Irvin Stern (2007)

Interview 2

Interviewers: Laura Shapiro, Shira Zemil, and Rachel Morgan.

[Beginning of Interview 2.1]

Irvin Stern: This story, I heard it when I was, I don't know, seven, eight, nine years old, seven, eight years old, nine years old. At that time, it had me very much fascinated. If you go back in history where children were kidnapped, disappeared. I'll give you a little example and it's brought down somebody that I knew wrote that book and he brought it down. He met somebody like a Russian. Jewish children, he used to catch them, the child on the street and they just disappeared. A lot of these they used to say--do you recall, they used to be called the Legionnaires from France. This was a volunteer army. They volunteered there for life. The same thing with these kids, they used to kidnap them, and this story was told to me. I never read it. I never saw it anywhere, but it was told to me and then later somebody said that it is written down somewhere, but I have never seen it.

This man, pretty rich man. He was more like the representative of the community. All of a sudden, his son disappeared. He was five, six years old. The child disappeared. They looked everywhere, even to the law and so forth. The child was never found. They couldn't find him. Later, later on in life, they made a decree, something the Jews have to pay a ransom and they have to move out of the towns and all that kind of stuff. So they didn't. In those days, most of your--how should I say?--politics was ruled by the church. I'm going back five, six, seven centuries. This is brought down. This is in the books. I think they called it feudalism. Did you ever hear of that?

Interviewer: Yes.

IS: You know what feudalism is.

Interviewer: Why don't you tell me?

IS: Huh?

Interviewer: Do you want to remind me?

IS: You don't recall?

Interviewer: Something about the Middle Ages, right?

IS: Okay. The church ruled practically all your politics. They ruled who is going to have a job and who is gonna work and who's gonna do the different things and so forth because in those days, jobs were not available. You didn't have factories and all modernization like you have.
That was--feudalism mainly means the church rules everything. Anyway, they decreed something upon the Jews, so all of a sudden they didn't--this man went to the church, to the elders of the church. They couldn't do anything. So they decided they're going to send a representative to Rome to see the Pope. And this man, that's his son disappeared, he was chosen to represent, to be the spokesman for the Jews. And he went. Finally, it took a while 'til he got an appointment, and they gave him an appointment. He said he could see the man. Come at such and such a time. They'll let you in.

So he waited for the day and he went, and they sit down to talk, and the first thing he asked him, does he play chess. So the man said, yes, I play chess. I used to play a lot. I don't play so often. The child that was kidnapped from him used to constantly play chess with his father. His father taught him, taught him the certain moves and so forth, and he sat down at the table and he started playing. Played one day. They arranged to come back the next day. Played with him the next day. And then, as they were playing the chess, the Pope made a certain move on the chessboard and the Jewish man was--I would just use the word stunned. This--only he knew and his son that disappeared knew. So he said to the--he looked at him. He said, how do you know this?

He said, I don't know. Somebody taught me this. Actually, as it turned out, they start talking. He couldn't say it was his son. It was what, 30, 40 years already, and it made me curious as I was as a child. I didn't have the encyclopedias at home like you have. One time I wanted to look in the encyclopedia. If you go back in history, there was always two Popes. Not always, but quite a few years was two Popes. One Pope was in Rome and one Pope was in France. France, at one time, was a very, a country that was ruled mostly by the Catholics. You made the remark when I said something that people always Spain. Spain was Inquisition, and I made the remark to you the other--last week was it?--about France's. Personally, I think France was worse than-- If you look up in the encyclopedias, one Pope is missing.

**Interviewer:** Which Pope?

**IS:** The 7th or 8th century. I don't remember exactly.

**Interviewer:** And that's the one from the story.

**IS:** And some, and the teachers told me that's the Pope because later they found out he was Jewish, and so they eliminated quietly and he left and nobody knows where, what or when.

**Interviewer:** That's a great story.

**Interviewer 2:** That's amazing.

**IS:** And I went. I looked it up in encyclopedias and one is missing. Fifty years, no Pope.

**Interviewer:** How old were you when you looked it up?

**IS:** How old? I don't remember how old I was.
Interviewer: But you were young.

IS: No, not that young. I looked it up when I was here in the States.

Interviewer: So you remembered the story.

IS: I remembered the story when I was a kid. My teacher told me that story.

Interviewer: That's a great one.

Interviewer 2: That's amazing.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: Alright.

Interviewer 2: Last time we kind of went off and we were talking about your childhood, and so now we're going to do more of a war time interview. So my first question is what were kind of the first signs of a Nazi presence in your town? I mean, when did you know that it wasn't a good situation?

IS: To begin with, we didn't see any Nazis in our town. The only thing you saw was the Hungarian gendarmes. You know, in Europe the same thing for instance. I don't know if you ever, ever read. Every once in awhile you read about it. The police in Israel arrested this one or the police did this. The police investigated this person. I'm talking politics and politicians and so forth. The police there, it's not like here because in Europe the police is part of the government. See, they're ruled and governed by the government. It's a minister, like you say a certain section that, that's all you do. They, certain people are picked--I don't know, when they go in the army to be in the police department and so forth, but it's not like each town here or each state has its own state police or city police and so forth. The police is mainly a national for the whole country. So, but we had was two police. We used to call the gendarmes. And we had, the town had--I don't know--maybe three, four were stationed in our town. That's about it. We never had any--how should I say?--riots or pogroms from the gentile people. We never had any problem of that in our town.

Interviewer 2: I know last time you mentioned that you did start to fear studying. You started to fear leaving.

IS: We feared a lot of times to travel.

Interviewer 2: To travel. What made you fear that? I mean, when did you kind of know that it wouldn't be safe to travel?

IS: Especially on the trains. You people don't read that kind of stuff. You know, in Europe they used to say the--as a matter of fact, I came across it not too long ago. They were called--there
was a certain group of people in Hungary who joined Hitler. The armed guard, whatever they were called. And even the government that ruled was part, had part of them, those people. Those people used to--how should I say?--unleash and let some people go out and just cause trouble. I'll give you a little example. You heard of Crystal Night. You know what that, how that started?

