

Good afternoon. I'm Bernard Weinstein, Chairperson of the Holocaust Resource Center Oral History program. Assisting me is Marcia Weisberg. We welcome George Popper.

Thank you. I was born in Czechoslovakia. At that time, Czechoslovakia was a democratic country. It was formed in 1918. And of course, it lasted until 1939 when it was occupied by the Germans. The life for the Jews was pleasant there.

There was some anti-Semitism, but the Jews lived very well there. And they led happy lives until the Munich Agreement in 1938. By that time, we all realized that there is no future and that we have to get out. At that point, we all applied for a visa at the American embassy. And the quota was long, but we hoped that eventually we would get our visa and be able to emigrate.

In the meantime, I graduated from high school and I sent my diploma to my uncle, who lived in New York. And he got me admitted to New York University. And because of that, I was able to receive a student visa for a year. And this is the way I got out.

I left Czechoslovakia end of September, and I arrived here in October. And I was able to have my visa renewed every year while I attended college. And eventually, I received an immigration visa and became a citizen.

Can you tell us a little bit, George, about your family life before the war?

Well, we lived in a small town called Ricany, which was near Prague. And we spoke Czech. And also we learned German, which was a second language. And in the same town, the town was a capital of a district, and the local high school was there. And I attended the high school and so did my sisters for a time.

I would say that during my childhood, there were about 200 Jewish families living in that time. And we had a synagogue with a rabbi later on. When the rabbi retired, we were not able to get a rabbi, so we had a cantor who would conduct the services. And we had a rabbi from another town who came twice a week and gave the Jewish children religious classes.

And out of the Jewish families living there, there were very, very few survivors. A few families emigrated, one of them to Canada, which was a family of my best friend. And most of the others were killed. And I think of the ones who went to a concentration camp, I think there were only about two or three persons who survived.

Somehow, I think that the people lived under a false feeling of security, because Czechoslovakia had a strong army, and also had an alliance with France, and France in turn, of course, had an alliance with England. And I recall very vividly that in March 1938 after the Anschluss when Germany occupied Austria, my mother said, we should pack everything and go to America.

And my father said, there's nothing to worry about. We have our Allies and nothing will ever happen. And that was very unfortunate.

How long had your family lived in Czechoslovakia?

As far as we can tell, because a friend of mine who lives in Czechoslovakia prepared a family tree going back to 1790-- he couldn't find records prior to that because prior to that, the Jews didn't have the family names which they have now. So as far as I know, the family had lived there probably for many generations.

What language did you speak in school?

Czech. We spoke Czech, and we had to also study German and French. But we spoke Czech. That was our language. And my parents were completely bilingual. They also spoke German and sometimes used German if they didn't want the help to understand.

How far were you from Prague?

I would say maybe around 25 miles. We used to visit Prague very frequently, because we also had family there. And my father went there on business and so on.

Was there any overt anti-Semitism where you were?

Not really. Occasionally some other child might have called you a Jew, or dirty Jew, or something, but very seldom. But the government discouraged any form of anti-Semitism. And the Jews, I would say, basically everything was open to them. The Jews were officers in the army, unlike in some of the other countries where they could not become. And they were active in various industries and so on. So overall, they lived very well.

When did you yourself begin to feel that you were in danger?

In 1938. I would say that when the agitation of the Sudeten Germans started, and then it was supported by England at the time. Chamberlain was prime minister, and he actually sent a mediator to Czechoslovakia. And he found all the fault with the Czech government.

And then, of course, that was followed by the Munich Agreement. Now, once the Munich Agreement was signed and Czechoslovakia lost all the parts where they had their fortifications, I think all the Jews realized that the situation was hopeless. And I would say the reason why not many more got out is that there was simply no place where they could go to.

Now, what happened to my parents was that they were hoping to get the visa to the United States. And they waited. And then, of course, the war started. The United States entered the war after Pearl Harbor. And all the communications were broken.

By that time, you couldn't go anywhere. And I know from my sister's diary, and also from some relatives who survived, that they were deported to Terezin, which is also in Germany, Theresienstadt, in 1942. And then they were deported from there to Auschwitz in 1943. Now, apparently, they were in a transport that the Germans decided to treat differently for propaganda purposes, and they kept the families in the same camp very near Auschwitz.

