Rubin Sztajer (2004)
Interview 2

Interviewers: Andria Scott, Shana Lieberman, David Harazduk
Also present: Regina A. Sztajer

[Beginning of Interview 2.1]

David Harazduk: I'm David Harazduk. I will be conducting the interview. It's March 3rd, 2004 and this is our second interview of 3 focusing on the war years. [tape skips] Last time, you were talking about how you had a limited knowledge of the outside world. I was curious, when you first heard about what was going on with the Nazi regime?

Rubin Sztajer: Just before the war began, just before September the 1st, 1939, as I probably mentioned to you we did not have any kind of communication. We did not have any radio, newspaper, nothing. So being 13 years old, I really was not very much interested, very isolated, never left the town so I did not know what went on outside my own little circle. And we heard, I heard the war the first day on September the 1st, 1939. We lived right near the German-Czech border so we heard the first shots, and my parents had said that there's a war going on. I did not comprehend what a war is like, and they said that we have to evacuate.

It was Friday morning and it was a very beautiful day, but for us, it got dark for the next almost 6 years. We took a few of our belongings and we marched, we left town—evacuated town. We did not have a horse or wagon. We didn't have push carts or anything, so all we did, we took a few things that we could carry and we marched all day until, as is customary of the Jewish law, on the Sabbath, you've got to rest. You can't do anything at sunset. We stopped in a villa and we took out, we conducted our services and we prayed and we had a little food that we had brought with us.

The next morning, we were ready to continue our evacuation, our [indistinct] and the Germans caught up to us. They said that they are here to help us. I did not know the difference between a German and any other soldier. I knew the Polish soldier, but I did not know that, that we could turn around and go home. So we did. We took up our belongings that we had and whatever we could carry with us and we marched back home.

Before we had reached out town, everyone was stopped, Jews and Christians alike. The Jews were separated from the Christians. We were detained, but everyone else—the Jews were detained, but everyone else was allowed to go home. We were waiting until Sunday early afternoon and they told us we were free, we can go home. As we reached our village, just on the outskirts of the village, the road divided. Those that went to the right which my family was among them came home safely. Those that went to the left, 272 people, Jews, were killed, I assume for no other reason that being Jewish of the faith they were born into.

On Monday morning, everyone, we were all told that we have to come to the town square. We could come to the synagogue. Outside the synagogue we had to go in, take all the prayer books and the scrolls with the five books of Moses [indistinct] and we brought it out and they burned them. They also took the horses. They had some horses put in some of the cannons and they put them in the synagogue to desiccate it. I assume the reason for it was to dehumanize us, to frighten us, to scare us in such a way that by just them opening, moving their lips, we would be scared of them, and they did succeed. They did a [indistinct].
Then we were told that from now on we had to come to the town square every morning and every evening. The new laws specifically designed for Jews, not what we cannot, not what we can do, but what we cannot do. So every morning, we took our news and we went down to see what is new. For example, if a German walked on the sidewalk and I approached him or he approached me, I had to get in the gutter because they were not going to walk on the same sidewalk as a Jew did. And there were so many others, too numerous to even talk about.

It continued until sometimes in the 1940 era of several months later because there aren't many dates that I do remember, more by the season. We were told that we have to leave our homes and to move into an area called the ghetto. Now, we hear the word ghetto being used here quite often, but the reason why when they hear the word ghetto, it has a completely different meaning. You're from Baltimore. If you're from Baltimore, you know that Pikesville is a Jewish ghetto and you also know that Cherry Hill is a ghetto and the half Polish ghettos and all kind of ghettos, but in the ghetto here is only because a certain ethnic group lives in a certain area. You can come and you can go as you please. You can move in or you can move out. You can do whatever you want. You are free. But, a ghetto to a survivor means a completely different thing. They chose the biggest slum they could find. They put us in there and they assigned each family a certain living quarter. I call it living quarter. I come from a family of 8. We were 3 brothers and 3 sisters and my parents. We were assigned a room no bigger than any of your rooms and maybe even smaller for 8 people. How do you live in one room, 8 people? You cannot. We had one bed in the room. We had a table with 2 benches and we had a little stove that my father found made out of metal. It was round, and because we didn't have any firewood or coal, we went to the lumber yard and brought some sawdust, packed it in solidly and it was winter outside and we were suffocating. And we lit it and it smoldered 24 hours. My mother, my younger sister slept in the one bed. The rest had to bend down over it on a [indistinct] table.

In the summertimes, the nights are not as humid as they are here. Somehow it is livable, bearable. If I was tired, now I could lie down on the floor and fall asleep. But in the wintertime, because we didn't have much bedding—when we left, all we could take the things that we could carry in our bags. That meant we took a little bedding, took us some clothes, we took some food that we had, a few pots and pans, what we could carry. So we didn't have too much bedding, and at night in the wintertime, the nights are very, very cold. Being below zero is nothing uncommon. We would call winters here heat waves over there. So most nights, we would not even take our clothes off in winter. We would wear the clothes day in and day out, day and night, 24 hours a day, sometimes 7 days a week because we did not have any indoor plumbing in these rooms. Water, we had to go and fetch and it was also limited because we could not go out of the area. In the ghetto, we were told that we cannot leave the area. We had to be confined. While the big cities had wire fences and walls, we did not have any wire fences and walls. We were marked as who we were by having to wear the yellow star of David, sewn on one the front, one the back. Anyone aged 8 or older had to wear one on the outer garments.

