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JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
LEGACY PROJECT**

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INTERVIEW BEGINS

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Michele: Today is January 15, 2001. Could you tell us your full name and, if you know, who you were named after?

Jacob: My full name, before the war was Jacob Kachan . . . K-A-C-H-A-N. After coming over here, I changed it—took out the “C” because most people called me “Ketchan.” I wanted my name to stay “Kahan,” so I took the “C” back out.

Michele: Do you know who you were named after, the name “Jacob”?

Jacob: After me?

Michele: Who you were named after?

Jacob: Yes, after my grandfather . . . because my grandfather actually, one of them was still alive, when the war broke out. The other one was killed during World War I by the Russian Bolsheviks.¹ The reason . . . why they killed him is, it was on a Friday, and my grandmother was *bentshn likht* [Yiddish: to (light and) bless candles], preparing *Shabbos* [Yiddish: Sabbath]. Saying a prayer for the candle is “*bentshn*.” *Bentshn* the candles . . . they do with the hands when they *bentshn*. The windows were shaded with a sheet. The shade . . . it was almost like you see sometimes those puppet shows. That’s what they told me. Of course, I didn’t see it. [The Russians] seen it through the window. They thought that my grandfather’s a spy, and showing with some mimics what’s going on, and they execute him right there.

Michele: What was family life . . .

¹ The Bolsheviks, originally also Bolshevists or Bolsheviki, were members of the majority faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party, which was renamed the Communist Party after seizing power in the October Revolution of 1917. When World War I started, Polish territory was partitioned between Austria-Hungary, the German Empire, and the Russian Empire. The area around Lodz was part of the Russian Empire until Poland regained its independence in 1918.

Jacob: His name was Jacob.

Michele: What was family life like in your house before the war?

Jacob: We were trading. We were manufacturing women's summer shoes.² We had two stores ourselves—small stores. We were . . . a lot of it was made by other people, what we send out we, we supplied the material, and they just done the finished product, just labor. We paid them so much per shoe. We wasn't rich, but we were comfortable. We had our own house. I had two sisters [Sara and Rose]: one older and one younger.

Michele: When you weren't working, what kinds of things did your family do together?

Jacob: I'm sorry I didn't quite . . .

Michele: When you weren't working, what kind of things did your family do together for fun? What kind of things did you do together?

Jacob: We celebrated. My mother [Malka] was Orthodox Jewish, from an Orthodox Jewish family.³ We had a kosher home, but my father [Moses] was more socialistic leaned. I wouldn't say a communist, but his brothers were very active in Communism. One actually went to Russia and was fighting together with the Bolsheviks. My father was still raised on keeping a Jewish home, but he wasn't that Orthodox. I was . . . he raised me in a Hebrew School. I used to go to grammar school in the morning to public Polish school. After I came home in the afternoon about one o'clock because we started, I believe, seven or, or eight, and then I went to a *cheder* for quite a few hours because it was getting dark.⁴ Of course, Polish winters, they're pretty short days . . . but I believe I still used to go about four, five hours even to a *cheder*. I was raised . . . I could read the Yiddish and the Hebrew, but I couldn't speak Hebrew.⁵ I could read, daven—say prayer in Hebrew—but I couldn't quite understand, because we didn't use [Hebrew]. We used

² Jews were an integral part of the textile industry of Lodz, which was known as the “Manchester of Poland.” (The city of Manchester had been the center of Great Britain's textile industry since the Industrial Revolution.) Jews owned many plants and factories in Lodz, including one of the largest in Europe.

³ Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the Written *Torah* and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

⁴ *Cheder* [Hebrew: room] 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*.

⁵ 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. The vast majority of Jews living in Lodz before World War II spoke Yiddish, but increasingly used Polish.

the Yiddish language at home. We just spoke just Yiddish, very little Polish. We used Polish in school, but once we came home, we used Yiddish.

Michele: Do you still speak Yiddish today?

Jacob: Yes, I use fluent Yiddish. I can read and write Yiddish, even now. As little as I used it, but it's a little harder for me than I used to, but I still can read it.

Michele: You mentioned that you were fluent in Yiddish?

Jacob: Yes.

Michele: Are there any particular Yiddish words that remind you of your mom and dad?

Jacob: Just about anything . . . Yes, at home I was called by my mother "Yankel," Jacob, but in Yiddish she called me, of course, my sisters and my dad, the same way, all called me "Yankel." My friends even in [concentration and labor] camp, they called me, "Yankel, go organize something." I was actually, that group what we worked together, what we were, most of the time we were working in construction work. We had a small group what we were mixing, we didn't have no machines mixing the concrete, we mixed it by hand, the cement and the sand and the, and the stones. Everything just so much, one-third of this, one-third . . . we knew exactly how the formula for different type of concrete to use and we were mixing it. That group was about approximately ten young boys, most of them a little older than I was. They covered for me up that I could go and steal something. I always brought something. I always find something to steal . . . like I say, organize . . . from the kitchen—some potatoes or some carrots. I had a way, I don't know, I was lucky, but one time I was shot at, and I had, they almost killed me, very close, got shot through the, a bullet shot through, but that was at night when I . . .

Michele: How do you think that incident affected you? How did you feel?

Jacob: I was in Nordhausen at that time.⁶ I was breaking into what they were keeping behind the kitchen. We used to . . . in summer, we used to bury carrots and potatoes, not in a shed, but we made like mounds. We covered with straw, and then we put earth on it, maybe a

⁶ Nordhausen was also known as 'Mittelbau-Dora,' 'Dora-Mittelbau' or 'Nordhausen-Dora.' This was a camp system with about 40 sub-camps around the main camp of Mittelbau (or Dora). It was established late in the war on August 28, 1943 throughout the Harz Mountain region in central Germany to manufacture missiles and rockets. Prisoners were put to work building V-1 and V-2 missiles and on other projects related to weapons development and production. The assembly place for the rockets was actually inside a mountain for protection from air raids. The prisoners worked underground building tunnels. The workers were mostly miners and construction workers. At its peak, over 40,000 prisoners worked in the camp system. They lived and worked underground, although at the end of 1944 some barracks were built outside the tunnels for the additional workers. The conditions were catastrophic and the mortality rate was very high.

few inches of earth, and then we leave it for the wintertime. That was the storage area. At night, I used to break in and load my shirt full of that and escape, but they have guards watching those mounds. One of those guards see me escape, and he shot a few times. One bullet grazed me and opened the skin. The bullet didn't go in the head, it just went through and cut my skin on [temple area]. I believe it's still a little . . . but I had to hide for quite a few days until it healed up. I couldn't go to a doctor. We didn't have no hospital and no doctors anyhow, and no shots for [tetanus]. After awhile—maybe a couple of weeks or so—it healed up . . .

