YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Holocaust

Personal Experiences

O. H. 436

ROBERT CLARY

Interviewed

by

Hugh Earnhart

on

May 21, 1986

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT CLARY

INTERVIEWER: Hugh Earnhart

SUBJECT: Holocaust, Concentration Camps, Nazis, Hitler, SS, Entertaining in the United States

DATE: May 21, 1986

E: This is an Oral History interview by Hugh Earnhart with Mr. Robert Clary for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Holocaust. The date is May 21, 1986.

Mr. Clary, tell us something if you can about your family, the neighborhood you grew up in, your brothers and sisters.

C: My father was born in Poland and so was my mother. He was a very religious Jew. His first wife died after giving birth to their sixth child. He married my mother who was fifteen years younger than he was. He had eight children with my mother. I'm the last and fourteenth child.

Before World War I my father went to Argentina thinking maybe he could make a living there because life in Poland was just terrible. He did not and went right back to Poland.

In 1921 he went to Paris, France and stayed there for two years before sending for my mother and the rest of the family. Most of my sisters and brothers and half brothers were born in Poland. I have a sister called Madeleine who is a year and a half older than I am. She and I were the only ones who were born in France.

The things I remember from my childhood were pleasant. My father worked as a tailor. Even though we were poor we never starved. The reason we never starved was because there was always the Rothchild Foundation which would take care of us. They would give us coupons to buy milk and clothes. My father worked very hard. I was very well dressed because he was a tailor.

Because my parents were religious, I went to a school for Jewish children until I was twelve years old. It was a school that was taught by french professors and we were taught French, not Hebrew or Yiddish. We did not go to school on Saturdays. The other kids in Paris went to school from Monday to Wednesday and then from Friday to Saturday. We went to school from Monday to Friday. We had the Jewish holidays off, but also the Christian holidays. I liked that a lot.

I remember my childhood with great fondness. I lived in an apartment house in a very beautiful section of Paris called Ile Saint Louis. That apartment house was built by a Jewish widow Madame Halphen who was an aunt of the Rothchilds. She built that apartment house, which is seven stories high, mostly for Jewish families who could not afford to pay rent with lots of children. She gave us three, small rooms. When I was a child it looked gigantic. It had a kitchen and a toilet, not a bathroom, a toilet. The minimum was there. I remember as a child being washed in the sink in the kitchen. Most of the apartments were occupied by Jewish families. Most of them were foreign Jews who never became French citizens. The house was filled with children. Madame Halphen was remarkable. She hired some social workers to take care of us children when we came back from school, from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. These ladies were remarkable. They taught us about the Bible and read us stories. There was a great warmth all around. That's what I had all through my childhood. I really did not know what a harsh world it was. I was aware of anti-Semitism; I was aware that I was a Jew and not a Christian or a Catholic or Protestant. But, I had a very good life.

I was also a very good student. I've always loved being in show business. I started professionally when I was twelve years old. That was more than one way thrilling for me. Not only was I making money doing something I liked, but I was also the envy of my peers.

E: What types of games did you play when you came home from school?

C: We would play the games that children all over the world play: Cops and robbers, marbles. I always loved going to the movies. My parents would somehow scrape money and give my sisters and I money to go to see a movie on Saturday. I was enthralled by the silver screen. I wanted to be a part of it. When I saw American movies and the great stars, the great musical stars of the 1920's and 1930's, I envied them. I would very often come back from a movie and show my mother and father how Fred Astaire danced. Can you see a ten year old little kid showing off what he saw? Since I can remember,

that is always what I wanted to do. I never wanted to do anything else but entertain people. By showing what I can do and having the love and applause, made me want to do it even more.

E: The ladies who looked after you when you came home from school . . .

C: They were hired by the owner of the apartment house. I don't think that they did anything else; they were social workers. They were all Zionists; they all went to Palestine in the late 1930's. They believed that Palestine was a Jewish land and that's where they should go. As a matter of fact, one of them, Lou Kaddar, became quite known in Isreal. She became Golda Meir's private secretary and companion. I remember her with great fondness when I was a child. She was absolutely marvelous. They all knew how to take care of us. They did everything with love. There was never any hate. They were never scolding people.

E: Was this because they were older that they knew about the anti-Semitic feelings that were in and about Paris at the time, and this was a way of shelter?

C: I really can't tell if that's why they did it. I think these ladies were dedicated ladies who wanted to help young children from poor parents to show them a different kind of life, that there are good things in life, that there is warmth and love, though we had that from our parents.

Until I was twelve years old I did not encounter anti-Semitism because I went to a school where all the children were Jewish. None of the teachers were anti-Semitic though they were not Jewish. They were very, very nice people. All the children had religious parents who believed Saturday was the day of rest. We did not encounter anti-Semitism because, in a way we were in a cocoon; we were protected. When I graduated from that school, I went into another world. Suddenly I was in a junior high school where there were very few Jews. Once a kid called me a dirty kike. I did not understand it. At another time I did hit a kid who called me that. I don't know why he was calling me a dirty kike; I was as dirty as he was. I washed as often as he did, probably only once a week.

In our neighborhood there were some Italian kids across the street who just picked on us. The older kids in our apartment house would fight them. It was the Italians against the Jews. Without really being involved in it, I saw the rise of anti-Semitism in the world, especially in Germany. I felt it. When people started to talk about war in the late 1930's, it scared me because as a child; I didn't want to die. I didn't want to be killed. To me, war meant exactly that.

I saw movies where people at wars got killed. As long as it was play thing, it was fine to be in a war and be killed, but not in reality. I really did not want to be killed when I was ten years old.

E: You obviously were very close to your parents. In the late 1930's, sitting around the table after a meal, your parents obviously knew of the stories being told about things that were happening in Germany. Did they even discuss it?

C: No, not in front of us. The only example I can give you is, one evening my parents were listening on the radio to one of Hitler's speeches, screaming as he was speaking. I walked out of the room. First of all, I did not understand German. I barely understood Yiddish because my father talked Yiddish to us and we answered in French. I barely understood that and did not understand German and I really didn't care what this man was screaming about. I wasn't even aware when Crystal Night happened in 1938. I was very happy to be with my peers and enjoy life as a child. In a way, I'm very grateful. I'm grateful that my parents did not warn me, did not scare me. I would not have enjoyed the childhood that I had. That would have been another worry, and they did not want to worry us. I think when you're ten years old you don't want to hear that.

E: You never get a chance to be a child.

C: I lost a great part of my teens, from sixteen to nineteen, which is an important portion of your life, when you can really explore life and know what you want to do. That was cut out from me.

E: If you could pick out one thing in your childhood that stood out more than anything else, what would that be?

C: Being in show business, being a professional in show business. That's what I thrived on. I don't care if it was because I wanted to be recognized or be different. To me, to go and perform on a stage and put on makeup and be somebody else and sing for an audience that was receptive, that was just thrilling. That really stands out.

E: Where did you get your training?

C: I had no training; it was something I did automatically. That is always what I wanted to do.

E: You could tap dance because you did it one day?

C: Yes. I saw it on the screen and just did it. I'm not saying it was good, but I did it. I sang, I always sang, and I always pretended I was somebody else, pretending I wsa

an actor doing all kinds of roles.

E: What type of pay did you get for this?

C: I really don't remember how much it was. It wasn't a big salary, but a salary nonetheless which I would give to my parents.

I did mostly radio shows for children on Thursdays when children did not go to school. In the afternoon the radio programs were geared for children. I also did many musicals for children, like Cinderella. I would work in a movie house where they would show shorts, then I would do three songs then they would have the main movie. It was fun; it really was fun. I enjoyed it tremendously.

E: How did a young kid with a lot of ambition, and certainly some talent get employment? There had to be people unemployed in Paris and you walk in and you're entertaining on radio for Thursday afternoons.

C: I didn't make it my problem. When I was a child I did not analyze things. I did not think about it. It was like it was due to me. I'm putting it in a very blunt, naive way, but that's the way I felt. In my youth, I really did not analyze things. I was not an intellectual, not that I am one now.

E: How did you get the job?

C: I auditioned for it. It was an amateur contest for children.

E: Like the Ted Mack and that kind of thing?

C: Something like this, yes. The contest would happen in a big theater with a large audience. There were prizes to be won. I did not win the first prize; I came in second as a matter of fact. It's funny, because when I auditioned, I did imitations of a French singing stars. The people who auditioned me thought I was very gutsy, but they didn't think it would work and asked me to do something else. At that time at school we were taught by a music teacher an aria from an opera, "Il Etait Un Roi De Thule," and that's what I sang. I was twelve years old and I sang an aria from a French opera. As I said, I did not win. A little girl with a tremendous voice won. But these people were so impressed by what I showed them that they hired me for a radio show that was on every Thursday afternoon. I sang with a group of four other children and there were sketches. That is what I did.

