with your story. We will show all the pictures later.

Ruth: It is hard to do both the pictures and the story.

John: This was towards the end of 1948?

Sam: This was June 1948. From over there, they took us with a truck to Tel Ladinsky. This is probably seven miles or kilometers from Tel Aviv. This was before the English army came. We had exercises. Instead of a real rifle, they gave us wooden pieces like a rifle . . . There was the

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97 Habima Square is a major public space that is home to a number of cultural institutions in the center of Tel Aviv, Israel.
98 Sarona was a German Templar colony established in Ottoman Palestine in 1871. Sarona is now a neighborhood of Tel Aviv, Israel.
99 Eichmann was born in 1907 in the German Templar colony of Sarona, in then Turkish-held Palestine, and learned to speak Hebrew, Yidish and Arabic fluently. His family moved to Austria when he was a young man, and he became active in the Nazi movement there.
first Israeli Army parade. I do not [have a] picture. They brought all kinds of big shots. They were working. This was the first brigade.

One time, I remember we were in the camp, Egyptian [planes] flew over. We did not have nowhere to hide. The camp was not a camp. I do not know how they could live in the wintertime because it was open. One time, they dropped bombs on Tel Aviv. This was 1948. Israel just had Premises. Premise was the same thing like you cooked on . . . “Premise” was what they called [it]. The plane [had] one motor and nothing else. Slowly, Jewish American pilots came and maybe French . . . They made the Israeli Air Force. You did not see the planes anymore.

Shortly after this—I was not over there too long in Tel Ladinsky—in the evening I was going to Tel Aviv. Later, they took us. I did not have nothing to carry because my old clothing was all gone. I had just what they gave me—overalls, and a uniform, one pair of shoes, and one cup. I did not have a rifle yet because we had wooden [practice] rifles. They took us on a truck and was going to [unintelligible; Tape 3, clip 1, 6:42; sounds like “Derek Durma”]. This was the way . . . Durma is east . . .

**John:** Another country?

**Sam:** No, this was the street to [unintelligible; Tape 3, clip 1, 7:15; sounds like “Yer Azalam”] was occupied through [unintelligible; Tape 3, clip 1, 7:19; sounds like “Lathrum”]. We could not go to Jerusalem. They climbed around the hills. When you’re going on the hills, you go zigzag and the same thing from the other side. They brought us to [unintelligible; Tape 3, clip 1, 7:49; sounds like “Nebrach”] near [unintelligible; Tape 3, clip 1, 7:50; sounds like “bre Sheim”]. There for the first time I saw an Israeli canon. The canon was by my house.

The next day, they needed some people. They took us to where the English governor was living in a foxhole. There was very old man. He had a rifle. He spoke Hebrew and I spoke a few [Hebrew] words he understood. He said, “This is my wife. You’re supposed to keep the rifle [close] like your wife. You’re supposed to wash her, clean her. If you clean her, she will be good to you. You [will not] kill yourself.” He was kissing her. I had to kiss [my rifle, too]. We were over there several days.

One day, we received from Czechoslovakia a heavy machine gun. I did not receive it. I was just a dummy over there because I did not know Hebrew. My company was 145 people—
150 with the Captain [and other officers]. They made three groups—*machlacha* [Hebrew: group]. Every *machlacha* was 45 [people] and every *machlacha* had three *keh* [Hebrew: kehtas] . . . There was three people. The Corporal was Israeli-born. They spoke Hebrew and they spoke French. The other group was Israeli-born and spoke German and Hebrew. The other one was speaking Bulgarian or something. They got together people for him so they understood him and he understood them. That was the Israeli Army and how they gave the orders. The captain would give the order in Hebrew to the lieutenant. The lieutenant gave orders to the corporal.

Right away, the first day they brought us . . . It was written down that I understood Yiddish and German in Hebrew. It was written down what [the word is for] bread, milk, water, gun . . . There were 20 words. That’s all. That’s what you need. The next day, they give you a little more. Slowly, they [taught us Hebrew] like this. That was [during] the Israeli war. I will not tell how they won the war. No. I will tell you. This [is] our secret.

**John:** Tell what you can tell.

**Sam:** One day there came a United Nations officer. I think he was French. He saw the heavy machine guns. He knew something was up. When he went away, maybe fifteen minutes later they were shooting at us [from] probably ten yards away . . . explosions. They made a camp for us in *Cataman*. The rich Arabs [lived] there. They took a bunch of houses. We had . . . everything over there. Watching for a few days to come back . . . something else.

I do not know it was, [but] one time our Corporal was wounded in the hand. He went to the hospital. We received . . . The boy was born in Germany. He knew . . . I do not know if he knew French. He’d just come from Corsica. He was a Corporal. He tried to show off. You know how you can try to show off with people in concentration camp was one way or in Russia with the Partisans. We tried to give him a cot . . . you put over the bed when you sleep . . . and whip him. We said, “No,” because we give everyone gymnastics outside when you woke up. He took us outside. First day was okay.

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100 The United Nations (UN) is an intergovernmental organization to promote international cooperation. It replaced the ineffective League of Nations. It was established in October 1945 with the intention of preventing another such world war. After World War II ended, tensions in Palestine escalated between the Jewish and Arab communities and the British and Jewish resistance groups. In September 1946, the British called a conference of Jewish and Arab leaders in London. When this ended in deadlock in February 1947, the Government announced it had decided to refer the problem to the United Nations.
Next day, he took us out, pulling “Techum,” [which meant] “get off, get down.” He took us out. One time he said, “Naroos.” The camp was [too] small to run around so he took us outside from our camp. The camp not far from us was in an Italian village [with an] Italian Consulate, a whole street. We ran. When we came over there, he started yelling, “Laroo,” to come back. We told him, “No, we’re making something good.” Nobody came uphill in the morning where we had to be around. The Captain told him, “You better watch yourself. No fooling around because those guys were in a concentration camp. They’re not afraid of you.” Later, the captain was laughing. [He was] not with him.

Ruth:  He was trying to make your life miserable but . . .

