

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA**

MEMOIRIST: WATLER BEER
INTERVIEWER: STAN LEFCO
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GA
DATES: MARCH 5, 1987

INTERVIEW BEGINS

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Stan: This tape is being made by the second generation, children of Holocaust survivors, Atlanta, Georgia. Today's date is March fifth, 1987. Would you state your name please?

Walter: My name is Walter Beer.

Stan: Where do you live, Mr. Beer?

Walter: I live at 216 Pineland Road in Atlanta, Georgia.

Stan: When were you born?

Walter: I was born on May fourth, 1922.

Stan: Tell me about where you were born.

Walter: I was born in a small town in the middle of Czechoslovakia called Vitkovice, which was a suburb of a coal mining town called Moravska Ostrava.

Stan: Tell me about your family.

Walter: Well, we were a large family. Originally, my grandparents from my mother's side came from Poland, and I believe they were four brothers, and they all settled in that particular town. They were all merchants, and they were all quite well-to-do. On my father's side . . . I believe my grandparents on my father's side came from the middle of Moravia, and they were bakers. They were very well-known bakers in a small town which was also a suburb of Ostrava and they were quite well-to-do.

Stan: Can you tell us the names of the members of your family?

Walter: Grandparents . . . my grandparents on my mother's side were Gustav Gottmann, G-O-T-T-M-A-N-N, and Cecelia Gottmann. And my grandparents on my father's side were Zigmund Beer and Offie Beer. My parents' names were Hugo Beer, my mother's name was Henrietta. I also had a brother, he was three years older than I am, and his name was Jan, J-A-N. That was the whole extent of our family, our close family. My mother, of course, had a brother. My uncle, his name was Joseph Gottmann, and he left Czechoslovakia in 1938, and came to the States, and he was the one who sent me an affidavit to come here. On my father's side, he had a brother and a sister. My father's brother followed in the footsteps of my grandfather and became a baker, very successful. My father's sister was a housewife and she perished in Auschwitz.

Stan: What was the name of your uncle?

Walter: My uncle Beer?

Stan: Your father's brother.

Walter: My father's brother was, I believe, also Joseph. Joseph Beer.

Stan: What was the name of your father's sister?

Walter: Mitzi.

Stan: What was the date of birth of your brother?

Walter: My brother's date of birth is easy to remember for me, because it was the ninth of the ninth month of 1919. That was . . . my brother's birthday.

Stan: Who lived in your house?

Walter: Well, we had a house which was combined with my grandparents' house. It was a multiple dwelling which they owned, and they sort of divided it as a dowry, I would say. They gave my mother half of the house. In our house, there were four apartments and we occupied the . . . complete upper floor. And there were three apartments downstairs which were occupied by some local people. On the other half of that big dwelling, which was L-shaped, there must have been about eight apartments, and that's where my grandparents on my mother's side had a grocery store downstairs and there lived themselves downstairs, and the rest of all the apartments in that other part of the L-shaped house were . . . rented. In my household there was just my mother, father, brother, and I. In my grandparents' household, it was just my grandfather and my grandmother. That was all . . . we were very close. Actually, we had broken through a wall, so we could visit each other, and . . . we had a very close relationship.

Stan: How many rooms did you have in your particular apartment?

Walter: We had . . . about seven rooms on the upper floor. As boys, we had our own room. My mother and father had a bedroom, we had a huge living room, we had a big kitchen, we had a huge dining room, and we had a study. We had a walk-in cabinet, it was sort of a walk-in . . . a little room in which my mother kept all provisions and foodstuffs. Of course, at that time we didn't have refrigeration, so all our food that had to be kept cold was put on stone steps that were leading into the basement, and the stone was keeping everything cold.

Stan: Was your apartment the typical size for apartments in the neighborhood?

Walter: No, I think our apartment was sort of upper-middle-class.

Stan: What did your father do for a living?

Walter: My father was a certified public accountant, but prior to that he was in business and he was a manufacturer of liqueurs. He was . . . after World War I, he went into business and out of essences he made all kinds of very fine liqueurs. Later on, he sold the business. He sold it to some people from Slovakia, and they moved into our house, because the business was in our house on the lower level. He himself got the job as an accountant at a big firm manufacturing tar products for roofing, and so on. And he had gotten from the factory where he was all kinds of fringe benefits, including chauffeured automobiles and vacations in Yugoslavia, and later on a house separate from our house in the main city of Ostrava, which was about 10 km away from Vitkovice. He was being driven to the office by the uniformed chauffeur, and we had a very good life at that time. That was up to approximately 1938.

Stan: Where did your father obtain his accounting degree?

Walter: He went to a special commercial school in Vienna, before the war, before 1918. He was born in 1890, and he was sort of not . . . he was not following in the footsteps of his grandfather, he rather got a very good education, he spoke six languages, and he went to a very good commercial school in Vienna. Through there he got his degree in accounting, and as I said he spoke many languages, which enabled him to get many good jobs. Especially before the war, before 1914. Before 1914 he worked at Trieste¹, which at that time was a free port, and because

¹ Trieste is a city and seaport situated in the thin, northeastern strip of Italy between the Adriatic Sea and present-day Slovenia. In 1938, Trieste was home to the third largest Jewish community in Italy. By the end of the Holocaust, only around 1,500 Jews remained. In the years leading up to the World War II, Trieste was one of the major ports of embarkation for Jews leaving Europe for Palestine.

he spoke Italian and German and the most impossible language, Hungarian, he was able to get a very good job as a shipbuilder there, in Trieste. That shipbuilder gave him jobs as a translator and also an accountant, and from then on, he was always getting better and better jobs. He was only a young man then, but it was amazing how many languages and how fluently he spoke.

Stan: What did your grandfather do?

Walter: My grandfather on my father's side?

Stan: Yeah.

Walter: He was a baker.

Stan: What year was your mother born?

Walter: My mother was born in 1893, and they were sort of teenage sweethearts. I still have some postcards from my father when he was courting her, and the strange thing was that, in order for the parents not to know what he was writing to her, he would write just a word like "I love you" and put on the stamp and put the stamp over it. And she knew that she had to remove the stamp to see that, you know, that there's still some relationship, because he was far away from there. I still have some postcards here which are very moving, very interesting. I was able to save some of these interesting letters and postcards.

Stan: What did you want to do?

Walter: I was . . . I was the youngest member of our family and I was very sickly all the time. My father felt that I could probably do something as far as art, that's something he wanted to do I guess, so he tried to convince me that I have some ability in drawing and painting. He planned for me to go to France to a school and learn art there. But I was very sickly and very weak, and I was not very good at school. Not good at all. Also, I feel that I saw some handwriting on the wall in 1938, 1939, and I really was not interested in Latin and Greek. It came to a point where I almost flunked, and the professor just gave me a choice. Either, he was going to keep me back in class, or I should voluntarily resign from school.

So, <laughs> I voluntarily resigned from school. And at that moment, practically, a year later or half a year later, the occupation of our country started. So, I wouldn't have been able to continue anyway. So, through the influence of my father, I got a job as an electrician, or electrician's helper. It was one of my father's acquaintances, and I became an apprentice, and then a journeyman, and I went through the whole thing . . . I became an electrician. I wanted to

stay with the arts, and I wanted to go to foreign countries and study art, but it just wasn't possible.

Stan: What type of school did you go to?

Walter: In Czechoslovakia, the name of the school was a gymnasium, which was a liberal arts junior college, I would say. I didn't finish the gymnasium, because the gymnasium was eight different grades, and I only went up to the fifth, and at that time I had to leave, and half a year later the Germans came, anyway.

Stan: Was this a Jewish school?

Walter: No, it wasn't a Jewish school. It was a regular school. Part of it was subsidized by the state, and part of it my parents had to pay for. But it was a classical gymnasium [inaudible]. . . classical gymnasium [is different to] a *realschule*², as it was called . . . in a classical gymnasium you were tutored on languages, philosophy, writing, and arts . . . it was a liberal arts school.

Stan: How big was this school?

Walter: The school was fairly big, because it was in the main city of Ostrava. I would say about 700 students.

Stan: What percentage of the school was Jewish?

Walter: Well, the whole population in Ostrava was fairly big, so most of the middle-class people, Jewish middle-class people, went to that school. The Jewish middle class. If somebody didn't have the aptitude for middle school, for that particular *mittelschule*, they went into some sort of a, I would say, vocational school.

Stan: Were most of the students Jewish?

Walter: No, no, no, no, no. I would say about 15, 20 percent were Jewish.

Stan: What was Shabbat³ or Yom Tov like?