Michele: What motivated you to take that risk?

Jacob: I wanted to help my friends and I wasn't just scared, that's all. To think back about it, that was my way to just like fight against the Germans. I didn't have a gun, so that's how I opposed them—by doing just the opposite what they wanted me to do. I didn't want to starve and I didn't want my friends to see starve. They didn't have the guts to do that, but to me, it was an adventure or I was just too stupid to think . . . something, but I done it all the time. Or if I had a chance to escape or I had a chance . . . even in Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁷ I was about a month in Auschwitz-Birkenau before they sent me to Czestochowa.⁸ Everybody had to get tattooed . . . those people what they were already tattooed, they already got, they got the soup and a piece of bread, what they were given.⁹ Those what they didn't get the tattoos had to wait for a long, long

⁷ Auschwitz-Birkenau was a network of camps built and operated by Germany just outside the Polish town of Oswiecim (renamed 'Auschwitz' by the Germans) in Polish areas annexed by Germany during World War II. It is estimated that the SS and police deported at a minimum 1.3 million people (approximately 1.1 million of which were Jews) to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex between 1940 and 1945. Camp authorities murdered 1.1 million of these prisoners.

⁸ Czestochowa [Polish: Częstochowa; sometimes also spelled 'Czenstochowa'] is a city located about 200 kilometers (124 miles) southwest of Warsaw, Poland. The Germans occupied it on September 3, 1939. In April 1941, a ghetto was created. Between September and November 1942, the ghetto was mostly liquidated in a series of *Aktions*. Those who remained were sent to work in area labor camps. In the second half of 1943, some 5,000 to 6,000 Jews were brought in from Lodz, Plaszow and Skarzysko-Kamienna to supplement the labor force. This may have been when Jacob arrived in Czestechowa. HASAG (also known as Hugo Schneider AG or by its original name in German: *Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft*) was a German metal goods manufacturer that became a Nazi arms-manufacturing conglomerate and the third largest user of forced labor in German-occupied Europe. During World War II, HASAG maintained dozens of armaments factories in Germany and Poland, with at least four factories around Czestochowa: HASAG-Peltzery, HASAG-Rakow, HASAG-Warta, and HASAG-Czestochowianka. The largest labor camp was HASAG-Rakow, a former ironworks. HASAG-Pelcery (also spelled Pelzery) was a former textile factory near the railroad station, which had been converted into an ammunition factory. There was also *Metalurgia*, a foundry on Krotka Street, and HASAG-Warta and HASAG-Czestochowianka. In general, a policy of "extermination through work" was applied in the labor camps. It is estimated that around 50,000 of the at least 58,000 Jews who were in Czestochowa throughout the war were killed.

⁹ During the Holocaust, concentration camp prisoners received tattoos only at one location, the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex. Tattooing was introduced at Auschwitz in the autumn of 1941 for Soviet prisoners of war. In March 1942, tattoos were used to identify prisoners at Auschwitz II (Birkenau). By the spring of 1943, the SS authorities throughout the entire Auschwitz complex adopted the practice of tattooing almost all previously

time. I was hungry, so I made out like I'm rolling down [my sleeve] like I already got my tattoo, and ran over and I got my soup and, and a piece of bread. I never got tattooed. I didn't want to get tattooed because I said, "Maybe if I escape, I don't want to have a tattoo on my hand." So I even got by without being tattooed . . . in Oswiecim.¹⁰

Michele: Where do you think, where did you learn your bravery and your cleverness?

Jacob: I learned it. I got into to camps very early; actually, I was about fourteen years old. You see, the way I got to . . . I was born in Lodz [Poland].¹¹ When the Germans marched in, they annexed it—Litzmannstadt—to being part of Germany.¹² We were from the first, in 1939, the end of 1939, we were already the first what they send out from Lodz, what they send out to deep Poland. We were the first one, and from then on, I already were in camps—not in concentration camps, they didn't have no concentration camps at that time, but there was work camps. I gradual learned how to survive and how to get by.

I knew the *kommandos*.¹³ I knew when they start coming in. They had *sonderkommandos*, what they used to travel from one camp to the other and pick up the weak, what they looked too weak to work to them.¹⁴ Of course, everybody looked . . . none of them looked too healthy. But they picked out those what they thought looked too weak to work, and

registered and newly arrived prisoners, including female prisoners. Prisoners were given tattoos on their forearms of their camp serial number, which was also sewn onto their uniforms. Only prisoners selected for work were registered and given serial numbers; those that were sent directly to the gas chambers were not registered or given tattoos.

¹⁰ Oswiecim [Polish: Oświęcim; German: Auschwitz] is a town in southern Poland and was the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp.

¹¹ Lodz [Polish: Łódź] was a large textile manufacturing city and Jewish cultural center about 75 miles from Warsaw, Poland and approximately 230 kilometers (143 miles) east of the German border. Lodz had a population of 665,000, of whom 34 percent (223,000) were Jews. The Germans occupied it on September 8, 1939 and renamed it "Litzmannstadt." After the German invasion, Lodz was annexed into the Reich. Immediately after occupying Lodz, the Germans began seizing Jews for forced labor, confiscating Jewish property, and executing or deporting to concentration camps hundreds of the city's elite. To make room for "repatriated" ethnic Germans [German: *Volkesdeutschen*], waves of Jews and Poles were deported to the Generalgouvernement.

¹² Both the Russian and German armies invaded Poland in September 1939. On September 28, Germany and the Soviet Union reached an agreement partitioning Poland and outlining their zones of occupation. A demarcation line for the partition of German- and Russian-occupied Poland was established along the Bug River, between Krakow and Lvov. The demarcation line would remain in effect until June 22, 1941, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in a military campaign codenamed Operation "Barbarossa."

¹³ *Kommando* is a generic German word meaning "unit" or "command." During World War II, it was also the basic unit of organization of slave laborers in German concentration camps, equivalent to a detail or detachment.

¹⁴ *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.

they sent them to camp, to exterminating camps, or to Auschwitz-Birkenau, or to Treblinka, or to some other camps.¹⁵ When they came in, first, I worked always, never worked in the barracks, in the inside, there were quite a few of them what they, trades people like, what they were making uniforms, and shoemakers, they were making shoes, but I always worked on the outside on construction work. When I seen those *sonderkommandos* coming in, I knew what they were fixing to do, that they going start picking some out for dead. I hid or I watched them very close to, where they got to the other side. I learned how to get by. I knew from early on, not like those people what they fresh came in let's say in 1943, what they were liquidated ghettos, what they didn't know nothing about camps. They were well fed and some of them well educated, not used to do that type of work, and they didn't last too long in camp. Even if they didn't get killed, they starved, starvation, or disease, or some other . . .