Sam:  Yes. Later, they took us again . . . one time here, one time there . . . In September we were over there in the village, Rocha. Today, it is Yogashlyim. Between Malha and Bethlehem . . . Bethlehem is on one hill and Malha is on the other hill. In between them is a railroad. I was on October 1, with two more garrisons in a foxhole. The foxhole was looking towards Bethlehem. In the afternoon of October 1, they called us from . . . In the back, maybe 500 feet was a house. We had a telephone form the house with a wire. They called us [to ask], “What’s going on? We heard shooting.” I was sitting on a lookout. I said, “Okay, they’re shooting.” I caught the grenade and I threw it down the hill. I caught it one time and [it exploded]. That’s when I got wounded. From here <indicates his left side> and back <indicates his lower back> I got [hit by shrapnel] and I still have a tiny splinter here inside <points to the area between his left eye and nose>. They will not take it out because they said of they took it out, it would make a scar or something. You can feel it if you put your finger [there]. On my back, they took it out. They took me to the hospital.

When they brought me to the hospital, there was not [just me]. There were some more. All my stuff I had on me. They found right away the booklet so they knew I was from Irgun. There was a big shot wounded from Palmach. They were looking what was going on. He saw me. I can speak no Hebrew. I knew . . .

Ruth:  To clarify, the Irgun-Palmach conflict lasted way past the . . .

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101 Malha is a neighborhood in southwest Jerusalem spread across a hillside in the Valley of Rephaim. Before 1948, Malha was a Palestinian Arab village known as al-Maliha. It is 3 miles (5 kilometers) northwest of Bethlehem, a Palestinian town south of Jerusalem in the West Bank. The biblical birthplace of Jesus, it’s a major Christian pilgrimage destination.
Sam: The first kibbutzim came to Israel in 1861. The first kibbutzim were from Russia because in Russia were lots of pogroms. They did not want the pogroms. They had been going to Turkey, to Greece, to everywhere . . . just by land, not by ship. It was always young people that went there. Ben-Gurion also came from such a group. Ben-Gurion came from Russia. They were Communists. In America, you speak more like business people. Over there, they are working people. They were not looking . . . All kibbutzim work together. What is mine is [yours].

When the English came to occupy Palestine in 1913 or something like that, Weizmann and Ben-Gurion were working with the English. They thought they could win just to bring in the court. [Ze’ev] Jabotinsky said they will buy land and bring a few people to Israel. With this, we can have Israel. Jabotinsky said, “No, you have to fight with guns.” Lots of times, Ben-Gurion’s people said, “I know something. You got this because . . . someone. You cannot fight them.” They always was against . . . Like in Poland or in Germany, everyone that worked wanted . . . unions . . . Ben-Gurion was with unions. His [unintelligible; sounds like “garoot”] was the union. Jabotinsky was not. That is why they called us before the war. They called us the Fascist. We had brown shirts with a blue [neckercief] like a Boy Scout has.

Ruth: Were the members of the Irgun or Betar taken into or accepted by the Palmach into the defense forces, the Haganah?

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102 Sam is referring to a period known as the Second Aliyah. In the wake of pogroms in Czarist Russia and an eruption of antisemitism, a wave of 40,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine between 1904 and 1914. Most of the immigrants were young people inspired by Socialist ideas. The first communal rural settlements were founded at this time, with Dagania being the first kibbutz in 1909.

103 The British rule over Palestine lasted roughly thirty years, from 1917 until 1948.

104 Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952) was a Zionist leader, President of the Zionist Organization, and the first President of the State of Israel. He was elected on February 1, 1949, and served until his death in 1952. He was born near Pinsk in today’s Belarus.

105 Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky (1880-1940) was born in Russia. He was a Revisionist Zionist leader, author, soldier and founder of the Jewish Self-Defense Organization in Odessa (Ukraine). He split from the mainstream Zionist movement in 1923 to form his own Zionist movement, which was militant in nature, openly training Jews in warfare and the use of arms. The Revisionist youth group was called Betar. In the 1930’s Jabotinsky became deeply concerned about the situation of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. He warned the Jews that there “were living on the edge of the volcano” and warned them to leave for Palestine as soon as possible. Jabotinsky died of a heart attack in New York City on August 4, 1940, during a visit to the United States.

106 The Boy Scouts of America are a youth organization founded in the United States in 1910 to train youth in responsible citizenship, character development, and self-reliance through participation in a wide range of outdoor activities, educational programs and at older age levels, career-oriented programs in partnership with community organizations. They wear a uniform and earn merit badges for achievements in sports, crafts, science, etc.

107 The Haganah [Hebrew: Defense] was a Jewish paramilitary organization that operated in the British Mandate of Palestine from 1920 to 1948. Later, most of its members became the core of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). After the 1920 and 1921 Arab riots, the Jewish leadership in Palestine believed that the British had no desire to confront the Arabs who were attacking Jews. Haganah was originally created to protect Jewish farms and kibbutzim and to actively confront the Arabs.
Sam: Like in 1936, England had two people in Betavicktie. Betar went to English surgeons and they were hanging out. They said, “We will not send any more prisoners to Acre.” Over there was a big [prison]. [They said,] “We will hang them.” England said, “If you hang one, we will hang ten of yours.” They did not touch one. No one could get in Acre. Irgun went in Acre and liberated lots of Jewish prisoners from Palmach . . . They knew . . . I’ve got the book . . . Nobody will tell you everything. They will tell you most of it.

Ruth: I have a thousand questions about this. How did you feel about being part of the Israeli Defense Force—or what was to become the Israeli Defense Force—and fighting with Jews in a Jewish Army?

Sam: I was just fighting for liberation of Israel. I do not know if I killed somebody. I was shooting. If I was in Underground, I would not tell [any]one.

John: I’m curious. How did the native Israelis feel about the European survivors coming over there? Was there any difference between the two groups or did you blend easily?

Sam: When I came . . . my sister’s sister-in-law [whose husband] brought the apples . . . they were living over there for long years, two families in the same apartment. Maybe one or two years before—I do not know—they took for themselves because they could not afford it. They had a child. He saw from about a hundred yards away there was a house, a big apartment building. He said, “Yeah, they have all new . . . They came with dishwashers. They came with [refrigerators and freezers] . . .” They were jealous. When the Jews came from Europe, they started making business—buying from here, selling from there . . . Some of them went into business. When my ex-brother-in-law—who died already—came to Israel, he brought with him a BMW motorcycle. He was not driving [it]. He was selling [it]. Someone who was on the border police—a big shot—bought it. I had a cousin who was a butcher in Poland. He was making the best salami, veal, all kinds of things. He was in the Polish Army. When he was in Germany, he went into business—I do not know how come—with porcelain. He was selling it. He got money, he sent to Israel. He bought land. He took what he needed for himself just for the land. He

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108 Acre [Hebrew: Akko; Arabic: Akka] is a port city in northwest Israel, on the Mediterranean coast. A citadel was built in Acre during the Ottoman Period over the ruins of a 12th century Crusader fortress. During the Ottoman Period, the citadel first served as a government building for Acre's rulers and then as a prison, army barracks and weapons warehouse. During the British Mandate of Palestine, the citadel served as a jail, where Jewish underground fighters were imprisoned. The Acre prison was the most highly guarded fortress in Palestine.

