

My name is Dr. Sidney Langer, and I'm the Director of the Oral History Project of the Holocaust Studies Resource Center at Kean College of New Jersey. I'm very pleased to talk today with Mr. David Altholz who is a resident of Maplewood, New Jersey, and has come to talk about some of his experiences during the years of the Holocaust.

Mr. Altholz, thank you very much for coming. Could you tell me a little bit by way of introduction about when you were born, the town you were born in, a little bit about your family?

I was born in 1928 in a small town called Krosno, K-R-O-S-N-O, in Poland. At a very early age, My father and my mother moved to a large town by the name of Chorzów in Western Poland, in Silesia, upper Silesia.

How old were you when they moved?

I believe I was about four at that time.

OK, so in 1932.

I had a sister who was a year and a half younger, and we all moved together. Now, Chorzów was an industrial town, rather westernized by Polish standards since it was very close to the German border. And the language was quite often dual language, both Polish and German. As a result, I spoke German then, and I still do. My education was--

How large was this town?

The town? I really don't recall now. I would venture to guess about 100,000.

About 100,000, and the Jewish population and the non-Jewish population was?

The Jewish population was small, very small, and most of the-- I remember we belonged to a Conservative temple even though my grandparents on both my mother's and my father's side were strictly Orthodox. We did go to the synagogue, that is, my father and I, every Saturday morning, and my religious education really was not too extensive.

The emphasis was on secular education. Now, my father was religious, but not in an orthodox manner. We lived there until the war broke out. We did of course go out on vacations, visiting my grandparents on both sides. And my education ended in the 5th grade, which was 1939. I was about to start the sixth grade when the war broke out, and I haven't been in school since. This is one of the few occasions.

You went straight from fifth grade to the college.

Yes, a great college.

What was the economic situation of the Jewish community like in that town?

There was a mixture of well-to-do people, people of middle class, and people of very humble economic circumstances. My father was a watchmaker. He did quite a bit of work himself, and he also took in their work from other stores. He was by no means well-to-do, but we were very comfortable. We had a very nice apartment and we lacked for nothing that I can remember.

And my sister, of course, when I started school at the age of 7, my sister being younger gave us the whole family a very hard time. She was one of those that insisted on equal rights, regardless of the fact that she was younger and a girl, no pun intended here. She was equal in every respect. She wound up going to a school which was almost 100% Catholic, Christian. I went to a school that was predominantly Jewish.

A secular school?

Right. What happened during classes is very often, there was the subject of religion being taught in public school, in grade school. And when the Catholic teacher came on, the Jews walked out or were excused from class, and when the Hebrew teacher came in, the Christian students were excused from class for that period.

Was there any tension in the classroom between the Jewish--

No. I don't remember any tension whatsoever at that age. I do remember occasionally having some stone-throwing contests with young boys, non-Jewish boys, in the small villages when we went to visit my grandparents during the summer vacation. I don't remember any of it in Chorzów.

This was a coeducational school that you went to? And your sister did not go to the same school not any special reason, or?

Yes. That school took only children from the age of 7.

Oh, OK. And you went to another school at?

And then she went to school-- I believe it was a Catholic school, but a state school nevertheless. They took kids from the age of 6.

From the age of 6. Now, you say that when you went back to the towns to visit your grandparents, you do remember rock-throwing incidents.

Yes. Yes, I do.

You did not know these other young boys.

No, I did not, but we were called names and we reacted to them, that is, myself and my friends.

How did they know you were Jewish?

They can tell a Jew very easily, very easily. Not all. It's not 100%, of course, but most Jews look Jewish. I know here, it's much more difficult. I know many Italians look Jewish as well, but in Poland, it was not quite so. In Poland, there was a peculiar-- not a peculiar, but a different look to the Jews, with some exceptions naturally.

Did you understand what the motivation was behind this kind of--

Yes, yes. I understood that they didn't like Jews.

Did you know why?

Well, I knew why by just listening to the adults talking very often. We were accused of killing their god, killing Christ, and that was the primary motivation for the hatred. Now, as a child, I didn't speculate any further. I simply accepted that as fact, that I knew that we did not kill Christ. At least, I didn't feel myself implicated in this or guilty of any of it. But it was an accepted fact that we could do nothing about it.

Were the students in your own school taught the same thing by their religious instructors?

Well, I never attended a Catholic religious class.

Yeah. I'm just wondering why there was a difference, for example, in these two towns in terms of the relationship between yourself and--

I'd rather feel, and this information, or rather the realization of this, came to me afterwards, that it wasn't in the classroom, that teaching in the classroom did not influence the students in a negative way, rather, the preaching from the pulpit in the churches.

