<Begin Disk 1>

Ruth: We are at the home of Zelman Sosne. Today is July 8, 2011 and John Kent will be interviewing Mr. Sosne. We appreciate it very much. This is for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. Thank you both.

John: Let’s start with when you were born and where. Start at the beginning.

Zelman: In 1925, October 8.

John: Where?

Zelman: Wilno . . . W-I-L-N-O . . . Poland.¹

John: You had the same name at birth? What was your name when you were born?

Zelman: Zelman Sosne.

John: Who were the people in your family, their names?

Zelman: My father, Shraga Fivel, my mother, Rachel, my brother, Akiva, my sister, Hannah, and I am Zelman.

¹ Wilno is the Polish name for Vilnius, the historical capital of Lithuania. The city has been known by many derivate spellings in various languages throughout its history, including Vilna, Vilno, and Wilna (German). Between the two wars, the city was a part of Poland. During World War II, the city was occupied by the Soviets and, temporarily, by the Lithuanians. It was occupied by the Germans from 1941-1944. When the Soviets recaptured it in July 1944, the city was incorporated into the Soviet Union as the capital of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Since 1991, it has been the capital city of the Republic of Lithuania.
John: Describe what your early family life was like when it was still normal?
Zelman: Normal? I lived a good life. I went to Hebrew schools . . . raised in Hebrew schools, until Hitler came. After that was the home . . . so everything was gone.

John: What did your parents do?
Zelman: Business people.
John: Your father had his own business?
Zelman: Yes.
John: What kind of business?
Zelman: My father with my grandmother came here in 1932, and they wanted to sell everything. My grandmother came back and she says, “America is a treyf neygung nebish medine.” [Yiddish: inclined to be a non-Kosher, inept, state]. I don’t know if you know what I just said.

John: Translate.
Zelman: “America is very not right country. It was all crooked.” She said, “I better die in my bed.” They came back right away. She was only one year in there.

John: Did they explain why they wanted to leave?
Zelman: They wanted to leave everything, to get out because, in Poland, we had pogromin, [Hebrew] . . . pogroms. Every Monday and Thursday, you had something against the Jews.

John: What did you hear about in your area?
Zelman: Where?
John: In your area, in Vilna, what were you aware of or what stories did you hear?
Zelman: We always understood they didn’t like the Jews. The Polacks is entirely different . . . they are different people. They look in your face, and they think, you are nice people . . . but they take a knife, and stick it in your back.

John: How did the people treat you when you were a child . . . in school or neighbors?
Zelman: I was a child. I was . . . since I was born . . . I was in Vilna for 13 years. Right

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2 Pogrom is a Russian word meaning “to wreak havoc, to demolish violently.” The term is used to refer to the organized, and often officially sanctioned, violent riots against Jews in the Russian Empire and in other countries during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Pogroms were not restricted to certain days of the week. Traditional antisemitism mixed with economic, social, and political resentment of Jews to serve as a pretext for the massacre or persecution of Jews in Europe during the era of the Holocaust. While under Lithuanian rule in October 1939, a violent pogrom broke out in Vilna until the Soviet army entered the city and put an end to it.

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after my bar mitzvah, the war started and we went to the ghetto. In Vilna, we had two ghettos . . . one to live and one to die. You didn’t know which one you were going in. One of our neighbors . . . they went to one of the ghettos that was to die and their son went in the other ghetto. My father grabbed him and told him to change his name. He survived the war. We were all together. We were four people together. My father treated him like a son. After the war, he went to Montreal, Canada and I came to America.

John: Can you tell a little more of what normal life was like before it got bad? What are some of your happier memories?

Zelman: Happier memories . . . was like . . . we lived good. We had a maid at home. We did Yom Kippur . . . You are bringing me back. I don’t want to hear about it anymore. I told you before . . . in Hebrew what it means . . . what it was. We’ve got to forget . . . cannot live [with] the trouble. A lot of people became crazy after the war. To me, I’m lucky I came here. The Jewish Federation brought me here. They were responsible for three years. After then, I got on

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3 Bar mitzvah is Hebrew for ‘son of commandment.’ A rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on tefillin (small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with Torah verses), and may be counted to the minyan (a group of 10 Jewish adults) 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.

4 The term "ghetto" originated in 16th century Venice from the Jewish quarter, where authorities compelled the city’s Jews to live. During the Holocaust, ghettos were segregated city districts where the Germans concentrated the area’s Jewish population. Starting in 1939, the Germans established at least 1,000 ghettos in German-occupied and annexed Poland and the Soviet Union alone. Ghettos were often enclosed, which served to control and isolate Jews. Jews living in ghettos experienced miserable conditions and overcrowding.

5 The Germans invaded Vilna in June 1941 and had established two ghettos by September. The larger ghetto (ghetto #1) was for Jews considered able to work and the smaller (ghetto #2) was for the sick, the elderly, and those without work permits. In a series of operations conducted by German Einsatzgruppe detachments and Lithuanian auxiliaries, ghetto #2 was completely liquidated between September and October 1941. Between 9,000 and 11,000 inhabitants were taken to a wooded area called Ponary and murdered. About 30,000 Jews crowded into ghetto #1 were forced to work in factories, on construction projects, or sent to nearby labor camps. Periodic killing operations murdered many of the ghetto’s inhabitants at Ponary. From the spring of 1942 until the spring of 1943, there were no mass killing operations in ghetto #1, but in September 1943, the final liquidation began. Children, the elderly, and the sick were murdered at Ponary by Germans and Ukrainian auxiliaries or sent to the Sobibor extermination camp. The surviving men were sent to labor camps in Estonia, while the women were sent to labor camps in Latvia.

6 Hebrew for “Day of Atonement.” The most sacred day of the Jewish year. Yom Kippur is a 25 hour fast day. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting yizkor (a prayer) for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine forgiveness, and listening to Torah readings and sermons. People greet each other with the wish that they may be sealed in the heavenly book for a good year ahead. The day ends with the blowing of the shofar (a ram’s horn).

7 The Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta is part of the Jewish Federation of North America (JFNA). The JFNA is an organization that raises and distributes funding for social welfare, social services and educational needs with the objective of protecting and enhancing the wellbeing 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.

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my feet. I did everything that I could to help myself.

John: Are you willing to tell us a little more of what you experienced?

Zelman: Here?

John: The whole thing.

Zelman: It’s nothing to explain. The experience is you’ve got to be strong. That’s all there is to it. Otherwise, you fall apart. [If] you fall apart, you are nobody.

John: Did your father think of moving elsewhere in Europe?

Zelman: No.

John: It was either America or nothing?

Zelman: Either America . . . yes, America or nothing. America or . . . maybe later on, we could move to Israel. But the way then it was in Israel, you could not get in.

John: In the 1930’s?

Zelman: You had to smuggle in. All the Jews who came in were smuggled into Israel. It’s not a country that let in the Jews. [Great] Britain was the worst enemy for the Jews, because they used to control Palestine.8

John: So you were trapped in Poland? There was nowhere to go?

Zelman: Where could you go from Poland?

John: When Hitler came into power in 1933, what were you aware of? How did things change, if at all?

Zelman: Hitler became in power because Germany was falling apart, and he promised them the moon, and the sun, and everything in the world . . . and he took it over. He became the king and the first enemy was the Jews.9 So he started with the Jews. Everybody was quiet.

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.

8 Palestine was the name of the area that is now Israel and Jordan. After World War I, the area came under the administration of the British and was called the “British Mandate.” In the early 1930s, Jewish immigration from Europe to the British Mandate for Palestine rapidly increased due to Zionism and the rise of Nazism. Nationalist uprisings and opposition to the mass influx of Jewish immigrants led to The Arab Revolt of 1936–39 and caused Great Britain to dramatically limit the numbers of immigrants allowed into Palestine in subsequent years and throughout the Holocaust.

9 Amid an economic depression and increasing political instability in Germany, Adolf Hitler and his party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (or Nazi Party) rapidly rose to power. In 1932, the Nazi party was elected to fill more seats in the Reichstag (German: parliament) than any other party. In 1933, democratically elected President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor of Germany, a position responsible for leading the Reichstag. As Chancellor, he began transforming his position into a dictatorial one. When the President died in...
Nobody told him anything what to do. You couldn’t tell him what to do. But then it became the end for them.

**John:** Did you see anything change in Poland during those years?

**Zelman:** In Poland, you could not trust the Polish people because when the war started in 1939 . . . when the Russians came into Vilna, half of Poland was Russian, and half of Poland was American. So the Polish people put in sugar in the tanks of the airplanes. They couldn’t take off.

**John:** Sabotage?

**Zelman:** Sabotage. Then later, in 1939, when the Russians took over Vilna, they turned around, and they gave it (Vilna) to Lithuania. It was called then ‘Vilnius’ [Lithuanian]. They changed it from W-I-L-N-O to V-I-L-N-U-S. The first thing they did when they came in, they made a pogrom. The pogrom did not last . . . just a few days . . . because the Russians came back right away to Vilna and they took it over. The Lithuanians were not any more the bosses of Vilna, the Russians were the bosses. It’s called ‘Belarus’ [now]. Vilna used to belong years ago to Belarus. That was . . . Poland, Vilna, Kovno, Latvia, Estonia . . . that everything changed to the Russians.

1934, Hitler declared himself head of state and effectively became absolute dictator of Germany under the title of Führer (German: Leader).

10 This is a reference to the “German-Soviet Pact” of August 1939. Also called the “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact”, it was a short-lived agreement between the Soviets and Germans in which they agreed to not attack one another and to divide Poland. America was not involved in the agreement. When Germany invaded Poland from the west on September 1, 1939, Soviet troops invaded from the east on September 17. By the end of the month, Poland was divided. Soviet forces occupied Vilna, along with the rest of eastern Poland. Soviet forces occupied eastern Poland until the summer of 1941, when the Germans expelled them in their push east to invade the Soviet Union.

11 During World War II, the dominant Polish resistance in German-occupied Poland was the Home Army. The Home Army fought several full-scale battles against the Germans, including the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. The Home Army also actively engaged in sabotage, with the primary objective of slowing supply transports and German forces.

12 Poland and Lithuania both claimed Vilna after World War I, but the city was occupied by Polish forces and considered a part of northeastern Poland from 1920 until the beginning of World War II. In September 1939, under the terms of the German-Soviet Pact, which effectively dissolved and divided Poland, Soviet forces occupied the city of Vilna, along with the rest of eastern Poland. In October 1939, the Soviet Union temporarily ceded the city to Lithuania.