109 On May 4, 1947, Irgun fighters blew a hole in the wall of the Acre prison and 27 prisoners escaped. At the time, 163 Jews were being held in the prisons (60 Irgun members, 22 Lehi, 5 Haganah and the remainder felons) and 400 Arabs.
bought all kind of machines that make salami and all kinds of things for a butcher shop. He came to Israel. He could not get a butcher shop. First thing, he did not know English and . . . he did not know Hebrew. Second, he did not have cows. The cows they were bringing [came from] overseas. He was staying over there in the Arabic homes. Then he sold it and he was going and working in Negev. He was working from night to night in 112, 120, 130 degrees [Fahrenheit temperatures].

Ruth: I think what John might have been asking and what I am curious about also is that I’ve heard many stories from survivors who went to Palestine or Israel after the war and felt that the Sabras looked down on them. Some of them had the experience of the Sabras saying, “The European Jews went like sheep to the slaughter and did not do this or do that . . . ” Did you ever experience anything like that?

Sam: No, I never head that. The Jewish people when they came to Israel they sent them right away to the front. They did not know how to use a rifle. They got killed right away. That’s what happened in 1948. Probably they sent them through . . . Within a month . . . No.

John: How long were you in Israel?

Sam: I was in Israel 28 months and ten days.

John: Until 1951?

Sam: No, I left November 1, 1950.

John: How did you make the decision to not live there?

Sam: I had two sisters [that survived]. One came to Israel with her daughter and with [a boy from the concentration camp]. One went to the United States with a husband and with a boy. My father was by himself in Germany. He was in care [under] six doctors [for] his back and his leg—in the First World War he was wounded a few times. He was now in Germany . . . He was beaten so much . . . I was not all the time with him. That’s just what I know. He was one time in court in Germany to get some money for our land or something like this. I do not know if he got something. He got 100 percent pension. He was one time in court. He [had] his lawyer and [there was] a lawyer from the government. The lawyer from the government said to my father, “Mr. Silbiger, I would appreciate if you can tell me or show me how they beat you.” [My father] said, “Listen, lay down here. I’ll show you how they were doing it.” He said [that] in court. The judge

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110 After the war, Lorka (Lola) returned to Osweicim. In 1945, she married Maurya Bodner, a survivor of the Gross-Rosen camp. They adopted a five-year-old boy named Mieczyslaw (Menachem) who had been a victim of Doctor Josef Mengele’s twin experiments at Auschwitz-Birkenau.
said, “No, you keep your mouth shut. Not a word.” My father understood what he said. He said not a word.

**John:** They did not believe him? They though he was making it up?

**Sam:** No, my father said, “Lay down here. I’ll show you everything like they did with me.”

This was in Hannover. I have papers here. <points off camera> On the couch are papers from Poland and Hannover from my father sent for my land, for everything.

**John:** Did you decide to move to America where your sister was?

**Sam:** Later . . . in the meantime, my father met a widow [living] on the same floor. Her husband was in the SS [as] a border police. He was in France. When the Americans came over there and he heard the war was over, he was afraid. He went to a cemetery there in France and killed himself [to avoid] being a prisoner. She had three boys and one girl. They were living on the same floor as my father and cousin—the girl. <points out a picture of her off camera> They were living over there. She wanted somebody . . . They were living over there—not got married, just living over there. She was getting a nice pension because he was in the border police. My father was getting a pension. They had a TV and good food. [He just] had doctors. He said, “Okay, you can go.” I met a girl and came to the United States.

**John:** When you say you met a “girl,” do you mean your wife? Tell a little how you met your wife.

**Sam:** By dancing. I was a pretty good dancer and she was too. I had one daughter and four granddaughters.

**John:** How long were you two together before you decided to move to America?

**Sam:** We [have been] married fifty-five years. On May 16, it will be fifty-five years in the United States. I met her maybe two years before.

I did not tell you [about how] after the [Israeli] war when I came back to Germany. I could not sit and do nothing. I did not want to go into business in Germany. When I was in concentration camps working, [it was] in carpentry. I went to the German [department] where they give you [jobs]. I said, “I’m a carpenter and I would like to have a job.” They gave me a job. The first thing I was working for Volkswagen. They were building a new [factory], making a big one. I was working maybe two or three weeks.

Later, I was working not far away from Celle. I was working for the winter in Celle. It gets cold working as a carpenter outside, so I was working in a window and door company,
[building] just rough stuff. We were making everything ready and they were finishing. Also by Celle, there was an English airport. There were lots of officers. We were building houses for them. We were two people working together. I got another guy. He was not a dummy. All houses were alike. We were making closets, doors and windows with concrete. [There] always was concrete over the closet, over the doors, over the window. We put the boards together how thick they were supposed to be and on every corner, I put a 1, 2, 3, or 4. You have to hold this together with wire so the whole thing does not go apart. [Then I also made the same parts again.] The other guys were working also.

<interview pauses, then resumes>

**John:** . . . about your father?

**Sam:** They were making [for my] father lots of trouble.

**Ruth:** Who was it making trouble?

**Sam:** Competition . . . making bricks. You make them on the floor. First, you put them on the side. When they were stronger, you put them in the shake so wind come through so they will dry. The competition was making trouble. He had to go to court. One time, won from them. His people hit my father in the face. That’s what I know form one thing.

**John:** Could you talk a little about what it was like to be in Germany in those first two or three years right after the war? How much interaction did you have with Germans?

**Sam:** Just with . . . I’d like to tell you something. When I was over there, we were working [to build] a bridge over the railroad. In Germany, you have carpenters and brick layers [who do] not stay in one place. [They are] not getting married. [They] move from town to town. They have uniforms. When they’d come in a butcher shop, [the butcher] had some end pieces they give them for free. A bricklayer, they would give them free. I was working on the bridge. One time, it was breakfast. They put the [other] carpenter against me. He said, “Let’s see how strong is the Jew.” I showed him how strong.