**Interviewer:** Yeah, but why don't tell me about it.

**IS:** Crystal Night started, a Jewish boy went and killed a German in France. That was a delegate from the German embassy. I don't know what the story was exactly there, but he shot him. He killed him. And then Goebbels figured this is a good excuse to unleash a big pogrom on the Jews in Germany. That's how the Kristallnacht started. So they figured, what are they going, how. They're going to burn all the synagogues. They're going to break in homes, rob the homes and tear this up. This is how it started. The first night--I don't know--maybe 30 people when the first time when they start burning they killed people, and that's how they started those pogroms.

People don't realize this dates back many, many years where they used to have these pogroms in the Ukraine, in Russia. And not so much like we come from Austria-Hungary Empire. We didn't have--mostly you had it from the Tsars, but we never had any. We never--I can really say we never had it. They had it in Romania. I think I mentioned to you last time, in Yosh where they round up a lot of people, and the armed guard of the orange shirt, whatever they called themselves. I remember as a kid they had a certain name, certain names of people, certain groups. What they used to, just for fun go out and have, rob Jews, beat them up and so forth. People were afraid of the trains because they used to throw them off of the trains during, different areas. Like a train goes to a certain bridge, a certain mountain. They used to throw people off. Just pick them up, throw them out of the windows.

**Interviewer:** And these would be the trains where--

**IS:** And that's why people stopped traveling too much.

**Interviewer:** When you heard about this, was it kind of word of mouth or did you hear it on the radio, the newspaper?

**IS:** The Jews were not allowed to have radios, so the preacher, he used to relay different things and tell everybody he heard through some people close by, that he heard this on the radio and he heard that on the radio. You might find this very funny or awkward. We didn't have any electricity back then. The town, or you had what they call kerosene lamps.

**Irvin's wife:** It was very rural, very rural.

**IS:** Or candlelight.

**Interviewer:** Right.
**IS:** Otherwise, we didn't have electricity. If you traveled maybe 20 miles, 20 kilometers or 25 kilometers, then you had electricity. Don't look at it so much. Take this country. The rural areas, the farmers and the country didn't have electricity, either. It was passed a law when Roosevelt came in that every place has the right to be connected to light or electricity, and I don't know whether it was how much they had to pay and how much the town had to pay, but you have to furnish electricity to that person. You have to furnish that person sewage. You have to furnish that person water and so forth. 'Til the Second World War, you didn't have it in the United States. Not a thing they taught you that in school.

**Interviewer:** No.

**Irvin's wife:** Of course we did.

**IS:** You lived in Baltimore. But you go out in these smaller towns.

**Irvin's wife:** Oh, oh.

**IS:** Today.

**Irvin's wife:** I see.

**IS:** You didn't have electricity.

**Irvin's wife:** I see.

**IS:** You didn't have--go out of the main city, you didn't have no sewage. You didn't have no water. You had to have, pump it up with your hands. You didn't turn the spigot on and the water was flowing.

**Interviewer:** [laughs] I was wondering about when there were, if there were any restrictions in your town.

**IS:** On what?

**Interviewer:** Umm.

**IS:** Yes. It was always restrictions. The Jews couldn't do this and the Jews go in business or Jews do different things. They always tried to--how should I say?--curb them, the Jews this and the Jews that and so forth. And that was only, that was only not when I was a young kid. That was only 1940, 1939. That came in. Before that, as a matter of fact, I don't think you people know this even, the Jews of Transylvania, when Hitler occupied Romania, he only occupied it for one thing, for one reason. There was a city what is called Ploiești, and nearby that town there was a lot of oil. They pumped a lot of oil out of the ground. That's why, he wanted the petrol. Then I don't know what the deal was between the governments. When he occupied Romania, Transylvania was given back to Hungary. The Romanian Jews were never shipped off to.
Auschwitz. A lot of them already got killed in pogroms. A lot of them hid out. Some of them were sent away to the ghetto to Transnistria, but they were not sent out to Auschwitz.

**Interviewer:** As a question, did you have to wear a yellow star?

**IS:** A yellow star, yes. If I went out in the town or with the streets of the town, I had to wear it. A certain jacket, I put that star on. If I wanted to go a certain place, I put that on.

**Interviewer:** At that point, was there some sort of presence, like a Nazi presence?

**IS:** No.

**Interviewer:** Still no presence.

**IS:** No.

**Interviewer:** What year did you have to start wearing a star?

**IS:** ’43, ’44, something like that.

**Interviewer:** Did you continue school at that point, any education?

**IS:** No. I didn’t go to school. I don’t think I went to school anymore, to regular school.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any relocation? Was your family relocated to any certain areas?

**IS:** In 1944, if I’m not mistaken, it was right the day after Pesach and I got up. I think Pesach ended on the Sabbath evening and Sunday morning they took us to the ghettos. Sunday during the day they took us to the ghetto, to a different town. See, what they did, they took about seven, eight or ten small towns and they relocated them all in one place.

**Interviewer:** Do you know what ghetto this was?

**IS:** It was—the name, Dragomirești.

**Interviewer:** How far away was this compared to your village?

**IS:** From my town, I would say 30 miles, maybe a little more, a little less. I would say about 30 miles.

**Interviewer:** What time was it? Do you know?

**IS:** It was in April, early April. I don’t remember the exact date. I could look. Next time you come, I’ll look it up for you.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**IS:** I can look back all these years.
Interviewer: What were--I mean, as a child, what were your reactions to being relocated?

IS: Nobody liked to leave home. Nobody liked to leave home and go away. You don't know where you're going to live. You might live in some kind of barn or something. You leave your home. But you didn't have any choice. You were forced to leave. We didn't--how should I say--we didn't. Nobody could imagine or realize what would become of it. Nobody liked to stay back because you were, you never knew what the consequences is going to be from this. That's about it. Nobody wanted to separate from the family. Everybody was trying to stick together.

Interviewer: Right. Do you have any specific incidents like your parents' reaction, other adult reaction?

IS: I have a--I was a kid. I couldn't understand some, but I remember a man making a remark one morning in the synagogue. To you people it's going to sound awkward. Before they took us all away to the ghetto, this man--he never survived. The poor soul died in Auschwitz. But he had a daughter survived. As a matter of fact, she passed away in New York.

The last name, I remember the last name was Starberg, and he said, “Who knows where we're going to wind up, if we're even going to have a burial.”

And to you it doesn't sound that much today, but when he made that remark, it made me, it made me a little think--What are you going to do with me? You're not going to bury. I never heard of cremation and all that kind of stuff. We never heard it. We never saw it.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean, in essence, what were your reactions when you just heard burial? Did you know that--

IS: No, I didn't. I couldn't. It was something new. What does he mean by that? I was only a kid. What does he mean when who knows if I'm even going to have a burial?

