My Name is Staszek Surdel

The Improbable Survival of Nathan Poremba featuring Joel Poremba
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Speaker: Joel Poremba

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

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00:00 [Holocaust Living History Workshop / My Name is Staszek Surdel: The Improbable Survival of Nathan Poremba featuring Joel Poremba / Wednesday, April 26, 2023 / 5-6:30 p.m.]

00:03 Susanne Hillman: Welcome to today's Holocaust Living History Workshop. Today's event is advertised as the Lou Dunst Memorial Lecture and it features Mr. Joel Poremba. Before I introduce our speaker, I would like to say a few words about Lou. Many of you probably remember Lou. He was a Holocaust survivor who played an important role in the early Holocaust Living History Workshop. He often came to share his experience with students, staff, and community members. And almost always he was accompanied by his delightful wife Estelle. A calm person with an impressive and seemingly unlimited amount of kindness and serenity, Lou left an indelible impression on the many many people who knew him. Lou and Estelle, you are both missed if you hear us or me. Now, to today's speaker. Joel Poremba is a business attorney with 25 years of litigation experience in both state and federal courts. After obtaining a degree in political science from UC San Diego, Joel got a law degree from Western State University College of Law and the University of California. It's always nice to host a UCSD [University of California, San Diego] alumnus.

01:17 Susanne Hillman: Joel is also the son of a Holocaust survivor, Nathan Poremba. In 1998 Nathan gave his testimony to the Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Hearing the testimony was a revelation to Joel but it would take 21 years and a trip to Israel to finally for Joel to finally be ready to watch his father's testimony in its entirety. And maybe you'll talk about that. Currently, Joel is working on a master's degree in Holocaust Studies at Yeshiva University's Fish Center [for Holocaust & Genocide Studies]. As some of you know, UC San Diego is one of the few institutions - the very few I should say - on the West Coast to offer access to the full database of videotaped interviews with survivors of the Shoah and other genocides. Currently, the archive holds about 55,000 such testimonies. It is by far the largest such database in the world. From my own teaching and research, I can testify to the incredible riches the archive holds, including the full testimony of Nathan Poremba. And I'll be happy to help anyone who is interested in using the archive. Uh, and now it is my great pleasure to ask Joel Poremba to come to the podium. Please help me welcome him.

02:34 Joel Poremba: Thank you Susanne and thank you UCSD for having me. I would never have thought after graduating in 1989 that I would be speaking here in this capacity. Um, I remember a time - well this building wasn't even here - but I wrote dozens, well researched and wrote, dozens of papers in this Library as a political science major and history minor. So um, but dating myself, you still had to do research by hand. So um, now it's all online and you don't even need to go to a library which is kind of disturbing but nevertheless. So this this all began for me this way - um at my bar mitzvah, I wasn't even 13 years old, and I worked into my d’var

Torah or bar mitzvah speech, um the fact that my father was a Holocaust survivor and I boldly stated that one day I would tell his story. Um, the only problem was I didn't know his story. Um, two years later the synagogue would always invite bar mitzvah alum to come back get an *aliyah*, get called to the Torah, give a small speech, and update the synagogue on what you've done, where you've been, and where you're going. And I once again said my father is a Holocaust survivor and one day I will tell his story in book form.

04:10 Joel Poremba: After services and during the kiddush luncheon uh regular shul goer came up to me and said, I was at your bar mitzvah two years ago and I heard what you said. And I heard what you said today. Tell me what have you done in these last two years to bring your father's story to light? I was 15; the only significant thing I had done was study for my driver's permit. And I said that. And the man must have been in his 80s, he just gave me this look like, you're out of your league, you're out of your depth. Patted me on the back and walked right around me. He might as well have walked right through me. I realized then at the tender age of 15 that I had no idea how I would tell my dad's story and again, I still didn't know it. What was I supposed to do? Um, for the next 31 years, I immersed myself in every Holocaust show, Holocaust documentary, uh trying to get my father to open up and to discuss the Holocaust. He would pass the room, he would see me watching these films, and still, he would just walk right by. The few times he would actually sit down and I would try to engage him in conversation, he would just get up and walk right out.

05:30 Joel Poremba: It wasn't an uncommon thing for me to experience that. My father had many Holocaust survivor friends in the Los Angeles area and they would come to the house and none of them would talk about their experience in Europe. And almost all of them were from Poland, which is where my dad was from. Um, they all had an enormously warm energy and personality and yet the few times I would ask about a tattoo on an arm or where they had been it would just be a quick answer and they would almost immediately begin speaking Yiddish to my father. And without understanding a lick of Yiddish, I knew what they were saying. I knew that they were saying, why is he asking? What does he want? And there would never be an answer. And sensing the discomfort, I became accustomed to it. I realized that not every Holocaust survivor wanted to talk about their experience and my dad was one of those. So when I fast forward to I believe it was December [19]92, *Schindler's List* came out. My family of four, we went to see the movie and after the movie my father for the first time, probably accidentally, slipped two things out. He said, did you see the scene with the Schindler Jews going in and out of the Krakow ghetto? I used to sneak in and out under the cover of their large group.

