Transcript:

Max Notowitz

A26

61min

Interviewer: Okay Mr. Notowitz, I know you're familiar with the project and what we're doing. I was going to take a few moments to tell you we'd like to do today. We're gonna talk to you a little bit about pre-war life in Poland, your family, and then we're gonna talk about…you were born in 1927, so we're gonna talk about everything up until about the age of nine or ten and then we're gonna talk about the invasion and what you remember. I know you were in a camp in the ghetto, we're gonna talk a little bit about that and then we're gonna talk about liberation and then what brought you to Tennessee. So I know it sounds like a whole lot. We can start with something, it says you were…you were born in Germany and then you moved to Poland?

Max Notowitz: Well, I was born which is in the city which is now Poland.

Interviewer: Oh, oh okay. Okay.

Max Notowitz: But I don't talk about it because there's so much explanation. How could it be you're born there and you…what, did the country move, you moved away from the city and the country moved into the city so I just claim I was born in Poland.

Interviewer: It's easier that way?

Max Notowitz: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about life in Poland.

Max Notowitz: My life? I was one of three children. I was the middle child but I was sort of a mama's boy. My mother was a former school teacher and I was real close to my mother. I had an older sister who's a year and a half older than I was and she was more into social activities. We lived—living in a little town where you can walk from one end of the town to the other end in about five minutes and population it haves about 4,000, of which about 2,200 were Jews and there was no railroad at the time when I lived there. There is one now. I was going to a boys' school together with Catholic boys. The Catholic boys had catechism studies and the Jewish boys had Jewish religion taught by a Jewish teacher. The girls went to girls' schools. In the afternoons I went to Hebrew school and the picture that I showed you here is the picture of the, as we called it, Talmud Torah, the learning of the Torah, that's Hebrews. And you progressed from…there was no such thing as not going to the school, and you progressed from early childhood. We learned to read without understanding what you were reading but just to read, read the prayers and then until you graduated, to reading the scriptures and then reading the Talmud, the Mishnah, the Gemara. And those things may be foreign to you, but that's the way it was. And then we had time to play soccer and some sports. We were sort of segregated from the Polish population, not necessarily because of any law or any restriction but we just kept…the Jews kept to themselves and the Poles kept to themselves.

I remember one time my teacher in public school told the priest I was a good student and he patted me in the back of my head and I couldn't live it down. I was touched by a priest, I wasn't kosher. But that's kind of life we lived. You might say we were a middle class family. My father, he was in the banking business. He had the Foreign Exchange Department in the bank. And he was also a partner in a meat export business; he was in it as an investment. My mother of course was at home, a housewife. And I remember things that we did. My sister started school, my sister was born in February 26 and I was born in October 27, and so she started school before I did, and she taught me some of the things that she learned in school and I taught her to read. I started reading real early, way before school and I read both German and Polish. And on Saturdays, it was a day of rest you know, stores were closed and my father would take a nap and my mother sometimes would take a nap but I would sit with her and read to her and read books, Wild West stories. I thought that the United States was [unintelligible 0:07:18.8] by the Germans. There was an author by the name of Karl May, M-A-Y, who wrote Wild

West stories and all the good guys were Germans and all the bad guys were Indians. And she would sit with me patiently and listen and I would read, and I was pretty proficient. And it wasn't until much, much later when I read about Karl May, I found out that he never set foot in the United States. It was all a figment of his imagination. Or things that he read in books about the United States and…

Interviewer: Tell me about your experiences with any anti-Semitism.

Max Notowitz: What anti-Semitism?

Interviewer: There wasn't any?

Max Notowitz: Well, there must have been but you know I never experienced anti-Semitism. I was—as you see in that picture I had a white color and I didn't have the side burns, side [unintelligible 0:08:53.3] as they call the curls, and I learned Polish and associated with Polish boys and we…Anti-Semitism existed but I didn't experienced it as such. In fact, after the war when I went back to this little town I had people tell me, "Why didn't you just stay here, you're just like one of us." I mean, the opportunity was there, but I…

Interviewer: Do you think it's because you were so assimilated?

Max Notowitz: Well, I don't say, I don't think I was assimilated. I mean, we were still separate but lived in separate areas but we could talk the language and we and I don't remember of any kind of anti-Semitism as such directed against me.