**John:** You fought him?

**Sam:** All of them was standing by. I did not hit him or nothing. Just when he fell down, I put him in my arm like this. <indicates he held onto the man in a headlock, choking him> The tongue came out. No one said a word to me anymore. He had a long tongue. Should I be happy? I swear that story is true.

**John:** Did you have any desire for revenge?
Sam: No. No one said a bad word to me. We were there by the bridge. Later it was a very strong winter. They’d been working by a building—a school—in Hannover. He laid up 90 percent. I got the job. The boss—the foreman—saw I was working . . . I am a person [who believes if] something be done, let it be done perfect [or] do not do nothing.

John: Did you have any desire to take your anger out on Germans after the war?

Sam: My brother-in-law was living not far—maybe 35 kilometers (22 miles)—from Landsberg. I was going over there for my sister. This was a town, an airport for American soldiers. They were making business over there with the American soldiers. They warned me about some guy over there. [He] wanted somebody to go with him to fight. I did not have a chance really.

John: How did you decide finally where to come in America?

Sam: I had a sister.

John: Where?

Sam: She was in Kansas City [Missouri].

Ruth: This was Mirka?

Sam: Mirka, yes. They’d both been working. They sent me papers. I paid my own fare to the United States. On the way, I met a friend who’d been with my brother-in-law in camp. They was always keeping two or three together. Mirka was already in the camp. Two guys . . .

John: You moved to Kansas City first?

Sam: Yes. I came to Kansas City on Saturday . . . I know I came in 1952 to New York . . . I came on Wednesday to Kansas City with the sister of the woman my father was living with. I came to [Kansas City]. I wanted to work in carpentry, but at this time they were building the highway in Kansas City. They went on strike. The building where we were living was just newcomers. My brother[-in-law] was working for the government. Some people were working in a luggage factory. In the luggage factory, they needed someone cutting silk, cutting paper, cutting metal, and all kinds of things.

My wife . . . The next day, they called right away they needed a seamstress. They put her over there. They told her what to do and she was doing it without [knowing] English or nothing. At home, her mother had had a sewing machine, so she knew how to do it. The first few days, they gave her to do work like everyone else. They saw she was doing good work and fast. They gave her piecework. Sometimes she was working just three or four hours. She came home.
For sleeves, collars... everything was a different price. She brought me the tickets. I was a good mathematician. I figured this up. She came with a check. Like the check office over there. I wrote down on a piece of paper, “This is so much and this is so much... And it comes to so much. And this is your taxes. This is how much you [should be] paid.” They saw they [were not dealing] with a dummy. They paid her right every time, every week. This was my wife.

One fellow that was working in the luggage factory said, “We need someone over there in the cutting department.” No one stayed longer than one or two days because there were three bosses and our foreman... everyone want something else. You cannot satisfy [everyone] all together. I said, “Alright, I will start over there.” In the meantime, I wrote a letter to my father maybe I can get a letter [from the] union to get... They did not. They were striking the whole summer. I was over there. They started to pay me... $1.06 [an hour]. After six weeks, the boss gave me $1.15 already because they [had] seen I was doing a good job. It was Jewish boys. I said, “Listen, when I was working in Germany in the concentration camp, everything was in centimeters.” Here, it was inches. I said, “Give me just one like this and I’ll make everything perfect.” I was working over there. After six weeks, I said, “Listen, give me some more.” He said, “I cannot do anymore. This is a union.” Later, after twelve weeks, I got $1.29. Then it was $1.29 [an hour] and that’s all. They told me, “You’re worth $5.00 an hour to me, just I cannot give you [that].” They were standing by a machine [that would slam down]. I had to count everything and make everything perfect. A line was fifty or sixty people. When one stopped a minute, it was already an hour. That’s what he told me.

John: What are some of the major differences you found between America and Europe with the people, culture...

Sam: [When] I was working in Germany, I got two marks... an hour.111 When I came to the United States... I made $1.29 [an hour] for the first six weeks. For this, you could buy seven pounds of hamburger. You could buy five pounds of chicken for a dollar. Tomatoes were just pennies. When it came to Christmas... my wife was working as a seamstress. I did not know it. We went shopping. We were always on Saturday night shopping. I saw a goose. I said, “Okay, now it’s Christmas.” I did not eat goose in a long time. I [ate it when I lived in] Poland. In

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111 The Deutschmark was the standard of money in West Germany from 1948 until 1990 and the unified Germany until it was replaced by the Euro in 2002. It was first introduced under Allied Occupation in 1948 to replace the Reichsmark. Like the American dollar, it was subdivided into pfennigs (pennies) so that 100 pfennigs equaled 1 Deutsche Mark. It is commonly referred to as the “Deutschmark” in English and the “Mark” or “D-Mark” in German.
Germany, I did not see any. I said, “Okay.” I bought a goose. Friday came . . . put in the freezer. To fill it up, I also bought five pounds of hamburger. It was a dollar. My wife comes with a turkey. It’s Christmas.

I was living by an Italian. Her son was Al Capone people. The people next door . . . backyard. [They were] Al Capone people. Her son may still be in jail. He was at this time in jail. One had a new, beautiful Ford [automobile] and her son was . . . She brought pizza to us. I looked at my wife [and shrugged]. We never ate pizza [in Germany or Poland]. I took the pizza with me on the job to throw away. She was looking in the garbage [and would have seen] if somebody threw it away. I ate just meat morning, noon and evening—turkey, hamburger and goose.

How I was with people? I did not have nothing to with on the job because I was cutting department. I was doing just with the bosses. There was one foreman—he was from Atlanta and died maybe ten or twenty years ago—who said to me, “Shmilek, be happy.” I did for him. He was a friend to me. He tried to show the bosses he was doing a good job. If I made a mistake, they did not know it. I did not make mistakes. If I made just one time a mistake, [I’d be out of a job].

**John:** What brought you to Atlanta?

**Sam:** My brother-in-law was here maybe five years. They came to Atlanta with a tiny little boy. He was three or four years [old]. They put him in kindergarten and they both were working. When they came from work, my sister picked up the boy. It was wintertime. He did not know English. He [went to the bathroom] in his pants. It was a hard life. They were working hard. They would like to go for something. My brother-in-law was working in a factory for the government. He said, “On Friday, I know already what will be my check next week.” My sister knew already what would be next week. They were saving money. They brought from Germany some and they were saving money. They wanted to go into business.

