

You didn't yourself recall. So you spent then about six months-- well, what happened? You were three months in the refinery and you were going back to your home, and then one day--

About-- in total, six months. And then another six months in the refinery.

Another six months in the refinery, OK.

Again, I haven't kept any diary, and I have no calendar at that time. But it seems like that way. And I could probably confirm that or at least ask more accurately of this Rabbi Wagshal. He's older than I am and he remembers a lot more than I do.

OK, so the approximate month then at the end of that period of time at the refinery would be when? It would be--

How to figure out-- Let's say a total of a year. It would be '39, '40. It was probably toward the middle of 1940.

Right. In mid 1940. OK, now you mentioned that that was the last time-- you know, once you were told to stay in the refinery, that was the last time you ever saw your mother and your sister. You saw your father a year and a half later. What happened? You know, what changed during this period when you were in the refinery?

We were there, as I said, for quite some time. It may have been more than six months. One day we were told that our job is being terminated and we would be taken to a gathering place for all other work parties in the area at that time who apparently also stayed behind like we did.

This was the so-called Lotnisko, which is an airport, a small local airport. On the Lotnisko we stayed awhile. A few weeks, maybe two weeks. I don't remember. It was a very brief period because I have no recollection other than having been there.

And you stayed in some barracks?

Yes. Yes. And from there we were taken to another-- by transport, by trucks, to another, as it were, I guess a small concentration camp by the name of Szebnie. We were there also a very brief period.

Can I just ask what was going through your mind during this time?

I was simply accepting and doing what I was told to do. There's several things that I do remember clearly is the fear, and the hunger I would say more than the fear, and the lice. It made me very uncomfortable. I guess hunger and then lice and then fear in that order if I had to put them in any kind of an order.

Was there any discussion among other people who were with you, "let's run away," "let's flee?" Or was it just an impossibility?

Yes, there was a discussion because I have heard some adults talk about somebody having come in from an outside-- from out of the camp-- outside the camp from a work day and bringing back some news, which obviously somebody must have given them. And the messages were going back and forth.

I remember people were buying and selling bread and cigarettes. Some of them had some jewelry with them or still some other valuables which they were trading in with some of the guards, which were mostly Ukrainian. Some of them were Jewish guards, so-called kapos.

And after that, Szebnie, that brief stop over there, we went to a concentration camp. And there we were separated, the men from the women, although we were always separate, but not that far away. That concentration camp was Płaszów. It was not far from Kraków and not far from the salt mines of Wieliczka.

OK, so this is mid 1940. You were 12 years old.

Yeah, maybe even toward the end of '40.

Toward the end the '40.

Płaszów was a pre-war cemetery which was leveled and enlarged several times and then fenced in with electrified wire and barracks.

How many--

This was, I would say, all Jews, of course. And all the other camps were also all Jews.

Was there any kind of selection process other than males and females when you got to the camp?

No. And there, by coincidence, I met my father. He was walking in a group, and I was walking in another group, and I saw him, and he saw me. There was quite a reunion.

He told me the sad news that from Chorzów when that ghetto was liquidated, all able-bodied people were taken off to Płaszów and the rest went to Auschwitz. And that was the last that he had heard from my mother and my sister. My sister was a year and a half younger at that time. That was very sad. Very sad.

Now when we arrived to Płaszów, we arrived at a very fortunate time it appears for us because just prior to our arrival, from what I understand, over 55,000 Jews were machine-gunned to death and buried in mass graves. Now, I haven't seen any of it, but I have seen some of the shootings that went on afterwards and their bodies being burned because there were shootings continually, but not on such a mass scale.

And the monument which now stands in Płaszów, of which I have the picture-- I mentioned that to you before-- recites exactly that fact, that gruesome fact. There was a very ironic and not funny, although maybe it may have been meant funny, name for this place of execution. It was called Hujowa Gorka, which is not a nice thing to say.