E: I'm sure when you came home and told your parents guess what, I came in second but I got a job . . . What did your mother and dad think about this?

C: My father was fifty-six years old when I was born. He had fourteen children. By the fourteenth he did not have the patience that he should have with a young baby that he had with his first child. I understand now, but at that time I did not understand. I think I was privileged that once in a great, great while he would put me on his knee and play with me. He was the first one who took me to a theater to see an operetta. He did not take any of my sisters, he took me, because he knew I liked it. We would go to the last balcony, the last seat, and watch this fantasy land. I loved that, yes, he did love me. He was proud of me because I was doing quite well at school; I was a very good pupil. In France, when you graduate each year the pupil who is the best student will get a big book with gold leaves on the cover. It was a huge red book. I had won that book very often. He would show the book with such pride when he would visit the rest of the family. I was very good at drawing and my father would take my drawings and show them to the rest of the family. That was his way of showing that he really was proud of me. He really never did it in front of me; he never boosted my ego or held me and kissed me and said, "That's great what you did." He never did that except once in a great while when he was in a good mood or not tired. That wasn't too often.

There was a generation gap. My mother was the complete opposite. She was the warmest. She was not a saint, but she was close to it. I remember my mother with great fondness. She was always the first one to get up and see that everybody was having that piece of bread and butter and half coffee, half milk before they went to school. She helped my father sew pants; she was remarkable, cooking, washing laundry once a week. All day long she would go on a barge on the river Seine and wash.

When I was a child, three sisters and myself who were not married lived in that apartment house with my father and mother. Out of the eight real sisters and brothers, one boy died when he was very young so I never knew him.

E: When France fell in 1940 you were how old then?

C: I was born in 1926; I was fourteen years old.

E: Do you recall the sudden blitzkrieg of overrunning France in six weeks?

C: I was on the Normandy coast that summer of 1939, performing in a casino in Cabourg. The war started in September before I was supposed to go back to Paris after the season was over. I stayed in Cabourg. My mother and father and some of my sisters joined me there. We stayed there until Paris was

occupied, which was in 1940. Then the Germans occupied most of France, so we went back to Paris. I did not see the German army entering Paris. Very often, before the German army's victory, we would have air raids with the sirens screaming when the German planes were flying over on a bombing mission. It was absolutely frightening. At the beginning of the occupation we Jews did not have rules yet; the rules started in the beginning of 1941. We had kind of a reprieve in 1940. I still went to school, to an art school. In 1940 I just didn't want to go to a regular school; it bored me. Somehow one of my sisters got some money and sent me to an art school where I studied art and posters and advertising. I loved that.

E: Did it ever cross the mind of a fourteen year old who certainly had heard stories of atrocities that were coming out . . . you hadn't?

C: I did not. I'm trying to think very deeply if I did hear atrocities. I really did not.

E: Did you ever think about just getting the hell out?

C: No.

E: Between 1940 and 1941 when they set the rules in place . . .

C: I never thought of it. If grownups thought about it you needed money to be able to go out. That's probably the reason why my parents stayed where they were. They had no money; they had nobody they knew in America to go there.

E: What about just moving to Southern France with Vichy?

C: They couldn't do it, not when you had a family and you had no money and you had no work. Most Jews stayed where they were. I am certain now, even though when I was a young child I wasn't aware of it, that my parents were aware of what was happening. My sister Nicky, who is three years older than I am, was not a French citizen. She was about six months old when she arrived in France and never became a citizen. On July 16, 1942, they rounded up Polish Jews in many sections of Paris, very early in the morning. My sister was a Polish Jew and she was supposed to be arrested that morning. She used to work in a doctor's office and the doctor knew that. He was not Jewish. He said, "You stay here tonight and you better tell your sister Helene to come and join you. This way if you're not there tomorrow morning, they won't be able to arrest you." They did not arrest my parents because my sister Madeleine and I were Fench citizens and we were minors. At that time, I don't know why, they did not arrest parents who had children who were French citizens. That evening my sister Helene did arrive home too late, just before the

curfew. My mother did not want to let her go to join Nicky. The next morning, July 16, the policemen came and arrested the Polish Jews in our apartment house, banged on our door and asked for my sister Nicky. My mother said, "I don't know where she is."

E: They asked by name?

C: Yes. They had lists of people who would be arrested that day.

E: Who compiled these lists?

C: I'm not sure. I would guess by the French police. It was ordered by the Nazis, the Germans. You see, we were registered at the police station in 1941. They knew who was French and who was not French, who was Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, who lived where, how old they were, everything. French authorities had orders, probably by the Germans, to arrest the Polish Jews on July 16. They came before the curfew was lifted, before 8:00 a.m. From 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. we could go on the streets, and that's it. From 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. we were not allowed to be seen on the street, otherwise we would be arrested. My sister Helene was at the apartment and she was arrested. That's how my sister Nicky escaped arrestation and deportation. Somehow my parents did scrape some money and got her some false ID papers. She fled to free France. She had to pay a farmer to go over to the border to go to free France. Eventually she joined the underground and that's how she was saved. My parents knew what was happening. My father read the Yiddish newspaper sohe knew what was happening. Again, he never burdened us children with those things. He thought it wasn't our problem. We never asked questions. In a small way I knew what was happening because I saw roundups. I remember during the summer of 1941 I was staying at one of my half sister's apartments in another section of Paris. One morning when I was there in that section of Paris they arrested only Jewish men, not women. They came to arrest her husband and two of her sons who were already in their late teens. I will never forget that. That was the first time I saw people getting arrested and only getting ten minutes to get ready and to be put in buses. I was frightened. I was not arrested because I wasn't on the list. They only arrested the people on the list at that time.

E: When they arrested someone what did this mean? A person can be arrested in the United States and you can take him down and he is fingerprinted and charged. What happened there?

C: It means people who were arrested sometimes spent the night or the day in the police station, then sent to camp outside of Paris called Drancy--that was a transit camp--or to different other camps in France. The deportation to Germany and Poland started in 1942. The ones who were arrested in 1941 were sent

to camps outside of Paris.

E: They worked?

C: No, they did not work. They just stayed there. That was the end of their freedom. Once the deportation started, we did not know where they were going. It's quite true that until the last second the people were deported from western countries; that means Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Spain, Italy. They did not know that they were going to extermination camps and gas chambers. The only ones who did know from the beginning were the Poles who were arrested in 1940, 1941. They were sent to extermination camps in Treblinka, Chelmno, Sobibor. Those were extermination camps and when they were on those trains they knew that they were going to the extermination camps and they were going to be killed. First they were sent to shooting pits. When that was too messy, they had vans with red crosses on top. The exhaust pipe would go in inside the van and that's how they would be killed. They knew that. When they built Auschwitz-Birkenan, that infamous concentration camp, that's where they sent most western Jews. They were Jews who were designated to send their brother Jews into the gas chambers and the oven, they were called Sonderkommandos. These people were not allowed to tell anybody where they were going. They told them they were going to get a shower with water because after traveling for three days they were filthy and hungry and thirsty. They said they were going to give them a shower, get dressed, and then they were going to give them something to eat. They told them they were going to work there and not to worry. That was the tactic. They did not want to tell them they were going to their death.

As a matter of fact, when I traveled the first day in a cattle train when being deported, my mother asked me to write a letter to my brother Jacques who was still in Paris. In the letter I said, "We are traveling east and we hope to join some of the sisters who were deported before us in Metz." Metz is a city in Alsace Lorraine. "We hope to join them in a resettlement camp." That's how much my parents knew. Obviously, nobody knew until the last second that they were sent to their death. In the documentary called "Shoah", the Producer-Director, Claude Lanzmann, is interviewing Sonderkommandos who survived. They told him that they were not supposed to say anything.

E: In the period from 1940 until they started to put the restrictions on Paris, the Nazi restrictions, what was life like?

C: For me it was shocking. Suddenly I realized that I was different, that I was not like somebody else. I was not like my friends I went to school with. Suddenly I had to wear a yellow Star of David. I had curfews. I could not be in the arts anymore or perform. That was a shocking and frightening

revelation. Why was I different? I didn't feel different. What had I done in my life, nothing.

E: You still breathe oxygen like anybody else.

C: Not only that, but I never hurt a fly. Maybe I did hurt a fly once . . . why was I different? Why was I spit on? The first day I wore the yellow Star of David on my coat, I had to go to that art school. I was afraid. I was wondering how they were going to treat me. Now they will know that I'm Jewish. Are they going to ignore me or spit on me? Well, they didn't. It was a small private school and my friends were marvelous.

E: I know Nazi's ordered you to wear it, but you put it on, you walked down the street. When you went through the door could you take it off?