Interviewer: What do you remember about the invasion of Poland?

Max Notowitz: I remembered a whole lot. You wouldn't want me talk about it.

Interviewer: I want to talk about it.

Max Notowitz: Oh, well, see the war broke out the first of September, 1939. And the Germans came into our little town where we lived on the 10th, which was a Saturday. The Polish army kept retreating and all of a sudden, that little town where we were, they decided or somehow they were caught in a fight and there were a 162 Germans killed in that little town. And we were taken to a field that they…the men were separated from the women and children and we spent the night out in the cold, it was cold at night, it was warm in the day time. We were worried about our father but he showed up in the morning. And while we were on the field they demolished or burned 162 homes and they were firing the shots over across the field where we were that the artillery on the other side but we got over there. They wouldn't let us at first into our homes but into the end of the next day we got there and the German soldiers looted the houses, not necessarily Jewish or non-Jewish, but we don't know of any others, but all the homes were looted, they were taken away. I had a collection of stamps I was so proud of and some German soldier came and took it. I really was heartbroken. But after that we closed up the house and went into a village where we stayed with some people that we knew for about two weeks until there was…

Interviewer: And this was when?

Max Notowitz: This was in 1939 in September.

Interviewer: Part of the invasion?

Max Notowitz: Yeah, well, right after they came in.

Interviewer: The people that you stayed with, where they Jewish?

Max Notowitz: No.

Interviewer: Did they know you were Jewish?

Max Notowitz: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: So they were hiding you in essence?

Max Notowitz: Well, there was no such thing as hiding it was just…we were there because it was a sort of…we didn't know who was coming or going…

Interviewer: What was going on?

Max Notowitz: Then we went back to the house and then it started out, you see the Germans posted proclamations saying that all Jews—this is where it started and when the civil administration took over—all Jews have to wear white armbands on their right arm with a Star of David.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you were feeling like the first day you had to do that?

Max Notowitz: It got to be a symbol of pride. We had arm bands embroidered. some of the girls wore them down below the arm. I mean, we didn't look at it as symbol of persecution, but what they did do is, if you wore an arm band they could take you, snatch you from the street and put you to work, until they established what they call a Judenrad, a council. And the man who was in charge of the [Judenrad (sp) 0:15:25.0] was a doctor who had studied in Vienna, fluent in German. And my father was the second in command. And we established an administration where the council designated, they wanted so many people to go to work, they designated. It was an orderly fashion and they designated so many people go to work on such and such days and this is when I started to go to work outside the…by the way, the schools were closed for the Jewish students.

Interviewer: Right.

Max Notowitz: So we didn't have school. And I decided; I'm a big decision-maker. I went to volunteer to go to work. There was an opportunity to go to work and work on the road, either building the roads or shoveling snow in the wintertime. And I volunteered to go to work because I sort of wanted to take off the pressure from my father and I worked, and one of the things that saved me is the fact that I established a reputation of being a worker and—

Interviewer: And that saved you?

Max Notowitz: Yeah.

Interviewer: How?

Max Notowitz: Because when they liquidated the ghetto, when they took us a place called [unintelligible 0:17:21.3] is where they made the final distribution, the people like my mother and the rest of my family went to [unintelligible 0:17:32.4] which was strictly a death camp. They were there, taken there, they were unloaded, undressed and marched to long trenches the bulldozers dug and machine gunned into it. I was taken to a camp, the camp was [unintelligible 0:17:55.1] because I had been working and in fact my mother wrote to me…

Interviewer: Wrote you in the camp?

Max Notowitz: Well, yeah. I got one letter in the camp.

Interviewer: They gave you mail?

Max Notowitz: Yeah, and I don't remember whether it was through the post or through somebody who came to the camp. But my mother wrote to me, "Your friends—" now these are my age friends—"Your friends are so jealous because you know where you are and we don't know where we're going." Yet in the same letter she wrote…people received letters from the ones who had gone in previous transports and they are telling us that they're being resettled on farms and they're gonna be a—and I hope we arrived there safely. Actually, she was looking forward to the trip.

Interviewer: Tell me about the camp. What were your jobs at the camp?

Max Notowitz: The camp…it was bordered…it was at the edge of a forest and what we were doing is, we were cutting down trees and digging stumps like we…

Interviewer: Like clearing out the forest?

