

**The following interview with Simon Kalmas is being held on May 25, 1982 at his home in Southfield, Michigan. The interviewer: Arthur Kirsch.**

**I'll start off in asking you uh, where—and first of all, your name.**

Yeah, well my name is Simon J. Kalmas.

**And uh, where...**

And in Yiddish—in case, if anybody's interested—is uh, Shimon Yosef Kalmus.

**Okay.**

My dad—my father was Israel, my mother was Yetta. We lived in Drobin, Poland, which is thirty-one kilometers from the city of Płock...

**And when were you born?**

...and a hundred and one kilometer from Warsaw. I was born during the First World War. Lived in Poland for twenty-four years, 'til the war broke out. And uh, and that's where I went to the whole megillah.

**What was your father's occupation?**

A blecher—a tinsmith—in Yiddish it's a blecher. Well, we did tin roofs, gutters. Uh, roofing and gutters, or appliances, or other tinsmithing that was necessary for the, for the uh, people.

**All right, the, the city in which you lived—describe it a little bit. Large, small, what kind of a Jewish population...**

It was a small village. Uh, I believe it was a hundred and fifty Jewish families. We had one bet ha midrash and one bet ha kneset. Plus all sects of Chasidim. We had the ???, the Gerer Chadisim, the ??? Chasidim, the Aleksander Chasidim, and also Mizrahi—which they had uh, a minyan, you know, every Friday night and

Saturday. It's uh, religious. Uh, very interesting. The city was typical by itself—the shtetl. We had a mikvah, we had a alt besoylem, nay besoylem, until the Germans came in and leveled the old, old, uh, cemetery—leveled it off. So they need the sand for building roads. So the bones, skeletons, everything was all over the places.

**What was the size of your family?**

Size of my family was seven. I had two brothers, two sisters and myself, mom and dad.

**Aunts and uncles?**

Yes, I had aunts and uncles, cousins.

**How many?**

None of them left that I know of. I want to put it this way, I had a cousin in Israel who left by the First Aliyah—the Halutz...Halutzim in 19...I believe '21 was it. And I went to see him. He died about a year—two years ago, so...

**He has family over there?**

He has a family over there. He got married there—he got children and grandchildren.

**So how many aunts and uncles did you have?**

Ah, from my mother's side I had even my grandmother that I don't even know what happened to her. I had aunts and uncles from my mother's side, I had aunts and uncles from my father's side. And I have not the slightest idea what became of them, because uh, they were separated a long time—before even uh, we went to Auschwitz.

**Did any of them live with you?**

Well, 'til—my aunt and uncles, you mean? Aunts and uncles uh, lived in the same city. Uh, as a matter of fact, I have a cousin in Philadelphia—her mother, mother and dad died at the same time as my father and mother died. So uh, this is one. Another aunt I don't know what happened to her. Like I was told in Israel when I came, if anybody you know notified—they have archives there, you know, from our shtetl—if anybody, you know, looked it up. And he said to me, "If anybody—if nobody notified us 'til now, they're not alive." Because they had names there from people that been thrown all over the world, you know, like in France, in Holland. Some of 'em remain in Germany. Uh, all over, you know, after the liberation—the—you had some relatives there or they had opportunity to go there. Most of them are in Israel, most of them. All my friends, boyfriends, girlfriends from way back, you know. I was an active Zionist and uh, and there was ??? uh, some of 'em left for Israel before the war. And some of them I found that after the war, that we were in camp together—had the same numbers tattooed. And that's, that's the way it is.

**You—your family seems—must have been quite active politically.**

Not, not quite. My father was a typical Chasid, or Chosid, if you want to say a religious. He belonged to a, a, a group, you know, the Chasidim. He had uh, he had this—the ??? rebbe, you know, this was his—and, of course, they had a minyunim, you know, every Saturday—Friday night—Saturday or holidays, that was—they rented a place and um, they had shalos sudot and all these uh, uh, things. So he was a typical religious, decent man. Now I, I just stepped aside from

all that. As a matter of fact, you can call that I was a rebellion for all that. To me, when the political Zionism, you know, came about, that's what I start looking into. I said, "We have to take that Zionism out of the prayer books and take it into the hands. Do something about it." So I remember as a youngster—twelve, thirteen years old—I used to go around every month collecting for the Jewish National Fund, you know, the Keren Kayemet LeYisrael. Pennies, you know, that women usually before Shabbos bentshing you know, uh, lichd or light the candles. My Yiddish is geharget, I'm telling you. Before line the camps, they used to drop in a, a penny or so, you know, tsedokah, and uh, and we used to go around and collect it, you know, e...every month, empty those boxes and send it for the Keren Kayemet. And uh, wanted to go to Israel. It was in the 19...in the early '30s, because there was no future in Poland. Anti-Semitism was tremendous. It was unbelievable. It's hard to describe.

**Would you try a little bit?**

We tried.

**Well what—describe some incidences of anti...**

The anti-Semitism?

**Yeah.**

It's, it's very hard to relate the whole uh, to put it in a plain, short sentence that the Gentiles were happy to see the Germans coming in and take care of the Jews.

That's, that's the, the story of it. That's anti-Semitism.

**Do, do you remember any, any specific instances, let's say when you were...**

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Yes, that the students, you know, used—like in Europe or any other places uh, comes uh, Saturday night, you know, shpatseeren you know, for a walk. Uh, you don't drive around a car because there was no cars there, so you took a walk. So the students, you know, stabbed quite a few people—stabbing. The police didn't do a darn thing about it. So we organized a, a, one—so vigilante, you know, take care of the uh, students that went in the—to the Yeshiva, you know, and they were going to wait—going home, you know. The lighting in our city was poor. There was no, no streetlights at all. So we took battery-lighted, you know uh, flashlights with canes and we waited vigilantes for these youngsters that went to cheder, you know, or to the Yeshiva, or even for the elderly that uh, used to sit in, in uh, bet ha midrash, you know, the synagogue. And uh, either midrash or something, you know, they, they were reading after m'ncha mariv or between m'ncha mariv, you know. And uh, so we would be uh, vigilantes, but it didn't do any good. So, the war broke out. I was only twenty-four years old at that time, when the war broke out. And that was the mess that came in. But uh, not a decent day of living human decency that I can remember since September 1 'til April 11th, '45.

