

In your story, after the liberation, you had returned to your hometown in Czechoslovakia?

Right.

You found your mother there.

Right.

Whom else did you find?

My brother, and we did not know whether-- we knew that our sister survived till a certain time, but we were not sure yet. Later on, we heard that she was taken to Sweden. One transport of young children were taken, because after Auschwitz, she wound up in Bergen Belsen. From Bergen Belsen, they took her to Sweden. And my sister came back some time-- must have been already May or June 1945 from Sweden.

And we all gathered together, and we made plans to leave. Of course, we all wanted to go to Israel. We had an uncle that was living in France, so our first stop was to go to France. I stayed behind because we had some property still left over there. The house still belonged to us, although we couldn't get it back, because it was a communist regime. But they let us live in the house.

And the store was taken over by a Gentile woman, and there was no more merchandise left. But somebody told us that she was hiding some merchandise in her apartment. We got back some merchandise. We tried to sell out as much as we could to make a few dollars so we'll be able to leave Czechoslovakia.

So first, my mother, brother, and sister left for France, and they stayed there with the uncle for a while. And I stayed back to liquidate whatever we had. Then I came to France in 1946. They left in 1945 for France. I stayed until '46.

Also, I wanted to go to Israel. I found out they had left already for Israel with one of the Exodus ships. And so I stayed back in France by my uncle. And I was in contact-- I was writing to Israel. [INAUDIBLE] My brother wrote me a letter. She said, do not come to Israel right now. Things are very bad. We are struggling over here. He says, you better go to the United States and make some money because we could use some money over here.

So I was listening my mother, and by my time came to go to the United States in January 1948, I came to this country. I got a job right away as a salesman. I could read and write English when I got to this country, but I couldn't speak it.

Where I learned to speak it is I was drafted into the United States Army in-- it was November 1948, the Truman draft. And this is how I learned to speak. First, I learned every four-letter word, and the rest of the vocabulary. And I stayed in the Army. We only stayed over a year. They had enough volunteers then, and they released us just before the Korean War.

I'm sorry to interrupt. When you came from France, came to the United States, did you have prior contacts with individuals in the United States?

Yes. Yes, I had-- first of all, I had two uncles living over here in the United States. And I was picked up by my mother's cousin. Then when I got here in January of '48, that was the biggest-- they said the biggest winter in history, yeah, the '47/'48 winter. It was more snow than there was in Europe.

So I was taken right away to her house, and then--

Which was where?

That was on the East Side.

In New York City--

In New York City.

--the Lower East Side.

The Lower East Side. Then I was taken to Brooklyn. My uncle lived in Brooklyn, another uncle in the Bronx. And then I got myself a job as a salesmen in the textile line. And then I was drafted into the Army.

We'll come back to the United States part of the story soon. I just reminded myself that I know you had some connection with one of the real heroes of the Holocaust, the rabbi of Nitra.

Well, the rabbi of Nitra, I knew well. But the real hero was his son-in-law, Michael Weissmandel, who was working very hard to save the few thousand Jews that were-- about 20,000 Jews left in Slovakia in 1944. And he was doing the negotiating with--

Gisi Fleischman.

Gisi Fleischman was also active. And they were paying off as much money as they could get out of the community. There were so few people left with money, and to postpone the transports as far as they could. But it didn't work because they stopped for a few months. And at the end, we all went. But while--

Could you describe Rabbi Weissmandel?

Weissmandel, he was a brilliant man. He had a wild look in his eyes, and he was so devoted to the course of saving people that many times he just had complete disregard of his own safety. He fell-- he was the one that jumped off a moving train and got into a bunker in Bratislava. And even from the bunker, he was working to try to find out where all the Jews are hidden, if they have any needs, to help them. He's a fabulous man. I still--

He was the one who demanded that the Allies bomb the tracks and the camp, Auschwitz.

I was carrying letters between Nitra and while i was traveling. There's one incident that happened. I was once on a train, and a tall fellow with boots came over to me, looks me straight in the eyes, and says, [HEBREW]. The word [HEBREW], you know what means. It means "urinate." It's a Hebrew word for "urination." This was the password among us that we wanted to recognize each other without letting anybody know who we are, the ones that were traveling with false papers.

And he says to me, [HEBREW]. And he says to me-- he gives me-- it was Slovakian money, a few hundred koruna, or whatever it was at this time. I don't know how much it amounted to. I was at that time near the Polish border, [PLACE NAME] He says, there is a train going to leave over here. He says, in a half an hour. I want you to get on this train, he says. The police is paid off. We have some smuggled Jews they smuggled over the Polish border. They're on the way to Hungary, and from Hungary they were going to Turkey, and then to Israel.

He says, all I want you to do is, over there, keep that money. He says, if you have any trouble over there that they recognize or something, most of them are paid off, but in case there is one of them that gets out of line, and he wants to cause trouble, he says, pay him off. He says, they all take money.