Max Notowitz: …like we did the last couple weeks here, and building roads. And what they eventually put up there was factories, they built factories because it was in [unintelligible 0:19:48.0] area and that's where we were, and that's when we found out that the—we were there a short period of time. We were there from about the first of July, I know exactly the date, until November 15th.

Interviewer: What was it like for you? What do you remember the most?

Max Notowitz: Well, one of the things that I remember is, two people who stayed in from work one day and evidently there was an inspection and when we came back there were two bodies. I was a little boy, I mean you know I was not—I was 13 years old, and I applied myself, I worked hard and…

Interviewer: Do you attribute your survival to your sense of strength?

Max Notowitz: No, not necessarily. I attribute my survival primarily to people who didn't push me, didn't send me. And this man who said to me to begin with, when we found out they were gonna take us away from there somewhere else, and some of the young people decided to, they said they're going to make a break for it, and I didn't know that I was gonna go. I didn't know, I didn't have anybody close to me, and then this man who was really not that close to me, he worked for the company my father had an interest in, but that had nothing to do with it and he…we were so different. He was a laborer and we were like…lived, went to school, my sister went to [unintelligible 0:22:18.2] like high school here. Anyway, he said to me, "Are you coming with us?" when they were getting ready to go and I said, "Yes, sure," not knowing what else to say and grab whatever I grabbed and I went with him. And for all those years he sort of looked after me. His granddaughter wrote to me and she said that grandpa used to tell us how he punched you in the back to straighten out your back. I had forgotten all about it. But that's one of the—I don't know, I just think it was luck.

Interviewer: Tell me about the day of liberation? What do you remember?

Max Notowitz: Well we knew that the Russians were coming. We knew that the end was near, but we also had problems with the Polish underground. A couple of guys went out and were caught and killed, and then they had another four that went out that they caught. And there was one man who guarded them, but see, the people who were killed, the first two, it was sort of open and they were afraid that the publicity is going to do more harm than good. And so they kept those four and they were gonna take them that night and kill them, and one of the guards that guarded them, used to work for one of the boys' fathers in a mill and he went and got Russian soldiers and they liberated them. So they saved their lives. And we saw first seven soldiers patrol, so I didn't know that they were in the army, they were so dressed different, pieces of clothing.

Interviewer: Did you realize what was happening when you went?

Max Notowitz: Oh yeah. Yeah, we knew.

Interviewer: And what was going through your mind?

Max Notowitz: Well, while we were in the forest and while we were in hiding, emotionally we were dead. There was no feeling of…and here was the opportunity that you said to yourself, "I made it. I did, I really survived." So I mean…

Interviewer: When you think about it, what do you think about?

Max Notowitz: Well I have a lot of trouble. I get so emotional.

Interviewer: That's okay.

Max Notowitz: What happened was…you see my problem was, I was brought up in a family where we did things like a family. For instance, and I'll give you, I'll deviate for a moment. 1939, the war was on, the German campaign in Poland was over. We were reading the German newspapers. Christmas 1939, big full page letter and reply, letter is from a German woman who's fiancée was in the army and he was killed in Poland and she had a child and no father and she wasn't married. And we read the letter, my mother read it and everybody was crying, tears, you know, human interest story. And Hitler himself wrote to her, what a great deed she did for the country having a son to replace the father who could have not died a better death than to defend the country and something like that. This is before the real persecution started. We really had no business doing this but that's the way we lived. We were closely knit family, and I was 14 when I was in the woods and no supervision, no instruction, no nothing. I mean I used to read scraps of paper, that we found in there. There was no way that I could face the world the way I was and especially after I was liberated and I was in a private home. There were two other boys and I, we escaped, stayed together and we had a housekeeper and she sort of looked after me. I mean I cried at night because I didn't have…

Interviewer: Parents.

Max Notowitz: …a mother, you see I get so emotional about these things that…you know, now I shouldn't do it but, I mean…

Interviewer: Where was your mother?

Max Notowitz: Where?

Interviewer: Did you know where at the time?