**September 1st of what?**

September 1st of uh, 1939—since the first day of war. The war, the war in our place started about four hours before even the world knew that the Germans crossed the border already. We were only sixty-somewhat kilometers from the border—from the German border. And we had colonies of German uh, what they called Volksdeutschen. In other words they were Germans, but they lived in, in

Poland. So the first day of war—the first hour of war they were in uniform. I believe there was approximately four million Germans in Poland—I mean those Volksdeutschen. And uh, we were surrounded by them because we were close to the border for one thing. And the first day they were in uniform. All of ‘em. And harassment was plenty. I can say maybe because I had skill that I showed in my trade and those Germans respected that for some strange reason. Uh, when they closed Jewish shops—Jewish stores, and I went to the commissar and I told him that I am a tinsmith. And uh, he said, “All Jews are—have now trades. Everybody wants to work. No Jew who works, I don’t—you’re probably the same as the other.” I said, “How can I prove it to you that I’m a tinsmith and we take care of the surrounding vicinity—all the farmers. And there isn’t any other tinsmiths than my father and I, and I would like to keep the place open and continue to, to serve the people.” So he gave me a, a permit. I uh, I had to prove to him that I’m a—that I am what I am—I am what I say, and uh, he gave me a permit. And uh, so while I was there talking to him about—to get a permit to—in order to keep my shop open. So I told him there’s two more shops that are Jewish, but they’re serving the, the people of this community, which is a blacksmith—also a Jew—and also a uh, locksmith, which is also a Jew. He said, “Send them down.” Sure enough, he gave permits. All right. So I—I’ll say and—I was lucky. No chochmeh, no bravery. Can’t say I was brave. I was strong, of course, I was young—I was strong. But it was more mazel than anything else.

**Prior to the war, what was your uh, education?**

My education in Poland? None. Eleme...uh, public school wasn't available in my time because we had First World War. I was born in 1915, so we had First World War. And that, that war dragged until the Bol...Bolsheviks, you know, came in too 'til about 1920—'20, '21. There was no compulsory school. The only thing is that we had a cheder—Talmud Torah that uh, Hebrew Yeshiva and all that. All other educations—I'm a self-made man. Because my younger brothers and sisters, they had school. It was compulsory at that—when they were born—when they were youngsters. Not in my time.

**What were your plans uh, for the future before the war?**

My plans were to get out of Poland as far as I can and as soon as I can. Unfortunate—and to this day I'll say it—unfortunate that all the borders were closed. The Jew didn't have no place where to go. And especially we didn't have any money.

**Was there someplace you were planning on going when you left Poland?**

Yes, I was planning to go to Israel. That was my, my first...

**Was this going to be an individual move or you—were you thinking about uh, moving the whole family, or...**

No, first it, you know, it was me that wanted to get out because I couldn't see any future in, in Poland. So—and then take it from there. You know, see what, what I, what I can do. There wasn't enough time, let's put it this way.

**Where were you when the war began?**

I was at home.

**How did you uh, how did you hear about the war?**

Like I said, I knew about the war. It was—the war was, was declared around ten o'clock. I knew about the war—it was six o'clock in the morning.

**Now you say you...**

I was on my way to work. The airplanes were already dropping par...paratroopers into our place, damaging the roads—bombarding. That was six o'clock in the morning. I uh, I don't know, I—like I said, just plain luck. When planes came overhead and I was on the road and I saw that something isn't kosher. So I climbed into a, a, a, a pipe, you know, as in a ditch—as you—when they drives through they have a pipe there...

**A sewer pipe.**

A sewer pipe. I climbed into that pipe there and uh, when everything quiets down I crawled out of it and they were dead from all over the places. So—horses, cows and, and what have you on the, on the, on the farms. It was about six o'clock April 1—not April 1, uh, September 1, '49 uh, '39.

**What were your feelings and thoughts at that time?**

What the feeling—I just turned around and went home to be with my family.  
That's it.

**You say you were—you, you were going to a job at the time.**

Yes.

**What kind of job did you have?**

Well, blecher, you know the uh, tinsmith.

**Okay, you were doing that.**

We were roofing...



**All right.**

...roofing, gutters or whatever for the farm itself there.

**You went home to your family. What, what—how did they respond to the war?**

**What, what did your family do?**

Well, they went through a war before. To me it was still new, but I was scared. I was scared. It's uh, we are trapped, that's all I could say, and that's all I could think of. We are trapped, no place where to go. The, the worst part about it was one week later they sent out an order that all men from sixteen 'til forty-five to concentrate in the church. You know, they had a big church there. Concentrate in the church. So you obeyed the order, you go to the, to the church there. There's nothing there. You're a hostage. Next day they loaded us up on trucks, took us away. By that time I—at that time I would say that luck was more with us than, than anything else because there were Gentiles also sixteen to forty-five. Of course in a lot of places what they did is they separated. They took out the Jews and the Gentiles, but this time they didn't. They uh, took us down to a nearby city, unloaded us in a field, machine guns on three sides, you know. Everybody thought this is the end, period.

**Now when, when did this happen?**

It was September of '39—1939, about two weeks—a week or two weeks later after the Germans came in.

**And they rounded everybody up then and took out the...**

Sixteen to forty-five, just men. Sixteen to forty-five. Nobody knew where, what, and where they took us, and—nobody knew. And surrounded us on three sides

with machine gun. And uh, we all thought that this is the end of it, uh, that's it. But anyways some order came down that they took us in into a big barn somewheres there. And we wait there. You couldn't sit up or stand up, you have to lay. Took away the matches, knives, you know, anything, you know, you had to throw it out. And uh, we were there without food for about three days. No water, no food. Until somebody finally found out where we are and food start coming in. People brought in baskets of food. So I remember that they were throwing into the crowd. So what could I catch—I, I caught a plum, a plum and I divided it with my brother. That's it. And then after—I believe we were there for about four or five days and they started to release—send everybody home.

**You had guards watching you this whole time.**

Oh yes, the guards were all—until we were released, I came home is all.

**Did your family have any options? Was there anything they could have done once the Germans came in? No.**

Not a thing.

**So you came home after that...**

Yeah...

**...and, uh...**

...and I remained with the family.

**And everybody was together.**

Yep. Until 1942—that was the final.

**Now before that, let me ask you what—you stayed there at the house then uh, with your...**

Yeah, with my, with my family.