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112 Alphonse Gabriel Capone (1899-1947), also called Al or Scarface, was born in Brooklyn, New York, to poor Italian immigrant parents. Capone went on to become the most infamous gangster in American history. He attained notoriety during the Prohibition era as the co-founder and boss of the Chicago Outfit, a multi-million dollar Chicago, Illinois based operation in bootlegging, prostitution and gambling that was responsible for many brutal acts of violence. In 1931 he was indicted for federal income-tax evasion and conspiracy to violate Prohibition laws. He was found guilty and sentenced to 11 years in prison, but was released in 1939 for health reasons. He lived out the rest of his days as a recluse and died of cardiac arrest at his home in Florida in 1947.
One time when I was already here, he went on a look out. He went to New Jersey [where] he had a friend. They friend had a chicken farm. He went over there. He said, “No, no, I did not come to America to . . . I cannot live like this.” Later he got another guy who was a salesman. He went out on Monday and was back on Friday. He was going around selling merchandise. He spoke already good English at this time because he was already [here for] five years.

Ruth: What was his name?
Sam: Roman Blatt. I have here my nephew. He is loaded. He got a son and he got three grandchildren . . . He said, “I will not do like this. I do not like to see every week thinking what will already be next week.”

One time, he opened a used clothing store when the war was going on in Vietnam. When Vietnam War was going on, people bought older stuff. Later when they got money, nobody wanted to buy older stuff. He had to go to work. First thing with the chicken farm [and] later, the other thing. He said, “No, I got married. I have a son. I’d like to have my wife, not to sit everyday in a different bed. I have my son. I’d like to enjoy my son. I have to look for a better [job].” He had already an apartment building. He bought a six-unit apartment building.

I was in Kansas City at the factory. In one and a half year, I bought me also an apartment building—also a six-unit. My wife was working while I was saving. I had $10,000. I bought an apartment building for $35,000. It was a little bit up. Later, I fixed the roof and some other things. I was the roofer. I was the manager. I was the carpenter. I was the janitor. [I was] everything. After eighteen months, when I said to my landlady, “I am moving out,” [she asked,] “It was no good for you?” I said, “I bought me an apartment building.” [She said,] “You’re not even a year and a half in Kansas City and you bought an apartment!” I said, “Yes, I was saving money.” You know why I was saving money? I was going [into work early] in the morning. From six to seven [A.M.], I was working overtime. From seven [A.M.] till four [P.M.], regular [pay]. From four-thirty to eight-thirty [P.M.] was overtime. I was working thirteen hours a day. Saturdays, [I worked] half a day.

When I was in Kansas City, [we did not go to] the cinema more than three times. [We bought] just food. [I would] just eat. I could not drink no whiskey or nothing because I had to be okay on the job. I bought a box of beer. There were 24 bottles in a box. It cost $2.68 for 24 at that time. Next to [our] apartment was an American. He was in the Vietnam War and he was
getting a check from the government. He was getting probably some money from the side also. When we was going to receive the check on Friday, he went first to the beer joint. I did not go to the beer joint. A glass cost 45 cents. He liked to drink. I do not know how much it costs today. You could kill me and I will not know how much it costs. I do not drink beer. That’s the reason I was saving. I was doing everything. And I did not have a car. One fellow who was working early with me came to pick me up from the home and brought me back in the evening because he was working overtime too. It cost me $2 a week [for] transportation.

John: What was it like for you to become a father for the first time?

Sam: The last time, he was 75 years old.

John: No, when you became a father.

Sam: My father . . . Today is Friday . . . Five days ago was [50] years. January 30, 19[61] . . . Fifty years ago! My daughter was born in Kansas City. It was so cold [with] ice . . . Kansas City was not like here. You had to put [snow] chains on the tires. When you’d go on a hill, you had to push. One was pushing the other one.

John: How did you like becoming a father for the first time?

Sam: I brought [my wife] on Sunday evening and later I was there at the hospital until probably nine or nine-thirty [P.M.]. They said, “Go home. She just got the water . . . We’ll call you probably sometime in the morning.” I went home and slept. Later in the morning, the telephone rings around six o’clock. I got myself up and it was ice. I had to drive slowly. It was probably maybe six or seven miles [around ten kilometers] away. When you drive on ice, you have to watch yourself. I seen the little baby over there and my wife . . . she was somehow brown. Some children get darker. She did not want to see . . . She said she looked like an [African American]. [We had] no family, just friends. One brought something for her. I went on Friday to the synagogue and they gave me [unintelligible; tape 3, clip 3; sounds like “a lire”] and they called her name. I told them to write down the name after my mother and my cousin. She was my age. We were playing all the time. I gave [her the name] Eva Helen. They wrote down Eva with an E-V. In Europe, it’s E-W. My daughter got . . . I wanted to fight but when you are in America, you have to . . .

Ruth: We have not talked about some of the bigger kinds of questions. What do you think about being here, making a life here in America and not being in Europe anymore? Do you have any thoughts about America?
Sam: America is a golden life. You can make gold. If you like to do something, you can do it. You have a chance. No other place [do] you have a chance. They put you to something, you’re given to this, you die by this. In America, you’re the boss. In other countries, they put you . . . I told you [the other workers in the factory were just] standing by the machine. They did not want nothing. They do not care. You’ve got lots of people in America that say, “I do not care.” When I came here, when I had a daughter, the first thing I told my wife, “Listen, let’s make money. When we will be good off, we’ll go make good time.”

One time, we came to visit Atlanta and my sister was telling me, “Sam, you’ll be a father.” My wife did not tell me. My wife told me she found out in Atlanta when we came to vacation. She said, “I will be a mother,” later. My sister told me. I opened my eyes . . . I liked my nephew. When I was in Kansas City [and] the head of the six-unit apartment, I bought him a bicycle. That’s what he wanted. [I bought him] which one he wanted. I did not say “[You must get] this one [or] this. Pick you out what you want.” He is today a millionaire. He was in grocery. He was in stocks. Later, he bought some land and the land made him very rich. Thank G-d he is okay.

Ruth: You’ve talked a little bit about surviving in such difficult circumstances. What about you—your personality and character—helped you to survive and then to be successful here in America?