Max Notowitz: Oh yeah, I knew she was dead because we found out, when we were still in the camp, we found out where they were taken. We had some guards that we bribed, and when I say bribed, we were in the camp but we knew where things were buried and people who…when the war broke out we told them to get the things. And so they went and they found out that the trains went up to a certain point and past that point the trains didn't go and then they found out from some eye witnesses that bulldozers dug the trenches and they were machine gunned into the trenches.

Interviewer: So you didn't go through your childhood, you didn't go through your teen years…

Max Notowitz: Yeah, that's…

Interviewer: You were a child and then you were an adult.

Max Notowitz: I had four children and when we were bringing up the children, my wife used to say, there were times that she would say, "But you don't understand them, they're teenagers. You were never teenager yourself." I wasn't. You see I don't have…I never felt sorry that I lost my parents at such a young age, but one of the things that I felt was that I was deprived of the gradual change from childhood to teenagers to adulthood or go

through the period of time. I was faced with a situation, I finished the fifth grade and I said to myself, "What am I going to do? Where am I gonna go?" And it was a problem and there were these people in Poland who said, "You can stay right here." And I probably could have, but I had a religious background even though we weren't that strictly observing. Excuse me.

[technical]

Interviewer: What we'll do when we come back is talk about liberation day and what you remember about the liberation. We'll talk… Tell me about liberation day.

Max Notowitz: Surprisingly enough I don't remember anything exciting. I know one thing we were not, a number of us, there were a total of us, the total was eight survivors, but I don't know whether there were two or three or four of us. We went—this was liberation day, this was—and we went to this farmer's house and he had cooked—he knew we were coming over there and he had cooked soup, a hot soup, and gave us soup.

Interviewer: How was that?

Max Notowitz: And I threw up right after, my stomach couldn't absorb it. I had not had any hot food and I remember I was sick, made me sick to my stomach but…

Interviewer: So you don't remember liberation day very well?

Max Notowitz: Well I don't remember anything that was any different than any other of the days. We had a house there that people lived in and I let them stay there and I went to see some people. I remember we went, we transferred some bodies of people who we buried where they were killed and transferred to the cemetery. And there this old caretaker there and I remember this, I laughed so hard. He looked at me, he said, "Are you still

living?" I said, "Do you think I'm a ghost?" I mean that's, you know, funny. Well…

Interviewer: And how old were you on liberation day? Around the time of liberation.

Max Notowitz: I was—let's see…that was 1945, I was 17. See, I was liberated in August and I was 18 on my next birthday. And I stayed in that town for a while but then, the Russians came in and the war was progressing. Poland is cut through the middle ground, the middle of Poland by the Vistula River and they got as far as the Vistula River. And it sort of led them to Warsaw. And in Warsaw the Polish underground rose up because they didn't want the Russians to liberate Warsaw. They wanted the Poles to liberate Warsaw. And they got their orders from the government in London. And the Germans when they got to Warsaw they put up resistance and so they—now, this is what I heard, I mean this is—I wasn't there, but the Poles appealed to the Russians for artillery support. And so the reply that Russian sent was, "Come under our command and we'll give you the support." They said, "We take our orders from London, our government in London," and so they said, "Let them give you the support." And evidently the Germans massacred a great number of Polish underground members. And then when the Russians stopped, the frontline stopped and then they started the offensive. They crossed the…and they chased the...

That town where I was became the headquarters for the Russian army, Russian first Ukrainian army, and Marshall Zhukov was the commanding officer. He was staying in a house about three houses down to where we were living. And I felt kind of comfortable with the Russians. I felt comfortable with anybody who let me stay on my own and I'd go to their…They had that propaganda office and they had a place where you could read and get books and get—and the guy that…he started me teaching Russian. You know I was a young boy and I was and he started telling me about Russia and I listened. And I lived in Poland with these other two guys and we…well, how can I describe it. There was a time where things were not available unless you got them somewhere on the black market. For instance, one time a Russian soldier brought us forty thousand needles. Now a needle to you doesn't mean a thing because you probably don't use it for years. You never use it. But a needle to people who don't have stores to buy clothes and don't have places to go

when they darn their socks or put the—like my mother said to me in the letter. She said, "Be sure you keep your clothes clean and repaired, and darn your socks." And so this was a fortune, and I remember, when I was a little boy, I mean a young boy, I went to a place called [unintelligible 0:40:47.3]—it was a bigger city, and then tried to dispose of 40,000 needles. Not all of them, but we got a real good price for it. And I had…I started leading a life of you know, I was a young boy and they would check you and said there was a man who had a $100 bill and you couldn't cash a $100 bill. So I got on a bike, rode about 30 kilometers to a bigger city and I got it changed into $10 bills and the man was happy to pay 10% and that's how we lived. And I participated in a lot of the things that we did.