And it wasn't even a gorka. Gorka is a hill. This was rather a depression. That's what it was called. They have two monuments standing there. One stands right in the middle of that pit, which is a huge, huge boulder reciting that fact that these Jews were machine-gunned there.

Who put up that monument?

I think it was the Jews of Poland. And this is also one of very few monuments in Poland that states that the victims were Jews in Poland. And most often, the monuments to those that were either persecuted or killed refers to citizens of Poland or citizens of other countries. This was one specifically designated for this unusual distinction as they were. It's one of very few that mentions Jews by name and were the victims there.

Now, Płaszów apparently has a very intriguing history. And Kraków in general, which I was not aware of until a few years ago-- I read a book, which was written by a German-- actually written by an Australian author, and it is a biography of a German civilian in Kraków. Schindler's List is the name of that book which I have.

And many of the names and places mentioned there I remember quite vividly. Many of the scenes, the public hangings, the public floggings. The kapos I remember by name. Chilowicz, a very notorious name. A Jewish kapo and his wife. Both very mean people I remember their demise and public display of their bodies and how we were required to walk by and stare at them and look at them as we walked by. It was quite an ordeal. Quite an ordeal.

How many kapos were there in your camp?

I don't remember, but I remember that the group that was shot-- I remember the story was that they attempted to escape, and they were captured, and they were brought back and shot.

The kapos--

The kapos.

--attempted to escape.

I don't remember whether they actually attempted to escape or if they were just simply executed because they had seen too much or knew too much or whatever have you. Maybe they known too much about some of the Gestapo people in the camp. So I would not speculate on the real reason, but I do know they were shot, and they were very prominently displayed. And this is one instance where none of us felt any sadness just looking at these dead people. We hated them.

Why do you think that Germans wanted you to view the bodies?

That was a standard procedure. It was a routine. We were required to view any kind of punishment or executions. We used to be called out on a so-called appell. There was an appelplatz which was a quadrangle or whatever, one large square. This is where we were counted every morning. This is where we were counted every evening.

And this is where we were required to stand at any of the periodic occasions that were put on. The shows, as it were. Hangings and such. Floggings. I guess this was apparently-- I'm sure this was designed to discourage any further incidents such as that. So there we stayed for quite a while, maybe a year and a half.

How many people were in the camp? Do you have any idea?

No idea whatsoever. I know there were many, many people. There was a very large woman's part and a very large men's part. And there are several people who were there who are here now-- from New Jersey and New York who were there at the same time that I know.

There were various workshops. And apparently what saved my father was the fact that he was a watchmaker. And what saved me was that I also claimed to have been a watchmaker. And in Płaszów, there were many shops. There was a watchmaking shop and there was a printing shop. There was a tailor shop and all kinds of other shop. Machine shops. And this is where we worked, my father and I.

And it was funny because I knew how to take a watch apart or an instrument. Very often we were given instruments from trucks or cars or planes or whatever to repair. I never knew how to put these things together again, of course. And so between my father and another fellow on the other side of me, they did a good job for me.

Could you describe the living conditions in the camp? Did you live with your father? Were you in the same barrack?

We lived-- I lived together with my father. We had a barracks-- let's see-- probably the length of this room. And there were bunks on both sides from wall to wall, and they were three tiers high. And the bottom one was on the floor. No, I think they were four high. There was nobody on the bottom.

And we climbed one on top of the other. There were, I think, 30 inches between barracks. It was quite a high ceiling. And we had some straw and our prison clothing, and we also had a blanket.

And those that were a little more considerate and that were above us were very careful not to turn abruptly or stir very strongly because the rain of fleas-- not fleas-- the lice was unbelievable. It was simply raining on us. And I remember now, if I make comparisons to what we lived like, it was I would say like you house a horse today in a stall, your animals. Something like that.

Now, we had a sink-- very long sink with faucets, water dripping. There was not much water, but it was dripping something [? about. ?] And we were all washing at the same time. Then after that, we went down

to this appeal to be counted.

