Irvin Stern (2007)

Interview 3

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

[Beginning of Interview 3]

Interviewer: Liberation and life, your life after the war. So last, we, you said that the last camp that you were at was Bergen-Belsen. That's correct?

Irvin Stern: That's where I was liberated.

Interviewer: That's where you were liberated. So can you tell me what--

IS: If you want to know, that's in the--at that time it was in British zone before--

Interviewer: Right.

IS: --Germany got back its normal government. Go 'head.

Interviewer: Okay. So can you tell me what life in the camp was like right before liberation time? Were you, did you have any knowledge that liberation was right around the corner or were you totally in the dark?

IS: Well, we knew it was liberation around the corner and I'll tell you why we knew. Right before we--how should I say it?--they took us out of camp, they had to deport us on the trains. We abandoned the camp because the planes were circling. The morning before, they were circling around, and they were American planes.

Interviewer: Do you remember what year--

IS: Or British.

Interviewer: What month it was?

IS: That was, oh, I would say end of March, beginning of April, because I was liberated April the 15th from Bergen-Belsen, so it had to be in the beginning, the first week of April.

Interviewer: And this is 1945?

IS: Or maybe the second week. That was in 1945, yes. And the planes kept on circling and they didn't, nobody went out. Everybody stayed in their barracks because they didn't take us out to work and later came an order on the loudspeaker that everybody should get out in front because the people who were able to walk and can walk to the trains, and who is not able to walk to stay in their barracks. But most of the people walked and it was a very few--they had like one of the
barracks sort of like a hospital it was supposed to be. I assume some people were left behind. If they killed them after we left, I do not know exactly what happened to those people. But we all walked to the trains and they put us all on trains. I would say approximately 100, 110 people go on these boxcars, cattle cars, whatever you call it. And it's a funny thing. They put a guard to the door, one or two. I don't remember.

The first night or the second night, some people went--did you ever notice like when trains sort of lock one wagon to the other, so they got it out, the refugees, and jumped off of the train. In the morning, the guard noticed it. He couldn't notice it. It was dark and the train was moving. And then some people must have had knives with them and they cut out the board, and they broke it out and the people crawled out through the hole and jumped off between the cars. And there was one Jewish man was with us. He was from my town, and it's amazing. In the morning he was gone. He jumped off, too.

Irvin's wife: What happened to people if they jumped off?

IS: Actually they were--because this guy turned up in Bergen-Belsen a few days later, a week later. He turned up there. So actually he lived whatever he could gather from the country, whatever, but he survived and then we met after the war. He also came to the States, but he passed away very young here in New York. His last name was also Stern. He was a distant relative. He was one of them that jumped off of the train. He had enough nerve because nobody knew where we were going.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: And what made it so bad, the distance that we traveled, you could have traveled in a day easy, even half a day, but the train went around us. Couldn't pass here. We had to try another circle. They kept on going. Most of these stations were all bombarded, all were destroyed. And the first thing they bombarded it was like, say, the stations where the transportation and all that, but they wouldn't let the people go. They tried to hold on to the slave labor 'til the last minute. They wouldn't let them go. Like I was reading in that book. The ones who came to Auschwitz, the people when they invaded Poland and the Ukraine, they were called the Einsatzgruppen and so forth. These people went around to kill. In some places, they were ahead of the army when they occupied the territories. They were even ahead--you wouldn't believe how they used to kill the people there. Some were shot, but a lot of them were put in, automobiles, big trucks. The truck was enclosed. They were killed with--what do you call it?

Interviewer: Carbon monoxide.

IS: Carbon monoxide. They were built like this to produce the carbon monoxide with diesel motors and the people just went to sleep inside and died. They used to catch them in the street, wherever they could, and just throw them into these trucks and that's how they killed them, and they must have had ditches where they dumped the bodies. And a lot of it was done right behind
the army lines or sometimes even ahead of the army when the war was going on, in the Ukraine especially, and a lot of times they said there in this book that I told you this guy wrote that the Germans didn't kill the people. They had the Ukraines that volunteered this and that, that did the killing for them, and then there was especially one place--it's mentioned when Himmler came to watch. He wanted to see how the killing is done and the man killed the grownup men and women. I mean, the army. It just wasn't Germans. And then the kids, they didn't want to kill the kids. The Ukraine, the guys from there, they killed the children. I was reading that yesterday as a matter of fact.

**Interviewer:** We actually, it's interesting. We learned about Hilberg the other day in class and we told our teacher how you had already told us about him. She was very impressed.

**IS:** A story about Hilberg?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**IS:** By the way, he was drafted.

**Interviewer 2:** We read about--

**IS:** He was drafted into the army from Columbia actually after he finished college.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. We learned about, he created a model of how the Germans systematically killed the Jews.

**IS:** Yeah. He even kept a list where they killed so many, so many. The towns, every town practically. His lists there were how many people they killed in these towns.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. He wrote this whole-- We learned that was his four-step process.