Walter: Yom Tov in our family was observed, but again, my father was sort of a renegade. He was a non-believer. He was a very ardent Zionist, but as far as . . . observing or *kashrut*,⁴ he

² *Realschule* is a type of secondary school in Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Estonia. It existed in other cities in Eastern and Western Europe.

³ *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.

⁴ *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

wasn't the one. It was my mother's family, my grandmother whom I adored—she was like a mother to me, to the end of her life—she was the one who enforced the Jewish customs. My grandfather died when I was very young. I hardly remember him, I must have been about four or five years old when he died. My grandmother from then on was part of our family, even though she kept her own apartment in the house that was next to ours, it was she that I came to first when I came back from school. And it was she who fed me noodle soup first, and then I had to go and see my mother.

Stan: What did your mother or grandmother do for Shabbat?

Walter: My grandmother usually would light the candles and she would bake the *challah*,⁵ and she would make the traditional meals. And she said the *Lecha Dodi*, you know. My mother picked up some of it. My father was not very much tuned in to that, but . . . he went along with everything. There was no [inaudible] in our house, but it wasn't that kosher . . .

Stan: Did you attend services on Shabbat?

Walter: No, we did not. No. We went to services on High Holidays.⁶ Of course, we both, my brother and I were bar mitzvah'd,⁷ which was very festive. We had a beautiful *shul*⁸ in our town, Vitkovice. And we were very close to our rabbi and his brother, who was a cantor. It was a nice community. And since all brothers on my mother's and father's side were in the same town, they were sort of very instrumental in what was happening in our town. They were all four brothers in the same town. All my mother's uncles. We were very close with those people. One of them had a daughter, and she married a man who had a store selling material, you know, clothing and buttons. Another one had a lot of real estate. Another brother had another store selling liquor.

So, they were all merchants, there were no professions on my mother's side of the family. Their children, the children of my grandfather's brother's side, they were all professionals. They were lawyers, they were doctors, they were architects, and so on and so forth. But they

sets of dishes, cookware, and serving ware are needed. Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law is called 'treif.'

⁵ Challah is special Jewish braided bread eaten on Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

⁶ The two High Holy Days are *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement).

⁷ Hebrew for 'son of commandment.' A 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.

⁸ *Shul* is a Yiddish word for synagogue that is derived from a German word meaning "school," and emphasizes the synagogue's role as a place of study.

themselves the old people, the old folk, were all merchants. As a matter of fact, my grandfather on my mother's side made the bricks out of which the house was built, that my grandmother, grandfather, and my mother lived. He made those bricks himself. It took him a few years, and he had a little establishment making bricks, but that was his side profession, so to say.

Stan: Did you have any Jewish and non-Jewish friends?

Walter: Over there? Yes, I had a lot of Jewish friends because of course we belonged to some organizations [inaudible], which were just unbelievably beautiful. As a matter of fact, I belonged to a *Maccabi*,⁹ which was very, very active at that time. And my father, even though he was a non-believer as far as ritual is concerned, he was a very strong Zionist. At that time all I heard was Herzl, Herzl, Herzl¹⁰ all the time. Since my father got his education in Vienna, and Herzl was really out of Vienna, he was very much impressed with Herzl. And my father organized a few outings for *Maccabi*, and . . . actually it was very sports-oriented, *Maccabi*. And my father was a big sportsman, and we went skiing as a group and he organized it, and we had gymnastics and he organized it, and we had all kinds of runs and he organized them. He was very much into that. So, I had a lot of friends of my persuasion. But I also had a lot of friends later on, when I went to that *mittelschule*, the gymnasium, that were not Jewish. And we used to go on walks and we used to climb mountains together, we went skiing together. It was a pretty good life. Czechoslovakia was a very nice country at that time, up until 1938, 1939.

Stan: Did you belong to any other organizations other than *Maccabi*?

Walter: *Maccabi Hatzair*,¹¹ which actually at that time was a Zionist organization. *Maccabi* was a sports organization, *Maccabi Hatzair* was Zionist. I belonged there, as a matter of fact, I went to some summer camps with them, into the Slovakian mountains, and so did my brother. And again, we participated in all kinds of festivities [inaudible], so on and so forth.

Stan: How many members did these organizations have?

Walter: There was quite a few, because there was quite a few members at that time in *Maccabee Hatzair* and in *Maccabi*. Because everybody belonged to *Maccabi*, everybody. There was hardly anybody that didn't want to join. There was sort of an undercurrent of anti-Semitism in our time, and we felt we had to stick together.

⁹ Athletic organization for Jewish youth

¹⁰ Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) was the father of modern political Zionism. In 1896 he published *The Jewish State*, in which he advocated the establishment of a Jewish state.

¹¹ The *Maccabi Hatzair* is a Zionist youth movement that operates worldwide.

Stan: Would you describe this undercurrent of anti-Semitism?

Walter: Well, it goes back to the Middle Ages, I guess. We had—Czechoslovakia was well-known for having a president, his name was Masaryk,¹² who was well-known for his liberal views and attitudes. And even at school we had to read one of his essays, and that was about the blood . . . what do you call it? The blood . . . something to do with the blood, that Jews were . . .

Stan: . . . Blood libel.

Walter: Libel, yeah. Blood libel. And he was defending the Jews. But there were some undercurrents, as far as that is concerned, from my non-Jewish friends. I had to explain to them that we do not use blood for Passover bread, that it's a fable, it's a made-up thing. But there was a lot of anti-Semitism amongst the [inaudible] (24:03) people. When you got to know the better-class people at school, I think there was less. But the [inaudible] people, who were mostly peasants—and in Ostrava it was a coal mining town, they were coal miners—they were very anti-Semitic. And that showed itself when the Germans walked into our town, because some of the so-called friends, that we thought were friends, turned completely against us. So, there was a lot of anti-Semitism.

Stan: Can you relate any personal experiences?

Walter: Yeah, the only personal experience, it was shortly before we all had to leave and after Hitler came into Czechoslovakia. And we had maids, okay, and some of those maids were of German origin, because we were in a region of Czechoslovakia which was very close to Germany. It was in the *Sudeten*¹³. So, we had German maids. And one morning they found a specific German newspaper lying on that nurse's bed, and she was gone, and that newspaper was the *Stürmer*.¹⁴ The *Stürmer* was a newspaper which was depicting or showing the Jewish race with long noses and money and the blood libel, you know . . . she just left it as a sign that she can no longer be with us and she had to leave. But . . . it was a bad scene, and she left and left that newspaper in our room. You know, it was . . . an undercurrent and very subtle at times.

¹² Tomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850—1937) was a Czech politician and sociologist. Masaryk was appointed head of the Provisional Czechoslovak government after World War I ended. He was reelected three times, serving as president from 1918 until health problems forced him to resign in 1935.

¹³ The *Sudetenland* was an area along the border of Bohemia and Moravia near the Sudeten Mountains. The *Sudetenland* had a predominately German population that was incorporated into the boundaries of Czechoslovakia after World War I. The area became a major source of contention between Germany and Czechoslovakia until the Munich Conference yielded it to Germany in 1938 as an attempt at appeasing the Germans.

¹⁴ *Der Stürmer* [German: The Striker] was a weekly German tabloid-format newspaper published by Julius Streicher from 1923 almost continuously through to the end of World War II. It was notoriously antisemitic.

My father was very capable in business, and he was helping my mother to get established in a certain small business. They were making, I don't know if you know what bast is. Bast is this certain fiber between the core of a tree and the outside of a tree. There's a certain amount of fiber there, and . . . my father actually used to import it from South Africa, and my mother had some women in town make, for bottles, a covering out of the fiber. They were selling it to wine manufacturers in France and in Germany. They even had customers in the United States at that time, in 1936, 1937. One day, my father got a card, or my mother got a postcard, from a small town in Germany. Those people were interested in getting these particular items from my mother, because they advertised in the paper. On the bottom of that—this was 1936 or 1937—on the bottom of that postcard inquiring about being able to buy some of these, it said “*Heil Hitler.*” It was a shock to us, and I have that postcard here still. And my father scribbled down in his handwriting, “negative.” In other words, he refused them, he didn't even answer that postcard.

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It was . . . sort of a forerunner of what's going to happen. Because that happened . . . I think that time was [inaudible] 0:11, I don't know if you remember [inaudible]. [Inaudible] was one of the outer regions in northern Germany which was taken over, which was independent, but it was taken over by Hitler in the middle 1930s. And out of that town [inaudible] we got that card, and it was sort of a forerunner of what was going to happen. And my father never believed that it could happen, you see, that's why we never moved. My uncle, my mother's brother, moved and he came to the States. He came to the States in 1937, 1938. And he said “Let's go. You guys better go. Something is going to happen.” My father said “It can't happen. All these people here are friends.” But it happened.

