

You were telling us about the family that you were living with, the lawyer and his aunt.

Yes. As I mentioned, he was a well-meaning person, but he was just plain scared of his own life. And he had very good reasons to be scared and to worry.

Was this a young man?

He was, at that point, I imagine, in the later part of 30, 36, 37, somewhere like that. So my mother had no choice but to try to find a place for us to live, and also she had to find a place to work. So from there we went to this man's sister, who was his older sister, and she was a school teacher in a one-class school not too far away from the town of Czortk³w. The place where she lived was called VIgnanka.

She lived in the school, and she taught in that school. It was a farm community. And my mother and I went there and stayed there with her that evening, and the next morning she told her that she's going to look for a job someplace. I stayed behind, and my mother left. And she went to another town not too far away, and, as I found out, she was very successful that day. She found a job and the place to live, but she also found people who knew her from her town. And they knew her to be Jewish, so that obviously couldn't work.

And she was very despondent and tired, and she came back to the school house. And this lady-- her name was Jaroslava, known as Slavka-- looked at my mother. And she told her-- she said, look, I had a feeling all along that both of you, you and your son, are Jewish, but now I know for a fact that you are Jewish looking at you. And I don't want you to go any place looking for a job because you're going to get killed. I think that you're going to stay here with me and my daughter. She had a little daughter. She was divorced.

And she said, either we will survive the war together, or we will perish, all the four of us. So everybody started trying, and we stayed there. And this woman didn't really have much to offer us. She didn't have much for herself or her child, so she shared whatever she had. And she was sort of asking the farmers to give us some food so we would have food to eat.

And it was cold, and one day, she and I went into the woods to bring some firewood. And there were rangers, and they it was illegal, obviously, to take anything out. So they start chasing us and started firing. And we ran, and she ran ahead of me, and I ran behind her. And I hit a tree stump, and I hit my knee.

And I couldn't run, so I jumped into the underbrush. And they passed me, the ranger and his help or whatever. And then I sat-- later, I sat there for what seemed like forever until I felt it was secure for me to get out and go back home. Meanwhile, she had come home, and my mother knew about the incident with a ranger. So my mother thought that I was killed, but I made it safely back.

And we lived there for quite a while, struggling somehow, getting whatever we could together to survive. And in the spring of 1944, the Russian army advanced, and we were liberated in that schoolhouse.

Was she teaching school to the children at the same time that you were living there?

Yes, there was a separate--

They were actually having classes?

There was a separate living quarters from the school quarters. She had a separate classroom where she taught. She was teaching all the subjects. This was a primary-grade school, so she did. She was teaching.

Now, it was in March of 1944 we were liberated, and before we were liberated, actually, the German army that was retreating stopped off for a short while in this school. And they occupied part of the school for the officers, and they called in the Ukrainian mayor of the village and ordered him to bring potatoes and some other things like wheat or

whatever for them, for food. And one day, when the Germans-- and chickens. So when the Germans retreated, we had some food left over. So that was the benefit of that short stay with the German army.

Then the Russian army came and liberated us, and now we were free. And we stayed there for a while, and the Russian captain who came first into-- and they took, also, the school partly for storage of army supplies and so forth. And my mother obviously told them immediately that we were Jewish, and at that time, the Russian government and the Russian army was very sympathetic towards the Jews and the survivors.

And this particular captain was also Ukrainian, from the eastern part of Ukraine, and he was married to a Jewish woman who was killed by the Germans. And his son was killed fighting in the war, so he was very, very sympathetic towards me. And he and another group and a few other officers sort of wanted to adopt me.

And one plan that they told my mother about was to adopt me, become-- I should become the mascot of that division, of the Russian military division. And they were going to send me as a-- the division would sponsor me to the famous Suvorov School, which is the equivalent of the West Point. It's a Suvorov military school.

In Russia?

In Russia. So my mother wasn't too thrilled with that idea. In any case, they had a short stay--

How did you feel about it?

Well, I sort of felt like a hero because they had a military parade in that little town, in Czortk³w. And I was taken in with them. They gave me a uniform because I had no clothing, so I was wearing a Russian uniform. And everything was much too large for me because I survived without boots, without shoes, without anything. So I was wearing a Russian uniform, except with no insignias on it.

And when they started the parade, the kernel arrived on a horse, but he was supposed to march with the troops. So I was riding the horse way up in front of the parade, so I was sort of like a-- for a 13-and-a-half-year-old boy who had just been liberated, it felt very, very good.

So then this Ukrainian captain and the whole group of officers-- they became really-- they were so involved with the war, with the fighting, and each one of them had lost somebody in the war. So as a routine, every evening they would sit and drink. They'd have drinking parties. Now, the difference between a Westerner drinking and the Russian drinking is that the object of a Westerner to drink is to have fun. A Russian drinks to get drunk or to forget his sorrows.

So eventually, they all get drunk, and they get sick. And I was very young, and they wanted me to drink with them. And one way not to drink-- I told them that I was not allowed for medical reasons, and until this day I don't drink alcohol.

But what I want to bring out is, after they moved on, this captain came back-- the front moved on, and he moved on. And they came back, and they brought some different military goods like uniforms, boots, and all those kind of things, foodstuff, American-made ham cans. And they asked me to sell them at black market and buy vodka on the black market.

For them?

For them. Well, that whole thing eventually came to light. This captain, who really was my closest benefactor, and the others stood court-martial. And he was sentenced-- he was given a death sentence because, in essence, what he did-- he was stealing army things, selling it, and living it up with the others.