Coming back to living quarters, where to sleep was not the big problem. The bigger problems were, if you cannot go out to an area and slum areas, as it is here, there's no industry. And if there's no industry, there are no jobs. How are you going to provide? How are you going to live, to earn a little money? They did give us a ration coupons, but we still needed some money to go out and buy, to buy that food or whatever we needed. And if you don't have a job, how are you going to live? In the summertime, we used to smuggle out together at night, and I say we, my older brother and younger brother and I, we became the sole breadwinners at 14 years old, 13 years old. We'd smuggle out and crawl on our arms and legs and our bellies, however we could go out, make sure that no one sees us at night, and we could crawl in the fields and dig up whatever they planted, whether it was potatoes or carrots or whatever we could get our hands on. We had to use our hands, and then we'd crawl out of there and crawl home and come home, bring something home. If it rained, we couldn't do it. You cannot crawl very well in mud. So that meant that night or two nights or whatever, nothing was coming in. But, that's in the summertime. The spring, fall
and winter, there are no crops. Here, there's something they plant 2 seasons, one season. There was one and one harvest and if there's nothing planted, how are you going to live? What are you going to live off?

Anti-Semitism was very, very high. I didn't meet one that liked me, but I am sure there were some people, but I never ran into them. But in desperation, times like these, one takes chances. We used to smuggle out at night and try to sell to the Poles, the Christians, whatever we could, whatever we had that was of any value that they were interested. We—if we didn't have anything, we used to go around and buy it from people, things that we could collect black market. We bought it for a little money and tried to sell it for a little more, to make a little profit. But, that ploy in the wintertime was no easy task. The snow starts coming down in November and it stays through March. If you go out of the house, you leave footprints. We went through fields, through dirt roads, and if you leave footprints, all they had to do to see where we came from and where we went, and it would be suicidal. So, what we had to do is hope and pray it was going to be a blizzard, because in blizzards, they weren't guarding as much, and at the same time, the wind would blow over and cover up the footprints and you felt a little safe. This is how we made a living.

Then came a date which I do remember, which is April the 12th, 1942. The purpose of the ghetto was to have every Jew in one area that they wouldn't have to go look all over town to find where we are if they wanted to round up Jews for either slave labor or extermination. They didn't want—they had us in a corner. We heard there was going to be such a round-up and I was 16 years old. I was small for my age. My parents decided that my father, older brother and older sister would hide, but I was 16. They felt that I would be safe when they come. They're not going to take me. Little did we know then how wrong we were. There weren't many places that people hide, but one could always crawl into a hole and for a few hours and hang out there. So my father and my older sister, Maliga, left and I stayed home.

In the middle of the night, they drove up and they were always very loud and we heard their footprints. My mother and me, we went to the door and she opened up when they started knocking. She opened the door and they knocked it down and they yelled out the names of my father and older brother. “Where are they?” She said, “They're not here.” They started screaming, yelling, “Where are they?” and they got the same answer, “I do not know.” Finally, they looked at me. They saw me. They told me to stand up. One came over, grabbed me by my arm because what the Germans never wanted to do? They never wanted to leave empty handed. Had my brother and father been home, maybe they wouldn't have taken me. I don't know. So they grabbed my arm, started pulling me up. My mother, as any human would do, grabbed me by the other, but we were not match for them. They pulled me out. They took me away. Never did see my mother, my parents, my younger brother and my two younger sisters. I don't remember the faces of those Nazis, soldiers, but I do remember the face of my mother and the faces of my 2 siblings. I still do remember the tears coming down. I saw their expressions. I really felt their pain. But, to no avail, I was taken to a forced labor camp. When I got there, they took a few things away from me. They took away my clothes. We had to get undressed. They had a team of men going through and looking for anything of value, any valuables. Even though I came there with just my clothes and my bag, no luggage, no nothing, they gave each one of us a new outfit which consisted of a pair of pants, a jacket, a one set underwear top and bottom sewn together, a blow-up bed to fill up with straw and a blanket that served as a cover and a sheet. No pillows. No nothing. No socks. My clothes were too big on me. I was small. They just took a package and gave it to me, but that wasn't a problem—what I had to do is find a man that was taller than I am in an outfit that didn't have clothes too small on him. Anyway, with clothing sizes, I didn't have to model for anyone. It would fit. It will stay on me.

I was assigned into a barrack. They over-assigned the barracks. If you have been to the museum, you've seen those barracks, and I went in after I filled up the straw. I climbed up on my bunk and I put my face in the dead straw and lie there and cried. The barracks, I'm talking complete [indistinct], not like we know them here. They got the cinder block. There's indoor plumbing. There's air conditioning, windows, doors, showers, you name it, toilets. We didn't have any of that. These were barracks, empty shelves and 4 walls,
a roof and a floor and bunk beds, and then we had in the center of the barrack, we had 2 long tables and benches on each side and we had 2 buckets. The buckets were, instead of indoor plumbing, human waste. Once it got dark, we had to go in. We weren't allowed to get out. It was curfew. We used those buckets. The next morning, we took turns dumping it.

I laid there and cried on that straw all night not knowing what is my future, if there is one. Will I ever see anybody? What will I do? What will happen to me? Will I ever get out? And so many other things. I had no sleeping moments. But, the next morning, the Nazis made sure that I didn't have time to cry. I didn't have time to sit around and feel sorry for myself. What they did that became a routine. Every morning, we had to get up 6 days a week. We had to get up at 6 o'clock in the morning. We had a half an hour time to whatever we wanted to do and 6:30, they gave us the rations of the day. It was a cup of coffee, substitute coffee. No bread, no cereal, no nothing.