Interviewer: When you did get to the ghetto, how long were you there?

IS: Oh, four or five weeks, six weeks, something like that. I would say around five weeks.

Interviewer: In terms of life in the ghetto, I mean first off, what did the ghetto look like? Was there a wall?

IS: No.

Interviewer: Did you have a lot of freedom?

IS: No. I don't know. I'll be honest with you. I really don't know if, if the ghetto was watched. If you would have gone out, I don't know. The only thing I know, they used to try and get the younger generation, the younger kids, to go and fix the roads and do this. They used to catch you and grab you, say you have to come to work today and do this and do this and do this. Many
times, I'm not ashamed to say it, I hid out somewhere where they couldn't find me. And I'll tell you something else. I learned something even in the ghetto. We were kids, a couple my age. That's when I learned to play chess. We hid in an attic. We were a couple of kids so we, you played cards or you played chess or you do something. So that's where I learned to play chess.

**Interviewer:** When you talk about they, like they would take you to work, who did you mean by they?

**IS:** They? I would refer to the police and so forth. There I saw Germans already in the ghetto.

**Interviewer:** Okay. The Nazis.

**IS:** The Nazis, yes. I saw Germans. Mostly you saw was SS because there were certain groups of Germans and the people don't realize it's called the SS and it was the Wehrmacht, the regular German army. There wasn't Wehrmacht. It was SS. The crosses, you know.

**Interviewer:** What was the living situation like in the ghetto?

**IS:** In the ghetto you, whatever you brought yourself from home, that's what you ate. They didn't issue any kind of foods or anything that I can remember. Whatever you brought from home, you ate it. That's what you had to eat.

**Interviewer:** What was your house situation like? Did you share an apartment with other people?

**IS:** I'm trying to think where we slept. It wasn't--it might have been an extension from the house or something there, but it wasn't the luxury of bedrooms and so forth.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**IS:** No.

**Interviewer:** In terms of-- also, did you, what was your job? You said you mentioned you had a job in the ghetto.

**IS:** That's what, they used to catch me. There, the streets are not like here. Mostly the streets there, let's say.

**Irvin's wife:** Dirt roads.

**IS:** No. It's pressed stone with a roller with sand. They used to--I remember they used to catch me and ask me to go work these machines. They used to have, feed the stones in the machine, used to crush it, and you had to haul them away and pile them up in different areas and so forth. That's what we had to do. And some people went out on the highway and tried to fix different things.
Interviewer 2: Would they give you compensation for that, no food or anything?

IS: No. Nothing. And if you didn't take something to eat or drink, you didn't eat and you didn't drink.

[End of Interview 2.1]

[Beginning of Interview 2.2]

Interviewer: How was, in terms of sanitation, were there a lot of sanitation problems--

IS: No.

Interviewer: --in terms of sharing toilets or anything?

IS: No. Well, the time was too short to have any problems in the ghetto for sanitation.

Interviewer: What were any consequences if you didn't work?

IS: No.

Interviewer: Were there any?

IS: No.

Interviewer: You just kind of got yelled at.

IS: It's mostly--it was very few that volunteered for the job, but they used to say, so many got to have from this area or this group. So many have to come and go to work. So you see most of the time, the beginning especially, just ignored them. Now later, they said you have to go. You have to go and so forth. Somebody has to show up in your family.

Interviewer: And if say they caught you not showing up for work after they told you to work, were there any consequences for that?

IS: No, no.

Interviewer: Also in terms of reactions with other families, people you lived with, were there any tensions with people, with their--

IS: You always have some, especially when you have a lot of kids involved and this involved. But we didn't, not that I recall to have any--I don't remember if we knew too many people in the, wherever they put us up or set us up to stay in the ghetto.

Interviewer: Were there any just, I guess--
IS: The only thing we did in the ghetto, the day before I think it was. You brought up a very interesting subject. The day before they shipped us out from the ghetto, they separated. They took the--how should I say?--the men with the exception of the small children. They took the, even the grownup boys and the men and they separated from their wives and children. They, I remember they took them into a school building and they put them up there. They stayed there overnight, and the next day they had to go to a certain place and then the wives and the children were there waiting for them.

Interviewer: I guess also just in terms of living with other people, were there any other kind of interactions like sharing food or sharing a living space?

IS: I don't recall sharing that kind of stuff, no. Each one stayed by itself.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's right.

IS: Not too much mixing one with another.

Interviewer: Were there any kind of cultural activities or religious activities going on? Any concerts or even just religious services.

IS: Not in the ghetto, not to my knowledge.

Interviewer 2: Was there a synagogue?

IS: They might have said, have some people gather and davan or pray together or on the Sabbath to read the torah so you had--but otherwise to my knowledge I don't recall of anything like that.

Interviewer: When you were in the ghetto, did you hear any news about what was going on outside?

IS: Not much. Not much. Because--it's a funny thing. I mean, after the war, when the Polish people and other people from big cities and so forth, you people might find it. You know, people say maybe 2,000 Jews survived in Berlin during the war. Did you start to think what that means? Two thousand Jewish people survived in Berlin all during the war. Do you know what that means? That means somebody had to feed them. Somebody had to give them clothes. Somebody had to give them shelter. And in Germany, anybody was caught, I'm talking the Germans, hiding a Jew they might have shot him. There was a very famous book that--I took it out from the Hebrew University here in Baltimore, Park Heights many, many years. I remember reading it and it's about approximately 2,000 Jews never, no ghetto, no concentration camp, and they survived in Berlin hiding out. Different areas, different parts and so forth and the Gestapo could never catch them. If they did catch one, and they knew, but there wasn't much they could do. They knew what German would leave food outside today and what German would leave them money to buy something tomorrow. They used to go from place to place. They never slept in the same place two nights because they were afraid. If a German, a Gestapo man caught one of those
Jews, some guys, they wouldn't send them away or kill them and so forth. They said, we'll let you go on one condition. You turn us in other ones. They used to call them the catchers. They used to tell go there and there, the Gestapo, and you'll find somebody to be able to catch them. So they were called the catchers. It was very interesting, this book that I read. And one of them wrote it after the war, but we never had anything like this.