06:54 Joel Poremba: It was dead silence and then he said, did you see the the camp? The labor camp Płaszów in the movie? I said yes. He said I spent a few weeks in there too. And that was it. And I thought for the next few years my father still would not talk about the Holocaust, until 1998 at my son's bris, or ritual circumcision. My father, out of the blue, came up to me and said that he had booked a date for the Shoah Foundation to come to the house and he was going to have his testimony recorded. If I was a betting person at that time I would have bet against him doing it. I was convinced he would cancel it. I didn't really understand what had changed that he suddenly would do such a thing. But nevertheless, the crew came on October 4th, 1998. They spent over eight hours in the house to collect almost four hours of testimony. And during that time, my wife and I had a six-month-old, and I was

growing restless over those eight hours and was pacing at the back of the house. And there were two times where I eavesdropped on the Q [question] and A [answer] between the interviewer and my father. And for the very first time, I heard two detailed stories that I had never heard before.

08:10 Joel Poremba: Um, the first one my father was explaining how once he had false papers and his next, his youngest sister had false papers, and hence the name Staszec Surdel. Um, that my, his sister had been captured by the Gestapo and they didn't believe that her name was truly Zusha Surdel. They believed she was Jewish and for several weeks they tortured her uh, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and my father was relaying that. Um, and it was very hard to listen to him recount that. I walked away and, hours later, I then eavesdropped again. And I'm gonna play for you, the four minutes that I did here. Um, but after hearing those two stories on that day for, for the next 21 years I wouldn't watch my father's video, nor would I talk to him about the Holocaust at all. On the other hand that experience for my father completely liberated him. It was the first time he had talked about the Holocaust to a stranger or to a fellow survivor in any kind of detail. And truly the shoe was on the other foot. He was chasing me around, when are you going to watch it? When are we going to talk? And I couldn't. And I, nor could I explain to him why I suddenly couldn't. I didn't want to reveal that I had eavesdropped. And I didn't want to explain what I heard listening to my father go through the Q and A and explain what he had witnessed.

09:41 Joel Poremba: Um until 2018 when I finally, for the first time, booked my first trip to Israel. And without any expectation that trip completely changed my outlook. Um it was a hundred Jewish men from around North America and South Africa that were on the trip and we were exposed to, I guess a way to say it is, movers and shakers type leadership on the uh, trip. And and I chronicle in the book, in the epilogue, the amazing experience I had in Israel, the people I met, the experiences I had, and the pearls of wisdom they gave. But the one I'll share with you, my own Rabbi - who took a contingency of Orange County men - um I had talked to him. And I said, um everyone knows what survivor's guilt is. And my father certainly had it. Why did I survive? Why did so many people not? Do I deserve it? What did I, what did I do to get here? I don't feel like I did enough to earn surviving. For me, I, I grew up with something I, I always called birth guilt. And that was, I knew that I was born as a result of the Holocaust. What, what Polish Jew, living south of Krakow, inarguably the center of the Jewish world at that time would have ever left Poland for New York and then eventually Los Angeles?

11:10 Joel Poremba: It would be unheard of. There would be no reason. Even with almost 600 years of rampant antisemitism in Poland 99, 98 percent of Polish Jews stayed in Poland. The Holocaust wiped out almost 450 members of both my grandmother's and grandfather's families. And due to that, my father came to the United States, and met my mother, and but for the Holocaust, I wouldn't be here. And it was a difficult thing to always walk around with and I had never verbalized it to anyone except for my Rabbi on that Israel trip. And my Rabbi said a very simple thing to me but it seemed to change everything for me. He said Joel, you are not the product of tragedy. You are the product of your father's triumph. And I hadn't, I hadn't thought about it that way. I still didn't know what resistance and resilience my father had employed to survive. So, I couldn't connect anything. Um, but I came back with a sense of energy and resolve. And I said to myself, I'm going to sit down and watch

his video and where it goes from there, we'll see. But six months went by and I still hadn't watched it. And I started getting text messages from the guys on the trip saying, you must have talked to your father. How did it go? And I hadn't. I absolutely hadn't.

12:33 Joel Poremba: And the second and third times they were texting me, I was ashamed that I still had not done it. It was still difficult to do. I came home with all this energy but it dissipated very quickly after coming home. Um, then my Rabbi was calling me. Have you done it? Have you spoken to your father? And I stopped answering that question. I clearly hadn't. And then right in, in March of 2019, I finally sat down and I watched the four hours. And it took me two nights to do it. It was very difficult to get through. Um, I called my father up. I told him I had watched it and I said, it's time that we we talked. And he said okay. I'm, I'm ready anytime you are and for another 10 hours I interviewed my father. And I wasn't even certain I was going to write a book. I just felt like I had finally reached the point in my life where I could face what he had been through and I was ready to hear it. And after that, I sat around for another year and I still hadn't put pen to paper. I wasn't sure I could really emotionally face it, typing words on a page, but I did. And next thing you knew, I had the entire book. And before my father fell ill, I had showed him the table of contents and he said you have the story. You have it now and he was involved all the way through the end of the first draft and I was able to get the book published before he passed on in October of 2021.