C: Some did. Some took it off if they walked on the streets during curfew. If you looked like what their conception of a Jew looks like, they may ask for your papers where a big "J" was stamped on it. They could ask men to pull down their pants. We Jews were circumcised. None of the French people who were nonJews were circumcised at that time; that's one way they can see that you're not Jewish. I never took off my star; I just obeyed that law. My mother said, "You're going to wear your Star of David and that's it." Whatever they told me to do, I would do it, even if it was reluctantly. Some people did take it off, but not too many. We were scared. People ask me, "How come you did not rebel?" Some did, but most of us did not because we did not know what was going to happen to us.

E: Students ask me this every once in a while in relation to my history of the south. Why didn't four million slaves just walk off the plantation? Where were they going to go? Were they just going to get themselves an AAA map and go to Ohio? What would you do?

C: They probably wouldn't let them go to Ohio to start with.

E: There was no opportunity to do that. You could storm that barbed wire fence, that electric fence, and the first ten people get fried. They would probably knock it down. The rest of you might be able to get over.

C: What about the guard towers with all those machine guns? The machine guns would kill the rest. There have been some attempts and some of them have been successful. One is an extermination camp in Poland called Sobibor. They did that exactly, what you're saying. Some people did save their lives this way. Sobibor was an extermination camp and the ones who were working there, planned to escape and kill as many guards

as they could. They escaped from the camp; some survived and many didn't. Treblinka is another example. Even in Auschwitz in later years because the allies did not want to bomb them, the crematoria. The Jews did bomb some crematoria. They were greatly punished; many were hanged, many of the ones who did not help them. The greatest example to me of rebellion was the Warsaw ghetto. Only a handful of Jews kept tanks and armies at a distance for days with just a few Molotov cocktails and a few pistols. That is remarkable.

E: The day they came to round you up and your family, can you remember how that day began and how it ended?

C: It was chaos the moment they knocked on those doors. By that time in our apartment house, there were Polish Jews who were already sent away; that included my sister Helene. The rest of the people that stayed in the apartment were mostly Jews who were French citizens or older people who were not taken away on that infamous July 16th day.

E: What was magic about morning?

C: Nothing! Only they would arrest people before they went to work. You would hear people tell everyone his own solution about this terrible problem. Some said, "Where are we going to go? Are they going to arrest us? Are they going to take us to a camp? Maybe it will be better than the life we have now. We have a terrible life now; we have restrictions. We can work for the government. We cannot go to the movies. We have to travel in special compartments in the subway. We have so many restrictions that maybe it would be better if we all resettled someplace else." That's what they did in another country; in Poland they put them in ghettos. They did not put us all in ghettos, but they arrested people by sections of Paris and put them in camps. In our particular situation, the way we were arrested, I've heard after the war that an anti-Semite who lived in that section of Paris went to the police station and said, "There are still some Jews in that apartment house. Isn't it about time you get rid of them?" That's exactly what they did that night. It was on September 23, 1942, and they came around 10:00 p.m. It was a complete surprise to all of us. We did not expect anything because they never used to have roundups after curfew. They gave us ten mintues to get some belongings and arrested the whole apartment house with a few exceptions. There were some ladies who were very, very sick; they let them go. One of the exception was my sister Madeleine. My mother had a key of the toilet two floors above us and she told her to go and hide there, she did and escaped. The policemen were all over the place. It's a miracle that she escaped. She went and stayed in that toilet being very quiet and hoping that they wouldn't knock the door down. She told me there were two French policemen in front of her toilet door and she heard one say,

"We haven't gone through that door yet." The other one said, "Let's go, we don't have the time." I remember going twice upstairs, evading the policemen to give my sister some clothes and some money, to stay put, then go to my brother Jacques the next day. I did not want to stay with my sister even though my mother urged me to stay with her. To me my mother was security not my sister Madeleine who was a year and a half older than me. Eventually my sister Madeleine went to my brother Jacques the next morning and stayed with him. She got some false ID papers and went to free France, saw my other sister Nicky, did not get along with her, so she didn't stay with her. She found a childhood friend, married him and she somehow escaped being deported too.

E: Did they deport any out of Vichy?

C: Oh yes. At the end of 1942 the German army occupied all of France. They deported many people from that southern part of France, which was free France for a long time. They deported from all over France at the end of 1942. Many were deported in 1943. They stopped deporting people in France in 1944. They did the opposite in Hungary and Romania; they started to deport the people in Italy, and Romania, and Hungary in 1944. Until then they were not deported. In Western Europe they started deportation in 1942.

E: When they knocked on the door and there was chaos and they gave you ten minutes to round things up, how did your parents respond to this as far as you and your safety?

C: My mother said, "We may not be protected, but I'm going to try to protect as many of my children as I can." Right away she said to my sister, "Go upstairs in that toilet and hide." My parents tried to protect as many of us as they could. We had ten minutes to take some belongings. We all took blankets because we didn't own suitcases and we put whatever we could in our blankets. We went downstairs and then we were cattle from then on.

E: They put you on a bus?

C: They put us on a bus and took us that night to the police station in our neighborhood. All night long we sat on benches being very well-guarded by French policemen who saw that nobody escaped that night.

I will give you one example to show you that not all French policemen were terrible; though most of them enjoyed what they were doing and doing their job thoroughly. They were happy to arrest us, get rid of us. There were some good policemen though. That day, on July 16, 1942, when they

arrested my sister Helene, the policemen who knocked on our door asked for her and she said, "Here I am." He said, "You have ten minutes to take your belongings." She asked him, "Can I go downstairs and buy some newspaper? I'll be right back." He said, "Yes." Obviously this man was hinting, yes go and don't come back, but she did come back. It's quite possible that she came back feeling that if she didn't he would arrest my parents and my sister and I.

E: Yes, repercussions.

C: That's probably what she thought; she did come back and was arrested. Right now thinking about it, I realize he was trying to tell her to go and not come back. All she had to do was just go, keep walking. That's one example of a policeman whose heart was not in it. But most of them did enjoy it; they would push us, scream at us, rush us, et cetera. The next morning they put us into buses again and took us to Drancy. Drancy was a transit camp. They had unfinished buildings, no doors, no windows, just frames. They had straw on the floors, no beds or any kind of furniture. All I remember from that moment on is always being screamed at and pushed and shoved and ordered. That's the way it was until the day I was liberated; that's how they treated us, by constant orders and always in a rough screaming tone. All I can say is that we were treated like cattle. I have seen movies of cowboys bringing the cows from one prairie to another. That is exactly what we were, cattle.

E: This train they finally put you on, do you have any recollections of seeing that? Was it in the daytime when you were loaded?

C: The ones who were being deported were called very early in the morning, around 3:00 in the morning. They will wake up the people who were going to be on that train. It was all done systematically. Everything was put on record. Nothing was done on the spur of the moment, nothing. It was all very well-prepared.

E: That's the German mentality anyway.

C: Yes. Hitler wanted a thousand year reich. He wanted to conquer the world. He wanted to show the world once he was gone, what he had done for his perfect world: Look what I have done for this world for a thousand years; I got rid of all the unnecessary vermin, the ones who are giving us trouble. I want a beautiful world, and here's the proof. On September 25, 1942 in France, 1004 people were deported to Germany. It's there on records in books after books; all the names are there. Their profession, where they were born, their first and last name, the day they were arrested, the day they were born, it's all there.

Serge Klarsfeld and his wife Beate are Nazi hunters. Beate is a brave woman. She is a German Christian. She once slapped a high officer in the German government in the 1950's because he was an ex-Nazi; she said, "You cannot hold that post," and slapped him and went to jail. Her husband's father died in Auschwitz. He survived because he was hidden. After the war, he got ahold of those records in France and made a book out of it. I have the book. It's all there in black and white. All the convoys, from the first deportation from France until the last one; you see all the names. In each convoy you see how many people were deported, how many went to a certain place. We arrived after traveling for three days in a small town called Kozel, in the Upper Silesia part of Germany. The border of Czechoslovakia and Poland, sixty miles away from Auschwitz-Birkenan. There the SS selected 175 men to go to slave labor camps or concentration camps. In the book it shows how many men were pulled out of the train at Kozel, and how many went to Auschwitz, how many were selected not to go to the ovens immediately and how many went to the ovens, how many survived in that convoy, it's all there. In my convoy that day, on September 25, 1942, there were 1004 people. One hundred and seventy-five were selected in Kozel to get off the train; the train arrived in Auschwitz and 91 women and 41 men were selected not to go to the gas chambers. The other 698 went directly to the gas chambers. Out of the 306 people from this convoy who were selected to go to work, 15 men came back. You flip the pages and you see names and names and names. Once in a while you see a dot in the front of a name; it means that that person came back. I saw my name there with a dot in front of it and not my parents, not my sisters. It's frightening. You see 80,000 names in that book. Eighty thousand Jews were deported from France. What amazes me, France was a very anti-Semitic country, much more than Holland, but more Jews were deported from Holland than France.