**Interviewer:** When you were in the ghetto, did you hear about things like the different camps going on?

**IS:** No.

**Interviewer:** Labor camps.

**IS:** No. To begin with, once you were--how should I say?--trapped in that circle, you had no way of communicating with anybody anything. You know, if you go back to history when Auschwitz was established, two people escaped. Nobody believed them. They were so--they came all the way from Poland. One came to England and one was shipped here. Nobody believed it. Something like this to happen, to kill. At that time, there was no crematoriums yet in Auschwitz where they burned all the corpses, all the bodies, and there was, in those days, they used to bury them. And then they had a big flood and all these corpses came up. They realized the burial will not do, so that's when the crematoriums were built.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever see people just sort of disappear from the ghetto?

**IS:** Run away you mean?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**IS:** Some people, a few people, not too many, singular disappeared. They ran away.

**Interviewer:** Ran away.

**IS:** They ran away and they hid out, but all by himself. It's not an easy thing to exist and I guess that the gentile would be afraid they might be finish, face punishment and so forth and so forth. But it was not easy thing besides. Who would leave the family? I'll never see them again. Not many, not many people would break away, goodbye. I'm not going to, that's it. I'm leaving. You didn't have many people do that.

**Interviewer:** Did you witness any people be sent to camps?

**IS:** Nothing. They didn't show any cruelty in the ghettos or anything. The only thing when they round us up like you asked before, I told you they separated the men from the women and children, and the next day they got them together. That particular area, you had to walk maybe 10, 15, 20 kilometers to the train. The only transportation there, we had back and forth two, three, four times a day to the big cities was buses. There was no train. All the transports were
moved by train, so what they did, they took the whole ghetto, made the people walk I would say a short, a short distance to the train and there was all the wagons, the train waiting for people and so forth.

**Interviewer:** As like a last in terms of seeing people, did you see anyone get sent to a camp by any chance?

**IS:** Not from the ghetto.

**Interviewer:** Not from the ghetto.

**IS:** Not from the ghetto. In Auschwitz when they selected people to go to work, everybody was separated and you were put in this category, this and this. Then I realized who I saw and, but not many survived. The harsh labor, and it was not so much food. You know, you'd be surprised how much the body can take, how much punishment the body can take. And today you say you can live on a 1,200 calorie diet and I believe it. But the treatment was-- I'll give you a little example. I worked in a camp. I had to go 15 kilometers, wake up 4:30 in the morning. Sometimes we got some coffee. Sometimes you didn't, black coffee. Then we had to stand in your group of people and you start walking. You walk the 15 miles to the water, the toilets. You stayed in the toilet. You couldn't even take a drink of water. There was no way to get. I was a very lucky man. I was very young in those days and you heard the word […]? That means the Germans, a civilian German. They used to drive these locomotives into the tunnels, haul out the rock that we blasted out, and bring it out and dump it. They drive the locomotive like a train, but there was in a smaller setup. It was much, much smaller. So once in awhile, I used to go over, “Can I have some water?” Asked the guy, the engineer that drove this locomotive, “Can I get a little water?” And I was very, I knew I was lucky. He would turn the spindle on and underneath I had a can and give me some water, some hot water. And in the winter it was very good, hot water. In the summer I let it cool off because there was no other way of getting any liquid or anything.

**Interviewer:** Which camp was this? This is the first camp.

**IS:** It was all--no, not the first one. The first one, see--how should I explain? After you were picked to go to work, to go to a labor camp, they came in 12:00 at night and say-- all, everybody came in at night. All the trains came in at night, took off the people from riding all day, because everybody, no transport four or five days constantly a train ride. So when you do arrive there, if you arrived to Auschwitz let's say in the afternoon, you stayed in that train 'til it got real dark and the train backed into Birkenau, and everybody got disembarked. Everybody got out. They told you right away, leave everything there. Just get up. And then when you get out, they try to scare the person so that--how should I say to you in English?--the person was disoriented. And each SS had a big dog with them. The dog barked and so forth, and the first thing they did, they separated men. They separated women. Some of the women were picked to go to work. Some of the men were picked to go to work.

Irvin Stern, Interview 2
Interviewer: Could you just backtrack a little--

IS: Go 'head.

Interviewer: --and explain the process of going from the ghetto.

IS: To Auschwitz.

Interviewer: Auschwitz, how you were picked to go to a certain camp.

IS: Once you were put on the train, everybody went into the ghetto. From the ghetto, everybody went on the train. I would say four to five days we traveled. Don't forget, we were in Transylvania and we had to travel all through Transylvania, all through Hungary, to get to Poland because Auschwitz was originally at the border of Poland and Germany. The town, it was a famous town there for many, many years. It was very famous as a Jewish town. It was called Auschwitzim. Today, not too long ago, a year or two ago, the elders there must have buried all the utensils from the synagogue, the crowns from the torahs and so forth. They all, found them all, and there is a Jewish town. There is a few Jews, went back there, rebuilt the synagogue and so forth. To travel from where I lived all the way there, like I said, the train never backed into the camp, only at night. And after we backed in, everybody got disembarked, women on one side, men on the other side. There was a famous man, Mengele. I don't know if you ever heard that name. Mengele. You did. He was the doctor of Auschwitz. He used to--he had four in a row, four people. He used to go by, take a look. He had a cane sometimes. He used to grab you with a cane. You come up. And if he picked you out to be sent to labor camp, go like this, this one and this one. It was also a question, how many people did they need in the labor camp because some transports they picked more. Some of the transports, they picked less.

I'll tell you a very interesting coincidence. And all of a sudden, came by me, he put the cane, pulled me out, go there, go there. Go 'head. Give it to him. So he picked me out. Later I take a look, when we were already marching away from there, I see my father. Later he used to come back [. . . ] And he picked some other guys out and some other guys that I knew from home. It's a very interesting thing that happened and I could never figure it out 'til about two, three months ago. All these years I couldn't figure something out. And I usually figure my problems out and I could not figure that out. After he picked us out, we were stripped, the same, man and women, everybody was stripped. Cut your hair off, everything. And then after they showered you and they bathed you, they gave you the certain clothes that you wear in the camps and they marched you to a certain barrack. The barrack was locked on the outside. In the morning, we got out. I see big wire fences, twenty feet high. I take a look. I see a lot of women and children, women and children. So I go closer and take a look. I thought maybe I recognize somebody there. I don't recognize. As I walk away, they were there, all day the children playing. And the evening came. They gave us some food which we couldn't--nobody could eat in the beginning there. The food they served you there, so they locked us back up in there during the night and everybody went to sleep.