14:05 Joel Poremba: Um, the way the Holocaust started for my dad was like this, Kristallnacht was November 1938, and that Passover, for the first time ever, my grandmother at the Passover table said to the family, maybe it's time we all leave and go to America. And my grandfather said no, absolutely not. Then September 1st Nazi Germany invades Poland and my grandmother said to the family, maybe it is not too late. We should leave. And my grandfather said we are not going anywhere. Then, six days later, the Wehrmacht rolled into my father's town Wieliczka, just eight miles south of Krakow. And my grandmother once again said to my grandfather, you should run. You should go hide. All the men in the city are leaving, go. And my grandfather said no, I will not abandon my family. I'm staying right here. I am not afraid. Um, five days later the Germans were looking for 32 Jewish men who had remained in my dad's town. It became a city without men is what it was called. Um, 32 Jewish men stayed behind, one of which was my grandfather. He refused to leave.

15:26 Joel Poremba: On that fateful day, on September 12th, the Nazis came to my grandparents' door, came in looking for my grandfather and they couldn't find him and they moved on to the next person on the list. But my father's Polish neighbors directed the Germans to go back in. They said he's in there. Go back, you'll find him. So they doubled up the number of men and they went in and they found my grandfather. He wasn't hiding. He was sleeping on the opposite side of a couch that wasn't facing the doorway. So the German didn't see him initially. Um, on that day the 32 men were brought to the Center Square. They were told um, you're going out to the forest for a job and so you'll, you'll be back at sundown. And my father, at the age of nine, who knew anything on September 12th? No one knew what the Germans' plan was to exterminate World European Jewry. They certainly said it. But no one knew that they would actually do it and what it would look like. And here we are just 12 days into the war, no one suspected anything. They said they were

taking them out to work and they'd be back. Why should we not believe that?

16:41 Joel Poremba: Um, hours went by and one teenage boy had made his way - he followed the trucks that took the men to the forest - and came back with the news that all the men had been gunned down. My father's entire life changed at that moment. His childhood ended. Um, so what my father learned from that was my grandfather paid for, with his life by saying no four different times. My father learned on that day, no matter what the Germans order, no matter what they say, and no matter what the Polish police enforce, do the opposite. And that's what my father did. For the next two and a half, three years, my father hid in plain sight. He was small for his age. He had light-colored hair. He had blue eyes. He was fair-skinned and he absolutely refused to wear the required Star of David blue and white armband. Um, and when I asked him why he would do that and risk his life, he explained that a lot of Jews in Warsaw fled south to Krakow during the early days of the occupation and a lot of Jews from Krakow continued fleeing south. So the city's sitting below Krakow, one of which was my father's city Wieliczka, and due to overcrowding, an 8,000 population city turned into 25,000. And for a little boy that sort of looked Aryan and didn't wear the Star of David, my father was able to weave in and out of the crowds and illegally go into stores and buy food and other goods that the family would need. Because otherwise, Jews weren't allowed to go to work, they weren't allowed to go to synagogue, they weren't allowed to shop for food.

18:29 Joel Poremba: So my father, in a sense, in the early days of the war helped feed his own family at the age of nine. So I'm gonna play the four minutes that I eavesdropped on that set me back 21 years. And for context, this is July 1942, one month before um my dad's town would be liquidated and all the Jews from Wieliczka were sent to Belzec which of course was a death camp. And after I play it, I'll discuss what it is my dad was going through.

19:19 [Video clip of Nathan Poremba’s testimony / USC Shoah Foundation / Visual History Archive / You can watch more than 3,000 testimony videos from survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides. Testimony videos not viewable on the VHA Online can be viewed onsite at many institutions around the world. Find an access site near you, where all testimony videos can be viewed: https//:vha.usc.edu/access]

19:48 Joel Poremba: So, that's one of the two stories I eavesdropped on that shut me down for 21 years. And what my dad was explaining, if you didn't get it all due to the emotional pauses and the sound wasn't completely perfect, um my dad had already been experimenting by hiding in plain sight. He had gone once at the age of 10 up on the train illegally to Miechow, um north of Krakow, where he had an aunt. My dad was very restless in his town. He sensed something bad the entire time and he just didn't want to be in the house. He didn't trust anything that was going on around him. The Germans would come to the door looking for a 10-year-old boy to help construct the camp Płaszów nearby and when my dad would hear the door, answered by his mother, he would slip out the back of the house and run away. In this particular time, in the interview there, my dad had heard all the rumors that there were deportations, and people were being put on trains and sent somewhere. No one really knew where but no one was ever seeing these people again.

21:03 Joel Poremba: Obviously Polish Jewry didn't know about the final solution which

had been put into effect earlier that year, January of [19]42. Um but by July [19]42 my dad had a sense once again that something was out of place and he wanted to run. So he left with his youngest sister and took the train back to Miechow where he was going to sneak in and out of the ghetto. That's where he was going to live. And while at the train station in Krakow, a train coming through that was 25, 30 cars long with a hundred people stuffed into every single car was heading somewhere. And obviously, they were suffering, the people were in distress. They were thirsty. They were speaking Yiddish. My dad and his sister had absolutely no idea where they were going and because they were posing as Christians they couldn't employ any kind of empathy or any body language that would indicate maybe we should help them. They just stood there stone face taking it all in. Um, my father is almost 12 during what he was just talking about and his sister was 14. Um, my dad's other three sisters stayed behind with my grandmother because if a, if if a woman was walking around in Poland with children in tow clearly you would look like you were trying to escape and you would have attracted attention and been scooped up by the Germans or the Polish police without question.