At 7 o'clock, we had to get ready. We lined up in rows of 5 and we were counted quickly, we marched a whole hour to work. We got there. The first day, they gave each one of us a shovel. What we did, literally move mountains and the bodies and never the ground so they could build their munitions factories. We started at 8 o'clock and we worked nonstop until 12. We had a half an hour rest period. If it was a nice day, fairly, not too cold, we would just lie down in the dirt, take a rest and fall asleep for a few minutes and then started again, 12:30 to 6 o’clock nonstop. Can you just imagine if you had to really [indistinct] have to be out there all day on a sunny day? The temperature is 90, 95, 100 degrees, the sun beating down on you, and you're out there. You don't even have a drop of water. What would that be like? We had no choice. If it rained or snowed, with rain that is in the summer, we used to put our palms of our hands out, catch a few drops of rain if the guard didn't look at us because we had to work, and just wet our lips.

In the summer—wintertime, it was different. We were out there all day. We didn't have the things that children cannot leave your door or your home and mothers would never allow you to leave home without it or you wouldn't leave home without. We did not have—we did not have any heavy coats. We didn't have any decent shoes, no socks, just rags wrapped around our feet. We didn't have any sweaters, gloves, scarves, you name it, hats and whatever. We didn't have any of these things. You're out there all day and don't even have a hot cup of coffee, the snow coming down, wind blowing, temperatures below zero. Again, we had no choice. 6 o’clock, we had to be ready quickly, lined up in rows of 5 and march back a whole hour to camp. We got to camp at 7 and then we had a half an hour time to wash up, to clean up. But when you have—in the middle of the camp, we had one barrack that had about a dozen showers and about 12, one big board, 12 holes cut out for toilets. When you have about 1,500 men to use all of these facilities in a half an hour, that gives each of us one-and-a-half seconds to use it. You know it cannot be done. The first few people that were lucky enough to get into the showers had a little hot water, but that only lasted for about a minute or so. The rest of us had cold water.

In the summertime, those that were lucky enough to get in get that little water, regardless hot or cold. It didn't matter. Even cold water felt good after a day backing in the sun. Refreshing, but it was a very welcome thing to be able to get in the shower and the rest never had a chance to even get a little water on themselves. What about in the wintertime? We're out there all day long and then you come back in the [indistinct], first one to get how water the few seconds I could stay under there. We did not have the things, again, that we always take for granted today. We didn't even have a towel to dry ourselves off. We did not have any toilet paper, didn't have a tissue and I don't even want to go into all the amenities, all the things that we have in our bathrooms today, we did not have it. [indistinct] that none of us would dare even going in take a shower. If you don't bathe, what happens is, lice form and once they come, it didn't matter whether they disinfected our clothes. We had them in our blanket. They disinfected the blanket, we had them in our hair. They shaved our bodies from head to toe. Somehow, the lice were always there. As a matter of fact, when I was liberated, my skin did not look the color you see it now. I had 3 years worth
of dirt. As a matter of fact, I could have gone back even further into the ghetto. It took me 7 months to finally get to see the color of my body.

7:30, they gave us our rations of the day, which consisted of a cup of soup made out of rutabagas and, if you were lucky enough, a horse would die, they would cut it in and we would have a piece of meat, but it didn't matter, horse meat or not, that was welcome. And a small piece of bread. We were supposed to go back from the cafeteria so-called, the mess hall, to the, our barracks, but we ate—I ate it. By the time we got back, I had finished because I hadn't eaten all day. I was very hungry. One reason, the other reason, I couldn't save that [indistinct] small piece I got to the next day because somebody would know and they would steal it from me. It would disappear, so my stomach isn't safe.

Then it was curfew. We were not allowed to get out until the next morning. It continued to sometimes the spring of 1943. In the beginning, we were in a slave labor camp. We were guarded by the military rather than by the elite S.S. We wore civilian clothes and they also had some guards. These were men that could not fight on the front. They were too old or they weren't a hundred percent physically fit, and they had some helpers, some of them Poles, some Ukrainians, Yugoslavians and all these people were there. They gave them a uniform and they felt important. They felt powerful. They could delegate people and they were very anti-Semitic, but then we were transferred into a concentration camp. The difference was, they gave us these striped uniforms and we were guarded by the S.S., Hitler's elite troops. I cannot describe the viciousness of them. I cannot even go into detail, the brutality that they inflicted on us, and they enjoyed it. To them it was, you could see on their faces. They really enjoyed it. They also had a helper in the German Shepherd dogs. Again, they're shown in the museum. They carried a muzzle. All they had to do was take off their muzzle and un— they were trained to literally rip people apart. I've seen them at work. When they were finished, there was nothing but the skeleton left.

The two most often punishments that they inflicted on us were the, they had a desk light specially designed where they used to knock, lock our necks in and our feet in, and we would just bend over and we used to stay there as a whip, and they gave 25, 50 lashes depending on what they considered a crime. A crime could be that I walked past a guard and I didn't recognize him. We were not allowed to use the word, “Heil Hitler,” which was their salute. We were not allowed to mention his name. We were ordered of that. But, what I had to was, I had to turn my head, recognizing him, and tip my head. Otherwise, what he did—and I mentioned that I got to camp, they put things away, the other things besides the clothes. They took away my name. I became a number. I remember what—25685—shown on my outer garment, my jacket. All he did is copy the number. He didn't tell me that I committed a crime, what they would consider a crime, and then I got called and they used to sit or something. They allowed us to leave our pants on. Other times we had to put our pants down, and they usually, they literally cut through the flesh. When they finished, all I could do was take a rag, find a rag, wipe off the blood and make sure that I go to work the next day. One of the things we did not have was sick leave. Anybody was sick wasn't worthy of the little food or the little space we took up because if I would have died, they had plenty to replace me. So, we had to be very careful, guard ourselves.

