# MEMOIRS OF SZYMON NAGRODZKI

Narrator: Szymon Nagrodzki

Date: August 10, 1977

place: Mr. Nagrodzki's house - Birmingham, Alabama

Interviewer: Deborah Rich

A. I came first from, I came from Germany really, from Munich, Germany to here. Now I was born and raised in poland, but the reason I came from Germany is because I was a prisoner of war, after the Second World war, and then, after we were liberated from prison, I was in a concentration camp in Germany, for quite a few years, from 1939 to 1945, and that's why I say I came from Germany but I was born in Poland. I was born in Poland, it was a small community, I'll say about 500 people, Jewish people.

Q. Was it all Jewish people?

A. No, it wasn't a totally Jewish community, it was a mixed community, Jewish and Christians, but it was a small community, there was mostly farming, not much industry at all, just farming, and business, you know, in town, on the outskirts out of town, it was mostly farmers. There was a mayor, and the mayor just ran the town just like he does in any other city. Most of the Jews were like handcrafts, like carpenters, you know, and tailors, shoemakers, and all that,

there was quite a few business people also. There were restrictions for government jobs. A Jew could hardly get a government job, and also, even I'll say a Jew couldn't even serve in the army if he had a high education because he would have to go in the officer, you know, school, in order not take him in, they would say well he is just not fit for the service, there is something wrong with him, and he's either sick or you know, that's why they had very few Jews in Poland, they were officers in the army, or they were just plain soldiers, you could get by with that.

Q. What was the name of the town in Poland?

A. Drobin. The synagogue, in comparison to here, it was very religious, it was like orthodox, mostly orthodox, we had a pretty synagogue, and naturally we went there to pray about three times a day, including holidays, and the average Polish Jew, you know, he was very religious, observed every holiday and every day. Concerning our home - we had a home, not a big home, we had a little home, and we heated with mainly coal and wood, we had an oven in the middle of the room, wired with those pipes through the chimney, and that's how we heated in the winter time, now in the summer time we didn't need any heat, we had a fan to cool off, but there was no air conditioning. Concerning my family - I had seven brothers and three sisters, and they all perished in the concentration camps, including my parents, and my grand-

parents too, all of them. We lived by ourselves. We were a big family, with nine children in the house, and the parents so nobody else would have any place. Concerning marriage - I would say that a lot of marriages were arranged through a matchmaker, and it was approximately the same ceremonies that we have over here, it was a little more orthodox, but we usually would get married under a chupah where we do here too, so after the marriage everybody had a good time, you know, singing and dancing and everything, generally people didn't marry before twenty-two or twenty-three years old, because usually a man, especially, first he had to have a job, and he has to be prepared to make a living, to take care of his wife, and family. I was not married there in Poland, I was married in Germany. My parents had a butcher shop. I did work, but I was a tailor, I didn't work with my parents in the business, but I was an apprentice and became a tailor and that's what I am. Concerning school - I went through school that's equivalent to high school over here, that's as far as I could go. For Hebrew learning, I used to go to Heder after school until about nine or ten o'clock at night, came home and the next morning went back to school, but very few Jews were allowed to go to college or seek higher education, you know, there was always something that he was not capable of doing. The anti-Semitism was very, very high. You were treated like a second class citizen, something like that.

Q. Did the women or girls go to Hebrew school?

A. No, there was a group of girls that did go to Hebrew school, they called it Beit Yankov ("House of Jacob") and that's where the girls went to school, the girls happened to be girls of very orthodox families. They did go, but as a rule, the average girl did not go to Hebrew school. There was no decision about who would go to school, say from the conservative point of view, it wasn't mandatory for the girls to go to Hebrew school so they just didn't go and they didn't send them, but like I said the Orthodox Jews, the girls, they did go, and they did learn Hebrew, and also a girl where I live, for instance, she didn't even have to go to the synagogue on Shabbot or holidays, or anything else, until she got married, now after she got married she had to go. For some reason single girls often didn't go, but if they wanted to, they were allowed, but it wasn't you know, you have to go. Most of the decisions in my family - we were a family at home, where decisions were made by my father and mother, of course, my father, he was the head of the house, and usually what he said was agreed upon, but it wasn't strict, you know, that whatever he says goes, it was a very, I would say, easy-going life. I mean according to the decisions. I mean there wasn't such decisions to make that was a matter of life and death. After I finished high school I went back to work, even when I went to school I had