And there was a big difference, a big difference, especially in the smaller towns where people were largely superstitious and priests, preachers were largely very, very conservative and orthodox, not taking the trouble of studying for themselves and finding out the facts, but simply accepting what they were taught by others and repeating them.

I have found myself, on one occasion, I found that one priest admitted to me that there were references in their prayer books, in the Bible to that fact, and in their commentaries as well. Now, the people simply accepted that as gospel. I know, I myself, as I said, during the various holidays, I have detected a certain nervousness among the Jews, especially around Easter time. But I myself, and my family in Chorzów, in the larger city, had never felt any insecurity or any discomfort.

Chorzów, you said, was how large again? You said about 100,000?

About 100,000. Chorzów is approximately 30 kilometers from Katowice, a large town, industrial, iron ore and coal.

And how far from the German border, you said?

Very close. In terms of kilometers, maybe an hour's trip.

Was the Jewish community a vibrant Jewish community? Were there Jewish organizations?

Oh yes, oh yes. There were Jewish organizations politically as well as religious organizations.

Was your father active? Was your mother active, or yourself?

I don't remember him being active at the synagogue in any way other than just being a member and paying his dues.

OK, so in 1932, you were four years old. When Hitler came to power in Germany, did this have any immediate effect in the town that you lived in? 1933, 1934.

I was at that time a young boy, not very much interested in the political scene. But I remember quite vividly, especially in 1938, my parents used to socialize quite extensively. They went to visit people. When they went to visit, they took us along. There were no babysitters there at that time.

And when we got company, of course, the same thing. We had a lot of kids, whether they were playing cards or doing some other things. Most often, a lot of time was spent talking politics and the situation. And of course, I remember quite well the various opinions and the various statements as to the fact that the war would never break out, that Hitler may be a maniac, but he's not that stupid, and he has plenty of very smart advisors to know that when England guaranteed Poland safety or security that he would not invade Poland.

And even some people ventured other opinions, that even if war did break out, it would not last very long. So no one could resist England and France combined for very long. And besides, Poland was also quite well prepared. I mean, they must have had at least all of a half a dozen planes at that time, and plenty of horse cavalry. Maybe it sounds a little ironic, but it was nevertheless the fact.

Mm-hmm. Were there any laws? I know you were very young. So in 1938, you were 10 years old. Were there laws passed in your town against shechita, for example, ritual slaughtering, at all?

Not that I remember, and I haven't read anything since on that subject. But I do not remember that at all. What I do remember, in the final stages before the war broke out, there were various protests by Polish organizations, Polish nationalist organizations, against Jews.

And invariably, the ones that I remember because there were signs and placards, were based on business,

on the economy. They were encouraging everyone not to go to Jewish stores or to frequent Jewish tradespeople and such, businesspeople. And there were signs all over. In fact, one of the slogans was [SPEAKING POLISH].

I remember that. I'll never forget it. Didn't mean much to me at that time, but translated, it means, "one should go to one's own for what is one's--" what belongs to you. In other words, don't go to Jews.

And this then is in 1938, 1937?

1938, I think, almost toward the outbreak of the war. Just, I didn't speculate on it. I simply accepted it.

Yeah.

I didn't understand it.

Did you yourself feel tension, you know, sort of building up?

I detected tension only with my parents. Traditionally, we went away for the entire summer vacation, spending half of it at, most of the time, my grandparents' on my mother's side, and the other half at this small local resort place, [Place name] a very beautiful town in the mountains.

And they were very apprehensive about splitting up. Most of the time, my father stayed behind and spend maybe two weeks with us, and then we went back home together, so that we split up at that point every summer, my father staying behind, and we went off on our vacation.

With your mother.

Right, my mother and my sister.

OK, and the splitting up was?

So in 1939, it was the first time that I noticed they were having some arguments, whether we should all leave together or whether we should simply do what we did in the past, with my father staying behind and joining us for the last two weeks of vacation.

In other words, your father stayed behind simply to mind the business?

Yes, yes. Exactly, exactly.

And then in 1939?

They were having discussions on that subject. My mother was very reluctant to go without him, and he felt it was necessary for him to stay because there was a lot of work for him to do. And he did stay, and of course, as we now know, just shortly before we were scheduled to return, the war broke out, And I hadn't seen my father until a few months after the war broke out.

OK, so in other words-- let's see if we can put some months. You were away during the summer months.

July and August.

August, 1939. And you're with your mother, and your father reluctantly stayed behind in the town. The war breaks out, and what happened at that point?

Well, we lost all communications with him.

Right.