22:30 Joel Poremba: But my dad and his sister, his youngest sister, without armbands that both fair head, fair-haired, and light-skinned, blue-eyed Polish Jews, they just mixed in with the overcrowding. Um later on in the book, I discussed another time when my father's at a train station and had to pretend like he didn't care, and clearly on, sprayed on the sides of the cattle cars were the words Treblinka. And he would later see trains that said Belzec and Auschwitz. He had no idea where these places were, or what they were, or where these trains of Jews were going but clearly from them suffering and, and crying he knew it was not a good thing. So for fuller context that is Krakow and my dad's town just south of it Wieliczka, a town that before the war was 8,000 people half of which was Jewish. It was definitely considered a Jewish town. Um, even back then and today Wieliczka is known for its famous salt mine. And this is one of the several photographs that my father was able to recover after the Holocaust and I grew up with this photo on the side of my father's bed.

24:02 Joel Poremba: And when I was five or six I said to him, who are these people? I couldn't understand, I had so much family on my mom's side of the family and I had virtually nothing on my father's side. And he explained to me these are my parents he said, and my four sisters. And I said well, where are they? And he said they were killed during World War II. I was five or six that was as much information as I had for decades. Um, this is a photo that my father had recovered, a family wedding in either [19]37 or [19]38. And um, in it my grandparents up front in the front row, and my father's two oldest sisters in the middle row. This is the main Market Square in Wieliczka. And the reason I'm showing it is because sometime between September 7th and the 11th um it became a playground for the Germans to round up Jewish men and humiliate them. And when I show you what's standing behind 43 Jewish men, you'll take it from me that that is the German Wehrmacht behind them with their trucks and equipment. I looked really hard at this photograph and I did not see my grandfather amongst the 43 men.

25:38 Joel Poremba: And it is documented, the wheelbarrow you see there, the Germans used to make Jews at this point in the war put large boulders in, in wheelbarrows and simply push them from point A to point B, for no construction purpose other than to tire them out, to humiliate them. Because when these activities would go on between the 7th and the 11th the local Poles would always line up for a showing.

Um, my dad couldn't remember if the Germans encouraged the Poles to come out and spectate or if they just did it on their own but my dad stood there and watched. And in this photograph, you can see one particular Orthodox Jew with a bucket. And my dad explained to me that most of the Wehrmacht was not mechanized in that, the division that came into my father's town had a fair number of horses. And the Jews were made to pick up horse dung and put it in the buckets and other times to put it simply in their pockets. And in this photo in the same square, the Germans cutting the religious side curls or *payos* off of a religious Jew's head. And if you're wondering who took these photographs you shouldn't be shocked to learn it's the German Wehrmacht themselves.

27:08 Joel Poremba: They documented most of their handiwork over the six years of the war and, as much as they did destroy, a lot was not destroyed. This is the day that 32 Jewish men were rounded up and taken to the forest, as I touched on earlier. And in this photo, you can clearly see a lot of, more Poles than in the previous days. And when I blow it up a little more, you can clearly see here another Orthodox Jew being brought into the center here by two Wehrmacht. This man here, I don't know if it was a, an undercover Gestapo or what have you, but my dad said that the boots that this man was wearing were not something that a Pole would wear. Um, and he seemed to be directing traffic amongst the Polish spectators for whatever reason. Um, my grandfather is done in this photo, or the any of the other ones. On this day he hadn't been rounded up yet so he hadn't been brought to the square.

28:20 Joel Poremba: This past summer my family and I were back in Israel. And even though I had been at Yad Vashem four years earlier, since I was with a large group we sort of hustled through most of the rooms. So, I didn't know what I discovered this past summer was the photo I just showed you is actually on a wall in Yad Vashem. And in this section of photos the placard read "Jews in forced labor." And I stood there and I thought, that's not what's happening in this photograph. As I told you, it had been five days of Nazi calisthenics, humiliating Jews. It's, it looks like it's forced labor, like in the photograph below where Jews are made to dig a ditch or shovel snow. So I'm in dialogue with Yad Vashem to try and get the placard changed. And they asked me why it was so important to me that the distinction be drawn and I explained to them the world, the world should know the different ways that Germans baited and humiliated Jews. And that what was made to look like forced labor actually wasn't in an attempt to gain passivity. Because for five days the Polish Jews in my dad's town didn't think anything bad was happening they just showed up, swept the roads, moved the boulders around with a wheelbarrow. They didn't suspect anything. This was to cut down and eliminate any resistance and it worked.

30:00 Joel Poremba: These are the three ghettos that my father snuck in and out of for the first three years of the war again, hiding in plain sight, pretending he was a Christian Pole, taking trains all alone, sometimes with his youngest sister, sneaking in and out of the ghettos. When, in July of [19]42, for the last time he left home and never went back. So, his shelter were these three ghettos. And this is the timeline of my father going back and forth, sneaking in and out of ghettos. When eventually in January of [19]42 him and his youngest sister acquired false papers. My dad would take on the Persona and the name Staszek Surdel and his sister Sasza Surdel and cousins that were still alive decided to split them up. My aunt was put in a home as a maid or a domestic servant. And for my father, he just shuttled from the Krakow

ghetto in and out under the cover of the Schindler Jews, aimlessly not knowing what tomorrow would bring. But as my father had done every single time sneaking in and out of the Miechow and the Bochnia ghettos, my dad always seemed to know when there was going to be a liquidation and he would leave. And every other time he would enter a ghetto for shelter, it had just been liquidated.