to work, because there was no way alone that my father could support the whole family, now everybody in the house, whoever was capable of working, had to work, and bring home the money, and put the money on the table. Now my mother whenever she decided she wants to give me fifty cents or a dollar I took it, if not, I just gave her the money, that was it. When the war broke out I was twenty-one years old. I was in the service, now in the service, we went out, as I remember correctly, we went on maneuvers, (in the Polish army), and in the middle of the night, we had a call to pull the whole army in, the war broke out with Germany and then they loaded us on the trains. Right from the field, they send us out to the front line with the Germans, and that's how you know, the war started with me, now, when I heard, when they occupied Poland, during the war, because I was not in Poland at that time, I was taken a prisoner of war, and they took me as a prisoner of war to Germany, and after a little while they find out that I am a Jew, in Germany, so they release me as a prisoner of war, and they took me into a concentration camp, see, because it was too easy for a Jew to be a prisoner of war, so they might as well be in a concentration camp, so I heard in the same thing, what my parents at that time told me when the Germans came into Poland, and a little at a time they start squeezing in on the Jews. First we have to wear those yellow stars, and then they

picked out one section of the town, they fenced around with barbed wires, it was a ghetto. nobody could get in or out, they feed you not enough to live and too much to die on. you know, just barely exist, now after a little while they start taking the Jews out from the city and they start sending them to a concentration camp like Dachau or Auschwitz.

Q. Were you with your family?

A. I was with my family in a town, they call it Roddam, and also in the ghetto so the people that were capable of working in the ghetto - those Germans, the S.S, came in every morning and took the people out of the ghetto to a place to work, you know, like on the airfield, or in a coal mine, or in a manufacturing plant. I happened to work in an ammunition factory. So, and then one night when I came back in the morning from work, the whole town Jews were taken out and sent to Auschwitz, all of the people in the ghetto were sent to Auschwitz, including my parents and everybody with them. And from there they sent us to another town, the people that were able to work, so were were in another concentration camp, and since then I haven't seen my parents at all. I know that they died in Auschwitz and Dachau, but I don't know which one or anything. So I was in another ammunition factory, and we were there making bombs, rifles, you know, and all that for the war, and a lot of people worked in the place where they put the powder in the bombs, now I

can't recall what they call that place, but those people, in normal times, if they had workers over there in that particular factory, they would work like three months a year, with special uniforms and masks, and they got paid for a whole year. And when they sent the Jews over there to work, they worked for three or four weeks, and they died. They turned yellow. Their eyes, their body, their skin, everything turned yellow. And you couldn't survive more than three or four weeks, so the ones that died they just removed and brought another one to die and so on, and so on. If you talked to one person that worked over there, if you just talked to him, you would turn yellow from his breath. It was just that horrible. And I worked in that camp for quite awhile, but didn't work in that particular area, that was a death sentence to work over there. Now I escaped from the concentration camp, I escaped from there because to be there- it was a death sentence anyway, so I didn't have any choice. I said either I'll die escaping or I'll die there. So there was still a ghetto in Roddam, so I escaped back to Roddam, there was five of us that escaped from that camp. Three of them got shot on the spot, and two of us - we jumped over the fence. We ran away; the other fellow ran one way, and I ran the other way. And I didn't know if he was alive and he didn't know if I was alive until we met in Roddam. We both went to the same place because there was no other way to go

back to the ghetto. At least we had a little better chance to survive there than in the factory.

Q. How did they decide who stayed in the ghetto or who went to a camp?

A. Well, they took so many people to a camp where they needed certain jobs to work, now if they run out of people they furnished more people out of the ghetto, just like having a herd to the slaughter house. They just waited until they needed to replace more people and they bring more people out of the ghetto to work. And you know everybody worked until they died - it was as simple as that. Now then after Roddam, after the ghetto, we got out and they start loading us all on the train, so we all got on the train again, and nobody knew where we were going, till we find out one morning and that we are going to Auschwitz. That was death with all the crematoriums, all that in Auschwitz, and then from there, so they stopped the train in Auschwitz and they took all the women and all the children and they were all unable to work. And they took them off the train and send them into the crematoriums right there, and the rest of us, the able bodies, that were still able to work - they send us back to Dachau. So then we were in Dachau. In Dachau, hundreds of thousands of people died from hunger. And like I say, still they were able to work, we worked on airfields, you know, coal mines, in factories, any way that