The American Joint Distribution Committee had an office in Warsaw and we formed a committee, three of us. I was the secretary treasurer and people who came from this town who lived in the United States sent us money for the survivors and for the people who come back. And I went to Warsaw to get the money, and I come into this office and, you know, I had—you can't conceal you're 18 years old or 17 years old, and he said, the man looks at me and he said, "That committee of yours, is anybody older than you?" I said, "Well, yes they are." I come in and they felt that I was capable and they gave me some of the money but the man came in and checked us over. And when I went to Warsaw, my father, who loved the opera, and he use to take—not my mother, my father—he used to take a bus from our town to [unintelligible 0:43:40.0], a bigger town, and then take the train and ride about four to six hours from [unintelligible 0:43:48.2] to Warsaw or Krakow and go to the opera, and then come back, usually the next day. And I couldn't wait to go to the opera, you know. I had an education, fifth grade education, but I've got to find out what my father saw in this thing. They had an opera house which didn't have walls, they had long blankets hanging in there and it was cold and I saw this—I think it was an Italian opera so…

Interviewer: What did you think?

Max Notowitz: And I stood there and because they didn't have many seats. Stood there and heard these people screaming and yelling in their kind of voices and I couldn't imagine how anybody can like something like that, but that was…

Interviewer: When you think about the war, what do you think most about?

Max Notowitz: About the war?

Interviewer: What do you remember the most?

Max Notowitz: Well, see I remember the early part when we were together and then it seemed then my later…my father was taken away in '41, he was sent to Auschwitz and he was killed and I became the head of the family. I mean my sister technically, and my mother sort of looked after us, and we kept closer in the ghetto. And I came home one day because I heard that some of the people that I worked with were buying non-Kosher meat, and it was a lot cheaper and I told my mother, "Why not do that?" And we had a stove and she put a thin partition so one wouldn't go over, I mean that's the way we lived and we were not that observant, and I ate more meat as a result of eating non-Kosher meat. And she was a hustler. I mean she looked to see that her children were taken care of. And she had a pass, she could go out of the ghetto and she told me she left a lot things, like we had some silverware and she left it with the principal of the school, my school, and I went to claim it and she never saw it. I mean there is nothing you can do about it and so…

Interviewer: What do you want people to know? If you were in front a group of 30 10 year olds, 12 year olds.

Max Notowitz: Well, I do come before them. I want people to know how one people can take the law in their hands, pass the laws and do things seemingly legal and to persecute, to do to another people the ultimate, kill them…

Interviewer: Do you want to teach them to that their freedom is precious?

Max Notowitz: Well, I usually try to impart the things that I had gone through not because I did something, not because I lived somewhere but for the simple reason that I was born Jewish, that I was a Jew. But I did a lot of things that…I never was ashamed that I was a Jew. Christians in Poland around Easter time and they thought Jews had killed Christ, and there were Jews who didn't show their faces outside. I never had that feeling, but we really had—I mean, to be a Jew at that time and to remain a Jew, and I think I have a lot of strength in my Jewishness because, well, I had a good friend and associate who tried to convert me for years. I mean he felt that I deserved to be saved and I got to a point where I really told him that I feel insulted. And I knew he meant well, but he did things that I just didn't think were right to, and yet he felt that he is the one that is going to be saved and I'm not. But that's where the, well…

Interviewer: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Max Notowitz: Well, one of the things that I always say… see, I came to New York in 1947 and the first thing I did was look for a job, and second thing, I went to school at night. I got both a job and went to school at night and within the first few weeks I took—they put me in the fifth grade. I was in fifth grade and…by the way, while I was in Germany I also went to school in Germany, I was in fifth grade and I was embarrassed with the children there, and I was grown and I got a tutor, a German student to teach me, he knows…Yeah, I discovered a new world, Algebra, things that if you don't about it, you don't know.