And they were marked in the records for what they call [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] special treatment in six months. And then the six months went up, they told them that they were going to transfer them to a work camp. And the SS commander of that particular camp says, you can have my word as an SS officer that you won't be gassed.

But they took them right to Auschwitz to the gas chamber, and they were all killed. I think it was on March 7, 1944.

You said they were all your sisters--

My sisters, and my parents, and many other relatives. It was a group of Jews from Czechoslovakia.

How old were your sisters?

Let's see, my oldest sister was about 20 years old at that time-- going on 21. My younger sister was about 18. And I heard then from my cousin that the next transport, which left Terezin about two months later, was also marked for killing after six months.

But by that time, the Germans were doing so badly that they decided that they would utilize any people who were in fairly good physical shape for hard labor. So that's how my cousin survived.

Now, when they were sent to Theresienstadt and then to Auschwitz, you were already in the United States?

I was here. I found these things out only after the war when I heard from a cousin of mine who survived and then when I

received my sister's diary where she described how they didn't know what was going to happen, they just knew it was something unpleasant. And she would always write, today, they gave out notices, and luckily we were spared, and so on, and so forth.

I'd like to just come back a little bit to 1938.

Yes.

That period-- had you heard in Czechoslovakia of what was going on in Germany during Kristallnacht and during these periods?

Definitely.

Did that have an impact?

That had an impact. And of course, we heard at all times what was going on as far as the persecution of the Jews, because that was always written up in our newspapers. And we knew, for example, that the doctors and the lawyers were not allowed to practice after 1936. And the Jewish teachers were not allowed to teach and so on.

So we were informed about that. But I think the whole idea was that until 1938, people just thought, well, this would be confined to Germany, because the Western countries would come to the aid of Czechoslovakia. And of course, instead of coming to the aid, they actually forced Czechoslovakia to give up the territory. So that's what happened.

Was Masaryk the head? Who was the head of the government?

Well, Masaryk was the first president. And he resigned when he was in his 80s in 1935. And he died shortly thereafter. And then the president was banished.

Banished.

The foreign minister was Masaryk's son who, again. Took the office after the war. But then he was most likely killed then during the communist coup d'etat.

He fell out of a window.

I beg pardon?

He fell out of the window.

Yeah, he fell. But it's not known whether he jumped or was pushed.

And you left in September of--

'39, shortly after the war had started. I left after I had gotten my student visa. And then I had to go to the Prague Gestapo office to get an exit permit, which they granted. They wanted to get rid of the Jews, so I didn't have any problem getting this official paper.

And of course, they took away the Czech passport, and they gave me a German passport. And every Jew whose first name wasn't Jewish had the middle name Israel. And the women had the middle name Sara put in the passport, so that everybody would know they're Jews.

What was done to your father's business?

Well, actually, my father sold the store itself before the war-- just, I think, after Hitler came, to another fellow who was

our neighbor. And then the rest of the property was actually lost. My parents had some jewelry and we had a friendly family in Holland, and actually, the man came and he took it with him.

But later on, he was also Jewish, so he was deported, and everything was lost. So as far as the property was concerned, it was gone. Now, later on after the house was taken over by the government after the communist takeover, eventually I got sort of a small compensation through the American government, because they made some arrangement to return some Czech gold to the Czech government if they would compensate American citizens whose property was expropriated. So I got a small amount.

So when you left for the States, that was the last time you saw--

That was the last time. And then we corresponded until December 1941.

What were your feelings at leave-taking when you left?

Well, I was glad to be leaving. And at that time, I hoped that my parents and my sisters would follow me in a reasonable future. And of course, at that time, we just thought that we had to leave because the life would be very unpleasant for the Jews, and you couldn't make a living as a Jew, and so on.

Nobody, of course, had the slightest idea of the Holocaust-- of the systematic extermination. That was just in nobody's mind at that time. Nobody thought that anything like that would happen.