they could they get us to work. We worked, and from Dachau, I would say I had been there about a year or two, and then it must have been close to the end of the war when they took us out from Dachau and loaded us on trains again and they supposed to take us to Tyrol. Tyrol is the border between Germany and Italy, and then in Tyrol we learned they had an order just to wipe us out there in Tyrol - so the Allies would have no trace of what hapened to those people, but it so happened, that we were liberated by the Americans right betwen Garmish and Tyrol, it was a few miles, right there, that the first liberation...The first thing I saw was an American tank cross the railroad track and lower the barrel right there at the locomotive and they stopped and then we were liberated. After we were libertated they took us into camp in Germany, under the American occupation. Naturally, they feed us, and we got everything we wanted except our health. You know, we had to be very careful because every one of us weighed about sixty-five or seventy pounds; nobody could hardly walk, they just had to crawl. They fed us and after a few months we've been in that camp, some of them were in Munich, some were in other camps, and a little at a time, we went to work. And of course, thye feed us from the Red Cross, I presume, we got packages from the Red Cross. But we were free, we could do everything we wanted to. If we wanted to go into business, we could do that or anything

else. I was in Germany and we were liberated in 1945, I believe, and then we were in Germany until 1949. In 1948 we registered as refugees to come to the United States on a quota. I married in 1947, and we registered to come here and here we are. We have been here since 1949. I had my personal opinion about America. I heard it's the best country in the world, which it is, but I figure, and I picture myself, even in the best country in the world, I'm going to have to work to make a living, because I said all along as long as I can remember - it's a beautiful country, it's a big country and a rich country, but you've got to earn your own living and you've got to work, and then you make good of it. You don't get something for nothing nowhere. You've got to work for it and that's why I've been working for it and I have no complaints.

Q. Now tell me how you got here, exactly.

A. Well, i 1948, we applied, and of course, we are supposed to have sponsors, and I believe the Jewish community here in America - they sponsored us. And it took a little while before we got our visas and papers, and until we were allowed to come into this country. We got our papers and visas in Munich. We came through New York, but we were supposed to come to the South, you see. They have so many thousands of people from Germany on the boat, so they divided them on the boat, so they divided them into groups -

let's say you have five hundred to Birmingham, five hundred to New Orleans, one thousand to New York, and they scattered them around the country so it wouldn't be a burden in one place, for the people that are supposed to be responsible for us, until we would be able to be on our own. We got off on the boat at New York, and we got on another boat to go to New Orleans, and from there they sent us to Birmingham. Everybody leaving Germany knew exactly where he was going. Well, I pictured myself, I couldn't even find Birmingham on the map, and I really didn't know...I didn't ask any questions, Birmingham, or New York, or Chicago, what do I know? I mean, America is America, anywhere you go. I'm in America, that's what I found. When I got to Birmingham, they gave me a place to stay, where to be, and they gave me so much a week to live on it, until I went to work and I made my own living, and now I told them it's time to quit and not to give me anymore. I appreciate what you all did for me, and now that I'm working I can make my own living. Yes, my first impressions of America were favorable, that it's the most beautiful and fine country in the world. I still say today that there's no corner in the world that is as good as America. I mean we have a few faults too, but it's the best in the world. As far as clothes - they weren't any different except maybe the fashion, I mean, when it's cold, you have to wear wear clothes and when it's hot you just wear a

shirt...and the food is the same thing, we never did go out to restaurants like the people do here, as a matter of fact, when I came from Poland going to a restaurant was a little bit of an insult, it wasn't too glamourous to go into a restaurant to eat. But what I also found out here in America is that the people here are not as close, they're not as close as in the family, as they were in Poland or I guess in Germany.

Q. Tell me more about when you first came to Birmingham.

Q. We lived in a hotel for a few weeks, and then we lived in an apartment. When we came over here it was very hard to find a place to live, in the 1950's when I came over here you couldn't find an apartment for the love of money. I lived in a garage apartment for a little while, and then we did find an apartment that we lived there for a few years. Then we bought this house here, and we've lived here since. About Jewish neighborhoods - Highland Avenue was a Jewish neighborhood at that time, and there was a lot of Jews living aroudn the Temple on Highland. That wasn't at my time but people tell me the biggest Jewish neighborhood was at Northside, and they all migrated to the Southside and suburbs, and so on. But really I cannot pinpoint where the Jewish neighborhoods really were.

