

THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
CHILDREN OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS PROJECT (CHS)

MEMORIST: JOSEF WIND
INTERVIEWER: ERNA DZIEWIENSKI MARTINO
DATE: NOVEMBER 10, 1989
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GEORGIA

INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Begin Tape 1>

Erna: This is Erna Javinski Martino in Atlanta, Georgia. We are about to tape Holocaust survivor [Josef Wind]—this is November 10, 1989—for the Atlanta Children of Holocaust Survivors' Fred Roberts Crawford Witness to the Holocaust Project.¹ Can you please give me your name and where you lived?

Josef: My name is Josef Wind. I live 1855 Wildwood Place in Atlanta, Georgia.

Erna: When were you born, Mr. Wind?

Josef: I was born August [3], 1912.

Erna: Where were you born?

Josef: I was born in the suburbs of Lvov, Poland.²

Erna: Please tell me about your family—how many brothers and sisters you had and their names.

Josef: I have just five brothers—four brothers and I'm the fifth. The oldest one is Itzchak Wind; the second one is Herman; the third one [is] Yehoshu'a; me, Josef; and the fifth one is Manes.

Erna: Who else lived in the house with you?

¹ The Witness to the Holocaust Project is a collection of Holocaust-related oral testimony, photographs, and film footage collected between 1978 and 1983 as part of a series of digital archival collections through the joint efforts of the libraries at Emory University and the Georgia Institute of Technology. The late Fred Roberts Crawford, Director of Emory University's Center for Research in Social Change and a World War II veteran, founded and directed the project.

² Lvov [Polish: Lwów; Ukrainian: Lviv] was once a Polish town in the southeast of Poland. It is approximately 350 kilometers (220 miles) east of Krakow, Poland and 341 kilometers (212 miles) southeast of Warsaw, Poland. On the eve of World War II, there were 109,500 Jews living in the city. After war broke out, the Jewish population ballooned to more than 200,000 as 100,000 Jewish refugees from western Poland fled the Germans. Since World War II, it is known as 'Lviv' and is a city in western Ukraine.

- Josef:** With me, lived just myself and my wife.
- Erna:** No, when you were a child.
- Josef:** We lived all of us [together].
- Erna:** And your mother?
- Josef:** My mother [Cila] . . .
- Erna:** Tell us about your father [Mikhael].
- Josef:** My father went to World War I and he died in a Russian prison as a prisoner of war.
- Erna:** Your mother raised all of you by herself?
- Josef:** Raised all of [us] by herself.
- Erna:** When you were growing up in Poland as a child, what type of school did you go to?
- Josef:** I went to the public school. Then, because I was special student in technical, in drawing and painting, I had permission to go to a *Technikum* [Polish: technical school].
- Erna:** Technical school?
- Josef:** Yes. I finished the technical school. After that, I couldn't [continue] because of my Jewish background.³ I had to go work privately. I worked privately in a printing shop. I did printing a little while. Of course, it was a Jewish printing shop. My education was as an electro mechanic. It was close to machine work. I'd been working over there probably two or three years.
- Erna:** Now tell me, when you were a child, what were *Shabbos*,⁴ *Yontif*,⁵ and the holidays like? How did your family observe the religion?
- Josef:** In the regular manner.
- Erna:** Tell me a little bit. Where you very religious?
- Josef:** No. My mother forced me to go. I wasn't religious.
- Erna:** You didn't go to a Jewish school at all? Did you go to *cheder* [Hebrew: room] at all?⁶

³ A quota was unofficially introduced in Poland in 1937 by some universities, which limited the amount of Jewish students that were admitted to ten percent—the proportion of Jews in the Polish population.

⁴ *Shabbat* [Hebrew], *Shabbos* [Yiddish], or Sabbath [English] is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays.

⁵ *Yontif* [Yiddish] or *yom tov* [Hebrew] is the generic word for Jewish holidays. It includes all but the High Holy Days of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

⁶ *Cheder* is 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*.

Josef: Maybe went to *cheder* probably when I was about five or six or seven years [old]. I didn't go that long. I used to go for a while to Hebrew school. Just I didn't . . . I'm not too religious now either.

Erna: Did you observe the Sabbath? Did you go to synagogue?

Josef: When my momma forced me, I would go.

Erna: Did you have Jewish and non-Jewish friends?

Josef: Just Jewish friends.

Erna: Only Jewish friends? You did not socialize with any of the Polish people?

Josef: They didn't want to socialize with me.

Erna: How old were you when the war broke out? About 27?

Josef: I believe maybe more. It broke out in 1939?

Erna: Right, 1939.⁷ You were about 27.

Josef: That's right.

Erna: How did life begin to change for you when the Nazis came to Poland?

Josef: The first day when they came in . . . the first thing, we had some . . . You want to know about the Nazis. First came in the Russians. I was with the Russians a year. The Nazis came in 1941.

Erna: To Lvov?

Josef: Yes. When they came in, there was a sign in the street, "*ostrzeżenie o śmierci*" [Polish: death warning] . . .

Erna: A death warning?

Josef: On the death sentence, everybody is supposed to go back to work. I'd been living in town and I'd been working printing books, and other things, and color books. I went out in the morning—my shift was from six o'clock [in the morning] to four o'clock [in the afternoon]. I went out and the [Germans or Ukrainian] militia picked me up and took me to where used to be the [Soviet secret police] . . . the [Germans or Ukrainians] took out some bodies what the

⁷ World War II officially began in Europe when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Within a month, Poland was defeated by a combination of German and Soviet forces and was partitioned between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union along the Bug River, between Krakow and Lvov. Lvov fell under the control of the Soviets, who entered the city on September 22, 1939 and immediately annexed it together with the rest of Eastern Galicia under the terms of the German-Soviet Pact. The Germans subsequently occupied Lvov after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and renamed the city 'Lemberg.'

Russians had executed.⁸ It was maybe 500 feet from where I'd been living. I cannot say exactly. I could draw a map. It was about three blocks. On the way there, they beat me up so much, my head was swollen like a watermelon. They then took me to work in the city over there in the jail yard and . . . some Germans take some pictures of how I did a good job. At six o'clock in the night, nobody supposed to be in street. I just walked into the city just a few blocks. They led me home. Each hundred meter or something like that, was standing a policeman or a German. This was the Ukrainian militia.⁹ They helped out too. They led me home. I been living very close to their headquarters. When I come home, I hardly could see to go home because my eyes were swollen up. Then I stayed over there. I didn't go out at all . . . After that, they used to stop and take people to work.

Erna: The Germans?

Josef: Yes. They took me to work on the airport.¹⁰

Erna: Where?

Josef: On the airfield . . . We were digging some ditches for special planes and things like that. Then they brought us home. I was keeping . . . Later on, they finished the job. They gave us in a transport. They got me . . . I mean, they got some people from somewhere else. I still was in my home—not where I'd been living . . .

Erna: You were still living at home with your brothers?

Josef: No. I'd been living with another family.

Erna: With another family? What happened to your family?

Josef: They perished.

Erna: How?

⁸ Soviet Security forces (People's Commissariat of Internal affairs, NKVD) murdered several thousand Ukrainian nationalists, as well as some Jews and Poles, in Lvov prisons before retreating from the German invasion in June 1941. Jewish forced laborers were forced to dig mass graves for the bodies. The Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators then used the massacre as a pretext for anti-Jewish pogroms, claiming that the Jews had helped the secret police.

⁹ In Ukraine, as in many German-occupied territories throughout Europe, antisemitism, nationalism, ethnic hatred, anti-Communism, and opportunism often induced collaboration with the Nazi regime. Such collaboration was a critical element in implementing the Final Solution and the mass murder of other groups whom the Nazi regime targeted. Collaborators committed some of the worst atrocities of the Holocaust era. Nationalists in the west of Ukraine were among the most enthusiastic, hoping that their efforts would enable them to establish an independent state later on.

¹⁰ Initially, Lvov Jews were put to work in numerous private firms located outside the ghetto that were run by either local civilians or by Germans, as well as for the German army and the Ostbahn railway company. Shortly before the Lvov ghetto was closed in November 1942, the Wehrmacht [the unified armed forces of Nazi Germany, which included the Luftwaffe (air force)] employed approximately 10,000 Jews.

Josef: I wasn't there. They got perished. They took them away. They start building the ghetto.¹¹ It was us in the ghetto. Was in the city. Was just in the beginning. Then they took me and put me in . . . a place where they'd been sending materials to the front.

Did I tell you how long I was with the Russians and how long with the Germans? It was a year later when the Germans occupied Poland.

Erna: Right.

Josef: They took me from over there. They asked to go in the ghetto . . .

Erna: They made everybody go in the ghetto?

Josef: From the ghetto, they took me to a field where all nations were working. There was over there Russian prisoners, Russian volunteers, French people, Jewish, Ukrainians, prisoners, whatever it is . . . We were just a brigade to . . . over there to terrify people, terrify Jewish.

They took us in the ghetto. I have a little room- just half the size like that <indicates the room the interview take places in>. [I was] living with one of my brothers. I don't know . . . maybe he didn't live anymore [at that time].¹² I believe I been living myself . . . in just half this room.

They took us everyday to work. We had to help with their houses and things like that. We were thirty-six . . . thirty-eight people. We were living over there sometime I believe in 1942 . . . We were living over there and working. I was . . . They treat me very nice because they brought in some broken tanks. From Germany, they were shipping them to the front. The Germans were working or whatever with all the different kind of nations. They didn't speak German. They put me to work in a shop.

Erna: Did you speak German?