The other thing, and David, you can try that—they get a light chair, nothing a little heavy and pick them up by the rear legs and crouch down on your toes, don't put your heels down, and see how long you're going to last. They set [indistinct] times. If I fell back, put my heels down, they would turn over and start all over again. If you last 5 minutes, you're doing very well. We had to do it 15, 20 minutes. The food was the same, but again, the punishments were much more severe. They continued until sometimes the end of night or so we thought.

As the Allied troops started closing in to Germany, they started moving us in deeper into Germany. We were told that we were going to vacate the camp. I did not have any belongings. All I had is a blanket, but we had learned a lot of things how to help us survive. We did not have aspirin. We did not have
anything to—Band-Aids. If one had temperature or a cut, we used to, we used our own urine. It has an acid that kills bacteria. I know it’s not pleasant to hear, but that’s what happened. But, I also learned that if you take paper and wrap yourself around to clean your clothes, it keeps the body temperatures in so you stay a little warmer. We had wooden-soled shoes, so I took a cement paper bag and put it between my coat and my underwear and we left the camp, and we walked through fields and dirt roads and there was snow on the ground. When you walk on snow in wooden soles, it sticks to it. When anyone tried to kick it off and was weak and fell down, didn't have a chance to get up again. They would kill him, shoot him, and there was a truck picking them up as you've seen the truck that now [indistinct]. Once they filled that up, they would leave and I don’t know, put up. I guess they didn't want to leave anything behind, any kind of sign or that. We marched the whole day.

At the end of the day, it started getting dark. We were all stopped and we were told we can sit down and rest, but the only cover we had was a scarf. We're in a field with snow. How are you going to sit down knowing full well that the snow will melt and we're out there in the open, cold, at night? For a while, I started resisting, but after a while your body gives up, gets tired and gives up. I sat down and the clothes did get wet and they flew around the paper, but I—here I am.

We marched for 4 days, and they finally told us, they took us to a railroad track. When we got there, they put us in those cars as you have seen in the national museum. When you went in there, I'm sure that you, it looked like a car that transported people, but it's so much more to anyone of us that was in those cars. They pushed in about a hundred or so, and they gave each one of us a loaf of bread the size of a brick and they gave us the famous bucket and they closed the gates. Had it been the summertime, we would have suffocated probably because of the stench, had human waste everywhere and the dead bodies. But, in the wintertime, fortunately, some of us survived. I cannot describe the condition in there because when we first got in, there was nowhere to sit down. Finally, people started dying and we took them and put them into the center of the car and there was a little room we had that we could sit down. But then again, the bottle overflowed and there was oil on the floor. How do you sit down in that filth? How filthy you feel, how dirty you feel, we still were at some feelings. But, again, after a while, I sat down in that mess. [sips water]

They let us out. The journey had been 4 days. They let us out twice. When we got out, I took some snow and ate that because we had nothing to eat. And then back in. I cannot describe the condition in that car, the way it smelled. The bodies. I do remember one particular man and I remember his face very well. I remember his sound and he was lying there and he was screaming he was in—he had to be in excruciating pain, but there was nothing that any one of us could do for him. We had our own problems. After a while, we got a little annoyed. Some people got annoyed and told him to be quiet. He did become quiet. After an hour, an hour and a half, we finally closed his eyes and he died. He was so sick that he still had a piece of bread and he couldn't eat it. I saw that piece of bread and I did take it from him after he died. He literally died in pain, not in peace. To better describe the condition in that car, after 4 days, out of a hundred or so, 10 of us walked out alive. You have to use your imagination.

We were then put on a truck, taken to a camp called Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen, unlike Auschwitz, did not have a—it was an incineration camp, but they did not have to use any gas, not use any bullets, nothing. They just put us there and nature would take care of it. When we got there, I found a place. I was able to lie down and—on some stone—and rest. When I got there, it was an empty shell. It was, you sat down on the floor. It was wet. The floor was wet, and the first thing I tried to do is try to change my clothes, to find someone that is not as dirty as mine. And we sat down to clean each other's legs and we fell back and we fell asleep. Like a domino effect, we fell back and fell asleep.

The next morning, it became a new routine. The thing was to get up in the morning at 4 o’clock, 4:30, go outside, rain or shine, and wait until they come around and count us. They [indistinct] between 10 o’clock
and 10:30 and we were not allowed to get out of line. That meant there was nothing to drink. If it rained, I
cannot put my hands out to get a few drops of rain. If not, if it snowed, I took some snow to get my
clothes or got down on the ground, and if it didn't rain or snow, if it didn't, if it rained there was no snow,
but it was snow. Even if it didn't, there was enough on the ground that I could bend down and pick up and
eat some of it. At 2, 2:30, they counted us and then they gave us our ration for the day, which consisted of
a cup of soup. No bread, no nothing.

Then we had a job to do. You've been to the museum. You saw these screens, two sets on the second
floor. One is Buchenwald on the left, Bergen-Belsen in the center, and Auschwitz to the right. I'm
speaking of the one in the center. After we ate, we had a job to do. We had to remove all the dead bodies
that died the last 24 hours. We tied them on the arms and legs and dragged them to huge graves—there
were thousands in each one of them—and we threw them in. You've seen those graves on those screens,
and we did not stop until we finished every—till we finished, everyone was removed.