**Did you...**

A lot of people, a lot of people—you see, the Russians came in from one side, the Germans came in from the other. So a lot of people packed up and ran to the Russians. And uh, you know, to Lublin. I uh, just didn't have the heart to leave the family somehow. I, I knew that there's nothing much that I can do for them, but at least whatever I can, I'll do with food—earn a living. And uh, so I—my, my friends asked me to go with them. “You see what's going on, don't stay here.” And they went. Some of them died over there.

**The Russian side.**

The Russian side. One came back without a leg. So I just took my chances. I said, “Whatever will happen, will happen. I'm not going to leave my mom and dad and they won't know what happened to me.” We were together 'til about—I believe it was November '42.

**All right, before that, how, how did life change at all in terms of your...**

Well, we...

**...routine or jobs?**

No, we still had the same jobs. They created a ghetto that everybody moved—that all the Jews had to move into the—to a section there.

**So you had to leave your house.**

Yes, but I didn't leave the house because I had the shop in the house. So I was allowed to get out of the ghetto on my own—go to the shop. So my father and my, my, my, my brother, you know, they went with me. Because under, under this

permit I had a man that I could, you know, employ. And it was 'til about 1941. Forty-one they decided that ghetto is not good enough, they're going to transfer us to another ghetto. So they transferred us to a ghetto in Neustadt, also Poland. In that ghetto we spent a year—'til November '42. Then they started gathering up. At first all men over sixty-six were tran...exported. Then they took everybody. A week there was everybody gone to Auschwitz.

**Prior to that, describe the life in the ghetto—the first ghetto.**

In the first ghetto, of course, it wa...it was home. But still, no matter where it is or what it is, it's home. So you move from this place, you move to the other place. Of course, it's, it's entirely different from the home that you were used to. You move into some shanty, or whatever, you know, somebody lived there. It was some Gentile, I don't know, laborer, or whatever worker he was. You had to move in there—that was a place it was available. There was three, four families into a—to, to a room. And uh, of course, typhoid start setting in, all kinds of sicknesses. And uh, was no doctor.

**Was anybody in charge over the ghettos?**

Yes there was a Judenrat. What can a Judenrat do? They had rat...rations, you know, for the, for the ghetto, and all that. I uh, like I said, I had the opportunity to be outside the ghetto all day and go in and out whenever, you know, I felt like it or had a necessity to go home or to go to the place. So a lot of farmers brought in, oh, like eggs, flour, potatoes, what have you, for so-and-so or so-and-so—they owe 'em some money, you know. I carried it in for them. Plus myself that I took home, you know, for, for my family. And that's...

**In the ghetto was there enough food?**

Not enough. There was a—set up a kitchen. People like us or like myself—my family didn't have to go to the soup kitchen because uh, I was still able to provide enough food for the family. Because I had the shop—I still had the business going, so it wasn't too bad. But when they transferred us to the other ghetto, then I'm already a stranger in a, in a, a strange place. Didn't know the place anymore, so we had to join the, the soup kitchen.

**Was there a—was there a school in the ghetto?**

No.

**How about a synagogue?**

No. Well, we—synagogue—a Jew is a Jew, you know that.

**Yeah okay.**

A Jew's a Jew and, uh.

**You made a minyan?**

We made—oh yes, there was more than a minyan. Oh yes. We had synagogue.

**So there was an active...**

Yes, yes.

**...there was an active Jewish life going on.**

If—now here's the, here's the point on—if they would leave us without tossing us around from one place to the next one place—even before the ghetto they made people—they gave 'em an hour to leave the place—move somewhere else. We need this for a German, you know. So this is a remission. But if they wouldn't put down the final axe to Auschwitz, we would have survived one ghetto, we would

survive two ghettos or even three ghettos. Because the Polish people, I would say they're probably the strongest that I've—I ever encountered. And I been with people from, from s...twelve nations in camp. And they fell like flies. Per capita, Polish people are more set to survive.

**Did you ever see any statistics on that?**

No, I don't have statistics, but uh, we have from our shtetl—there's quite a few people survived. Even you lost a whole family, but one from—of, of the family survived. And I was at a, at a wedding in Philadelphia for my cousin. And, of course, there were others from the same shtetl and we were talking about it. And were—we were saying that from our city—from our shtetl—per capita we have more people survived than from any other place—from our shtetl.

**In your, in your, in your ghettos, was there any smuggling?**

Yes, yes, yes there was smuggling, of course. People that knew the vicinity, you know, for smuggling, they did. I didn't have to smuggle in my city because I had a permit to go in and out. But when, when I came to the other ghetto in Neustadt, then my smuggling wasn't do any good because I didn't know anybody to go out and, and smuggle around, you know, uh, to hock this, you know, for something else. Things like that, so...

**Was there any type of resistance?**

In our place we couldn't have any resistance. First of all, you weren't safe—besides the Germans weren't safe from the Gentiles. There couldn't be any resistance because you couldn't even go any place that somewhere they wouldn't call a German, say "This is a Jude." They couldn't speak German, but they knew

“Jude.” This they knew to say. “This is Jude, Jude.” You know. So in our place we couldn’t, couldn’t do a thing. Of course, Warsaw is something else. Other places—like my friend came back without a leg—he was in the Partisan. You know, the Partisan uh, in Russia. So uh, there, there was a resistance. This I could understand. They had the, the terrain. They had the cooperation from the surroundings, you know, it was—not, not in our place—wasn’t our places.

**There were a lot of Jews brought into your ghetto?**

Into our ghetto?

**Yeah.**

Well, first of all there was the Jews from our city...

**Right. Were they brought in from outside the city also, do you know?**

They also—they came in. You know, they smuggle themselves out, wherever they sent them away, they came back and, and uh, came in. But when, when they took us to the other ghetto—so they already had a ghetto in their city. They piled in another two thousand people, you know, into their ghetto. So six families into a room. There would be bunk beds, you know. Every family had a bunk bed.

**You, you mentioned the Judenrat. Do, do you remember any names of people in charge?**

I remember one name and I believe he is in Israel and he is in charge—either curator or in charge, I don’t know. I didn’t know when I was in Israel, otherwise I would look for him. His name was Milech Buki. I believe he is in charge of something there in the Yad Vashem. Either he is curator or whatever it is.