Q. So you went into a job here, did you have to work on Shabbot?

A. Yes, (to both questions), I'm in charge of the tailor shop at Pizitz, and I've been there for about twenty-seven years. This was my first job, and I still there.

Q. Do you remember any places at that time that refused to hire Jews?

A. No, I don't remember any places here in Birmingham that refused to hire Jews. No, but I remember a place where they refused to rent apartments to Jews, it was right next to the apartment where we lived. It was an apartment that had a sign that said no Jews allowed. But I don't know if it's still the case now, but maybe it is. There's a lot of places in Vestavia where I heard there's no Jews allowed, either. Maybe they don't have any sign, but I know for a fact that there was a Jew that bought a house over there and he had to move out because they threatened him and he had to move out. But by law he is all right.

Q. How did you get along with non-Jews in your job, your neighborhood, etc?

A. I get along fine, I never had a cross word with anybody, Jews, or Gentile, alike. As a matter of fact, in the store when I do work, there's a lot of non-Jews, and never a bad word, or anything else. I mind my business and that's all

I'm interested in. They don't treat me any differently; they treat me nice; I have no complaints. Well, once in a while you get a drunk and he says I've got a best friend that is a Jew, but you've got that everywhere. But other than that I've heard a lot bad comments, you know. I wouldn't go into a discussion with him or anything like that, because people like that - there's no way you can convince them one way or another. Because I guess they're just anti-Semitically inclined and there's just no use in talking to people like that, so I just ignore it. When I came here I didn't have any English. I had to survive, so I've learned. I had no help from anyone - I just picked it up. When you have to survive, you can do a lot of things.

Q. So you were orthodox when you lived in Poland...?

A. No, not quite a orthodox, I mean I was just religious, everybody knew that a Jew had to go to synagogue, you had to go to Hebrew school when you're a kid, not necessarily to be orthodox, but that was the Jews tradition - the Jew's way of living. When I came to America, well I'm still a Jew, but on Saturdays I have to work, and it's a different life here in America, altogether. You couldn't find a Jew in my town that (inaudible) Sabbath into shul but over here it's alright, you see.

Q. Did you join any cultural or political organizations, or clubs?

A. No.

Q. What did you do for relaxing or entertainment?

A. Well, I tell you we are a family here where we live for the children. We brought the children up and we were with the children together all the time, and really and truly to belong to a club or to go out for recreation, I could not afford, you see I couldn't afford and I couldn't do it and I am just as happy as I can be that I am able to do for my kids, and that was about all, I'm still not belonging to any clubs. As far as health, we didn't use home remedies, we had our family doctor, if something happened we did go to the doctor. Concerning religion, I joined Temple Beth-El, and I'm still a member. Yes, that satisfied me. We observe holidays and go to the Temple. The only difference was that over there you could go more to the Temple and live more of a Jewish life over there than you could here. I mean it's no way possible that you could observe...Well, first of all people had more time - like Succoth was a week, and Pesach was a week, and Rosh Hashanah was two days and all these holidays was observed. People were very poor but they did observe the holidays. Now over here they're not all rich, but they're not all so poor. You have to work for it over here, otherwise you couldn't exist. We do support almost

every charity we can. As far as Zionism, well, I believe the Jews have and they should have and they are supposed to have a homeland, and why should we be worse than any nation in the world, by religious...that Israel is our homeland, and I feel very strongly that we should have it. I guess without that we couldn't exist. I mean we did exist for so many thousands of years but everybody looked down at you like you're nothing and I believe since Israel became a Jewish land, that we have more respect all over the world.

Q. Did you ever consider going to Israel instead of coming to America or was that not possible?

A. Well, I am dreaming about going to Israel but right now, I'm just you know, I can't do it.

Q. No, I mean when you were in Germany.

A. When I was in Germany, I had a relative in Israel at that time, she told me, I mean we had been writing letters, that at that time I couldn't make it to Israel because the time was so bad, and there's nowhere to live and nowhere to stay, so we came here. Concerning assimilation, Yes, I did feel welcomed here by the community and by everybody, I did feel like a stranger in a strange country, but, I learned fast. I had to learn the language. I had to learn how to survive, and I went to work and thank God I'm doing alright and I have no complaints. I became an American around

1953. We had to be here about five years before we could become an American citizen. No I'm not politically active. As far as my children, I do believe that they feel...not orthodox, but they do feel that they are Jews, they feel religious, they feel tradition. They have been going to Sunday school classes and Hebrew classes. And we still observe as much as we possible can, the tradition, you know, in the house. [His daughter, Louise, approximately 23, who is sitting at the table, adds to the interview].