Stan: Can you describe other ways in which your life began to change with the coming of the Nazi movement?

Walter: Well, first of all, we were denied to go to school, okay, my brother, too. He finished at a particular gymnasium, a classical gymnasium. He was able to go through *matura*,¹⁵ what they call *matura*, he went through his eighth class. But he couldn't continue with his studies, he wanted to go to university, but he couldn't. Immediately after the Germans came, we had to give up our house that the company gave us and move back into our own home. Everything was taken away from us, including my father's job and . . . my brother left for England and I had to stay

¹⁵ Secondary school exit exam

back and had to work, forced labor¹⁶ building some dams around the river. And at that time, around 1937, 1938, 1939, I was sixteen, seventeen years old.

Stan: What about your parents?

Walter: My parents . . . my father couldn't work. He did get some subsidy from sort of a social . . . they didn't have Social Security, but there was some sort of a subsidy that he got. He was retired . . . from his job, at the age of . . . he was born in 1890, so in 1939 he was, what, 59. He was 49—no, 49. He was 49. So, he didn't do anything. He was able to take the money that he had in the bank and use it up. And we collected rent from our house. But he didn't do anything. My mother got very, very sick at the age of 49 and passed away about two years later after she got sick.

Stan: You said that you did forced labor?

Walter: Yeah, we did forced labor at the regulation . . . we were working on the river.

Stan: Were you supervised by the Nazis?

Walter: No, we were supervised by Czechoslovakia. We had to walk to it, we weren't able to take any public transportation, and it was quite far. And we had to walk, and we had to be there early, and it was very hard work. You know, shovel and pick, pick and shovel, and there was a narrow-gauge railroad there and we had to work on that and shovel all that sand and gravel into a big bucket.

Stan: How many were working on this project?

Walter: About 27 to 30 of us. And there was nobody there supervising us. Of course, we didn't get any pay. We didn't get any pay. But I'll never forget how some of those little cars which were holding the gravel had to be switched from one track to another and it was my job to make the switch from one rail to another. And unfortunately, I got caught, my hand got caught there, and there was nobody there and I think three or four nails came off my left hand. And I had to run, I don't know how many kilometers, I had to run, bleeding hard, into the next town, to get some medical assistance. There was very little that the people cared, they just took my nails off. They just snipped them off. There was no way to get into a hospital as a Jew.

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The Nazis subjected millions of people (both Jews and other victim groups) to forced, or slave labor, both inside and outside concentration camps, often under brutal conditions. Forced labor was often pointless and humiliating, and imposed without proper equipment, clothing, nourishment, or rest.

Stan: How old were you and the people you worked with at that time?

Walter: That was in 1940, so I was eighteen.

Stan: Were the others you were working with around the same age?

Walter: They were all young, about all the same age, yes.

Stan: Did your relationship change with your non-Jewish neighbors with the coming of the Nazis?

Walter: Of course, they didn't associate with us at all. Not at all. I haven't seen those people that I went to school with and we had fun with, all of a sudden, they just disappeared. My parents' friends also, on the street where we lived, they all disappeared. It was just non-existent.

Stan: Were your contacts then only with Jewish people?

Walter: They were only with Jewish people. All of a sudden, all our neighbors, we visited each other more often. And people walked instead of taking the train, because we couldn't take the train. We weren't permitted to take the train, so we walked into the main town. We walked . . . we had friends come into our town, and they walked. It was a much closer relationship between the Jews. Amongst the Jews.

Stan: Were the non-Jewish people at least friendly on the street to you?

Walter: Very. Very, you know, I would say it wasn't honest. It wasn't sincere. You know, there were already the rations and it was hard for us to get the same things that everybody else got, so we had to buy some of the stuff on the black market. Or go out of town and get it from peasants, and they didn't know us. But most of our close friends, even neighbors, or homeowners like we were, they just completely ignored us.

Stan: You said that you did not—that your father did not think anything could happen to you. But did you or your family consider making any plans as the war came closer?

Walter: Yes, as a matter of fact, my brother was the one who was supposed to have benefitted from it most, most of us. There was an organization at that time, I think it also originated in Vienna, of some Jews being moved into South America. I forgot now where. I think it was one of the islands. It wasn't Cuba. It was somewhere around Cuba. And there was a big organization that was started by Jews, by Viennese and Prague Jews. And they started to get money and my—I'll never forget—my brother . . . got all kinds of clothes for the tropics, you know like tropical helmets and boots and safari shirts and all that. And my parents had to lay out a certain amount

of money to get him out. And then the whole thing collapsed. And those people that collected the money disappeared. So, we don't know what happened.

So, my brother was stuck, and he made some plans to get out. But as I said, my parents didn't want to move, and they didn't want me to move. The only person that made a move was my brother. And he got a special permit from the Gestapo¹⁷ to move to England because he had an affidavit and a work permit from England where one of my father's cousins was living. So, my [brother] and a friend of his moved by foot and they moved from Czechoslovakia across the continent and tried to get to the English Channel. They were incarcerated about three times. Finally, they got into Cologne and the Jewish congregation got him out, and they transferred him safely into Belgium, and from Belgium they went to England. He was the only one that went to England from my close family.

Stan: Can you tell us what other orders were issued by the Nazis?

Walter: Well, the most important orders was that you couldn't work, okay, not permitted to work. And most of your assets were frozen. Later on, the house was taken away and there was a German . . . it was put under German supervision, and all the monies were collected by the Germans.

Stan: How did you obtain money for food and other supplies?

Walter: My father had money, okay. My father had money. And as I said, he was pensioned prior . . . when he was dismissed from his job, they gave him a certain amount of money, but nowhere near what we were used to. And he had money.

Stan: Were you in a ghetto?

Walter: Prior to a ghetto, I was transported in 1939 . . . there were 300 Jewish men taken out of my city, out of my town, and we were transported to Poland. It was right after the Polish-German war, which was very short. And we were transported into a strip between two rivers, between the River San¹⁸ and Bug¹⁹ at the eastern part of Poland. And we were supposed to be building a ghetto there, or a camp there. The name of the town was Nisko. N-I-S-K-O, on the

¹⁷ An abbreviation of *Geheime Staatspolizei*, which means "Secret State Police." It was established in 1934 and placed under Heinrich Himmler. With virtually unlimited powers, it was highly feared. The *Gestapo* acted to oppress and persecute Jews and other opponents of the Nazis, including rounding up Jews throughout Europe for deportation to extermination camps.

¹⁸ The San River flows through southeastern Poland and western Ukraine and is a tributary of the Vistula River.

¹⁹ The Bug River is a major European river that flows through eastern Poland, forming part of Poland's borders with Ukraine and Belarus.

San. On the River San. And we were sort of herded into a big open space, all 300 men, male members of Jewish families only. I was with my father and all the members of my family, my father's family, my mother's family, and all of a sudden, my father disappeared, and I didn't know what happened to him. He had all my luggage, all my clothes, and I was there alone. And at that time, I was seventeen, it was 1939. I ended up going by train, not knowing where my father was, into this town Nisko. There was nothing in it. There was nothing in the town, there was just a little village, and we had to start building barracks. We had to fell trees, and they gave us equipment to saw the wood and make boards out of the trees.

Later on, we were joined by the same type of group from Vienna. So, there were Viennese Jews and the Jews from our town, building this camp. I later found out that my father was held back because he was wounded during World War I . . . he had a projectile in his body. And he was able to prove to them that he was fighting on the side of the Kaiser, of the Austrian king in that time, in 1914-1918. So, they held him back because of that, and he was a lieutenant in the Austrian army, and also because my mother was sick, they held him back. So, there I was all by myself, and we didn't know what was going to happen there. Fortunately, there was no way to build anything there, on this tributary between those two rivers, because it was all sand. And it poured continuously. And it was just like one big puddle. The whole strip, it was maybe 200 kilometers long, but very narrow. It was maybe only about five miles wide between those two rivers. But it was very long, it went from north to south. So, they decided they're not going to build that camp.

And in the meantime, we tried to escape, because on the other side of the River Bug, there was Russia. And there was no-man's-land, between those two rivers. They didn't belong to anybody. So, a lot of us tried to escape and go over to the Russian side. The closest town to where we were was Lvov²⁰, okay. So, we came into Lvov one morning. And we were stopped by the Russians and they asked us two things: do we want to stay in Russia, and do we have a membership, a Communist party membership card. And we said no, so we were pushed back, so we had to go back into the same camp again. We had very close German supervision in that camp where we were, but they were not the black-clothed Gestapo. It was a different type of . . .