E: When you were riding on that train how long was the trip?

C: Three days and two nights.

E: Did you ever get off of it?

C: Oh no, the doors were really sealed. Guards were between each boxcar on the outside. I don't know how you could escape. There were slots only for air. It was really packed to the rafter.

E: What types of things ran through your mind as you looked there? How would you describe what you were going through?

C: Absolute terror. As a matter of fact, when I did the documentary for Dr. Saul Friedman, I went back at that railroad station outside of Paris at Bobigny. They have

four boxcars, authentic boxcars, and I went inside one of them and broke down. I couldn't stand it because I saw my three days there; I saw my parents.

E: Right back in front of you again.

C: That moment killed me. My talking about it, my saying to the camera that's the last time I saw my parents, I just couldn't stand it. They gave us very little to eat, some bread, sausage, and margarine. I was sixteen and a half years old and I was helping, distributing the bread just to keep occupied. I don't remember writing the letter. My mother asked me to write.

E: How did you get that letter mailed?

C: I threw it through a slot.

E: Someone just found it?

C: Yes, and they did send it to my brother becaues he received it. That proves again that not everybody was terrible. There were some righteous Gentiles who felt terrible about what was happening to us. I remember the people in the boxcar, the terrible stench of it. I remember sitting next to my mother, never sitting near my father. I don't remember my father on the train, that's how far apart we were. His younger brother was with him. I remember the way my uncle was arrested was terrible.

Our apartment house had an annex. There were only two apartments on each floor of that annex. In our apartment house there were like five on each floor. They never went in the annex to arrest Jews in that annex. My uncle with his wife were living there. My uncle said to his wife, "I'm going to go downstairs and say good-bye to my brother." While he was trying to go a policeman said, "Where are you going?" He said, "I want to say good-bye to my brother." He said, "Get on that bus." That's how he got arrested and died in Auschwitz with my father. My aunt was never arrested. She survived the war; she stayed in her apartment.

E: What was in the annex?

C: Apartments, but the policenen never went there.

E: Why?

C: I don't know. Maybe the policemen didn't think it was part of the apartment, I don't know. It was a seven story high annex too; they did not go near it. The ones who lived in the annex were never arrested that day, except for my uncle. My uncle was my father's younger brother and he adored him.

It was three terrible days because the train would not go directly to Germany. It would go forwards for a while and then it would stop. Then it would go backwards; then it would stop, probably because military trians had priority. We would hear some French spoken outside the train, when it stopped during the frist day. That's when my mother asked me to write to my brother that we were going to go to Metz, because she thought that was where we were going to go. Two days later the train stopped and we didn't hear French spoken anymore, it was German. Where are we? I didn't put two and two together. I was probably scared and doing what I was told to do . I really did not ask questions. I don't know if I took it for granted. I was with my parents and that's the way it had to be.

The third day the train finally stops, they unsealed the wagon and opened the doors. Again chaos, because you heard such noise from SS guards telling the men to jump off the train, screaming, hitting us with rifle buts. Dogs were barking, biting people. It never stopped, as I said, complete chaos.

E: Wouldn't you think that the German, with all the detail that he went about arresting and loading trains and so on, would have had somebody there who spoke French saying in French, get off the train, or line up, or do whatever you're going to do?

C: They didn't care by then. Once we arrived in Germany, that was it. They took over.

E: They were beyond the possibilities of any photographers or news reporters or that sort of thing.

C: There are many newsreels of arrestations, cattle trains et cetera.

E: They were taken for their own use.

C: Sure, to show the world how they got rid of the Jews. Most of the Jews left on the ground at Kozel did understand German because they spoke Yiddish; if you did speak Yiddish you can really understand a lot of German. It's practically the same language. The SS guards yelled at us to jump off of the train. What could you do? They had machine guns and dogs. I jumped off the train with my brother-in-law. I was sixteen and a half years old. I looked like twelve. If you're twelve years old they won't let you live because you're not strong enough to work in the factories. I was sitting on the ground when another SS passed by. He hit me and said, "Go back on the train. You don't belong here. We don't want you." He hit me with his rifle butt and pointed to the direction of the train. He said something in German that I

did not understand. There was screaming from everywhere, from the women in the train who were losing their husbands and sons, from the people giving orders. It was unbelieveable. All I could hear and see was just a lot of screaming and pushing. I jumped on the train, and stayed instinctively at the open door passing cans of water. They gave us water because we had nothing to drink for three days. The stench was terrible. Some people were dying; it was awful. When I lecture, I try to describe that, and I try to put students in the train with me; I really don't do justice to it. I can't describe the horror that went on. It was catastrophic. I was at the open door with an older man, who knew he was not going to be able to work so he stayed on the train helping with me, passing the water to the people inside. Another SS passed by and asked me how old I was. I didn't know what he wanted from me and he was hitting mem. He wanted an answer. That old man answered for me. He must have answered the right age because the SS pushed me off the train and said, "Go and sit on the ground." I rejoined my brother-in-law. Because of that third SS and the old man, I am alive today. Once they selected the 175 men they thought would be able to work and be sent to slave labor camps or concentration camps the train was sealed again and went to Auschwitz-Birkenau. At that time we didn't know that. Later on we found that is where those trains were going. That's where Mengele was. Dr. Mengele was doing the selection who was going to live, who was going to die. It's quite possible if I went to Auschwitz-Birkenau that he would not have selected me to go to the right, to live for a while. I looked much too young. I was not a twin; he wasn't going to do an experiemnt on me. I probably would have gone with my father, stripped naked, shaved and sent to the gas chamber.

Did you see the nine and a half hour documentary that Claude Lanzmann did called "Shoah"? There is a description in the documentary of the gas chambers and the last seconds of the people in them. You die with them.

E: No.

C: It is outstanding. He interviews many people: Poles, Christians, Jews, ex-SS guards. That is what the documentary is all about, interviews. A Sonderkommando was a Jew selected by the Nazis to take the new arrivals into the gas chambers and from the gas chambers to the ovens. In Shoah, one of the Sonderkommandos explained what he saw once he opened the doors where the people were gased. That was one of the most heartrendering things I have ever seen. I was sobbing. I couldn't believe it.

E: What was the feeling towards a person who is us, he is Jewish, he is Polish, French, whatever nationality, and here he is, to save his own backside or for whatever reason working for

the Nazis in these hideous crimes? This has happened in all wars.

C: The Nazis obviously wanted the camps to be run by the Jews and those Jews were responsible to the Nazis to see that the camp ran smoothly the way they wanted it to be run. That was quite a responsibility. When you have power how do you deal with that power? Some do it magnificently well and most of them do not; most of them abuse it. The Sonderkommandos were forced to do it, because if they didn't want to do it they would be shot. Most of the Sonderkommandos knew they weren't going to survive. The Nazis did not want them to survive. They may talk and say, "I sent thousands of people at a time into the gas chambers and then I put them in the ovens." That's when their lives were over, for the most of them, after three months. When there was a lull in the convoys, that was when they would get killed. Some of them did survive and they are talking about it and they are telling the world the truth.

E: How did they do it?

C: I don't know how they did it, but some did survive. I have seen very nice Judenaltesters. They were the Jewish commandants of the camps. In my first two camps I was in they were very good. They knew how to walk that thin line. They knew how to cater to the Nazis and satisfy them and they knew how to treat us when the Nazis were not around, as somehow human beings, and show some compassion.

The second camp I was in, which was a concentration camp, that Judenaltester was revered by all the inmates. He's dead now. He was liberated; he went to Isreal and died there. Each time you talk about Demerer who was the Judenaltester, they always talk with great love about that man. Because of him our camp was not as sadistically run as a lot of others.

We had Kapos, and Kapos were under Judenaltesters; they were lieutenants. They had under their command a certain amount of inmates, not the whole camp. I have seen sadistic ones, Jews. I have seen them when it was not necessary to be violent, and I have seen some magnificent ones, some very brave ones. One Kapo in the second camp was from Belgium; I saw an SS hit savagely three people because one of them stole a useless piece of wire that was on the ground. That Kapo could have ignored it. "I'm a coward, let him hit them, I don't know what he is going to do with them; he may kill them." Because that SS was a maniac. He went to that SS and said, "Don't do it. It is a useless piece of wire. Why are you hitting these people? For what? It's a useless piece of wire; nobody wants it; it's scrap." He got hit and these four people got hanged because that one person stole a useless

piece of wire. That Kapo got hanged with them.

E: You were in two camps?