After we finished our job, we could stand around until it got dark, and then it was curfew. We had to go
inside the barrack on the floor, wooden floors. We were caged in like animals. I don't know, 3 or 4
hundred men in each cage and they had mud all over the place. One side was men. The other side was
women. Every day, the new transport would come again. They were marching them in and it became a
routine. After a while, you didn't even pay attention to it.

One day, a group of women went walking by and someone yelled out my name a little bit, and I turned
around and it was someone I hadn't seen for 2 years. It was my older sister. She could not stop to talk to
me. She kept on moving, and so from then on, I knew she was in the camp. I did not know she had
survived, and the same thing for her, because graves always were near the women's section. So every time
I dragged someone, if I saw a woman lying face down, I would turn her over hoping that I won't
recognize her. Fortunately, I did not.

Finally, the so-called day of the liberation came. The day of liberation is because I'm here. I'm telling the
story. Not just my story. I'm telling all of those that died. They were buried there and never were rest.
That is the only difference between me and them. What about all of those that saw finally a little daylight?
We could rejoice that they were liberated and they died after liberation. When the English came in, there
was a can of bacon, a can of sweet condensed milk. I ate it, and many of us did, but not all of us. And
what we got, we were not used to that kind of food. We got dysentery, diarrhea. So we were dehydrated.
Everything went flush through our bodies, and we all had typhus and that's a terrible combination. So
people kept on dying. I was as close to being dead as anyone can be and still be here telling the story. I
saw some men walking over to the warehouse, so I finally crawled—I don't know how I made it—and I
saw some bread. I took some, 4 loaves of bread, just towards me and somebody showed me, took 2 away
from me. And I took those 2 left over, small loaves, put them in my coat, in my lining in my other
garment, lice and all, and sat down and from then on I became—I could not move no more than this chair
could.

And then I went into a coma. I don't remember much what happened after that because I wasn't conscious,
but for 57 years, I did not know what happened until about a year and a half ago, my sister—she would
not talk about it. She told me a story what happened after. Actually, she didn't want to talk me, but I went
to speak to a school and I asked her to come with me. Finally, she consented and she came. I promised her
she wouldn't have to say anything. When we got there, after it was finished, one of the kids asked, "What
happened after you were liberated?"

So I turned to her and I said, "You don't have to, but it would be great. You were there. You know what
happened. Why don't you tell them the story?" She consented and that's how I got. She found me naked.
Where she found me was at a skull camp. What people did, they went through the camp and looked for
familiar faces. If I knew one person that might have known someone else, I would say, “John, Jim is over there.” That's how we got to know. Glo recognized me and she went back and told my sister that I am there. She came there and found me naked. She took off her panties and put them on me to give me some decency, some humanity. I didn't weigh much because I was—I had no flesh on me. I was just skin and bone, a real skeleton with skin on it. She got some clothes and they took me in and they carried over to the wounded section. And she took some little bit of water and a rag and put it on me, tried to make me feel comfortable, and she brought me back, finally, brought me back to life.

It took me—for 7 months, I had to be taken care of like an infant. I had to be bathed. I had to be cleaned. I had to be fed. I had to be turned and all of these things. I was just like, I was a vegetable. After 7 months, she finally took me and literally picked me up and carried me on to a truck and the truck us to [indistinct] a major city, and she pushed me through the original window and told me the American [indistinct] we had learned that my brother, older brother survived. And she left me there with some friends from out of town and she [indistinct] and he came and got me and he took me over to his place in the city and then they got me into a sanitarium.

While I was in the hospital, not only did I have, I had dysentery and typhus, but I also had pleurisy because when they cleaned me up, they transferred me and the wind blew off the covers. It rained so I caught pleurisy. My resistance was very low, and with pleurisy, you have a problem breathing. So [indistinct] window and I caught an ear infection. They didn't catch that for about 2 months and when they finally took me to have it x-rayed, they find, they found that my infection is right near my brain. If they don't operate on me right away, I'd be gone. They did because they didn't need any, any approval, so they operated on me, and anyway, it took me 3 years to finally be able to say I'm out of woods.

The Holocaust is something that teaches us to know about, unfortunately, very few people have learned from. What the Holocaust taught us was that you cannot allow evil to flourish. The best way for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing. It also teaches us what can happen, what life is about, and I tell this to the young people how grateful they should be for what they have. Like you people here, you have a family. You're going to school. You're building a future. You're planning a future. You have so much to look forward to and you've been given so much. And men have died, and women have died, for what you, what we all have today, including myself. There are men and women dying as we speak right now for our freedom. Some people think we should not ignore the wars. Some people think we should be isolated. We shouldn't be worried about what happens anywhere else. If the world would have done in the 1930s what we have done in the past years, I would not be sitting here and telling you about the Holocaust. There would have been no Holocaust. It's important to learn from all of this not only to appreciate what we have. Material things aren't very important. There are a lot more important things than material things. And there's a lot to learn from and I hope that this will help you understand it and help you cope better with life, with situations.

DH: I think, I, I just want to thank you for telling these stories and I appreciate you taking the time and going through it again. I, I do have some questions.