Irvin Stern, Interview 2
The first night or the second night, somebody opens the door wide open, calls a name, and keeps on calling that name. Finally, somebody answers that name. What the name was for what, I don't know. You heard the name, there were people called Capos? No. A Capo was--the only difference between him and the German, he didn't have no guns. He was the same thing, incarcerated like me in the camp, but he was like an overseer over me, and these two guys come in there and they call a certain name. They were dressed in black. So finally some guy comes out and they starts questioning and they beat him bad, very, very bad. So somebody said to him, why would they? They were looking for somebody that sent those guys out from the ghettos. When I'm talking ghetto, think for instance large ghetto in Poland where they had half a million people. We were what? My town had 400 or 500 people. That town had, we were maybe three, four thousand people in our train, our transport. In those days from Poland, they used to have the representative from the, and they were the ones who said you go today and you go and you go and so forth. Some of these people, maybe they favored other people. Maybe they didn't. So in the meantime, these two guys must have got shipped from a certain ghetto before and they wanted to take revenge on somebody that had something to say in the ghetto when they shipped him. So when they came, they must have been notified by somebody, so they went looking for him to get revenge.

So anyway, what I'm trying--let’s go back what I was telling you before. There were these women and children. So the second night we went in, and the next morning we come out and there isn't a soul in there. No women, no children, nobody. In 1945 how should I start this in the middle and explain this stuff? When I was liberated in 1945 from Bergen-Belsen, I only stayed--I was liberated April the 15th by the British and I stayed around in that area 'til maybe the middle of June. I found some relatives. The closest I found was my father and his father were brothers. We grew up together. He might have been two years older than I was, but we grew up together, and he was very, very sick in bed. So I said to him, I'm going out. Maybe I can find something for you.

So when he said, see if you can bring me cigarettes. For cigarettes, you could buy anything with more worth than money. So anyway, I came back. I brought him cigarettes, I don't know how many packs, and he got himself something to eat. Second time I went away for a day, when I came back he is not there anymore. First thing in my mind, I thought he passed away and--the Red Cross used to come and pick up the dead people.

Irvin's wife: Was it your cousin?

IS: Wait. So he isn't there. So I go around asking the people around him, others, what happened? He said he don't know. He didn't die. The only thing we saw men, people in white, the Red Cross came and took him on a stretcher and took him out. He couldn’t walk, he was that weak. Took him out. So I thought to myself that had to be the Red Cross. So I started asking questions, where is the Red Cross located in Bergen-Belsen? So I kept on asking. They told me go there and there and there. One place, another place, another place 'til finally I found the place. I said, you have
that person here by the name so and so forth, his name. Yes. So where is he? Oh, he was on the boat already. He's in Sweden. We put him on the boat last night.

After the war, the Swedish government allowed 15,000 or 18,000 sick people to take them out of the camps and put them in the hospitals because most of the people were full of TB and full of typhoid. I would say 80, 85 percent of them died. I was lucky. I was never sick. I was about 17. 18 years old, so I said to them, can I go, too if you want to know my name? And the first thing they say, what are you his brother? I said, yeah. That was my first cousin, put me on. He said, you come back here at such and such time tomorrow and you can go.

I came back. I thought to myself, I have nobody in the family left. What am I going to go home for? Whatever is there I'm going to find when I get better and healthy and so forth. I can go home then. So I went, came back the next day. They put me on the train. I went away to a city, the name. It was called Lübeck. It's right near the ocean. You cross what they call the straits and that puts you on the other side from Germany and you land in Malmö in Sweden. And I was there overnight.

So the first thing they do there, they go through the same process again. They strip you and give you new clothes. They wash you. And the only difference there when we came to Sweden, they put all of us in quarantine. Quarantine is 21 days in case you have some kind of disease that will show on you or break out on you. And stayed 21 days. You wouldn't even believe what happened. In the quarantine, some Germans, some SS, disguised themselves and also came with us. How do you know? So in the morning, they put us up before you went to wash up. What they have in there in that place, I don't know if you ever saw these fountains, round ones with spigots, and people go there and the water constantly runs. So one that came to wash, he just washed his hands and washed his face. So the guy says to him, why don't you take your shirt off and wash yourself like a man? He took off the shirt and there was a tattoo, SS. That's how we found out. People started getting excited, hollering, beating, fighting with him. The next thing, the Swedish police came and took him away. Sweden didn't have anything against that man. They let him go.

So that was one incident that happened in Sweden. We stayed there 21 days. I think I mentioned to you last time that's when I found out about they found six, six or seven hundred girls. Some of my, two of my cousins were also in that group, were bought out by Himmler. I think I mentioned to you that last time. That's when I found and they came to see about who is in this transport. They thought maybe they could--but that was only one incident. So in Sweden, it was different. The country, they were free there, the SS. They didn't do anything to Sweden. Swedish didn't even--I don't think they even punished.

So that's how I got to Sweden, and from Sweden you couldn't come to the United States after the war. I came with a student visa and after I came with a student visa, after six months or a year they took my passport away and I was left here without a country. So they passed a law that
everybody was here, a certain amount of people can apply for permanent visas. So I applied. That's how I became a citizen.

**Interviewer:** We definitely want to get more into that in the next interview, but to kind of go back to Auschwitz really quickly, first off, did you have any interaction with the doctor?

**IS:** We never, we never, no. We never, like I said, I never could find out what happened to the women and children. Let's go back to there where we left off.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**IS:** Two, three months ago--I go a lot to the synagogue here right across the street. I walked up. Somebody told me who he was. Since I walked up, I said hello. He knew I was together with your father, your grandfather in the camp. All through the camp, many, many months we worked in the same details, in the same tunnels and so forth. I don't know. At the beginning, maybe it didn't interested his mind. Then he calls me up from LA. He was a brother-in-law to the rabbi of this shul here, of this synagogue. He calls me from LA. He lives in San Diego. Could I give him an interview?

I said, what do you mean, an interview? I said, your father won't tell you about the camps? He said, he won't tell us anything. I said, I was there with him. I said, your grandfather. His grandfather also passed away before the liberation just like mine. So, can I come at such and such time? I said, yeah, I'll give you a few hours.