**Was that the first ghetto or the second ghetto that you lived in?**

In the first ghetto. So, he survived. His brother didn't.

**So you lived in the ghetto then up until 194...**

Nineteen forty-two.

**All right, uh...**

In '42, in '42 we went to—took us to—first we didn't even know where, then we found out it's Auschwitz.

**All right, describe how they uh, they got you to Auschwitz.**

By train—box, box cars, packed in. No way out.

**How did they inform the people of the ghetto that it—that you were leaving?**

Well, they didn't have to inform anybody. They just surrounded it with uh, with uh, either SS or the SA, you know, yellow uniforms or the black uniforms or whatever and uh, surrounded it around and all the Juden austreten. That's all.

**Did they give you a certain amount of time to get ready to leave?**

Within an hour, most of the time, may...

[interruption in interview]

**Were you uh, able to take certain things with you?**

What good does it do? Okay, we took certain things. You put down another shirt on top of you, another shirt on top of you, uh, you can only wear one pair of shoes. Okay, so you had uh, what they call a rucksack. A rucksack, you know, is a, uh, what would it be in English?

**Shoulder bag.**

Yeah, a rucksack. So if, uh...

**Backpack.**



Backpack, thank you. But, but that backpack—if the SS had a bad eye on you, he just took a knife and cut the strap, you know, and just dropped it. Off, off off—yeah, okay. That’s how, that’s how we went on the train.

**All right, but you all went together.**

Well, we were separated, we were separated. We went together, of course. I don’t think I can still remember it. My sister and my father—we ran into each other somehow. And uh, my dad said, “This is the end.” So we came to Auschwitz—was at night. And, of course, he select to the right to the left, you know, to the right to the left. I was sent to the right. So that this is already, you know, into the gas chamber because they packed us in into a, a, a bathroom. Well, with, with the showerheads, you know, a public, public baths—a showerhead. So we thought that this is it. You know, gas is going to come out through that same thing. And about an hour—two hours later and they said uh, somebody informed us that uh, relax uh, tomorrow morning you’re going to be processed for, for work. In other words, you’re going to get new clothing, you’re going to be showered uh, haircut, shaved, and what have you. And next day the process begun. Snow about two, three feet deep. The only thing you—they left on is a leather belt and a pair of boots or the shoes—whatever you had on. So you stood in line in the snow until you got into the bath—a shower, and you came out from the other side with a striped suit. So next day—next morning while entering the line—it went al...alphabetically, you know, according to the A-B-C. So my brother came behind me, next day. So here’s—I had forty-seven, here’s forty-eight.

**Yeah, Mr. Kalmas was just showing me the number on his arm. What is the number there?**

It's seven-seven-three-four-seven. And he had three-four-eight, behind me, all right. So we were in Auschwitz for one night. Next day different eintreten. Was—what's the matter now—they selected strong men for another camp. See, Auschwitz was the main and the surrounding had all kinds of camps. Every ten kilometer was a, a, a different camp. Strong men for a camp that does the coal mining. So at this point I was separated from my brother. I was the strong one. And that's it. I was a coal miner from 1942 'til 1944. Around October '44, I believe—either September or October—when the bombardments came a little bit more frequent, you know, than—and they da...damaged another camp site. They damaged the roofs, the gutters, you know, and all that—the other machinery. They had a big plant—that's with the uh, IG Farben Industry. Maybe you heard of them, I don't know, but IG Farben Industry they called it. And they produced from the coal—they made all kinds of fuel. Grease, fuel, medicine, what have you, out of the coal. So I was transferred out of the coal mine as a, as a skilled worker. So I was transferred out of the coal mine into that camp. That was for the first time that I saw daylight. I worked twenty-one hours a day in the coal mine. Three hours of sleep.

**For how long?**

From '42 'til '44.

**You worked twenty-one hours a day, everyday?**

I left three o'clock in the morning, it was aufstehen. We came back into that camp—it was twelve o'clock at night. It's unbelievable. That other camp—when I came to that other camp already which was—oh all kinds of peoples. I found a few from my landmen, you know, from home. And they were already old ones. They knew, you know, the ropes around there and they gave me help—a little bit extra food, this and that. Plus—now this is something to, to take note of—that anybody saw the number, they knew when I came and where I have been. That gave 'em respect, because there so few left with this number. So that didn't let me do any heavy work in the other camp that I came in. They made me foreman of a group to supervise 'em with the work, you know, like the roofing and all that. And then we got already through a little bit easier. First of all you could breathe fresh, breathe fresh air, that's for one thing. And then uh, those uh, people who uh, were on the same commando or the same camp said, "You have respect for him. He's a zib'n zibitsik—he's a seventy-seven, number seventy-seven."

**What was it about the number seventy-seven?**

That was—that means that's the year when he came. He came in 1942 and he survived because there's only three or four left. Like in that one camp that I was in, sur...survived that I know of is three, four people. In the first—in the coal mine—four people. In the other camp, only one survived from our—from this number. We, we knew by the number where the people are from. Or he is Italian or he is uh, Hungarian or he is German—where he came from. There was no name at that time. You didn't call by name. Only seventy-seven thousand, period. This—it's funny, as a youngster, I had a boyfriend—we went to cheder together.

Before the war his family left for Belgium. And he was a youngster—only eight, nine years old. Left for Belgium. Soon forget about it. We were in camp—in Auschwitz on the coal mine there. So every evening you had to be what they call an Appell—they uh, counting. You know, you have to uh, see, you know, if the same amount of people came back as they went out. Somehow the SS commander calls a name, Bruk. “Bruk?” I said, “The name is so familiar. Bruk. Belgium.” And we were in the same block—you know what a block is—a barrack—in the same barrack. He slept on one side of uh, in other words uh, uh, three—what they call it? I can’t think of the name right now. Not beds, you know, the three...