13 Upon taking over Vilna in October 1939, Lithuanian authorities immediately enacted discriminatory policies against Poles and Jews. Anti-Jewish disturbances broke out and refugees from the surrounding areas flocked to Vilna for protection. A violent pogrom soon broke out in Vilna until the Soviet army entered the city and put an end to it.

14 When Soviet forces occupied eastern Poland in September 1939, the city of Vilna was incorporated into the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Vilna was temporarily ceded to Lithuania in October 1939, but Soviet forces reoccupied the city after pogroms broke out. By June 1940, Lithuania had been annexed by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]. In the summer of 1941, German forces invaded. Nazi occupation lasted until the summer of 1944, when the Soviet army liberated the area. After World War II, the USSR annexed Poland and the

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John: What was the Russians policy towards the Jews?
Zelman: From the beginning, they didn’t do nothing. They turned it over to Lithuania. When the Lithuanians started to have pogroms against the Jews, they came back in, and that was the end of it. You were waiting, that’s all. Then in 1941, they liquidated the ghettos.

John: When did your family first get moved into a ghetto?
Zelman: That was in 1941 . . . 1939 . . . 1941.
John: So for about a year-and-a-half?
Zelman: We were in the ghetto close to two years.
John: So from the end of 1939 until 1941?
Zelman: To 1941.
John: What was life like for you and your family?
Zelman: It was not so good. When you were in the ghetto, people lived together. You moved into somebody else’s house. They let you go out to work. My father had a business . . . extra, what he did before. So we had to make . . . for the roofing industry. So he had a partner . . . he had a gentile partner. [The roofing company] was still working because . . . the gentile took it over. My brother and I . . . used to go out every day whenever we could to him, over there, in the plant. He helped us out a little. We wore three pairs of pants. Two pairs of pants you tied up to your leg, and one is big, wide . . . and you put in potatoes with everything to eat . . . that’s the way we survived.

John: Did you have much interaction with the gentile population?
Zelman: No, you didn’t have it . . . nobody. They didn’t want you to have it . . . nobody.

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Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (which included the cities of Kovno and Vilna). They remained part of the USSR until late in the 20th century. Today, Vilna is again Vilnius, Lithuania and is located just to the north of Belarus’ border.

15 From 1939 to 1941, the Jews in Vilna endured both Soviet and Lithuanian occupation. Under Lithuanian occupation, pogroms broke out in Vilna. Under the Soviets, the elimination of all free institutions, nationalization of private businesses, confiscation of property, and threat of arrest or exile disrupted Jewish life.

16 German troops entered Vilna in June 1941. In late August and early September 1941, the Germans murdered between 5,000 and 8,000 Jews in the area of Vilna that was allocated to become a ghetto. Immediately afterward, two ghettos were established in Vilna. One ghetto housed forced laborers and existed until 1943. The other ghetto housed between 9,000 and 11,000 Jews considered unable to work and was liquidated between September and October 1941.

17 When the Germans invaded in June 1941, Vilna’s Jews were immediately subjected to anti-Jewish decrees, mass killings, forced labor, and concentration into ghettos. Zelman and his family were sent to the larger of two Vilna ghettos established by the Germans in September 1941, which was used to house forced laborers until it was liquidated in September 1943.

18 A gentile is a person of a non-Jewish nation or of non-Jewish faith.
You were in the ghetto, you had the SS [Schutzstaffel] watching you.  

John: So the Germans were . . . ?
Zelman: The Germans were in charge. They took it over.
John: Was there any information coming in from outside about the war?
Zelman: No, we didn’t hear nothing. The only one thing sometimes . . . you used to walk to work when you were in the camps . . . the older Germans used to tell you a little news. Otherwise, we didn’t know anything what was going on. We didn’t even know what day it is because every day is the same thing . . . what you do, you go to work, and you go to a lot of camps. I was in a lot of camps.

John: What was some of your other memories of the ghetto phase, what day-to-day life was like? Was there any school for the young people?
Zelman: No. No schooling . . . nothing schooling. You maybe had in the house . . . you had in some of the houses . . . you had a little religion, to pray, but you did not go to the synagogue because they used to go in and burn it up. In the small little towns, they used to go in, and take the rabbi and the Torahs, put gasoline, and burn it all together . . . life, the members’ life. That is what they used to do in the whole area around Vilna.

John: What was it like for your mom? What was her experience? Was she taking care of the kids?
Zelman: I was already . . . I was then . . . when it started in 1925, I was bar mitzvahed [Hebrew] in 1939, so.

John: You were about 15 or 16? How about your mother?
Zelman: No, I was 13 years old then when the war started. I was a small child. But my mother, my father . . . my grandmother died right before the war. She was with us. My father’s sister lived not far from us. She came . . . she and my mother left together. We don’t know if they went to Auschwitz-Birkenau or if they went somewhere else . . . but we didn’t hear from them.

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19 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 his leadership, it grew from a small paramilitary formation to one of the largest and most powerful organizations in the Third Reich. The SS controlled the German police forces and the concentration camp system. The SS was responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during World War II. After World War II, like the Nazi Party, it was declared a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal and banned in Germany.
anymore when they liquidated the ghettos.20

John: You mentioned earlier that there were two different ghettos, one to live, one to die. Can you explain that?

Zelman: One ghetto . . . if people went, for instance, went to the right, you thought it is the good, always right, people think it’s the right way. But, on the left one, the people survived. All the people on the [other] side went to death. Not far from Vilna, it was a big place, called Ponar . . . P-O-N-A-R. There was a lot of dirt where the Polacks prepared themselves to put in tanks for gas. So it was open. So you got over there close to 1,000,000 Jews buried alive.21

John: How did you know about that?

Zelman: That comes out very fast.

John: When did the ghetto phase end for you and your family?

Zelman: 1941.

John: How did that happened?

Zelman: How did it happen?

John: Yes, what happened?

Zelman: They opened your doors . . . knocked down, they says, “Juden, out. Raus.” [German] Which is, “Go out.” We all walked. You didn’t have nothing with you . . . you left everything.

John: Where did you walk to?

Zelman: We walked to . . . because we had some friends on a special street, so we went down and we into right away to their house. We stayed with them until the rest of the ghetto was

20 Auschwitz-Birkenau was a complex of camps near the Polish city of Oswiecim. Originally, Auschwitz-Birkenau was supposed to be a huge pool of slave labor, but sometime in 1942, it was decided that it was the perfect place for the ‘Final Solution’—the extermination of the Jews. When the larger Vilna ghetto was liquidated in September 1943, the majority of Jews were murdered at Ponar. Others were sent to the Sobibor extermination camp. If Zelman’s mother and aunt survived the liquidation, they may have been sent along with the other surviving women to labor camps in Latvia.

21 Ponar or Ponary was a wooded area approximately seven miles from Vilna where the Soviets had dug large pits for fuel storage tanks, but had been forced to evacuate the incomplete project when the Germans invaded. The Germans and their Lithuanian auxiliaries used the site for mass executions from early summer 1941 to July 1944. 70,000-100,000 people were brought to Ponar by foot, truck, and train and murdered. Most were Jews from Vilna and the surrounding area, although Soviet prisoners of war and other enemies of the Nazis were also murdered there. In the early phases of the Ponar exterminations, the victims were buried in the same pits where they had been shot. However, in September 1943, the Nazis forced 80 Jewish prisoners to dig up the pits and burn the bodies in order to destroy evidence of mass murder. Most of those prisoners were killed, but 15 escaped.
completed out.

**John:** Do you remember the friends’ names?

**Zelman:** I don’t remember too good, no, but it was from . . . my brother had a girlfriend. So we went to their house.

**John:** What happened after you moved into that house?

**Zelman:** We stayed in the house until they liquidated the ghetto.

**John:** How did they liquidate it?

**Zelman:** They told you to get out and you’re out. That’s all that it was.

**John:** They didn’t burn it or destroy it?

**Zelman:** We didn’t know. When they took us out from the Vilna ghetto, we went right away . . . we went to Stutthoff . . . we went to camp.\(^{22}\)

**John:** How did you get to that camp?

**Zelman:** By trains. They took us to trains . . . the trains.

**John:** Like regular trains or the open cattle wagons?

**Zelman:** No, closed. It was wagons but not open. We went to camp. Stutthof was the first camp. You didn’t know . . . if you go into the camp . . . you didn’t know if you were going to live or if you were going to die. It was the same thing like the ghettos, right or left. All the camps had gas chambers.\(^{23}\) So one was for life and one was for death. Later on . . . you did not stay in the camp too long. You tried to move. Whenever they called for people to move, you kept

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\(^{22}\) Following the invasion and annexation of Poland in 1939, the Germans immediately established the Stutthof camp in a very wet and wooded area near the city of Danzig (Gdansk) on the Baltic Sea. Stutthof was originally a civilian interment camp. In 1941, it became a “labor education” camp and, finally, in 1942, it became a regular concentration camp. It was expanded in 1943 and guarded by the SS and Ukrainian auxiliaries. Stutthof prisoners were used as forced laborers in SS-owned businesses, local brickyards, private industrial enterprises, in agriculture, or in the camp’s own workshops and airplane factory. The camp’s brutal conditions left many prisoners injured or very weak and sick. Those whom the SS guards judged too weak or sick to work were killed in the camp’s gas chamber. Gassing with Zyklon B gas began in June 1944. Camp doctors also killed sick or injured prisoners in the infirmary with lethal injections. From the summer until the fall of 1944, Stutthof received wave after wave of prisoners evacuated from camps in the occupied Baltic States, which were about to be overrun by the advancing Soviet forces. After being sent to Estonia from the Vilna ghetto in the fall of 1943, Zelman was likely among the prisoners evacuated from the east and sent to Stutthof in the summer or fall of 1944. As Soviet forces continued to push west in the winter of 1945, the Germans began to evacuate Stutthof’s estimated 50,000, mostly Jewish, prisoners. The majority of the prisoners were shot in the Baltic Sea or sent on brutal death marches. Some were shipped west to other camps. Stutthof was liberated by the Russians on May 9, 1945.

\(^{23}\) The Germans differentiated between extermination camps, whose primary purpose was the systematic killing of prisoners, and concentration camps, which were used to contain slave laborers and prisoners of the Nazi state. Stutthof did have a gas chamber where prisoners were murdered but the camp was operated as a concentration camp, its prisoners used as forced laborers.
moving.

John: What do you remember about the train ride?

Zelman: What do I remember? Just they put you in like cow, like a horse, anything . . .

John: How long were you in there?

Zelman: Where, in the camp?

John: In the train?