Michele: Did you see . . . do you have memories of your mother or your father taking risks to protect you or your other sisters?

Jacob: No, my father, he was in the Polish army, and he never came back from Warsaw.¹⁶ He was in Warsaw what I last heard. I never heard of him. But my mother and two sisters, they were in the ghetto in Krosno, where we were sent from Lodz to Polish protected, German-occupied Poland, what they called at that time.¹⁷ They were until maybe the end of 1941 or 1942, I don't know when they were . . . it was a little city, and I don't even know, I never heard of them

¹⁵ Treblinka was established in the Lublin district of Poland in November 1941. It began operations as a death camp in July 1942. Treblinka was part of the Operation Reinhard program, which also included the death camps of Sobibor and Belzec. All three camps were pure extermination facilities, that is, the Germans intended that any Jews who went into the camp were never come out again. Nearly 900,000 people were murdered at Treblinka. Treblinka was closed in early 1943.

¹⁶ Although Polish forces had been preparing for conflict, when the Germans invaded Poland from the north, south, and west on September 1, 1939 and rapidly advanced, Polish forces withdrew from their forward bases of operation close to the Polish-German border to more established lines of defense to the east. When the Russians invaded from the east on September 17, Polish defenses were quickly overwhelmed. Polish forces soon retreated toward Warsaw, where they were defeated in a massive encirclement attack and siege. The Polish Army finally capitulated on September 28. A large proportion of the Polish army was captured during the invasion: around 400,000 men by the German forces and over 200,000 by Soviet troops. The troops in Warsaw were evacuated to German prisoner of war camps. Some of the prisoners were released, but many were sent to concentration camps or used as forced laborers.

¹⁷ Krosno is a town in what is southeastern Poland today, near the borders of Ukraine and Slovakia. It is approximately 320 kilometers (200 miles) southeast of Lodz. The Germans occupied Krosno on September 9, 1941. Shortly thereafter, Jews from Krosno were sent to the Frysztak labor camp to work on Hitler's local headquarters complex. By the end of 1941 the Jews population of the Krosno ghetto was 2,072. In August 1942, the old and sick were murdered in the ghetto after a selection and the rest sent to Belzec death camp and murdered. Between 300 and 600 Jews remained in the closed ghetto until December 4, 1942, when all but 25 were sent to labor camps in the Rzeszow area. In February 1944 those Jews who were still alive in the camps around Rzeszow were sent to Plaszow labor camp near Krakow. When Plaszow was liquidated the Jews were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen and Stutthof concentration camps.

until . . . as long as the ghetto was there, once in a while I escaped from work camp and got to the ghetto and seen them and stayed there, but I had to go back to work because men, especial there was Polish, it was a Jewish *Judenrat* what they called, and we had Jewish police, *kapo* police.¹⁸ Once they found out that you escaped from a camp, they was afraid themselves. They said, “Turn, go back to work or, you know, we going to be . . . We are responsible for you.” They caused me to go back because some other people might get hurt because of me, so I just maybe stayed in the ghetto for a little while and then got back to a work camp.

Michele: Do you have any memories of people helping you, having memories of people taking risks to help you in your survival at any point?

Jacob: No. I didn’t need no help. I could help myself. The only thing what keeps me going is to survive and have revenge on the Germans and see that some of my family survived. Actually, I stayed in Germany [after the war]. I would have . . . left Germany maybe a little sooner if not my first wife. She always insisted that we still go and find somebody in her family. Actually, she did find a cousin, what she came back. She actually survived not in the camps, but survived what she escaped to Russia, and then came back to Germany after the war was over.¹⁹ That’s the only cousin what my wife found. In my family, as far as I knew, what I’m still have hope, even now, wherever I go, I always ask about family on my mother’s side or on my father’s side, but I haven’t found any. I always, just like I say, even up to now, even if I go to some kind

¹⁸ To assist in managing the large communities within ghettos and concentration or labor camps, German authorities installed a hierarchy of Jewish administrative units under their control. The *Judenrat* or *Ältestenrat* was a Council of Jewish leaders established in the various ghettos and Jewish communities of Nazi-occupied Europe. They were installed to manage the communities and provide the Germans with forced laborers. A *Judischer Ordnungsdienst* [German: Jewish Ghetto Police; also known as the OD], was also established by the Germans to keep order in occupied areas. They were often referred to as the “Jewish Police.” A *kapo* was a prisoner in a concentration camp who was assigned by the SS guards to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks in the camp. The *kapo* system minimized costs by allowing the camps to function with fewer SS personnel. It was designed to turn victim against victim, as the *kapos* were pitted against their fellow prisoners in order to maintain the favor of their SS guards.

¹⁹ As the invading German forces advanced east in September of 1939, hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees fled westward. It is estimated that the number of refugees who crossed from the German-occupied part of Poland to the areas annexed by the Soviet Union totaled about 300,000. The Russians left the border freely open to traffic until the end of October 1939. From then until the end of 1939 a small number of persons still crossed the border. When the Russians then annexed eastern Poland and a German-Russian demarcation line was established, some of the refugees returned home, while about 40,000 continued their flight fearing arrest and persecution in either German- or Russian-occupied territory. Many headed to Romania, Hungary, and Lithuania, only to later become victims of mass killing operations when German forces advanced deep into Soviet territory in 1941. The vast majority of the Polish refugees, however, remained in Soviet-occupied Poland. In 1940 and 1941, Soviet secret police officials arrested many of the refugees, who were considered “unreliable elements,” and deported them to Siberia, central Asia, and other locations in the interior of the Soviet Union. While they endured horrible conditions, this paradoxically saved the lives of a few hundred thousand Jewish refugees.

of gathering or to Israel or Washington, I keep asking people they knew from that city what happened, and where, what, but I don't believe they survived. You never want to give up. It's always in my mind that it's impossible that so many members in my family could have died. A lot of them lived . . . most what I knew lived in Lodz in the city.

Michele: Will you tell us your experience and then your escape from Bergen-Belsen?