**Irvin's wife:** Excuse me. Can I say something, please? He would never speak about anything.

**IS:** In the beginning, I didn't talk anything, either.

**Irvin's wife:** For years.

**Interviewer:** You wouldn't?

**IS:** My kins either. No.

**Irvin's wife:** Would never speak, to his children.

**IS:** So after he came back, so he brought his brother. There were two brothers. He brought his brother here, and we went back in the rabbi's study. We start talking. I said to him, when we start talking, I said, when did your father--you know what yahrzeit means?

**Interviewer 2:** Yeah.

**IS:** The yearly memorial for the parents. I said, when does he keep the yearly memorial? So he tells me. You know any Hebrew?

**Interviewer 2:** Very little.

Irvin Stern, Interview 2
IS: Very little. 26th of Iyar. That's the second of Nisan, the second one after Pesach. The 26th of that month. I said, I keep the same day. And I know, I even can tell you the day it was. It was a Thursday night we came in and Friday was the 26th because it was after sundown. It was the middle of the night.

He looks at me and says, “How can that be certain?”

I said, “You know something? You just gave me an answer that I couldn't answer for all since I was in Auschwitz.”

He said, “What was it?”

I said, “When we get up and I told him the story, I saw these women and children.”

Now I'll tell you what happened. You couldn't figure it out either. They brought in two transports, two smaller transports. Usually it was one transport a night. They brought in two. They couldn't kill everybody that night, gas them and cremate them. So they took the women and children from one transport and put them, set them up in there 'til the next day.

I said, “You know, you can tell your father. His memorial might be the 27th, a day later.”

So when I told him that, he said, you are right. Makes sense because there was a lot of women and children. So that's what happened. They could not kill two transports. See, every night, and they finished picking out these people for work and they put people in gas chambers and then cremation. Alright. Next. From there, we stayed in Birkenau a week. I think it's more maybe.

Interviewer: You were taken to Birkenau first.

IS: Yes. That was part of Auschwitz. We call it Birkenau because that's where all the gas chambers and crematoriums were. The camp, Auschwitz, didn't have that. They had some dead corpse. They used to bring it to Birkenau to get cremated.

Interviewer 3: How close was Birkenau to Auschwitz?

IS: Within walking distance.

Interviewer: Yeah, I've been there.

IS: Within walking distance.

Interviewer: But one's closer to the city.

IS: That's--you know where the city gates where the trains come in.

Interviewer: Yeah.

IS: That's Birkenau. That's where they--
Interviewer: And the trains just ends there.

IS: That's right. That's part of Birkenau.

Interviewer 2: In terms of Auschwitz, do you mind describing just the food, what the food was like.

IS: The food? In Auschwitz I don't remember exactly, but the whole food consisted--they gave you a soup every day. That was every day and mostly the time they used a lot of barley or potato soup, and they gave you--most of the time they gave you, I don't know, half a pound of bread and they gave you maybe an ounce, maybe two ounces of margarine, and they gave you a piece of kielbasa but they called it like bologna or something. And somebody used to say, how can you eat that? That's horse meat. When you try to survive, you eat anything you can put in that gut, but believe me, a lot of people wouldn't eat it. Very, the elderly, the middle aged people, very, very few survived. Like I said to you before, you get up in the morning. You get a little black coffee to drink and then you start walking 50 kilometers and you work all day long, anywhere from 10, 12, 14. You didn't work more than 10, 12 hours, but you had to stay in a pile to be counted for an hour here and an hour there and stay on your feet constantly. Then if, sometimes we used to get a ride with the train back to camp. And if it was bombardment, we didn't get a ride. We had to walk back. You walked 30, 25 or 30 kilometers every day. You worked all day and didn't get anything all day long 'til you went back to the camp. You got your rations, your soup and whatever you had. You received a piece of bread and so forth. The bread was half sawdust. You might think I'm funny, but I mean you could see the chopped up straw because they couldn't--they put it on straw to bake it in the oven. And that's why so many people just died. We used to go every time back and forth in the back of the group, and you're walking. They used to have these carts, two wheels. It's a platform where people used to drag it in case somebody dies, put them on there, bring them back to camp. Didn’t leave dead in the road. So they brought them back to camp and then they picked them up from camp to the crematorium. So that was the routine every day. It was, the treatment. It wasn't necessarily all the time the nourishment. The treatment, the body can only take so much and that's it.

Another thing we started before about the quarantine, and it took me maybe three, four months before I found my cousin in Sweden. He was in the hospital and finally somebody came to our camp. I said, maybe you came across this and this name. Oh, yeah. He's there and there, so I found him. One, two, three faster than--the Red Cross let me know. So they gave me a ticket and I went to visit him. He recuperated. He just passed away, was just a year.

Interviewer: After Birkenau, where did you go from there?

IS: I was shipped to Buchenwald. In Buchenwald, they photographed me. I had to fill out a paper and they gave me a number. That's--after that, I was only known by the number, not by name.

Interviewer 2: Was the number tattooed?
IS: No. I didn't have a tattoo. Anybody who came inside in the country, and especially the last couple of years. In the beginning, they used to tattoo everybody, take them to Auschwitz. Then they stopped and just gave me, issued me a number here and here.

Interviewer 2: Where was this camp, what town?

IS: Buchenwald?

Interviewer: What country?

IS: We went there five years ago, four years ago, me and my grandson. Rhinehart, Rhinehart, I don’t remember.

Interviewer: But is it in Poland or Germany?

IS: Huh?

Interviewer: It's in Germany?

IS: Yes, in Germany. We went from here. From there we went--where is it, I'm trying to think. Did we go from here or from New York? We went to [pause] I didn't go with no group, just me and him. He said, “Zayde, you can talk German. You go 'head. [ . . . ]” So I did. What I didn't do in German, I did in English. So we went, and the first thing, we went to Buchenwald. We went up, the city there if I remember right about 5, 8 miles from the camp. It's open for everybody. I didn't even recognize it because everything was taken down. The only thing we did, we went to--there's an office. We went to the office and I wanted to see if they have any records of me. Sure enough, they had my records. They had my father's records and so forth. My grandson, I didn't bother, it would never occur to me, I knew my father was born in 1895, but I didn't know the date, the month. So my grandson must have--and then he starts looking in the computer. He found the paper that my father filled out see because part of his name is after my father and he told me that, the same birth details, the same day.