When you came here in 1939, do you have any recollection of how Americans regarded what was happening in your country?

Well, I think that in general, the Americans were friendly to Czechoslovakia, partly because a lot of the people knew about Masaryk. His wife was American. And they liked the country because it was a democratic country. So they were friendly towards it.

And people were generally very friendly when I came. Later on, I got a scholarship for Colby College, which was actually arranged through a Quaker group for me. So I found it very friendly reception here. Now, I know that as far as admitting people, that many people were not that enthusiastic about admitting immigrants, including some Jews that I spoke to who were afraid that the refugees would take jobs from them.

I remember several in particular who were very worried about that aspect of it. But I think that also, I must say that people were not aware until maybe 1944 or so what was really going on there.

People here?

People here-- about the systematic killing and so on.

Was there anything in the newspapers that you recall? I assume you spoke English when you got here.

I spoke some, and I started to read the paper. So let's say by the time I was here for a few weeks, I was able to read the paper and understand it quite well.

Did you see any news about what was happening? What was coverage--

No, I somehow remember that this news came out much later because, actually, the extermination started probably around 1942 or so, I think-- after that famous Wannsee Conference. And they didn't start building camps-- actually, they had concentration camps in Germany, which they opened up in 1933.

But people were killed there, but it was not the factory type of killing. But the concentration camps that they opened up in Poland I think didn't start till around 1942, I think. And of course, knowledge here took probably some longer time

still.

You met your wife in this country.

Yes.

Can you tell us something about her background?

Well, my wife was born in a small town. The name is Hynau, which was near Breslau, which was in Silesia. And now it has become Polish. And she went to school there. And then when it started to get a little bit more difficult for the Jews, she was sent to a private school.

And somehow, my parents-in-law, their life was not that affected, because they lived in a small town, they were well liked, and so on. So I suppose that they didn't start thinking about immigration until around 1937 or so. And then, of course, it was accelerated in 1938.

And they were able to get out. My wife has one brother, and he went to Israel, Palestine as it was then known in their youth-- Aliyah. So he left a few months before they did. And actually, my wife's family, I would say that her uncles and aunts, the majority of them survived.

And there were, I think, two or so who were killed, but most of them were able to emigrate. And actually, one of her cousins was actually hidden in a convent and survived that way.

And when you got here in the United States, did you start school immediately? Where did you live?

When I got here first, I already had the acceptance from New York University. And my plan was to start in February of 1940, which I did. So in the meantime, I went to high school in the evening for English classes to learn better. And I took some other courses at City College in English.

So you lived in New York?

Yes.

Manhattan.

And I started then at New York University in February. And I went there for one time. But of course, I couldn't afford the high tuition, which at the time was about \$250 a term. And I started to look around for some scholarships. And somebody told me to get in touch with the Quaker office, which I did.

And they interviewed me, and then they eventually offered me two scholarships. And I took the one for Colby College in Maine. And besides that, they also gave me \$100 a year from some other fund towards expenses. And I worked. I lived in a fraternity house and became a member. And I did various jobs, like I washed the dishes, I waited on tables, and one year I took care of the furnace, and so on.

Were there other European refugees there at the school in similar situations?

I was the only one at that time. There was another one who had graduated when I came. But there were some faculty members. I remember there was a professor who was a mathematics professor from Romania. His name was Schoenberg. And actually, when I was there the first year, he invited me for Thanksgiving together with some faculty members.

He was the only other refugee. His wife was, I think, the granddaughter of Paul Ehrlich, who was the discoverer of Salvarsan, which was the medicine against syphilis. And he was there.

He was Paul Ehrlich's grandson?

And now the wife was, I think, either daughter granddaughter. She was from Germany, he was from Romania originally. So he was actually a faculty member.

And did you have correspondence with your family at that time?

Yes, we had regular correspondence, as I mentioned, until November or December 1941, when the United States entered the war. So then everything was cut off.

When you were growing up in your family's house, did you have a lot of Yiddishkeit, or were you religious? Or how would you characterize--

Well, we were religious. My father, as a matter of fact, was always an official in the temple, in the synagogue. And we used to go-- we used to go every time somebody had a yahrzeit. And we used to fast on Yom Kippur after I became bar mitzvah and so on. But we didn't keep a kosher house.

And in that part of Czechoslovakia, Yiddish was not used as a spoken language. It was used-- just used certain terms, like [YIDDISH] and shiksa and so on.

Important words.

And there were some words that actually were used there but are not used here. Like there was a word which was called [YIDDISH], which meant somebody that's stupid. And actually, that word comes from the Hebrew word [HEBREW], which means a donkey. But people spoke Czech. And let's say if they wanted people to understand, they spoke German.

But Yiddish was not used in that part. Yiddish was used more in the Eastern part, which is now part of the Soviet Union, which was originally Hungarian. Then after the war, it became part of Czechoslovakia. And there they spoke Yiddish to a certain extent.

Going back to the letters you received, what was the mood and the tone of those letters in November of '41 and December '41?

More or less, the mood was that they were hopeful that the visa would come through, that we would be reunited.

Were those letters censored?

I couldn't tell if they were really censored or not. I know that my mother sent a few cards from the camp, and those were, of course, heavily censored. And all they were allowed to say there that we are well. Now, those cards were sent to some other relatives in Czechoslovakia.

My mother had a cousin who was married to a non-Jew, and she survived that way. So she used to communicate to her. But basically, they could write a postcard, and I think they were limited to a number of words. And they could just say that, we are well, and we received your package, or something like that.

Who did you live with in New York?

I lived with my uncle and aunt. My aunt, who is still alive, she lives in Israel now, she is the sister of my mother. And she married a fellow in Germany, also in Breslau. And they immigrated to the United States at the beginning of 1939.

And there is an interesting story, because he was a very successful salesman in Germany. And as a matter of fact, he retired for the first time when he was in his 30s. And when the situation got around 1936, he took all his money out, and he went to Prague with my aunt. And he went to consult some big banker.

And this fellow said to him that he shouldn't be an alarmist and things will work out. He took his money back to Germany. But luckily, he then applied for the visa in time, so he was able to emigrate in 1939. And he got some money out, but not as much as he did. So I lived with them. And then I went up to Maine to Colby College, and I lived there while I went to college.

Did the letters signify anything that things were getting worse, or that they were coming to a head, or anything like that? Did you read between the lines?

Well, it was evident, for example, that just towards the end before the correspondence stopped, they had to move to another apartment. Because when my parents took the apartment in Prague, it was in a very nice section. And it was a nice apartment.

But then apparently they wanted to concentrate the Jews in one part of the town, so they had to move to another apartment. And then later on, I read in the diary that several Jewish families had to share a very small apartment. And then they had to move again suddenly-- they said somebody appeared from some German organization and said, you have to move by tomorrow morning. They had to move to another apartment and that's how it went. In other words, they were always harassed, even prior to the deportation.

Is the diary of your sister being the main record that you have of that period?

Well, I have, actually, the diary of my sister, and then I have some information through a few relatives who survived. One of them was a cousin of mine who lives now in Chile. And another one was an aunt who was the only one whose son was killed, and she survived. And eventually, she committed suicide about 20 years later, I guess partly due to the experiences that she had. So that's how I know what happened afterwards.

Tell us a little about the diary.

Well, my sister started the diary when she was 19 years old, in 1941. And at the beginning, she said, we lived in very difficult times, and we hope that we'll survive. And she described social life-- about her friends and so on.

But then it started-- you could feel the fear that they had of the unknown. They know that people are being deported. They didn't know what was going to happen to them. Of course, I don't think anybody had the idea that they would be systematically killed, but they knew that they would be deported.

And what they used to do is that the Germans used to pass out notices to the families that had to be deported, and you could always see, now, the notices were passed out, and we were spared, and now we'll have, again, about six weeks before the next notices will come out. And then she would say, today, my aunt got a notice. And then she wrote about my younger sister's boyfriend got the notice, and they said goodbye, and so on.

And then she wrote a very moving part about a family that they knew in Prague. And the man died. And she mentioned about the funeral-- they had to walk there, because they were not allowed to use trolley cars. And she said it was the funeral of the dead and of the living, because the same afternoon the wife of the man who was buried in the morning and the daughter were deported.

And then towards the end, every entry has something showing the fear of the unknown of the deportation. Like she would say, today, Mrs. So-and-so went to leave, and today, so-and-so left. And we are still lucky. And then she says, oh now, they said there won't be any transports for four weeks. And then three days later, they got their notice. They said, we got our notice, and I don't know if I'll ever see Prague again, and so on, and so forth. And that's where it ends.

That's where the diary ends.

How long was the diary sustained for?

I would say a little over a year, because it started sometime in 1941 and ended in 1942. She wrote part of it in the camp.

No, no, no.

This was all prior.

This was all done in Prague. She gave it to the governess, and she sent it to me after the war.

The governess there?

Yeah. How did she know where to find you?

Well, she knew my aunt's address in New York, so she wrote to that address. And then she sent it to me. She died about seven years later or so.

How did you learn what happened to them?

Actually, the first information I received, let's say when the war ended in Europe, then suddenly these pictures started to appear when they liberated the death camps and all that. And naturally, everybody hoped that his family survived. And then I received a long letter from my cousin, and he described in the letter what happened and gave me the date when they were killed. And so that's how I knew.

How did he know?

Because he was there. He was there. You see then, as I mentioned before, he left Terezin about two months later. And his transport, which was also put in this so-called family camp, and when it came to the date when they were supposed to be gassed, they selected the younger people for hard labor, and they shipped them to another camp, which was called [? Schoenheide. ?]

And there, they were doing work. And some people, of course, died there because of the bad treatment. But he eventually survived. And his wife also was in the concentration camp and survived. She lost her first husband, but they married, and then they came here after the war, and they went to Chile. And they lived there.

But I learned from him then what happened. And then later on, of course, I heard from my aunt who survived. And she told me the same thing.

You have children?

Yes. I have two sons. And my younger son is married, and we have three grandchildren.

Over the years, did you talk about what happened?

Yes, I talked about it. They're aware of what happened.

I know you've commemorated several times what happened. I heard you read from the diary yourself--

Yes.

I know that you feel very emotionally about all of this, of course. But are there any thoughts of yours that you've had over the years about these things this whole period that you want to share with us?

Well, I think that even now, it will be 45 years since my parents got killed, but I still find it hard to believe that anything like that could happen. And I think that's probably the same feeling that most people have.

You say you did hear some rumors about what was going on in Germany when you were living in Prague?

Well, we knew that there was persecution of the Jews, and that was well known and was reported. And I think the feeling was that the Jews would have to leave Germany eventually, because they couldn't make a living, and it was difficult for them, and they were being harassed.

But I don't think that anybody in his wildest imagination thought that there would be this wholesale destruction of the Jews. And unfortunately, the Jews in Czechoslovakia felt that they were safe because they believed in the alliances. And they believed, first of all, Czechoslovakia, if it would have come to the war, they probably eventually would have been defeated, but they would have slowed down Hitler.

And as we found out later on from the history books, the German generals were ready to overthrow Hitler that time, because they felt that the army wasn't ready for war. And actually, they sent envoys to England to Chamberlain, and they asked him not to give in, but he wouldn't even see them.

Have you been back to Czechoslovakia?

Yes, I was there. And actually, I've met with some Gentile people who went to school with me. And also, we had a very--

Were you in Ricany?

Yes, and in Prague. And we had a very interesting and emotional experience. When we were in Prague, there's an old synagogue there called, in German, the [GERMAN]. And we went to go, in and there was a lady from the Jewish community and she said, you can't go in, because there's a wedding and it's being filmed by the German TV.

So I said, I was born here. And so she let us go in. And it was an unusual occasion, because there are hardly any young Jews left. But this fellow, I think he was half Jewish, and the wife converted to Judaism, and they were being married in this very old synagogue. So it was a very emotional experience.

And unfortunately, Hitler succeeded in making Europe, as he called it, judenrein, because there are hardly any Jews left in any of these countries-- in Czechoslovakia, Poland, or any of them.

Those that were lucky enough to emigrate, emigrated where mostly? To America?

I think that the country that most people preferred to emigrate was America. And as far as the people that I know, most of them emigrated-- first of all, from my hometown, very few emigrated. But from Prague and so on, they emigrated to America. And very few were able to go to Canada, some to South America, some to Australia. I also have my mother's cousin who emigrated to Sweden.

You mentioned Denmark before.

Yes, my wife's actually two cousins, they married two Danish lawyers, non-Jews. And when Hitler occupied Denmark, they went with them to Sweden by boat. And that's how they were saved. As you probably know, most of the Jews in Denmark were saved due to the help of the local population that got them to Sweden.

How did the local population in Prague react when you and all of your family and friends were being taken?

Well, I wasn't there, of course. But from what I hear from the people who survived, they weren't that much concerned. And there were not that many people who were safe, or hidden, or so on. I know some. We used to have neighbors when we lived in New York, and they were from Slovakia. And they were actually hidden by some local people and they survived.

But there was not that much help, I think. Of course, again, you can understand it, because anybody who was caught helping Jews was immediately shot. So it would've taken somebody very brave to help. And I think that, also,

everything was done in this very systematic way, because they were good records of the Jewish population.

So it probably would have been very hard for somebody to hide or pass as a non-Jew, because they right away started to move the Jews from the small towns to Prague and to certain designated areas so they could keep the count. So I don't really know anybody who survived in the western part of Czechoslovakia unless they went to a camp and survived-- but who survived in hiding, I don't know anybody.

Were the Slovakian nationalists very active in that area?

Not in that area, because they were active in Slovakia in the eastern area. And by the way, they were very anti-Semitic. And when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia, he took over the two western parts, which is Bohemia and Moravian. And he said that Slovakia would be independent.

And there was a government that was formed under a Catholic priest who became the president and prime minister. And they actually had some kind of an organization, similar to the SS, in Slovakia. And this man was Father Tiso. And he was actually shot after the war. I think that stems back to some dissatisfaction, because Slovakia felt that there was the more backward part of the country, and they weren't treated well.

And I still remember as a boy there were some that felt that they might be better under Hungary and so on. So they always made some agitation against the western part of the country.

Which was democratic?

Yeah, but they actually had a pro-Nazi type of government at that time.

Among the Jewish community, was there a great interest in Zionism, or Bundism, or any other--

There was some. I would say that probably the majority at that time felt that they were Jews of Czech religion. I think that's how many of them felt. And there even was a newspaper, which was called the newspaper of Czechs-Jews, like with the hyphen. But there was interest.

For example, I have a cousin who lived in another small town, and he was a great Zionist. And he actually emigrated around 1934, '35. And everybody, of course, said he was crazy. But he was the only one of his family who survived. His sister and his parents were later killed.

So there was interest. And I think in Prague, there was also a Jewish sports club, which was called Macabee. And actually, my cousin, the one who survived who is now in Chile, he went to Palestine because he was Zionist, but he came back because his father died and his mother wanted him to be back. So he actually went back at that time. And eventually, he survived.

He survived?

Yeah. He survived the concentration camp. But I would say that the Jews felt very emancipated and sort of as part of the population.

Do you ever speculate about whether your life would have taken a different turn if it hadn't been for these things? Would you have come to the United States, would you have stayed in Czechoslovakia?

I don't know. I might have come here, because there was always a lot of interest in the United States. And I had, actually, two uncles who came here. One of them came here early before the first war, and the other one came in 1920. So I'm sure that I would have at least come here for a visit, and I would have liked it and stayed.

But we were always interested in learning languages. And the plan would have been, if the situation would have been normal, I would probably have gone to France for a few months during a vacation to learn French, and the following

year to England to learn English. But who knows? It's hard to speculate. But maybe I would have ended here also, but under different circumstances.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

No, nothing too much. In general, I think just the people who were aware were being Jews and probably could bear the persecution better than, let's say, people who were so assimilated that they thought of themselves as Germans, or Czech, or everything else.

Yeah. George, thank you very much. Thank you very, very much.

Welcome.