Zelman: Until they took us to Stutthof. From then on, we were going to a lot of camps. Stutthof was in Poland . . . the camp. Then later, I went into a lot of German camps.

John: Who were you with? Was it your whole family at the time?

Zelman: No. We were my father, my brother, [and] the other boy who survived with us. So we were four.

John: Your mother and sister went separately?

Zelman: No. I don’t know. I don’t know. No. I told you that in the beginning. They left and we never knew about them.

John: When the train door opened, what did you see?

Zelman: When the train was opened . . . they opened the door, and they threw you out. “Out, out.” “Raus, raus,” in German. You walked . . . somebody . . . you walking. If you go to the gas chambers, it’s too bad. If you go in here, they give you a shower. They cut your hair. They take away all your underwear and everything. They give you something to put on, and that is . . . you leave. They give you some wooden shoes that you cannot run away.

John: Did any of the other prisoners talk to you at all?

Zelman: No, not too much.

John: Give you any advice?

Zelman: No. What are you talking [about]? They were mean people.

John: The other prisoners, too?

Zelman: No, the prisoners are just like I am . . . the same thing. But the people who kept us were Nazis, SS. That is all that was in charge . . . the SS.

John: What was a day like?

Zelman: What was a day? You get up four o’clock in the morning. You go to work. You built whatever they tell you, that’s what you do. We used to clean swamps, we used to build
highways . . . carried 25 pounds or more on your shoulders with cement. Some people carried the cement, and some people made the highway. They had a free highway . . . that is the Autobahn.\(^24\)

That’s made with Jewish blood.

**John:** What season was this?

**Zelman:** There is no season. Season is whenever it’s cold, it’s cold . . . whenever it rains, it rains . . . and then summer is the summer.

**John:** Do you remember if that was the summer of 1941 or the winter?

**Zelman:** From the beginning was right after the Jewish holidays started. The whole thing started right . . . 1939, after the Jewish holidays. From then on, you didn’t know what day it is . . . you didn’t know what holiday and everything.

**John:** Stutthof was in 1941 some time?\(^25\)

**Zelman:** Yes.

**John:** What was it like when everybody was just in the barracks, just not working? What did people do? What did people talk about?

**Zelman:** Everybody had to go to work. If you don’t go to work, you go to crematorium.

**John:** What was it like during the rest periods?

**Zelman:** What can rest? You don’t have no rest. You rest when you died. They buried you . . . they don’t even bury you, they just drop you in the swamp. My father died natural death in 1944 so they wrapped him with a towel and dropped him in the swamp.

**John:** Were you there when that happened?

**Zelman:** Yes, I was there. Yes. Excuse me . . . we used to go there in the same swamp.

They made us go in the morning to wash our hands and face.

**John:** So you were in Stutthof for what . . . three years?

**Zelman:** No, no, I was there maybe about . . . maybe close to a year. Then, they start

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\(^{24}\) The Autobahn is a controlled access highway system in Germany. Construction of the Autobahn was begun before Hitler came to power, but Nazi propaganda appropriated the project and the Autobahn became one of the Nazi régime’s showpieces. Fritz Todt, an engineer, senior Nazi figure, and founder of Organisation Todt, used conscripted laborers to construct more than 3,000 km (1,900 mi) of roadway between 1933 and 1938. By late 1941, construction on the Autobahn had ceased almost entirely, as the organization shifted its focus to other war-related projects in Germany itself and occupied territories from France to the Soviet Union. In 1942, Albert Speer took over and, as the war progressed and available labor became more limited, Organisation Todt became notorious for using forced labor, including Jews.

\(^{25}\) After the Germans invaded in the summer of 1941, Zelman went to the Vilna ghetto. He probably arrived in Stutthof in 1944.
asking for help. They want to know who wants to move . . . so we, all four of us . . . we used to raise our hand and go. My father died in 1944. I lost my brother in 1945 . . . January. Then, the boy that my father saved, he and I met after the war.

John: His name?
Zelman: Samuel Byne. But he went to the camps [as] Samuel Sosne.

John: What other memories do you have of Stutthof?
Zelman: Stutthof was a bad camp. Every camp . . . all the camps are the same thing. It is not different.

John: That was right on the coast, was it northern Poland?
Zelman: I don’t know, but it was in Poland. Stutthof was in Poland. But then later, they took us out of Poland . . . [We] went to German camps.

John: Were only Jews in that camp?
Zelman: Only Jews, nobody else . . . Jews and German SS.

John: Was it only men, or did they have a women’s section?
Zelman: In Stutthof, they had the women separate . . . and the men separate.

John: Everybody was Polish?
Zelman: All from my area, they were all . . . everybody was Polish. Then, later they brought in, I think, from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia.

John: What condition were you in physically?
Zelman: I was a young boy. What do you mean condition? How can you grow when you don’t have no food?

John: So you were starving? Were you sick?
Zelman: No sick . . . If you sick, you “Amen, good-bye, baby.” Don’t say you’re sick. No one says “sick.” How sick you are, you don’t tell them.

John: Did you have any interaction with the guards, with the SS?
Zelman: We didn’t have nothing to do with them. We didn’t have anything to do with them because you don’t know who they are. They are SS. So you talk to the wall . . . you talk to them. The old Germans were different. In some places, they had a lot of old Germans was watching you. They were entirely different. They let you pick up potato peeling, or something else, you know. Otherwise, you didn’t talk to nobody.
John: Why were the older ones different?
Zelman: Older ones . . . I don’t know . . . maybe they had a little feeling. It’s human nature.
John: When did you leave Stutthof?
Zelman: I don’t know.
John: What year?
Zelman: I don’t remember the year. We didn’t know. The minute we left . . . the minute we went into concentration camps, we didn’t know what year it is, and we didn’t know what day it is . . . nothing.
John: Did you have an identification number, or how did they identify you?
Zelman: When I was liberated, they gave me a piece of paper. That’s really 1945, maybe 1950.
John: But in the camp?
Zelman: The camp was . . . the Germans was already out for two weeks, we didn’t know it. I was liberated in Austria. From Poland, all the way . . . I traveled all the way until I got in Austria.
John: How did you leave Stutthof then?
Zelman: By train . . . everything train.
John: Where did they take you next?
Zelman: I don’t remember, I’m not going to tell you . . . and I don’t remember. I remember some, a few camps . . . but it was a lot of camps. We moved, from 1941 to 1945, was four years [in] camps. So the best thing was not to stay in one camp. Just keep going.
John: Were they all in Poland?
Zelman: No, we left Poland. The minute we left Stutthof, we were out of Poland.
John: So were you then in Germany?
Zelman: Yes, we were.
John: The rest were all Germany?
Zelman: The rest were in Germany . . . Germany and Austria.
John: So even if you don’t know names, were these more like camps or factories?
Zelman: No factories, no factories. Everything is a camp. You had to go out and work, not inside. No work inside. Unless you were a butcher or you said you are a cook, so they made you

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work in the kitchens for the Germans. Otherwise . . . I was a young boy then.

**John:** What types of work were you doing?

**Zelman:** Any kind, any kind. I just told you . . . we worked cleaning. I used to cut trees . . . do everything they tell you. That’s all that it was. You used to get up four o’clock . . . and then around four in the afternoon, you went back to the barrack. That’s all that it was.

**John:** You were working outside usually?

**Zelman:** I must have been outside . . . no insides . . . you didn’t . . . no, no insides.

**John:** So you were exposed to the elements?

**Zelman:** That’s what they told you. They didn’t want . . . see, they watched you . . . you were like in a group . . . 25 . . . five, five, five, five, five. Twenty-five people . . . you had two SS and 25 people. You went with the same 25, to go there and coming back . . . and they counted you right away.

**John:** Did you have a particular friend outside of your family?

**Zelman:** No, I didn’t have nobody. You didn’t have friends. You [were] a loner. You are yourself. That’s what you are.

**John:** What was the nighttime like?

**Zelman:** [At] nighttime, you laid down on the floor. They had barracks, like one [bunk] on top of the other one. You took your underwear, your pair of pants with your jacket, with hat, with stripes . . . you made a pillow, you laid on it . . . no blankets, no nothing. Slept on the floor, or laid on the wood.

**John:** Who was in charge of each barrack?

**Zelman:** The Nazis. If it would be somebody else, you could run away. They are the watchmen. They were tough.

**John:** So it wasn’t like an elder prisoner?

**Zelman:** Elder prisoner, they didn’t have any. No human being was more to them than a fly. Just like a fly. Same thing . . . no human being. They didn’t care about you. You are nobody. You are a fly. A fly flies around, then you fall down, [and] you dead.

**John:** How did you deal with this experience?

**Zelman:** I cannot tell you. I just . . . maybe through G-d, who gave me . . . I don’t know myself how I survived. I was a child. The time for me to grow, become somebody . . . I was in

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the camps from 1941 to 1945. That’s four years [in the camps] and two years in the ghetto, from 1939 to 1941.

John: When you were in Germany, was there any contact at all with the population?
Zelman: No. I just told you before. It’s no contact with nobody. You contact with G-d, with the top, and you contact with the ground. It’s a joke, but that’s what it is.

John: There was no information about the war?
Zelman: Nothing. We didn’t know anything what was going on. At the end, was a little closer. It was a cold winter . . . a very cold winter. The Russians brought in the people from Siberia. They can take cold weather. They drink vodka and they know how to fight. That’s what killed Hitler—because he started going farther and farther, he was already past England . . . he was in Egypt over there . . . almost in Israel. That was his loss. He went a little too far. He ate a little too much and he drank a little too much . . . and that’s what made him lose the war.

John: So where were you, as far as you know, towards the end of the war?
Zelman: I was in Austria. I was in two camps over there. I was in some other camps, too. I was in Mauthausen. I came into Mauthausen at night and they were pouring water on you. I saw . . . I had a feeling. I said, “It’s bad.” I didn’t know what I’m going to do because the water kills you. It’s like the fire department . . . they poured . . . a fire on a house. They were pouring water on us. I saw a few people pick up the dead people over there. So I took somebody, and I picked him up, and I laid under him. He was over me. All night they were pouring water, until in the morning. Then, I got up.

John: How did the water kill people?
Zelman: How does the water kill? Next time, go down to the fire department, ask them to

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26 At the height of its power, Nazi Germany had pushed as far north as France and Norway, but Hitler had never managed to occupy England, Germany and its ally, Italy, had also controlled North Africa, managing to push as far east as Egypt. The Mediterranean, including Greece, had also been occupied by Germany. Some fighting occurred in the Middle East in Syria and Lebanon, but Palestine (the future state of Israel) remained under British control throughout the war. By the winter of 1944-1945, Hitler’s army was unable to maintain its eastern and western fronts. Soviet forces had reached the Oder River in eastern Germany while American forces attacked from the west. By late April, Berlin was encircled. Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945 as Soviet forces neared his bunker in Berlin.