31:35 Joel Poremba: My father's luck the first three years of the war were indescribable. He actually decided to leave the Krakow ghetto right before its last liquidation and took, took it upon himself to find a job up at a farm in Bibice, just north of Miechow, posing as a Christian Pole going along with the birth certificate he had that bore the name Staszek Surdel. This is the only known photograph of the inside of the Miechow ghetto and it's a picture of an inhabitant of the ghetto and the Jews had carved the star David on the inside of the wall. This is one of very few photographs that are in existence of the Bochnia ghetto. And these are the front gates of the Krakow ghetto that my dad would sneak in and out of uh, in 1942. When my dad was up on the farm posing as a Pole um, he had to deliver daily dairy goods to a reclaimed uh, German fortress up the road. So even though my dad thought he was leaving the danger of Krakow and all the German activity there, he ended up being closer to danger than he was in Krakow.

32:58 Joel Poremba: Um, and he had an incident uh, on the farm uh, with a German soldier that was drunk. In an act of resistance, my father kicked into the mud after an altercation, splattered mud on the German's boots, and my father's punishment was to be sent as a POW [prisoner of war] to Bergen-Belsen. Um, but the farm owner was a drunk himself and no one was going to provide the dairy products to the Germans up the road. So, the farm owner sought my father's release, telling the Germans nearby that they were servicing, I'm not going to milk the cows and I'm not going to churn the butter. You got to go get that kid back for me. And my father was accidentally rerouted on the train to Plaszow and when the farm owner discovered that after a few weeks, he secured his release so that he could come back to the farm and re-engage with enslaved labor. And this is what the uh the fortress looks like up the road in Bibice. It was a World War I German fortress that the Germans reconstituted and there was a large contingency underground.

34:13 Joel Poremba: And and I want to note also um, my father had a front-row seat to the retreating German line right at that fortress. Um, the Soviet Red Army stopped their assault right there. They fought for a week and then continued pushing West and when that occurred in early [19]45. The war was over for my father but then unfortunately he went back to Wieliczka and found out that the whole town had been liquidated. Um, these were the deportation orders that the Germans and the local Polish police put up. They put it up on August 26 and the deportation was for the following day on the 27th. And in English, I wanted to highlight on numbers two, three, and four. This is part of the deception that the Germans employed. Um, in number two it says uh, if you have a passport or work permit you don't have to be deported. Um, and number three if you're sick and in the hospital, you don't have to be deported either. And then in number four, pack a bag. You're gonna get on the train. None of these were true. As we know, you could bring a bag but the bag was false. I mean you were going to a death camp so, it was just to gain passivity from the Jews so that they wouldn't rebel when getting on trains at gunpoint. And two and three, they gunned down everyone in the Wieliczka hospital and no one was exempt whether you had a work permit or a passport. And in six, seven, and eight,

it's basically if you resist you will be shot.

35:53 Joel Poremba: And I just wanted to call attention to the fact, when it says police there - that's the Polish police who were complicit in almost everything bad that happened in Poland and certainly in my father's town, in Wieliczka. And this is a postcard of what the train station looked like a long time ago and what it looked like in 2013 when still there was no plaque or any kind of memorial um of this station being a waypoint to Belzec. When, unbeknownst to me, 80-year anniversary of the deportation uh, Wieliczka cleaned up the the station and actually held a memorial there. Um, I don't think they put a plaque up but shockingly they did recognize what happened on that very day. But in contrast uh, the city of Wieliczka has never recognized what happened on September 12, 1939, when I showed you the photos of the roundup of my father's town. And the reason for that is obvious. Um, a local municipal clerk in the Polish mayor's office helped the Germans put together a list of the remaining Jewish men in my father's town. And the local Polish neighbors helped the Germans find exactly where the Jews were living on that list. And more specifically, redirected the Germans to go back into my father's house to find my grandfather. So that is the reason they don't recognize that particular operation because they the Poles did participate in that roundup and genocide on that day.

37:35 Joel Poremba: And after the war, my dad came back from the farm to Krakow shocked that he did not recognize anyone. No store owners that he knew previously were there. And then he made his way back to his home in Wieliczka. And when he was there, he went to his childhood home. He never had any intention of staying in Poland. He merely wanted to go in to get some momentos, heirlooms, only to find a Polish family had moved into his house. This is a common phenomenon almost 90 percent of Polish Jewelry were wiped out and for the hundreds - maybe 100,000 Polish survivors - they all went back to their synagogues, their homes, their businesses there, someone had moved in or either bulldozed the synagogue or business. And my dad was met with open hostility by the Polish family that moved in. And the woman that answered the door said am I seeing a ghost? Why are you here? Why are you still alive? She was upset that my father had survived. And my father went to go get a Soviet militia man. Again, he made it clear to her he didn't want the house. He didn't want to move back in, he just wanted to go in and go in the attic and get a few things. And she said to the Russian militia man, they violated then existing German law. He failed to report for deportation, so his claim here is invalid.