Jacob: Yes. In Bergen-Belsen, I came in from Nordhausen.²⁰ Nordhausen was a camp where we were making the V1 and V2.²¹ [The Germans] evacuated it because the Russians were getting pretty close on them. They brought us into Bergen-Belsen. I don't know the distance from Nordhausen to Bergen-Belsen, but it took quite a few days to get us to Bergen . . . actually not, they call it Bergen-Belsen because it was a little city, "Bergen," and then "Belsen." They brought us into Bergen after maybe almost a week, traveling, stopping and traveling, stopping and traveling a few hours, and no food. They had in those cattle trains they had maybe packed in two hundred people. They packed in . . . when we used to go in, we knew that we needed some space to breathe, we didn't want to get so we got all of them, most of them what we got in, we got to the front, though they took some two by fours [pieces of wood] and hit the front so all of them got to the back to escape the as far back and then when the people escaped to the back, they packed in another bunch of, like cattle until it was completely full, almost standing like herring. I remember when they opened the doors, maybe ten, twenty people actually could stand on their feet, get off and stand on their feet. The rest of them just stayed behind, or a few of them, what they did get off, they were very weak, they shot them. They shot them right there. The rest of

²⁰ Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp near Hanover in northwest Germany, located between the villages of Bergen and Belsen. It was established in 1935 as a prison camp for political prisoners, criminals, Communists, "asocials" etc. from the area. In 1943 it began to serve as a transit camp for Jewish prisoners who were initially excluded from deportation. They were to be held in exchange for Germans interned in western countries. Toward the end of the war, Bergen-Belsen became a dumping place for Jews marched out of camps in the east. There was no housing for them, no medical care, no food, and no water. Ultimately there were about 41,000 prisoners in the camps and the mortality rate was extreme. From late 1944, food rations throughout Bergen-Belsen continued to shrink. By early 1945, prisoners would sometimes go without food for days; fresh water was also in short supply. Sanitation was incredibly inadequate, with few latrines and water faucets for the tens of thousands of prisoners interned in Bergen-Belsen at this time. Overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, and the lack of adequate food, water, and shelter led to an outbreak of diseases such as typhus, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and dysentery, causing an ever-increasing number of deaths. In the first few months of 1945, tens of thousands of prisoners died.

²¹ The 'V weapons' were the V1 and V2 rockets that were used by Germany at the end of World War II. They were the world's first cruise missiles. The V-1 was a pilotless airplane/bomb (today what we call a 'drone') which the Germans launched at Britain and parts of Belgium near the end of the war. It carried one ton of high explosives. It was pre-programmed so that the engine would stop at a certain point after which they would randomly fall. It was purely a terror weapon. The V-2 rocket was more sophisticated and was really the world's first ballistic missile.

them what could walk, we had to walk to Bergen-Belsen. A lot of them dropped walking. It wasn't too far to the camp, but it still maybe five or seven miles from that train depot.

Michele: How were you at that point? How were you feeling at that point?

Jacob: I was very weak, but I was strong enough to walk. It was wintertime . . . it was January. I remember having my bed cover with me and I had it over a head. There wasn't a fast march because nobody could walk fast, but I was making it. I didn't sit down or fall down. I had enough strength to come into Bergen-Belsen. When I came in to Bergen-Belsen, the conditions were awful. All you could see is skeletons, like a dead person walking. There was no work. They already disorganized. There was very few . . . not too many guards even. Not an awful lot of guards because there was no work details to go out. They didn't feed us, and didn't . . . just, once a day, they brought a big kettle, a fifty gallon, and most of the time, we were fighting about that—even that water, what they were getting. One pushed the other that a lot of time, we turned over the whole kettle of food because that, those in the front didn't have no choice. They were pushed. The guards didn't care. Sometime they took a stick and started beating us, but then later on, they just didn't care. [They thought,] “Let them [do] whatever they . . . were doing.” They didn't care too much. It was already very close to, some of them already had a feeling that that's getting to the end. I had that feeling because I never seen Germans to be that, that much disorganized the way that Bergen-Belsen already was. Or they didn't care. They thought, “They going to die anyhow,” and just let it go that way.

One morning, I was already maybe a week and there was nothing to steal in that camp. There wasn't . . . so finally I figured out that some of those manholes got to be . . . a water drainage sewer or a regular sewer, whatever. We managed to open one and I was the one who crawled in. I said, “It's got to go somewhere. It's a sewer.” It wasn't a very large. You had to actually on all four you could . . . it was big enough to get down on all four. We kept crawling until every, whatever we seen a manhole, we raised it and looked a little out, are we behind the fences. Once we seen that it's already behind the fence, that the fences are behind us, we opened that manhole, and it was getting dark. We waited until it got dark and we got out. Then for a few days, we lived from the German fields what they left over, potatoes. It was in wintertime. There was nothing growing, but a lot of it, what they left over, what wasn't fit or whatever, or just left over, what they skipped, we could still dig out potatoes and a lot of those big . . . like a turnip . . . what's that called?

Michele: Rutabaga?

Jacob: Rutabaga, that's right. Yes, rutabaga. If we find those, that was a delicacy. We kind of supported ourselves for a few days. Then we looked, we watched farm houses, and we didn't see no men in some farm houses . . . just women and kids. We finally got bold enough and got in and asked for food, that we don't want to do no harm, just, we still had the . . . blue and white stripe [prisoner] uniforms on. Most of them fed us. They said, "Get away because there's a lot of German soldiers and SS around; you get away." Or they meant really the truth, told us the true or they wanted us to get away, but always when we got food in a farm house, we didn't stay around too long. We escaped. Every day we made about twenty miles or so. We were already strong. We really were pretty good back at our health.

Then one day, we seen a semi tank truck . . . and we knew the German crosses on the tanks. We seen the star. We knew or it's American or it's English. We seen that star, we knew it must be ours. We start waving and they seen that we had the prison uniforms on. They put us in top of it and took us into a camp. They gave us uniforms. It was still war going on. That was a reconnaissance unit, a forward unit, what they actually were picking up packets of prisoners, what they were called [by troops in the area who said], "Say listen, you two, three miles away. Well, we got ten prisoners." They were doing that, picking up prisoners. They didn't let them inside. They had to march in front and they were driving behind them until they got to the camp. The camps wasn't too far away. That's the units what we were with until April 15, [1944]. For about three months. We were with that unit. They gave us guns, we were just like soldiers—not under discipline, we just about done what we wanted to do—but we were getting the same food what the soldiers were getting and cigarettes and everything just like a soldier, like a private. We were translating too.