Josef: Of course. I was born in Austria. [Lvov] wasn't in Poland when I was born.¹³ It was Austria. In the schools, they teach us German, Ukrainian, and Polish till the fifth grade, and from Yiddish,¹⁴ you learn pretty good German. I got a little accent probably.

¹¹ In Lvov in the fall of 1941, Jews still enjoyed relative freedom of movement, but were moved into a ghetto that was established in November of 1941. German authorities ordered some 80,000 people to move into the area designated for the ghetto in the north of Lvov, where about 25,000 people were already living. The ghetto was not sealed until November 1942.

¹² Josef is probably referring to his youngest brother, Manes [Mathias]. It is unclear when he died. Josef's older brother, Herman [Zvi Hirsch Tzvi], his wife Sara, and their two children were killed during the Holocaust as well.

¹³ Formerly the capital of the historic region of Galicia, Lvov has switched between many countries as a result of war and occupation. In 1772, Galicia became part of the Hapsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire and Lvov was known as Lemberg. The city remained under Austrian control until World War I.

One day, I'd been helping the Germans. They had some mechanics—not Jewish. [They were] Polish. They didn't understand German. They took me out from the shop to go out. I fixed them up one of the tanks to be able to pull the rest of the tanks back because they froze up. They sent them over water. It's cold over there, freezing in Europe. They froze up. It didn't take long. We had to carry over there regular trucks. They put some guys three times as big as me. They pulled me for that too. They come home sick. I wasn't. I was strong enough because I was fed enough.

The *Lagerleiter* [German: camp commander], the *Kommandant* [German: commander],¹⁵ the Director went on vacation. Was over there first day. He put us . . . They took the thirty people who was us and put us in concentration camp. It was the day where I said . . . I was in concentration camp. Comes the *Schutzpolizei* [German: protection or security police],¹⁶ the *Luftwaffe* [German: air force] . . . all of them takes out laborers. We didn't have no assignment. Was a Jewish *Lagerführer* [German: camp leader]. We come in and stay over there . . . It was a *Volksdeutsche* [German: German folk].¹⁷

Erna: A German?

Josef: Not a German. He's a German . . .

Erna: He lived in German territory.

Josef: He comes from Germany, a civilian. They put us in concentration camp—all thirty something of us. We was in concentration camp. They didn't have assignment.

Erna: Which concentration camp was this?

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ The *Kommandant* [German: commander] was the highest commanding position within the SS service of a concentration camp.

¹⁶ *Schutzpolizei* [German: protection or security police, or Shupo for short] was a uniformed police force that was part of the *Landespolizei*, the state level police.

¹⁷ *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.

Josef: It was Janowska.¹⁸ One thousand five hundred, I believe they called it.¹⁹ No, it was Janowska. One thousand five was the brigade. It was Janoskwa. They took us over there . . .

Erna: Janowska was were?

Josef: In Lvov.

Erna: On the outskirts?

Josef: Was like in the periphery, in the outskirts . . . not far. We was over there. It was a holiday²⁰ and they promised over there . . . the Jewish *Lagerführer* asked us to disperse because if not, they take us all away . . . shoot, clean us up. We went picked up some bricks and other things, walking around. They knew was something leftover. The next day they said they going to send us to working . . . in the street. They put us in two trucks, two *Schutzpolizei*²¹ in one truck . . . *Gestapo*²² . . . We went up a half a block and turned to the street. I know it was the way to the

¹⁸ In September 1941, the Germans established an arms factory on Janowska Road in the northwestern suburbs of Lvov. Soon after, they expanded it into a network of factories as part of the German Armaments Works (DAW) and it became the Janowska labor camp. In addition to being a forced-labor camp for Jews, Janowska was a transit camp during the mass deportations of Polish Jews to extermination camps in 1942. Thousands of Jews from the Lvov ghetto were deported to Janowska. Those classified as fit to work remained at Janowska for forced labor. Those unfit for work were sent to Belzec and killed or taken to a nearby ravine and shot.

¹⁹ The *Sonderkommando* 1005 were special units created to implement the large-scale action [known as *Aktion* 1005] to obliterate the traces of the mass killings committed by Nazis in occupied Eastern Europe. The decision to commence the action was made after the news of the mass murders began to spread in the Allied countries, and when hastily buried corpses began to pose a health hazard in occupied Poland. The first phase, which lasted from June 1942 to June 1943, saw the burning of bodies in the death camps. A second phase commenced in June 1943 when mass graves in Poland and the Eastern Territories began to be liquidated. The first site may have been the Janowska camp near Lvov. The labor was carried out by prisoners, mainly Jews, who were organized into three groups: one to open the graves and exhume the bodies, a second to erect the pyres, transport the bodies and arrange them on the pyres, and the third to sift through the human remains for valuables, crush the bones and scatter the ashes. Certain prisoners were assigned the task of keeping the fire going and counting the corpses burned, while others were responsible for leveling the terrain, plowing and replanting the site after the graves were destroyed. Most of the prisoners were killed on the completion of their assignment. According to Leon Weliczker Wells, one survivor forced to serve in the Janowska *Sonderkommando* who testified at the Eichmann Trial, the Janowska *Sonderkommando* 1005 was formed on June 15, 1943, when forty people were taken out of the camp, ostensibly for a road building detail. For the next several months up to 120 prisoners were assigned to the death brigade, which incinerated tens of thousands of bodies. Among their grisly tasks was to grind the bones that remained after the burning process in a special machine that used steel balls to pulverize the bones. The prisoners worked 8-10 hours a day.

²⁰ Josef is likely referring to the festival of *Shavuot* [Hebrew: weeks], which is the Jewish festival marking the giving of the *Torah* by G-d at Mount Sinai and occurred June 8-10, 1943.

²¹ Each *Sonderkommando* 1005 unit consisted of several SD (Security Service) and SIPO (Security police) officers, who supervised the work, and several dozen *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police), who served as guards.

²² *Gestapo* is 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.

cemetery.²³ I jumped the car and I got shot. I got shot in the middle of the finger. I got a strife shot in my leg. The guy who was supposed to be our . . .

Erna: Your supervisor?

Josef: No. A Jewish who takes care of Jews.

Erna: A Jewish supervisor.

Josef: Yes. He was a boxer. I knew him from before. I knew he was a rough fellow. He was a prizefighter. I ran off the truck. This is the reason I got shot. He was running after me. If he wasn't able to catch me, they'd shoot him. They'd kill him. They brought us over there to take care of the ghetto, what they liquidated.

Erna: You were caught after that or what happened after you ran away?

Josef: No, they caught me and put me in the truck and brought us over there. They were looking for me. They know it was . . . somebody else was . . . I kept quiet . . . I am a quiet man anyway. They took us over there where they had liquidated the ghetto. If you want to know how they liquidate the ghetto, was a little lake—just as big as my house.²⁴ They shoot it out. I got a little piece of tape what I made. I tried to give my son to explain it. He didn't know. I couldn't explain it much. They took us to the *Frauenlager* [German: women's camp] in the night.²⁵

Erna: To the women's camp?

Josef: To the women's camp. Over there, we were working. First thing, we were working in the . . . took away the fresh bodies. They killed them on the front of a lake, where all the blood accumulates.

Erna: This is when they liquidated the ghetto?

Josef: They liquidated the ghetto? No. They liquidated the ghetto and they liquidate some from the [Janowska labor] camp too.

Erna: At the edge of the lake? They would just shoot people?

²³ The Lvov ghetto was located in the northern part of the city. A large Jewish cemetery was directly to the west of the ghetto, on the edge of the city. Janowska labor camp was on the northwestern outskirts of the city, just beyond the cemetery.

²⁴ Although Josef refers to it as a lake, the majority of executions took place in the Piaski ravine, just north of the Janowska Labor Camp.

²⁵ A map of the Janowska Labor Camp can be found at https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?ModuleId=10005279&MediaId=396. The women's camp was located closest to the camp gates and road leading to the ravine. Housing the *Sonderkommando* there would have made it easier to get them back and forth to the Piaski ravine while limiting their interactions with the rest of the camp.

Josef: It was not a lake. It was a . . . pond. We fished out . . . We went over there where they kill the people. We put them up on a place and stacked them up on the sides a little bigger than the living room here <indicates the room the interview is taking place in>, just higher, a couple thousand.

Erna: Bodies?

Josef: Bodies. We stacked them up and put into fire. They got some wood underneath with some kerosene and they were burning two or three days. We stacked up stack after stack. When we finished that, we start to dig out some graves—mass graves. With the mass graves . . . this was already the *Sonderkommando* [German: special command or detail].²⁶ They took us in *Sonderkommando*.

Erna: *Sonderkommando* was a special group of people who were selected . . .

Josef: Yes. Not selected—caught for crime doing. They found them in not Jewish sections or where *Juden Frauen* [German: Jewish women] was. They brought them over there to kill them. Some of them they left to work. We was a brigade. We started with 87. We finished with 120.

Erna: If you tried to run away or you tried to save yourself, then they would put you in the *Sonderkommando*?

Josef: Some of them. Some of them they killed.

Erna: The *Sonderkommando* was what?

Josef: We were doing just like a crematorium. Instead of a crematorium that was going with twenty or thirty people, we did it in thousands.

Erna: They made you do that everyday?

Josef: Everyday. If the fire was out, they brought in some more people. Each time they brought in a *Kommando*, they asked us if we know what's happening. They asked us to stay between the wires. They shoot it out. They had to go one on top of the other. You are jumping from one place to another. Later, when they shoot, of course they got to be naked.