And go with them to-- the town was Rozmberk Just accompany them all the way. See that it's all right. And there was-- see, at that time, there were still some families who were still allowed to stay in Czechoslovakia because of economic reasons. In other words, the Gentile that took over the business claimed that he needs the Jew to help him out. So

Some of them were producing Army uniforms. In other words, it was all necessary for the war effort. So those Jews could stay. So, and a lot of families that were able to get papers stayed there. So there were still plenty of-- about 20,000 still left that were not sent away with the family transports.

So there was still a community over there. They had a synagogue over there in Rozmberk And this is where all those Polish Jews were gathered, waiting. I brought them over there. I see everything was all right. I didn't know what to do with the money. I gave it to one of them over there, and I told them the story.

First, they missed-- they didn't trust me because the way I was dressed. But when I came in the morning, I told them that I just came here to see that they're all right. And I say goodbye to them and I left them.

And one other question, and then we'll come back to the United States part. When you came back to your hometown, four of the six members of your family survived. What was the proportion of the people-- of the Jews in the town who survived?

We had about the best percentage of survival because--

"We" meaning your family or your town?

No, my family, I would say. We were very lucky. Well, lucky-- I lost my father. My mother was hiding out. The percentages was-- some families were wiped out completely. In fact, most of them were wiped out completely. But as the youth that went in 1942, that got a little better jobs in Auschwitz, a lot of these survived.

The youth. You're talking the youth It was my age now. The ones that were in their 40s and 50s, I don't know of anybody that survived, maybe one that looked young and were very strong that survived. My father came from a family of 12. Nobody came from-- and I don't know, it must have been at least, I don't know, maybe 5, 6 dozen children among the 12--

Siblings.

--siblings.

The ones from the concentration camp came back from one family, one girl, from another family, one boy. That's the one that saved me, and the girl is the one that saved my sister. But they are the only ones that came back, their families, nobody else came back. But my family, we were lucky that I got back my brother and sister.

Were you later in going to the camps, or was it just luck?

Well, it had to do a lot-- a lot had to be luck. And also, in my case, it was because I went late. My brother also went late. My brother was only caught in-- my brother left for Auschwitz sometime in September, in 1944. It's also--

Towards the end of the war.

--towards the end.

All right, now, if we may, let's bring the story closer to date. You were in the United States, and you were drafted into the Army. You got out of the Army, became a salesman.

I used to get \$75 a month. I used to send my mother every month \$50, and I kept \$25 for myself.

She was in Israel?

She was in Israel already.

And this was when, about '49, '50?

This was '49, and beginning of '50, I was released.

You weren't married yet?

No.

I assume you married shortly after that?

I married two years later, in 1952.

And where did you live?

Well, at the time, I lived in Brooklyn, and my wife lived in New Jersey.

She's in New Jersey first.

She's in NJ. Well, she was born in Manhattan, but the parents lived in NJ.

All right. So that brought you to New Jersey?

That brought me-- that's where we got our first apartment, in New Jersey.

And where did you live after that?

Well, the first apartment was in Union City, New Jersey. Then, from Union City, we moved to Plainfield. And then we came to Elizabeth.

From Plainfield to Elizabeth.

What brought you to Elizabeth, where you've been living most of your married life?

Well, mostly the children, the school, the JEC, the Jewish Educational Center.

All right. Do you have any questions about the New Jersey part of it?

Having a family network or relatives in place attracted you to Manhattan.

Right.

And you were able to get a job in a business you knew something about.

Right.

Was that-- did you find other survivors having similar experiences? Or was that relatively unusual from what you knew?

I'll tell you something. I wish I didn't know English the way I know, because some of those that didn't know how to read and write English are now they're big builders and they're multimillionaires.

[LAUGHTER]

They had to become carpenters and bricklayers, and today they're multimillionaires.

But when you came here, did you find-- particularly in the family, your relatives, did they have any understanding of what had gone on? Or was your story--

No. Let me tell you something. First, when we came over here, of course, they knew that there was problems over there. But they had no idea what happened to concentration -- From the silly questions they ask us-- how did the food taste, and did you-- were you able to see a movie, they asked me. Or what could you read? Did you get newspapers?

So when we heard these silly questions over there, we shut up and we started to talk about it, because we also heard that some of the guys that told them what happened, they felt they were exaggerating. They didn't believe them, so we just stopped talking about it. In fact, we stopped talking about it for such a long time, then even after I had children, and my wife asked me a question, we also did not discuss it. We just felt that nobody is going to believe it anyway, because I myself wouldn't believe it if somebody would tell me a story like this. So we didn't talk about it.

In fact, my oldest son, when he was about six years old, and something came up. Company came, and they started to ask questions, and I just gave him a few details. So my little son says to me, Daddy, you were just standing there and let them shoot at you? You didn't shoot back? [CHUCKLES]

So there was no understanding?

There's no understanding, no.

And when did you start talking to your children about it?

Well, when they were a little older, usually during the Seder night, when we have Passover, when we have a gathering, the whole family, and we recount the exodus. So sometimes the children would say, well, Daddy, tell us something what happened in the camps, just a few things.