And then we stood in line to get our food. That's another thing. I think that somebody must have really taken a liking to me because every time I saw that man dip very slowly to the very bottom of the kettle and bringing it up very slowly making sure that I have really something to eat on that plate. It was nice. And I never knew the fellow. He didn't--

You have no idea why he did that?

No. Maybe he felt sorry for me. I must have looked a sorry sight.

Who-- was he a German soldier?

No, that was one of the prisoners.

It was one of the prisoners who was doing that. Was there any attempt at any kind of religious observance, ritual observance in the camp?

Not in an organized manner. I have seen people in Płaszów especially. There were many Hungarian Jews there at one time also, for the later part. And they were observant. I have seen them [? schuckling ?] and all these things. But I have never been encouraged or asked to pray or become part of a minyan or anything like that.

But [? those ?] who--

There were some people who prayed.

And they actually had a minyan of-- quorum of 10 people where able to--

I don't remember any particularly minyan, but there must've been. There's enough Jews around there.

Enough Jews for a minyan.

We had a potbelly stove there. Two of them as a matter of fact. One on either end, which was kept going all the time in the colder months.

In the barracks to heat the barracks? OK, so you were there for approximately a year and a half you say?

Maybe a year. Maybe a year and a half. Sometime like that.

Now, during that time, a number of individuals you mentioned before were killed, aside from the kapos who had--

Oh, yes.

--escaped.

Oh, yes. Many just died because they were sick. And we had an infirmary there, but nobody ever came back from there.

Did you think you were going to survive? Did you--

I didn't think in those terms at all. I just simply didn't think. Most vividly, as I stated before, what I remember is the constant hunger and the lice. And there was a fear from a beating rather than for my life. Because the beatings were very often there. Now, what happened--

Let me just ask you. I'm sorry. I don't want to interrupt you. But the fear of beating. Was it the personal

injury? Was it the injury-- the physical-- the pain that would come from the beating? Or was there something psychological maybe?

No, this was a fear of the pain. Pure and simple. Now, what happened-- also a fear of your life very often, but not on a daily basis. For instance, there were people who did escape. Sometimes they were caught. They were brought back. They were publicly flogged or hanged. Now, the floggings, I think, were for trespassers within the camp. The hangings were mostly for those who escaped and were brought back.

There were many who did not-- who were not caught then what happened is during one of these appeals, mostly in the morning where we were counted and we were short, one of the guards just went-- we were standing in rows of five.

They took every 10th person from the first row or second row. It was quite arbitrary. And they were then executed as a group. Every 10th person. And on one occasion, my father was the ninth person. It was very close calls. That was a very fearful kind of a experience.

Was there any struggle among the inmates at the camp to make sure that they were not the 10th person if this--

No.

--happened on any kind of consistent b --

No, they were required to fall into the ranks, and this is the way they stood.

And were you--

At least I was not aware of any kind of hiding or switching of places. Nobody would allow that. It's like stealing somebody's bread, which also happened occasionally. I mean, the person who was caught or even suspected suffered terribly.

OK, so you're in this camp then for approximately, we're saying--

About a year, a year and a half.

A year and a half.

I remember it was late fall when a small-- not a small. Our entire workshop of watchmakers and possibly other workshops, but I'm only aware of our workshop, was taken-- loaded onto freight cars and given a couple of-- two cans each of conserves, the canned food. And after a couple of day's journey, we arrived in Germany. The name of that concentration camp was Sachsenhausen.

OK, so this is the beginning of 1942.

No, I would say closer to '43.

Beginning of '43.

You know, I may be completely mixed up on the time because I remember there were rumors that the Germans were stopped at Stalingrad. And we were still in Płaszów. And that they were going to dig up all the corpses and burn them, which they did.

And shortly thereafter, I don't know how shortly, maybe a few months, we were taken away to Germany. So that is the one point of reference is that rumor of the Stalingrad battle, which came back, again, from the work parties outside of camp.

And your father was with you in this group of watchmakers?

My father was with me at that group.

OK, so then you entered this-- the name the camp again was--

Sachsenhausen.

Sachsenhausen.