27 Mauthausen was the primary camp in the camp system in Austria. It has a whole series of sub-camps (about 50). It was opened after the Anschluss (when Germany annexed Austria) in March 1938. It was established on the site of a quarry, and its purpose was to use slave labor to exploit the quarry. In addition to working in the quarries, which was essentially a death sentence, the prisoners also worked on construction projects (such as building roads, power plants, tunnels, or power stations), and for the armaments industry. Its last commandant, Franz Ziereis was notorious for his brutality and cruelty. About 200,000 prisoners passed through Mauthausen and its sub-camps, and the death rate was about 50 percent. It was liberated by the Americans on May 5, 1945.
take the hose, and pour water on you. You’re going to find out in five minutes. It’s very hard. Then from Mauthausen, I went to Ebensee.\textsuperscript{28} There [is] where I was liberated.

\textbf{John:} What do you remember about Mauthausen?

\textbf{Zelman:} It was a camp. The only one thing I remember . . . for the last two weeks, all the SS were not there and we didn’t even know. When the Americans came in in 1945, the camp was open and they liberated us. They told us not to eat too much . . . just eat what they give you. They used to give rice and a little milk because the stomach was shrunk. So that’s all they gave us to eat. You came on your feet . . . when you came on your feet . . . so you had to do . . . so I went down to Munich [Germany], started talking to survivors . . . find out my friend. They told me where he is. I went over there . . . caught a few trains. Took me about a week to get from Munich to Bremen [Germany], took me about a week to get after the war. I went and find my friend. He used to live next to us . . . my neighbor.

\textbf{Ruth:} Did you say you were in Mauthausen or Ebensee when you were liberated?

\textbf{Zelman:} Liberated in Ebensee.

\textbf{John:} What do you remember of that camp?

\textbf{Zelman:} It’s like any other camp. If it’s one . . . they [are] all alike.

\textbf{John:} Was there any activity at that point, any work or just waiting?

\textbf{Zelman:} No. We don’t work then. At the end, we didn’t work. We were . . . it’s called \textit{muselmanns} [German: Muslim] . . . we were in very bad shape.\textsuperscript{29} We were in very bad shape. We didn’t eat, we didn’t drink . . . nothing. A lot of people died fast over there.

\textbf{John:} What condition were you in?

\textsuperscript{28} Ebensee was a sub-camp of Mauthausen. The prisoners there worked in the armaments industry. The camp was in a dense forest and close to a rocky formation where tunnels were dug to protect the factories from Allied air raids. It was second only in size to Dora-Mittelbau with 12 factories and 1,404 feet of tunnels. The first prisoners came from Mauthausen in November 1943, and started digging the tunnels. They worked 12 hours per day in all kinds of weather. More transports of prisoners arrived until 1945 when the number of prisoners peaked at 18,500 in the last desperate days of the war; although overall about 27,000 prisoners passed through. About 8,200 prisoners died there. Living conditions were severe, and the work was exhausting and dangerous. The death rate soared. Those who fell ill or who died were sent back to Mauthausen, until Ebensee got its own crematoria. The last roll call took place on May 5, 1945. The commandant Anton Ganz ordered the prisoners into the tunnels where it was rumored that explosives had been set up to seal them in. The prisoners refused to leave roll call. That night about 600 guards fled the camp, and the next day the Americans arrived. Ganz and several former guards were tried and convicted after the war.

\textsuperscript{29} Muselmann was a term widely used among concentration camp inmates to refer to prisoners who were near death due to illness, exhaustion, starvation, abuse or hopelessness and seemed resigned to their impending death. The origin of the term’s use is unclear.
Zelman: I was in bad shape, too. I just listened to what they said, not to eat too much. I didn’t do it, and I went through. [I] suffered a little, suffered a lot. But that was the main thing. I didn’t eat. What they gave me, that’s all that I ate. I got stronger every day.

<interview is interrupted, interview resumes>

Zelman: I was in Sachsenhausen. We came into it before Ebensee. In Sachsenhausen were the smartest Jewish people in the whole wide world. They know how to make money, passports, everything… they were a very educated people. The minute we came in there, they said, “Wir Deutschen Juden.” [German] “We are German Jews.” They didn’t say they are Jews, but “we are German Jews,” so we didn’t like that because they said, “We are German Jews.” So we used to tell them… excuse me for my language, “Du bist ein Arschloch.” [German] “You are asshole.” You know what it means. You have heard it. So we used to tell them that. Then later, guess what… when they closed up the camp, then I went to Mauthausen. They killed them first before anybody.

John: Why?

Zelman: Ask them, ask the Germans. Don’t ask me.

John: You didn’t like it that they identified themselves as Germans rather than Jews?

Zelman: Jews. They are a Jew, not a German Jew. I am a Polish Jew. I didn’t say I am a Polish Jew. What did it do me any good? I am a Jew. I had right in here <indicating the left side of his chest> a David star, a Magen David [Hebrew: Star of David]. I had it on my leg, and I had it on my back. If I want to run away, you cannot run. That’s what you wore. Same stuff, every day, never washed.

John: What else do you remember about Sachsenhausen?

Zelman: I was not too long there. We went in, and then went right from there to Mauthausen.

John: Mauthausen… you were inside the big camp, or they had like a tent camp?

Zelman: No, no… the big camp. A lot of people died there. A lot of people suffered.

John: Was there any work at that point, or did they stop working there?

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30 Sachsenhausen was established as the principal concentration camp for the Berlin area in Germany. It was located near Oranienburg, Germany, and was opened on July 12, 1936. Between 1936 and 1945, Sachsenhausen held Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, “asocials” and, later, Soviet civilians. The number of Jewish prisoners ranged from 21 in 1936 to 11,100 at the beginning of 1945. Soviet forces liberated the camp on April 22, 1945.

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Zelman: I didn’t stay there too long. They moved them right from there. We stayed, and they sent us right away to Ebensee.

John: So you weren’t working in that quarry that they had?[^31]

Zelman: I worked over there . . . wherever, in Ebensee . . . I worked there. But then later, it was getting less, and less, and less, and less. Then I was . . . we find out for two weeks, we were all laying on the floor . . . didn’t work, nothing, no food, not anything. We find the Germans already checked out. Then, later, it was May 5, [1945] . . . the Americans came in and that . . . came in a rabbi . . . came in a Catholic priest . . . came in another priest. The rabbi who liberated me in Ebensee . . . years later, here in Atlanta, I come into synagogue. He looks at me, and I look at him. I say, “I know him,” and he said to himself, “I know him.” So we met after the davening[^32] [Yiddish: praying] after praying, and we had a little talk, and he was the rabbi down here at Shearith Israel.^[33]

John: Do you remember his name?

Zelman: Mossman, [Sydney] Mossman.^[34] Originally, he was from Montreal, Canada, but he joined the army, the American army to help . . . the British army he joined . . . then later went into the American. He was Rabbi Mossman . . . that was his name.

John: Do you remember what was going through you the day you heard the war was over, on May 5, 1945?

Zelman: Honestly, we didn’t give a hoot what it was. We didn’t know. You were alone now. Where were you? We were alone. You talked to yourself. A lot of people had breakdowns.

John: What did you see? Breakdowns? What did you see?

Zelman: People got nuts. People got sick, very sick. Then later some of them died, like flies. They were grabbing the food. But that is life.

John: After liberation, where did you go the next day, the day after that?

[^31]: Prisoners in Mauthausen concentration camp were deployed as forced laborers in the Weiner Graben quarry. The back-breaking work extracting granite proved deadly for many prisoners.

[^32]: The act of reciting Jewish liturgical prayers during which the prayer sways or rocks lightly.

[^33]: Founded in 1904, Shearith Israel began as a congregation that met in the homes of congregants until 1906 when they began using a Methodist church on Hunter Street in Atlanta, Georgia. After World War II, Rabbi Tobias Geffen moved the congregation to University Drive, where it became the first synagogue in DeKalb County. In the 1960s, they removed the barrier between the men’s and women’s sections in the sanctuary, and officially became affiliated with the Conservative movement in 2002.

[^34]: Rabbi Sydney K. Mossman was born in Windsor, Canada in 1913. He served for many years at Shearith Israel Congregation in Atlanta, Georgia.
Zelman: After the liberation, I went . . . I told you . . . when I got on my feet, I went down to Munich. I came down to Munich because a lot of survivors [were] there. The first thing I saw was a Jewish religious guy, a Hasid, who wore a shtreimel [Yiddish: fur hat] and white socks. I saw an American soldier, a black man. I never saw a black man in my life. In Poland, we don’t have no black men. That was the most . . . thing . . . there. They were working in the army. The other guy, I don’t know . . . I just saw him, but I didn’t talk to him.

John: Was there any kind of organized help?

Zelman: No, no, you were right on your own feet. They started doing a little black market . . . like some of the guys. Each one was telling what to do. When I went to Bremen, my buddy was doing black market, and he took me in. I had a job. I did a job. I was a partner in the business. So we made a living. Then, we went to Bergen-Belsen, to be a DP, displaced person, because you had to have a place. So there are all the pictures what you see in here. I was in charge.

John: How did you learn about the DP camp?


John: But I mean did the American authorities or somebody say go there?

Zelman: No. Let me . . . give it to me, please [referring to the book Holocaust and Rebirth; Bergen-Belsen 1945-1965]. You see this man? This man . . . he is a captain in the English, British army . . . but he worked with the Haganah [Hebrew: Defense]. He worked with the

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35 Hasidism is a sect of Orthodox Judaism that was founded by Jewish mystics in 18th century Eastern Europe.

36 Bergen-Belsen was established by the Nazis in 1943 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. 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 the war, the German army camp near the former concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen 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. It was the center of Jewish DP political and social activity in the British zone of occupation.

37 From 1945 to 1952, more than 250,000 Jewish displaced persons lived in camps and urban centers in Germany, Austria, and Italy. These facilities were administered by Allied authorities and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).


39 This was a Jewish paramilitary organization that operated in the British Mandate of Palestine from 1920 to 1948. Among other things, its members organized underground immigration into Palestine. The Haganah sent in agents
You’ve got there another guy . . . a little guy. That was the guy in charge of the camp, Bergen-Belsen.