²⁰ Lvov 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 'Lviv' and is a city in western Ukraine.

it was like civil police. It wasn't the black Gestapo. So, they didn't even know we were gone for three days. So, we came back, and all of a sudden, we heard that we had been transported back. We couldn't believe that after six months we were being transported back. We were given food, we were put on a train, and we came back into our town. And it was amazing. My mother was still alive, and she was in remission at that time. I'll never forget how when I came back, she was sitting in the garden, she looked wonderful. My father was happy to see me. And here I was, back. It was 1940.

Stan: How long did you remain?

Walter: 'Till 1941. My mother passed away between the time I came back and 1941. And then in 1941 we were all shipped to Theresienstadt,²¹ all of us. The whole community, okay.

Stan: Where was Theresienstadt?

Walter: Theresienstadt was a garrison town between Prague and the . . . northwestern part of Czechoslovakia. It was a garrison town which was started sometime during Maria Theresia's times, and that's why it was called Theresienstadt. It was called after her, and transport after transport was coming into Theresienstadt. I don't know. We weren't the first ones to come there.

Stan: This was in 1941?

Walter: I came there in 1941, yes.

Stan: And your father?

²¹ The Theresienstadt (Terezín) "camp-ghetto" near Prague in the present day Czech Republic was opened in late 1941 and existed until May 1945. In the course of its existence, approximately 140,000 Jews from Germany, Austria, and about one third of the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia were sent to Theresienstadt.

Nearly 90,000 Jews were deported from Theresienstadt to other ghettos, concentration camps, and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. Over 60,000 of those were Jews from Bohemia and Moravia. Fewer than 3,100 of the Bohemian and Moravian Jews who were deported from Theresienstadt are known to have survived.

German propaganda often portrayed Theresienstadt as a "model ghetto" to mislead or conceal the reality of its role as a collection center for deportations to ghettos and killing centers in occupied eastern Europe. The publicly stated purpose for the deportation of the Jews from Germany was their "resettlement to the east," where they would be compelled to perform forced labor. Since it seemed implausible that elderly Jews could be used for forced labor, the Germans cynically described Theresienstadt as a "spa town" where elderly German Jews could "retire" in safety. The deception likewise served to calm the public when other special categories of Czech Jews—intellectuals, artists, writers, doctors, and scientists—were deported.

In May 1945, the total number of prisoners in Theresienstadt exceeded 30,000. The International Red Cross took over the camp-ghetto's administration on May 2, 1945. The SS fled Theresienstadt on May 5 and 6. Scattered German military and SS units continued to fight Soviet forces in the vicinity until Soviet troops liberated Prague and entered the camp on May 9. They assumed responsibility for its prisoners the next day.

Walter: My father came with me, of course. And all my family. My grandmother was still alive, on my father's side. She came with me. I only saw her for a day. My aunt on my father's side came with me. I only saw her for a day. But we stayed in Theresienstadt—my father and I stayed in Theresienstadt until 1944. In 1944 . . . in the meantime, in the three years, the four years in Theresienstadt, a lot of things happened, you know.

Stan: How were you transported to Theresienstadt?

Walter: By train.

Stan: Can you describe the conditions on that train?

Walter: The train was a normal passenger train. We . . . the windows were blacked out, we didn't know where we were. We just knew that the train was moving, but we didn't know where we were going, okay.

Stan: What possessions were you allowed to take with you?

Walter: We were . . . able to take a certain amount of kilos with us, a certain amount of pounds. So, we all had all kinds of . . . you know, everything that we could carry possibly . . . as a matter of fact, we had some friends who made some special food, which was supposed to be very nutritious out of flour, and sugar, and butter. We made a paste out of it and put it into silk stockings and made sort of a long sausage tie, and in it we put some jewelry, you know, or things like that, and we were able to get it through. But we did get as much through as possible. Before we left the house though, we buried all our jewelry and we . . . in our house and the upper floor before you got into the attic, you opened up the attic and just stuffed everything into it that we possibly could, because we had hoped that we'd come back.

Stan: Did you ever recover the jewelry?

Walter: Yes, I had to . . . after the war when I came back all by myself, I was digging the garden for maybe two weeks 'till I found everything. I found everything. The neighbors were looking like, you know, I'm nuts.

Stan: What was the value of the jewelry you found?

Walter: Well, I had [inaudible] my father's wedding band, my mother's wedding band, some jewelry that my wife still has now. You know, opera necklaces and . . . my father had fancy . . . those buttons for shirts, some good silk scarves. My mother's silver . . . brush, and all the mirrors and stuff like that. As a matter of fact, the stuff that he stuffed in between the layers of boards in

the attic was mostly linen, toweling, and stuff like that, he covered it all. And I had some shirts made out of the linen before I came to the States in 1946.

Stan: Did you take postcards with you that you referred to earlier when you were sent to the ghetto?

Walter: The postcards? No, they were all hidden in the attic. You know, all that was hidden in the attic.

Stan: Was someone else living in the house?

Walter: In the house? Fortunately, we had a maid at that time . . . at that time, the maid that we had when I was very little was able to take our apartment, and she was very helpful to us when I came back. Of course, she didn't want to give anything up that she found in the apartment, but that's another story. Like the piano and stuff like that . . . there was no way to get anything back.

Stan: Can you describe life in the ghetto?

Walter: In the ghetto, as youngsters we, you know, all [inaudible] . . . only the able survived really. My grandmother perished immediately, she just couldn't cope with it. There were a lot of old people that couldn't cope with it.

Stan: When you saw could not cope with . . .

Walter: . . . Well, they were taken advantage of. The morality of all the rest of the people who were capable—able, able-bodied—was such that they took advantage of the weak. Which was very unfortunate. We were given our bread, for instance. None of the old people were really able to keep it for too long, before it was stolen by some younger people. It was unfortunate, but that's what happened. And therefore, they weren't able to . . . they couldn't cope with it. And they were put into special housing that was inadequate.

Stan: They were separated from you?

Walter: Of course, of course. There was what's called a **zeichenheim**?(22:38) which was, I don't know, how do you call it, **zeiche**? . . . somebody who's already on the verge of, you know, just . . . losing life.

Stan: Did they receive any medical attention?

Walter: Very little, very little. There were no dentists, of course, you know. There were dispensaries where they gave you just very little.

Stan: Were the doctors Jewish or not Jewish?

Walter: All the doctors were Jewish. The cultural life in that particular ghetto was I think . . . well-organized.²² And some of it was . . . I think most of it was . . . not legal. Like, we took Hebrew from some very well-known professors, but it was not legal. We had meetings on Zionism, it was not legal. We sang Israeli songs, at that time Jewish songs . . . it was all, you know, illegal. The only thing that . . . the ghetto itself was governed, was self-governed, all the higher-ups were all Jewish.²³ And they were, I think, three main countries that were represented in this particular ghetto, Theresienstadt. It was Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Austria, and they all had their main men in charge, it was like a triumvirate.

And there were, of course, fights between all those factions because the German Jews always felt more German than Jewish, and the Czech Jews were very assimilated, a lot of them, okay. Only the Viennese Jews were really very strong in their beliefs, and very fine Jewish-thinking people. But amongst ourselves, there were many, many factions. And it was not pleasant at times. We felt that the German Jews—that the German head of the German section, was sort of collaborating too much with the Germans, with the Nazis, with the Gestapo. Later on, after the war, as a matter of fact, one of them, **Mommelstein?**, his name was **Mommelstein?**, he was persecuted and I think he was shot or he was hanged because of it. Because he was a collaborator.

Stan: What type of business was carried on in the ghetto?

²² Despite the terrible living conditions and the constant threat of deportation, Theresienstadt had a highly developed cultural life. Outstanding Jewish artists, mainly from Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany, created drawings and paintings, some of them clandestine depictions of the ghetto's harsh reality. Writers, professors, musicians, and actors gave lectures, concerts, and theater performances. The ghetto maintained a lending library of 60,000 volumes.

Because of overcrowding and the separation of men and women into different barracks, most families in Theresienstadt did not live together. In order to make conditions better for the fifteen thousand children who passed through Theresienstadt, the Jewish leadership established special homes in public buildings. Zionist youth movements, including Youth Aliyah, actively participated in creating a unique atmosphere within the homes that focused on preparing the children for emigration to Palestine. Although forbidden to do so, the children attended school, painted pictures, wrote poetry, and otherwise tried to maintain a vestige of normalcy.