RS: I just want to say that at the time I made the commitment, I made the commitment to my family and all those that perished, that were killed, murdered. I went back to camps that I was talking to young people. I spoke last week to an older group and I, because for years I wouldn't do it, but I do want to talk to young people because I want you to carry on after us. I want you to be able to tell your children who never have the opportunity to hear a survivor. I want you to be able to tell them what happened, not to feel sorry for us, but to prevent from these things happening again. That's my purpose, so I'm glad to be here. I'm glad to have the opportunity to tell you the story, but keep in mind, while this is my story, this is my life, it is also the life of all the 6 million and the 3 hundred, some thousand that survived, 6 million that perished, 3 hundred thousand survived the camps.
DH: I think that your commitment to telling young people is honorable and courageous. I mean, I don't have words to describe what you went through, but I think courageous and honorable are words that describe you telling us your story. And I think that each of us and we understand the responsibility that we have. That's why we're taking this class.

RS: I want to commend you all for taking the interest in it to learn. It is very commendable and thank you for the kinds things that you say about me, and I have to thank you for doing something that those of us that aren't here would want to say a few words. Thanks for remembering me.

DH: I do have some questions about your story, a little bit more in depth. One of them, I think, was when you were 16, you were taken away from your mother. Can you tell me what that's like for a 16-year-old being stripped from, from his family, and the journey, the mysterious journey away?

RS: Right. The best I can tell you is if you—if I have a pain and I'm going to describe to you what kind of pain I have—I really can't.

DH: No?

RS: The same way. How can I describe being taken away from home? How can I describe how, how I felt or how my family felt? How can I describe what a mother feels, parent feel like, or a sibling that stayed away never knowing what was going to happen? I—it's just beyond description.

DH: Yes.

RS: I'd also like to say something is my wife is, she is not a survivor, but she's lived with me for 51 years and she studied the Holocaust. She wrote some things about it. I didn't know that she wants to make any comment or not, but if she does—Reg, if you want to jump in, please do. I don't want [indistinct].

Regina A. Sztajer: Why don't you finish asking him your questions and then I'll say something.

DH: Okay. I think another question, you were talking about several times the bucket that you had to go to the bathroom and just the, even through the ghetto and just the smells that you—

RS: How—how can I describe that? The smell. How can I describe it? Like pain. How can I describe the things that I've seen was done to people? I don't even want to talk about them because they're so graphic and they're so inhumane that people can't imagine and they won't believe. Let me give you an example why I don't want to talk about certain things. In 1943, in winter, around Christmas time, December, January. I don't know because we didn't have a calendar. We didn't have dates. Every day was the same for us. There was an air raid. The British had—I didn't know then, but I learned later on that the English were coming into Germany, bomb Germany, lit up the sky, and they bomb Germany at night, around midnight. The Americans came during the day and bombed. So I didn't know then the difference between the British and American. I didn't know that. The first daytime, they came at night bombing the area. They lit up the sky. It was a Wednesday because on Wednesdays, we couldn't—if something of our clothes to be disinfected. One Wednesday, we would put in our clothes. The following Wednesday, we would put in our blankets rather than taking everything, and when we turned in our clothes, we didn't have any clothes on us. If there was snow, we had these ditches for whatever reason. I don't know why. And they made us go outside without clothes. If I'm going to sit here and tell you that I was out there in the snow for 2 hours, you're going to say I'm a liar. And if I was to sit over there, I would say the same thing. It's just unbelievable that I could sit for about 2 hours, give or take a half an hour, I don't know.
Even for a half an hour and it was a lot more than half an hour, and then come in and not even catch, not even have a runny nose. How it happened, I don't know.

So there are certain things if I'm going to be talking about it, I would do 2 things, either lose the attention of the people because it's too graphic or they won't believe me. So, I cannot go around and even talk about that stench, that smell, having it all over my clothes. It's just unimaginable. We were not treated like animals. We were treated much worse than animals. The name calling alone, like Jew is a pig [indistinct] Jews. There are so many stories that I cannot even translate from German into English or from Polish to Yiddish or English. I can't do it. I don't talk about it. Maybe others do. I don't know, but I am just—there are so many things that will never be told. We will never know.

RAS: I'll tell you a story I know.

Andria Scott: Well, wait. Let's do it this way—we only have 5 minutes left. Let's switch tapes.

RAS: It's after the war.

AS: Okay.

RAS: And pertains to the end of the war.

[End of Interview 2.1]

[Beginning of Interview 2.2]

RAS: We've been married for 51 years and I am a history teacher, so I've studied the Holocaust, but being married to a survivor makes it even more special. In 1992, 50 years after liberation—

RS: 50 years after I was taken away from home.

RAS: Taken away from home. Rubin and I went to Europe, and we decided to go to Germany and to Bergen-Belsen, the last camp he was in.

RS: Let me say why, why we went. When I was in the camps, I saw some Germans promenading outside the road. I was inside. They were outside, and I made myself a promise if I ever come out, I will walk on that road and looking just like they do. So for 50 years, I was planning in my head. Finally, we talked about it and finally we decided we're going to go back so I can stay outside and look at goyim.

RAS: So we went back to the camp and I said to him, "Well, are you going to stay on the outside and look in?" and he said, "I don't have to anymore because I'm free. I can walk where I want. I can do what I want." And we went to Bergen-Belsen and I don't know what it looked like when Rubin left. He remembers it as being absolutely awful. As a matter of fact, after everyone was taken out of there, they burned it down. The Ger—the, the British.

RS: Because of typhus and lice.

RAS: Lice, yes. So we get there and it's a beautiful cemetery, what it is, green, very well taken care of. There's a little museum there explaining what happened and the Germans have taken very good care of it. And, and it's huge. Everything that has to do with the Holocaust is huge. We went to Auschwitz. It's acres and acres and acres of ground.
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RS: 4 hundred and 50 acres.