Once in a while, we had a chance—they didn't let us because some of those officers were pretty mean. They didn't let the prisoners [get] hurt, but if they didn't have the officers—just the soldiers—we could roughen up. We couldn't kill, but we could roughen up a few Germans. That's the only revenge what we could take. We had an officer, he must have been of German descent or something. He once stuck the gun to my head. I couldn't speak English and he speaked a little German. He said if I do that one more time—hurt prisoners—that he showed me he's going put a bullet in my head. He could [have been] just bluff[ing], but he done that to stop [us hurting the German prisoners]. Once in a while if we had a chance, we did roughen up a

few prisoners. One of us, Moshe, a friend of mine, he was a little on the sadistic side. He could kill. He could really. As much as I went through, I could never. I could shoot back if somebody was shooting at me, but actual going up in cold blood and killing somebody . . . even the worse what I went through, and what I seen, what they done to me, I still couldn't do that, couldn't kill people. It just takes a certain character to be that way. Of course I made up . . . Moshe said, "Yankle, what's wrong with you? That's a German. Blow his brains out." I'd say, "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah," but most of what I could do is give him a kick or a punch. But actually pick up the gun and kill somebody, I couldn't do it—not my character. But Moshe, he could, and once we got liberated . . . when the Bergen-Belsen camp was liberated, I just left everything and went back to Bergen-Belsen.²² That's how I met Mona.²³

She was very undernourished. Even after the liberation where we had plenty food, she was never actually adjusted. She could never . . . adjust herself to just forget about what happened. I seen a lot of killing, but she said she seen her own family in Lodz . . . She was in the ghetto all the time, until she came in from the ghetto to Bergen-Belsen. She seen her own family dying. I believe her mother was with her until almost the last minute. Her mother gave up the last piece . . . they were given some food, and she said she already ate, and gave her. That's how she survived. Her mother starved. She seen her mother starve for hunger in the ghetto. She seen a lot of more misery than I did. I seen groups bringing in what they escaped and being executed and bury them, but I didn't see that much . . . not that much suffering because, like I said, I always managed to steal something, not to die for hunger . . .

Michele: How would you describe Mona? How did you know that you wanted to marry her?

Jacob: We met just after the liberation of the camp. We used to go together until my wife, Mona—well, my girlfriend at that time—she found a cousin. She was in Hamburg [Germany].²⁴ That was a little city in . . . Bergen-Belsen was at that time the English zone.²⁵ It was a few

²² The British liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945 and it took them weeks to even be able to start to deal with the horrifying situation. Many thousands of prisoners died after liberation, being too far gone to recover. After liberation, the British burned the barracks of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp as a health precaution. A former German army camp nearby became a displaced persons (DP) camp for refugees. It was in operation from the summer of 1945 until September 1950. For a time, Bergen-Belsen was the largest Jewish DP camp in Germany, and the only one in the British occupation zone with an exclusively Jewish population.

²³ Mania (Mona) Kahan (née Markowicz) was born September 20, 1928 in Pabianice, Poland. She married Jacob on September 21, 1948 in Amberg, Germany. Mona died on September 18, 1958 in Atlanta, Georgia.

²⁴ Hamburg is a major port city in northern Germany, connected to the North Sea by the Elbe River.

²⁵ From 1945 to 1949, Germany was occupied by the Allied forces and divided into four administrative zones by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and the United States. The American occupied zone was in the southern

hundred miles away from the American zone from Hamburg, where she heard that her cousin survived the war. So we took a train and we met in Hamburg.

We decided to stay in Hamburg and that was already in 1947. We stayed in Hamburg. What the German government was giving us, we didn't go to work.²⁶ I did once in a while. I didn't feel like going to a German factory and work again for the Germans. Then both of us, we just traveled around . . . wherever we heard there was a displaced person [camp] like Landsberg²⁷ or some other displaced person camps.²⁸ We traveled to look for relatives, to see . . . especially my wife. She was very obsessed that she still going to find family. We registered with the Red Cross.²⁹ In every camp we came in, we registered. I would have gone back to Poland to look for family, but my wife didn't want to go. She said, "There's Communism over there and there's still antisemitism just like it was before the war," and it was.³⁰ Even those what survived . . .

Michele: How did you find out about your mother and what happened to your sisters?

Jacob: That they didn't survive?

Michele: Right.

Jacob: I didn't find out and even up to now, I still believe that somehow, somewhere . . . I know it's impossible, but it's still in my mind that some relatives survived, that it couldn't be that many just perished. Lately, I went back to Poland, just to have peace of mind. I wanted to . . .

portion of Germany and included the cities of Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Stuttgart, Nürnberg, and the southern part of the city of Berlin. The British zone was in northeastern Germany and included the cities of Hannover, Bremen, and Hamburg.

²⁶ Between 1945 and 1947, the Allied governments enacted various legislation dealing with reparations to be paid to the victims of Nazi oppression. The Jewish Agency presented the first official claim to the Allied governments in September 1945. The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) was established in October 1951 to help with individual claims against Germany arising from the Holocaust. The Claims Conference initially recovered \$100 million from West Germany, with direct compensation to Holocaust survivors paid in installments.

²⁷ Landsberg was the second largest displaced persons camp in the American Zone. It was founded in April 1945 in former military barracks near Munich. From October 1945 Landsberg functioned as an exclusively Jewish Camp. The population of 5000 Jewish DPs, chiefly comprised of Russian, Latvian, and Lithuanian survivors.

²⁸ When hostilities ended on May 8, 1945 in Europe, as many as 100,000 Jewish survivors found themselves among the 7,000,000 uprooted and homeless people classified as displaced persons (DPs). Allied forces established temporary facilities (DP Camps) across Germany, Austria, and Italy to house DPs.

²⁹ Displaced Jews registered with various aid agencies like UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), the IRO (International Refugee Organization), or the British Red Cross' Central Tracing Bureau (which would later be renamed the International Tracing Service) in the hopes of reconnecting with their families.

³⁰ After World War II, Poland was occupied by Soviet forces and soon became a Communist state, which was hostile to religious institutions. Many of the approximately 200,000 Polish Jewish survivors further 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).

. I had a heart attack a few years ago, and I thought, “I probably haven’t got too much longer left.” I said, “Before I die, I have to go back to Poland and at least walk in those places as a free man,” where I wasn’t under guards, beaten, and pushed, and couldn’t go. So at least I went back to those places just to have peace of mind.

Michele: What did it feel like when you were there?

Jacob: It was very sad, very sad to be in those places, but at least I felt like a burden from my heart came off, that I’m in the same place where I was beaten, and couldn’t do what I wanted, and now at least, I’m free in the same area where thousands died. It gave me a little peace of mind that at least I got that much satisfaction back in my life.

Michele: When you were there, if you could have said anything to the people that either helped you or harmed you, what would you have said if they were still alive or if they were still there?