²³ Theresienstadt was administered by the SS but guarded by Czech gendarmes and run internally by the prisoners. The Jews in Theresienstadt lived under a Jewish administration called the Council of Elders. The German authorities charged the Council with implementing orders and making selections for the deportations, but otherwise allowed it to act independently as a quasi-municipal authority. The Council organized municipal services, such as housing, electricity and water, sewage and sanitation, policing, and religious, judicial, and postal services. The council organized personnel for labor detachments and organized educational activities, cultural events, and religious celebrations.

Walter: In the ghetto we had all kinds of businesses that were making money for the ghetto. One of them was making uniforms for the Germans. Another one was making . . . agricultural, okay, we had fields, we had grain, we had planting. And vegetables, gardens, and so on. Another one was mica, mica was being mined not far from there. There were certain [inaudible] there . . . splitting mica and sending it out to German industrial towns for insulation.

Stan: What is mica?

Walter: Mica is a geological . . . it's like an insulator, but it's mined. If you look into . . . into an electrical appliance, the insulation between the element and say the bottom of an iron, in an iron . . . between the element and the bottom of the iron which is made out of steel, polished steel, there's a layer of mica. So, it insulates the element from the other conductor. See, that's mica.

Stan: What other type of education was going on in the ghetto other than . . .

Walter: . . . In the ghetto, we had a very good cultural life which was . . . sort of subsidized by the Germans. But mainly, it was led by . . . well-known Jewish artists and very well-known Jewish actors and singers.

Stan: What about schooling?

Walter: Schooling was not permitted. It's why we had to meet in basements and attics and so on and so forth.

Stan: Did you receive any instructions other than Hebrew lessons?

Walter: No, that was voluntary on our part. <End VTS_01_2.VOB> <Begin VTS_01_3.VOB> At that time, I was already an electrician, and I was working as an electrician in that camp, in that ghetto. And small children . . . they had very little. Very little. Almost none. Of course, there were not too many small children there.

Stan: What did the small children do?

Walter: They were in separate buildings, and there were sort of playschools. But again, they didn't get enough care, and there was a lot of sickness there. The very young and the very old suffered greatly.

Stan: Were there a lot of deaths among the young?

Walter: Lot of death, lot of death. And a lot of other . . . pregnant women suffered, they had to lose their babies forcefully.

Stan: Did you personally and often see people die?

Walter: Who, me? In that particular ghetto? There was one part of the ghetto which was not accessible to us. There were some hangings there. And those hangings were at the time when Lidice happened. You probably know that someone was assassinated in Czechoslovakia, a big German . . . official.²⁴ And they found that the assassin was hiding in a church in Prague, and then they burned the town and chased everybody out of the town, Lidice. They burned it, and as a reprisal they hung a few Jews in Theresienstadt. They also hung some people there—or hanged some people there who tried to escape. Everybody that tried to escape out of the ghetto. We were surrounded by moats and by . . . falling bridges . . .

Stan: Drawbridges.

Walter: Drawbridges. [Inaudible] tried to escape, because sometimes we had to go out, to get out of the ghetto to go on a job. Not as much as an electrician, but as a . . . in the agricultural part of the ghetto. Then they were hung or shot, those people . . .

Stan: Did anyone escape successfully?

Walter: Yes, a couple people did escape successfully. And they had Czech names and they had a lot of Czech friends and they were able to escape. Very few people, though. Because there was a lot of informing going on on the outside of Theresienstadt. Everybody became an informer immediately . . . somebody escape, it didn't take long, about a day and they were back, or you know, they were shot.

Stan: How were people informing on others?

Walter: Well, the Czechs were . . . the Czechs were not very . . . the Czechs are anti-Semitic as it is, as a rule. And, you know, it was a certain amount of collaboration on the Czech part, with the Germans.

Stan: Did they receive any rewards for informing . . .

Walter: . . . No, I don't know about that. But they felt that it was a particular duty at that time.

Stan: Were there rabbis in the ghetto?

²⁴ Reinhard Heydrich (1904-1942) was the *Reichsprotektor* of Bohemia and Moravia (the part of southern ex-Czechoslovakia that had been annexed to the Reich). He was brutal and ruthless in his suppression of dissent and was deeply hated. He was attacked in Prague on May 27, 1942 by a team of British-trained soldiers, who jumped him as his car turned a corner on the way to his office. He died from his injuries about one week later. Intelligence falsely linked the town of Lidice (then in the Protectorate, now the Czech Republic) to the assassination. On orders directly from Heinrich Himmler, the village was completely destroyed on June 10, 1942. All 192 men over 16 years of age from the village were murdered on the spot and the rest of the population were sent to German concentration camps where many women and nearly all the children were killed.

Walter: Yes, we had some rabbis in our ghetto and they were very influential.

Stan: Were they able to carry on . . .

Walter: . . . Some of them did [inaudible]. As a matter of fact, one of them, a very well-known rabbi, his name was [inaudible], Rabbi Beck . . . he was very influential. He was given a special type of accommodation. He had his own house and he was very influential. He was like the elder, one of the elders of the community. And I've seen our rabbi from our town perish, they took him out of our ghetto, maybe after being there for two days, and shipped him to Auschwitz. And I'll never forget how he was standing there before being transported and praying. It was very, very moving.

Stan: How did you know he was being sent to Auschwitz?

Walter: Well, we had communication with Auschwitz. As a young Zionist group, we had some people in Auschwitz who were able to get us information of what's happening. On postcards or by letters or by people that came, because there was a constant movement of people in and out of the ghetto. Transports were going out and transports were coming in and, you know . . . the Zionists had a lot to do with it, the type of information . . . they knew everything that was happening.

Stan: You knew there were mass killings?

Walter: Yes, I knew exactly, because the leader of our group was in Auschwitz before I came there, and he was able to get us the information that says, when you come in, you're going to be coming in on the railroad, you're going to be going left and right. Make sure that you're okay, make sure that you look up and feel strong, that you feel upright, and so on. You're going to see some smoke coming out of chimneys, you're going to see some flames coming up . . . this is what's happening. So, when we came, we knew . . .

Stan: Was Rabbi Beck able to conduct services in the ghetto?

Walter: No, Rabbi Beck was a spiritual leader, but he was not . . . he was more on the . . . I would say he was more on the, not on the religious end of . . . leading spiritually. He was giving us direction on how to behave. His philosophy on how we should behave in that particular ghetto was the one that he gave us, and we looked up to him because he was revered, even by the Germans he was, you know, well-liked by everybody.

Stan: How long were you in the ghetto?

Walter: I was in the ghetto from 1941 to fall of 1944²⁵.

Stan: Where did you go after the ghetto?

Walter: 1944, I went to Auschwitz, because I wanted to leave with my father. He was forced to go, and I volunteered to go with him.

Stan: How did you go to Auschwitz?

Walter: In the cattle train, in the cattle train. It was a very bad trip. I don't know how many people in a train. Men and women. I forgot now how long it took us, but we came into Auschwitz . . . actually it was Birkenau, Auschwitz-Birkenau²⁶. And we unloaded at the railroad siding. As I mentioned before, we were warned about what's going to happen, and this is what happened. Men in uniform directing us, going left and right, but shortly before that, I told my father to look erect, look healthy. And he was 54 at that time. And he made it, he made it through. He went with me to the right side.

Stan: How old were you at that time?

Walter: In 1944 . . . I was 22.

Stan: Would you describe the condition on the train?

Walter: I hardly remember, but there were a lot of bodies squeezed into the train, and, you know, it wasn't . . . pleasant. I don't remember how long we were in the train, it was complete darkness and it was just one body on top of another body.²⁷

Stan: Did anybody die on the train?

Walter: Not in my section, that I knew. I don't remember anybody dying in my section.

²⁵ To alleviate overcrowding, large transports were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944.

²⁶ Auschwitz-Birkenau was a network of camps built and operated by Germany just outside the Polish town of Oswiecim (renamed 'Auschwitz' by the Germans) in Polish areas annexed by Germany 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.

²⁷

Rail traffic on most railway lines in German-occupied Europe during World War II was extremely dense and trains with prisoners took the lowest priority. A trip that might have been made in a few hours during normal conditions would often take days. Conditions on the train were brutal. The Jews were so tightly packed into windowless freight cars it was difficult to breathe. Without food, water, and proper sanitation measures, it was a miserable and traumatic experience. Many transports included people who already experienced pogroms, ghettos, and other stressful and violent situations. The process of loading the trains was often very chaotic and violent as well. Already weakened from their experiences, many passengers—especially any that might have been very young, old or sick—died during their journeys.