**John:** Do you remember their names?

**Zelman:** It’s right . . . his name . . . I give it to you . . . right in here. That was this guy . . . was from Baranowicze [Poland: later Belarus]. This is the same Bergen-Belsen that the commander from the . . . [Samuel] Vinick. That is his name . . . this guy’s name is Vinick. That is all my friends. I cry for no reason. You see, most of these boys, they went to Israel after the war. Right after the war, they put them on a boat. I went . . . since my cousin sent me a telegram not to go . . . so, I waited. I went to Israel with my bride. I went to my cousin and I gave her the telegram. She hugged me. I kissed her and she kissed me. We went to *Latrompe* [Hebrew: Har Hatayasim or “Pilots’ Mountain”]. It’s a place where the air force . . . it is between Tel Aviv [Israel] and *Yerushalayim* [Hebrew: Jerusalem, Israel] from the airport. I went in. Most of the fellows . . . their names . . . they all got killed. They took them in the army right away, and they killed them. They got killed. Most of these friends . . . all these friends . . . I saw the names. It shook me up.

**John:** In 1948, they all got killed?

**Zelman:** When they came in . . . yes, they were fighting in 1948.  

**John:** You mentioned that your cousin said, “Don’t settle in Israel.” When was that exactly? When did you get that letter?

**Zelman:** It was right in 1948. She sent me a telegram. I don’t know if you [Zelman indicates John] know Hebrew. You [Zelman indicates Ruth] know Hebrew, so I am going to tell you. I had a telegram that said, “Zelman, atah echad meir bechor mi mishpacha. Achshav anesheya beminasa.” [Hebrew: “You cannot perish. You are a bright light. You carry your people.”] That’s all. She said, “Right now is a war in Israel. You are one from your whole family,

who held clandestine military training in Bergen-Belsen in December 1947 in order to prepare DPs for immigration to Palestine. Later, most of its members became the core of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

40 The official Israeli Air Force Memorial on Har Hatayasim or “Pilots’ Mountain.” In a wooded area near the monument, there are columns with memorial plaques commemorating all the fallen air force officers and soldiers over the years.

41 The Arab-Israeli War of 1948 broke out when five Arab nations invaded territory in the former Palestinian mandate immediately following the announcement of the independence of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948. Fighting continued until February 1949, when Israel and its neighboring states of Egypt, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Syria agreed to formal armistice lines.

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from your city, and your Poland. (Like this.) Go to the sweet, the good country, the golden country, the United States of America.” That’s what it means in Hebrew. So I changed. I went right away to the German consul. I filled out papers and, in 1949, I came to the States [at] the end of the Jewish holidays. 42

John: Were you still thinking about what your father had said that America is a corrupt place and all of that?

Zelman: Then, that was not in my mind . . . my mind was to make a living. When you’re liberated, you were on your own . . . didn’t have nothing.

John: When did you come to the conclusion that your mother didn’t survive?

Zelman: I came to the conclusion when we went from the ghetto to the camps . . . to Stutthof. Then we find out . . . we didn’t have my mama, my aunt, my sister.

John: But you never knew exactly what happened?

Zelman: No, most things went to Stutthof.

<phone rings, interview pauses, then resumes>

John: Did you consider at the end of the war that maybe she was a survivor like you somewhere?

Zelman: No. Look, you got a feeling . . . otherwise. Then, somebody told me that my sister went to my hometown after the war and they killed her because they took away the whole house and everything. Then, I never been back there. I promised myself I will never go to Europe. But my son married a girl from Paris, from France. Then the wedding . . . but I promised myself . . . so I went to the rabbi and I had a talk with him. He says, “You can go.” So I went. But otherwise, I never stepped back.

John: Your sister did survive . . . but the Poles . . . ?

Zelman: No, I don’t think so. Somebody told me that she got killed.

John: After going home?

Zelman: When we finish here . . . I got . . . a professor from Emory [University—Atlanta, Georgia] went to Vilna. I gave him my address and he went. He came back and he showed pictures of the land [where they had] tore down our homes and made somebody new homes. So

42 Zelman Sosne left Europe on October 4, 1949 aboard the USAT General Hersey, a former troop ship commissioned to carry displaced persons to the United States and Australia. The ship sailed from the port of Bremerhaven, Germany to Boston, Massachusetts, arriving on October 14, 1949.
that’s what I’ve got. So now I feel that papers . . . maybe didn’t pay for that.

**John:** Talk about the Bergen-Belsen phase. How long were you there? Were you there for like four years?

**Zelman:** No. I was there in and out. I was there for a good two years but I was out. I was going out, trying to make a living.

**John:** What was going on in the camp?

**Zelman:** The camp is a camp. Some people . . . most of them did black market. They had to do something.

**John:** How much interaction did you have with Germans after the war?

**Zelman:** Nothing, no, no, nothing we had with Germans. Nothing.

**John:** So the black market was strictly within survivors?

**Zelman:** Survivors, yes, survivors. I buy. I sell one, he sells another one . . . you know what I mean? It was entirely different. But then later, some people went into business. Somebody went into horses. Here in Atlanta, was a family . . . there were three brothers. They went into horses. They used to sell horses from Germany to French because Frenchmen like horse meat. So you know something new, you never knew it.

**Ruth:** Zelman, you said that you were planning on going to Israel. Can you talk about how, in Bergen-Belsen, the group was formed. It was like a *kibbutz*, right?43

**Zelman:** No, not *kibbutz*.

**Ruth:** Was it from a youth group or a *Betar*?44

**Zelman:** No, I am not a *Betar* and I am not a *Linker*.45 I am right [wing]. I was *Mizrachi*, so that’s what I was.46 We were there, used to get up every day, go *davening* in the *shul* [Yiddish: synagogue]. A family from my hometown went to Israel and they called me. They said, “Come to *Eretz Yisrael* [Israel].” I have a friend right now . . . my partner . . . not a partner [now], he

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43 A *kibbutz* is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture, although today they are also based on industrial plants and high tech enterprises.

44 The *Betar* Movement is a revisionist Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 in Riga, Latvia by Vladimir Jabotinsky. Chapters sprung up across Europe. After World War II, and during the settlement of Mandate Palestine, *Betar* was traditionally linked to the original Herut and then Likud political parties of Jewish pioneers.

45 *Linker* is German for “left”. The major stream of left wing Zionism is the Labor or Socialist Zionism movement, which believed a Jewish state should be constructed as an agrarian nation of proletariats.

46 *Mizrachi* is a religious Zionist organization founded in 1902 in Vilna by Rabbi Yitzchak Yaakov Reines. Its youth movement, *B’nei Akiva*, became an international movement. *Mizrachi* believes that the Torah should be at the center of Zionism and that Jewish nationalism is a means of achieving religious objectives.
lives in Chicago, Shmuel Poritz, and we both together sent a truck and two cars to *Eretz Yisrael*. But the man . . . I didn’t go, and he didn’t go because I didn’t go. I told him I thought . . . because I was in Bergen-Belsen and he was somewhere else. Everything that we had was ours . . . fifty, fifty. So when I sent it to him, and everything, then later the other guy found out that we are not coming, so he took it away. Whatever he did, he did. But he and I didn’t go. He didn’t go because of me, because I am not going.

**John:** When all these friends went?

**Zelman:** This is all friends.

**John:** When they all went, did you consider joining them?

**Zelman:** No. That’s what . . . you see, look. This is all boys, right? These boys used to work for the *Haganah*. She [Zelman indicates Ruth] knows what the *Haganah* is. I was in charge of them all because I . . . he is not . . . he is the Israeli guy right in here. You see, this is all the same people, here, and here, and here [Zelman gestures toward the book]. Here is [Samuel] Vinick. That’s me. But most of these boys . . . some came to America. They find out that I’m not going, so they changed around in Bergen-Belsen. They came to America, too. But most of them . . . we all . . . we were like a group. We were like a group.

**John:** Who was the sponsor in who helped you get over here?

**Zelman:** This wasn’t sponsor, the Jewish . . .

**Ruth:** HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] or the Joint?47

**Zelman:** HIAS . . . the Joint helped.

**Mrs. Sosne:** Zelman, you didn’t tell them about your kidney . . . you didn’t tell them how you lost your kidney. They beat him up and, when he came here, the kidney was so deteriorated that it had to be removed. But he forgot to tell you.

**John:** When did that happen?

**Zelman:** That happened in 1950.

**Mrs. Sosne:** No, when did you get beaten?

**Zelman:** In the camps. Look, I am not the only one who got beaten.

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47 The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) merged with the Hebrew Sheltering House Association in 1909 to form the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or “Joint”) is a humanitarian assistance organization founded in 1914. In the wake of World War II, both organizations assisted with the emigration of Jewish displaced persons throughout the former war zone.

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John: What happened, though, to you?
Zelman: That was nothing. A guy came over . . . took a stick he had. He gave me a beating like a little bit. I didn’t do nothing about it because I didn’t have a good life . . . didn’t know what was right and what was wrong. So when I was liberated, then later I came to Atlanta, Georgia. One day, I feel I am passing with blood. So the woman where I stayed in the house, she says, “Go to a doctor.” The Federation was in charge of me, so Mickie Eisenberg took me to the doctor. We went into the doctor. Dr. Bleich says, “I am not an urologist,” so he took me to an urologist . . . then I never came home. I went straight to the hospital. They took out a kidney. I’ve got one kidney. That’s after the war, but that came from the war.

John: Where did you come first in America?
Zelman: Straight to America.
John: Right away to Atlanta?
Zelman: Atlanta, Georgia. The Jewish Federation, they signed for me that they will take care for three years. I didn’t even know it. But I knew they brought me over.

John: What were your first days and weeks like here?
Zelman: First days and weeks . . . I find a job right away. I wash dishes.
John: Did the Federation connect you with other people?
Zelman: No, you’ve got to do it yourself. You got to wake up . . . get out the dream.

Mrs. Sosne: You had Mickie Eisenberg, a social worker.
Zelman: I told them. I just told them she was taking care of me.
Mrs. Sosne: She helped you.
Zelman: She helped me . . . because I didn’t know English . . . nothing.
Mrs. Sosne: You went to school to learn English.
Zelman: I went to school to learn English at night. Worked in the morning, go to [school] at night.

John: So you were about 24 when you got here? How old were you when you came?
Zelman: I was about 18 years old.
Mrs. Sosne: No, not here.
John: When you got to America?
Zelman: I was 13 years old in 1939, right. I went from 1939 to 1945 is six years, so I was
18 or going to be 19.