And the war lasted a few weeks when Poland was finally overcome.

Right.

My father managed to travel by whatever means were available. And I think that in October, I saw him again. He came to us, to the small town of Tuchów, which is where my grandparents lived on my mother's side.

And you had not heard from your father this entire time.

Until he came back, no.

Until he came back. He didn't know what happened.

Right. There was no communication at all, I assume, with the entire town. Well, how far away was this town from--

Well maybe it's -- From my hometown?

Yeah.

Well, maybe two, two and a half hours by train.

OK, so you were reunited then with your father after a few months. OK, and what happened then?

Well, we were together, and we lived in my grandparents' home. And every day, we were notified of new rules and regulations that were posted on the bulletin board and given out to the so-called Judenaltester, the head of the Jewish community, which was appointed by the Germans.

Right. So you had a Judenrat in that city.

Yes.

A very small town, your grandparents' town.

Yes.

There was no consideration of going back.

No, whatsoever. And we eventually left Tuchów.

But did you know what had happened to the Jews who remained in your town?

No. They were dispersed. I mean, each went in different directions. I know that from my own family, aunts and uncles and such, some went to Russia, to the Eastern side of Poland, which was occupied by Russia, and the others went to larger cities, but they were dispersed. Eventually, we went to Krosno, which was the town where I was born, with my grandparents.

And my father's-- actually, not my father's grandparents, but that was the nearest town to where my father's parents lived. And we stayed there awhile.

Why did you move just from one town to the other at that point?

I don't remember anymore. I don't remember the reason for that. I guess my father wanted to see his parents or something like that. It's speculation. I really don't remember any particular reason.

Did your mother's parents come along with you, or just your immediate--

No, my mother's parents remained behind. Oh, I think what happened, in time, we were required, the Jewish community was required, to supply a certain number of people to work. And some of the people in our family were taken to work, and one of them did not come back. I think he was shot. I don't remember who it was.

I think it was a young man, an uncle who was married to one of my mother's sisters. And then shortly thereafter, we left. I don't remember any particular reason. Maybe this was connected with it. Maybe it wasn't. But of course, as part of this, what I do remember shortly after the occupation, the Germans-- and I remember that because my father commented on it over and over again.

The Germans went from house to house and took people out of there, mostly men, who were educated or were educators or doctors, lawyers, former military men and young people. They just took them outside and they were shot.

You witnessed this yourself?

I witnessed that myself. I didn't witness the shooting, but they loaded them up on the trucks and the word came back. And what amazed my father--

This was before you moved-- sorry, to make sure I know this-- before you moved to Krosno.

Before I moved to Krosno, right. These Germans, these groups, a dozen or so at a time, came with a long list of names and addresses. They knew exactly where they were going and for whom they were looking. Those names were provided by the Judenrat.

By the Poles. No, by the Poles.

When you say that--

By Polish spies.

You had mentioned that--

Most of those people were Jews, but not all of them were Jews.

Right. Many Poles were also taken.

Well, the Poles who were taken, were they politically active Poles?

They were either politically active or formerly belonging to a socialist party, perhaps, or in a position of leadership. Anyone, apparently, that seemed like a potential threat to them, or potentially a leader of a resistance, was taken and shot.

The only reason I asked you about the Judenrat is because you had mentioned that there was a Jewish council in the town.

Yes.

And I was just wondering what kind of relationship or perception you had of the relationship between the Jewish council in the town--

Well, they were primarily there to carry out the orders of the Germans, to supply the number of people to work, to supply the number of fur coats or the number of pounds of gold or whatever they were required to do that time. And every week, there was something else that the Jewish community had to give up or deliver, and they were in charge of delivering it.

Yeah. And you were very young at the time. You were 10, 11.

I was was 11.

11 years old at the time.

Yeah, that's right. '39, I was 11 year old.

Did you have any feelings toward-- did you understand the role or the function of the Jews?

No, I did not understand anything. I just had fear because everyone was so insecure, and people were looking for hiding places. My father at one time, and my mother, were contemplating to give us away, both my sister and myself, to a Christian family for safekeeping, and they decided against it.

But I know that this was very seriously considered at that time because some people were doing it. As I mentioned previously before this interview, my wife was given away in such a manner. And this family kept her alive as a niece from out of town, but she had no identity papers, and this is how she survived the war. And we visited those people, incidentally, six years ago.

Mm-hmm. Do you have any idea how many men from the town, or young boys, were taken during the time you were living there?

No, not really, because I remember the names being mentioned of people that my family knew.

Yeah.

But I really don't remember about the others.

How long were you there before you went to Krosno?