**Bunks?**

Bunks. So here on one side, you know, there was an aisle in the middle here and one side an aisle on the other side. And he was in the same barrack and I didn’t even know who he is until they called out his name. When he left there he was maybe eight or nine years old. Here we get—we got together in camp. All right. So, uh, I had another friend that left for France—family left for France when we were kids. Found him in Auschwitz. So it’s uh, the only thing I can say—I believe uh, this Thursday, Thursday is Shevouth—on Shevouth if you’ll notice that they read Akdamut, I believe they call it. That uh, this has nothing to do with the Torah—that’s something else, you know, that’s beside that. And those passage—the Glory, you know, that uh, uh, when the Jews received the Torah, you know, from the um, Harsinai and they sang, you know, uh, and danced and, uh. So on one passage says, “If the whole—if all the skies would have been parchment and all the oceans would be ink, wouldn’t be enough room to describe the glory of

God,” okay. This is the same thing. I don’t care how many books people have written and how many they’re going to write, it’s not enough. Nobody is able of describing what went on, because there’s not enough paper, not enough ink to take in every detail what happened in six years. The Holocaust—Dr. Weiss. It’s true. Every detail. But it’s only a fraction, a fraction of one percent—not even that. Take one Dr. Weiss, multiply it by six million. The same damn story. Everybody went through more, less, you know, a little different, you know, here and there. But basically they’re all the same. This is true. That’s the ghetto, that’s how it was, that’s how people lived.

**Do you ever know what happened to the rest of your family—your mother and dad?**

They’re not here, so I know what happened.

**You said that when you went in—first came to Auschwitz you, you, you went into a, a, what, what looked like a shower room.**

Yeah.

**You thought it might be the gas chamber.**

Yeah.

**Did you know about the gas chambers before?**

We, we heard about it, yes.

**How is it that you heard?**

Um, somehow, I don’t know how, but apparently that from every—we knew about the liquidation of Jews before that in 1941. That there’s a direct liquidation. That people were taken out from the Warsaw ghetto on automobiles and gassed.

How did it happen? How did we find out? Somehow, somebody survived that gas, came back.

**Did people believe them when, when, when these stories came back?**

No, because is it ha...is it possible to take a direct human being and kill 'em, innocent? A man, a child, a, a boy, a girl. Direct—put 'em in, in, in automobile and, and, and, and turn the gas on and gas 'em? Nobody believed it. That was the whole thing. There was always somebody that survived even when they were shooting 'em, you know, they told 'em to dig a grave and line up. They're shooting them. Somebody survived there from the grave and got out. He got mi...mingled up, you know, among the dead and uh, he survived. Came back and told the story.

**But nobody believed him.**

Nobody believed him, that's true. Nob...nobody believed him. I will say it myself, I didn't believe it.

**What did, what did they think he was saying this for?**

They didn't have nothing specific or detailed, you know, saying. The only thing they knew is they survived, period. Run for your life. Where, where are you going to run? There was no place where to run. We're just, just killing—like sitting ducks—shooting—no place where to run.

**So how long were you in the camps?**

From 1942 to '45. Then we transferred from Buchenwald, from uh, from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, because the Russians were behind us. So it was January, January 18, I believe was it—yes it was January 18, five o'clock in the

afternoon. We start marching from one camp. The Russians were behind us maybe a mile or two miles, you know, away. And they burned—all day long they were burning the uh, papers, documents. So—and, I don't know, God got mad at us. And the heaviest blizzard of the year came down that night. We marched from five o'clock in the afternoon to about ten o'clock next night. We finally came into a camp Gleiwitz. It was Gleiwitz One and Gleiwitz Two. We came into Gleiwitz. Hunger. We fell down dead. Tired. As a matter of fact that, whenever I think about it, I said, "How dumb can a human being be?" The snow about three feet deep. You lay down under the snow but you cover yourself up so you shouldn't freeze, but you lay on the snow. So we were there overnight and they gave each a half a loaf of bread or a piece of salami or whatever it was—meat—I believe, a piece of salami and shipped us on the train from Gleiwitz to Buchenwald. Ten days on a open boxcar. Snow, snow over your head and no place where to sit down because you were packed.

**No roof on those?**

No, open box cars. Finally about five days later or so, a little bit more room became available because people died and they took 'em out and put 'em on another open car—all dead, you know, piled up. So we had a little bit more room to sit down already. And in a way I'll say that we were lucky. It was snowing. Heavy snow. So you ate snow from somebody else's shoulder. Until we finally got to Buchenwald. Buchenwald then uh, they start shipping us around all over the places, you know, they had camps all over Germany. And I said to my friends that we were together, you know, in uh, in the previous camp. Like I said I had

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the command of I believe four, four or five—two Hungarians, two Polish boys. And those two Polish boys were hang...hanging on to me and we became friends. And they were hanging on to me and when we came into Buchenwald, I said to them, “We don’t leave from here. Here we’re going to stay. We don’t go to any other camp. Are you with me?” Say, “Yep.” Because the bombardments over Germany was quite heavy already. Buchenwald is on a hill. You could look down there on air force—you could see the bombardments—the planes, you know. I say it’s only thirty miles from down there. So everyday that we ship ’em out—we were sixty thousand in that camp when we came in. Ten days later they were shipping out six thousand people a day. You know, it’s just like if the cow doesn’t want to go into the slaughter house, you take a little hay and you, you know, tease ‘em into the slaughterhouse. The same thing was over there. If you go they will give you a half a loaf of bread or whatever it was there, to be a—I don’t know exact what—how much bread they gave you. And if a person is hungry, he will go even if he knows behind that gate, you know, might be death. But he’ll go because he’s hungry. And I said to those two youngsters, “We’re not going from here.” So what we have set up—every two hours somebody’s going to keep post so that the others can sleep. You see, if, if any activities goes on, just notify us so we can move out from that area—go somewheres else. We saved ourselves. ‘Til one day we got caught in a jam. They blocked off this area and we are in it. So I said to the two boys, “Come with me.” We went into the Scheiße room—the shithouse, you know. Shithouses was a ditch with a post on top and it was running, you know, from one camp to the other. “Come with me.” And we went



down there through that and up to the other camp. We saved us—saved ourselves this way. And that was dragged on to about April, April 10. It was already taking out only ten thousand I believe left or twelve thousand people left. Of course, there was all kinds of nationalities. There were Ukrainians and Russians and Germans and, and all that. So they decided to put all the Jews into one barrack. It was a three floors barrack—three-story ba...uh, barrack, with the intention to blow it up with us in it. We didn't know, we found out, five minutes later. As we went into that camp—apparently that the, the Russians knew about it, the Germans knew about it and they organized themselves outside. Somehow they got in touch with the outside. And we heard it's a—over the loudspeaker that everybody, we should go into safety because there's a Flieger alarm. It means uh, uh, an air raid. After that air raid—took about five minutes—American tanks came in. And those Russians and those Germans had weapon with them. And they took the SS that they were sitting around the—they dropped their weapon and we were saved at this moment. That was April 11th, 1945.