**Mrs. Sosne:** Twenty-three.

**John:** Then America in 1949, you were about 23?

**Mrs. Sosne:** He was born in 1925, so he was about 23.

**John:** It must be hard to learn a new language when you are already an adult?

**Zelman:** That’s right. That was the trouble. If you come before you are young, then you can . . . It’s okay. I’ve got an accent. So what?

**John:** What was the Jewish part of Atlanta, the Jewish community like in those days?

**Zelman:** When I came it was 6,000 Jews here.\(^48\) It was a small town. Everybody knew each other. Then later . . . everybody . . .

**Mrs. Sosne:** They were very helpful.

**Zelman:** Very helpful.

**Mrs. Sosne:** They helped the married people. They put the married people into business, but he was single . . .

**Zelman:** Eleanor, I am going to do the talking . . . just go in there. The Atlanta Jewish people, most of them, are all people from Europe. They helped most of them, too. If you are married and you have children, and [you’ve] got to make a living. They used to buy you a grocery store . . . put money in the register. You heard about that, I guess. Everyone were on their own . . . that’s all there is to it. But I was not going to be in the grocery business so I was washing dishes. From washing dishes, I went to work for Butler Shoes.\(^49\) From Butler Shoes, I went to work for Fulton Paper Company.\(^50\) For Fulton Paper Company, I had a misunderstanding with the new boss so I walked out on him . . . told him good-bye . . . took off for a year. I came back, and I went to work for a meat company. And there, I retired.

**John:** Did you decide on a direction, what you wanted to do?

**Zelman:** What I wanted to do, I couldn’t do it. My mind was to do an accountant . . . but I came in, I got sick, and I’m getting older and . . . to go back to school. The army didn’t take me .

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\(^{48}\) According to the “Metropolitan Atlanta Jewish Population Study” of 1984, there were 9,600 Jewish persons living in the city of Atlanta and the five surrounding counties of Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb, Gwinnett and Clayton in 1945-46.

\(^{49}\) Butler Shoe Corporation was founded on December 31, 1948, and operated shoe stores throughout the United States.

\(^{50}\) Fulton Paper Company was founded in 1919, and was in the packaging and container business. In 2009, it was acquired by Southeastern Paper Group, Inc.
. . because of the kidney. Mickie Eisenberg went with me. Here . . . two things. [Zelman takes his Registration Certificate and Notice of Classification out of his wallet and shows them to the interviewers] That’s for the army. This first thing, that’s what I had to do. I was young. I had to be . . .

John: We’ll take more pictures later, too. [John holds cards up to camera]

Zelman: Mickie Eisenberg . . . she was in charge of me. She’s still alive. She lives now in Boston with her daughter.

John: What made you consider getting into the military? Was it for the education?

Zelman: Because if I would get into the military, they would pay for everything. [I] didn’t have nothing. How can I go . . . you go in the military . . . then, that was in . . . 1945 until 1949. If you go, and you signed up to go in the army, then later . . . a guy from the army . . . I could go when I was getting sick . . . no trouble. So I gave up everything. I went to work for washing dishes, to Butler Shoes, and then Fulton Paper. After then, I went with somebody who used to have a business . . . made a deal with him. I came back and I have been staying here all my life. It’s like my home.

John: How did you go about meeting your wife?

Zelman: My wife . . . I had a customer . . . it was her aunt. She said, “I’ve got a girl for you.” So she came down. We started talking, we met and everything, and then later, we got married.

John: What attracted you to her in particular?

Zelman: I met her . . . I liked her, so I says, “I am going to marry you.” She says, “You’re crazy.” She married me anyway.

John: What year was that?

Zelman: 1964.

John: So you were here for about 15 years?

Zelman: Yes, before. [Zelman looks at his book]

John: We’ll go through the book later. Ruth will take pictures. How did you go about adjusting to American culture . . . in the South?

Zelman: You’ve got to use your brains. If you don’t use your brains, you go down. If you use your brains, you go somewhere.
John: In what ways was American culture and Southern culture different from what you were used to in Europe?

Zelman: I wasn’t used to nothing. I was a child when I left. So if we wouldn’t be at war, and I would be in Poland, I would be in good shape right from the beginning. I didn’t have to worry . . . nothing. But I told you, we went to the house . . . what I told you . . . my brother had a girlfriend. My father opened them a business when he was 17 years old. He is six years older than I.

John: So you would be a successful accountant in Poland?

Zelman: I wouldn’t be an accountant. I wouldn’t have to be an accountant. I would be maybe in the business, too.

John: What was it like to see the black/white relationship of people when you first came here?

Zelman: When I came in here, I didn’t like it at all. When the guy picked me up from the train station, I said, “Where is democracy?” I came to Boston [Massachusetts]. I took a train from Boston to Washington [D.C.]. In Washington, we had to get off the train and go to another train because white and black cannot sit together. I said to the guy who picked me up, I says, “Where is democracy? Look what goes on in here.” He said, “You don’t like it, go back.” That’s what he told me. So what could I answer? What would you answer?

John: Did you see the connection with how they treated you in Poland?

Zelman: I was against . . . I used to go to school at night downtown, close to Five Points, and I used to see an elderly black man get off from the sidewalk for me . . . and bows down and take his hat and bows down.51 I said, “What is that? What goes on?” Evidently, everybody says, “They are slaves . . . they’ve been slaves.” I have been living here so long. You know what? When it was Martin Luther King, and they rioted all over the United States, I lost the appetite for them.52 That was no justice. I used to call on Martin Luther King, the Senior in the church . . . used to sell him paper towels and some other stuff. Every time, I had to bring him a bottle of bourbon . . . so he was on the take. So I said to myself, “If he is on the take . . . the preacher . . . they are all ganeyves [Hebrew: thieves] . . . they are all thieves.” You’ve got to use your head

51 Five Points is a district in downtown Atlanta, named after an intersection where five streets converge.
52 Following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968, riots broke out across the United States.
and that is all there is to it. Business is business. If you’ve got to make a living, you do a lot of things you don’t want to do. You buy it.

**John:** How did the war experience change you? How did it affect you after the war?

**Zelman:** After the war, I was like an animal. We . . . all the people liberated at the same time, we were animals. We wouldn’t take nothing from no one.

**John:** Explain that.

**Zelman:** For instance, there was a time we didn’t have what to eat that would be right after the war . . . we used to go into a German farm and say, “Give us bread and butter, give us bread and butter, give us bread and butter.” They were afraid of us . . . the way we were talking. That was . . . you have to be strong.

**John:** Did you have any urge for revenge?

**Zelman:** No. What can I do? What? Tell me. What can I do? A lot of people used to go on the train, open the door, and throw out Germans. To me, that was . . . I didn’t believe in that. I lived an entirely different life.

**John:** Did the war change your sense of what Jewishness meant to you in any way?

**Zelman:** I was born a Jew. I’m going to die a Jew. I’m not going to change my religion.

**John:** Were you a religious man before?

**Zelman:** I come from a religious family, yes. I went to a real Hebrew school . . . the best school in Vilna, and [my father] paid money for that, for my brother, my sister and me. My father paid, not me.

**John:** Did your faith help you get through the war?

**Zelman:** I couldn’t . . . that is . . . in Hebrew, they say, “It’s mazel. [Hebrew] It’s luck.” I can’t say nothing . . . maybe my mazel, my luck . . . that’s what I can say. I believe in G-d. I pray every day. I’ve got a kosher home. What else?

**John:** What was it like to become a father?

**Zelman:** You get married, and we had two children. We had a boy and a girl.

**John:** You were about 40 when you had the first child?

**Zelman:** Yes.

**John:** That’s quite an adjustment later in life.

**Zelman:** But I still did it. I made a living [and] sent them to good schools. My son became
a doctor.

John: What are your kids’ names?

Zelman: My kids’ names? I named my children after my father. I raised my daughter named after my mother. That’s the Jewish tradition. You name people after they are dead. You don’t name them when you are alive.

John: The names or the American version of the names?

Zelman: My son’s name is Gabriel in English, and in Hebrew, it’s Shraga Fivel. My daughter is Rachel . . . Rachel in English, Rachel in Hebrew. They’re both educated.

John: What are they like as people? Can you describe them a little bit?

Zelman: They are good children. They got big families. My son got eight . . . my daughter got nine children. Very religious.

John: Maybe talk about your wife a little. She is listening so be careful.

Zelman: What should I tell?

John: What was she doing since, [when] you got married?

Zelman: She was working.

John: Was she working in your business, too?

Zelman: No, I didn’t have no business. I worked for somebody else. My wife is an educated girl. She’s got . . . how many diplomas you got? Eleanor?

Mrs. Sosne: I’m not talking. I’m from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania . . .

Zelman: She is from Philadelphia. [Her] aunt used to live here. She was my customer, like I told you. She introduced me to her, and we started dating. She left . . . she went back home. I started talking to her on the telephone. It came the time we got married. After marriage, she moved to Atlanta. We had two children. My son was born in Philadelphia. My daughter was born here in Atlanta, Georgia. That’s all. We gave them a good education. I worked hard all my life to make a living and she worked and that’s all. Now, we are two people with four walls. They moved away. We are here.

John: Ruth was asking about the synagogue you joined?

Zelman: When I came here, I joined . . . I used to go on Washington Street, at Shearith Israel, over there. Then later, the shul moved away. Right here on Highland Avenue . . . Shearith Israel. Then, when I was sick, with the kidney, I lived on Parkway Drive and I used to go Beth
Jacob *shul*. It was in a house on Boulevard. After then, I used to live at Mrs. Nelkin[’s] for a year. She took care of me after the operation, because she is originally from my hometown. She was from my hometown. I knew her sister and I knew her nephew. The nephew came to America, but I knew the sister from Europe. I knew the whole family. She took care of me. She was very nice. I appreciate her. She did treat me like a king. Then we moved on this side of town. I used to go to Rabbi [Joseph] Cohen’s house, *davening*, for 17 years. Then later, he quit, and I went back to Beth Jacob. I am still with Beth Jacob.

**Ruth:** Was Rabbi [Tobias] Geffen at Shearith Israel when you went there?  
**Zelman:** Yes.  
**Ruth:** What do you remember about him?  
**Zelman:** He was 100 years old when he passed away. [He] was a very nice man. He had a big family. I know the most . . . his one son used to live here. He was a lawyer. He lived next to Mrs. Nelkin. Rabbi Geffen was a very nice man. He passed away when he was 100 years old.

**Ruth:** Did you know Rabbi [Harry] Epstein at all?  
**Zelman:** No, not much.  
**Ruth:** I think he was from Lithuania.  
**Zelman:** His father sent him to Kovno [Lithuania] . . . to the *yeshiva* over there. The minute the war started, he checked out, and he came back. His father was a big rabbi in Chicago [Illinois]. He had a big *shul* . . . because my friends, who were my partners with me in Germany, they lived in Chicago . . . for the Jewish holidays, I used to go over there.