Sam: I was almost not . . . I left March 22 [1956] . . . My daughter was born on January 30 [1956]. On March 22, I sold the apartment [building] and, on March 22, I came to Atlanta. In Atlanta, my wife was with the baby. I was looking for a grocery store. I bought a small grocery store . . . He was an old guy with his wife and the colored people were stealing. He had all the candy and chocolate [out of view]. He was standing [on one side of a shelf] and all the candy and chocolate was [on the other side]. They were stealing everything [including] toothpaste and such things. When I took it over, the first thing [I did was] turn [the shelf] around and put the candy and the medicine, toothpaste, the little things, everything [where I could see it] and the food over [on the other side]. They were stealing [from me too]. I caught [them] stealing too. I caught stealing butcher string. I threw them out.

When I had the grocery, I had five hold ups. One time, because I went out, they put the gun in my back. One time, they hit me on the back of the head and made a hole. I had to go to
the hospital to [get] stiches. One time, my wife was with me in the store. When I had five hold ups, I said, “This is enough. I do not want nothing.”

Later, I was working in . . . My father died. I was going every day in the morning and evening to say kaddish.113 After the praying in the evening, I was leaving . . . My daughter was going with a friend to school. My daughter was over there and I had to go pick up. When I came to pick her up, [there] was a guy from Egypt—also a Jew. He saw me. He said, “What are you doing?” I do not remember what I said. At this time, I [was not] doing nothing. I said, “I am without work.” He said, “I have a store with fine jewelry and good gowns and all kinds of things.” First, he’d known my daughter for a long time. The girls were best friends. He said, “How about you work with me?” I worked with him. Later they started making MARTA on Whitehall Street.114 I started to make operation on my hand. Everything was . . . I was helping my brother-in-law and so on. Also, we bought from . . . Things got . . .

When my daughter got married . . . I was working in the grocery and was going to [unintelligible; tape 3, clip 4, 0:10]. When my daughter was ready for school, she wanted a car. I said, “Listen . . .” She wanted to go to [unintelligible; tape 3, clip 4, 0:30]. She wanted a car. The car was something from Chevrolet. [It cost] $520. Later, she said she wanted something like this . . . It was over $6,000. Later, she had a boyfriend. She said, “He’s got a Trans Am.” It was almost $8,500 or $9,000. I have just one daughter. What should I do? I bought it. She was going with her boyfriend. I told her, “I sent you to college.” I was sitting in the schul, in the synagogue with a fellow who was a big shot at Emory [University].115 I said, “I want you to be a doctor.” She said, “Okay, but first I’d like to go to [unintelligible; tape 3, clip 4, 1:38]. [I said,] “Okay.” First, I was in . . .

One time, I head from her, “Listen, my boyfriend . . . We’d like to get married.” They did not want . . . She did not tell me they did not want to have a doctor. They have three generations of doctors [in his family]. His sister is a dentist in Philadelphia. They’d like to have a

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113 Kaddish (Hebrew for ‘holy’) is a hymn of praises to G-d found in the Jewish prayer service that is recited aloud while standing. The central theme of the Kaddish is the magnification and sanctification of G-d's name. Along with the Shema and Amidah, the Kaddish is one of the most important and central elements in the Jewish liturgy. The Mourner’s Kaddish is said at all prayer services and certain other occasions. Following the death of a parent, child, spouse, or sibling it is customary to recite the Mourner’s Kaddish in the presence of a congregation daily for 30 days, or 11 months in the case of a parent, and then at every anniversary of the death. It is important to note that the Mourner's Kaddish does not mention death at all, but instead praises G-d.

114 MARTA

115 Emory University
nurse and children. They’d like to have lots of children—six children. My daughter did not listen to me. Later, when she’d had four children, they came to this divorce because they caught him fooling around with the best [friend].

_Ruth:_ Sam, you are a member of Beth Jacob?¹¹⁶

_Sam:_ I was a member until ten or eleven years ago. When I moved here [to a new home], my daughter was [a member of] Etz Chaim.¹¹⁷ I [now belong] to Etz Chaim. I quit [attending Beth Jacob] because . . .

_Ruth:_ It was too far?

_Sam:_ Yes. Over there it was Orthodox.¹¹⁸ I am really not Orthodox.

_Ruth:_ Going through your experiences during the war, did that change your attitude about being Jewish? How did being a survivor affect . . .

_Sam:_ The first time the Germans occupied [our area], they came by our house because it was a drive-in. There was plenty of place. They put a kitchen and they still had food. They called the people to come. This was the first time I ate _treif_—non-kosher—[foods]. Later . . . When we were still in Oswiecim, we’d still go with our chickens downtown to our _shochet_.¹¹⁹ He’d make kosher. When I [was in the work] camp, I wrote a letter and said, “Please send me some underwear and send me something from Shokliski.” They knew who it was because he was our neighbor. He was a butcher. He did not have . . . for himself [but] he was cutting pigs or cows for Polacks. They were making it ready, making salami. They put some in the chimney. They never got spoiled. My father was . . . also my cousin . . . He was eating fat because the doctor told him at the brick factory was lots of dust so to eat it. Maybe that’s the reason he died at 75 or 76 years

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¹¹⁶ Beth Jacob is an Orthodox synagogue on La Vista Road in Atlanta founded in 1942 by former members of Ahavath Achim who were looking for a more Orthodox congregation. Beth Jacob is now Atlanta’s largest Orthodox congregation. The congregation first met in a rented grocery store on Parkway Drive. It moved to a permanent location on Boulevard when it purchased and renovated a two-story apartment building. In 1956, it converted the Tabernacle Baptist Church on Boulevard to a synagogue. It built its current synagogue building on a five-acre lot on La Vista Road in 1961.

¹¹⁷ Congregation Etz Chaim is a progressive, egalitarian Conservative synagogue established in 1975 in Marietta, Georgia, a suburb in north metropolitan Atlanta.

¹¹⁸ Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the Written Torah and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

¹¹⁹ A _shochet_ is an adult male Jew who is trained and accredited by a rabbinic authority in the Jewish dietary laws. Specifically, a _shochet_ slaughters animals in a way prescribed by Jewish dietary laws to avoid pain to the animal as much as possible, and to safeguard the health of the consumer.
I told them, “Please send me [meat] from Shokliski.” I was in camp already [and] had to eat not kosher. There was nothing kosher.

I came to the United States [and] I was doing the same thing all the time. My daughter [eats] kosher at home. When she goes to a restaurant, she will eat fish or . . . she probably eats something not kosher too. She is 50 years old. [Kids] do not listen to you anyway. She just comes if she needs something . . . Thank G-d.

**Ruth:** Parents and children have different relationships now than what you had with your father—with a lot of discipline and what not. I do not think that exists much anymore.