²⁶ *Sonderkommando* [German: special command or detail] refers to several types of special units during World War II. The name was assigned to groups of Jewish slave labor units that were employed in the gas chambers and crematoria of extermination camps. Charged with removing the bodies of those gassed for cremation or burial, they were forced to participate in the extermination process. Jewish *Sonderkommando* units often were rewarded with better food and physical conditions than other inmates, but were also typically executed after a few weeks or months, only to be replaced by a new group of prisoners.

Erna: Can you tell us in order how . . . usually this was called an *Aktion* [German: action] when they decided to kill a group of people . . .²⁷

Josef: Yes.

Erna: Can you take us through from beginning to end how it went exactly?

Josef: The most *Aktionen* [German: actions] there was from the ghetto to the concentration camp or to that camp . . . the *Aktion* was to catch people. The *Aktion* was in the beginning. Later on, after the ghetto, they just took it out. They liquidated the ghetto.²⁸

Erna: Tell us how it would happen, how they killed the people.

Josef: How they killed the people? Just round them up, five or six . . . this is . . . when I was [there], they brought them out from concentration camp, brought out about 15 [hundred] to 2,000 people. We had to stay behind barbed wires, not to go out. When they shoot them out, they made some chain holes. Like half this table <indicates a table off camera>. From here was the beginning, then go back to the beginning. From here, about ten squares, about two feet, three feet, four feet deep, five feet deep, six feet deep . . . When the blood flushed down—because it was a lot of trouble with blood to get rid of it—flushed down going from the two feet to the three feet, from the three feet to where there was just a foot left. We covered it up. This was the blood.

Erna: The blood was where? I do not understand exactly.

Josef: The blood was from after executions. The blood was flooding . . .

Erna: They brought the people out. How did they execute them? They put them on the edge of a ditch?

Josef: The edge of the fire place or the edge of a little . . . when they got shot in the ditches, I haven't seen it. When they were shooting later on, I was seeing it.

Erna: Tell me what they did there. You said you were behind the wires and you watched when they were killing the people?

Josef: Yes. It was like from here to across the street. Maybe closer.

Erna: So they brought them out. What did they do? Did they make them get undressed? Tell me what they did.

Josef: Undressed completely. Naked.

²⁷ *Aktion* is the German term used for any non-military campaign to further Nazi ideals of race, but most often referring to the assembly, and deportation of Jews to concentration or death camps.

²⁸ In early June 1943, German and Ukrainian police destroyed what remained of the Lvov ghetto, killing thousands of Jews in the process. The remaining ghetto residents were sent to the Janowska forced-labor camp or deported to Belzec.

Erna: They brought them out naked?

Josef: No, they come and then undressed. The last time I was work . . . the last two or three months I was working inside, behind a desk because I'd been making for the Gestapo special . . . where you take off the boots.

Erna: Right. Tell me how one of those executions worked when they brought people out, from beginning to end what happened, if you can describe it.

Josef: Sure. They brought them in. They asked them to undress completely. They put them one to the other one how far they could go and shoot five or six at one time. They way they come in. They shoot them here <indicates the base of skull at neckline>.

Erna: In the back of the neck?

Josef: At the back of the neck. One shot. Was complete naked.

Erna: This was men and women?

Josef: Men and women. No matter. The only thing was we had to put the bodies on the stack, the men was clean and the women was discharged 99 percent. I mean, the men was discharged and the women was clean. Later it comes to my mind because what it is . . . when a lady goes to death she [is vocally distraught]. A man went quiet. When you in trouble, you start to have stomachache. You dead, you don't hold. You discharge. Most of the men—99 percent—was discharged. Women was clean. I was working this thing for a lot of months.

Erna: How about children? Where there any children there?

Josef: I don't know. I haven't seen any because I wasn't there in the beginning. In the beginning, they took away children with old people.²⁹ They put them on trains. They put me away on trains too. I ran away from a train. The put some . . . I didn't know but they put the old people to [the Belzec extermination camp]. I was in a train. The train made a round curve. I jumped here <shows off camera> and hid under some train logs. That's how I came back in the ghetto.³⁰

Erna: Okay. We were talking about when they shot the people. Then what happened?

²⁹ In March of 1942, deportations from the Lvov ghetto began. The first deportation took around 15,000 religious people, elderly, women and children to the Belzec extermination camp. By August 1942, more than 65,000 Jews had been deported from the Lvov ghetto and murdered. Thousands were sent to the Janowska labor camp.

³⁰ Many individuals attempted to escape deportation by jumping from the trains into the forest, where their lives depended on finding a partisan group or a peasant who would help them. Guards attempted to put an end to this practice by ordering deportees to strip before leaving on the transports but the so-called jumpers (*shpringer*) continued to leap to at least momentary freedom. Some joined work detachments by passing as Poles. Other jumpers tried to escape multiple times, only to return to the ghetto after failing to find help.

Josef: They stacked them up about fifteen feet high.

Erna: You had to lift the bodies that were shot?

Josef: They didn't. We did it. We had to do the job.

Erna: I'm saying you had to lift the bodies?

Josef: Yes, pick them up and put them on the . . .

Erna: Stack them up?

Josef: Stack them up. In the beginning, they had just wood on the top. Later on, they brought railroad tracks and put like in a stove so it was air underneath.

Erna: So it would burn faster?

Josef: We had to stack. We had some drains around here. We didn't need more gasoline, just the fat from the people. With long sticks, we got a container and just poured on the [stacks]. The smallest parts that came out was just like this pencil. Of course, we took out the gold from gold teeth, diamonds, whatever it was over there. They packed it and shipped it away.

Talking about that . . . I stole about 300 parcels when I was working in the mass graves. I seen them go [through] things. I tell the truth. I just knocked them out. I put it in the wall. We had to scrub off the slush. I put it in the wall. The bodies. One time I said, "Let's see . . ." I put in a sack. We didn't have no toilet over there the first six months. I make a hole to go out. I put in a little sack by a bush, a nice little . . . and covered it up. After I survived . . . It's a long story, too. After I survived, I went with a friend that I was with in concentration camp the last three months. I was caught a few times. I went over there three or four times. I couldn't find it. I give up. Later on, I said, "It must be at this place. I'll find it." I stole shoes and a pair of slacks. The rest, some of it, I gave it away to the Jewish . . . I kept it for souvenirs for the Jewish . . . Holocaust Center.

Erna: This burning of the bodies was outside in the fields. Were there any farmers or anything in the surrounding areas?

Josef: They was surrounded about two miles around. Nobody could be . . . The only thing, the population could smell . . . the burning flesh.

Erna: So they knew what happening?

Josef: I don't know if they knew. Probably they knew because the Ukrainers were there. [The local civilians] wasn't there. No civilian or person could go [there]. There was a . . . They gave out a record . . . Nobody—when it comes to general inspection—could say no more than he

was eight days, seven days, or two days, or three days. We was [there for] months. We [were witnesses and therefore] had to be destroyed.

Erna: The *Sonderkommando*? The people who worked . . .

Josef: The *Sonderkommando*. That's right. We was caught up. We was six survivors. One lives in New Jersey. I went in . . . I was caught again twice.

Erna: You're saying they killed the *Sonderkommando* so that you couldn't . . .

Josef: The *Sonderkommando* ran away.³¹ The whole group. They caught me in 1943.

Erna: Let's try to stay in order of what you were doing. How long did you work there in this camp in the *Sonderkommando* in Janowska? Do you know how long you were there?

Josef: About twelve months.

Erna: About twelve months?

Josef: In Janowska. We moved from Janowska [after] six months.³² We were living on the ground. You had to . . . If you wanted to catch how we were living . . .

Erna: I'm trying to understand the order of what happened.

Josef: Okay. They took us in another place.

Erna: How long were you in Janowska where you were working on the *Sonderkommando*?

Josef: Six months. A year and a half we working altogether probably.

Erna: You worked the *Sonderkommando* this whole time?

Josef: All the time, yes.

Erna: When they asked you, you just told them you were just there a week or so?

Josef: No, I was a leader. If the general comes for inspection . . . the *Hauptscharführer* [German: head squad leader], he be running that. The Gestapo, the SS,³³ they were running that,

³¹ On November 19, 1943 after the final liquidation of the Janowska camp, a group of the surviving *Sonderkommando* members revolted. They succeeded in killing a few guards, and a number of their members—including Josef Wind and Leon Weliczker Wells—escaped.

³² During the second phase of *Aktion 1005*, which began in June 1943, mass graves across Poland and occupied territories in Eastern Europe were liquidated. In August of that year *Sonderkommando 1005* units burned the bodies of Jews massacred at Babi Yar and those killed in Kamenets-Podolski. Later, units were sent to Yugoslavia, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus. It is unclear where Josef was sent after his *Sonderkommando 1005* unit finished its work in the Piaski ravine, but there were multiple sites in the area where mass killings had occurred. According to two other survivors, the *Sonderkommando* first burned the bodies in the ravine near the Janowska labor camp before being taken into the Lisincki Forest to exhume mass graves. Their testimonies can be found at <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/janowska.html>.

and the *Schutzpolizei*. They were running this camp—the *Schutzpolizei*. We were living . . . we were 160 people, for example. In the last one, they was 60 people. We were living in two cells. A Russian big . . . Later on, we were living in better conditions. The first six months, we were living on the floor on straw. The second one, we had some living places. We didn't have no toilets or nothing. They brought us in water, food. They feed us pretty good.

Erna: What kind of food?

Josef: We had some meat on Friday, when the Germans didn't have any. It was *Fleischfrei* [German: meat free].

Erna: Yes, on Friday the Catholics didn't eat meat.³⁴

Josef: They are not Catholics. Anyway, they give us good [food] to eat.