C: If you don't count Drancy, where I stayed overnight, I was in four different camps. I was never in Poland. I was never in extermination camps. All the camps I was in were in Germany in Upper Silesia. The first one was a slave labor camp, it was called Ottmuth. It was a transit camp and only a handful of people, like a 150 people, stayed there to work in a shoe factory. In that transit camp you had people from Holland, Belgium, and France who would arrive every week and were put into two barracks. A gestapo agent would come once a week and select the people to be sent to either concentration camps or extermination camps. I was extremely fortunate to stay in that first camp for nineteen months. The reason I stayed there was, I instinctively sang and danced, and the Judenaltester, the Jewish commander of the camp, liked me. Each time there was a roll call for selecting people to be sent someplace else, he would put me aside with my brother-in-law. That gestapo would not touch us. I stayed in that camp for nineteen months until we were all evacuated to a concentration camp.

The second camp was called Blechhammer, and that's where I stayed nine months. We were building that factory that will make synthetic fuel from coal. The allied bombers would come at 11:00 a.m. every morning and bomb that factory. I stayed in that camp nine months; that was a satellite of Auschwitz. In the first camp, we were not given a number on our arm; we did not wear striped uniforms. We were shaved from head to toe. We had ill-fitted civilian clothes that did not belong to us. The Star of David was cut out in the front of our coat, in the back of our coat, in both legs of our trousers so we would not escape. We were not guarded by the SS, except for that gestapo agent who would come once a week to do the selection. They were old wehrmacht soldiers or young ones who were wounded and could not fight anymore. Those were the people who were guarding us. They were not as sadistic as the SS. They did not hit us; they did not scream at us constantly. They were guarding us. They were gestapo agents supervising the shoe factory. They were always yelling at us to work faster. In that factory the first few months I worked digging trenches. That was hard work for me; I was a sixteen and a half year old kid who never had a hardworking job in his whole life. Because I sang and was liked in the camp, the Kapo put me inside the factory to work at a machine making wooden heels. By the time the wooden heel would come to my machine, I had to take that heel and put a piece of leather rubber at the end of the heel and nail it so that the wooden heel would not get worn out too fast. That was my job. I had a quota; I had to nail the leather or rubber to 4,000 pairs of wooden heels a day. With all the machines going on

at the same time, the noise was so unbearable. The sawdust falling all over us . . . all I did all day while I was working was sing. Nobody could hear me. That's how I kept my sanity, singing the French songs that I knew. There was some sabotage; they were sabotaging the pieces of wood, or pieces of leather or rubber that would not fit. I just nailed them; I didn't care if they fit or not. It was very hard work, but somehow I managed to just overcome the whole thing.

I was with my brother-in-law. I was sixteen and a half years old. I didn't have any parents to protect me anymore. Here is my brother-in-law who has lost his wife and two children, and here I am, and I'm young. He probably thought, "Robert is now my responsibility. I'm going to protect him." That is probably what he thought. He meant well, but I did not like his regimentation. I did not want to be with him. Because of my being liked by the Judenaltester, I protected my brother-in-law. He could have been sent away from that transit camp but because he was my brother-in-law the Judenaltester said, "Okay, he is going to stay with you." Unfortunately he died in Buchenwald, the last camp. I did not see him die. I was very close to two, young French kids my age. We shared everything; we stayed in the same barracks.

E: When these SS officers would come once a week or whenever to these camps . . .

C: It was a gestapo agent, not even SS.

E: Did he come with a list?

C: Not that I'm aware of.

E: Did he go in and simply look?

C: Yes. We were on roll call and he would just point at people to be shipped out somewhere else.

E: He would line everybody up and go through?

C: That is quite correct. Since they could only use 100 or more people to work in the shoe factory, the ones he selected may wind up working in quarry mines or ore mines or salt mines. They would send them to other camps where they were needed to work. This transit camp only allowed 150 people to work in the factory. We, the 150 people, were protected by the Judenaltester. "Those are my men; don't touch them. Do whatever you want to to the others, not these people." We were in a way the lucky ones. The treatment, though we ate very little and worked hard, was not as brutal and sadistic as other concentration camps. I never saw hanging in that transient camp. I never saw anybody tortured. I saw people

being slapped around, but I never saw anyone being tortured.

In that first camp, I saw two people escape. One was the supervisor of our room. Each barracks had ten to twelve rooms. This supervisor was a man who spoke perfect German, spoke perfect French, perfect Polish, was very healthy looking, and left his hair grow. I don't know how he did it but he escaped. I have heard after the war that he was a double agent. It is quite possible that he was because I don't know how you could have escaped. I don't know how he managed to get the money and go on a train. The only thing is, he did not have his hair shaved. Some of the people in that first camp were privileged. The cook, the supervisor of the washrooms, the Judenaltester, the Kapos, did not have their heads shaved there in that slave labor camp. Anyway, he escaped and successfully went to France.

The other one who escaped was a very stocky, defiant man. I remember his name was Max. He escaped, but was captured and killed. Those are the only two people who in thirty-one months, I have known to have escaped.

E: What type of confinement did they have there? Was it barbed wire with sentry posts?

C: The first transit camp was very simplistic. When we were evacuated from that camp it became a prisoner of war stalag for English soldiers.

The second camp, Blechhammer had brick walls, electrified barbed wire, guard towers. It was a concentration camp, and a huge one. There were 3,000 people in that camp. It was quite different. The treatment was different. We were shaved; we were given striped uniforms; we were given a tatooed number on our arms; we were branded cattle. I never saw or heard of one escape from that camp. I saw people going to the electrified barbed were to kill themselves because they couldn't stand living anymore. I saw many hangings. I must tell you that at the first hanging, I was absolutely petrified. We had to stay on roll call to see that man going on the scaffold and being hanged and dying. Then some of us had to stay on guard duty all night long to see that nobody touched or unhanged that man. He had to stay hanged all night long, that was horrifying.

E: What was the reason for that?

C: It could be as simple as a man stealing a useless piece of wire. One time while being hanged, the rope broke, and usually if it happens in normal life, the man would be reprieved, but that was not his case unfortunately. They were very brave. That Kapo from Belgium, before he was hanged said, "You're going to be free one of these days,

don't lose your faith." Those were his last words to all of us who stood on roll call watching him before his death. By the sixth or seventh hanging, I really didn't care because after a whole day of hard work, I was very tired and I wanted to go in my barrack and eat my piece of bread and go to sleep. If I was going to be on guard duty for four hours, I was going to have very little sleep.

E: What did guard duty entail?

C: We were on guard duty, to see that if men from your barrack went to the latrine at night they should come right back to the barrack and not escape. That was your responsibility. I would say I was on guard duty once every two weeks for a good four hours. We used to average four to four and a half hours of sleep a night.

E: If anything was going to happen, you certainly didn't want it to happen during your four hour watch.

C: That's quite true. You were on guard duty for the men in your barrack.

E: What did these barracks look like?

C: A typical barrack was a long, one-story high, all wood building that contained maybe twenty rooms. In each room you had double bunks, maybe ten on each side. That means they have about forty people in each room.

E: They weren't one, big dorm room?

C: No.

E: There was privacy.

C: Privacy? No. We never had privacy. We were forty in one room with double bunk beds.

E: I got the impression these were smaller rooms.

C: No.

E: These were big rooms?

C: They were not that big. The double bunks were not wide and they were very close to each other. We had a stove for winter, a table with two benches. Everything always had to be scrubbed and immaculately clean. When you left in the morning to go to work your bed, which had a mattress, pillow, and blanket, had to be made up like the Marine bed. We had brooms made of twigs to sweep our rooms and halls of our barracks. When we left the camp to go to work the barrack

had to be absolutely immaculate; otherwise when you came back you were going to see a shambles and you would be severely punished if your room was not clean. Everything was upside down and then you would be punished. You would get extra work, be beaten, it was unbelieveable. Nonetheless we did not escape bedbugs, cockroaches; we did not escape lice. We had that by the tons. We had washrooms where we could go and wash our hands and faces. They would let us take a shower once a month. But many of us were too tired and did not even go to wash our hands. They ate their piece of bread and their square of margarine and they went right to sleep unless they had to be on guard duty. We had to go to the kitchen to bring back the coffee in big vats, and the bread and margarine.

E: What type of work did you do in these various camps? You said you left to go to work and things of that sort.

C: In the first, I worked in a shoe factory. The second camp, I worked in a factory that made synthetic fuel from coal. That factory was not completely built. I was building bridges. In my Kommando, my job was to build the bridges and then put cement pipes on the bridge and connect them so the oil from the coal would eventually flow through it. The winters in Upper Silesia are treacherous. That is one thing I did use in "Hogan's Heroes". I knew how cold it was in Germany. I was the only one out of the whole cast who was ever clicking my heels, because I knew how cold it was. Winters were very cold in Upper Silesia and we had very little clothing, so we would grab empty, cement bags in that factory to put between our skin and our shirt. We would take rags to make socks out of because we did not have any socks.