39:04 Joel Poremba: Well, the Soviet militia man was no, no friend of the Poles at that point and evicted her. Um, but my father didn't stay. I mean, he just removed a few photographs a few items and left. But as many survivors have said, just like my dad, the house hadn't been touched. Every piece of furniture was exactly the way it was when he left, the carpets. It just, it made no sense. But this was a phenomenon in almost every home that a Jew survivor encountered. I chose this is the cover for my book. Um, That’s my father in Hungary after the war. And it's, it's a face of a person that I I never saw. This is a person who suffered greatly for three years, hiding in plain sight, and for three years under intense suffering on the farm, wearing the same set of clothes, no access to a regular bath or shower, no access to any kind of medicine, and having to pretend for three years that he had no care in the world what was going on on the outside. Um, that face of confusion and loss is not a face that I grew up with.

40:24 Joel Poremba: Um, this is my father six years later on the SS Washington coming to New York um, due to the uh Congress's uh displaced persons act which finally allowed Jews to leave Europe for the United States. And this is my father at 21. And that is the face of of the man that I knew. And this is my dad's youngest sister that actually survived with him on false papers. Um, I don't know another way to say this, but she didn't have it as bad as my dad. After she was tortured by the Gestapo, she was able to remain in a house as a domestic maid for the last three years. She had no idea where my father was while he was on the farm and she ended up dying in 1961 after moving to Los Angeles along with my father. Um, that was my my parents when they wed and this is the day after my bar mitzvah when I made that promise uh to the synagogue that I would one day tell my father's story. Um, back in those days you'd have your bar/bat mitzvah reception often the day after your bar mitzvah and that's when this photo was actually snapped.

41:42 Joel Poremba: And that was uh us at uh my wedding. And you saw the video earlier, a little clip. And at the end, they they had my mom, my brother, my wife, and my six-month-old on screen to say a few words. And currently, we are working on a short animated documentary um, and I just have a few cuts to show you. Uh, this is the interview and by one of the the lights on the right is the slats door um that I eavesdropped and listened to two stories that my dad told. And that's pretty much all I could see but I could clearly hear what I heard about the Gestapo story with my aunt and when my dad told his mother that he was leaving for the very last time. And that would be a rendering of what life was like on the farm for my father bringing dairy products up the road to the local German garrison. And it was important to me to at least show you that my dad lived to get an Aliyah my son's Bar Mitzvah and did the same at my daughter and her Bar Mitzvah and this is at the reception and with that I just want to again, thank you UCSD for having me and be happy to answer any questions that anyone has.

42:23 Susanne Hillman: Okay. Um yes, I will walk around with the microphone and please wait until you have the microphone to ask, to ask your question.

43:43 Speaker 1: Thank you for a wonderful presentation. I was wondering how much you have been involved in the [unclear] discussions [unclear] DNA as well as

44:12 Joel Poremba: And it's an important question. Um, I started reading and hearing about what I called alleged trauma to Second Generation. I didn't, I didn't understand it, and because I didn't experience it at home. Um, however after I watched my dad's video, I realized that there was some trauma. Um, and I'll tell you one incident. I was 13, 14 playing in the backyard with a very close friend and my brother. And my dad came out the backyard to say goodbye, he was going to work. And he said goodbye and the three of us were so engrossed in what we were playing with neither, none of us acknowledged him. He repeated it three more times, bye guys I'm going to work. And again, none of us responded. And I looked up I saw my dad turn to leave. And I looked up to see his backside and he looked over his left shoulder and he clearly said, you would never have survived. And I didn't at the time, at 13, understand why he would say such a crushing thing to a 13-year-old. So, I figured at that time we ignored him. He said he was going to work. No one, no one responded. Okay, I guess it was bad. But when I was somewhere between college and law school I thought, there has to be something bigger to that. But my father and I were not talking about the Holocaust so I had no

inkling. When I watched the video, at the very end the questioner asked my dad to sum up and he very clearly said my childhood was stolen from me. My world changed when I was nine years old.

45:58 Joel Poremba: And it it finally occurred to me, that if we were so busy playing it was something he had cut short at nine. And it must have triggered him in that one moment. Um, that, that was really the only thing that my father ever said that was related to Holocaust in terms of trauma. Um, but I would say that the other thing that I that really bothered me growing up was whenever, whenever we would encounter family or friends people would hear my dad had a strange accident. He was only in school up till nine, so he didn't have a classical Eastern European Polish accent. He spoke Yiddish, German, Russian, Hebrew. It was hard if you listened to him to pin where he was from. So people would always inevitably say where are you from? And my dad would always say I'm from New York because for him that's when his life began. But clearly, my dad didn't sound like a New Yorker, and, no offense, he didn't act like a New Yorker. Um, it bothered me hearing that because I knew it wasn't true that he was from New York. But it was his way of saying I don't want to say I'm from Poland. Don't ask me any questions about the Holocaust. So he would leave it there. But almost every person would give a look, you're not a New Yorker. So growing up with that, it bothered me. But then it made sense because my father didn't want to be asked about the worst time in his life when he had no power or control over his person, and when he suffered so much and lost over 450 members of our family. So, I know second-generation men and women who definitely had more trauma than my brother and I did. But um, after watching the video - to answer your question - I realize it is real and those were the two things that I dealt with which is nothing compared to what other people did.