Interviewer: It's crazy.

IS: January the 14th. He came back and says, look what I found. He showed me the paper. He's got a copy of it. And from there, they called up. I wanted to go to Dora where I worked in the tunnels. From there I was shipped to Dora back then and they called ahead, and there was a woman in the office waiting for me. She gave me all the information and took pictures and she got somebody to take me to the tunnels, and my grandson came in in the tunnels. He couldn't believe his eyes. He said, amazing.

Interviewer 2: How long were you in the second camp?

IS: The camp itself, in the concentration camp, I would say about a year.
Interviewer: In Buchenwald or all the camps?

IS: All the camps.

Interviewer 2: For the second camp, Buchenwald.

IS: Was very few people. From all these transports that we were 3,000, 4,000, whatever it was, very few people.

Interviewer 2: From just the train rides.

IS: The train and the walking and working in these camps. You worked with an air drill all day long. You sometimes, all the dust. You couldn't focus your eyes and the dust laying on top of your eyelids. Like I said, no water. It just wore you out. That was the main thing. It's not so much the food, the punishment of the body constantly, constantly. And you know, believe it or not, that every man that survived [20 . . . ]

Interviewer 2: Did your father go to either of these two camps, to Birkenau?

IS: Yes. He was with me all the time.

Interviewer 2: He was with you.

IS: 'Til January, the end of January. They shipped me away to another camp nearby and they shipped him away, and I know they shipped him away to Bergen-Belsen and that's where he perished. It wouldn't surprise me they laid him in one of those mass graves, the remains. They had sixty mass graves in Bergen-Belsen. I don't know if anybody ever told you that. Each grave contains between three, five thousand corpses.

Interviewer 2: From Buchenwald, where did you go from there? What was the camp after that one?

IS: From Buchenwald I went to Dora.

Interviewer 2: Where was that?

IS: About two hours drive by bus. They took us in a truck.

Interviewer: Also in Germany?

IS: All in Germany.

Interviewer 2: All your camps were in Germany.

IS: Yes.

Interviewer: Except for Auschwitz.

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IS: Except for, that was near Poland, near the border. Auschwitz it's called, the town. That's where the camp was built.

Interviewer 2: I guess just talking about maybe more of the work that you did. Obviously, we know the tunnels, but was there other work that you did?

IS: Yes. Sometimes they needed to go here and do landscaping or sometimes they, to clean up the bombardment. Sometimes they used to--all night long they used to bombard a certain town or certain factories or they blocked the highways and this, they used to take people from the camp to go and clean up and so forth.

Interviewer 2: Do you have any specific--well, first off, from Dora, where did you go after?

IS: From Dora, I think I went to a camp named Elrich, E-L-I-C-H. I think that's the spelling, and from there, and the last one before I went, was shipped to Bergen-Belsen was Hartzengen.

Interviewer 3: Also in Germany?

IS: Nearby. All that area was full of labor camps and most of them all worked in those tunnels.

Interviewer: Would you march there or would they put you on trains?

IS: Walk.

Interviewer: When you would walk, did you see--

IS: Most of the people walked.

Interviewer: When you walked, did you see German civilians?

IS: Sure.

Interviewer: And did they have any interaction?

IS: Never.

Interviewer 3: They never threw things at you.

IS: Never bothered to look at you. They just went by and they're like-- And after the war, they said, we didn't know anything. We never saw these people.

Interviewer: Assholes.

Interviewer 2: Are there any specific experiences from one of these camps that you remember? It could be like a religious experience or just a friendship.
IS: Well, when so many people, you know, the holidays. It's amazing. This person knew this. This person knew this by heart. We knew every holiday when it came up. People knew how to--I don't know if you--how should I explain you this?--how to count the Hebrew calendar. The Hebrew calendar, you only have--what?--354 days, but you got to break down the 354 days what they call it the [...] the year. You have to cancel many days. You know, when every holiday, people could remember that and today was--I got off that whole year one day from work, one day, and you’ll never guess. You would think it would be some religion, the gentiles.

Irvin's wife: Christmas or New Years?

IS: New Years, not Christmas.

Irvin's wife: I thought I had heard you say--

IS: Christmas we went to work the same, the same as any other day.

Irvin's wife: Just New Years.

IS: It's New Years, New Years we got off.

Interviewer 3: Why do you think you got off New Years?

IS: They didn't give anybody off. Don't forget, if we didn't work-- Why do you think, if you--I don't know if you understand it. All these camps, most of the camps were liquidated before the Americans approached, before the Russians approached, before the British approached. All these camps, they tried to hold onto the slave labor. It's that simple. If they didn't have the slave labor, Germany couldn't carry on the war like that the way they did. It's the slave labor. Don't forget, you had twelve, a small country like Germany-- Don't forget Germany to the United States. The United States has got what--250 million people here? There you got what--70, 80 million people. And they had an army. People under arms, 12 or 14, 12, over 12 million people. So somebody had to do the labor. When you, when you arm so many people, have fronts all over Europe. You know, people don't realize something. They give--I don't know if you people ever heard. There was a dictator in Yugoslavia. His name was Tito. You ever heard that name? The people, he, during the war was a partisan. He fought with the partisans in Yugoslavia during the Second World War and they give the man credit for tying up a half a million German soldiers. In Yugoslavia, they couldn't go out to the front because Tito was part of the partisan, so organized that Germany had to keep a half a million soldiers in Yugoslavia.

Interviewer 2: Did you ever have any contact with any of the partisans?

IS: No. They never tried to approach the camps and the camps and the camps were not--Something [pause] Anything else? So after, after--take for instance, Auschwitz. Auschwitz was liquidated two weeks before the Russians entered it. Whatever they couldn't ship out by train,
they made the people walk, and if you fell down, they shot you and they left you there. People, because they didn't want to give up on the slave labor and they kept on pushing. I give you a little example. I worked in the camp Hartzun. Bergen-Belsen might be three hours, four hours, if you ride by truck, by train. I rode seven, eight or nine days by train because wherever we went, there was all bombarded. The train couldn't go through the stations. So back again, try there, but they wouldn't let the people alone in the camps. So they finally shipped us off to Bergen-Belsen.