E: What about any kind of help from the outside? Did that exist in any way? You're always hearing the Red Cross was doing this or that.

C: In my experience I have never seen the Red Cross. There is one thing the Nazis did, that is trying to fool the Red Cross by taking them to Theresienstadt. At Theresienstadt they tried to make an exemplary concentration camp to show the Red Cross how they were treating the Jews. "What do you mean we're killing them? What do you mean we're sending them to the gas chambers?" Look, they have sidewalk cafes; they have entertainment; they have food. Look at how well they are dressed." They did that to fool the Red Cross. The people from Theresienstadt all went to Auschwitz and died. Once the Red Cross went away they did not have extra food; forget about sidewalk cafes and everything. I have never during my thirty-one months seen a Red Cross package; I have never seen a Red Cross person coming in the camp.

I don't know how people manage to save gold or save things to

bargain with a nonJew outside the camps, to get something else to eat. They did it; I don't know how they did it, but they did it. By entertaining, I got a little extra food in the camp. That is how I managed to connive my way to get something else. Once in a while you would see in the soup some barley; that was a rarity. Most of the time it was just water with rutabagas. Once in a while you would see a thicker soup with some potatoes in it. Once in a great while they would give us some biscuit; that was really a rarity. The every day ration was the same: a tin cup of black water, a bowl of soup, a piece of bread and a square of margarine.

E: When you were in the concentration camps or under German supervision, was there any attempt to curtail celebrations of Jewish holidays, Jewish observance of the religion or anything of that sort?

C: I know some religious Jews did not eat on Yom Kippur. They probably saved their ration of bread for the next day; they did not eat that day even though they had to go to work. I am sure that somehow during Passover they celebrated in their limited ways. I am not a religious Jew. I am a proud Jew. Even though I was raised in a very religious environemnt, I really was not religious. I believed in God; I had a fear of God; I prayed to God every night when I was in camp, but I wasnot a man who on Yom Kippur would not eat. I'm aware of all of the holidays; I know them quite well. I must tell you frankly that during my internment my friends who were with me constantly did the same thing I did. We ate on Yom Kippur. I don't remember saying, "This is passover; let's think about it and celebrate." It's like I did not remember writing the letter on the train, which I obviously did. But thinking about it in the camps, I don't remember being around very religious Jews who would not eat on Yom Kippur or who would do something about the Jewish holidays. I know it has happened though, because I have talked to many survivors since then and I know that many of them have observed the holidays, in spite of the circumstances. Somehow, once inside the camp when they were not under the supervision of the SS guards at night, they would do something to remember those Jewish holidays.

E: What did you do from one day to the next to make sure that you absolutely survived?

C: I rolled with the punches; that's one thing that I did. I went with the waves and not against them. I find ways not to trick the SS, but escape the blows; that's what I did to survive. Because I am small, at roll calls when it was very cold, instead of being in the first row--we were a row of five people--I would be in the third one so I would get less of the wind than the first one. I would always try to be in the middle of people so I would not be as cold. I would try to do those things to escape the blows, physically

or weatherwise.

E: What's the difference in your own mind between the SS and the regular German troops? We hear all sorts of distinctions and it varies from one person to another.

C: The regular troops were Wehrmacht or air force people. These were drafted people; they were forced to go into the military. They did what they were supposed to do. They were supposed to fight wars, and fought they did. Otherwise, they would probably be killed.

SS were the elite. SS were not drafted soldiers; they were volunteers. They embraced the Nazi party willingly, thrillingly. That was the difference. That is why when President Reagan went to Bitburg and laid a wreath in the cemetery where there are SS buried, that was just an affront to a lot of us. They were taught to treat us less than vermin. They were taught to kill us and hate us with passion, and they did a good job of that. The only time I saw one SS guard who was a human being was near the end of our internment. It was in my second camp in Blechhammer. He wasn't the commandant of the camp; he was kind of a lieutenant. As I said, they knew that the Russian soldiers were all over Poland and coming very, very close to the eastern part of Germany and Upper Silesia. This man was somehow more human than the others. I will never forget once, he made an optimistic speech to all of us. He said, "Do not despair, one of these days you will see some better days. You may even see freedom, so don't give up hope." (I am paraphrasing). He also insisted that we had a theater and entertained. The last three months that we were in that camp, the entertainers did not go to work. I was part of that group. We rehearsed in the afternoon and put on shows on Sundays. I don't know what happened to him. He probably got killed by the other SS who heard him speak like that. He is the only one during the thirty-one months that I was in the concentration camps that I heard speak humanly. Otherwise, the others were sadistic monsters enjoying their work.

We had one in Blechhammer that we nicknamed Tom Mix. He thought he was an American cowbody movie star. He acted like a rough, American cowboy movie star. He was cruel beyond control. He was absolutely dreadful. We were afraid to be near him. He was really what we thought SS would be. He was hitting us, killing us, shooting us, hanging people for nothing. It was just terrible.

E: What was his rank?

C: I really don't know. He must have had some power. He was not the SS commandant of the camp, but he had some power. He always carried guns in his holters.

E: Pistols.

C: Yes, pistols. His rank must have been high enough to give orders. Very often he didn't feel like sleeping, just for his joy he would wake up the whole camp after a half hour and we would exercise all night long. He would urge the other SS to hit us because we were not exercising fast enough. The exercises consisted of crawling, running, bending, all these things constantly, all night long, the whole camp.

E: Then you had to go to work the next day?

C: Twelve hours.

E: Was that a working day, twelve hours?

C: At least that, yes.

E: Did it make a difference in the winter?

C: No, absolutely not. Only one Sunday out of two did we not work. Work was a twelve hour day, yes. In and out of the camp we had to march in brisk tempo by music supplied by musician inmates. We had to stay on the Appelplatz for hours to be counted to see that everybody was present and that nobody escaped. There was no end to the cruelty of the SS guards because we were not human beings; we were branded cattle.

E: Do you think it would have been any different had the SS or the elite not been in charge of those camps?

C: There was a difference. The first nineteen months I was in a slave labor camp. The Wehrmacht was guarding us. I did not see that kind of cruelty for the first nineteen months that I saw for the next nine months and up to the day I was liberated.

E: What can you remember about the time of liberation? Certainly this SS saying, "Don't give up, don't despair . . .

C: That SS speech was long before the liberation. It was like five months before the liberation. The winter of 1945 we all did the same thing. There is not a survivor who did not go through this same thing, because of the Russian soldiers being all over Poland and starting to invade Eastern Germany, the SS did not want to be taken prisoner by them. They did not want us to be liberated by the Russian soldiers because they were afraid that we were going to talk and say this is how we were treated, this is what they did. They started to evacuate all of the camps from Poland and the eastern part of Germany. It was a debacle. The Germans were losing the war on all fronts, not only the Russian front, but the western front too. There were no trains available, no trucks available so they made us walk. The guards walked with us, but they had food to eat and

they were better clothed than we were. We had just the bare essentials. We took a blanket, that was the only warm thing we had to put over out shoulders and our heads. We walked and walked in deep snow. From Blechhammer, 4,000 of us started walking on January 21, 1945. We could hear cannons, Russian cannons; they were not that far. Before leaving the camp, they warned us: "We're going to evacuate the camp and burn the camp so you better not stay behind. Whoever is going to stay here is going to be killed." Well, they didn't do that. Most of us did go to the Appelplatz that morning with the blankets on our shoulders and started to walk. We walked for fifteen days like this. Once in a great while they found a barn that could accommodate us and they would let us sleep for a few hours. Otherwise, we just walked night and day. I heard constant shotgun. The order was to kill the ones who could not walk anymore or trying to escape, and killed they did. We arrived in the camp called Gross-Rosen. Half of us made it; the others did not make it. They were killed on the road because they could not walk anymore. We had nothing to eat. Twice they gave us a piece of bread during those two weeks.

I don't believe what I used to do. I did it twice during those fifteen days. When we found a barn to rest and sleep for a few hours, when the SS were falling asleep, I would sneak out of that barn and go to a farm and knock on the door and ask for a piece of bread or anything. The farmers, the women or the men, gave it to me. Since I escaped, instead of staying there I went right back to the barn to be with my friends, my security. Freedom was the unkown, scary. I really took my life in my hands doing that. A guard could have woken up and shot me because that was the order.