A. I think I feel a deeper sense about Judaism, not necessarily in observance, but I think I am more sensitive to what happened in the Holocaust, more so than my peers, who might look at a film about it, and say oh, that's awful, but I look at it and get pretty upset.

Q. More so that your non-Jewish peers?

A. Yes, but non-Jewish and Jewish alike, really, the American kids that never understood or knew what went on, they've only heard and read about it, and I feel like I have really been through it. [Father interrupts and continues talking].

A. Well, there's no way you can explain to a child if he doesn't have the feeling. I mean, the feeling is just not there, when you talk about raising children - we raised our children in the best way we knew how, we never threatened them. We never said that you have to do a certain thing, or you have to do this or that. I mean, as a child, you have

to guide them, in a nice way, correcting what is wrong, and the rest of it - it's up to the children too. It so happened, I guess we are the luckiest people in the world, by having the children we do, they are never a minute's trouble, to anybody, and it's like I said, if you disagree or something, you have to explain why, if you tell a child not to go out or something, or not to come home late, it's not because you don't trust them, it's just for some reason when you love somebody you try to protect them, and that was on our minds as long as we raised them. It's not because I'm afraid the child wants to do something wrong, it's any hour in the day or any hour in the night you can do it, but you have to trust, if you do trust when you say come home at a certain time, it doesn't mean you don't love them, it means you love them, you're afraid, you're scared, you want them to be at home with you. And some children will say he's old fashioned, but the minute they have children of their own, they are old fashioned too, maybe worse. So that's how it goes, you see. But if you holler or you threaten or something, it doesn't make sense. You have to explain why, and the rest of it you have to be lucky, which I am...

Q. Yuo said something about noticing that families were not as close...

A. No, not as close, I don't know about non-Jewish families, but even in Jewish families, you don't have that

closeness, because you hear a cousin or an uncle is coming and the child has a date or wants to go to the movie, it doesn't make any difference to the uncle or the grandparents, she is out, she hasn't got time. But where I was born and raised, when an uncle came, it was almost like a gathering - it was more important, the family came first. And we can live in a five or six room house with three or four bedrooms, but when a relative comes they have to go to a motel or a hotel, "It's not quite enough room here," you see, the people here, they don't want to be inconvenient, they want all the conveniences, a relative used to come to our house where there were twelve people and sleep on the floor or on the couch. There was always room, but the same thing when they come in, the first thing a family came, an uncle or a cousin, or whoever it was and we start to cook at home and eat a meal like it's supposed to be and the easiest thing to do is to get them out and go to the restaurant so they don't have to wash the dishes or the glasses - and it's not family-like, like it should be. I think maybe it's because we live in such a big place like America, and people aren't as close. I really don't know why. maybe it is...I have an idea, take a family over here, if it is a very poor family they will try everything in the world to keep up with the Joneses, they will try to do the same thing that the richer family does. And maybe the children, when they're born,

before you turn around, the mother is going to work, regardless of whether she has to work, she just wants to get out of the house, get a maid, or somebody to take care of the child. Now, the richer families, I think, they belong to a club, and if they can't afford to have a maid in the house, or somebody to take care of the children, she'll do that in a hurry, and go play golf, or play whatever they play, and gave a good time. She comes home at night, the child is already asleep. Now when the child goes to school, and grows up a little, the child gets up in the morning and goes to school and comes home in the afternoon from school and the mother is either at the club or somewhere else or working, the child doesn't see the mother. Now to make a long story short, it comes to a few years later, when the child grows up to be fifteen or sixteen years old, and if the child does something wrong, and the mother comes along and says you didn't supposed to do that or you didn't supposed to drink, or smoke, well naturally that kid is going to say "Well, mother where have you been all these years, I don't even know you, all of a sudden you are telling me I'm doing wrong." Take a tree, you plant a small tree, you can bend that tree any way you want it, once that tree grows up, either you break or you cannot bend it.