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53 Beth Jacob is an Orthodox synagogue on Lavista Road in Atlanta, Georgia founded in 1942 by former members of Ahavath Achim who were looking for a more Orthodox congregation. Beth Jacob is now Atlanta’s largest Orthodox congregation. The first location was a converted house on Boulevard.

54 Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen (1896-1985) was born in Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey. He was trained for the rabbinate in Turkey and accepted his first pulpit in Havana, Cuba in 1920. In 1934 he moved to Atlanta, Georgia where he was installed as the rabbi of Congregation Or VeShalom, a Sephardic congregation. Rabbi Cohen officially retired in 1969, but remained active at both the synagogue and in the community until his death in 1985.

55 Rabbi Tobias Geffen (1870-1970) was an Orthodox rabbi and leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in Atlanta from 1910-1970. He is widely known for his 1935 decision that certified Coca-Cola as kosher. He also organized the first Hebrew school in Atlanta, and standardized regulation of kosher supervision in the Atlanta area.

56 Rabbi Harry Epstein served as rabbi of Ahavath Achim from 1928 to 1982, when he became rabbi emeritus.

57 *Yeshiva* (Hebrew for “sitting”) is a Jewish educational institution for religious instruction that is equivalent to high school. It also refers to a *Talmudic* college for unmarried male students from their teenage years to their early twenties. In pre-war Kovno (Kaunas) Lithuania, the *yeshiva* in Slobodka, an impoverished district of the city, was one of Europe’s most prestigious institutions of higher Jewish learning.
Ruth: Then you went to Anshi Sfard?\footnote{Congregation Anshi S'fard is an Orthodox synagogue located in Atlanta, Georgia. It was founded in 1911 to provide a home for Hasidic worship and fellowship for Jews from Poland, Galicia and the Ukraine who had settled in Atlanta. It is the oldest Orthodox synagogue in Atlanta.}

Zelman: No, Anshi Sfard was Rabbi Cohen. You know him? You’ve heard of him? I used to pick him up in the morning to take him to \textit{shul}. It was cold. He didn’t have a car. He didn’t drive. I don’t know if he had a driver’s license.

John: What do you remember about him?

Zelman: Very nice man, yes. Then the rabbi who liberated me, Rabbi Mossman, he was in Shearith Israel. He came down, too. He was a nice man, but he had a bad wife. His wife left him. I think you heard the story, so forget about it.

John: Did you notice any difference between American Jewishness and European in terms of the values or attitudes or anything?

Zelman: They [are] entirely different . . . here it is entirely different. Over there, most Jews, the children go to Jewish schools. Not too many go into public schools. Over there, you are raised entirely different than here. It is up to your family. It is up to your family . . . from where you grew up.

John: You wanted your kids to be very traditional?

Zelman: No, they picked themselves what they wanted to be. But I send them to Jewish schools here, paid for it. It is up to them. They are doing with their children what they want. That’s their business.

John: Before we started the whole interview, you said that you are very reluctant to do interviews, even back in the 1990’s?

Zelman: I still don’t like to do interviews. My wife made the interview.

John: Could you explain why?

Zelman: I don’t want it . . . I told you that. I want to forget about the past. The past is not good for anybody. If the past was good—you had a good life and everything—it’s different. But what did you have? You were a slave. The same thing like the Jews were in Egypt . . . the same thing. They used to work with the stones . . . with the same thing, that’s what we did. That’s the same thing with the Bible, what we [did]. On Passover, that’s what reminds us what everything
was. Now, it’s already in the books they have written in that anytime you say Yizkor [Hebrew: remember], remembrance for them, you mention the people who were killed by fire, by water, by sword, by guns, that’s what it is. But otherwise, it’s the same thing. Who wants to talk about bad things? Tell me who. Find me a man who will come to you, and wants to talk about bad things.

**John:** Some survivors want to pass it on so they don’t take it with them.

**Zelman:** Some survivors are different. I am different . . . I am an entirely different man. I cannot see what somebody else does. Certain things that they do, it bothers me, so I don’t have anything to do with it.

**John:** Have you associated much with other survivors over the years?

**Zelman:** No, I don’t belong to Hemshech [Hebrew: continuation]. I don’t belong to that. I don’t believe in that because I had a fight with them. They made a monument for the 6,000,000 people . . . they made [it] in a cemetery. I am a Kohen. I went to the Jewish Federation . . . sent me some people. Big people used to be in the Federation. I knew him very well. They sent me to talk to the other people. It was a handful of people, five or for six people . . . to change, not to make the monument over in the cemetery. He was giving the land. The old man, Sam Massell, on Peachtree Street . . . his grandson got it . . . the land, where the Jewish Federation used to be. He offered them [to] give [them] the piece of land and to put in a monument for the 6,000,000 Jews. But they didn’t want it so they got in the cemetery. So let them go there. Over there, dead

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59 Passover [Hebrew: Pesach] is the anniversary of Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days. Unleavened bread, matzot, is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelites during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they did not have time to wait for the dough to rise. On the first two nights of Passover, the seder, the central event of the holiday, is celebrated. The seder service is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life.

60 A traditional mourning service to honor lost loved ones that is recited four times a year, on Yom Kippur, on the last day of Passover, on the second day of Shavuot, and on the eighth day of Sukkot.

61 Eternal Life-Hemshech is an organization of Atlanta Holocaust survivors, their descendants and friends dedicated to commemorating the six million Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust.

62 A Memorial to the Six Million, a granite monument topped by six torches, with each torch representing one million Jews killed in the Holocaust, was erected by Eternal-Life Hemshech at Greenwood Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia on April 25, 1965.

63 A kohen is a priest, a descendant of Aaron the priest. In the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, priests or Kohanim officiated in the Temple, and were responsible for worship ceremonies, such as leading services, offering sacrifices, and burning incense. No was was admitted to the priesthood unless he could prove his priestly descent. To maintain a high degree of purity, Kohanim observed certain prohibitions concerning marriage and contact with the deceased.

64 Sam Massell (born August 26, 1927) is a businessman who served from 1970 to 1974 as the 53rd mayor of Atlanta, Georgia. He is the first Jewish mayor in his city's history.

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people go, not living people.

**John:** They should have put it someplace else?

**Zelman:** Like all over the United States, nobody put it in a cemetery. I am a priest in the Jewish religion. I am a kohen. I don’t go to cemetery. I don’t go to funerals. If I go to a funeral, I stay outside. But I don’t go anymore at all. I made up my mind. I don’t go now to dead people. I hate to go to visit somebody in the hospital. It hurts. So that’s my privilege . . . to be American . . . freedom.

**John:** Mrs. Sosne, can you think of any other stories that your husband has mentioned over the years?

**Mrs. Sosne:** Are you talking to me?

**John:** Yes, anything. Maybe we could jog his memory.

**Mrs. Sosne:** Tell them the [unintelligible: 1:26:08] story. He would put his hand out for bread and he’d stay under a dead person so he would get his piece of bread for extra food.

**Zelman:** We used to have people laying there in the camps. I’ll tell you. So they are dead. So we used to keep them an extra few days because you could get an extra slice of bread. Your marbles got to work right. If you are a schlemiel [Yiddish: an inept, clumsy person], it’s your own fault. You’ve got to be active. You got to be on your toes not on the bottom of your heels.

**John:** Where there any specific decisions you had to make, any choices that worked out for you? Were there any turning points for you?

**Zelman:** A lot of turning points. We were in business. You lose money. You lose money, you say Kaddish [Hebrew: sanctification], forget about it, and you keep going.\(^\text{65}\)

**Mrs. Sosne:** He was 13, but he was inculcated thoroughly with Judaism and his values, and that is the core of his essence. He has not deviated from that and he does not.

**Zelman:** I’m not going to change.

**Mrs. Sosne:** His decisions are all based on his early childhood upbringing . . . his background.

**John:** Then maybe a big question that might not have an answer: How do you fit the Holocaust into the whole Jewish history and teaching? The why of it—how does it fit in?

**Zelman:** Can I ask you something? How can you bring back 6,000,000 Jews? You tell me.

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\(^{65}\) The Kaddish is a prayer that praises G-d and expresses a yearning for the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. The prayer is a sanctification of G-d’s name. It is recited at funerals and by mourners in memory of a loved one who has died.
If you can give me an answer for that, I can tell you what you want to know.

John: I don’t have one.

Zelman: So, that is life. America wasn’t so good for the Jews anyway. They didn’t let in the ships with Jews, and they had to go back, and guess what? You’ve heard of that?

John: The St. Louis?66

Zelman: So talk to G-d and tell him what America did. A lot of people don’t believe.

Mrs. Sosne: A lot of them lost their [faith].

Zelman: A lot of my friends come from very, very religious homes . . . and got away . . .

Mrs. Sosne: I can say, from my experience, that in Atlanta, Georgia, my husband is probably the only one, or one of the only ones, whose children have carried on the Orthodox Judaism. Most of them . . . their children have gone far, far away from it.

Zelman: That’s real life, yes.

Mrs. Sosne: The ones that I’ve met . . .

Zelman: I’d like to tell you something else. Jewish people . . . they make a cholent67 for Shabbat [Hebrew: Sabbath].68 She [Zelman indicates Ruth] knows what it is. It’s a big pot.

Mrs. Sosne: Soup.

Zelman: So you make a cholent for Shabbat. You put in all the ingredients, you put it in an oven, and it cooks during the night. You don’t know what tomorrow is coming out, or is it good or bad. It’s luck, that’s all it is. If it’s good, it’s lucky. If not, forget about it, you’ve got to throw

66 On May 13, 1939, the German transatlantic liner St. Louis sailed from Hamburg, Germany for Havana, Cuba. On the voyage were 938 passengers, one of whom was not a refugee. Almost all were Jews fleeing from the Third Reich. Most were German citizens, some were from Eastern Europe, and a few were officially “stateless.” The passengers held landing certificates and transit visas issued by Cuba. A week before they sailed, the Cuban President, Federico Laredo Bru, issued a decree that invalidated all recently issued landing certificates. When the St. Louis arrived in Havana harbor on May 27, 1929, the Cuban government admitted 28 passengers: 22 were Jews who had valid United States visas; four were Spanish citizens; and two were Cuban nationals. One other passenger, who tried to commit suicide, was evacuated to a hospital in Havana. The remaining 908 passengers were forced to return to Europe after both Cuba and the United States refused to admit them. Jewish organizations obtained entry visas for them to four European countries: 288 went to Great Britain; 181 went to the Netherlands; 214 went to Belgium; and 224 went to France. Of the 620 who returned to the continent, 87 managed to emigrate before the German invasion of Western Europe in May 1940. Five hundred thirty-two St. Louis passengers were trapped when Germany conquered Western Europe, and just over half, 278, survived the Holocaust.