Erna: What were they? You said they were not Catholics. What were they?

Josef: They are Protestants, I believe—the Germans.

Erna: No, the ones that don't eat meat on Friday are Catholics.

Josef: I don't know. They didn't deliver meat. We got good [food] to eat.

Erna: When you worked the *Sonderkommando*, you did this the whole day long, the same thing?

Josef: The last time I didn't because when they moved in the other place, after a few weeks . . . my profession, I'm an electro mechanic. That's what I'd been studying. I'd been working as a machine operator in a printing shop. Because I'm an electrician, they had to put some electricity over there. We was here from end of street <indicates a long expanse>. They couldn't take no time with electricians. I make the electricity. In this place, they gave me an easier job, to do some carpentry. We were living not on the ground . . . We were living in cells.

<End Tape 1>

<Begin Tape 2>

³³ 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.

³⁴ Catholics abstain from eating flesh meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Fridays of Lent. Traditionally, Catholics abstained from eating flesh meat on all Fridays. Since it is believed Jesus sacrificed his flesh for man, abstaining from eating flesh meats is seen as a form of penance for sins. Flesh meat includes the meat of mammals and poultry—including beef, pork, chicken and turkey—but does not include fish.

Josef: . . . big camps, Russian camps. Was 60 people in one camp. We escaped. We escaped in . . . November 11 . . . a Polish independence holiday.³⁵ I have the one guy [Leon Weliczker Wells] that lives. I am in touch with him. Six of us survived. They caught them. I was back in a concentration camp—it was not a Jewish one—with other people. Some guys were in the woods with the partisans.³⁶ I don't know. This guy wrote a book. I believe he was . . . I gave it to Jewish Community Center. *Death Brigade*.³⁷

Erna: *Death Brigade*, yes.

Josef: You seen it? He sings the [unintelligible Hebrew, sounds like “Vanetchka”]. Later on, the last three months they caught me and took me to the concentration camp. First, I hide myself in prison because I was afraid they recognize me from the *Sonderkommando* and then they'd take me to shoot at. When I come to the camp, the camp lager, the *Führer*, wasn't there. They sent me with five ladies—a lady from 75 years old—and a man. We were in a bunker four by four [feet]. They were asking . . . We had to wait till next day to be executed. They asked me. I said, “Don't worry. It doesn't hurt. Take off your pants. That's it.” I wanted to die in clothing. The watchman asked us who we was. I said I'm an electrician. They got some anti-aircraft sirens and they got engineers that could make it. He said, “Can you fix it?” I said, “Yeah.” They took us out behind the kitchen where usually they execute the people. I didn't want to take off my clothes. I said, “Let them kill me.” You had to take off your shoes. I didn't take them off. I said, “Let them kill me with my clothes,” and I ran to another side. It was a small space. He said to me, “[unintelligible German, sounds like “hasse” (hated) or “hose” (pants) . . . “fahre” (ride or race)], come on.” He killed the other six people and called me up. He asked me, “You are an electrician? Come. You fix it.” I come.

³⁵ National Independence Day [Polish: *Narodowe Święto Niepodległości*] is a national holiday in Poland celebrated on November 11th to commemorate the anniversary of the restoration of Poland's sovereignty as the Second Polish Republic in 1918, after 123 years of partition by the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Hapsburg Empire.

³⁶ In response to the German occupation, Poles organized one of the largest underground movements in Europe with more than 300 widely supported political and military groups and subgroups. Officers of the regular Polish army headed an underground armed force, the “Home Army” [Polish: *Armia Krajowa*, AK]. After preliminary organizational activities, including the training of fighters and hoarding of weapons, the AK activated partisan units in many parts of Poland. Some Jews who managed to escape from ghettos and camps also formed their own fighting units. These fighters, or partisans, were concentrated in densely wooded areas. Life as a partisan was very difficult. People had to move from place to place to avoid discovery, raid farmers' food supplies to eat, and try to survive the winter in flimsy shelters built from logs and branches.

³⁷ Josef is referring to *The Death Brigade (The Janowska Road)* written by Leon Weliczker Wells and first published in 1963 by The Macmillan Company.

In camp, they took off our hats and boots. I had some good clothing. I ran away with good clothing because people left their clothing. I took. Everyday, I had a new shirt. I washed it because of all the lice. I washed it and dried clothes . . .

<Break in tape>

Josef: . . . like a *Kommandant*, keep us legal to do jobs for him—carpenter, shoemaker, whatever it is. I was an electrician.

Erna: Right. I want you to say all of this. Right then he said to you what?

Josef: “Come do work.”

Erna: In other words, he wanted you to go with him to do some electrical work?

Josef: I already did the electrical work. He let me live. We went to live in the private little houses.

Erna: What happened right there when he said to you, “Come, you’ll do the electrical work,” right after they killed your friends?

Josef: They were not my friends. They were just people they caught somewhere in the streets, brought them in, and put them in the bunker to kill them—just like myself. Got to have permission from that high authority, so we were waiting. We were standing. We couldn’t sleep in there. It was not enough space. It was four by four [feet]. Each bunker was four by four [feet]. There were two of them and we was in one of them. It was five or six people, standing overnight. Then they put us behind where they execute behind the kitchen. I didn’t want to take off my clothes. I give them advice. Take off the clothes you won’t get a beating. It doesn’t take . . . It was mighty easy. You get shot [in the back of the head]. A shot [from a doctor in the arm] hurts more than a bullet [to the back of the head]. They put it in your neck and you’re gone. That’s what it is. I been running. I didn’t want to take off my clothes. He called me out with a nasty word. I came out. I fixed the sirens. He put me to the brigade over there. We went for eleven o’clock for lunch. They’d been cleaning potatoes. We went over there. Somebody recognized me.

Erna: That saved your life that you were an electrician?

Josef: It saved my life probably. I came into the shop over there. One of our escapees recognized me. He asked me, “What are you doing here . . . been alive?” He was not even a smart fellow, an older guy. I said, “My name is Pasternik.” He kept his mouth . . . Nobody was around. He start asking me where I been and about everybody, so I told him.

Erna: The reason for this was because if you told anybody you were from the *Sonderkommando*, the Germans would . . .

Josef: I didn't know about it. I don't know. About three or four months later, when they had to evacuate the camp . . .

Erna: Why were you evacuating the camp?

Josef: Because the Russians were about 50 miles from the city.

Erna: They were approaching?

Josef: That's right. They were on their way.

Erna: The Germans decided to liquidate the camp?

Josef: No, I didn't believe them. They said that they are going to evacuate. The Poles and the rest of them, they let out. The Jewish—we was about 80 or 90 people—they going to evacuate. I took him to the . . . We were supposed to go to the air shelter. They were going to the air shelter and I had some tools. I had to break the barbed wires. One boy got killed, so I went on a couple hundred feet and broke out. I went between bushes. I cut away from other bushes and matched myself up. The next day . . . They said the truth. They took away everybody. It was just what I told you. We was alive because we was a coward to go in. It was not allowed to go, Jewish in the air shelter. Then I went in the woods. Was in July [1944]. I been sitting over there seven and a half days.

Erna: Hiding?

Josef: Hiding. Because the front was right where the *lager*—the camp—was. I been hiding over there. I had a jacket. I took off my jacket and took off the shoes. We had one rain. I been eating . . . from the wheat . . .

Erna: The grains?

Josef: The grains.

Erna: From the field?

Josef: In the field. It was a terrible thing because it goes in a little bit in your throat. I don't know. Maybe as a child you been eating it.

Erna: You choked on it?

Josef: Yes, it cuts you. After that, I could not go out. They . . . earlier, I couldn't go . . . know who was over there because the next point where the Germans were fighting the Russians. The Russians already were [close], probably the end of the street. I went out of the [woods]. I went to

an empty house. Usually in the city, they got the ghetto. In the ghetto, they got some rainwater. You wash your clothes with it.

Erna: From the gutters?

Josef: From the gutters. It stayed in the wooded barrels a long time. I tried to drink something. I was thirsty. I had one rain and been drinking from the shoes or soaked off the jacket. Seven and a half days without food, without water. It was in July. I stick my head in it and was drinking from the barrel. When I raised it, I had to spit out.

Erna: It was no good.

Josef: The worst thing . . . I will never forget it. I went out to the city and went over there. The Poles seen I still I had the yellow . . .

Erna: A star?

Josef: I didn't have a star. I had a triangle in yellow paint on the pants.³⁸ They knew I am a Jew. They asked, "Where this survive?" [They said] 'this,' not 'he.' [They said,] "Where *this* survive?" So I was free.

Erna: In other words, you're saying the Pollacks were still antisemitic?

Josef: Not still. They helped—the Ukrainers and the Pollacks. They was . . . I read the papers everyday what's going on everywhere in the world. When it comes to Poland, what's over there, they rescued the other people . . . I didn't even want to look at it.

Erna: They did not help you at all? Nobody helped you?

Josef: My goodness! They been hunting [us]. They took away everything. They emptied the homes.

Erna: Of the Jews?

Josef: Of course. They took the apartments. Not the Germans. [The Poles] took it. They emptied it . . . Anyway, I came out and where I used to live, she [a neighbor] recognized me. She brought me out—it was summertime—a nice soup. Didn't let me in the home.

³⁸ With some variation from camp to camp, the categories of prisoners in concentration camps were 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, nonconformists, 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.

Erna: Didn't let you in the house?

Josef: No. I been eating on the steps. I hated Polish people. I loved the Russians. They were very hospitable. Maybe nice things they don't want to listen about it. They are nice people, the Russians.