We finally arrived at Gross-Rosen, which was a tremendous camp, overwhelmed by people coming from all parts of Poland and Eastern Germany. There were not enough barracks available and they just overcrowded us into barracks. Those were just empty barracks with a cement floor. There were no windows and it was freezing cold and it was muddy outside. There were no bunks, no straw on the floor. You couldn't even sit; there was no room to sit. We would go on roll call in and out for three days. They were hitting us because we were not walking out of that open door fast enough. No food for days, too many people once they gave us a piece of bread; I helped distribute the bread. It was just taken away from my hands so fast. In two weeks and three days they only gave us bread three times. It was just terrible. I saw one of my close friends with whom I spent over two and a half years, dead in the mud. I must have felt something, but I don't remember being downhearted. That is a tragedy. I spent two and a half years with this charming guy my age who was brave and intelligent, but he did not survive this march. There I was seeing him dead and I was indifferent. They had made selfish

animals out of us. All I thought about was my survival; it is true. It was absolutely true.

After the third day, the inmates from Blechhammer stood in line and I saw people going into a barrack. I didn't see them coming out. The process was very slow. It took hours. I thought they were gas chambers. I thought this was our death; that's it. That is where we were going; they didn't know what to do with us; there is nothing available; the camp is over-crowded. I thought maybe Gross-Rosen was an extermination camp. What they did is when we finally arrived in that barrack, we were registered so that they could have records of when we left Gross-Rosen. They gave us a piece of bread and margarine and they put us into an open cattle train and we traveled for days to go to the middle of Germany. We arrived finally in Weimar, which is six miles south of Buchenwald. The train stopped and the allied bombers were over our head and they bombed us. They probably wanted to bomb the railroad tracks, but it wasn't only bombing; they came down and machine gunned us. I, like many of us who could still have the brains to do it, went under the train fast. I don't know where I had my strength to do it, but that is how I escaped being machine gunned.

They made us walk those six miles to Buchenwald and put us into shower rooms because it was late at ngiht. I was frightened again. I was with a friend and said, "Let's not go in the shower with the first group; let's stay in that anteroom. We will sleep there. Maybe we will be gased later." We didn't; we slept there overngiht because it was too late for us to be disinfected and deloused and shaved again and processed to get clean uniforms. Buchenwald was overcrowded because everybody was coming from the eastern part of Germany and Poland. I had three horrendous weeks of Buchenwald. We were given very little food. I've seen more people die there. Buchenwald was a tremendous camp; I found out later on that the big camp was mostly occupied by underground fighters, political people and a lot of communists from all over Europe. That was the first time I saw Russian soldiers in their own compound. There were Ukranians, homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses. The little camp is where they put in the Jews. First they took us in a theater so we could be sorted. When room in the barracks of the little camp was available, they would put us there. Those barracks had three or four rows of bunks and people were dying like flies. I was saved in Buchenwald by nonJews. It was an absolute miracle why this German chose me out of so many people. He wanted nothing from me, but to save one human being. He did save me. He was the head of the delousing department in Buchenwald. He had power to do certain things. He knew high ranked people. The administration in Buchenwald was done by the inmates who were there mostly since 1937. There was a tremendous underground reseau there. The inmates knew everything, working at the adminstration of the camp. There was an arms factory right next to the camp and they

would install Germany communists or Czechoslovakians to work in the factory to sabotage the arms. They would smuggle arms and ammunition and eventually were going to do something with it. That German got me out of the little camp where it was hell on earth. At least there was some kind of a better life in the big camp, more organized. He knew I was French and he put me in a French-Spanish barrack. There I met two French men who were absolute saints. Not Jewish, they were underground fighters. These two Frenchmen made faith in human beings, because they were marvelous. They were strong; they were nice; they were thoughtful. When they saw me, this little, fragile man arriving in the barrack they took pity on me. They did nurture me back to life. They protected me. One of them was a musician who had an orchestra in Buchenwald. One of his members, a base player, was a Czechoslovakian who was a secretary in the administration. That Czech really saved my life. They started to evacuate the Jews. There were too many people and they started to evacuate them again. First the Jews went, and 90,000 died on the road outside Buchenwald. They were killed or died. This Czech protected me. He had a small barrack in a little camp. He shared this barrack with five other Czechoslovakians, and that is where he hid me. I don't know what he did with my papers. Again, when you arrived you were registered. When I went to do a documentary at Buchenwald in 1984, the man running the museum just took my file with my name, showing when I arrived in Buchenwald, how long I stayed there, and when I was liberated. Obviously, he did not destroy my paper, but he must have hidden it. While I was in his barrack, he gave me a pass so I could go from the little camp to the big camp and visit my French friends. I never worked in Buchenwald the last two months I was there. Once I was nurtured back to life I entertained there. I entertained every night; I went to different barracks and sang for the people from Holland, from France, from Czechoslovakia, all kinds.

I was liberated on April 11, 1945. My number at Buchenwald was 125603. There were a great number of people and you were on roll calls for hours to be counted before going to work in the factories. I never went to work there; I was very, very lucky. Once I was nurtured back to life, I think that was the best time I had in thirty-one months. I was protected by the two Frenchmen and the Czech and they were just marvelous. In Buchenwald, we always heard rumors. We had heard that the Third American Army was very close by and maybe soon we would be liberated. That was marvelous. Also, the circulated rumor was that the SS was supposed to liquidate the whole camp by putting it in flames before they left. The morning of April 11, 1945, they did not burn the camp. I will never forget that morning because there were no roll calls and there were no guards in the guard tower. There was an eerie silence in the camp. The men in the big camp did liberate Buchenwald before the Third American Army arrived. They cut out the wires and

they went to the beech wood which surrounded the camp and brought back the Germans who fled, the SS. They did not kill them, but held them as prisoners. Then the American GI's arrived in the late afternoon on April 11, 1945. Then you realized what happened; that it was over; that you had survived. To me it was like a dream. It took me days to realize it was all over.

E: Was there a lot of cheering?

C: Oh yes, everything. There were two, huge Appelplatzes where we would stand on roll call in the big camp and little camp. I will never forget, there were small, allied planes flying very, very low to see if people were alive. People did an SOS with their bodies, and they were waving their arms to those allied planes. There was screaming, and flags of all European nations flying. I don't know where they hid them.

E: Where did they come from?

C: There was a big underground and Buchenwald was a different kind of camp. I've never encountered that kind of camp before. The saddest part for me was suddenly they gave us food and a lot of them died because they overate. They overate too much rich food that they never had for years and some of them died this way. To be free suddenly after 31 months was a big dream. The remarkable thing is a week after we were liberated we gave a concert for the GI's in the theater where I stayed eight days practically dying. In that same theater we gave a concert; I sang for them. It was marvelous. Here I am, American friends, I'm singing for you.

I was liberated on April 11, 1945 and by May 3rd I was back in Paris not knowing if I would find anybody in my family. The first person I encountered at the hotel we were sent to was one of my sisters--my sister Nicky--who was supposed to be arrested July 16 and went to the underground. She was now in an auxiliary corps unit taking care of survivors, and she knew I was alive. In that auxiliary corps unit, they had drivers--truck drivers--women, who would go to Germany and bring back the French survivors. One of the drivers saw me in a town called Eisenhar and that woman knew me. She was the one who engaged me, when I was a small kid during that amateur contest. She remembered me and she went back to Paris and she said to all of the people, "Does anybody know Robert Widerman?" My sister said, "That's my brother!" She said she had just seen me and that I was coming back with the next convoy. So, my sister knew I was alive. That morning her superior said to her, "Why don't you go and have lunch?" She said, "No, there is a convoy that is coming soon. Why don't I wait until they arrive? Then I will go to lunch." That's when she saw me. The joy to see my sister was immense. I didn't think I would find anybody and there she was hugging me, kissing me, telling

me that I have a family in Paris. I have sisters and brothers who were not deported, who joined the underground or were hidden by nonJews and that's why they were alive. I was the only one out of thirteen of my immediate family that was deported who came back. None of the others survived.

E: What were the medical facilities like? If the Germans didn't provide anything, did the underground try to provide anything?

C: In the camps, to the bare minimum. The first camp I was in, the transit camp, we had a marvelous Polish dentist who doubled as a doctor. He would do whatever he could. As a matter of fact, he did something to one of my teeth. He put a filling that was good for years. He was a very gentle person. Unfortunately, if you had more than one day of a fever the gestapo agent would come and you would be sent to the extermination camps. We did not have a hospital in the first camp; it was too small. The second camp, Blechhammer, where there were 3,000 people, yes. There was a barrack with a hospital, and only if you were not tremendously sick would you be staying there. Otherwise, you would be shipped out. They had maybe two or three doctors there and a few nurses. We really didn't have major sicknesses. Whatever we had they would give you an aspirin. As long as you could be on your feet, and walk, they'll let you stay two days in a hospital, but by the third day, that's it, you're gone. I know they had a tremendous hospital in Buchenwald. Gross-Rosen, I only stayed three days; I don't know anything about it except the barrack I was in and the terrible treatment we had. I don't remember anything except the immensity of the camp and we being shoved into one barrack and suffering. In Buchenwald they had hospitals.