But I didn't want to spoil the Seder evening, so I may have told them a few stories. But I didn't want to tell them about the real things while I was gone over there. I felt it was not fitting to talk about it at the table.

But you have told them the real thing? Or have they discovered it for themselves?

They discovered most of them by themselves. They were reading. My children always go to when there's stuff over here in Kean College, when they have the Holocaust gathering. My daughter, especially, she always comes and listens to the stories. And they also urged me to make this tape, [CHUCKLES] if they called me, I should not refuse it.

So they'll want to see this tape, I believe.

Right.

One final question I've got, then is just I'm interested in following you into New Jersey. I take it then it was a business opportunity, a career move, more than anything else that brought you here?

Yeah, but what happened, we lived-- I worked in Manhattan. When I was still single, I worked in Manhattan. And then this was Second Avenue. And Bellevue Hospital was expanding, and they took down that whole area. And I lost my job, and I was looking to go into business for myself.

And through some contact, a fellow that I knew in Jersey City, in the same line-- I helped him out with some merchandise at one time he needed. He appreciated it. He asked me if I would be willing to go into business with him, open up another store because I was mostly in the decorating line. He was mostly in the dress goods line. So we opened up a little store in Rahway, New Jersey. And then we expanded, and this is what brought us to NJ.

You've been in business in New Jersey ever since?

And I've been in business since 1955, 37 years.

Mr. Moskowitz, after all that you've been through-- and it's been tremendous, and we certainly appreciate your coming

in and sharing with us your story-- how has this affected your philosophy of life, your understanding of human nature?

Well, I was very disappointed in the human race because what I saw what was going on over there. But if human beings can do the things that they were doing, I don't think they-- we were much more above animals. But, then again, I suppose there is such a thing as self-preservation. Everybody tries to preserve himself.

I would say that most of the things that happened in the camp was self-preservation. And as far as the Germans, I still cannot understand to this day. Of course, there is some hatred to me against the Nazis. I would not say-- I would say there is both pity and hate, but more pity than hatred, because it's unbelievable what one human being can do to another one. Then we are not more than animals.

Did they see you as human beings, do you think?

I think that most of the Germans, the training that they got, they did not consider us as human beings, maybe some kind of subhuman race or something, because I just cannot understand that if they would consider us human beings, how they could do the things that they did.

When do you think they saw you as human beings? After the war, did they?

Well the restaurant owner who cleared off two tables saw you as a human being.

Well, maybe he was a human being. I still don't know. Maybe he was afraid. Maybe he wanted to show that he was one of the good Germans. You still can't tell.

Or self-preservation on his part.

Yeah. It's still hard to get into somebody's inside to find out what prompts them to do certain things. All I know, that a German could shoot somebody without hesitation, without thinking twice, just for his convenience, because when we were walking, and we were walking a little slower because the shoes were ripping, and the shoes were falling off, and so if somebody had to step out of line to tie his shoe, or he had to go in to relieve himself, this would slow him down a little bit. So it would be more convenient to shoot him. And so we can't-- he couldn't let him there because that would mean that he escaped, which would be against the rules. And the Germans went strictly according to the rules.

In your estimation, is there anything we can learn from all this?

I don't know. I don't know whether this is going to help. Maybe this will help, if people will see what could happen me if you don't behave like a human being, because I've seen educated people-- most of the officers, I would say, in order to be a German officer, you had to be educated. So I see that has nothing to do with education.

Sometimes you found a plain person that could not read or write, and he took you in. And I didn't see too many cases in Slovakia, but here in Poland, I know stories that some of the peasants took in whole families, and they survived the war. And they had no education. So it seems that education has nothing to do with it.

And religion, definitely, has nothing to do with it because I've seen the best Catholics that wouldn't take in a Jew. And then you saw some Protestants would take them in. And some Protestants would not take them in. And so religion has nothing to do with it. Education has nothing to-- either you have a good heart or you don't have a good heart. I don't know what it is.

Final question, now that we've come this far, and we're finally talking about it and studying it and teaching it, what do you think our responsibility is in terms of the events of the Holocaust?

Well, what you are doing over here in Kean College, I think you're accomplishing a lot because at least it's going to be on the record, and people can see could happen. The responsibility is to educate people to behave like human beings, because today it happened to the Jews. Tomorrow it can happen to the Blacks.

It can happen to Catholics, all of a sudden. You don't know. The United States may become more Protestants, and they start persecuting Catholics. So the main thing is to teach people they have to learn to live together and to recognize each other's beliefs. And just because you are different, that doesn't mean that you are his enemy. And I always felt the problem with anti-Semitism was because we were different. And by being different, they thought that we were their enemies. And they never trusted us.

I think that's a proper note on which to conclude. I want to thank you for coming down and sharing this experience with us. I'm sure that it's going to be very helpful to your family, to your grandchildren, your children, and so on. And it's going to be helpful to us in teaching about the Holocaust. Thank you very much.

Thank you.

Thank you.