Erna: The Russians treated you well?

Josef: I'd been working for the Russians. I'd been working [for them] before the war and after the war.

Erna: This was really your liberation, the way you got out of there?

Josef: Yes.

Erna: Was the war already over at that time?

Josef: No. I'd been working in a warehouse from July until May . . . I can't remember . . . end of May. Was it May the war was over?

Erna: Right.

Josef: Maybe half a year later I departed . . . maybe the next summer. I don't think it was the same summer because the fifth of May [1945] was the end of the war.³⁹ I departed a year later because I'd been working again in a warehouse for the Russians. I had a little trouble to leave.⁴⁰

Erna: That area was liberated by the Russians?

Josef: By the Russians.⁴¹

Erna: How did the Russians act toward you? They knew you were Jewish, right? What did you do?

Josef: I'd been working in an office.

Erna: For the Russians?

Josef: Yes.

Erna: You had no family there that survived, that came back?

Josef: No.

³⁹ The war in Europe officially ended on May 7, 1945 when German General Alfred Jodl signed an unconditional surrender to the Allies in Reims, France. The following day, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel officially surrendered to Soviet forces in Berlin.

⁴⁰ The Soviet defeat of Germany in Eastern Europe led to a tremendous geographic shift in Polish territory and, ultimately, to the establishment of a communist dictatorship in Poland which was largely antisemitic. After a surge of anti-Jewish violence in 1946, over 75,000 Jews streamed out of Poland into the Allied-occupied zones in Germany, Austria, and Italy. In many cases, emigration was illegal and Jews had to rely on clandestine organizations to escape Poland as the relationship between the western allies and Russia had significantly deteriorated.

⁴¹ The Soviet army reentered Lvov in July 1944.

Erna: Your parents were killed and your brothers?

Josef: My daddy was killed in World War I. The whole family got killed where I was. I had two brothers [Itzhak and Yehoshu'a] in Israel. I got one of them [Yehoshu'a] now here in the United States. I brought him over. [Itzhak] died two or three years ago.

Erna: The two brothers in Israel left before the war to go to [Palestine]?⁴²

Josef: Yes. I was supposed to leave. I didn't want to go. I'd been making good money.

Erna: What about any friends or other relatives? Was there anybody left from your hometown?

Josef: No.

Erna: No one?

Josef: Whoever left . . . that's what I heard. I didn't see them. After the war, [some survivors] was in the woods, was partisans . . . fighting the Russians.⁴³ [The Russians] killed them after the war. Just two or three of them survived. I can't remember nobody from before the war. No, I can't remember nobody was left over from before the war.

Erna: What did you do then? You said you worked for the Russians.

Josef: Then I departed myself for Austria and worked for the ORT.⁴⁴ I worked for the ORT about four or five years. I'd been working in Salzburg [Austria].⁴⁵ I was director of the Salzburg

⁴² In the early 1930's, Jewish immigration from Europe to the British Mandate for Palestine rapidly increased due to Zionism and the rise of Nazism.

⁴³ Polish resistance during World War II was both anti-German and anti-Russian. After Poland was liberated in 1944 by the Russian army, anti-communist Polish partisans continued to wage attacks on the Soviet regime by attacking troops, prisons, and concentration camps established for political prisoners. Most of the Polish anti-communist groups ceased to exist by the late 1940's or early 1950's.

⁴⁴ Founded at the end of the eighteenth century, the ORT's [Russian: *Общество Ремесленного Труда, Obchestvo Remeslenogo Truda*, "Association for the Promotion of Skilled Trades] mission is to advance Jewish people through training and education. After World War II, ORT was very active in the DP camps, opening schools with rehabilitation programs in 78 camps. The purpose of the schools was to train and prepare DPs (displaced persons) for resettlement in industrialized countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia as well as Israel, which had a significant need for highly trained manpower. Some 85,000 Jews were trained in new professions and provided with the tools they needed to rebuild their lives.

⁴⁵ In December 1946, the first ORT trade school in Austria was opened in Vienna. By the end of 1947, additional schools were open in Ebelsberg, Steyr, Wels, Salzburg, Hofgastein, Hallein, Linz and Bindermilch. The schools conducted programs in 50 trades ranging from dressmaking to technical chemistry, optics and building trades. English and Hebrew language courses were also held. ORT's Central School in Salzburg was the first post-war vocational training establishment in Austria. It opened in February 1947 and had 350 students by mid-1947. An annex to the main ORT school in Salzburg opened in 1948 in the Beth Bialik transit camp in Salzburg and another school was located in the Riedenburg camp. As emigration progressed, ORT schools in Austria began closing down. The Salzburg school was transferred to Hallein, a DP camp twenty miles from Salzburg, in 1947. It remained open until 1954.

school. I been working over there. I believe this is the book from it. <begins flipping through a book off camera> Yes, this is the book from the ORT. I was director of ORT School.

Erna: Just pick it up like that and hold it in front of yourself, we'll be able to see it. <Josef holds a book up and begins to turn pages in front of camera> It was a professional school?

Josef: Yes. It was teaching different kinds of professions. The first time, I was a half a year an electrical instructor. They couldn't find a director that knew more than one job. Because I am qualified in a lot of different kind of skills, I was director over there for four years, three and a half years.

Erna: Right. Then what did you do?

Josef: I had to go. I sent everything away to Israel. Then I changed my mind. I came to United States. I had two brothers over there it took me two years to find. It took them two years to find me. I knew I had some of them. They didn't know I'm still alive. I had a friend . . .

You want to see some more? <continues flipping pages in book> It's in English and Yiddish. I want to show you my school. It's from England or United States. It's caricatures . . .

Erna: [The book] just describes what the organization did?

Josef: Yes. We had seven or eight different courses for immigration. These are all directors. <Hands book to interviewer to look at an image on a page> See from that what you can find on Salzburg, too.

Erna: Then you decided . . . You got a visa to come to the United States?

Josef: I got a visa. I didn't have no problem to get it because I'm a survivor.⁴⁶ Whoever come from Russians, they have a little bit of a problem to come here.

Erna: Where did you come?

Josef: Here. Straight here.

Erna: Straight to Atlanta?

Josef: Yes.

Erna: When was this?

⁴⁶ After the war ended, President Harry S. Truman favored efforts to ease US immigration restrictions for Jewish displaced persons but existing laws had no provisions for displaced persons until Truman issued a directive on December 22, 1945, ordering the State Department to fill existing quotas and give first preference to displaced persons. In 1948, Congress passed legislation to admit more DPs to the United States. The 1948 Displaced Persons Act authorized the entry of 202,000 displaced persons over the next two years but within the quota system. When the act was extended for two more years in 1950, it increased displaced-person admissions to 415,000, but Jewish DPs only received 80,000 of these visas, making them only 16 percent of the immigrants admitted. By 1952, only 137,450 Jewish refugees (including close to 100,000 DPs) had settled in the United States.

Josef: In 1952, I believe.⁴⁷

Erna: Nineteen fifty-two. You were still single?

Josef: No, I came with my wife [Bronia Mendel] and with my older son [Michael]. He was born in Austria [in 1947].

Erna: You met your wife in Austria?

Josef: No, I met my wife, took her out from a [Polish] home. Took her out of . . . A friend of mine—it was two girls—took them out . . . We didn't have nowhere to sleep. We was sleeping . . . There was maybe twenty or thirty big synagogues or temples. They burned up everything. In my neighborhood, there was across the street a temple—a beautiful one.

Erna: This is in Lvov?

Josef: In Lvov. She was with non-Jewish people. She'd been hiding. The Germans kept her in other places. I find a guy. I was with him in concentration camp. He said, "Take out some . . ." I took over six or seven rooms where the Gestapo was . . . a big place. We put some straw sacks around. Whoever showed up, I took them home because I'd been working for the Russians in a warehouse and I had food. I used to bring home food. We got meat and bread. We didn't get everyday bread. I feed them. He told me, "I got two girls. They can't stay . . . [Polish]. Take them. You got enough space." So I took her and another girl. Whoever disappeared, went to the west . . . If she was wants to wait for me . . . I said, "You go to the station. I'll find you in [Poland]." It was another city in Poland.⁴⁸ I had a lot of girls who ran back to whoever saved them. Whoever came back . . . She was a few months with me. I didn't think to get married.⁴⁹ She hanged out with me. She stayed. Then I moved to Breslau.⁵⁰

Erna: Vratislav?

⁴⁷ Josef, Bronia, and Michel Wind arrived in New Orleans, Louisiana aboard the USNS General Taylor on December 7, 1951.

⁴⁸ 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. Only 2,000 Jews from Krakow survived the war. Some Jews who lived in Russia during the war returned to Krakow in 1945-46, but it is unclear why Josef's wife went there. A Jewish community was not re-established because of a fear of pogroms.

⁴⁹ Josef and Bronia Wind were married on February 20, 1945.

⁵⁰ Breslau [German] is the historical capital of Silesia and Lower Silesia, located on the Oder River in Central Europe. At various times, it has been part of the Kingdom of Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, the Austrian Empire, Prussia, and Germany. Today, the city is known as Wrocław (Polish: Wrocław) and is the largest city in western Poland. In Czech, the city is known as Vratislav. Breslau is about 540 kilometers (336 miles) west-northwest of Lvov. After the war a community in Breslau was established by Jews from Poland, but most had immigrated by the time Israel became a state.

