

We're continuing our discussion with Mrs. Lefkovic. Mrs. Lefkovic, how much did you know about what was going on during your experiences?

Well, we have known already in 1942 about letters coming from Auschwitz. We did not know where Auschwitz is. We knew it's in Poland. Then there were families-- to Auschwitz went young men and women. Families went to Majdanek, Treblinka. There were letters coming. The letters were not clear. But the message was clear enough to realize that it's terrible. People were writing, saying names of people who died, and they were saying that they went to visit Aunt so-and-so who has been dead for the last 20 years, to give the message that these people who were 16 and 18 are dead within two, three months.

I don't know exactly when later we got the documented messages, yes, and information from people like Dr. Vrba, who was a 16, 17-year-old young man who was one of the very, very few who succeeded to get from Auschwitz to Slovakia. And in Slovakia, he met with Jewish community leadership.

And I don't know again how, but there was contact between Slovakia and Hungary. And we knew in Hungary, my uncle was telling me, in '44, when the deportations started in Hungary and we did not yet know if we will cross the border, when we will cross, we will be caught today or tomorrow, he told me, you don't go to Auschwitz, me and my brother, and because we were young. And he said, you will jump. And you-- it was, in a very rude fashioned, he told us, you can break your legs but you will jump. You have to do it.

By the way, when we returned to Slovakia in '44, my uncle remained in Hungary. My aunt and her three 40-year-old daughter, my cousin, returned with us. My uncle remained in Hungary because his parents-in-law were detained. And he wanted to take-- beginning, summer '44, they were detained, like I said, when they caught the illegal people, they put them into prison.

So these were older people. And he was taking them daily food and so on. So he did not take care of himself to go with his family but went with them. He was caught. He was taken into a transport. And he, with his cousin and with another friend, jumped out. Already in the detention came where they were. So apparently we knew that is Auschwitz.

They arranged-- I don't know if it was money or if it was not money-- they were in a brick, where you make bricks. The Germans always concentrated the Jews around Budapest in a brickyard place. And he got some tools. And with his tools he had also a saw to open an iron window.

So here you have in the car, railroad car of 50 or 100 people, standing, three men, his friend, his cousin, and so on. One was standing and holding the other guy on his shoulders. And the third was-- can you help me-- sawing--

Sawing off the bricks.

--off the window. And the other people were yelling at them because they feared that if three people went as numbers. If three will be missing, or one will be missing, people will be punished.

So can you imagine what kind of situation happens that Jews have to yell at other Jews, you don't save yourself because we will be punished? So one had to police those people they should not yell and call the German police. My uncle jumped out. He knew that his wife and his child are in Slovakia. This cousin jumped out and the third man jumped out. The third man was married and his wife did not want to jump. She stayed and went to Auschwitz.

When this man, friend of my uncle, came to his mother-in-law in Budapest, who was illegal but she was still there, and told her what happened, the mother-in-law told him, you killed my child. You did not save my daughter. She did not want to jump. If he would not jump, they go together. Can you imagine to come into these kinds of situations?

So my uncle jumped, and they crossed again and he was not caught and he returned. And they were caught in September together with my aunt. My aunt is a heavy person. And he told me in Sered, this time I cannot jump, because my wife cannot jump. Because he went through this experience of the husband getting out and the wife not. I go with Anne. And

he went with her, and said returned and he did not.

My cousin, who was five years old, she was with a non-Jewish family. My aunt returned. I don't know, she is a tall and used to be a heavy woman. She came back. I did not recognize her. She recognized me. She looked like her own grandmother. She had-- she was yellow. Everything was in ruins. She might have been probably, I don't know, 60 or 80 pounds. But it was an unbelievable number compared to what I was.

And we were, at the time, it was only one month after liberation. She had jaundice. And she was in full pain-- she had terrible wounds all over from malnutrition, her feet. Because she was a big woman and she was so thin, her feet and her hands looked so very, very large. And we were sitting in a cafe where [INAUDIBLE] met in Bratislava, which was a capital of Slovakia. I don't know how everybody knew when he returned he has to go to cafe palace.

So we were sitting with my mother in cafe palace. And somebody comes to me. And she looked like her own grandmother. I saw some similarity, but I never saw this woman. So she knew me. I did not know here. That was my aunt. She is now here.

She said, I never would have made it. She went through Auschwitz. She has a tattooed number. She went on this hunger march for three months. I would never have been able to go in snow, barefooted, for three months. She did it. She said she did not want to live. She knew she has to live, because she has a five-year-old child outside.

What happened to her child?

She was outside. They reunited. So when she came, she immediately needed care. I took her to a cousin I knew already said, there is a cousin of hers who has an apartment. So she went there.

How were you reunited with your family?

Well, when I came to my home town, there was one Jewish family and they told me where my mother and brother are hiding. It was in my grandparents' village. And I took a train and I walked and I came there. And in the beginning, you know, we just did not recognize each other. Because my mother looked so terrible. She had long hair. She never had long hair. She was gray. She was not gray before that.

I was blond and black, because I did not have the colors in Theresienstadt to continue with [INAUDIBLE]. And we just looked at each other, and there was a lot of crying, because they were already one month liberated and my brother was coming and going, and he brought all the news of people coming back and of camps and of deaths and of what was happening.