**This—describe—before we get into what happened after your liberation—describe generally the conditions of the camps, you know, the sanitary conditions, the food...**

After the liberation, or...

**No, before.**

Camps?

**Yeah.**

The sanitary conditions in the places that I was—not Auschwitz—outside Auschwitz—cannot complain about sanitary conditions, until we got to

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Buchenwald. Buchenwald was a different story. But in the camp, the ???, and the coal mine camp there that I was there, sanitary conditions were good, if I may say so. Because as soon you got back from work, you got to go and take a shower and you got soap, you got a towel and you had to change from, from work clothes, you know, to camp clothes. So sanitary was good. I cannot say there wasn't. Also they had medical facilities—whatever the facility was available to them.

Bandages was toilet paper—that was the bandages. But in general, as cleanliness—clean, this was the only camp that I been at that you could say, you know, it's clean, it's clean. Of course, we had to do it ourselves. Because we never had a free day or a free hour or after a meal or. You came from work, you have to go take a shower, and after you took the shower you had to run in and get your uh, dish of soup—whatever it was there, a piece of bread and a piece of butter. We had a, uh, we were considered as a hard workers, so we had double ration. Instead of a third, we had a half loaf of bread, you know, per day. That's what you got in the morning. And uh, and a dish of coffee, which was artificial coffee made—ersatz coffee. In the morning and a piece of bread and this is what you went to work. It was three o'clock in the morning. Then you came back it was twelve o'clock at night. So sanitary conditions I wouldn't say that—I didn't have nothing to complain about. And uh, if you would only have the time to clean yourself, wash yourself, you know, and, and, and, and, and soap yourself.

Everything was in a hurry—rush, rush, rush, rush, because there wasn't enough time. And you came back eleven thirty or eleven o'clock, all you wanted

to get to bed as soon as you can. Rest up a little bit. Especially me—I, I had an accident in the coal mine and I had a damaged leg and it swell up.

**What kind of accident?**

In the coal mines always accidents. Two trains caught together and I was between it.

**Did you...**

Those are the little trains, you know, that they carry coals, you know, it is not the big box cars.

**Did you get some kind of medical attention?**

Yes, yes. But you couldn't have too much medical attention, because if it takes up too much time—there's no field orders there. You can't work—we used to call it, you go on the frying pan if you can't work. But there was one doctor—a Hungarian there. He took care of the surgery without anesthetic. And one night I came back to the camp and I said, "Doctor, I just cannot make it. I cannot walk." This was two kilometers to work—to walk from camp to work, plus maybe another two or three kilometers underground, you know, to go to your place where you have to work. And I said, "I don't care if they send me to the frying pan or not, this is it." So what he did—that he uh, he uh, took me in for two days, let me rest up, and sent me back to work for a day or two. Took me in another two days, sent me back to work. Like I said, I had mazel, nothing else. No ???.

There's no such a thing being smart—outsmarted them. No. I had mazel. Plus I was stronger, ambitious, and the will to live it's beyond anybody's imagination. I don't think that the, that the average person will read about it or listen to the tape

or see on television can ever understand what hunger means, what the will to live—it's, it's, it's a extra strength that's—it's beyond human imagination. Can you imagine that I could lift a ton, ton of coal, you know the little wagons, the li...they call it lorry. A lorry used to be a, a ton of coal—to lift a ton, ton of coal to put it back on, on, on the rails because it popped out? I cannot believe it myself.

**You mean it fell over, you lifted it up?**

Yeah, when it derailed.

**Right.**

I had to put it back on the rail.

**You lifted it up to put it back on the rail?**

Well, with skill. You know, you don't lift the whole thing...

**I understand.**

...you lift one hand, you know.

**Right.**

All right. A little guy like me that weighed only a hundred ten pounds—a hundred fifteen pounds. This is something else. And hunger. Would you believe that you can feed yourself on dandelions? Whenever I killed a dandelions out there I'll never forget this. I'll never forget that. After the war I said to my friend, "You know something, let's go out there where we used to march by and see if the dandelions taste as good as they used to taste a month or two months ago." My God, no. They didn't. But at that time, the dandelions were just as sweet as a, a chocolate éclair, if you could only find it. My wish was all these years—and I lived through that—I said if I have to die, I want to die one hour after the war to

know the outcome and be able to sit down and have a loaf of bread, bread in front of me and say, "I'm not hungry. I have that, thank God."

**What did you do after you were liberated?**

I lived in Germany—in Stuttgart for four years, until I got—well, like, like a camp, you know, a displaced persons camp in Stuttgart.

**What were you doing while you were there?**

I wasn't doing anything. I just wasn't doing a darn thing. I was the first year—took about a year—I was out of my mind. Depressed. Especially when somebody found a brother or some relative that they were united again. I was so depressed it wasn't even funny. But I got myself out of it. I start lift up my head again, start all over again. Start all over again—make plans where will you go. What is going to be your future. Where you go from here. What do you do. You're not going to sit in the camp all your life. Wait for the ration—to go for the rationing in the morning, go to the mess halls, you know, for dinner, go back and read or listen to the radio or go somewheres. One night I sat down and I knew there's an address in New York, United Service for New Americans. I sat down and I wrote it in Yiddish...

[interruption in interview]

**In Yiddish?**

Yeah, I sat down and wrote a little letter and I uh, I found it in the—the address I found in uh, *New York Times*. They were forcing it every week, you know, relatives that looking for somebody. So I found the address where I could write to United Service to New Americans. I sat down and wrote. I, I knew from my uncle

that Americans don't like to read long letters—long mail, don't make long ???, you know. Don't tell too long stories. I sat down and a small little letter, told them the whole story condensed. Where I had been, where I am. And besides all these atrocities and agonies I went through, I'm physical...able—physically able to work, and I would appreciate if they would help any way they can to build a future for me. Didn't take long, I got an answer. Not just an answer, I got called to the, to the office in Stuttgart. Before even I got the letter. “Did you write so-and-so and so-and-so?” I said, “I did.” “Don't you know we have an office here that you should come in?” I said, “Yes, I was here, but you can't get in—I can't get in.” Couldn't. Nobody let you in.