**IS:** You mean your teacher knew about him.

**Interviewer:** Yes. It's in our textbook for the class.

**IS:** Hmm. I'm surprised. Your teacher, some, some history. Who's that? Salzberg teaches there?

**Interviewer:** No. He teaches us more about how to interview. Our professor, her name's Uta Larkey. She's a German woman. She's not Jewish, but she's extremely knowledgeable, so--

**IS:** Well, she was impressed, what? That I knew about Hilberg?

**Interviewer:** That you had told us about him.

**IS:** Oh. I just told you because it happened I read, started reading the book.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. We told her. We told her that you showed us the book. So anyway, so you were saying so you guys circled in the train.
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IS: And we kept on. An area like I said we could have traveled it in a few hours, I went eight
days or nine days, and the only thing, one time they gave us something to drink and hardly any
food. So a couple of places, the train stopped. It was the bombardment. You wouldn't believe it.
Some places, you came in. One car was on top of the other, two or three like from the bomb,
from the explosives. It was thrown up in the air like you see sometimes when you have a
hurricane or something where the force of the--

Irvin's wife: Earthquake?

IS: Not an earthquake. They'll pick up sometimes a car and just put itself.

Interviewer: Oh, a tornado.

IS: You haven't seen anything like that. A tornado one time, sometimes the force will root up a
home and move it. So it's the same thing. The explosive was so great that sometimes we used to
see these cars piled one on top of the other. And the door was open. The guards were not, just
walk around, watched. They saw what was going on. And a lot of people ran out and grabbed.
You wouldn't believe it. Two raw potatoes. That's what I ate. Did you ever try to eat a raw
potato?

Interviewer: No. Wow.

IS: And that's what you survived.

Irvin's wife: He was lucky to even get that.

Interviewer: Right. That's amazing.

IS: So as soon as you got-- Then in Bergen--we reached Bergen-Belsen.

Interviewer: So you went back to Bergen-Belsen?

IS: We went back. We haven't reached it yet. We left Harzungen. The name of the camp, the last
one that we left from, was Harzungen. I'll give you a little example. This was, let's say, the
tunnels. Here was Ellrich. Here was Harzungen. It was another--it was four small camps and here
was Dora. I mentioned that in that article name Dora is mentioned. So all these, most all these
places there are people, most all of them worked in the tunnels. The tunnels had many, many
openings. You couldn't rely just on one entrance. Entrance from this side, entrance from that side
because they were huge mountains. The main one was a track that was running from here, let's
say, to Buchenwald, 120 kilometers under the mountain. So if I would say a half, at least a half a
million people lost their lives. I would, I wouldn't come maybe close to it because life was
nothing. If you needed a thousand people, they went and grabbed a thousand people from all the
occupational territories, from all these different countries. I mean, life--I don't know if you ever
read anything. In the Ukraine or in Poland, and some of these places were already, before they
occupied them, were in Czechoslovakia. They were already, this general is going to get this
place. This general is going to get this place. Those people are going to settle here and those people are going to be settled here. It was all arranged. They're going to get rid of the people that lived there and it's all going to be German territory. They didn't--how should I say?--they didn't think negative. I mean, those, they were so sure of themselves that, they're going to lose the war, they wouldn't think of that 'til the time finally reached they realized. Even with the invasion, they couldn't believe that the Americans and the British attempted an invasion of Europe. Sometimes, I don't know if you ever watched the war films. When the guy discovered so all these ships with people and the first landing was, they couldn't believe. Nobody believed it. When they phoned Berlin, they said there's an invasion. They couldn't believe it. They were so sure that this is, this belongs to them and you know, I don't know if you did much reading, who broke actually the back of the Germans? Did you ever--

**Interviewer:** The back of--

**IS:** The back. Who really squeezed the Germans out?

**Interviewer:** The Russians?

**IS:** The Russians. I don't know. Sometimes if you read history, where was Napoleon defeated?

**Interviewer:** In Russia, not in France?

**IS:** In Russia.

**Interviewer:** In Russia?

**IS:** They draw them deeper and deeper and they froze them out. The people died. They were frozen to death.

**Interviewer:** How come--why do you think Hitler didn't invade Russia earlier?

**IS:** That is a very good question.

**Interviewer:** Because it makes--

**IS:** Nobody knows.

**Interviewer:** Because, well from my--

**IS:** Maybe he wanted to secure the rest of Europe first.

**Interviewer:** But from my reading about the Holocaust, it would seem to me, because of the fact that he didn't invade Russia, it seems to me that his ultimate goal was to go to Jewish populations and wipe them out.

**IS:** Well, that was why he took Poland.
Interviewer: Right.

IS: The biggest Jewish population of any country in Europe was the Polish, Poland.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: And I many times myself asked how come you have Jewish people every, every corner of the world. But how come Poland, the Jewish concentration of that country was so great. They had more Jews in one country than all Europe. I'm talking all Europe.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: How come? So it's not easy, and somebody gave me some answers, but it's not easy to understand. To begin with, the Jews originally started with Europe, started when the Jews left, let's say Israel, in the beginning. We're talking about the common era. As Jews leaving Israel, they did it over 3,000 years already. You go to Iraq, Persia places.

Interviewer: Babylon.

IS: Persia, where we celebrate Esther and Purim and so forth. It's over 3,000 years, Assyria. I mean, you had these-- In those days, they were the most powerful, Egypt, the most powerful countries of its time. And the most knowledgeable, the most advanced. Where was your education started? Where was your alphabet started? Where was your weights and measures and stuff like that? Anybody learn that?

Interviewer: In Egypt there's a lot of--

IS: A lot of it was in Egypt. It's already, like glasses, it's mentioned Egypt when they start to fool with glasses. But Assyria, did you ever read--what is it called? Excuse me.

Irvin's wife: Read what?

IS: I don't even remember what it's called. [...] in the Talmud that the Assyrians. I've got the dictionary. You young ladies want to learn something, some history? You can show it to the teacher, too. The only thing, I got to find it.

Irvin's wife: He learned all this after he came to America.

IS: I didn't read it all.

Irvin's wife: He didn't--

IS: Besides, they wouldn't let you read at home. You're going to get too smart.

Irvin's wife: He didn't know any English when he got here, and I met him as soon as he came here.

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Interviewer: How did you guys communicate then?

IS: It wasn't easy. She spoke a little Jewish.

Interviewer: Jewish [laughs]

Irvin's wife: Yiddish.

IS: That's right.

Irvin's wife: [...] It was difficult.

Interviewer: Invaded Germany.

IS: Now Germany. Germany actually, when they invaded Poland, why not a certain half of the country? The Russians came in and took half, also.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: I think Germany did that for a purpose. Germany could have gone through Poland without any, any problem. But maybe the Germans needed to regroup or something. So Russia came and took a certain part also. Took them what? A year and a half, two years, and then Russia went and started some-- I mean, Germany started on Russia. So they took Poland. They took the Ukraine and they took all these little, small countries. You had Estonia, Latvia. There was another one.

Irvin's wife: Yugoslavia?

IS: Lithuania. So those three also came in and then German occupied them. And after that, after they went into Ukraine, they rushed on, just kept on going into Russia. They went up to the--I don't think. At that time they called it Stalingrad. Today it's another name. It's called--

Irvin's wife: Isn't that part of Russia?

IS: Sure, it was part of Russia. They were actually what? Twenty, 25 kilometers from Moscow and people really thought they're gonna, they're gonna really go through Russia, but the winter came in and that's when things slowed up and they had to stay there and, you know, Europe suffered a lot. And Russia, nobody knows how much Russia suffered during the Second World War. And they say it was 20, 22 million people died in Russia on the Second World War. They don't say how many died in the streets and all that from hunger and frozen because you could-- It wasn't a matter of money. You couldn't buy hardly anything there even if you had the money.

Interviewer: Because of the Communism?

IS: Because the Communism and because they had such a huge army and everything was the army, the army, the army. And people don't realize it. Bergen-Belsen was not built as a concentration camp. Bergen-Belsen was originally for Russian prisoners. They starved them all
to death. There are pictures of it. The Belsen, the camp, that was two. See, let's say this is one and this is one. This here was barracks, assembled like a regular barrack, and each barrack, I don't know, contained I would say at least 80, 90 to 100 people. Within a kilometer or two kilometers from here, there was Bergen-Belsen. That was actually originally, there was a camp for the Russian or German soldiers. They're permanent buildings.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: And two and three stories. When I came, that's what they put me in. The camp was so full. Wherever you went, everything was full.

Interviewer: This is when you got off the train after--

IS: When I came off of the train. I went up on the attic. That's when they put me up in the attic. I had at that time a friend. He was originally from Czechoslovakia. He said to me--I came out of the train. I was 17, 17 1/2 years, 18 years old. For eight days, I was locked up in that car, hardly anything to drink, anything to eat. I wanted to take a blanket with me so we were there. You get yourself up and come. They get a hold of me, dragged me out of there and we started walking. You know, there I saw, trains, but this I remember. When I went back four, five years ago with my grandson. I was explaining. You walk up from that train. It's even a platform. There's a platform, some cement you walk up, and from there we just keep on going. When I went back, four or five years ago, first they wouldn't let me in. I come into the front. As I come in the front, there's space, like a small booth. You been maybe in Israel?

Interviewer: Right.

IS: Well, you go in certain places. You can't go in an embassy or something. There is always a booth outside. If you want, you have to go give your name and they got to call in and so forth. There was a booth there on two-- On one side, only one of them had a soldier standing guard, and right in front there was a big tank. I think it's a picture there in fact.

Anyway, we got-- He said, “You can't go in there.”

I said, “Why?”

“Because this is the British headquarters.”

You know, each, each, the Americans, the British, French and the Russians, each one had a certain place where they had the headquarters.

So he said, “This is the British headquarters and you can't go in there.”

I said, “I was liberated in there. I would like to go in. I remember certain places, certain things. I want to look at it.”

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He told me “You can't go inside.”

So he said, “You want to go to the other camp?”

So we picked ourselves up. We were there, me and my grandson. We had a German driver and we went to Belsen, to the camp. That camp had nothing left.

**Interviewer:** They burned it?

**IS:** Because it was so full of typhoid and TB that they burned the barracks down to the ground. Give me that book I gave you.

**Interviewer 2:** With your photos?

**IS:** Yeah.

**Interviewer 2:** This one.

**IS:** There should be something that you can take notice of something. [pause] You wouldn't believe it what it says in this one. This is--you ever hear of a camp by the name Sachsenhausen?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**IS:** People don't know that Sachsenhausen was a camp that on a small scale. Most of it was political prisoners, foreigners. Most of them was all foreigners that they captured in Germany. Sachsenhausen did not belong to the same group of labor camp that I was in.

**Interviewer:** Oh, okay.

**IS:** Sachsenhausen was a camp built by the Gestapo.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**IS:** And they had a gas chamber and it had crematoriums. When we went there, the crematorium was wiped off, emptied and wiped, destroyed and they were rebuilding them then because the German police didn't want, wanted to destroy everything not to find anything.

**Interviewer:** Who was rebuilding that?

**IS:** The Germans.

**Interviewer:** When?

**IS:** When we were there five years ago they were rebuilding.

**Interviewer:** The crematoriums?

**IS:** Yeah. Everything fixed up.
Interviewer: Why?

IS: See here--

Interviewer: Why would they rebuild them?

IS: For the people to see, see here.

Interviewer: See, I've learned--

IS: I said something to my grandson. When we came there, there was a ramp you had to go down, not far from the crematoriums, and a metal door. It was a small window. You could not see through the window inside because it was so dark inside, but they had benches around the wall. I said, but outside there was a revolving. I said, this is a crematorium. They drove the people down the ramp and in there and closed the door and they gassed the people with cyclone 'til it was proven different. But I want to show you something.

Interviewer: When I took a tour of Birkenau--

IS: Yes.

Interviewer: --there, but part of it is burned down and they told me on the tour that the reason they would never rebuild is because they don't want Holocaust deniers to say that it's fake.

IS: That's why they didn't want to rebuild it.

Interviewer: So why are they--

IS: But that one wasn't destroyed. The only thing was destroyed was the crematoriums.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: The crematorium is just ovens. You were in Germany, to Auschwitz?

Interviewer: No. I only went to Poland and the Czech Republic.

IS: Alright. Next time if you ever a chance, go to--what do you call it? Prag [aka Prague].

Interviewer: Yeah. I've been. I went to Terezin.

IS: You went to Theresienstadt?

Interviewer: Yes.

IS: Did you see the ovens still standing?

Interviewer: Yes.
IS: You did see that.

Interviewer: Yes.

Irvin's wife: We were there a couple of times.

Interviewer: You have?

IS: Those ovens.

Irvin's wife: Those ovens.

IS: Are still full with human ashes. Today.

Irvin's wife: My daughter went there.

IS: See, he asked me, this woman was in Dora.

Interviewer: Oh, was she the woman who helped you and your grandson find your name?

IS: Yeah. She's the one--

Interviewer: The paper that your father--

IS: --that showed me. That's right. No. That was in Buchenwald.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: This is, what she found my name here. She was a very, very pleasant person. Where were you, because they called her from Buchenwald that I'm coming to Dora, and she was waiting and waiting and waiting. We got lost. We couldn't find it in the hills there, but I'm looking for something.

Irvin's wife: Irvin, Irv, turn them a little carefully. It's Michael's.

IS: I won't do a thing to them.

Irvin's wife: I see how rough you are.

IS: No, I don't.

Interviewer: How long were you in Bergen-Belsen before you were liberated from there?

IS: Not too long. A week?

Interviewer: A week. Oh, okay.

Irvin's wife: That's all?
IS: Not too long, ten days. When I was there from April the 15th 'til, I think it was June the 17th, 18th, something like that.

Interviewer: So they kept you there a couple of months.

IS: Yeah.

Interviewer: But it was under British--

IS: But they moved me out, too. They moved me to Bicella [?] for a short time because they were afraid the people are going to get--

Irvin's wife: Is that in Germany?

IS: --typhoid or TB.

Interviewer: But once the British came in, life in the camp was--you were a free person, right?

IS: This actually, he never saw this. This is, he took this from a picture.

Interviewer: From a photograph. Of course, yeah.

IS: Because it was nothing. But I wanted to show you something here.

Interviewer: So you were, so you were there for ten days.

IS: This is the clothes that you wore.

Interviewer: Yeah.

IS: A jacket and a pair of pants. That's it. And in the winter they issued you a, supposed to be a coat. It didn't last too long. People cut them up . . . but. Go 'head.

Interviewer: So when you were liberated, what was--you were there from April to June. What were those couple of months like?

IS: Let me tell you what it was after we were liberated.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: It was a Sabbath, on a Saturday. We were sitting, already came down from the attic to our room on the first floor. And there was a certain group of Hungarian soldiers. They were called the Iron Guard. They joined the Hitler army to come to Germany. They were guarding Bergen-Belsen, and all of a sudden around the afternoon on the Sabbath, a guard must have walked by and the window was open. He threw in a pack of cigarettes. You should see these people. They would die for a cigarette, so this one wanted a cigarette. That one wanted a cigarette. So anyway, the normal time you never saw this, a guard to go and just throw you in cigarettes. So you knew
the time because at night when it was quiet, you could hear the explosives, the bomb. Not only
the bomb, the artillery and so forth. And Sunday morning somebody come out. He said, you
people are liberated. We are not under anybody. We are liberated.

Interviewer: But you stayed there after you were liberated.

IS: Where else you gonna go?

Interviewer: Right. Of course. So what was, did they give you a lot of food then?

IS: That was the, that was the--no food.

Interviewer: There was still no food even after the liberation.

IS: There was still no food, no water.

Interviewer: The British didn't bring any in?

IS: Besides they poisoned the water. Somebody said they were afraid to feed the public with the
food and all that kind of stuff. So we didn't have anything for a day or two.

Interviewer: So then, for a day or two.

IS: A day or two.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: Then we had--

Interviewer: Alright. So then in June--

IS: In June.

Interviewer: You went to Sweden?

IS: No. Before that, they pulled me out and took me to a town not far away from there, and they
set us up. I don't know what you would call it. Some kind of warehouse it was. I don't know. And
we stayed there a night, didn't like it there, and I didn't, didn't want to stay there. I walked back to
Bergen-Belsen. And when I walked back, I had a first cousin. We were pretty close, even in the
camp. We used to--if he had extra food, he used to, we used to meet each other. He went to--he
came from work and I went to work. You know, we used to work in shifts. Sometimes we
worked in shifts, three shifts, working in the tunnel. So sometimes we crossed each other, and if
he had food, he threw it over and gave me extra food. My father was still with me at that time.
And then he was very sick after the war.

Interviewer: Your friend?
IS: Came down, right after the liberation, came down so sick.

Interviewer: But your father didn't see liberation.

IS: My father didn’t live the liberation.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: And he was so sick. He looked like--

Interviewer: This is the friend that you told us last week how you said he was your brother and then they took you to Sweden.

IS: That's exactly, the same guy.

Irvin's wife: His cousin.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: He just passed away. It was just a year.

Interviewer: But didn't you tell them, didn't you tell them he was your brother?

IS: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: So I was afraid they will not--

Interviewer: Let you go. So then--

IS: --let me go.

Interviewer: So this is, you were, at the time when you went to Sweden, you were at this other town they brought you to.

IS: Right. I went back to Bergen-Belsen. I come upstairs where he always there.

Interviewer: And he wasn't there.

IS: He wasn't there.

Interviewer: So then you asked around.

IS: So I asked around. They told me two people came and so forth.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: So I finally, I went to Sweden also.

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Interviewer: Yeah. So you told us a bit about Sweden, but I'm curious about--

IS: See, I left Germany. A lot of things have changed after I left. I didn't stay around. People got more organized. People couldn't travel. The Jews didn't want to go home. They know there was nobody and nothing left at home. To Israel, you couldn't go, especially--

Interviewer: Why?

IS: --if you were in the British zone.

Interviewer: Okay. Right. That makes sense.

IS: To go illegally, smuggle yourself in--

Interviewer: Was dangerous.

IS: Not only it's dangerous.

Interviewer: So it was dangerous.

IS: If you're captured, what did the British do? You don't remember. You're too young. They put you in Cyprus, like--

Interviewer: Right.

IS: a concentration camp there.

Interviewer: In a refugee camp.

IS: That's right.

Interviewer: But the British wouldn't allow you to go to Israel because it was still, they were still controlling Palestine.

IS: That's right. They were still part of the British Empire.

Interviewer: Right. So--

IS: So they wouldn't let you go there to begin with.

Interviewer: So when you applied for a visa to the United States--

IS: No. So we had, after we came, went out of the quarantine from Sweden, they put practically every nationality together. They didn't take a Polish, Pollocks with the Jews here or the Czechs with the Jews there. I'm talking goyim or something like that. They usually tried to, the Swedish government, to put the people. By the way, when we came, there was very few religious Jews in Sweden.
Interviewer: Right.

IS: Very, very few. There was one, the rabbi for the--how should I say?--for the whole Swedish Judaism. He was the spokesman and he was actually--you know a little Hebrew?

Interviewer: I know, yes.

IS: Okay. Did you ever hear the word maschile?

Interviewer: Maschile? I don't remember. You know that?

Interviewer 2: What does it mean?

IS: Huh?

Interviewer 2: What does it mean?

IS: The smart ones, the--

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: The ones who ask a lot of questions and--you never heard that expression, he belongs to the maschilim?

Interviewer: No.

IS: This originally started in Poland, in Lithuania, where people where more modern. They reinterpret the bible differently to-- Look. Your father taught, learned the same five books of Moses that I learned.

Interviewer: Right. Of course.

IS: His school interpreted it one way. My school interpreted it the other way.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's what I like about Judaism.

IS: Your father is a Reform, right?

Interviewer: Yeah. He grew up Conservative.

IS: Alright. Where did the Reform start?

Interviewer: In Germany.

IS: In Germany.

Interviewer: Moses Mendelssohn.

IS: Moses Mendelssohn. Where, all of a sudden, how did he get Reformed?
Interviewer: Well, he wanted to be able to be able to live a German life, to be like kind of assimilated.

IS: But you know, when the Reform movement came in, the Jews wanted to be like the Germans. They went to church.

Interviewer: Right. Moses Mendelssohn said, his big line is, you live, be a German on the street and a Jew in your house.

IS: But they went to church.

Interviewer: Yeah. They lived like a, they just lived like any other German.

IS: But they still had the get it in some ways. That's where the maschilim came in.

Interviewer: Aah. So was it maschilim versus chasidim?

IS: No. They said they wanted a more open, modern society.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: Okay. When Mendelssohn came, he ate kosher.

Interviewer: Yeah.

IS: He kept the holiday. He kept his way or my way. That's a different story. But you had something before the Reform movement which you never thought. Your father would know about it.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: Did you ever hear of the Nalogins?

Interviewer: No.

IS: In Hungary.

Interviewer: No.

IS: Never heard of it?

Interviewer: No. Wait. Can you hold on one second?

IS: Go 'head.

Interviewer: Why, what do we have left? I mean, there's no time limit from the class.

IS: You can come back.
Interviewer 2: Do you have another tape?

IS: A week, maybe a few days.

Interviewer 2: And then you went back to Bergen-Belsen?

IS: I went back.

Interviewer: And then to Sweden.

IS: And then to Sweden.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: And then to Sweden. So that's where, it comes in different. I mean, I wanted to invite you here for a, for dinner if you want to come.

Interviewer: That's so nice.

Interviewer 2: You're so nice.

IS: Very nice.

Interviewer: Do you want to focus on your story? So you were in Sweden for a year and a half, and then what--

IS: Oh. So after, as soon as we, they dispersed us to our destination, where we're going to stay after the quarantine. This person came to visit. This person came to visit. The first person that came to--

Interviewer: Where were you in Sweden? I'm sorry.

IS: You wouldn't know. It wouldn't matter. Trompen [?] is the first place it was.

Irvin's wife: Did you tell them about the camp there?

IS: Yeah. Moment. And I'll tell you came, the first person to see us in that camp. I mentioned to you either, was it the first time you came or the second? I think it was the first time. A rabbi from Seattle, Washington.

Interviewer: Yeah. You did mention that.

IS: Golglenter.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: He was one that was always trying to buy out Jews from the Germans. Remember I told you when we came to Sweden he found quite a few girls.
Interviewer: Right.

IS: And he brought out, he paid eight, seven, eight or nine dollars per person. That's how much a life was worth.

Interviewer: Disgusting. That's disgusting.

IS: You understand. And they, they brought them over to Sweden. When we came to Sweden, they found them. They were there already six weeks. That means they were brought out two months before the liberation.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: But Sweden was a very--we talked before about the meschilim. A very interesting man. His name was [pause]

Irvin's wife: It's hard to remember all that time.

IS: Very interesting, very learned man. Your father would know the name. He went to Constantinople in those days--

Irvin's wife: Constantinople.

IS: With Gustav V, the king of Sweden. I think that's [pause] It will come to me. Before I get over, I'll tell you the name. And he was, he was a real Reformed. Anything we asked, he questioned. He once, and he went to the government because he said if you bring him more Jewish people and all this, he said you can expect that anti-Semitism to get bigger and bigger. So he didn't want too many Jews to come to Sweden. It was only around 15,000 Jews after the war when we came to Sweden. Holland, remember, or was it? I don't remember now. Where they rescued the Jews with the boats.

Interviewer: Oh. In Denmark?

IS: Denmark. All the Jews in Denmark, I would say 96, 97 percent of them, were taken out of the country and brought in fishing boats, smuggled them to Sweden.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: Very few they captured. How did they find out? They were supposed to be all the Jews roundup Yom Kippur night, on Kol Nidre, and one of the Gestapo men was very--

It's a few things I would. You get me more and more to talk about certain things but, and from Sweden, this man came first and we asked him, “How can we get to the country? I don't want to go to Cyprus in another camp.”
He said, “I really don't know. Right now there is no way anybody can come to the country.”

So this was, that was in 1945, and in 194-- , end of '45 or the beginning of '46, we were in another place. We had already a kosher camp and all that kind of stuff. Then another man came. He was also a refugee. He was a refugee from Germany. His last name was Jacobs. He was a rabbi. He was a rabbi in Germany. In there he was a refugee. But he had connections with the organization here in the United States. He also had, I found here the magazine article from the rabbinical college. And somehow he got an idea because you couldn't come with no visa or anything to this country.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**IS:** Maybe they would take in students. So he came to the rabbinical college and he suggested maybe he could issue some visas, some affidavits, that you're going to take care and support them and so forth. And that's what happened. He got thirty affidavits and we came over, thirty boys from Sweden.

**Interviewer:** That is incredible.

**Irvin's wife:** He has a picture as--

**Interviewer:** That's really incredible.

**IS:** I just came--

**Interviewer 2:** So this is 1945, '46?

**IS:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So when you came, how long did you go to rabbinical college for?

**IS:** About two-and-a-half years I would say.

**Interviewer:** Wow. And you guys met the minute, as soon as you got here?

**IS:** Very close.

**Irvin's wife:** '46.

**Interviewer:** How did you meet?

**IS:** Her stepfather came to the school and he must ask me home and so forth, and that's how we met.

**Interviewer:** That's so nice. And what, did you, were you--what was it like to be in America after having gone through such horrible times?
**Irvin Stern, Interview 3**

**IS:** It wasn't so--in the beginning, it wasn't so because you couldn't communicate too well and most--

**Irvin's wife:** You mean you couldn't.

**IS:** And most of the boys, very seldom you ran into somebody that you knew enough Jewish, enough--

**Irvin's wife:** He smiled at me and I smiled at him and that's what did it.

**IS:** --to be able to speak fluently with you and so forth. And most all the boys, they didn't want to stay here. They all left for New York. I think we were three or four that were left here in the rabbinical college.

**Interviewer:** Wow. And so what year did you guys get married?

**IS:** '48.

**Interviewer:** '48. Wow. So--that's nice.

**IS:** It's a long time.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. And did you, what did you do? I mean, so you were ordained as a rabbi?

**IS:** No. I never stayed long enough.

**Irvin's wife:** He was never a rabbi.

**IS:** I just, but--

**Irvin's wife:** He's called rabbi but never a rabbi

**Interviewer:** I saw that. We saw that on your--

**IS:** I saw, well, I used to work as a shochet right behind [. . .]

**Irvin's wife:** And his title was reverend.

**IS:** He had a good [. . .] and so forth.

**Interviewer:** Why is your title reverend?

**IS:** That's what they, they--

**Irvin's wife:** A shochet is--

**IS:** Because anybody who is licensed has to have papers from another rabbi.

**Interviewer:** Right.
IS: Is referred to like a preacher or referred to as a reverend.

Interviewer: Oh, alright.

IS: So I said to the rabbi, he calls me Rabbi Stern, at work. I'm talking when I worked--

Irvin's wife: A lot of people called you that.

IS: --kosher meat and all, and he says--I'm at work--he said, the trouble is you know more than the rabbis.

Interviewer: [laughs] That's funny. So--

Irvin's wife: You had to study.

Interviewer: Of course. So did you like the teachings at the rabbinical school?

IS: Yeah. It was very interesting.

Interviewer: Yeah. And did they--they didn't teach you in English. They taught you in Yiddish?

IS: No. Most was in English, even--

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

IS: And you know, this is one of the schools, when I was there, there was two hundred boys.

Irvin's wife: He did go to school there for a while.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: No more than two hundred boys.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: Today it's nine hundred boys, a thousand boys.

Interviewer 2: What's the name of this school?

IS: Ner Israel Rabbinical College. It's in Reisters--

Interviewer: Reisterstown.

IS: Yeah. It's on Wilson Lane, you go down a little bit, not far from here.

Interviewer: And so by what year would you say that you were speaking English pretty, pretty fluently? How long did it take you to learn English?

IS: English. I would say six months, then I started pretty much.
Interviewer: Six months. And how--you taught yourself by reading newspapers?

IS: Reading, that's how I started.

Interviewer: Wow.

IS: Read newspapers.

Interviewer: That's great. So you were--

IS: I captured the--

Irvin's wife: He was very determined.

IS: --English language quite--

Irvin's wife: Very determined.

IS: --because I got children and grandchildren, finished big colleges, and they say, Zayde, where did you learn so much English?

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, you would never know that you weren't--I mean, that you weren't a native speaker.

IS: The only thing I have, still do once in awhile with the grammar.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: Otherwise--

Interviewer: My Hebrew grammar is awful.

IS: Then I have somebody here and if I don't know a word or something--

Interviewer: She can help you.

IS: She helps me, yeah.

Interviewer: So I have a few questions for you, kind of just about your perspective after the war. How do you today view Germany? How do you feel about Germany today?

IS: The new generation is completely different. They know we already had after the war, oh we didn't know this we didn't know that and we didn't, had no idea of this. Most of the Germans will tell you that. But they realize what actually happened and I, a few years ago the foreign minister or the prime minister--they call him. We don't call him there the prime minister or the president--said he would like to see Germany [pause] to be like the United States, all kinds of nationalities.

Interviewer: Right.
**IS:** Either you to follow this, you know how many Jews live today in Germany?

**Interviewer:** A few thousand? A couple of thousand.

**IS:** If I tell you close to 180,000.

**Interviewer:** I had no idea.

**Irvin's wife:** I didn't, either.

**Interviewer:** That's a lot.

**IS:** That's a lot of Jews.

**Interviewer:** They're brave.

**IS:** You don't see Jews. You know, years ago a lot of Russian Jews came to the United States.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**IS:** You don't see that anymore. You know where most Jews go today from Russia?

**Interviewer:** Germany?

**IS:** To Germany.

**Interviewer:** A lot of families would never buy a German-made car. How do you feel about that?

**Irvin's wife:** He feels the same.

**IS:** I never. I be honest with you. I never bought a foreign car from any place. Only American made.

**Interviewer:** Right. And, in our class, we were having a big, we were learning about the ideas of Intentionalism versus--what is it? Functionalism? And, well, it was the idea that the Intentionalist school of thought is that Hitler and the Nazis from the very beginning, their intention was to kill the Jews.

**IS:** Well, the Nazi party was before Hitler came to power.

**Interviewer:** Right. But we're learning the Intentionalists from the very beginning when Hitler, in the '30s, in the '20s, Hitler's plans were very--

**IS:** It was already the ‘20s, the Nazi party.

**Interviewer:** --was to kill all the Jews. And we're also learning that the Functionalists believed that their plan wasn't to kill all the Jews until into the war. So--
IS: His plan was to kill all the Jews.

Interviewer: From the very beginning.

IS: All the minorities.

Interviewer 2: From the beginning?

IS: From the beginning.

Interviewer 2: Why do you think that?

IS: Why? To begin with--

Interviewer: I think the same thing.

IS: -- if you read some of the ideology, a Jew was not considered a human being. He was considered so low, about the lowest, I don't know. The Jew or the gypsy was about the lowest of the low because they only believed their race is the proper race to exist in this world.

Interviewer: Well, our teacher is a Functionalist, but I personally, like you, I would think that it was their plan from the outset, especially because we were talking about earlier how can a person who doesn't believe that it was their intention from the beginning say, why didn't they, why didn't Germany invade Russia? It doesn't make sense.

IS: You know, to be successful to invade, anybody can invade. But to hold onto what you captured is not that easy.

Interviewer: Right. You need a lot of manpower.

IS: A lot of these people are not--the climate in Russia is different than most of Europe.

IS: They froze them out.

Interviewer: Right.

IS: And that's one reason. Second, whatever the Germans shipped to Russia, to the army when they had a half a million, or three-quarters of a million, not even, hardly half reached them. The Partisans-- just like they bombed the railroads and destroyed a lot. And they never reached, and the people was--

Interviewer: Yeah.

IS: You cannot fight with an empty stomach.

Interviewer: Right. So, another--how did you, why did you choose to become a shochet? How did you choose--
IS: Well, if I want to get married, I had to go make a living.

Interviewer: Right. So, and you wanted--

IS: And then we had in the family at home some of my uncles were in that same thing.

Interviewer: In the business.

IS: Yeah. And the same thing in Europe.

Interviewer: Wow. So, and you were a shochet for 60 years.

IS: Fifty-nine.

Interviewer: Fifty-nine years. Wow.

IS: I have a cousin in Monsey, upstate New York.

Interviewer: Uh, huh.

IS: A few years ago, he has a very good friend. They went to yeshiva together in New York.

Interviewer: Okay.

IS: He--did your father went to rabbinical school in Israel, a Reform?

Interviewer: Yeah, for one year.

IS: That's called [. . .] there.

Interviewer: A Reform, rabbinical college, for one year in Jerusalem and then four years in New York City.

IS: New York.

Interviewer: What do you think people our age or our generation, what would you like people to learn from your story, to take away from what you experienced?

IS: Life has to go on. What you do with your life or have to live your life, it's not easy. People, oh, I'm going to tell it. It's not easy. Not everybody wants to live my life and I don't want to live somebody else's life because I--you know who the most famous person is in Germany, in German Jewry? Go 'head.

Interviewer 2: When did you start to talk about the Holocaust? When, did you, were you talking about it right after the war?

IS: Oh.
Interviewer: Or--

IS: Well, for me, I got married. I didn't want to talk about the war. What am I--

Irvin's wife: He didn't speak--

IS: Tell my wife.

Irvin's wife: Not a thing for years.

IS: What does she know about--

Interviewer: How many years?

IS: She was a young kid.

Irvin's wife: I can't tell you how many, but it--

IS: She was a young lady.

Irvin's wife: As you got older, when there--

IS: Another thing.

Irvin's wife: That's when he started.

IS: After the war, during the war, you know. I don't know if you came across--

Irvin's wife: He had nightmares. He had--

IS: --some Jews in this country.

Irvin's wife: A lot of people do.

IS: I saw people when they heard the name Roosevelt, they turned around.

Irvin's wife: Oy!

IS: Excuse me and spit. What Roosevelt--

Irvin's wife: Tell them why.

IS: To the people in this country--

Irvin's wife: Tell them why.

IS: --he was God.

Irvin's wife: Yeah. In my family, too.
IS: He was God. They bathed him. There was [. . .] a rabbi by the name, Silver is his name.

Interviewer: Until your children were older.

IS: It's no use. You only irritate sometimes certain people when you talk about the war.

Interviewer 2: Yeah.

Irvin's wife: That's not the reason.

IS: So you don't talk about it.

Interviewer 2: But what made you start to talk about it?

IS: I don't know. The kids. They start to teach it in school. They asked me would I go to talk here. When they asked me to talk on [. . .] and I go to [. . .] They asked me would I go to talk to these people. So I went.

Interviewer 3: So your children knew you were a survivor, but you didn't actually--

IS: No. I was, from where I come from, they didn't have no children's transport. From Poland, they didn't have no children's transport. The only thing they had from children's transport was Germany, so maybe a couple from France.

Interviewer: Are you talking about the kindertransport?

IS: I have a book. You know that book, that book--

Interviewer 3: Just what I was wondering about is your personal children, your own children. They knew you were a survivor?

IS: Yeah.

Interviewer 3: They kind of--

IS: They knew.

Interviewer 3: Understood.

Interviewer 2: But they didn't know your story.

IS: Yeah. They knew.

Interviewer 3: But they didn't know your story.

IS: Yeah. They know my story.

Irvin’s wife: They knew but not details
IS: Besides that [pause] I cannot find it.

Irvin's wife: He had nightmares for some time.

Interviewer: Could you talk about the nightmares? Are you willing to talk about that?

Irvin's wife: No. I don't think he would.

IS: I still have them sometimes.

Irvin's wife: Yeah.

IS: I'm not ashamed--

Irvin's wife: He'll call out and--

IS: I'm not ashamed to tell you.

Interviewer: I have nightmares, too.

Interviewer 2: If I went through anything like that.

Irvin's wife: It's not the same.

Interviewer: It's not the same at all, but my boyfriend--