Jacob: You see, some people what they lived in small towns, they know gentiles [non-Jewish] what they were neighbors or friends, and they could go back. But I lived in a large town. Our city had a hundred thousand Jews—maybe one-third, no actually one-half of the city was Jews, Jewish populated—and all our living we made between ourselves. It was some trade with the gentiles, too. I wouldn’t say a hundred percent just with Jewish [community], but most of them in large cities, that was going on. So I couldn’t tell you. I didn’t know an awful lot of gentile friends. Even in school, I went to with just Jewish [kids]. We had our own Jewish . . . even public schools, we had just Jewish, no gentiles. We had fight with the gentiles, just about every so often, there were waiting for us, to beat us up. I didn’t have too many gentile friends. A lot of them did help—what I heard, not [what I experienced] myself—but they didn’t have too much chance to help a Jew because they risked their life, too. There wasn’t too easy. If [the Germans] found a Jew hidden in a gentile home, they executed the gentiles, too. It was very big risk if somebody did hide a Jewish family, but—what I heard—there were quite a few took that risk.

Michele: Later on in life, what did you tell or teach your kids about the Holocaust?

Jacob: We survived. The least we can do, the horror what we seen . . . I was very uncomfortable to talk about it, even in my own family, even with my kids and my wife. I never talked about it, but later on, I decided we have to. We the only ones survived. We witnessed what happened, so at least, we ought to tell for future generations what happened during Nazi times.

The horrors and the killings . . . it's unbelievable. Even when I go over and tell my own story, I just don't believe that human beings could do things like that—that much cruelty and bring on that much suffering to other people. I, myself, will tell the story if in some way I can help that some horror like this, never happens again. I hope it never happens.

Michele: Is there anything else that you want to tell us? How did you come to live in Atlanta, Georgia?

Jacob: I didn't pick it. They assigned . . . when I got my papers for to come to United States, they just said that, "You're going to Atlanta."³¹ It didn't matter to me as long as I come to a free country, and I can earn a living, and raise a family. That mattered to me. That's how I came over here.

Michele: Did you move close to the Jewish community? Did you live . . .

Jacob: [Did] I knew people in the Jewish community? No, I didn't know anybody. I didn't have no family in the United States whatsoever, but I myself, didn't need no help. I didn't have no profession, but I knew . . . all those years I worked in construction. I figured, "I'm strong. I can go back in construction." I told people that I can paint and that's how I went in painting. First I worked for some painting companies. Then when I start learning the language a little bit, I went in business for myself. I earned a pretty good living being in paint contracting, painting and wall coloring. You want me . . .

Ruth: No. Did you say that you and Mona did not have children?

Jacob: No, we lived together. We were married together ten years. That was a big . . . she was so fragile. She was going to doctors all the time. She's had some woman problems. Actually she told me her first menstruation wasn't until she was twenty years old. She was so fragile from probably the camps and being hungry all those years. She was . . . finally when we came over here, she went to gynecologists, doctors. They told her she never going to have a child. Probably this was the straw . . . what finally decided, but she never brought it out. She was depressed. She had depressions and she didn't had no life in her . . . almost like a zombie or like didn't much care, but she never let anybody know that she has a mind to commit suicide. One of those days, she did. I came back from work and she committed suicide.

³¹ Jacob and Mona Kahan sailed from Bremerhaven, Germany on November 29, 1949 aboard the *USAT General Harry Taylor*. They arrived in New York on December 10, 1949.

We didn't had no kids. I wanted [to] at least leave . . . build a family and leave somebody [to] survive and carry on my name. I met my second wife. She was of . . . Jewish German descent. They managed to escape in 1939. They actually wasn't in camps, but they had a hard time to find a country what they wanted to take them in. Finally, they escaped with some valuables what they could pay to get off in Cuba.³² She had two sisters. They charged, I understand, five hundred dollars per head to get off in Cuba. They stayed in Cuba until after the war and then they managed to get papers to come to United States. I met her. I speak fluent German and I heard somebody speaking. I was in a club and I heard somebody speaking German. I started a conversation. That's how I met my wife.

Michele: Did you talk about your experiences of the war? Was that one of the things that you talked about?

Jacob: No. Never. Never until lately—the last few years. I didn't, when they got bigger, my kids, and of course, I raised three boys, I started tell them, but they already, they were too, they, I didn't want to burden them with all actual horrors what happened. I just wanted them to tell where they come from, where I come from, where my grandparents, and stuff like that. I didn't want to tell them stories about the camps. I didn't, but she . . . they learned little by little.

Michele: What were the values that you wanted to teach your kids?

Jacob: Well, kids . . . even if I don't believe what I seen and lived through, how could they heard it? They thought it's another story . . . just like other stories they heard from history, from what happened to Indians . . . but now when they're older, they understand murder. I took my middle son lately to Poland. I showed him all the camps—not all the camps, I was in quite a few camps—but I showed him Auschwitz-Birkenau. I showed him Krakow [Poland].³³ Krakow is not much left. That high mountain is still there in . . . Plaszow.³⁴ Under that mountain, thousands of

³² Most Latin American nations were relatively open to immigrants from 1918 to 1933. After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, however, antisemitic sentiments and economic concerns fueled by the Great Depression led to increasingly tight immigration laws being introduced throughout Latin America. As more and more Jews tried to flee Germany in the 1930's, immigration quotas in other countries and the difficulty of obtaining a visa from the German government made emigration harder and harder. On May 5, 1939, four months before World War II began, Cuba issued Decree 937, which severely restricted immigration.

³³ 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.

³⁴ Also known as the 'Krakau-Plaszow' camp, Plaszow [Polish: Płaszów] was in a suburb of Krakow, Poland. It was established in October 1942 as a detention place for Jewish forced laborers in the district. Plaszow was expanded in 1943 and in 1944 was it transformed into a full-fledged concentration camp when Jews from the Krakow ghetto were sent there. The new camp was situated nearby on the site of two Jewish cemeteries. The camp was evacuated

people were executed. They had a name for that mountain, but in Polish they called it ‘*Hujowa Górka*’ because that was the mountain when they took you over there, that was the end of it.³⁵

That mountain is still there, except barracks or the streets what you, what we paved, what I worked, it was a Jewish cemetery. We had to take the monuments and make roads out of them.³⁶

Of course, that Jewish cemetery, there’s nothing left. It was nothing left when the camp was there. We destroyed it completely. They made us take all the monuments and just bulldoze everything over it, build roads, build barracks, build that big mansion for the [Commandant Amon Goeth].³⁷ I’m trying to remember his name . . .

Michele: With everything that you saw . . .