E: What about the selfishness in a camp? Did you observe any of that going on?

C: I observed all kinds of things. There is an example of three brothers and a father who stuck together so brilliantly all through this ordeal. They really were not selfish. They're still alive; they live in Isreal. I once said to one of the brothers, "Your father was lucky that you were there." He said, "On the contrary, we were lucky that we had a father who kept us in line and kept us together." You saw all kinds. We were more or less all equal. I've seen great kindness, great sacrifices. I've seen terrible people, great selfishness. I've seen people who were cowards, who were stool pigeons; I saw all kinds of people all through the thirty-one months.

E: Was there any reluctance, or was there a willingness on the part of some people just out of desperation to give in to the Germans, anything they wanted, whether it was house boy, sex, work, whatever it took to get by?

C: It may have happened. I wasn't aware of that. There must be some people who did that. Young kids were sent to clean the SS barracks and maybe some were sadistic enough to rape them, I don't know. I was lucky not to be part of it. I was small and probably I was kind of cute; who knows, they could have taken advantage of me, which they never did. I'm very grateful for that. Who knows what they did? I have seen some very brave people; I've seen some very gentle people; I've seen people rising above the situation, and I've seen the complete opposite.

E: In your friendships within the camp certainly you were going to help each other out as much as you could, but when you came back from work and you had your bread or whatever little food they were going to give you, what did you talk about?

C: Everything. What the day was, remembering incidents from our youth, the movies we saw, the kind of life we lived, maybe if we were free people again what we were going to do with our lives, what the future would be. We always helped each other. You could not survive alone. You could not just isolate yourself and say, "That's it, I'm going to do it all by myself." You could not do that. I've seen people with a member of the family helping each other or friends like I had, my two friends. If one was feeling low the other one would pull him up and say, "Come on, it's going to be all right." It would help. We would steal a potato and we would share that, or I would get an extra bowl of soup and share that. We shared our sorrows, our sadness, and our joys. We helped each other, and that was extremely important.

E: When you got back to Paris and your sister and so forth, obviously with the movies you had seen on the silver screen and Hollywood and all that . . . How did you get to the United States?

C: I was very fortunate. I went right back into show business and I worked, not making a lot of money, but working in dive nightclubs; it didn't matter, to me the important thing was to get back to the business I loved. Eventually, I would up being an orchestra singer, a band singer. We worked in a big dance hall in Paris, very well-known. I used to work in the afternon and in the evening. I was part of a jazz orchestra with a girl who was a band singer too. In 1947 there was a strike in America; the musicians did not want to do any recordings.

E: Truman took them out on stirke.

C: Obviously people went to Europe, to England, France, and Germany to make some recordings. One A&R (Artist and Repertoire) man, Harry Bluestone, used to work for a transcription company that was called Standard Radio Transcription. He went to England to do some recordings and he went to Paris and somebody called

him and said, "Why don't you go to the Olympia Dance Hall. There is a marvelous girl singer and you should hear her and maybe you'll record it." He was looking for things like that. He went to that place and he listened to her and he listened to me and never talked to her. He had an interpreter come to me and say, "Mr. Bluestone wants to talk to you because he wants to record you for America." That's all I had to hear. A kid who always loved anything that was American. My idols were Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Louis Armstrong, and so many others. One thing that I had on my side as a Frenchman after the war, I was one of the few people who could sing and swing like an American. At that time French people were known to sing waltzes and not really swing. I could not speak English at that time and was taught the words phonetically. There I was doing a recording swinging numbers with a very, very thick French accent not knowing what I was singing. In 1948 my record was a big hit in America. The same people, Standard Radio Transcription, asked me if I would come to America with a contract, a seven year contract. I was twenty-two years old. I had no mother or father to take care of. All my sisters were married; they had their own families; their husbands were taking care of them. Why not? What did France offer me? She helped the Germans to put me in concentration camps for three years. What do I owe France? I loved France; it was my country, my native tongue, but nonetheless I was very thrilled to come here with a contract. It has been very good.

E: You came here as a singer.

C: Yes, an entertainer. I did a lot of nightclubs. During the 1950's I did a lot of Broadway shows. My first Broadway show was called "New Faces" in 1952. It was a big door opener for me. Then I did other plays, other musicals. I did a lot of variety shows on television in the 1950's and 1960's. In 1964 I was in Los Angeles and the Bing Crosby Production was ready to do a pilot, "Hogan's Heroes". My agent asked the producer, "Who do you want in the pilot?" He said, "I would like a Frenchman." My agent said, "Well, Robert Clary is in town." I was living in New York at that time. He said, "Bring him." He heard me sing in the early 1950's in a nightclub. He said, "Bring him, that's exactly who I want." That's how I wound up being in "Hogan's Hereos". The producer said, "The part is yours. I don't know if it is going to be big or small, but it is yours if you want it." We did the pilot and three months later my manager called and said, "The pilot has been sold. You're going to start filming in June of 1965."

E: As you were standing there in a German concentration camp or prisoner of war camp and clicking your heels occasionally, did you ever stand there and say, "My God, there is an SS man."

C: No, I never did that.

E: Could he be a stooge?

C: I never did that. To me that was not my reality. It was not what I wen through. To me that was fun make believe. I really never equated two and two. It never tormented me. To me it was a nice way to make a living. Suddenly the show was a hit. I'm playing a French prisoner of war; I'm not Robert Widerman; I'm not the little Jew who was deported. I was a corporal who was a soldier and was taken prisoner. It never bothered me when I saw people in uniform. Very often in some of the segments I had to wear an SS uniform to fool the SS themselves. I don't know how you could fool them. There is a 5'2" man with a black SS uniform, how can you fool them? I looked ridiculous; I looked like a wind up toy. But that was part of the fun. It did not bother me because it was not what I went through.

E: Do you have anything else you need to add?

C: No. You know what I've been doing since 1980. I made up my mind not to be quiet about the past anymore. I realize that it has to be taught to the young students who know practically nothing about World War II. In 1980 I said, "Okay, I think I'm ready. I think I'm able to stand in front of a high school or university audience and say this is the way it was, learn something about it." It is sometimes very painful, but it's also greatly gratifying.

E: I want to ask one other thing. There has been a lot of talk particularly on some of the national talk shows and so forth that this is now forty some years, let's put it behind us, let's go ahead, let's do something else. Of course, the only thing they're talking about is not stopping the celebration of the storming of Normandy, not stopping celebrating this or that, what they're talking about is let's stop the war crime hunt. How do you feel?

C: Once in a while somebody says, "Isn't it about time that we forgive and forget?" I say, "Have you ever forgiven the Jews to have killed your Christ centuries ago? You still blame us to do it. Why don't you stop that?" I say, "The day that you will become a nice human being and remember to be a nice being and there will be no more wars and you will learn from history, believe me, I'll be more than glad not to talk about it. I don't enjoy doing it, but it has to be done until the day you will learn that you cannot repeat history anymore." That's what I said to her.

E: Do you think there is any legitimacy to the fact that there is a tremendous guilt on the part of the western nations, particularly England, the United States, and France, that they either allowed it to happen, they ignored that it was happening, and finally when those troops, American, British,

Russian, free France, all showed up at these camps that they realized it did happen?

C: Yes, because millions of nonJews did die. Not the same way, it was not genocide for them, but nonetheless they were arrested and died in concentration camps by the millions.

E: They allowed a nutty, wallpaper hanger to try to reshape . . .

C: To me he was not a nutty, wallpaper hanger. To me he was not that nutty. He knew what he was doing. One of the students said to me, "He was an idiot." I said, "No, don't ever say that he was an idiot." He was not an idiot. He knew exactly what he was doing. It just went over his head and he abused his power. He was not nutty at all or an idiot."

E: There is a certain guilt factor that still remains.

C: It should be. From history I have read how the ones who escaped the Warsaw ghetto or Auschwitz and went to England and reported what was happening, some English people in the power of the state were saying the Jews have a tendency to overreact and overexaggerate their stories; don't listen to them; it's not that bad. That is what they were saying, and people were being killed left and right. They should have a certain guilt about it.

E: Did you at any time have any connection with the Jewish underground?

C: I never did.

E: But you knew it existed?

C: No, I never did. I was very naive in many, many ways. It's possible that I was my saving grace. I'm not saying it was, but it's quite possible that it was my saving grace.

E: If you knew about something and wanted to get involved in it, you might have been more eager to do something within the camp.

C: I think I did my best in the camp to be able to survive and to help some of them. My rebellion was to entertain. We all did different things to rebel and show all right, you're not going to put me down; you're not going to drag me like you want to. That was my kind of way of doing it instinctively, I must say. I was extremely naive, simplistically naive.

E: Well, thank you.

C: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW