

US army soldiers came-- the medics-- and brought you to the medical facility. You stayed in the medical facility for about three weeks. What happened then at that time? Well actually, you did say you came out, they gave you civilian clothes. Did they tell you where to go? Did they--

No, we were free to go wherever we wanted to. We were given--

So how old were you then?

--identification papers stating that we were former concentration camp inmates. And at that time, I imagine that was like the magic wand. All you needed to do is show it, and every door opened.

US officials gave you these papers. Did they question you at all about your experiences in the camp at the time?

No.

No.

No, we were treated, and we were released.

Where did you go?

Which was surprising, now in retrospect.

Yeah. No, I mean many individuals were questioned by the Allied officials.

There were no guards at that time present. The one lonely guard just before liberation just scooted off very quickly. He was standing at the gate. And by the way, we had very little food at that time. The Germans also had very, very little at that time.

Right.

Now after that, we, upon consultation between the two of us, we had a consultation--

You and your best friend?

Right. He--

You were 16-- you were--

I was 17. No, I guess 16. 16.

16.

1945, going on 17.

Right.

After having consulted with each other, we decided that I had no particular interest at this time to go back to Poland. And he having been born in Berlin and having lived in Berlin before the war had many friends there. So we decided to go there.

And in order to go there, we had to go across various occupied areas, such as the English and the Russian. Now, there was a shift of borders between the various occupying powers, and we did have to cross the Russian zone before going to

We're going to Berlin. at that was an island, surrounded by Russian occupied territory.

The first thing the Russians did, of course, when we arrived at their border--

How did you get there? This is by--

Bicycle. We had the bicycle, remember?

Yeah, yeah.

We were given bicycles. They took away our bicycles-- the Russians-- and the cameras and the watches. And then we were, of course, free to go. But we had--

That must have been--

I was astounded.

Exactly.

I spoke to them in a very broken Russian. I did speak Polish, of course. And finally, we came across a military camp outdoors in tents. And as one of them happened to be, I guess, a lieutenant, seeing us just walking across asked us who we were and where we were going. And I told them. We showed them the papers that we had. And he started talking Yiddish to us. And the first thing we know, we were invited there to spend the night with them in the tent, and they had roasted the cows or whatever they had. They cut off chunks, and we had a feast.

Next morning, one of their trucks was going in that direction, so we were offered a ride, and we did-- just outside of Berlin. And the driver told us that this is as far as he was going. And we walked the rest of the way. Not quite the rest of the way, but some of it. Maybe an hour or so walk on foot, and then we managed to get a German with a horse-drawn wagon, and we managed to get into town. There immediately the first thing we did is go to a clearing center for former inmates of concentration camps.

And how did you know where to go?

We asked. We asked the military authorities. They directed us. There was a yiddisher gemeente and there was also-- I can't think of the name for it-- the [INAUDIBLE] Rein or something like this. It was an organization of previously imprisoned people. And this consisted of not only Jews, but Germans or Christians, many communists-- many communists.

And so at one of those gatherings, I had actually recognized someone with whom I spent some time in the watchmakers' camp in Sachsenhausen. And, of course, we were glad to see each other. He mentioned to me the sad news that he had seen my father. They were on a forced march toward the last few days of the war from Sachsenhausen. And my father, not being able to make it, fell down and was shot.

A months later I saw another fellow who also spent time in the same concentration camp in the same shop. And he told me that he remembers seeing my father after liberation. So I was, of course, very happy to hear that good news. They were liberated by the Russian army, incidentally. And that gave me a lot to think about, because I had to start going out to look for him or anybody from my family. And the only way to do that was to go back to Poland.

At that time the only way to go to Poland was on freight trains and illegally. There was no civilian movement between countries at that time. But I did. My friend provided me with all kinds of warm clothing and food and whatever have you, and I made it to Poland. I went to every single town that we had been in, including [INAUDIBLE], Tuchow and Krosno.

And the first thing I did-- each one of these little towns had their own little yiddisher gemeente. In Krosno, one of these

fellows who was active in it or actually taking care of that thing, remembered receiving a postcard from my father. My father's name was-- it was another big town, so everybody knew each other. And it was recognized very easily.

Well, we were looking through a huge pile of mail. Apparently, many people at that time, instead of traveling like I did, which didn't make much sense, we're sending cards to every center such as that-- the either Jewish centers or former concentration camp inmates clearing centers-- sending mails. And well, on the very bottom he found it, my father's card, looking for his family with his address where he was, which happened to have been in the English zone after that realignment of the borders.

So after three months of traveling in Poland, I went back to Berlin, and then I decided to set out to see my father. I went out, and I was promptly arrested at a railroad station, because even though I had my magic piece of paper, there was still no crossing without any special permits between borders.

There were permits being given. And then I applied for it. And my friend didn't trust me anymore, so he went with me. We both had permits, and we went to L¹/₄beck, a town in Germany and the town-- beautiful town-- where he lived. That was some reunion. There I found my aunt, his sister, also. She came from entirely different direction.

You had searched for three months in Poland.

Then I spent a few months in Berlin-- back in Berlin. And then we got our permits finally after the first unsuccessful try.

And you were reunited with your father in that town in--

L¹/₄beck.

L¹/₄beck.

It's funny, but just the other day we were watching a TV program on the Buddenbrooks, Thomas Mann's novel. That takes place in L¹/₄beck. It's funny, and it brought back some memories about the town. Now the first thing my father did was he didn't send me back to school. I hated school. But he did provide for tutors to come and teach me 2 and 2 and so on and so forth. That was the extent of my education. I did learn some history. I did learn arithmetic, literature, whatever that teacher could provide.

And music lessons-- my father had the secret ambition to make me a violinist, because his father once gave me a violin. He used to play at Jewish weddings before the war. He had several violins, and his father gave me a violin before the war. It was an old gypsy violin.

And, of course, I was too young to play on it. That was his secret wish, and finally decided after the war I'm going to take up violin, which I did, and I enjoyed it.

Really.

I still have it-- the new one that he bought me.

How long did you stay in that town with your father before coming to the United States? Or did you come--

Well, we stayed-- I saw him in 1947, about two years after liberation. And we stayed there until 1949. I think it was June of 1949.

Were you applying for visas at that time at all?

Yeah, and we came here.

Did you consider going to Palestine at all or--

No. My father at that time was the one that was making the decisions, and he had some relatives here from before the war. And they did sponsor us, and we came down.

You came into New York?

Straight to Ellis Island, almost didn't make it because having been asked to produce the X-rays that we all had to carry with us, the X-ray showed a spot on my lungs, which apparently was a scar from pneumonia that I must have had some time ago. But after, I think, two or three days of studying this thing and realizing that this was something from the past, we were allowed to stay.

Did any Jewish agencies help to facilitate the process of coming to the United States?

Well, the DP camp people-- UNRRA.

Right.

And the HIAS.

Did you spend time in DP camp?

Some, not much. But my father did the DP camp, then when I started taking my lessons, we lived just outside of the DP camp in an apartment.

OK, so the UNRRA then helped facilitate the process.

And what happened when he came into the United States through Ellis Island?

Well, we were, of course, received very happily by other cousins, second or third, who are-- in retrospect, now I know these people must have gone through some anxieties. They didn't know whom they were inviting. But we had developed the friendship from that time on. I was offered a job and he was offered the job. In fact, he worked as a watchmaker for Omega, with whom he did business before the war. He was repairing watches. They had a place in New York.

And, of course, they knew of him. They recognized the name. They traced it back from Switzerland.

Amazing.

And I was working for about nine months, and then I received a letter, which was really startling. It says, you are hereby requested-- and that was a letter from the US Army Induction Service. Very promptly, I was drafted into the army. That's when the Korean War broke out. And that's when I learned my English really, not from my teacher in Germany, I can tell you that.

So you fought in the Korean War.

No, although I volunteered for Korean action. After my basic training, I was sent to specialized training in communications. And my company was at that time split in half. One half went to Germany, one half went to Korea. And in spite of the fact that there was a law-- an army rule, I'll call it-- which provided for any volunteer being accepted for Korean duty-- and I volunteered-- Germany was the last place I wanted to go. But that's exactly where I wound up, because I was the only one in the company and spoke German fluently. And so they the captain, obviously, just did not even forward my application, which I found on subsequently.

So you spent how many years in the army?

2 years.

2 years. How did you come to New Jersey?

Well, we decided to emigrate from New York. We went overseas. Actually, I decided to work in New Jersey, and I just couldn't. My wife wasn't too happy about my traveling across the Lincoln Tunnel every day, so we bought a home in New Jersey in South Orange, and then we moved.

I'm only asking this just since we happen to be sitting in New Jersey-- why you decided to work in New Jersey as opposed to working in Manhattan or in California.