Josef: Yes. I bought . . . was working . . . in Vratislav a business. People start to run away from over there because there was a city—Katowice [Poland].⁵¹ Maybe you've heard about it. They killed a lot of Jews. I left the business. Everybody ran away from Poland.⁵² It's the reason I cannot read the papers about Poland. I sold my business. I don't remember even to whom. I had a friend. He died too in Israel. We came to Austria. In Austria, I find a few guys over there that I knew before the war. The reason that I knew them before the war was that I was with them in camp. From Vienna [Austria]⁵³ to Linz [Austria].⁵⁴ From Linz, we went to a camp. We had to move over there.

<conversation about noises made by Josef fidgeting off camera> I am nervous, I'm telling you.

Erna: It's no wonder that you are nervous. I am sorry I interrupted you. You were at the camp in Linz . . .

Josef: Then I went to Salzburg, where I was in camp when I start to work for the ORT.⁵⁵

Erna: You're talking about the DP [displaced persons] camps where they were holding people after the war?⁵⁶

⁵¹ Katowice is a city in the Upper Silesia in southern Poland. After World War I, Katowice was attached to Poland. Antisemitism increased in Katowice during the 1930's, and in 1937, pogroms and bombs thrown into Jewish shops led to emigration from Katowice although the Jewish population remained at 8,587. On September 3, 1939, when the Nazis entered the city, the Jewish population had increased due to an influx of refugees, and was approximately 11,000 to 12,000. Flight and expulsions left 900 at the end of the year. After World War II, about 1,500 Jews, most of whom were from other parts of Poland and had spent the war years in the Soviet Union, settled in Katowice.

⁵² After liberation, many Jewish survivors encountered manifestations of antisemitism, hostility, and violence from the local populations when they returned home. In postwar Poland, there were a number of pogroms (violent anti-Jewish riots). One of the most well known examples occurred in the southeastern Polish town of Kielce on July 4, 1946. Forty-two Jews were killed and 40 others injured. While not an isolated instance, the massacre symbolized the precarious state of Jewish life in the Holocaust's aftermath and prompted many survivors to leave Europe.

⁵³ Vienna is the capital and largest city of Austria, and one of the nine states of Austria. Before World War II, the overwhelming majority of Austrian Jews lived in Vienna, which was an important center of Jewish culture, Zionism, and education. Only 2,000 Viennese Jews survived deportations during the war, along with about 800 Jews who managed to hide. After the war, the city was under joint Allied occupation. After the city was liberated in April 1945, there were 17,000 Jews in the city, most of whom were Hungarian Jews or other refugees. Between 1945 and 1952, other Jewish displaced persons, who looked towards the American Army for services and protection, rather than towards the Austrian government, augmented their numbers. After the Kielce pogrom in the summer of 1946, Jews fleeing Poland flooded into Vienna. Some 52,000 individuals passed through Vienna. In response to the overcrowding, more DP camps were opened in Austria, with Vienna often serving as a transit point.

⁵⁴ The area around Linz, the regional capital of upper Austria, became a major assembly center for displaced persons and refugees- in the first five years after the war at least 150,000 Jewish DPs passed through the region and a series of camps, including two permanent camps in Ebelsberg and Bindermichl as well as a large refugee center in Wegscheid, were established.

⁵⁵ By 1947, over 13,000 Jews, mainly from Hungary and Poland, were living in the three permanent and five transit camps in and around Salzburg, Austria.

Josef: Yes. My son was born over there—the oldest one. I have some pictures over there. I used to wash the diapers . . .

Erna: You were in the DP camp yourself in Linz?

Josef: In Salzburg and in Linz, too. Then they give us a [former] Gestapo villa. We were six. I was with four or five teachers. We had a villa from the ORT. We were working over there four years or whatever it was. I wasn't prepared to have some of the dates [to tell you] exactly. I might not remember them anyway. This is kind of fifty or sixty years back.

Erna: Right. Then you said you came to the United States in 1952?

Josef: Yes. I been here working. They give me two weeks. They give me a job in a printing shop. I make some envelopes. If you wanted to see my paychecks, I can show you from the whole time. They liked me very much. We'd been talking through a translator. They had some lady. She'd been talking German. I didn't speak not a word of English. I didn't expect to be here. They gave me some overtime work . . . time and a half and full-time—Sunday and Saturday. I was working a year. Then qualification, they gave me a bump for \$50. I believe maybe cash or something. They closed till after New Year. I went to somebody working with him. I met him in Europe. I worked with him in the **[unintelligible German, sounds like “grosse helfen” (great help)]**. I been with him two years in my home.

I didn't want to go to Israel. I don't know why. You see, I was closed in a country where you cannot go nowhere. If I go to Israel, I would sit over there and not be able to go nowhere. I want to be a free man. So I went here to United States. One of my brothers—they both was here—they want to see me. No, I went there before I came over here. A week before, I was over there by plane. Then I came here and settled down. I'm still here.

Erna: You have two sons, right?

Josef: I've got two sons and one grandson.

⁵⁶ When hostilities ended in May 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). 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. In 1946 and 1947, the number of DPs in the camps rose substantially. 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. 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.

Erna: Have you talked about your experience with your family?

Josef: Not exactly. I tried to make one of them . . . I have somebody here tape. I tried to say something. I said one day, they killed off . . . I tried to start [telling about my experiences] from everything—what we were doing with the blood, for example, when they liquidated the ghetto. We had to . . . in the pond over there close to the place where they execute them. All the blood went in a little pond—not a lake; a pond just as big as this house, maybe a little bigger. They put us . . . Then I fall into this kind of job. They tried to take us out. We couldn't share . . . They brought us a barrel of kerosene. We put the kerosene on the water and put the water on fire. The blood . . . you don't living but it's blood. The blood gets clotted up, like cooked pieces. We took some nets, took it out, put it on the fire, and burn it up. The second place, we had to so much blood. [they] bring in 2,000 [bodies]. From each person, at least two liters of blood goes. A person's got about four liters, I believe. We make some chain holes . . . about four by four [feet]. At the top, we make one foot deep. The blood would go down to one foot deep. The second one had two feet. The third [hole] had three feet. We make a chain of holes. [The blood] would flow one to the other . . . so the blood was just one feet deep. We covered it up.

Erna: To make the blood ran off from the bodies?

Josef: From the bodies, yes. This way . . . they find out . . . in the beginning, we used to cut up the bones we was burning. We was like from here to across the street from the Jewish cemetery. We took the tombstones. We took a piece of wood and a can in the bottom. We had a two pieces of wood, we would . . . <indicates pounding up and down on the tombstone>

Erna: To grind the bones?

Josef: To grind the bones to dust.

Erna: After the bodies were burned?

Josef: Yes. Of course, we'd taken out all the gold or metal.

Erna: To leave no evidence?

Josef: Yes. Then we spread it over the fields. In the other place, they had a machine for that.⁵⁷ We still had to take out the metals, and the gold, and things like that. They shipped it away. I believe I told you I stole some of it, too—the gold things.

Erna: Yes. That's not easy to forget.

⁵⁷ An example of the bone crushing machine can be seen at https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=0&MediaId=824.

Josef: I go back and forth and back and forth. They've got no schedule to say how it goes.

Erna: No. You were singled out just for being a Jew. How do you feel about that?

Josef: I come from a country where they singled out a Jew, too. They called it *numerous clausus* [Latin: closed number; a fixed maximum number of entrants admitted to an academic institution] . . . I was fortunate I came from my public school and went into—not a Jewish school—a technical school. I can show you what I been doing. When I finished, I was very good . . . not in spelling, or reading, or writing. I was very good in mathematics. I was the best in school in hand work. It was a nice technical school. There was maybe five or six Jewish [students] over there . . . *numerous clausus* . . . Other Jewish people had been studying overseas because the Poles didn't take them into the universities—doctors, engineers . . . My family's friend had been living in Argentina. He studied in France. His daddy was a doctor. He was a doctor. He died a few weeks back.

Erna: Because the Poles wouldn't let the Jews go to Universities?

Josef: No.

Erna: So you grew up with antisemitism?

Josef: Yes. Polish people are the biggest antisemites. Over there, it's created. Germany created antisemitism. Over there [in Poland], they are born antisemites.

Erna: Why do you think so? Why are they such antisemites?

Josef: Who knows? They used to say . . .

<Tape 2 Ends>

<Tape 3 Begins>

Josef: *Polskie ulice i żydowskie budowle* [Polish] . . . polish streets and the Jewish buildings. Poles. The Ukrainers—they didn't like not the Poles or not the Jews.

Erna: They resented the Jews?

Josef: Yes. The biggest amount of Jews got killed [came] from Poland. Was three and a half million Jews over there.

Erna: Did you ever receive war reparations . . . *Wiedergutmachung* [German: reparations]?⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) was established in October 1951 in New York, and presided over by Nahum Goldmann, 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. An additional \$125 million was added in 1988, to enable remaining Holocaust survivors to receive monthly payments of \$290 for the rest of their lives.

Josef: Yes. I receive this way . . . I didn't apply at all. I said . . . They're supposed to . . . I don't want it from them. They cannot pay me [for] what I went through. The German government sent to me . . . to the Consulate sent to me . . . costs; forgiving the positions . . . I got something from the federal government left over. Even the federal government wanted to know about it. I said, "I'm not going nowhere." They came to me.

Erna: How do you feel about taking that money?