<interview pauses, then resumes>

Jacob: After surviving, when we . . . after liberation . . . first, I still thought that we going to find some family—if not very close, at least distant cousins or somebody in the family. But what more years, it went through, farther on, and I seen that I’m not find nobody. I was actually almost mad at everybody—gentiles or even Jewish people. I said, “How could they listen and hear all those things and not protest or done something to save some of those people?” Then I even thought, “We have a G-d. We believed . . .” I prayed every day and even if I [or] we wasn’t that Orthodox . . . I followed tradition and was brought up as a Jew. Later on, when I seen that none of them survived, I said, “If we have a G-d and any G-d could watch that terror and that killing and those killing of innocent babies,”—actually some of them not even being shot, but just thrown in the ditches still alive . . . I said to myself, “If there is a G-d, I don’t want to believe no more.” I just . . . I was actually hating almost the whole world. I hate to say it even against G-

in August 1944 with 8,000 inmates being sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen and Stutthof concentration camps.

³⁵ There were three execution sites in Plaszow. From the summer of 1943, daily executions were held at the remains of a World War I fortification located on a hill in the southwest part of the camp. Prisoners called the site *Hujowa Górka* (sometimes also called *Chujowa Górka*), which roughly translates to “prick hill” and is a mockery of the surname of SS officer Albert Hujar, who committed and directed the executions. The second killing site was a large pit on the southeastern side of the camp. The third site was on the northern part of the camp at the old cemetery.

³⁶ During World War II and in the decades following it, Jewish gravestones, or *matzevot*, were frequently removed from cemeteries and reused for a variety of purposes. Prisoners at Plaszow were forced to use Jewish tombstones from the cemeteries the camp was situated on to pave the camp streets.

³⁷ Amon Goeth [German: Göth] (of *Schindler’s List* infamy) was the commandant of Plaszow labor camp near Krakow, Poland from February 1943 until September 1944. He was a cruel, brutal, conscienceless sadist who murdered at random. He terrified all of the inmates whenever he roamed the camp on his white horse in the company of his dogs, who killed people on his command. After the war, the Supreme National Tribunal of Poland at Krakow found Goeth guilty of murdering tens of thousands of Jews. He was executed by hanging was on September 13, 1946 at age 37, not far from the former site of the Plaszow camp. A villa was constructed for Goeth at Plaszow, which still stands today.

d. I said, “If there is a G-d, I’m not going to believe in him no more because it’s unbelievable if there’s a G-d watching that and he didn’t kill that murderer what committed those crimes or done something.” It’s actually hard to think in a normal way after those things, what we seen and survived and at that age . . . but later on, you get . . . you learn a little from life. This was my opinion. Some [survivors] actually got stronger religious. They felt, “I survived because of G-d. He made me. That’s how I survived.” I said the opposite. I said, “There is no G-d. I survived because I helped myself survived. That’s the only way I survived. If there’s a G-d, I just want to show him that I’m not going to believe in him.”

Michele: Will you tell us some about your first wife, Mona, and how she felt after the Holocaust . . . in terms of how you talked about having a family or how you lived your life together?

Jacob: I still try . . . I might not be religious, but I’m still a Jew. I tried to raise my kids giving Jewish tradition, and have *bar mitzvah*,³⁸ and we belonged to Beth Jacob³⁹ until they grew up. Then they went on their own. I didn’t want to stand in their way. If they fell in love with somebody, that’s their choice. I didn’t want to be against it.

Ruth: Mr. Kahan, you left your family when you were very young and were separated from your parents. How did you feel about being a parent yourself? How did you know what to do when your kids became teenagers, and you didn’t have anybody bringing you up?

Jacob: I didn’t know. We needed guidance. Actually we needed guidance when we were liberated. That’s when we needed—guidance. Instead of food, we needed some [psychiatric] guidance. Now I can see if we had [received psychiatric help], that it could have helped a lot of young people. I just carried on because that’s part of life, that’s nature—to survive. I was born a survivor, to survive.

Ruth: You said that in the camps you were always organizing and doing things that in society outside of the camp is seen as not being . . .

Jacob: No, nobody thought me that.

³⁸ *Bar mitzvah* [Hebrew: son of commandment] is a rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on *tefillin*, and may be counted to the *minyan* quorum for public worship. He celebrates the *bar mitzvah* by being called up to the reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday.

³⁹ Beth Jacob is an Orthodox synagogue on LaVista Road in Atlanta founded in 1942 by former members of Ahavath Achim who were looking for a more Orthodox congregation. Beth Jacob is now Atlanta’s largest Orthodox congregation.

Ruth: No, but how did you go from a person who had a different moral or ethical way of doing things? Your ethics in the camp about stealing or doing things, that doesn't work out in the world outside of the camp today. How did you make the transition from being a . . . taking risks and stealing and going back into society? How did you do that?

Jacob: I always believe to adjust themselves to not to be against the law, to obey—not to obey the occupier or the enemy. I would fight the enemy what destroyed my family, but in a normal life, I figured you got to . . . that's my character. Some of them were born . . . I was a hard . . . Actually, I was what you might call a workaholic. I got myself in, when I started, when I got a job working that many hours, whatever they ask. If they asked for overtime, I was . . . in the middle of the night, if they asked they need somebody to work, let's say at Rich's, in the middle of the night all night, I could work all day and then volunteer work at night.⁴⁰ I just tried with the work to lose my actually the memories what I was carrying. I could never forget. I carried those memories. Sometimes the least little thing, if somebody mentioned, I just couldn't sleep. At least I wasn't a drinking man and I didn't believe in drugs either, but that was . . . my actual tranquilizer is work until I raised a family. Once a family came along, I tried to make a good living for them, but I was always a workaholic. That was my tranquilizer in life to forget all those horrors.

Ruth: After losing so many members of your family, how were you affected by Mona's death? It was sudden. How did that affect you?

Jacob: It affect me in a way . . . if you ask a psychiatrist, he probably would say that I'm not normal, but who is? No, it affect my life. If affected because I never actually had a normal life what another person what grew up in a free country and under freedom.

Ruth: How do you feel about America?

Jacob: Even now, I got a bond I could say of food or something. Even now, I can see nothing wasted. Even something what is almost spoiled, I eat it anyhow, because I can't see it be thrown away. Even that many years, and an abundant of all kind of food, and I'm not bad off either, but you just can't get it out of your mind.

Ruth: How do you feel about America? What were your first impressions when you came over? It must have been so different. What did you think when you first got here?

⁴⁰ Rich's was a department store retail chain, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia that operated in the southern United States from 1867 until 2005.

Jacob: I was very happy because I never seen actual freedom. That little antisemitism what I lived through, especially in Poland, even before the Germans marched in . . . for a little while, I was very happy.