RAS: It's mind boggling. And so, the only thing there after we took a little museum was this huge cemetery, no stones. You know how you usually see stones? Nothing like that. There was one big monument put up by the Germans and then a small monument put up the British brigade. During the war, Jews that were Palestinians—they were not Israelis, they were Jews—joined the British army. They went over to fight the Germans and tried to rescue people, especially after the war. So the British brigade put up a monument, and I was sitting on that monument and he was wandering around trying to make sense of this whole place. And there was no one near me, no one. There were some British soldiers off in the distance. The only other thing there, there were no, like we know of tombstones. Nothing like that. What you see is this vast, huge place, all green, and the perimeter all around the camp are immense graves. Some of them contain maybe 20,000 bodies. You don't even know. They're just—

RS: Big numbers.

RAS: They just dumped people in, the dead in, and then what they did is, it was like a mound with stones completely around this huge mound, and in the front of it, it would say, "April, 1945, 20,000." Any number that they could think of. There were many, many of these huge gravesites. And I sat on this tomb, this monument, thinking what should I say to him? I don't even know. What can I say to make him understand what he's seeing compared to what he saw when he left? And I felt something on my left, on my right side, on my right shoulder. And I looked. There was nothing there. There was no one near me. There was nothing there, but I felt a presence of something. And I heard no words, no sound, no nothing, but the people buried there told me what to say to him. And what they said was, his nightmares have always been that the people are reaching out to him and saying, "Don't leave us. Don't leave us here." And I said to him, "They're telling you now you're free because we're buried with dignity. You can leave. We'll be okay." And he said the prayer for the dead as we left, just the kadish, and for quite a few years, he didn't have any nightmares, but I will never forget it because those people told me what to tell him. And it, it was amazing.

RS: Let me continue about something that [indistinct]. Before I left, we had made plans. We had an itinerary. My sister called up, says, "Where are you going?" And I said I, told her where I'm going. When every survivor goes, has to go to Auschwitz, or if they lost somebody, even if I don't know—I don't know where my parents are. I don't know where they're buried, where their bones are, ashes, whatever. I don't know where my sisters or my brother are. We don't know. So I said, I told her where I'm going, and she says, "Aren't you going to go to Treblinka?" Now, my sister and I and my brother, we never talk about what happened after I was taken away. Not one word. I did [indistinct]. We just didn't want to talk about it, and they still don't want to talk about it. I do talk about my experiences, but they would not do it. So I told her. She says, "Aren't you going to go to Treblinka?" I said, "Why would I do that?"

So she told me a brief story. Every parent tried to save their children and, whatever they, however they could. My parents decided to take my 3 younger sisters, send them to a bigger city to my aunt, hopefully, hoping that they were safe them, they would be safe there. They wrote home. They want to come home. My father, as any parent would do [indistinct] and bring them home. [coughing in background] And they're brought home. They liquidated the ghetto. So now we're going under assumptions that they were taken away, taken back to my aunt. That ghetto was liquidated and sent to Treblinka. So now I have to, we have to go to Treblinka. Treblinka is 65 miles north of Warsaw and we were supposed to leave that night, 165 miles south of Warsaw in Krakow, in Auschwitz. The roads aren't like here. You cannot speed. They have one, two lane roads, and sometimes if you try to go around, they're walking the cows or something like that. So we—but I had no choice. We came up to Treblinka and I read the history of it. You're probably wondering or maybe you ask yourself, “Why didn't we resist? Why did we go in like sheep into the gas chambers? Why didn't we fight back?” There are many ways of resistance. My
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resistance is being here today, not giving up. I have every reason in the world, every minute of every day to give up. I've seen people giving up and they died. Here, we know that resisting is you go take a machine gun or a gun or a knife or a baseball bat, whatever, and you go out and fight. We knew, I knew if I'm going to take a knife and stab one of the guards in their stomach that they would take a few thousand people and kill them as a punishment. It's not one for all, but all for one. So we could not do that, but what they did in Treblinka, instead of putting down fertilizer on the grounds, they put down gasoline and they lit a match and burnt down the camp knowing full well that it's going to cost many, many lives. But, what they did was they tried to destroy the factory. When you knock down the factory, you can't produce anymore. They burned down the gas chamber, burned down the camp, and burned down the crematorium and everything.

So about 3, 4 hundred escaped into the forest. Most of the camps were within the perimeter of a forest. This camp was also in the perimeter of a forest. With the exception of a few, they all got caught and killed. So here I am 50 years later coming there and looking into the forest and staying there, I don't know, 2, 3, 5 minutes, whatever it was, and looking in waiting for 2 little faces to come out, hoping by some miracle that something—it was a nightmare. After a while, she said to me, "Rubin, let's go." I finally realized that it's not going to happen. They're not alive. They're not there. In Treblinka, they have a lot of stones that people put down, nothing underneath. They put the names down for either people that they think that died there or names of towns and villages. And right next to it—they have a monument—right next to it is a pit of ashes. So I went over to the ashes and I—it was the toughest thing I ever had to say in my life. I told my sisters and all those people that were burned, that died there, “I may never come back here.” But, I told them as long as I can walk, as long as my lips will move, I will go around and tell people that no man or woman, woman or child, should have to suffer what they did. And this is my commitment to them and all the other camps that I will go around and I will talk about it for as long as I can and hoping that after me, you people and people after you will tell their story. You being Jewish, you tell the story of every Passover about the exodus of Egypt. Celebrating Hanukkah. Those were supposedly miracles. To me, the great miracle, there are two that I know of. One is any survivors surviving and the other one the founding of the state of Israel. Had there been a state of Israel then, maybe my parents would not have escaped, but there would have been hundreds of thousands of people that would have escaped.