Josef: I didn't want to take it. They sat in the whole court, with picture and things . . . they had pictures from the people . . . First, they called me to the Consulate, whom I didn't know . . . to give a description from the people. I don't know how they found out [who the witnesses and perpetrators were] and I don't know to now either. I said, "Give me the names and I can tell you how they looks." He gave me [the names]. Then he said, "You can swear?" I said, "Yeah." Then he said, "You will have to swear." They let me go. In a few years—I don't know how many years . . . comes the whole court. They called me back to come to Stuttgart [Germany].⁵⁹ I didn't want to go. I didn't go for the *gut macht* [German: make good] either. They applied here. They sent me about \$10,000 or maybe more. I don't know how much. I've got to ask my wife. Maybe she'll remember. Then they started to send me some checks. They called me back to raise . . . They paid me 25 percent. I'm over 70 years old. I never been going. They can send it.

Erna: Did you ever go back to Europe since the war?

Josef: Yes. [My wife] got an uncle . . . He was in Paris. He was in Belgium. She had an uncle over there. When I'd been living in Salzburg, he found out through the United States that she's alive and came to see us. He wasn't in jail. He ran away from Belgium through Switzerland. He died now . . .

Erna: When you go to an event, or a particular place, or when you sleep, are you ever reminded of your war experiences?

Josef: I don't want it. I don't go . . . if they make some . . . Eternal Life-*Hemshech* or whatever . . . I never show up.⁶⁰ I never go.

Erna: Why?

Josef: I cannot go.

⁵⁹ In October 1966, sixteen SS officers—nine of them found by Simon Wiesenthal—went on trial in Stuttgart, Germany, for participation in the extermination of Jews in Lvov, Poland.

⁶⁰ Eternal Life-*Hemshech* is an organization of Atlanta Holocaust survivors, their descendants and friends dedicated to commemorating the 6,000,000 Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

Erna: It is too difficult?

Josef: I don't go.

Erna: Do you think another Holocaust is possible?

Josef: You never know. It don't supposed to be exact on Jewish . . . Holocaust goes on all over the world. There's a Holocaust . . .

Erna: Why do you think it's possible?

Josef: I just say it's not special for Jews. I mean, Holocaust goes on everywhere.

Erna: You mean people being murdered?

Josef: That's right. Murdered, exterminated . . .

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

Josef: To me, very important.

Erna: Why?

Josef: Why? Just . . . My son lives in North Carolina. If he gets in trouble, he's got his Daddy here. Or if my son lives over there [in Israel], he got nowhere to go. It's the same thing with us. I didn't want to go [to Israel after the war] because I didn't want to be closed off. I was enough in jail. There [were] days you couldn't go out. They took by force when the fighting was started over there between the Arabs and Israelis. They took from our [DP] camps the young people by force.⁶¹ They comes in the night in trucks, went through the Alps, through Italy, from Italy to . . . Nicosia . . .⁶²

Erna: Greece?

Josef: No, Nicosia is not Greece.

Erna: Pakistan? Cyprus?

⁶¹ As the flood of Jewish refugees poured into the DP camps established by the Western Allies after the war, Zionist organizations—most notably the *Brihah* [Hebrew: flight, escape]—operated in DP camps to organize the “illegal” immigration of Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine. Refugees intended for Palestine were often placed temporarily in Austrian DP camps. The Jewish Brigade—a battalion from the British Mandate of Palestine that had fought with the British Army—also helped establish displaced persons camps in Europe and became active in organizing the emigration of Holocaust survivors to Palestine. Many Brigade members joined the Haganah, a paramilitary organization in the British Mandate of Palestine, which became the core of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Josef's recollection of kidnappings is likely of covert Soviet activities rather than the forced immigration of survivors. In some incidences, Soviet agents entered the DP camps disguised as Jewish victims of Nazi concentration camps trying to infiltrate these migration channels to smuggle Russian agents into the Middle East, where they hoped to incite revolt against the British in Palestine. Soviet agents also used both legal and covert methods of deception, kidnapping, bribery, and threats to force repatriation of Soviet nationals in order to curb a concentration of anti-communist political expatriates in the West.

⁶² Nicosia [Greek: Lefkosía; Turkish: Lefkoşa] is the divided capital city of Cyprus. Northern Nicosia is the capital and largest city of the de facto state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The southern part of the city is Greek. Nicosia was under British rule in the post-World War II period Josef is referring to.

Josef: Cyprus. I forgot. See, you get old, you forget a lot of things.

Erna: That's okay. I am young and I forget a lot of things.

Josef: It's okay. I'm really . . . sometimes names I am forgetting. I have a brother. He brought here from Israel. He just don't remember almost . . . He don't have Alzheimer's disease. Just he's forgetting.

Erna: Yes. You feel very strongly about the existence of the state of Israel?

Josef: I feel the existence . . . must have their own country. I'd let them have it. There's a lot of antisemites, too.

Erna: I want to thank you very much for your time in making this tape. We understand how difficult it is for you to talk about it.

Josef: It is more than two hours of talk. To tell you the truth, it's a lot. Each day is a year. Each day got no end.

Erna: If you lived in the camps, you mean?

Josef: Especially in the *Sonderkommando*. It's what I went through. It happened. We never talked about it.

Erna: We appreciate you letting us record you.

Josef: I didn't even talk to my brother. He used to help me out three or four years ago. He got sick or whatever. I got a tape from him. He used to . . . he treated me just . . . I don't know . . . just how it would be if I was a criminal. [He would say,] "You killed so many Jews—thousands of Jews," and things like that. He just . . . It hurt me.

Erna: But you didn't do that.

Josef: I didn't do nothing. I just been working over there. I killed the Jews? I was a victim myself.

Erna: That is right.

Josef: I couldn't tell him. I don't know. Usually I very seldom talked about it at home at all. I never did. Maybe once in a while I said something and he comes in over there . . . I made a tape from him to show his wife what's the matter with him.

Erna: That is very difficult, I know. I am sorry that you had to go through this tragic period in your life.

Josef: I'm not sorry now. It's over.

Erna: We appreciate that you would share it with us.

Josef: You're welcome.

Erna: Thank you for letting us into your home.

Josef: I tried to leave for my kids things I did. When they grew up, they start to ask me questions. [My son] brought the camera. I make a half a tape. He start to ask me back to back the same thing. He just don't understand whatever happened. He was born here and raised here.

Erna: It is hard for anyone to understand what happened because those are not usual things to happen.

Josef: I've been watching two films of the Holocaust. One film I been watching . . . I never watched it. They were somewhere in Ukraine. They broke out from a camp. It looked exactly what happened to us.

Erna: I think it was called *Escape From Sobibor*.⁶³ Maybe that was it?

Josef: I don't know. People been survived here in the United States, they come . . . They was in the Russian territory, I believe. You know about it? You have seen it?

Erna: I'm not sure if it's the same one I thought you meant.

Josef: Then there was the four or five series from the war . . .

Erna: The miniseries, *Holocaust*?⁶⁴

Josef: No.

Erna: *War and Remembrance*?⁶⁵

Josef: *War and Remembrance*. I been seeing that one where they brought the empty bodies and put them out from the truck. Over there, they got it easier—the bodies with the clothes . . . They asked them to take it off and then shoot them out. This one was somewhere . . . I'd never heard about this camp, but it was exactly the way . . . in a way, the same thing. They was organized, too.

I organized . . . on the last . . . on the second place—I gave this the man for the book how we escaped—it was November 11. [For] two days, there was a Polish holiday. We planned

⁶³ *Escape from Sobibor* is a 1987 British television film that aired on CBS. It is the story of the mass escape from the extermination camp at Sobibor, the most successful uprising by Jewish prisoners of German extermination camps (uprisings also took place at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka).

⁶⁴ *Holocaust* is an American television miniseries broadcast in four parts in April 1978 on the NBC television network. The miniseries followed a fictional German Jewish family's experiences during the Holocaust.

⁶⁵ *War and Remembrance* is an American miniseries based on the novel of the same name written by Herman Wouk, which aired from November 13, 1988, to May 14, 1989. It is the sequel to *The Winds of War*, which shares the story of the Henry and Jastrow families from 1939 to 1941. *War and Remembrance* continues their stories from December 1941 through August 1945.

to escape. I didn't work by the dead. Since I'm an electrician and they put a new place on it, they let me do it inside with a partner, doing carpenter work. I make him something. It was an invention. They been wearing boots. To take off the boots so I can keep it in the pocket and have to have feet. The feet was placed on half of another guy. I make some . . . to go through . . . Because I been working with wood, I make to get through the barbed wires. We planned that. Just not everybody [could escape with us]. It was four people. The rest of them wasn't supposed to know. They had a piece of board two of them like <gestures off camera> . . . nailed down with four piece wood, just with one nail. One nail here <gestures off camera>, one nail at the bottom. You put a piece of table over there, take the top one, and it rested against the barbed wires. We planned to go through the channel. It was shorter, like half that <gestures off camera>. Just wide about that much <gestures off camera, but seems to be indicating approximately two feet wide>. This was double.

<Interview pauses, then resumes>

Josef: We had some music, the orchestra.⁶⁶ The Hungarians wasn't too hospitable to the people.⁶⁷ In a way over there, they'd been eating almost to the last minute until they went to them. They were burning some lamps, candles, make a *Shabbos*, and everything. They crossed the border. They went over there and the Jews threw them out.

<Interview pauses, then resumes>

Josef: Because was November, it was cold. They were living sixty police. We was 120 in the same . . . not the room. We didn't have . . . not a room, just material [a tent] . . . a Russian campus. We had two campus and they had one campus.

<Interview pauses, then resumes>

Josef: In the barbed wires was two openings [gates]. We had some fire inside to keep warm. It was in November. In Poland, November is pretty cold. [The guards also] get them some fires.