Stan: What happened after the selection?

Walter: After the selection we went into a room where we stood completely shaved, and Lysol or some other type of . . . disinfectant was put on all our parts that were shaved, and it was not pleasant. All our belongings were left behind, and we were given . . . uniforms. Striped uniforms.

Stan: Who did the shaving?

Walter: Some inmates, some inmates . . . people whose job that was. And my father was still with me.

Stan: What happened after you were given uniforms?

Walter: After we were herded into barracks. The barracks were . . . just plain barracks, bunks all along. In the middle there was a rise that went through the whole length of the barracks, and there was constantly somebody marching on it, some Gestapo man marching on it. Back and forth, the full length of the barracks. It was like a little podium through the middle of it. There was constant supervision, going back and forth in those barracks.

Stan: Who did the selection?

Walter: It was a man in uniform, I don't know the name of it, it could've been Eichmann,²⁸ or . . . I don't know who it was.

Stan: You don't know what a rank this person had?

Walter: No, no, not really. I was just glad that I was on the right side . . . I was happy my father was with me.

Stan: Who was sent to the left side?

Walter: Mostly women and very small children and old people. People that were able to work, or that they saw could be of some use, they went on the . . . good side.

Stan: What happened after you were in the barracks?

Walter: After we were in the barracks, I was there about four days. And very little, extremely little food, almost none. Just bread and some soup, turnip soup. And they were organizing groups of people to be sent out into industrial sections of Germany. And my father was selected . . . separately from me, he was separated from me. I was in a group of people, a different group of

²⁸ Adolf Eichmann was a senior SS officer

people. We were sent to a small concentration camp near Leipzig²⁹, the name was Taucha. And it was under the jurisdiction of another big concentration camp.

Stan: So, many days did you spend in Auschwitz?

Walter: In Auschwitz I was about four, five days. My father was about the same amount of time. But he was shipped to Bergen-Belsen.³⁰

Stan: What type of bathroom facilities, or restroom facilities . . .

Walter: We had latrines, we had latrines. It was cold at that time, it was after fall, it was late fall 1944. It was an impossible sight. The latrines were already frozen. And there were just holes that you had to use as a bathroom. Because of the freezing, there were just mounds of, you know, people's defecation. They were just building up. And we sometimes had that particular detail to bring it down with a crowbar. We were very closely supervised even there, there was always somebody with us, even to go to the bathroom.

Stan: Was there any heat in the barracks?

Walter: There was no heat, no.

Stan: What did you use for warmth?

Walter: Our own bodies, you know, we slept next to each other . . . we faced each other from the back and just held each other, that was how we slept.

Stan: Were there any mattresses?

Walter: No mattresses.

Stan: What did you sleep on?

Walter: We had straw, mostly straw.

Stan: Did you have any blankets?

Walter: No blankets. We had jackets. Our underwear was made out of **taliesin? (13:50)**, our underwear. It was awful. Our feet were wrapped in rags, there were no shoes.

²⁹ Leipzig is a city in eastern Germany.

³⁰ Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp near Hanover in northwest Germany, located between the villages of Bergen and Belsen. It was established in 1935 as a prison camp for political prisoners, criminals, Communists, "asocials" etc. from the area. In 1943 it began to serve as a transit camp for Jewish prisoners who were initially excluded from deportation. They were to be held in exchange for Germans interned in western countries. Toward the end of the war, Bergen-Belsen became a dumping place for Jews marched out of camps in the east. There was no housing for them, no medical care, no food, and no water. Ultimately there were about 41,000 prisoners in the camps and the mortality rate was extreme.

Stan: Did any people die in the barrack?

Walter: A lot of people died in the barrack . . .

Stan: . . . Did you see people die? . . .

Walter: . . . They took them out of there . . . as a matter of fact, it was our detail. In that particular camp, to carry the dead out.

Stan: Where did you take them?

Walter: We had them on a . . . two-wheeled wagon, and we were issued gloves . . . And we had to throw them on the wagon, and just wheel them to a certain spot where they were picked up. I don't know where they went from there. But we had to pick up the [inaudible] bodies, that was my detail.

Stan: Is this what you did the four days that you were in Auschwitz?

Walter: Yes . . . and then we left to the camp in Taucha, and we were assigned to a detail which was working in a munition factory, in Taucha. They were making bazookas . . . bazooka [inaudible] . . . for the Germans. And I was the electrician in the factory, amongst others, and I was under the jurisdiction of a civilian German electrician.

Stan: Was this factory in a camp or in a ghetto?

Walter: It was in the town, and we were marched at four in the morning into the factory out of the ghetto, out of the camp, the concentration camp.

Stan: You lived in a concentration camp?

Walter: A concentration camp. Completely, with electrified wires and all that. You know, with turrets around it, and . . . watch towers.

Stan: In the camp, did people share things?

Walter: In the camp people shared things . . . when we were washing after we came back from the factory, we were watching the sky, and we saw these planes coming into life thinking [inaudible] . . . flames. Many times, . . . I was there from late fall 'till April thirteenth or fifteenth, 1945.

Stan: In the camp did people ever share food?

Walter: Yes, we had a certain group of young men who shared food. Again, there was a lot of collaboration, so people collaborated with the Germans. They were given special privileges. The . . . Jewish head of the electricians, he was able to get his own quarters. And they were in the

electrical plant itself, they were making their own electricity. And he was completely enclosed by a very high wire fence

Stan: How did the people feel about those Jews who collaborated with Germans?

Walter: Well, I won't tell you. He was given provisions out of the German kitchens and he was really . . . he was a *kapo*.³¹ And he wasn't very well-liked. One night, he was pushed by some of the inmates against the fence, and he actually burned against the fence.

Stan: He was electrocuted?

Walter: Yeah. They saved him . . . I don't know what kind of degree burns he had, but he was completely embalmed. And they saved him . . . we were there for six, seven months. And he was able to . . . walk again, but he was so despised that, and I was a witness to that, that one day they caught him, and they wrestled with him to put him down on the ground—some inmates—and they stepped on him with their feet, and they cracked his skull. That's how much they despised this man, because he was a collaborator.

Stan: Did they kill him?

Walter: Yes.

Stan: Were there any reprisals?

Walter: No reprisals. The Germans, you know, it was like an additional bonus to them . . . we were there until April thirteenth, fourteenth, or fifteenth, I don't remember now which exactly, which date it was exactly. And on that day, they took us all into a square, and they counted us all and they told us with a smiling face that Roosevelt³² died, 1945. April.

Stan: Who was this?

Walter: Roosevelt died, Roosevelt died. So, from now on everything would be fine. And they took us all out of the camp and we went on a march, from April fifteenth we were marching back

³¹

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.

³² Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) was the 32nd President of the United States and a central figure in world events during the mid-twentieth century, leading the United States through a time of worldwide economic crisis and war. Popularly known as 'FDR,' he collapsed and died in his home in Warm Springs, Georgia just a few months before the end of the war.

and forth. We went west, the British were coming. We went north, the Russians were coming. We went east, the Russians were coming. We went south, the French were coming. We didn't know, they didn't know where to take us. So, from almost Leipzig, which was almost in the middle of Germany, we went back and forth, back and forth, until we got in a little neighborhood of Dresden in Germany. Dead west of Czechoslovakia. That was already the beginning of May. I saw many people die on that march.

As a matter of fact, a distant cousin of my mother's, who I was very close with, and he was in my camp . . . I was with him all the time, and he was an older man . . . I mean, I was only . . . 1944, 1945 . . . I was 23. But he must have been 45, and that was old at that time. He didn't make it. He fell behind, and I tried to help him, and they came after me with shotguns and with German Shepherds and told me to go ahead. And I had to leave him in the gutter. Shortly after I left him, I heard shots. They killed him. While we went on. And . . . I mean, there were bombings, there were low-flying planes going over us and we had to disperse to both sides of the road and go into the gutter along the road. We were being shot at by the British and the Americans, they didn't know who we were. We were on a death march.

Stan: In the munition factory was there ever any instances of sabotage . . .

Walter: No, no. We were very closely supervised. And I was not in the production department of the munition factory. As I said, I was an electrician working with a German.

Stan: How long was your work day?

Walter: It was about 12 hours. Twelve-hour work day. So, we came there at six, we left at about four.

Stan: What were you given to eat in the facility?