**Sam:** She moved out from her house to an apartment. Everything else—all her stuff—came here to the basement. I have everything. One time . . . now it’s supposed to be Purim.\(^{120}\) She invited all the kids [and] my wife . . . I never was over there in that apartment. She invited me also. I came over there. I took a look over and said, “This is not [good enough] for my daughter. My daughter should not live like this.” I was looking what is going on. Purim should be now. In May, it will be . . .

**Ruth:** I am sorry [to interrupt]. How did you end up making a living here in Atlanta after you sold the grocery store? You had the jewelry store? Then what happened?

**Sam:** I was helping out [in] my brother’s store. I was doing all kinds of jobs. Later, I was working in the jewelry store. I was occupied and made money.

**Ruth:** What did you think about moving to the South?

**Sam:** Very nice. Here the neighbors all like me. I had one neighbor [whose] husband was a Jew too. He died a few years ago. She called me for [my] birthday. She brought this <points off camera> for my wife’s birthday. I do not remember what she brought for me . . . It was just four or five months [ago]. I think [it was] also some candy. I do not give candy. I give a bottle of wine.

[Nearby is another] neighbor—an older couple. They were good in court against my son-in-law because my son-in-law . . . Someone was trying to break in on the corner and across from me. They—that neighbor—called the police. We were sitting all together. Everyone was good with me. My yard must be nicer than the others because I am a Jew.

\(^{120}\) Purim is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people in the ancient Persian Empire from destruction in the wake of a plot by Haman, a story recorded in the Biblical book of Esther. According to the Book of Esther, Haman planned to kill all the Jews, but Mordecai and his adopted daughter Queen Esther foiled his plans. The day of deliverance became a day of feasting and rejoicing. Some of the customs of Purim include drinking wine, wearing masks and costumes, and public celebration.
Ruth: Tell me what you mean by that.

Sam: I do not want somebody to say, “Because a Jew lives here it’s dirty,” or something like that. I was in a concentration camp. I was in Israel in the Army and over there you have to be clean. If not, you’ll get sick. I learned from my mother and my father to be straight, be clean and keep clean. When you do something, do it perfect. Do not tell lies because every lie comes out—if not today then tomorrow.

Ruth: Those are very important lessons that you learned.

Sam: Yes. I had a grandmother who said, “If somebody asks you how you are doing, you always say, ‘Good.’ If he is your friend, he is happy. If he is your enemy, he is cranky.” That’s what I do. I am now 87 years old. My legs, they do not want to do it, or it hurts me here, or it hurts me there... I do not say nothing. How long I can do it, I do it. I go to the doctor twice a year. I [had dental] implants. He said he found something else. When it hurts me, I will go. I have TMJ. It hurts me. I hold it out. I am strong.

Ruth: You are a tough guy.

Sam: I have pain. I do not take no painkillers. I was in hospital. I had an operation. After the operation, they came to me with a pain pill. I said, “For what?” [They said,] “For pain.” I said, “Keep it for yourself.”

Ruth: You are tough. You are strong, built to last.

Sam: I have plenty of pain. My wife has a whole medicine bag.

Ruth: You go to the Café Europa meetings, right? Do you enjoy being with other survivors?

Sam: Yes. This week we had the Israeli Consulate there.

Ruth: Tell me about that.

Sam: He was telling everything. At the end—I tell it like it is—he said, “We have to do something.” I said, “You know, if something get bad, Israel doesn’t owe nobody else. Just take the bomb first on Iran and later on somebody like Egypt. Kill them! Don’t give up. Don’t let you be a prisoner by them because that should kill. Kill them!”

Ruth: You are still a Betarnik [Yiddish: someone who belongs to the Betar Movement].

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121 The temporomandibular joint (TMJ) acts like a sliding hinge, connecting your jawbone to your skull. Dysfunction can lead to pain and discomfort. Jaw pain, difficulty chewing, and clicking and locking of the jaw joint are some of the symptoms.

122 Café Europa is a social group for Holocaust survivors. It is hosted worldwide by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc. Gatherings are typically luncheons, dances, talks, or other community events. The name comes from a cafe in Stockholm, Sweden where survivors would meet after the war to try to find family and friends.
Sam: Yes. That is what I told him.

Ruth: What are your feelings about Israel? What does Israel mean to you?

Sam: I cry for Israel now. I cry for the kids. You should see how nice, how beautiful the kids. . . The boy [my sister adopted after the war] went with my sister to Israel. They were to him like a mother and father. They raised him up. I do not know if he got a college degree.

My sister had just a [biological] daughter. She got a college degree, was a professor, and later was studying to be an ambassador. Her husband is a [unintelligible; tape 3, clip 4, 15:50]. He came to Israel to study in Israel. He [became] a professor and was working in [unintelligible; tape 3, clip 4, 16:00; sounds like “Yom hamelei’ah”]. He’s still a professor. They have one son and one daughter.

The son finished Haifa Polytechnion and later was in the Army. He was working, selling all kind of things. They were sending him to Houston [Texas] and other places in Texas. They sent him also to Japan.

I was over [in Israel]. [They] will not tell you what they are doing. Nobody will tell you. They have a daughter. One time, I called my sister. [My grand-niece] picked up the phone. [She said,] “Hello?” They speak English. They have double . . . Canadian and Israeli [citizenship] . . . I said, “Who is this?” She said, “Rachel.” I said, “How are you doing?” She said, “Okay.” [I asked,] “What are you doing?” [She said,] “Oh, I am in the Army.” I knew she was in the Army. She told me she was over there in [unintelligible; tape 3, clip 4, 17:23]. I said, “What are you doing?” She said, “Oh, [it is] very interesting.” [I asked,] “What is interesting?” [She said,] “Oh, we’re very good.” No one tells you another word.

When I was in Israel almost 30 years ago, we were 38 people from Atlanta. We ate supper and one time he took a suitcase and [was] going away. I said, “What’s going on?” He said he [was going] to work, he [had] to check up. What he was doing, nobody told me.

Ruth: Have you been to Israel lately?

Sam: I was there from May 5 to May 15—ten days. I did not see too much. I was with the family.

Ruth: It has changed a little bit since when you were . . .

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123 The Technion—Israel Institute of Technology is a public research university in Haifa, Israel offering degrees in science and engineering.
Sam: Change . . . When I was there in the Army and I came 30 years ago, it changed a lot. It has changed [another] ten times [since then]. I do not recognize anything.