In Tuchów? After the war started, the war broke out, maybe a year, maybe nine months.

Now, during that nine-month period or that 10-month period, your father, he was sent to work.

My father was sent to work. I remember the very first time when this came out because I was with him, and I don't know what happened, but I wasn't able to do any of the work. And apparently, a lot of people were doing it for me.

A train pulled up at the railroad siding and left, I don't remember, two or three railroad cars of cement, cement bags. And we were required to unload it very quickly. Now, the guards were whipping everybody who wasn't moving fast enough. It was total chaos. People were running, and I can't believe to this day that my father was carrying a bag of cement. Today, since I'm in the business, I know what it weighs, and he was no great athlete.

Right.

He carried it, and very quickly, too. And that was one of the details. Then I remember when the winter came, we had-- I don't remember the reason for it, simply roundups, so-called-- they used to call it Aktion, roundups of people. And they were taking-- I don't know whether they had any particular people in mind or just Jews in general.

They were taken out, and anybody who was seen fleeing from the ranks of those that were gathered was shot on sight. And I do remember that that's another reason why I feel that it was about late spring when we left, because people were shot, and of course, they were bleeding.

And snow eventually fell and froze, and the whole thing. And I remember when the snow started to melt, the blood and the stains came up again, all over again in the spring. And this is how I know that we must have

left after the snows melted.

During that nine-month period that you were living in the town, I assume the family was living in fear.

Yes.

Was your mother required to work at the time also?

No.

So she's staying in the home, your sister.

Yes. They mostly wanted men. And there was the same situation as far as the workforce is concerned in Krosno. And after the arrival of Krosno-- what happened? Oh. The work parties were again ordered out by the elders of the Jewish community. And one of these work parties consisted of my uncle, my two cousins, my aunt, about eight members of my family with the exception of my father and my mother my sister, but including myself.

And we were sent out to a refinery outside of town in Krosno where we worked. We were treated quite well there as compared to other work parties. We were fed, and this routine went on on a daily basis. We were taken out on trucks and brought back on trucks. After a few months of that, one day, we were taken out on trucks to the refinery and we did not return anymore.

It seems that all the Jews in Krosno were gathered. At that time, there was a small ghetto organized. And all the Jews in Krosno lived in that ghetto, and the work parties went out of this ghetto and came back to the ghetto. One day, we went out and we did not return. We were given quarters at the refinery.

OK.

Now, what happened afterwards--

That group, you said, was yourself and about nine?

My aunt, who's my father's sister, her husband, her two children, which was a boy and a girl.

And how old were they?

They were older than I. They were older. They were about four or five years older than I. We were young men and women.

Right.

And we were kept there.

Your sister and your parents stayed?

Stayed behind.

OK.

And that is the last time I had seen my sister and my mother. And my father I had seen again a year and a half later, but that's another story. I found out subsequently that the ghetto in Krosno was terminated, and whoever was in the ghetto at that time was taken to a larger ghetto, which was, I guess, a county seat.

It was a ghetto for the entire region, because a lot of these smaller ghettos were then terminated, and all these people were taken to Jędrzejów, which was a larger town, and it had a larger ghetto. That was the last that I had seen my mother and my sister.



So you had to be working in the factory then, with the other members of your family for about--

It was a refinery.

At the refinery for what, seven months, eight months?

Maybe nine months.

For about nine months until you were told you can now return, and there was no prior warning.

Oh, I see. No, no, no. We worked there for a very short time, maybe six months, maybe three months before we were told we can now return.

When you were told you can return, you were told obviously when you were at the refinery.

We were given quarters to sleep, to stay, and we were fed there. And my aunt and my cousin were in charge of the food, of the kitchen. And we were given food supplies and sleeping accommodations, and we worked there for about six months.

How many people were working in this refinery?

Maybe 30, a total of 30. And we were treated quite, I would say normally. I didn't feel any animosity. In fact, the people, there were no SS guards. It was one civilian administrator, and they were mostly army people. They were nice, as pleasant as the one could expect them to be.

Subsequently, only recently, I came across someone who was with me at the refinery, and I haven't seen him since, Rabbi [Personal name] He lives in Long Island now, and of course, he is today a rabbi. He was very religious then, very, very religious. And he filled me in on many details that I was not even aware of. I couldn't believe some of them.

For instance, one of the people, one of the army officers, important people in the refinery, was very helpful to us by giving us medical supplies and giving us extra food, and this man subsequently, according to this Rabbi [Personal name] lost his life during one of the attempts on Hitler's life. He was apparently blacklisted for quite some time, and he was, according to this Rabbi [Personal name] an extraordinary person. He risked, truly, his safety.