47:54 Speaker 2: Thank you so much. Um, [unclear]. Where do you think your father [unclear] at age nine to come up with everything that did at such a young age I can't even imagine that -

48:17 Joel Poremba: Being lied to where his father was being taken and then he comes back with a bullet-ridden body um, that set the stage for my father right then. He just knew I'm not going to do anything that's asked of me by the Germans. And immediately sliding out the back door when anytime they were looking for him to construct the Plaszow camp, my father just kept on the run. His will to live was indescribable. Um I think his incentive for getting through those three years - and no one knew the war was going to last another three years, right - getting through the three years on the farm, I think my father his incentive was I don't know what happened to my mother and my three sisters and then his youngest sister that was you know working as a maid. He was living to get to the day where he could see them again. It was only after the war before he made it back to Wieliczka did he realize almost every town in Poland had been deported to death camps. But he had to go there to find that out in 1945. So, his incentive was to see his family again and he was thoroughly upset by that.

49:33 Susanne Hillman: Questions? I’m going to come around.

49:48 Speaker 3: Thank you for doing this. What would your father say about the Russians? It seems like with the Russians conquering the Germans people have been out of one advantage of fires it seems like he got away pretty easily and what

was that about?

50:07 Joel Poremba: Um, I'll, I'll tell you a story about the Russians. So, when they were fighting with the Germans right outside of his farm um, at night the wounded soldiers in the battlefield were moaning and the Germans would always try to recover their wounded and the Russians would pick them off one by one. But when the Russian soldiers were moaning in the fields, the Russians wouldn't retrieve them. So, the Germans weren't able to, to even out the numbers, and they were crushed in the end. But my dad, and his few cousins that survived, they knew they needed to get out of Poland. Uh, it was obvious to the world what Poland, what Russia was there to do to Eastern Europe and that was to create a huge buffer in front of itself. Um, it was just like you say, out of the fire and into the frying pan. There was no doubt about it. But my, my, my father and his few cousins, they were in Belgium; they were in France; they were in Czechoslovakia; they were back to Poland. The antisemitism picked up right where it left off. Um, and my family actually felt safer in Poland than they did in any other part of Europe but they knew they needed to get out because the Iron Curtain was clearly closing. And then Russia went on to punish the Poles for 75 years behind the wall. So um, yeah. It wasn't from anything good to anything better no no question about it

51:41 Susanne Hillman: Final question? Or more, we have a little bit of time.

51:47 Speaker 4: Thank you for your presentation. [unclear]

52:04 Joel Poremba: You mean my father? It was a very antisemitic town but it was half Jewish. There were every denomination of synagogue there. There was a huge Zionist movement there, um Jewish businesses, kosher butchers, everything. But there were plenty of incidents and I sped the early chapters of the book explaining everything that my father experienced between five and nine antisemitic incidents. Um, my grandfather was the de facto leader of the Jewish community in the town. He had a presence where whatever Jew was being beaten or verbally harassed, my grandfather got involved every time and it would and the incident would end right away. Um, that was kind of commanding presence that my grandfather had. He was 6 [foot] 4 [inches], had a deep voice. And my father watched all this from age five to nine. And without knowing, my grandfather was modeling for my father how to stand up to evil. But what my father learned from my grandfather saying no four times, he didn't want to run, my father learned when to run and when to believe that evil is evil and there's no fighting it without weapons and just to hide. But it was a very Jewish town. Um, most of it would shut down on Shabbat and the Jewish holidays and there was an unhealthy respect between Pole and Jew in that town but it was a, I mean my dad had a good childhood up to age nine. Overall it was a good Jewish community.

53:49 Speaker 5: Thank you very much for sharing. I wonder if your father was able to start talking about his past but he talked much with you about his own mother and father and whether it was hard for him to remember those things and share it with you.

54:15 Joel Poremba: No, it wasn't hard for him to remember and I got enough detail that I actually wrote one chapter about my grandfather before the war and one chapter about my grandmother before the war. Um, and I explain all the modeling without

my grandfather and grandmother knowing what they were providing for my father. But without, without the structure of resilience that they provided, my father would not have survived. And they had no idea what they were providing. I mean, my grandmother was not asked, she was told by my father I'm leaving. Twelve years old, I'm leaving. And my grandmother, she could have fought back but she gave him the freedom to run. And she had no idea if that was increasing or decreasing his odds of survival. It ended up saving his life, clearly, because if he had stayed the whole town was deported to Belzec.

55:13 Speaker 6: Hi um, in the video did your father ever mention any non-Jewish people that have helped the Jewish people or [unclear]?

55:30 Joel Poremba: The the only non-Jewish help my my dad received was the false papers that were sold to my dad's cousin and then he gave it to my dad and his sister. It was a priest. Um, he charged 500 zlotys which was a lot of money during the war um. But my dad and I talked extensively about this priest. My dad didn't remember his name. Um clearly, if he was trying to set up Jews to give out false papers and then tell the Gestapo hey I sold these and now you can find them, he would have done it. But he didn't. So, he was truly trying to help. And he needed an income, so he was charging for it. There were a lot of dead Polish children from the *blitzkrieg* in the opening weeks of the war. Um, so the priest got a hold of a lot of birth certificates of dead young Polish kids. So, he was selling them discreetly. Um, that's the only non-Jew that helped. And clearly, those false papers helped my dad survive because he traded on that to be able to work at the farm. Because the farm owner was suspicious of him initially, asking are you from a city? Are you from the countryside? Jews came from cities and Polish non-Jews came from the countryside. And my father said I'm from the countryside. Here's my birth certificate. So, he couldn't have hid for the last three years under that persona without those papers, so.