Ruth: You cannot recognize it.

Sam: I just recognized when I came in my sister’s apartment. I did not recognize any[thing]. I was over 30 years ago and Yad Vashem was a different one. This one—Yad Vashem—when you are coming out, there is a big picture from my sister, my brother-in-law and the boy. I was with my wife, my daughter, and my ex-son-in-law fifteen years ago in Poland . . . She got [many] pictures from inside over there. She picked a flower for me. I [have] a flower from over there.

When we came back from Poland, I had the grocery. After the grocery, I was going every Saturday to synagogue. One time at the synagogue, came a Jewish journalist. He was talking to the rabbi and the shamos and [asked if anybody] was in a concentration camp or in Auschwitz-Birkenau. They said, “Better. Here is someone who was born in [Oswiecim] and was in concentration camps.” He came to me. I was telling him. He was over there twice already [visiting] concentration camps. I said, “I am from Oswiesm and over there is a house . . .” rom a neighbor . . . When I was over there, I was standing there and here came a lady. I did not recognize [her] because it was over 60 years ago. She said to me, ‘Shmilek?’ I said, ‘It’s not Schimig; it’s Shmilek.’ She said, ‘Oh, yes.’” She told me she was going to school with my brother. She told me her name. She told me she got married to this one. I said, “That one?” She said, “Yes, that one.” I said, “That one with the capalisch?” He had such a funny . . . like you see in America a schmatta [Yiddish: rag], different dress, like you this one, you show . . . This one was the same.

Ruth: How was it for you to be back in Poland?

Sam: Nothing. My daughter and my son-in-law . . . They [saw] something new. They [saw] the concentration camp. In the concentration camp, I said Kaddish over by the . . . small crematorium. There was a fellow talking to the people. I said, “They are not telling the truth.

124 Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, was established in 1953 by an act of the Israeli Knesset. Since its inception, Yad Vashem has become a leading center for documentation, research, education, and commemoration of the Holocaust. Construction began in Jerusalem in 1954 on the western side of Mount Herzl and in 1957 the memorial and museum opened. On March 15, 2005, a new museum complex four times larger than the old one opened at Yad Vashem.
They’re telling what . . .” I showed them my [tattoo]. They all believed me. They looked at him as a . . .

I took a cab driver and every day he wanted $100. We went to Zakopane [Poland] also.125 This is where Jews were going on vacation in the summertime. In the wintertime they were going skiing. It is not far from the border. We were in Krakow. They have a carriage with the horses. My daughter and son-in-law [took a romantic ride]. Also in Zakopane, we saw people.

In Oswiecim, I did not go to a lawyer; just in Krakow. He said, “What is the name?” I said, “This is my name.” He said, “How can I trust this is the name?” He said, “Where is your mother?” I said, “My mother is in the concentration camp.” He said, “Where is your father?” I showed him the certificate from when he died. Later, he said, “Maybe you’re telling me some stories.” I said, “I can bring you some people that know me from when I was living [there] and [who] went with me to school.”

Over there, we have a house. This one they knocked down in 1875. The people moved in and they did not do nothing. This house probably was a few hundred years old . . . how they built it. I remember from before my grandmother had in the corner, they had been sleeping on. Was an oven and [near] the oven, they’d been sleeping in the kitchen. I still remember in this house.

**Ruth:** You have a lot of good memories and bad memories from Poland. It is complicated. Is there anything we have missed that you would like to talk about?

**Sam:** One thing I can say is I am very happy with America—just not with the [politicians] now. The politics is no good. [President Barack Obama] said, “The people think I am a Muslim.”126 They showed what part he’s Muslim. He’s ninety percent Muslim—[President Barack] Obama . . . what he said to . . . You’re taking this?

**Ruth:** I can turn it off if you want.

**Sam:** No.

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125 Zakopane is a town in southern Poland at the foot of the Tatra Mountains. It is a popular wintertime destination for mountain climbing and skiing.

126 Barack H. Obama is the 44th President of the United States, serving two consecutive terms from 2009-2016. He is the first African-American elected as president in United States history. Although Obama declared himself a Christian, rumors began that he was a Muslim. Whether the rumors were an effort to discredit him or to equate him with a faith some Americans perceive as negative, the rumors persisted throughout his presidency.
Ruth: We can talk about that when we finish [the interview]. Since this tape will be viewed by your grandchildren, is there anything about your life, what you’ve learned, or what you’d like them to learn that you want to tell them?

Sam: The grandchildren . . . [in] the divorce, he took away three grandchildren from her. We were in court. It cost me lots of money. I’ve got boxes here and she’s got [some] at home. One daughter was still with her. After Thanksgiving, she—the last one—went to my son-in-law. Are you putting this on there?

Ruth: I still have it on. I am sorry. I know that is personal.

Sam: Yes. Now my daughter is without kids. Last week on Sunday was my daughter’s birthday. They took me to the Cheesecake Factory\textsuperscript{127} at Perimeter Mall.\textsuperscript{128} It was my wife, my daughter, and her four children. They gave her something. I gave them . . . We bought [it] for two girls. The oldest one is no good. One is supposed to have a birthday on Sunday. I do not know what it will be. They say . . . Over there they have the music play. I was taking them to lunch every Sunday when they were here. You said ‘lunch,’ I said ‘to dinner.’

Ruth: You have already become an American.

Sam: We eat breakfast in the morning. My wife eats a banana about ten o’clock. Later, at twelve o’clock is dinner. Around three o’clock or 3:30, coffee with a cake. [My wife’s] birthday was two weeks ago—January 19. On Wednesday it was two weeks ago. At six o’clock, I make the salad and make everything ready. Around eight o’clock, [we have] some orange, or apple, or ice cream, or something like this.

Ruth: Speaking of dinner, I am sure I have kept you from having your supper.

Sam: It is six o’clock.

Ruth: Sam, thank you so much for sharing your story with us. It is very important.

Sam: You are finished with me?

Ruth: I am finished with you. We just want to thank you again.

<End Tape 3>

Interview Ends

\textsuperscript{127} The Cheesecake Factory is an American restaurant chain that boasts more than 250 menu items and more than 50 signature cheesecakes and desserts. It began in Detroit, Michigan in the 1940s.

\textsuperscript{128} Perimeter Mall is an upscale shopping mall in Perimeter Center, Dunwoody, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, near the interchange of Interstate 285 and Georgia State Route 400. It is the second largest shopping mall in the state of Georgia.