And I did not mention what made me sad about my liberation, why I call it so-called liberation. Like I said, I'm here, but what about those that did not survive? One of those that you must have heard and you probably feel like you've known it all your life, that died 3 weeks before liberation and her name is Anne Frank. How many—what would have Anne Frank have discovered had she been alive? We will never know. What would have happened if a Dr. Sagan had never escaped back to Germany? Which one of you would have had polio today? How many people? What about the [indistinct] dynasty? The founder of Intel, Andy Grove? There would have been no Intel. And how many tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people, we don't even know what they achieved? That's why we have to be vigilant. We have to be aware of what's going on, not just around us, but past us. There's no such thing as being an observationist. Many years ago, you could have put up a fence around yourself and protect yourself. Today, there's wide open, and that's what's so important to me. [turns to RAS] What were you going to say?

RAS: I was going to say that what they accomplished at Treblinka by burning it down—something like 800,000 people were killed there. If the camp had remained open another few years, it could have been millions. So, Himmler ordered the camp closed after it had been burned down. So this is, and then the resistance, the fact that these people gave their lives to close down this camp was very important.
RS: The Warsaw ghetto, a few men and women, something like 300, very few made it, fought the whole German army. The Germans had a bigger problem, took them much longer to finally defeat them than it took them to take Paris.

RAS: Right.

RS: Now Paris—and they did not have the kind of weaponry that the French army had. Of course, the war has been very good to the surrendering, but that's another issue. Very good to carrying the white flag.

RAS: [laughs]

AS: Now, if I can ask a quick question?

RS: Sure.

DH: Do you know anything about your brothers and sisters, like where they went? Because I know you said your older brother and your older sister and you were the only 3 that survived.

RS: Yes.

DH: So do you know that fates of where your other brothers and sisters and parents ended up?

RS: We don't know. We don't know where it is. We have no graves to go to. It comes to, in Jewish tradition between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, everyone goes to the cemetery, and when I see people here, you know, I've got to go to the cemetery and I say to myself, you're very lucky that you've got to go. I wish I had to go. I wish I could go to it. We don't have a place. I would love to go to a cemetery knowing that a member of my family is there, just saying a prayer there. Whether they hear me or not is something else. We don't know what happened. We don't know how they died, when they died, where they died, nothing. There are no records.

DH: Were there any other relationships that you forged outside of your family during that time?

RS: By, by relationship, you mean friendship?

DH: Friendship or acquaintance.

RS: Keep in mind, that is, what you read in books. There was no such thing as socialization.

DH: Right.

RS: We did not socialize. We did not, our lives, we were always busy. I worked 6 days a week. On the 7th day, it was Sunday, they made us take dirt, we turned our coats around and picked up our coats and they put a couple of shovels in the dirt, carried from one carton to the other, back and forth around, just to keep us busy. We could not sit down and you probably may read. I'm not saying all the books are valid and false, but you might have read where we held services. We prayed, all that. We were not allowed to do these things. We weren't allowed to gather and make any noise. If we would do that, they'd come and you would make a great target for them because maybe they were afraid, I don't know. Maybe they were afraid of us organizing. When you would get groups, you're organizing and there's a resistance. They tried to avoid all that.
DH: One, one of the things that I noticed about your story was humanity. How important was it to try to keep your humanity even though they were trying to strip it away from you?

RS: Someone asked me, how did I survive? Of course, I don't know, but if I have to give a reason, it would be 75 percent luck and 25 percent not giving up, wanting to live, if that's what you mean by humanity. It has to. A doctor can do so much for you. You're playing as big a part if you get sick than the doctor does and sometimes even more. It's very important. I've been fortunate. I feel that drugs helped my life.

DH: And when, when you saw your sister in the camp, can you just try to describe the balance between seeing her for the first time in 3 years and not being able to show any emotion?

RS: I don't remember seeing her the first time. I don't remember. I was in a coma. I don't know.

RAS: No, when she came into the camp.

DH: In the camp.

RS: Oh—did I try to do what?

RAS: All he could do is, she asked him, is our father here? And he said—

RS: I didn't know. I didn't even hear that. She just went, she had to continue. She had to keep on moving.

RAS: She couldn't stop. They couldn't hug and kiss each other and—

RS: I was in a cage.

DH: Right.

RS: I couldn't go out and she had to keep on walking. We were so disciplined to obey the rules. We knew if I just bent a little bit, it would cost my life.

RAS: I think the most amazing thing is that Rubin, Saturday, turned 78 and his sister Monday became 80, that they lived to be, to be old people. But, not really old. Neither one of them are old people, and I guess, it's like every time we had a child and a grandchild, I'd say it's a slap in the face to Hitler.

AS: [laughs]

RAS: And the fact that he's here and is so vital and his sister is, it amazes me.

RS: And just to put it in a humor in, the reason why I'm still around here, I don't want to collect my insurance.

RAS: You don't have insurance. [laughter]

AS: Your older brother, he survived?

RS: Yes.

AS: He's deceased now?
RS: No.

RAS: No.

RS: He's still, my, they're both, all 3 of us are still alive.

RAS: He's 82 and he lives in Florida with his wife, and his sister lives in New York.

DH: [to other interviewers] Do you have any other questions?

AS: I'm trying to think.

RS: Somebody's hearing me.

RAS: What is going to be the last part that you're going to do?

DH: It's going to involve his time after the war.

RAS: Oh.

RS: It's what?

RAS: After the war.

AS: We kind of covered some of that now.

RS: You can turn that off.

[End of Interview 2.2]