Ruth: Just for a little while? When you started working right away?

Jacob: Yes. Actually, almost the second day because I had very, a lot of pride in me because we never took *tzedakah*.⁴¹ We always gave *tzedakah*. Here, the Jewish Federation said, “Listen, go to school for about a month, and we going to pay you. For that time, we going to pay you. You don’t have to worry about, learn a little language.”⁴² I said, “No, you give me a job. If you got a job, I want to go. I’m strong. I don’t want no charity. I don’t need it.” I actually didn’t need it. I was very strong, and young, and I wanted to go to work. I never . . . even if people wanted to help me, I didn’t want the help. I had just too much pride to. In a way, it wasn’t too good. Some people were helped and they done a lot better. They went to school and some . . . but that was my nature.

Ruth: You said before that you managed to do these really remarkable things in the camps—to find food and to do these things. You said that you had an adventurous spirit? Do you still have that? Is that still a part of who you are?

Jacob: Yes, in a way, even over here. I wasn’t trained for actually any job and when I came over here, I said I was a painter. All I had to do is watch for a few days how somebody’s doing it and I could do it too. That’s how I actually learned a trade and that’s how I was making a living, because I knew if I see if the other guys going to do it, I’m going to learn it too. Then—even not knowing the language—I already started building a business. With as little English as I knew, I was taking a chance and going out. I didn’t have much to risk . . . some risk of not getting a job and not making a living, but I took the risk and sometime in business . . .

⁴¹ *Tzedakah* [Hebrew: “justice” or “righteousness”] is commonly used to signify charity and refers to the religious obligations to do what is right and just. The highest form is to give a gift, loan or partnership that will result in the recipient supporting himself instead of living upon others; the second highest is to give donations anonymously to unknown recipients.

⁴² The Jewish Federations of North America represents 153 Jewish Federations and over 300 network communities, which raise and distribute more than \$3 billion annually for social welfare, social services and educational needs *with the objective of protecting and enhancing the well-being of Jews worldwide*. After the Holocaust, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the “Joint”, or JDC), the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and other philanthropic organizations that later merged to form the JFNA worked together to support Jewish survivors. Refugees from displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy received funds to help them resettle in places like the United States or Palestine and create new lives.

Michele: Do you see that adventurous spirit in any of your children or grandchildren? Do you feel like that's something you passed on?

Jacob: No. My kids, they completely different. They haven't got . . . except one boy is a little bit about my character.

Michele: In what way?

Jacob: Adventurous, and a little bit even the looks, but the rest of them are not like the chip off the old block. They different characters, all of them.

Ruth: What are their names and who did you name them for?

Jacob: The oldest one actually is adopted. He's not mine—Dennis. I gave him . . . my father had two names, Moshe Itzak (Isaac). He got Dennis Isaac. His name was already Dennis . . . when I adopted him, I gave him the name Isaac. The other one, Joseph, is Yosef. He's on my grandfather's side. [It's the] name of my grandfather. The youngest one is my wife's. He is of German descent, so he got Kurt. His name is Kurt. He's named of her grandfather. So one is Kurt, one is Joseph, and one is Dennis. The oldest don't have no kids. He is already forty-eight. He don't have no kids, but Joseph got two kids and he's in Houston [Texas]. He's working for IBM [International Business Machines Corporation].

Ruth: How did it happen that you adopted Dennis? How did he come into your life?

Jacob: When I married my wife, she already had [Dennis]. She was married before—Marianne—and she had a child. He was about nine months old. [Her ex-husband] wasn't much of a provider. When I told him that I take over if I can adopt him, he won't have to pay, he was glad to let me adopt him. He said, "Okay, you can have him." I said, "I never want to hear from you again." He agreed to it. That's how I adopted him.

Ruth: You have a beautiful granddaughter that's been wandering around here today, but you know this is . . .

Jacob: You don't know her too well! <laughing>

Ruth: But this is a tape that she'll probably come to . . . it will be meaningful to her in a couple of years. We have . . . your other grandchildren will come to the museum and you know that other people come . . . what would you like to say to them—to people who watch the tape or to your granddaughter—about your life or what you're most proud of? What would you like them to understand?

Jacob: I would like to see that they carry on the Jewish tradition. They don't have to be religious, but I want them to carry on the Jewish tradition, to be a Jew, to be a Zionist,⁴³ and to fight for Jewish cause, and help our Jewish brothers whenever help is needed. With religion, I'll leave it up to them.

Ruth: Are you ever worried about your children and grandchildren? Because you were a Jew, you had so many really horrible things that happened in your life. Do you ever worry about them, or the future of the world, or their experiences? How do you feel about all that?

Jacob: I believe we should take and give. We ought to carry on the Jewish tradition, but if somebody feels like assimilating, I believe in that, too. I don't believe we ought to just separate ourselves and say, "We the chosen people." If we would have been the chosen, where was G-d [when the Germans] choose to kill all our Jews? I'm just a simple man, I'm not a philosopher, but I would like to carry on the Jewish tradition because I was raised a Jew and I believe in it.

Ruth: What are you most proud of? What do you feel is a good accomplishment in your life? When you look back over your life so far, what do you enjoy?

Jacob: I don't believe I done anything special. I just try to be a Jew and tell the world what happened to me. That's about all the talent what I . . . I'm just a simple man. I haven't got an awful lot education . . .

Ruth: Well, your education was . . .

Jacob: . . . but I learned a lot from life. Going, living through that many years, you got to learn something!

Ruth: Is there anything that we haven't asked you that you'd like to say a word or two about? Anything you can think of?

Jacob: Not off hand.

Ruth: We covered everything?

Jacob: I believe you . . .

Ruth: Did you go to Israel after the war?

Jacob: Yes . . . I've been to Israel five times.

Ruth: What's your feeling about Israel?

⁴³ Zionism is the national movement of the Jewish people that supports the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland in the territory defined as the historic Land of Israel.

Jacob: A very good feeling! I came to Israel, I feel like we finally accomplished from so many thousands of years, we finally got our land. When I see our own policemen, I feel like my brother . . . I could hug a policeman [and say,] “What? Are you going to tell me what to do?” I feel like he’s my brother. I had a very good feeling coming to Israel because I am a Zionist. I believe in carrying on a Jewish life. I wish I could be religious, but I’m not.

Ruth: We’d both like to thank you so much for your time this afternoon.

Jacob: Thank you. I got to thank you. Every time I talk a little, it gets a little bit lighter to, but I wish I could tell you . . .

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INTERVIEW ENDS

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