When I went back with my grandson four, five years ago, the guy looked at us and I asked him, is this such and such a thing still here? Sure, you can see it. You want to see it? So he put me in a jeep and took me out and showed it to me, where we embarked when they brought us to Bergen-Belsen. It was even a platform where the train was the end of it and we all disembarked there. We went up. And I said, I remember before we even went I said, is it still up, the big fence? He said, yeah, the fence is still there, but there's a lot of names on it. The people were shot. They couldn't walk so they shot them dead. People don't realize it. And you know--I think I mentioned to you last time--most of these people that, these SS, they were never brought to court or to justice. Most of them were volunteers and I would say at least half were from all over Europe. Some were from Romania. Some were from Hungary. Some were from Yugo-- And these people, after the war, just picked themselves up and went back home. At home, they don't know what they did in Germany. And even the Germans, some of them, some of them didn't know. But I went to a camp. I told you I went to Sachsenhausen. That's near Berlin. When I went to Berlin, it was mentioned the other day in the paper, somebody about Sachsenhausen. Anyway, the wall, and this side of the wall the town and the people in the street. Like you tell me they didn't know what was in there, and that was a political. All the foreigners were brought to Sachsenhausen. All the people that were not Germans were brought to Sachsenhausen. That was a Gestapo camp. Anything else?

**Interviewer 2:** Did you have any experiences with Nazi personnel specific to you in these camps?

**IS:** No. I never, I tried to stay out of this. With those people you never win. You never win. I could--I was told this and another thing people don't realize. They didn't--they were not so harsh. I noticed sometimes the elderly, they were much, much harsher on the elderly people than the young people. I cannot, you would think it would be the opposite. Right after the war from my town, a lot of young ladies and young girls went through the war. They survived and so forth. Did you see my father? Did you see my father? I said, I saw your father. You father isn't around anymore. He passed away. There was quite a few that I was together with and I told the young, after the war, your father is no longer living. He came. He was picked to go to labor. True. But he never survived.

**Irvin's wife:** Excuse me a minute. Couldn't it be that they didn't have the patience for the older people?
**IS:** Nah. They just let it out on the elderly people. I'm talking elderly people. I'm talking middle age, but they were much older. They were older than I was.

**Interviewer 2:** Did you have any special relationships in the camp, friends or anything?

**IS:** No.

**Interviewer 2:** Helping someone [. . . ]

**IS:** Just tried to take care of my father as much as I could, and that was enough. That was enough for me because when you finished work, you didn't feel like doing anything. You just went back to camp. You ate your soup and you were done for the day. Very seldom you saw people going around kibitzing with other people and so forth and so forth. By the time you were done, you didn't feel like doing anything. And go out in the winter, it was very cold and they hardly gave you any clothes to put on. If I would tell you what I tried to keep warm with, you would never believe it. I remember when they told me, if you get cold, you're going to be punished. I said, well, I'll worry then. In the meantime, I cannot bother. I'm cold.

**Interviewer 2:** What did you use in terms of things--

**IS:** Paper bags. Went out through the head, through the arms.

**Interviewer 2:** Where did you get them from?

**IS:** Different ways in the camp. Sometimes a cement bag. Other ways. We used to, like the first they issued blankets. For each, for five people you got a big blanket to cover. That blanket didn't last half of the night. It was all cut up. To wrap their feet, people made these things, but I never folded blankets. There was no other way to keep warm. We didn't have no heat or anything like that. The only heat you had, one body to be next to the other. That's the only thing. One kept warm, one kept warm the other one, so-- But they didn't issue, no. They used to pack us in like, like packed sardines, 130, 120, 130 people. Dragged us in the train. Sit down, one after another, they packed them in. Like I say, the food was not always the main issue. Some camps had a little better food or more often. Sometimes they didn't have the bread. They didn't issue it. And some people just couldn't take it. They gave up on themselves, and once you gave up on yourself, your chances of survival were not too good. If you make your mind up you wanna get out of here, I used to say when I was in my bunk in the camp, I said, I hope to get out of here. And I was lucky. I never got sick, and I think that played a very big role in-- That's where I learned to be so stubborn.

**Interviewer 2:** Were you ever injured by doing the work?

**IS:** The only thing, one time I got injured, yeah. I never went back there again. Laying track for the train and I got these two fingers caught and the nails broke off. They were just hanging in this half of this, and I remember after we got in from work, I went to the infirmary there. I said,
maybe you can help me. So he took a look, took a pair of scissors, put it underneath the nail, just cut it off and fixed them. He looked at it. He put some Vaseline, put in on, goodbye. I never went back.

**Interviewer 3**: And it healed okay?

**IS**: Healed okay. It was--

**Irvin's wife**: He's tough.

**IS**: When it was cold, ugh! First time in my life I got out a--like a month, a month-and-a-half ago, I went to the chiropodist. My toe.

**Irvin's wife**: He had an ingrown toenail and he was--

**IS**: I went to this--

**Irvin's wife**: Uh!

**IS**: --and he took a look.

**Irvin's wife**: This guy can take pain, but--

**IS**: And he said to me, you know it's infected. I said, I know. That's why I came here.

**Interviewer**: [laughs]

**IS**: I know it's infected. He said, looks at it. He said, I'm going to put some-- I'm going to go and numb it. So he took out a satchel, clippers, and took the nail, put it inside. I thought he was going to numb it and pull the edge out of it when it grows into my toe. He cut it alright, but he never numbed the toe. He took a pair of surgical scissors. I don't know if you know what that it is, and he got a hold of the nail and twisted it and tried to pull it out.

**Interviewer 3**: Oh! In Baltimore?

**IS**: Yeah.

**Interviewer 3**: Oh, my God!

**Irvin's wife**: We live in Baltimore.

**Interviewer 3**: I know.

**IS**: So he pulled it out and I can take a lot of pain. I never have--if I have a tooth or something fixed or some are pulled, I never take a needle or anything, but I-- So when he cut that, I said, when I hollered. I didn't holler. I got a hold of that chair. He said, it's alright now. It's over, he
Irvin Stern, Interview 2

says to me. It's over. But anyway, he pulled it out and he gave me four or five pills, four pills I think it was. He said, I want you to take these, but don't take them 'til you see your doctor.

So the next morning, I went to my doctor. I said, I had something done to a toe and he told me not to take the pills unless you give me permission. He said, he looked at the pills, he said, you can take it. I'm supposed to call him that day, later on. So I call him. I said, do you do this to all your patients? He wouldn't answer.

Interviewer: [laughs]

[End of Interview 2.1]