Walter: We took our food with us. We were given food in canisters. Soup, mostly. Soup and bread.

Stan: What type of soup?

Walter: Made out of beets, or, you know, something that [inaudible].

Stan: Were you ever given meat?

Walter: Never. Never had any meat, never. No milk, no meat, no eggs . . .

Stan: . . . butter?

Walter: No. Always was soup and bread. That was the staple of food. That's why we all had, you know, blown up. We were all blown up by the time we came . . . after the war. We all had big stomachs. No nutrition.

Stan: Was there ever any humor or laughter or joking at all, during this time?

Walter: During that time, we lived in hope. We really lived in hope. We knew it was going to be ended someday. We didn't know we were going to survive it, but somebody's going to survive it, we felt . . . some of us. And some of us really didn't survive. It was awful, what happened at the end. We slept on soccer fields and we slept on the grounds, on roads, and in fields and so on. We sometimes had to just get off the main road and go into fields and dig up some sort of a root and eat it. We were able to manage, to keep our stomachs full. Radishes, for instance. We used to dig up radishes with our bare hands and eat them.

Stan: Was there ever any . . .

Walter: . . . Potatoes, we used to cook them like they now have pressure cookers. We came up with a new way of cooking potatoes. We dug a hole, put the potatoes in there, were able to get some matches or make a fire, and cover the whole thing with . . . soil again. And there was just steam coming out and the potatoes were done. Almost no water. That's how we cooked potatoes, on the way, you know, as we stopped for the night or something.

Stan: Was there ever any time of laughter or humor at all . . .

Walter: No, not then. It was very strenuous at that time . . . very stressing.

Stan: How many people were on this march?

Walter: On this march we had about 375 people, 400 people, and when we ended the march, we had 70 people. When we ended the march, it was the first week in May, and I'll never forget the day because it was my birthday, May fourth. And we woke up, and we covered ourselves with twigs from evergreens, and when we woke up that morning—it was high up in the mountains—those branches, those of the evergreens, were full of snow. And we didn't feel the cold. We were just huddled together. So, we got up and we marched another one day or two days. And we came to a soccer field, and we didn't know where they were taking us, we didn't know where we were. And we woke up early in the morning, a friend and I, and we saw there were no guards. All the guards were gone. So, I said to my friend, forget it, let's get out of here. So, the two of us walked out of the particular area where everybody slept. There were 70, 75 people sleeping there.

Stan: How many guards were there watching the group . . .

Walter: There was a bunch of guards there. And on that particular day they already started to tear off their insignias, and their lapels, and their rank things. They already knew what was going to happen. So, when we got out, we left, it was just starting to . . . the day just started to break. And we came into a village and the village was very quiet. And we knocked on the farmers' door, and he saw us in those striped uniforms and he closed the door immediately. And we said, "Please let us in."

Stan: What country were you now in?

Walter: Still in Germany, just on the border of Czechoslovakia and Germany. And he let us in and said, "Look, I know what you are. I don't want you to be around. Go into the attic, sleep as long as you want, but you've got to get out of here as soon as you get up." So, we went up in the attic and about an hour later, he knocked on the door of the attic and said, "You've got to go, you've got to leave. We saw . . . a group of SS people marching by here and we don't want to be in trouble." So, we left, as fools, we went back to the soccer field that we left. And we saw every single man dead on the soccer field. What had happened, that group of SS men, as they walked past the soccer field just took the machine gun and mowed everybody down. Later on, I met the guy who escaped, and he was running, and as he was running, a bullet hit him through his mouth. He lost all his teeth and the bullet came out through his cheek. But everybody else
<End VTS_01_3.VOB> <Begin VTS_01_4.VOB> there on that field was dead. So, we went back into the village, okay. It was like eight 'o clock in the morning then.

Stan: Who were you with?

Walter: I was with a friend of mine that I knew from my hometown. He's now in Israel. And . . .

Stan: . . . What is his name?

Walter: Arthur Goldstein.

Stan: How old . . .

Walter: . . . He was a little older, he was a teacher already at that time. He was maybe three or four years older than I was.

Stan: And how old were you at this point?

Walter: In 1945 I was 23. Okay, so . . . we went back into the village and we went back . . . close to the farm that we went to. And we heard some moaning. So, we looked around behind the

building and there was a [inaudible] truck out behind the building, German truck. And in the truck, we found a German soldier wounded. And he pointed to his gun all the time, pointed to his gun. He was bleeding, he was really in bad shape. So, we knew what he wanted. He wanted his gun, he wanted to shoot himself. So, we gave him his gun and we left the truck and we went behind the truck and in a few minutes, we heard a shot. He shot himself. So, we went into the truck and just took everything off that he had. Everything—socks, pants, shirt, cigarettes, chocolate, a hat, one of those . . . knit hat, like a ski hat.

Stan: What about his gun?

Walter: No, no gun. We didn't want any gun. I don't know why, but we just didn't take the gun. His shoes, we took everything, and we left. And then, we walked out on the road and it was a dirt road, and all of a sudden there was a lot of dust coming out on the road. And out of the dust, the first Russian tank came. And there was a Russian soldier sitting on top of the tank . . . in front of the tank, with a bazooka in his hand, and from the bazooka was hanging a red flag. That's how they came into this village, and they were our liberators. It was maybe May seventh or so, 1984—1945. And they came . . . in big droves and they . . .

Stan: You're talking about the Russians?

Walter: The Russians. And they came, and they occupied the town, the little village, and they talked to us. First to us that they did wrong was they gave us the wrong food, and we were not used to eating food. They opened up cans of lard and pork and whatnot, and we started eating with our hands. And there was some cattle laying in the street that was dead, so they took knives and just ripped it apart, and flies were sitting on it. Needless to say, we all got sick. All the other, you know, prisoners of war turned up and all the people from other concentration camps turned up. And we were given a house with Ukrainian prisoners of war, and in that house, there was just two of us, Goldstein and I, and two prisoners of war from the Ukraine. They were the biggest anti-Semites I've ever seen. And we knew that we had to just leave. I couldn't stand it there. And we knew that they, the Ukrainians, took some bicycles away from some Germans in town.

So, we wrote . . . the Ukrainians a letter in Czech and in Russian, a little. And we took the bikes down from the attic and walked down, it was very steep steps coming down from the attic, and we both went on the bikes and my friend Goldstein couldn't ride a bike. Never rode a bike in his life. Not only that but he also lost his glasses, he couldn't see a thing. I gave him a push and we went down the hill and we started bicycling. We knew in which direction Czechoslovakia

was. So, we went through mountains and mountains, valleys . . . we were stopped by a Russian soldier, a big soldier, big guy. And he told us not to travel in the dark, because it was really early in the morning. He kept us there 'till daybreak. And after daybreak we just kept on going on the bikes until we hit the first railroad tracks, that's where we waited.

And then everybody came out of the woods and from the mountains and they all started to congregate around railroad tracks. And when the first train came going east, we loaded up our bikes and we went to Prague, which was like a three-hour trip on the train. In Prague, I got very, very sick. I couldn't even make it. My friend Goldstein had some acquaintances in Prague and he told us we should go to the villa and that they would give us shelter. So, we went there but I could hardly make it . . . I was very sick from that food the Russians gave us. And we had to leave the bikes at the railroad station and we just walked up that house with his friends. And they gave us a bath and they welcomed us and so forth. Next day when I went back to get the bikes, there was only one there and we started having trouble between friends, whose bike did they steal, was it mine or yours.

So anyway . . . we went to a Jewish community center in Prague and they gave us some quarters and some food stamps, and we were able to get some good food into us. They have us a house which was occupied by nothing else but refugees, and we were able to stay. Until the Russians came, and they practically took our bags from under us. And everything that they confiscated that time, the first week after liberation . . . there were trucks going east, and everything was carried back into Russia. So, I said to myself, why do I have to sleep on the floor again? Let me go to my home town. It was like 350 kilometers east. Ostrava. So, I went back to Ostrava and my friend came with me. Goldstein.

Stan: How did you get there?

Walter: By train, but it took us a long time, because all the bridges were blown up, and we had to sometimes get ferried over the rivers to get another train on the other side of the river. So, it took us quite a bit, quite a long time, to go 350 kilometers.

Stan: Was the countryside bombed and devastated?