57:01 Speaker 7: Thanks Joel. I feel your pain with that when you are talking. My question has to do with the documentary [unclear]. Is this a feeling that Dad I've done a lot. I've made this book but I haven't done enough. I still need more. I feel more. I, I want to give your story more extension and other people. What are your feelings about why you're making the documentary?

57:42 Joel Poremba: You, you hit on a truth. Um, I would say that is probably 20, 30 percent of the reason why. The the rest, there is no formal Holocaust education in 25 states. And even for the 25 states that do have a Holocaust education curriculum, it's very quick. It's, there's nobody in the United States, there's no group that is actually overseeing it. It's sort of like pick a school district, you have a motivated teacher. He or she just cooks up a lesson and they maybe it's one day. Maybe it's three days. Maybe it's a week spread out over the entire year. I want to be a part of that and I'm interested in hitting middle school and high schoolers. And if I bring his story to light in a short animated documentary I'll hopefully engage students along those, those lines. So yeah, it's to bring more attention and fulfillment to myself in continuing to tell a story but in another way, in another medium that today's youth can relate to better than reading a book. Because I know so many of them don't like to. Um, so it's just that hopefully, the documentary will cause you to read the book because there will be way more detail in the book about what went on for six years than there will be in a 13-minute short animated

documentary. So it's all that.

59:10 Susanne Hillman: We have two final questions.

59:12 Speaker 8: It would be interesting in knowing how um your father, as a youngster like that, avoided, officially avoided, getting the armband. And your story reminds me of *Empire of the Sun* which I just saw the other night - the Spielberg movie about the little boy in the Japanese camp who's running around helping everybody who uh - it is quite a phenomenal story. And I think your father's story is quite a phenomenal story as well. But how did he avoid in the initial, when they were going to bring armbands on all the children, how did he avoid that?

59:54 Joel Poremba: Well, like I said earlier, the town became overcrowded and he truly got lost in the shuffle being so small and looking Aryan. Um, my dad I guess you could say was bold at that age. And just his answer was no when asked to do anything by the Germans. And he thought he could get away with it and he did. He had one incident when he was trying to buy food. Jews were not allowed to go in stores with an armband and buy food. And the kid who told the German soldiers to go back into their house saying that man is in there, he was in the store that my dad was buying food at and recognized him. And my dad - and he says this in the interview - just did a 180. Ran out the store. He didn't hear anything after that. He wasn't pursued um but his heart leapt into his throat because if he had been caught, A you're in a store illegally buying food, and B you're not wearing the armband. And my dad probably would have just been put on a train and never seen again or just shot right there in the streets. But for whatever reason, times were tough, it was a busy city, people were struggling for food and that kid never went looking for my father again after that. And I talk about my father looking for him in 1945 after the war and the moral dilemma my father faced in should I look for him, and if I look for him what am I going to do to him? My dad just left the country and took the higher road.

1:01:29 Speaker 9: Question. What did your dad wind up doing professionally once her came to the US? And second part of the question um how did his experience uh influence how he raised you and his outlook on life for his long life?

1:01:49 Joel Poremba: He ended up buying two liquor stores, sundry stores, in the LA area. Um, they were Jewish areas in the [19]60s and then became dangerous places to work. So eventually he sold them and retired but he worked those two stores for almost 40 years. And he would work six days a week, 12 hours a day. Um, didn't have a formal education, um you know, he he learned a few trades and as a result, he did all the plumbing and electrical and carpentry in the house growing up. Um, he was a self-made guy as far as that went. Um and what was the other part of the question? Uh, my dad didn't wear the Holocaust on his sleeve. If you had met him you wouldn't have suspected anything um which was the case for most Holocaust survivors that I've met. There was nothing on them about bitterness or loss. So my dad had a very cheery, rosy outlook on life. He didn't, he wasn't bitter. He didn't talk about the past and he instilled a great work ethic in my brother and I that, you're not going to get anything in life without working hard. And since he didn't achieve for himself during those early years, in his teens and 20s before he came to the United States, he wanted that for his sons. And he sent us to Hebrew private schools growing up. And between him and my mom, they made us study, study, study every

waking hour if we weren't eating, sleeping, or in class. Um, that was, that was what was instilled in my brother and I. So, you know, he wanted everything for us that he didn't achieve. So he was proud that my brother became a dentist and I became a lawyer. And I think through us that's, that's what he wanted.

1:03:49 Susanne Hillman: So I would like to announce that some of you have probably seen um Joel is selling his book. So, if you would like to learn more you can pay cash or credit card. It's out there. And before you leave I'd also like to draw your attention to our final event of the year. On May 17th we will host Peter Hayes. He's one of today's foremost Holocaust scholars, uh internationally renowned, and he will talk about the quest for profit that inspired so many antisemitic actions and policies. So please, if you can, join us on May 17th. Thank you all for coming and thank you above all for Joel.

1:04:32 Joel Poremba: Thank you.