My work took me here, and then my wife having to use the Columbia University's facilities for scouting for public school systems decided that South Orange-Maplewood, which is a combined system, was a very fine system. And that's where we moved. At that time, our son was 4, and he was ready to go to kindergarten almost.

Do you ever sit now and reflect on where the world was during the Holocaust?

On rare occasions.

The world in general, the American Jewish community?

Yes, on rare occasions, and especially the annual events of the Holocaust observances, and also sometimes when we get together with friends not during that time. We do think quite a bit about what happened, what caused it, why it happened, and what we have learned from it. And we had, as I said previously, whether it matters at all-- whether we have learned anything from it.

It seems that we have a distinct talent-- almost a need-- to ignore history-- ignore anything that is distasteful or uncomfortable or inconvenient for our political purposes. Just totally ignore it. But I don't like to philosophize too much. The subject is more than I can comprehend.

Is your father still alive?

No, he died a few years ago.

Have you participated in the annual gathering of the Holocaust survivors? Were you in Washington?

To some extent. For the first time, I went to the last one in Washington. I just don't feel comfortable. They don't seem to be important enough to me personally. But I did go to the last one, and I did come back with a good feeling about it in Washington.

We have our local services, which are interfaith observances. We have had them now for a number of years in Maplewood South Orange. I feel that it is appropriate that they are interfaith, even though like any group, we have so many divided opinions and varied opinions among us Jews.

Some of them are guarding jealously our own tragedy. I feel that there's nothing to be guarded here. I feel that we should share it. We should bring it out to the community to the Christians who also suffered degradation, humiliation, and whatever what have you-- death. I feel that we owe a debt of gratitude to many, many Christians and Jews-- of Christians who did not have to risk their lives or their well-being or their comfort but did nevertheless, even though numerically there may be few. But it amounts to quite a bit-- quite a number.

I feel they ought to be recognized. They ought to be honored and to be remembered. They are victims as well as they are heroes, as it were.

I feel that the fact that I am alive today is an accident. It has nothing to do with my cunning or my shrewdness or my physical ability to endure deprivation. This is just pure chance.

And perhaps due also to some people who are helping, like that fellow with the extra good serving of food. And I am sure there must have been others that I don't even remember who I did not even notice. Many people, all their life-- to somebody who helped them. It may have been a German guard for all I know. This is all too often overlooked, and in the heat of passion that some people experience or get worked up to when they talk on this subject. I went through that stage, too.

The first thing I teach my children is that the word hate, even though kids very loosely use that term-- oh, I hate this one, I hate that one. I have simply forbidden that word. I've stricken it in my house from my dictionary. That word should not be used at all. I don't hate the Germans, and I don't hate the Poles. I perhaps feel hatred for those who have been doing these criminal things, but not all people have done it. A lot of them have simply taken the easier road. Well, if you don't bother me, I won't bother you.

Many people here are the same way. People I feel are the same all over the world, certainly the civilized world. I haven't been in any part of it or not. They have many, many common human characteristics, and one of them is that one's own safety comes first, no matter how easy or how dangerous it would be to help another fellow human being. Some people wouldn't even take a chance if it wasn't dangerous, and others are willing to risk their lives for it, and many did and many lost. I know some myself.

So I very often-- maybe I'm a little bit out of turn. I fault people when I hear them speak with passion against Poles or Germans-- people that were born here, have never experienced anything remotely comparable to what we have experienced. They simply, as if to justify or rather cleanse their soul of guilt, they hate that much more those that they have never even met.

I took my kids to Poland, both of them with my wife, specifically to show them a civilized nation-- polite, very well mannered-- educated. And I showed them Wawel University, the Wawel Castle. But it is the Jagiellonian University and many other universities-- very, very respected centers of learning. The Jagiellonian is, I think, over 700 years old. I think it's one of the three oldest in Europe. I showed them where Copernicus studied, and I took them to Auschwitz, and I took him to Plaszow. And I showed them what these same people only a very few years ago did-- their fathers. And the same people today could do the same thing under similar circumstances.

You cannot-- if you want to hate somebody, you would have to hate the entire world's population, because we are all subject to the same weaknesses and the same shortcomings and imperfections. And then certainly, the right circumstance can bring out the worst in us. There are, I'm sure-- I know-- exceptions to this rule, but as a rule, this is my own private feeling.

OK, I want to thank you.

Enough.

I want to thank you very much for coming and talking to me.

You're welcome.

Pleasure.

Well, if you can, [INAUDIBLE].