**What office was this?**

It was the UNRRA. United Refugee Organization of America, or something like that. Okay, so she tells me what happens and “We'll be in touch with you.” That was in '48—1948. It didn't take long. I was accepted. I went through the whole damn shebang. I was already packed to leave, I was just waiting for the, the date—ready to leave. I get a letter or get called down there—I believe I was called in person—that all that what was previously accepted has been canceled. A new law is now in effect in the United States that you have to go by number now. Well, lucky me that Truman, Truman—President Truman—he should I believe a hundred and ten thousand new immigrants in the displaced persons camp and I got a number from him. Took a whole year. Finally made it in 1949. So April 5, 1949 I arrived at the shores of New Orleans. That's the Nation...Nashville, Tennessee.

**Why Nashville?**

The Jewish community center was sponsoring “X” number of refugees. I was the first one there. I had a good reception. I had a good reception there from the Jewish community. Very fine people. Terrific people. Very friendly, very hospitable. That if they could help in any way, they did. But I had to leave Nashville. I just couldn’t stand the signs that says “For Colored” or “Colored” on the busses “For Colored to the rear.” Or uh, the wa...water pumps and said for “White” and “For Colored.” I said, “Damn it, I just got out of that shit in Europe.” ‘For Juden Verboten,’ here I came into the same shit house.” I got in a fight with a—on the, on the street car there. Because I’m not supposed to sit in the rear, I’m supposed to sit in the front. The rear is for the Blacks. The truck driver—the bus driver stopped the bus and he ordered me to go up in front. I said, “Why?” He said, “Because you are White and these are Black.” I said, “It don’t make any different to me, they’re human, just like I am.” We got in a little fight. I came back in—back home to the lady that I live there uh, a Romanian from Romania. She says to me, “Mr. Simon, you move up North because there’s no, no place for you in the South because you’re going to get killed.” That’s how I came to Detroit.

**Did you know anybody in Detroit?**

I had a couple friends that we were in camp together. We were in camp together and uh, in displaced person camp together, not in the other camps. We were, we were in the same camps—not together. So uh, and I wrote ‘em about it. So they told, “Come down here. The, the—here is entirely different.” So I said, “I just

cannot drop and go. First of all I don't have any money. Where will I go without money?" So I, I said, "I'll tell you what, I'll take a vacation between Christmas and New Years under this disguise, you know, I'm not going to spill, you know, before I got something else." So I uh, took vacation between Christmas and New Year, came down here and never went back. I came back for my stuff and my old lady said, "I bet you, you got a job there and you'll never come back." Sure enough. Now I'm here.

**What was your uh, feelings, uh, your first initial feelings towards the United States?**

Not good, not good. I uh, like I said, I, I got s...slapped in the face by coming into Nashville. If I would have come into New York, Detroit uh, Cleveland, you know, Chicago, it would be a different story. But if you come in to New Orleans and you see what's going on there, that this, this is for blacks—the segregation, okay, the same thing that—ghetto! I probably coined the word ghetto here.

**Well, how is it that you came to New Orleans? Everybody else came through New York.**

Because I—there was no uh, we came with the, with the military transport ships. And there was a ship going in this—in...into this port or whatever it is there. So I was on it. For fourteen days, fourteen days on the, on the, on the war ship. And it's no fun in a, in a, in a transport ship, let me tell you so. No fun. It's a, it's a chapter by itself. It's a chapter by itself.

**Do you talk about your experiences—like you did tonight—do you talk about these very often?**



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Uh, once in awhile, my son is uh, asked me questions. And the same thing he asked, “Dad why don’t you write it down? Why don’t you write it down? You could have a book, you know, thousands and thousands of pages.” I don’t have the skill. It’s not just you write or—you have to have a skill of putting down an essay, how to bring things together. I, I was telling the story here, its jump from one place to the other, from one place to the other. There’s a billion items between from 1939 to 1940, from 1940 to 1941, from ’41 to ’42. And every day has a story by itself. Every day is a story by itself. How can you write it when we talk about it? You know, we have uh, on the lighter side, you know. A, a Jew always have, uh, Sholem Aleichem used to say a “Guelechter ???”—there’s no translation for it. I don’t know how to explain it to you what, what it means. But you laugh and you cry. Okay, you laugh on the outside, you cry on the inside. So we had uh, let’s see you laugh, you know. I was working in Buna with the, with the IG uh, Farben industry. And as a roofer, after the bombardment—they bombarded the kitchen that supplied, you know, lunches for the, for the entire plant. So we had to go repair the roof. So we left a hole in that roof and we took our time to fix it. We got potatoes and salami and meat out of that roof—out of the warehouse there. So there’s a lighter side to the story, right. So one night we have to go back. I—like I said, it’s on the lighter side of the story. So, so I had a pail, a pail filled up with potatoes. You cannot take it to the camp, so we left it on the roof, you know, hidden—covered up with something. The next building which was two or three stories higher, another uh, refugee or, or uh, prisoner, you know, saw what I’m doing or what we are doing. And we took off, we went away. They

came down and took the pail. I found out later that, that afterwards, that the same guy—we were good friends in, in, in displaced person camp in, in Stuttgart. He said, “You know, I did it,” he said. He said, “I did it.” See, we uh, we had opportunity, when we had potatoes for example. As a roofer, we made fire to warm up the tar in big drums, you know. That’s how I heated it up, you know, in order to be able to spread it on the roof. So we had another drum with water in it. We made another fire, we boiled the potatoes. Trick of survival. You don’t have to be a genius, but it is good. It’s a good experience if you should ever get lost in an isl...on an island somewheres how to survive—how to heal yourself when you get cut. You have no Band-Aid or, or things that you wouldn’t think of. You were thinking you went through medical school in order to take care of it, but you did.

**Do you suffer from any physical illness as a result of your experiences?**

No. Not until the last few months. They’re telling me I had a cardiac arrest. It’s a good thing I got the cardiac arrest after I retired. It didn’t happen to me before I retired. But I didn’t. Took a test and uh, there wasn’t that cardiac arrest. It just had uh, hardening of the arteries and I have to be careful. I don’t get any pension from the Germans because I didn’t want to prove anything for me. I have no reason to claim anything. And I didn’t want to press on it too much either...