Interviewer: Sure.

Max Notowitz: And I went to a play, a German play, and I saw people so involved in this sort of—well, I mean they knew what was going on, it was a play, I think it was *Antigone*, you know, which is not that easy to digest. And I was left cold and I was told that you have to be educated to know. I said I enrolled in night school and within first few—I came to New York of February—no. No, March 14th, 1947 and by the end of May I had taken test and I passed the elementary school and—I mean, the fifth grade and the whole elementary school and I was able to go to high school. And then in the summer time I had enrolled in an English only school that was offered by the labor counsels—something like that—in New York and

then I was eligible for high school and started high school in New York. At the same time when I came to New York, I looked up people, relatives, and in fact I went to work for one of my relatives, and he gave me a job just like he gave jobs to at the other people. And then a man from the union came in and said, "You got two bucks?" I said, "What for?" He said, "Join the union. You get 75 cents an hour." Then my relative said to me, "Why did you have to join the union?" I said, "Why didn't you pay me 75 cents to begin with?" Anyway, some other relatives said, "You have relatives in Memphis." It was really my father's cousin, no close relative. And my cousin had a wife who was 32 years younger than he was. And he was up in age and they would come to New York on [unintelligible 0:54:51.0] in Memphis and the relative in New York arranged for me to meet them and they said, "Why don't you come to Memphis?" I said, "No, I got a job here. I'm going to school here." "Well we'd we like for you to come to Memphis." I didn't know whether they were serious or not, you know, like, "Come to see me sometime." But I said, "Let come for a visit during the Spring break." And I took the bus when I came, left New York and came and you know how you come from New York, past the Mason Dixon line. Anyway, I made it…

Interviewer: You loved it.

Max Notowitz: I came to—to Memphis and it was the eve of Passover and my aunt, I called her aunt but you know I couldn't say, "Hey, my second cousin's wife." You know what I mean? Calling her like that. I said, "Aunt Esther." Everybody called her Aunt Esther. She had about 30 people, and theye were no great Hebrew scholars, and you know when you read the Passover, you read the story of the Exodus and they were all orthodox and you read it in Hebrew, you don't understand it and sometimes you read the English. You know they all read passages and struggled through it and it came to me and I was fluent, I mean I really zoomed through and they gave me more sections and I keep telling my wife, "I snowed them with that thing." And so the next morning my aunt says to me, "You're not going back to New York." I said, "Look, I can't." I didn't know what she had in mind. She said, "We're gonna go, we're gonna register you in the Christian Brothers High School." It's a private school and she had a cousin whose son went to Christian Brothers so she…

Interviewer: Uh-hum.

Max Notowitz: And I didn't go back to New York, I sent for my stuff. I went to Christian Brothers and got credit for my foreign language and things and went to summer school and I graduated in two years.

Interviewer: Wow!

Max Notowitz: And then I got a scholarship to Vanderbilt, a tuition scholarship.

Interviewer: Great.

Max Notowitz: And it took me three years to graduate.

Interviewer: That's amazing.

Max Notowitz: And I was a good student.

Interviewer: I'll bet.

Max Notowitz: And a…

Interviewer: I remember, didn't they say that about you early on?

Max Notowitz: I say…see one of the things that I bring out and whenever I talk to people, to children, was my mother wrote a letter to me, the letter that I got. She had said that, you know, told me all the things to "Keep your clothes repaired," and "Be sure to eat warm meals," and "Don't trust people too much with whatever you have because they'll take advantage of you."

And one of the things she said, “I hope to be able to see you again, but if the good Lord denies me that, I want you to do one thing for me. The best way to get anywhere in the world is by acquiring an education, as much of it as possible. Promise me that if you have a chance, you’ll get a good education.” That always brings tears to my eyes. And you know it works in a lot of cases and “Children, I’ve had the satisfaction of it.” Like, there's the Facing the History in Ourselves, and each year they have a banquet. It was either last year or the year before, there was girl from a school, a black girl who said she was sort of going through school without any purpose. And then she heard me, and it sort of gave her an incentive to apply herself, and it made me feel good.

Max Notowitz: You see I’m such a softy.

Interviewer: It’s been an honor for us to talk to you.

Max Notowitz: Well…

Interviewer: And I’m gonna…