67 Cholent is a traditional Jewish stew. It is usually simmered overnight for 12 hours or more, and eaten for lunch on Shabbat (the Sabbath).

68 Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays. Shabbat observance entails refraining from work activities, often with great rigor, and engaging in restful activities to honor the day. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday night and is ushered in by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. It is closed the following evening with the recitation of the havdalah blessing.

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it away. That is life—the same thing. You don’t know what will be. You’ve got to believe what you believe. If you don’t believe, that’s your business. That’s all there is to it. I cannot tell people how to live.

**John:** Can you think of other things?

**Zelman:** You got some more? What else you want?

**John:** Do you think in the last 60 something years that Europe has changed—the Poles, the Germans, Hungarians, and so on?

**Zelman:** Don’t anybody tells you something, its BS [bullshit].

**John:** You think it’s still under the surface?

**Zelman:** They don’t like Jews, period. That’s all there is to it. To them, a Jew is not good. [unrelated conversation, interview resumes]

**Ruth:** What about Israel? You almost moved there. What are your thoughts on Israel today?

**Zelman:** I don’t know. I’ll be honest with you, I don’t know. First thing, my opinion, is how can Israel have a *Knesset* [Hebrew: assembly]—a *Knesset* is the government—when they have Muslims in there? The Muslims . . . they don’t like the Jew. But that’s what Israel did . . . they took in everybody and they thought everybody’s going to be right . . . but they are not. So, it is written in the *Torah*, “*Torah goyyim harog*” [Hebrew], the best gentile . . . kill it. The Muslims, that’s what they are. They got to be killed. Otherwise, they [are] going to kill you. That’s my opinion. I cannot . . . I am not a liberal . . . [Israel’s] got a lot of liberal people. So they maybe believe different and I believe different.

**John:** What do you imagine the future is going to be there?

**Zelman:** The future is up to G-d, not to me. That’s the reason we pray. We pray. In our prayer book, it’s written, you live *yom, yom, yamuslana* [Hebrew]. You live by the day, for today. We don’t know what tomorrow will be.

**Ruth:** Your wife was saying that you taught your children Jewish values when they were growing up. She took care of the day to day and you took care of their spiritual life in a certain sense. Can you talk a little bit about what you tried to teach them?

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69 The *Knesset* is the unicameral legislature of Israel. As the legislative branch of the Israeli government, the Knesset passes all laws, elects the President and Prime Minister, approves the cabinet, and supervises the work of the government.

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Zelman: I taught them to be a good Jew. That’s all.

John: What does that mean to you?

Zelman: I taught them. I helped them in Hebrew. But I was learning so I gave it to them. That’s all there is to it . . . and they absorbed. That’s all. What? You can have a lot of children. Look, a lot of people got children . . . they sing to the children. Look this terrible . . . what happened . . . the girl killed the girl. Now, they are going to kill her . . . people are going to kill her. If she comes out of jail, and she doesn’t have somebody to taking care of her and watching her, she be dead. They are so blown up. You don’t know . . . the main thing, you had a jury. Right? If you had a jury and they came out with what they thought was right, forget about it . . . what are you going to come from . . . the Supreme Court. Where in the heck . . . the Supreme Court passed a bill everybody can have a gun in the United States. Where in the hell have you ever heard of it in the world? To kill people. Look what goes on here in the black neighborhood, every day . . . you got on television, every day they kill each other. For what? They’ve got to have money for dope, that’s all there is to it. They’re not raised . . . they know the mama but they don’t know who the father is.

John: Was your father’s estimate of America accurate?

Zelman: I don’t know. I couldn’t tell you. He didn’t stay here. He came, and he died by Hitler.

John: The image that he gave?

Zelman: The image that he gave . . . otherwise, they would move. The image . . . what they saw, they didn’t like it so they came back. My father had a brother in Cuba. He left years ago, way before the . . . everything. He didn’t want to serve the Czar so he left Poland. He came to Cuba. He lived his life. My father lived his life. That’s all there is to it. Each one’s got to live their own life. I cannot take care of somebody who doesn’t want to work. If somebody wants to drink, can you stop him? If somebody wants to go to Las Vegas [Nevada] and play . . . make money, lose money, it’s his money, he can do whatever he wants . . . as long as you don’t give

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70 This is a reference to the trial of Casey Marie Anthony, a Florida woman who was on trial for the death of her two-year-old daughter at the time of this interview.

71 This is a reference to two landmark decisions by the United States Supreme Court regarding gun control laws. In 2008, the Supreme Court interpreted the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution to mean an individual is guaranteed the right to own a firearm for traditionally lawful purposes such as self-defense. In 2010, the Supreme Court further determined that the amendment applies to and supersedes local and state laws, which might otherwise limit that right.
him the money so you’re not the boss. That’s all that’s left. That’s life. Life is a tough cookie.

**John:** What would be your teaching or your message to your grandchildren or your great-grandchildren some day?

**Zelman:** That’s not my business. Now, [I] think that the family has to raise their own children. Where two people sleep on one pillow, the third one cannot interfere.

**John:** If somebody watches this in a museum 100 years from now, what would you want them to learn or gain from your experience?

**Zelman:** Each one . . . I just told you that each one takes his child . . . some do, some don’t. Some don’t wash her . . . shave themselves. You don’t know what it is. Each one is a different person.

**John:** Do you think the world has changed at all because of what happened?

**Zelman:** The world’s not worth a penny. The whole world is no good. Look what goes on in the Congress now. They fighting about money . . . so two people say, “We not going to do this . . . we not going to do this.” How come they went, they backed their President Bush and they went to Iraq, and killed so many young people, spent billions of dollars? Why? You go ask right now, call up Bush, why did he do it?

<phone rings, interview pauses, interview resumes>

**John:** So you don’t think that any moral lesson was learned from what happened?

**Zelman:** Nothing happened. What happened? Look at the government, how crooked it is. Now they say . . . look, I am not for . . . what’s the President’s name?

**John:** Obama. 72

**Zelman:** Obama. I’m not for him. I didn’t even vote for him. But what’s right is right. They screwed up the whole thing. That is the reason all the doo-doo is what the American people are eating. What can you do? What can you do? What? They used to have an office in Washington, D.C. over there and go make deals with people. How many people went to jail for that?

<phone rings, interview stops for unrelated conversation, then resumes>

**John:** Is there anything else you would like to add that we didn’t bring up?

**Zelman:** I’m just telling you there is nothing to bring up. I’m not a politician. I’m just a

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72 Barack H. Obama is the 44th President of the United States, serving two consecutive terms from 2009-2016. He is the first African-American elected as president in US history.

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plain citizen. I pay taxes.

Ruth: Was there something good about coming here to America?

Zelman: Yes, I am thankful. Did I say I’m not thankful? I’m thankful.

Ruth: It is good to be able to complain. You complain here and not there.

Zelman: I am not complaining. Over there, I couldn’t complain. But then I am complaining because it is not the truth that comes out. They [are] lying. They’ve got the cover over their face, and that’s not right. It’s not right. Now, I don’t care what they going to do . . . look, at my age, I don’t care what are they going to do. So if they charge me a little more, I pay a little more. But that is not the right thing. A lot of people lost homes . . . so crooked . . . so crooked. I belong to Bank of America. I just paid it yesterday. Why? I got a letter . . . I’ve got to have more money for them in the bank to do business with them. I keep $1,000 all the time in the bank. Now, they want more. Why should they keep my money? They don’t pay me interest. Do they pay interest? No. That is not . . . how right is that? They tell me what I have to do with my money. That’s the same thing [with] the government. Why do you think it is so much struggle right now with the hospitals and everything? Why? Because people go at night in the emergency. Everybody doesn’t have nothing, but you got to take care. You’ve got to help somebody . . . if somebody is sick, you’ve got to help. That is the hospital. So, is that right? How many people lost . . . right in here, across from here <points to indicate his own residential street> . . . foreclosure, another foreclosure, and another foreclosure . . . three houses, foreclosures here. You go to the bank, and you can buy a home real cheap, if you want to buy a home.

John: So do you think this is all due to corruption?

Zelman: Corruption, that is *gneye* [Hebrew: theft] . . . in Hebrew, they call it ‘*gneye*.’ That is stealing, stealing, stealing. The Republicans stole so much money. Bush’s government became filthy, filthy rich. The rich will never . . . has a little heart for the poor. Even the Rockefellers says they are willing to pay more money, more taxes. The old man got . . . Eleanor, what is the guy got the stock, the big stock, expensive? What’s the old man selling stock?

Mrs. Sosne: Hathaway.73

Zelman: Hathaway. Here is man, he says, we should pay more. He himself . . . his stock is

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73 This is a reference to Warren Buffett, the Chairman, President, and Chief Executive Officer of Berkshire Hathaway Inc., an American multinational conglomerate holding company headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska.

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what . . . $800,000 one share.

Mrs. Sosne: Not $800,000 . . . $80,000.

Zelman: Eighty thousand dollars a share. So how can . . . It’s corrupt. The whole government is corrupt. How much did the vice-president make from the . . . he had a company in Iraq. You are shaking your head. What do you think about that?

John: You are preaching to the choir here.

Mrs. Sosne: There’s nothing worse than what they did in the Atlanta school system. That . . .

Zelman: That is the black people . . . they did it to their own children. How in the hell can they do that, to be so stupid? Their own children suffer. Now all the teachers are speaking up.

Mrs. Sosne: There is still a slave mentality.

John: On that note, thank you very much for your story.

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS

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74 This is a reference to United States Vice President Dick Cheney. Prior to becoming Vice President in 2001, Cheney had been the chairman and CEO of Halliburton Company, an oil field services company. Halliburton has become the object of several controversies involving its ties to Cheney and the award of government contracts.

75 This is a reference to the Atlanta Public Schools cheating scandal. In 2009, improbable gains on state-administered standardized tests were published in the Atlanta-Journal Constitution, which suggested teachers and principals within the Atlanta Public School district had cheated. Following an investigation, the Georgia Bureau of Investigations released a report around the time of this interview that suggested the cheating was widespread enough to indict dozens of educators and administrators, including the district’s superintendent.