Walter: Everything, yes. Yes. And there was a [inaudible] revolution in Prague before we came there, because there was a general—his name was Vlasov—and he was up to [inaudible], he was a collaborator. He was a Ukrainian, he was a collaborate with the Germans. And then when he saw that the tide was turning, he all of a sudden started to work with the Czechs. But

they hung him anyway, they didn't trust him. So, there was a lot of bombing going on in Prague. A lot of . . . but I came into my hometown, and I got very, very sick. I got typhoid fever. I was full of lice, and I was undernourished. I was blown up from all those potatoes and bread, they didn't feed me the right food. I was just a mess. And there were no hospitals. They had to . . . they made a hospital out of a school. And I was in it for like, four weeks. And that's how we were liberated.

Stan: What about your family when you returned home?

Walter: When I came back and I first went to a Jewish community center in my hometown, and I started to look for my family and there was nobody there. I knew my brother was in England, so I started to question my . . . you know, how to get in touch with him. And they were able to find him for me. He also was looking for me and my father, but in the meantime, my father . . . nobody knew what happened to my father. I found out later that he died.

Stan: What happened to your father?

Walter: My father was in Bergen-Belsen, and in March 1945, he died. That was maybe one month before the end of the war. I was with some friends in . . . Prague in 1945, late 1945, and they told me that they knew a man by the name of Beer, and he was in Bergen-Belsen and he was very well-liked, and he was always talking about his two songs. And I said, "What was his name?" and they said to me, "Hugo." He was my father. So, he was in Bergen-Belsen and he was . . . again, they were employed by the war effort there. They were painting railroad cars with lead paint, and he got very sick from that. They liked him, so they gave him an inside job in the camp. He was sweeping the grounds and he was collecting garbage, whatever he was doing, an educated man. But then when March came, the same thing probably happened in Bergen-Belsen that happened to us in Taucha. You know, they just killed everybody. He never came back.

So that's . . . I knew that he died in Bergen-Belsen sometime in March, end of March. My brother came back from England, he came back in a uniform. He was in the Czech Air Force, and I was very happy to see him. The first thing he said to me, it was just the two of us, "You're going to the States and I'm going to follow you." So, my uncle, my mother's brother was here since 1938. We got in touch with him and we were able to get a . . . an affidavit from him. I got here in 1946 into New York and . . . I've been in the States since. My brother came later. He stayed in England for another year and found a young lady there. Left her there, came here, then

brought her into Canada, got married in Canada, and came to the States. We lived together. Anytime it was just the two of us, we were close.

Stan: Did you think you would survive the camp?

Walter: He?

Stan: You. Did you think you would survive?

Walter: I lived in hope. That's the only way to go through . . . that was the only way for me to go through. Just to live in hope that you're going to make. I did not . . . it doesn't mean as I said to you before that I became ruthlessly immoral about taking things away from old people. I've seen it happen. Some of my friends did it. I didn't have it necessary, because I was an electrician. I was able to procure whatever I needed for myself.

Stan: What made you decide to come to the United States?

Walter: The United States . . . I had the choice between Israel and the United States, and I somehow chose . . . most of my friends went to Israel. Friends that I was with in Theresienstadt for four years, went to Israel. And I felt bad that I didn't go, but my family was here. And my brother was coming here. And it was just the two of us, we had to . . . continue somehow the perpetuation of our name.

Stan: Have you ever talked about your war experiences with your family or anyone else?

Walter: My daughters are very interested in both our experiences, my wife's and mine.

Stan: What were their reactions to your story?

Walter: Well, especially the younger one, is very interested the background we're coming from and what we went through. And she's part of the second generation in New York.

Stan: The fact that you were singled out for being Jewish, has that had any effect on your practice of Judaism?

Walter: I've lived with it for 64 years, I don't know, it became a part of my life and it sort of . . . you encounter that no matter you are, I feel . . . I was never in Israel, but I assume that's about the closest you can get where you will not be singled out and pointed out. But wherever I was, whatever country I was in, whatever city I was in, it was tough. And it strengthened my belief in being Jewish, it does. I would never . . . renounce my background. Never. Neither would my daughters because of it.

Stan: Did you ever apply for, or do you now receive, war reparations?³³

Walter: We got some reparations in the beginning, in the 1950s, the early 1950s. My wife and I. Very little. Some for jewelry that was not returned to us, because a certain amount we had to give up and carry to certain offices in our hometown. And other things that were taken away from us in Theresienstadt. And this is something that we got money for. You also got money for loss of employment and loss of education. Very little.

Stan: How did you feel about receiving . . .

Walter: I don't feel good about it. There's some people who hold it against me. But I don't feel good about it at all. I don't want to take anything for that. There's some people I know that get pensions and they had to go back and get medical affidavits that they've been suffering certain illnesses since that period of time. But . . . I was supposed to have done it, but I can't do it, just . . . I don't feel I can do it. I just don't feel I can do it.

Stan: Do you often think about your experiences?

Walter: I do think about it. Very often.

Stan: Are there any particular events that make you think about it more often than other times?

Walter: Well, first of all, the loss of my family. My father was a good leader, and a good example to both of us, to my brother and I. My mother was a typical good mother, cooking and sewing and knitting for us. And holding us together culturally. And of course, my grandmother which was my idol, she was the one that was everything to me in the beginning, when I was small. And very often lonely, it was always grandmother . . . that was very sad. That is something that I think about very often, yes.

Stan: Do you think another Holocaust is possible?

³³ Between 1945 and 1947, the Allied governments enacted various legislation dealing with reparations to be paid to the victims of Nazi oppression. The Jewish Agency presented the first official claim to the Allied governments in September 1945. The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) was established in October 1951 to help with individual claims against Germany arising from the Holocaust. The Claims Conference initially recovered \$100 million from West Germany, with direct compensation to Holocaust survivors paid in installments.

In 1952, the government of West Germany reached an agreement with the state of Israel and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany to pay reparations for material losses and injuries incurred during the Holocaust. Three separate German laws, known as the West German Federal Indemnification Laws, were adopted in 1953, 1956, and 1965. They further provided for compensation in the form of one-time payments and monthly pensions to Holocaust survivors. In the years since, other agreements for reparations have also been reached.

Walter: Just the way my father said it can't happen in Czechoslovakia, I just don't believe it anymore. It can happen everywhere. And I think my father, even though he was an intelligent and cultured person, an educated person, there was one wrong move he made and that was that he did not move. Like other people. Some people, you know, just left arbitrarily. Just left their families and left.

Stan: Why do you think it could happen again?

Walter: Because there's an undercurrent that . . . as I say, I was never in Israel, but no matter where I was, and I've traveled lately even in Europe, now when I was in Europe three or four times, I've seen the undercurrent. And even in the United States there's a definite undercurrent.

Stan: Undercurrent of what?

Walter: Of anti-Semitism . . . based on economic jealousy. It's not a blood libel anymore, but now it's the economic jealousy.

Stan: Have you first-hand experienced any anti-Semitism?

Walter: Yes, sure.

Stan: Can you describe it?

Walter: The people who would mention . . . even here in Atlanta, I don't want to be personal about it, but there's certain people who told me . . . you know, I took a guy once through Atlanta, through Georgia Tech and I saw a name . . . Furst Street, you know, F-U-R-S-T. I said to the man I was riding with, "That's not how you spell first." He says, "No, no F-U-R-S-T, that's a very well-known Jewish family in Atlanta," he says. "Very rich," he says to me. So . . . "Oh, really?" "Oh yeah, they had a big pencil factory here," he said to me. "There was an incident sometime in the 1920s here," he said to me. "I don't know," he says, "if that was the case, but there was an incident. By the way, nobody knows now how they made their money," he said to me, you know.

I mean, they're a business family. They had the pencil factory, didn't they? Then he says, "and the lady of the house, she goes to Paris once a year, and gets a wardrobe there. Nobody knows how they got into their money." What kind of nonsense is that, you know? It's sad, a cultured man, Emory graduate. I said, you know, it's not fair even to talk to me like that. And there are many incidents like that. I work with a lot of people who, you know . . . even before I came here, New York, quote, warn me, "You're going to go to Atlanta and everybody there thinks the Jews have horns." It's true, a lot of people think that.

Stan: How important is the existence of the state of Israel today?

Walter: It's very important to me. I wish I was there, I could go there, I wish I had time to go there. Maybe after I retire, I'll make some time.

Stan: Mr. Beer, I want to tell you thank you very much. I want to thank you very much for giving us this interview. I wondered if you have anything else you'd like to say in conclusion.

Walter: What I said today, I hope it's going to help somebody, maybe the younger generations, including my daughters . . . to see that the world is composed of all kinds of happenings and I hope that some of those experiences that we experienced or that our parents experienced will not be forgotten. And so . . . act accordingly. That's all.

Stan: Thank you.

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