⁶⁶ In many ghettos and concentration or extermination camps, music was performed on command as a regular part of the camp's daily routine. Amateur and professional musicians from among the prisoners formed officially sanctioned orchestras, ensembles, bands, and choirs. The musicians performed as directed by the camp administration. Prisoners sometimes performed for the entertainment of the SS or as background music for work details leaving and returning to camp. Music often accompanied punishments and executions as well. In the extermination camps, prisoners sometimes performed during the selection process or near the crematoriums as a means of deceiving and calming newly arrived prisoners. According to Leon Wells' account in *The Death Brigade*, there was a tent in the area where the *Sonderkommando* were housed which had musicians. Wells mentions that the musicians served an important role in the planning of the escape. The prisoners would sing along with the music to fool the guards into believing nothing was amiss. During the escape, the prisoners relied on the musicians to help disguise the sounds of any commotion made during the escape.

⁶⁷ HUngharians

Is not the same people that planned to run away, to make the hole. Other ones, they used to call him burn *meister* [German: master]. He took care of the fire. [He and other prisoners] shoveled [hot coals] from the fire [onto the guards at] both sides, [at the] same time, put on the **Shutzwaffe**, on the people whoever been . . . ⁶⁸ The people ran out. We all ran out, just nobody knew where to go. You couldn't see from here to the bushes [indicates a very short distance].

Some of them survived. I don't know—maybe ten. Some come . . . they brought them back [were captured]. **[Unintelligible; 7:40]** under the city. After the war, some of them died. One of them I know is alive. We are in touch—the guy [Leon Wells] who sent me the book, *The Death Brigade*. Everybody took some other jobs—like [Simon] Wiesenthal.⁶⁹ He do something else. He got the profession. The Germans sent him to school. He is younger than I am. He was with me from the beginning. He survived.

A few more survived. I know two of them died. I see them alive. I know they died. I talk to him sometimes. He calls me up. He says in Australia is somebody. We survived—just three or four. I know one of them. I gave him some money when we ran away. He's supposed to be alive. Somebody told me he's in Mexico.

When I took out the clothes [from the pits after the executions], I took out the money—dollar bills, gold, whatever it is. Because I was working, I took a piece of lumber and make a hole a big piece and covered it up so it looks like one piece. I'd been planning to run away. I told the helper next to me, I said, "You get you one of them sticks." I got a stick and he got a stick. Somebody told me he's alive. I don't know. I never seen him.

I was sitting in a well for two or three months. I went over there. I had a brother, a child. She was a Ukrainian and he was a Pole. They had two small children. A child was left over because they killed my sister-in-law, my brother, and another child. I took a two and half year

⁶⁸ According to Leon Wells' account in *The Death Brigade*, the plan for escape was that two prisoners would approach each of the two gates, carrying items that made it appear they wanted to trade with the guards. They would attack and kill the guards and then the four would go to the tent where the other guards were sleeping and kill them. On the night of the escape, the first pair disabled the guard quickly but not before he had cried out. Afraid the guard at the second gate would be alerted, a prisoner who had been sent to build a fire to keep the guard warm, used his shovel to throw hot coals in the guard's face before hitting him in the head with the shovel, killing him.

⁶⁹ Simon Wiesenthal (1908—2005) was a Jewish architect living in Lvov, Poland at the beginning of World War II. In 1941, he was sent to the Janowska concentration camp and then to a labor camp. He escaped in 1943 as the labor camp was being liquidated but was recaptured in June 1944 and sent to Janowska again. When the concentration camp was liquidated, Wiesenthal was sent on a westward trek through Plaszow, Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald, before finally being liberated at Mauthausen in May 1945. After the war, Wiesenthal dedicated his life to locating and prosecuting Nazis who had evaded justice. In 1947, he opened the Jewish Historical Documentation Center in Austria.

[old] baby and put her where I been working, not far from the camp. I didn't have nowhere to go. It took me two days to go over there because you couldn't go in the daytime; just in the night. I went over there.

We was in a well, hidden for 3 months. Then when the Russians was all in the Polish territory, I had to leave the place. Come spring, they was afraid the well will get deeper and I will drown there and they wouldn't have any [clean, safe drinking] water. It was my roughest time I believe. I was covered up complete. Food they gave me . . . You know what a well is? Country wells, they got concrete and wood around in a square. They take away a piece of lumber and give me the food [and then would replace] the lumber. All the time I been asking . . . In spring, the water comes higher, and higher, and higher. I been asking them to give me some bricks to make . . . That much space [indicates two to three feet] I had leftover. He threw me out. He said, "You got to go out."

Then I went in to jail. From there I came in the concentration camp. In jail, I [tried to] hang myself. They cut me [down]. I was afraid they'd recognized me because we broke out. When you go in the jail, on the wall, there was names of others. I found some names from my brigade, too. Everybody wrote their name [on the cell walls]. When they caught them, they killed them. I was just 24 hours in jail because they took me out of there to execute . . . even soldiers—Polish soldiers, Russian soldiers, probably [some] was Jewish. It is unbelievable. Boys 15 or 14 years [old] used to come in with . . . riding whip. They used to beat us over the face until blood covered the skin and everything. Fifteen years old! Maybe not yet 15. They sure was rude.

Erna: Mean.

Josef: Yes. They used to say, "*Gnadenschuss*" [German: mercy shot].

Erna: Mercy.

Josef: Mercy, that's right. "*Gnade*." [German: mercy]. It was not too pleasant. You can sit a whole night every day is [like] a year. These are not soldiers. It's impossible. I never did want to go . . . I never did want to talk . . .

You want to know something else?

Erna: Only if you want to tell us.

Josef: [It is] hard to tell. I'm glad that somebody lived.

Erna: Somebody had to live to tell the story; otherwise they wouldn't know what happened.

Josef: It's a lot of people . . . especially in our place now because it was the last point they broke from Holland . . .⁷⁰ Of all the things I remember from the war, what make me sad . . . I couldn't forget it. When I been working in the camp . . . before, when they put me in the concentration camp—just in the camp . . . [unintelligible; 11:10] Commander . . . where they sent everything to the front. It was a special base.

Erna: A supply . . .

Josef: Supply small engines, and tanks, and different kind of stuff. We were working over there—different nations: French war prisoners, volunteers, Russian war prisoners, Jewish, Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, all kinds. It was a big place. It was [unintelligible; 11:35]. In the morning, every nation, every group stayed . . . there was the next to me was the whole people everywhere . . . what's happened next to me. Why I remember that . . . [next to where I was housed] stayed two Russian [groups]. One part of the Russians was prisoners of war. The other one was volunteers, [unintelligible; 11:56; sounds like "Talmaci"]. I don't know what state it is. Anyway, we get in the morning a loaf of bread. We were in . . . The other ones, how they feed the Russians I don't know. We had a separate kitchen. Once in a while, they cooked some ox tails and put in some potatoes and made some soup. We stayed out before everybody goes to his place of work. It was a huge place. One Russian took a loaf of bread. The Russian volunteers—*Talmaci*—took a piece of bread and threw to the Russian war prisoners. How hungry we was and they was! They picked up the bread and everybody started to take out a part of it. [One of the Russian prisoners of war] picked up the bread and threw it back, [calling the Russian volunteers], "[unintelligible Russian phrase, 12:26] Get chalked, doc!" I swear, I could never this forget. Nobody knows what means hunger. [The prisoner] resisted the hunger because he [felt the volunteer] was a traitor and threw the bread back. I will never forget it. I've mentioned it many times—all the time—how people are. *Ich lebst, stirbst du*. [German: I live, you die.] You understand?

Erna: You're saying that people are . . .

Josef: They didn't care!

Erna: In English, they call it, "Dog eat dog," that people come to the level . . .

⁷⁰ It is unclear what Josef is referring to here. The Netherlands were liberated by Canadian forces in April 1945, while the area around Lvov was liberated by the Soviets in July 1944.

Josef: No, it's not the same expression. I want you to understand. If I live, you die. If you die, I live. You just . . . Everybody could take the guts out of his neighbor if he will survive . . . Everybody just wants to survive.

Erna: That is human nature.

Josef: They didn't care what price. It was not all the time. They brought one time to us a friend of a brother I knew very well. He was injured just like I was injured. He was injured or something. They asked him to work. He said, "I'm not to work. I want to be killed." They killed him. He was shot somewhere. He was in bandages. They very seldom brought something . . . they killed somebody from our . . . They got some gangrene.⁷¹ It was . . . your whole body get red. It is an infection. Whoever got gangrene, they had to have a replacement. They brought some criminals—whoever did something bad they brought them concentration camp. After us, after I went over there . . . was six or seven months still was concentration camp. They finished up somewhere in the fall.⁷² It was pretty late. The ladies, the women, they sure make . . . I believe I already said that . . . they all was quiet to the execution. Like men, they used to go . . . They carried them. He was clean. Not ladies, not women. I haven't seen the children at all. They probably took the children a year earlier or whatever it is.

<Tape 3 Ends>

<Tape 4 Begins>

Erna: Again, we thank you for doing this tape.

Josef: You're welcome.

<Tape 4 Ends>

Interview Ends

⁷¹ Gangrene refers to the death of body tissue due to either a lack of blood flow or a serious bacterial infection. The condition often affects toes, fingers, and limbs, but can affect muscles and organs. Symptoms include discolored skin (usually red or black), severe pain followed by numbness, and foul discharge. Poor sanitation conditions in the camps meant almost all prisoners suffered from boils, rashes, and abscesses from vitamin deficiency or infections such as gangrene. The prisoners may have also developed gangrene from frostbite.

⁷² The liquidation of the Janowska camp began in October 1943, just before the *Sonderkommando*'s escape.

Cuba Family Archives