So when I came-- yes, and of course they did not expect me, because they knew that I was deported. And here I was. Because I did not go further from Theresienstadt because I came at the right time when deportation ceased.

Did you find out anything more about your father?

Yes. I was one time later in the summer in jewelry store to fix a watch. And when I gave my name, yes, when he was taking [? some order ?], a man was standing next, and he says, ah, your name is Aschner. I knew your father, and that was his name. And I said, yes. This man was a watchmaker. And there is a story, I don't know it's true, that the Germans took about 60 men who were watchmakers. And they needed them for some kind of instruments. And this man survived three years of Auschwitz. And they were working inside, not in cold. And they were apparently relatively fed. They survived.

So this man was somebody, and he told me that my father died in approximately August in Majdanek of typhoid. So I was very grateful that my father died, that he did not have to go to a death chamber.

Were you involved at all-- you or your friends involved at all with the poetry and the artwork and the concerts that went on to resist that?

No, we were heavy labor duty people. Those were apparently people-- at first, we did not have the skill, and second, we came later. And these were apparently the people who came into the beginning and who produced before we arrived.

You were aware, were you, of what the Germans were attempting to do with Theresienstadt to make it sort of a model city or a model camp for the Red Cross and for others.

No, we did not know about Theresienstadt, where we were in Hungary. We knew only about Poland. And because Jews from Slovakia were deported to Poland '42, '44. Only when I was in Sered later in '44, somehow apparently the Germans, lying and promising, were telling that Theresienstadt is a better place and therefore, they were giving us like a bonus to sending us.

But it was not because they were so good to us. It was because the armies were advancing. And there was no anymore North and there was no anymore Bergen-Belsen. So the last place to be liberated was place which was around Prague, because the Russians were coming from the East, the Americans were coming from the South, from Austria. So this was a place to go.

But the terrible thing today, when one is thinking, is that at this time, every train was needed. They had enough trains to deport Jews, let's say in '44 from Hungary. Another terrible thing is that not one railroad track was bombarded. Because when I was talking about this relatively calm summer of '44, when I returned from Hungary and before the deportations started in Slovakia, there was daily airplane alarm. The planes crossed Slovakia coming from Italy, from Hungary, and so on going North, to bombard Germany. Nothing was dropped in the middle. It's the railroad tracks.

And you think they knew about all of it.

If I knew, they knew. They had that information when we had.

Have you ever attended a reunion for Holocaust survivors?

Yes, many times. In Israel. Here, I meet also occasionally. And I have reunion, whether I invite some people for dinner, it's a reunion.

Did you go to Israel right after the war?

I studied after the war in Prague. And in '49, I went. I was 19, no, I was 20, I went back to high school. I never finished high school. I was 22. I went to the university in Prague.

And the hardships, I could tell a lot about hard life. I never considered it hard, because it was all always compared to. So like I say, I don't take a warm room for granted.

Do you speak with your children about the Holocaust?

Yes. But I did not give them the whole story, because it comes somehow in pieces. I tried to tell it to them, because I had to tell. My husband, his whole family, he-- I was a lucky one. I had a mother and a brother. My husband had two sisters, two parents. Nobody is alive. So we had to explain. So it's not difficult in Israel. Because in Israel, everybody was in the same situation.

And this was very, very hard how to tell, what part to tell, how much to tell. And later, I also felt that I don't want to impose of them horrors. Because my cousin, who was five and six, and she was, and her mother returned with 60 pounds, and she did not recognize her mother, because she was for about nine months with a Christian family. And the Christian family where she was deposited put her into another Christian family, because they were scared. And they just loved her. And they made her their own child.

They told her at the same time that her mother is somewhere. I don't know what they told her. When her mother

returned and she got scared to see her, because I was scared to see her mother, she was kneeling at her bed and praying to Jesus Christ to save her mother, to get her healthy, to get her well. Because she was used to say a prayer every evening with the Christian family.

My aunt and my cousin have excellent relationship with this family. They were so good to them. They came to visit them in United States. They have correspondence. They sent presents to them.

How do you feel about the German people today?

Look, as long as somebody's name is not Eichmann or somebody who can be, about whom I know that he was SS and so on, and there is a new generation. I don't know if it's not normal. I don't have anger. I have a lot of sorrow. I don't have anger in me.

The guy who was our commandant and who is now living in Syria, his name is Brunner, I remembered. Yes, he was organizing for deportation in '44 from Sered, Slovakia to Auschwitz. Saw him daily running through the camp, [MAKES SOUND EFFECTS], with a stick, ordering people, and we were trembling.

Does the knowledge that this man is still alive and protected bother you?

It does. But there are so many others. It was a whole nation who participated. It could not have happened otherwise.

Is there anything else you want to add or say?

Well, when I see fundamentalism or political very authoritarian regime, I get scared. And when I see that people follow, I get even more scared. Because I said always, it's not a disaster that one leader is crazy. The disaster is that people follow him. If he would be crazy and nobody would follow him, he could not do too much, whether his name is Stalin or Hitler.

OK. Thank you very much.

Thank you.