Sachsenhausen. Not far from Berlin. That was a pre-war camp built as a concentration camp mainly for political prisoners. Then lately they were political and criminals as well as Jews, but not all were Jews. There were many non-Jewish prisoners in Sachsenhausen and many political.

Were you told why you were being sent to Sachsenhausen? No?

No, and we didn't ask either. I mean, even if we did ask then, nobody expected to be told the truth. Besides, it didn't matter. We were not in control of our actions or our time. We simply did what we were told to do.

Now, Sachsenhausen, I was greeted with a big, beautiful sign, "Arbeit macht frei," and that was also a work camp. The shops-- we were again designated to a watchmaking shop, which was outside the camp. Outside the camp. We walked.

I remember it was the wintertime. We were having these wooden shoes, wood bottoms. And the worst of it was that snow kept building up on the bottom. And pretty soon it was this high, and people were tripping. And some of them were tripping, were falling, and then they were shot. It was chaos.

I think after a while we were given different shoes because they were losing too many watchmakers or whatever. That was a large group of people there. I was there I think maybe a year. Maybe less. I don't remember.

You walked outside everyday to this work facility?

Yes, and we were brought back.

And the food?

I said both of these concentration camps as opposed to extermination camps.

Correct.

And there is a difference. Now, after that, a group of youngsters of maybe 200--

After that you're saying--

After my stay in Sachsenhausen.

The full the full s --

Maybe a year or so. A group of youngsters was loaded up on a boxcar and taken someplace else. I don't remember the name of the place. It was either [Place name] or Ludwigslust. I think it was Ludwigslust It's a tiny place. I don't remember seeing it on the map after the war.

It turned out to be a munitions factory. And they build a small area with barbed wire, and this is where we were kept. We didn't do much work at that munitions factory. We were kept there, and we had very little food. Very poor conditions.

Was your-- you said a group of 200 or so?

Youngsters.

Youngsters. Your father was not included in that group?

I think they simply took whoever they had seen or whoever met their eye. And my father actually stayed behind. Now, there were some German Jews there, and there were some Greek Jews there, which I have-- I remember meeting boys, and there's boys my age.

At that time you were approximately 15?

15, mm-hmm. Maybe 16 or going 16. Something like that. 15, I guess. Maybe just in between. Who knows? We stayed there for a few months. Maybe a year. I, again, don't remember. The factory was almost always bombed and inoperable. I don't remember ever working inside, but we were there nevertheless.

Actually, I do remember a few occasions where we worked inside because a friend of mine who also happened to have been a German Jew who now lives in Berlin, West Berlin was hurt there. He was injured. And one of his fingers was, I think, caught in one of the machines and became very infected.

He didn't lose it, but to this day the finger is paralyzed, totally paralyzed. I have seen him as it happens a year and a half ago. And I just spoke to him recently because my son had gone to Europe for a vacation, and he's going to visit him in Berlin.

You had no contact with him until a year and a half ago?

We had contact with him after the war. We were liberated together. We lived together for about a year and a half. Then I went to Poland to look for my father, and I found out about his whereabouts and lost contact with him.

OK, let me just go back. I'm sorry, I jumped a little bit ahead.

Yes, too far ahead.

Right. So you were in this munitions factory for about how long did you say?

Maybe 3/4 of a year. I don't remember. It must have been more than seven or eight months. And the conditions were miserable.

Did you know at the time about the extermination camps?

Oh, yes. I knew full well. My father told me what happened to my mother and my sisters. I knew that they had extermination camps. I also know what happened in Płaszów. And there, the worst part was just before liberation. It was a week-- a two-week period where people-- most of our group were dying off of diarrhea or malnutrition or something like that.

And in fact, we had no tools. As a matter of fact, I remember that many of the corpses were taken to the latrine-- it was the only large dish that we had-- and were dumped there. We had nothing even to bury them with. And I suspect that some of these corpses were used and put to better use. But we had very little food. But we did eat something. At any rate, one morning I heard the rumble.