**Why?**

...because my pride is more than their pension, whatever the amount is. I don’t want anything.

**Any psychological disabilities?**

If I would have that, I would have gotten a pension.

**Do you think about it a lot?**

No.

**Do you ever think of going back to Poland to your home? Even after you were liberated you never wanted to go back?**

After I got out of Buchenwald went to the west, because Buchenwald was taken over—Roosevelt died a week later I believe. So—and then the Russians came in, they start straighten out the line, you know. So Russia took East Europe, East Germany, and so we hopped on a, on a train that was delivering coal, you know, from the east to the west. I hopped on a train and I went west—went to Frankfurt. I went away from to the Russians. And as soon as I got out of there, I said, “My foot will never step into the—on Polish soil ever.” I might go back to Germany, to Stuttgart, to Frankfurt, you know, to the other places, but I’ll never go back to Poland.

**And to see your home or if anybody was there?**

Not my home, not my nothing. I have nothing to see there except heartache. I was in Israel and uh, I have a friend of mine that she left for Israel—her family left for Israel in 1934. And uh, when we got together for Pesach, she was telling me that she uh, they took a, a trip, you know, to Europe. So while they were in Germany, they flew over to Poland. So they went into the shtetl. She said, “You’re better off not to go.” And she left before the war—two years before. I should go back to see what happened after the war?

**What was she talking about specifically?**

The entire—well that was even when we were there. Everything was—whatever it was Jewish was torn apart. The shul, the bet ha midrash, all the Jewish institutions that used to be were just torn when we were there. They couldn't burn it because it was too condensed. You know, it would create a fire of the entire city. So what they decided to do is tear it apart. And they tore it apart. Even that old cemetery that wasn't in used, I believe, for the last hundred or two hundred years. But it was there, because it was there with, with monuments—with, with that you could still read, you know, the people—that Tsadik so and so, Tsadik so and so, you know, who's it so and so. It was just leveled off. So what you had to go to see? I would go and see the place that I went to cheder or go to see where the place I went to shul or, or, or, or, or to the Yeshiva or, or, or the other places where you used to go dancing or you used to go, you know, you, you just playing baseball or, or soccer or, or something? It's not there. What are you going to go see? You're better off, in my opinion. I'm better off if I think back to live with the memory than see what, what became of it. This, this is my opinion.

**Do you have nightmares?**

Huh?

**Do you have nightmares?**

I wouldn't say no. I cope with it.

**Does the past interfere at all with your life today?**

No, I don't let it. I—from way back, I'm a strong-minded man from way, way back when I was a youngster. They call it stubborn, okay. I'm a stubborn man. I have a different word for it. Determined. I am determined. I was determined to

come to the United States, because when the war ended, I was thirty years old. Well, where will I start anything if not in the United States? At least I, with my skill, I'm secured of a job. I wouldn't have to stand in line in a soup kitchen. And that was true, thank God. From the day I came to last year, I never been out of work. I built up a life for myself.

**What kind of work do you do here?**

I'm the same in sheet metal.

**Mm-hm.**

I was doing heating and air conditioning. Where else in the world can a man—I know, because I've been these places—can a man come in with not a penny in his pocket and to be frank and honest about it, not even a decent pair of pants on his tuckus—to come to that and be able to retire after thirty one years, being in a country. Where else? Can anybody do it Germany? Can they do it in, in England? Even so, you know, England's supposed to be a democracy. Can you do it in France?

**Have you become a citizen?**

Oh yeah, a long time ago. A long time ago. I was in the country, I believe, four years. That's what the requirements was. Four years and I got my citizenship here. Even so, even so I don't care to go to elect a president because I was very much disappointed in 1956. When damn Eisenhower ordered the Israelis, the British and, and, and the French out of the Suez area—I don't know if you remember that, that he ordered them out of there. We wouldn't have that mess that we—in the Middle East that we have now if their presence would have been there. He

ordered them. I said, “Oh, heck with it.” There go—all go for their own glory, not for the people. Except Roosevelt, maybe. I don’t—didn’t know him. But as much as I read about him or heard about him—that he was for the people—for the American people. Maybe not a hundred percent, because he shouldn’t have let the ship go back to Germany. Not a hundred percent, okay, he’ll—he got his lesson. However, he provided a decent life. He cared about the poor, he cared about the unemployed, he cared about the—here we got a president that cares about prayer in school but he doesn’t care about nine million unemployed—what to do about it. The same thing with Milliken. He doesn’t care how from years back that Michigan has gone down and down and down and down. Didn’t care about it, didn’t even look into how to get industry into the state or make the industry that’s in here to stay, not to leave. But taxes—he has to keep up a government, so give me taxes, give me taxes. Where from? This kind of people am I going to elect?

**Mr. Kalmas, thank you. It was an excellent interview.**

I enjoyed it.

**When I called you, you said that you’re not experienced, you’re not a celebrity. I think you did very well and I appreciate it.**

Well, I appreciate it. Compliments. I’m a self-made man and I’m proud of it.

**I can understand why.**

I have...I haven’t seen a illiterate Jew and I’ve been around. And I met people under all kinds of circumstances, and I know their lives, and—but they’re not illiterate. He might not be as good in English as somebody else. But he’s good. I ran into a landsmen in Philadelphia. Poor, poor—what we would call here below

poverty level, okay. Here in the United States he's an automobile dealer. And I thought to myself, "Where else in the United States?" And also a self-made man, also a self-made man. Because people from our age didn't have the opportunity or the chance or the place or the country or the people to, to turn out what they can give from themselves, you know, to others. They come to the United States, they are blecher like me, you know, at home we call it a blecher, a tinsmith. A blecher like me, who—there was the kitchen, there was the shop, there was the kitchen, there was the shop. To come to the United States and have a little factory? Making that work and, and, and machinery. Where else? United States. At one point I made the right decision.

**By the way, I wanted to ask you, I never asked you how you met your wife.**

My wife?

**Yes.**

Oh, I met her here in uh, in uh, Detroit. She's American born. She was born in Mount Clemens.

**And you have one son that's a doctor.**

And then my—the—my daughter is in college. She is uh, graduating next June. So my son is in, uh, in uh, residence in uh, in Topeka, Kansas. And uh, I'm proud of him, both of them. And I'm proud of myself. I accomplished a lot. I suffered a lot. It was worth it.