But he didn't do it for his own-- everybody joined in, not for his own benefit, really. So there was a court-martial. I was involved in the sense that I was sort of the middleman, but I was so young that they did not prosecute me. But they arrested my mother, and my mother was court-martialed. This was after the liberation.

But all these officers testified that she really was not involved, so she was let go. She was freed. And they were not executed. He was not executed, but he was stripped of all his rank. And he was just put up on the front line. He probably was killed by the Germans or something.

So my mother came out of this court-martial deal. This was right like within a few months after we were liberated-- it was in the summer of 1944. And she met another survivor of the Holocaust, and she married with my blessings because, prior to that incident with the court-martial, I felt that I was old enough to support her. Then I realized that it wasn't quite as smart as I thought I was. So I gave her my blessings, and she married. And he also survived the Holocaust. His wife was killed in the war, and he saw--

Did he have children, too?

He had a son who was immediately, upon liberation-- he was inducted into the Russian army, and his father, my stepfather, did not know what happened to his son. So a few months went by, and we had-- so this part, now, of the country became part of the Soviet Union, and we were pre-war Polish citizens. We were allowed to move west, to emigrate to Poland, to Poland proper.

So on the one hand, we were very anxious to go, but on the other hand, we felt that, if we go, my stepfather will never find his son. So we waited to hear, to have some sort of an idea of where he was. And on my stepfather's birthday, on July the 10th, 1944, he got a letter from his son, who was now in the Russian army stationed in Germany, on the North Sea.

So now we knew where he was, and we emigrated to Poland. And first we were transported to Vienna, and from Vienna, we were taken to West Germany, to a displaced persons camp.

Excuse me, just one clarification. You said '44. Do you mean '45? The war was already over in Europe at the time you're talking about?

No, it was in '44.

It was in '44, OK. I'm sorry.

This was after your liberation but before--

After your liberation, before the actual end of the war.

--the actual war had ended.

The war was still going on.

OK, I'm sorry.

It wouldn't end until May '45. This is now a--

--almost a year before that.

--year before the end of the war. Yes, we were allowed to go to Poland, and we went-- I'm sorry. Vienna is not at this point. We went to Poland, and we settled-- the Polish government actually settled us in the territories that they annexed from Germany. What used to be eastern Silesia now became western provinces of Poland. And we were settled in a town-- the German name was Liegnitz, lower Silesia, and now it's called Legnica.

And we stayed there for a while, and then we realized that, actually, Poland was becoming a satellite state of Russia. This is where the-- there was a Polish government in exile in London, and at one point, we thought that the exile government will come back to Poland and they will form a government in Poland. But that was not to be.

And the territories that we were-- Stalin was, at that time the-- the head of that territory was Gomulka, who became, later on, the Polish premier. And then Stalin got rid of him.

But anyhow, we lived in Legnica for a while. Meanwhile, the Russian army was fighting in Germany, and eventually, after a year, the war came to an end. And by then, we decided that it was not advisable for us to stay in Poland because now, after the war, in 1944 or '45, beginning of '45, there were pogroms in Poland against the Jews.

By the Russians?

By the Poles in the territories. There were not that many Jews altogether. So we decided to go west. We were contacted by some other survivors, that there was a group of Jewish-- they sort of formed an underground to bring us to Germany, and this was really illegally supported or clandestinely supported by the UNRRA, the United Nations Relief Organization. It was feeding us, actually.

So we went through Vienna, and they brought us to a western town in Germany-- I can't think of the name of it. I can't remember. It'll come to me-- and put us in a displaced persons camp. My family, my stepfather, my mother, and I stayed there for a few days only, and as soon as we got identification documents, we decided to move on our own to Munich.

Yeah, but I skipped the part-- the part in Poland I skipped is that, when we lived in the Legnica, my stepfather and my mother got the permission from the local Polish authorities to go to East Germany to visit my stepbrother, who was then serving in the Russian army.

They found him in East Germany. He was let out of the Russian army, and he came with us-- he came back to Legnica, stayed with us, and together with us, we came to Germany and then to Munich. And we settled in Munich.

My father then started a business in Munich, my stepfather. It was an import business of textiles, and with my stepbrother was with him in the business. And my mother hired a tutor, and I took an entrance exam to a engineering school, die Technische Hochschule. And I studied there and completed my studies in 1951 with a degree in mechanical engineering. And shortly thereafter my graduation, we emigrated to the United States.

How do you feel that this whole experience has changed your life?

Well, I've often thought, obviously, about my life, and the most that I've said about it and the time that I really did a lot of soul-searching was while I was in Munich. I had an accident, and I was in the hospital for many weeks. And then I was, I think 17 years old, and this is before I started college.

And I still remember now. My thoughts were that the past was such a horrible time for all of Europe, and, specifically, all the Jews, and, especially, the Jews in Poland. I don't know if you're aware of it, but the Jewish history in Poland dates back 2,000 years, before there was a Poland. There were Jews there.

And specifically, about my family, that only my mother and I survived of the whole family. I don't know how many-- my father had only a brother, who was an American, but my grandparents had all kinds of families. And I don't remember them because I was too young.

So thinking about all these things that happened to us, and I lived through these horrors, and fires, and hanging people, and climbing over bodies, and all those kind of things. And now I was in Germany, a free person, with a life in front of me, I was hoping. And consciously, I had a thought-- how will my life unfold? Am I to, for the rest of my life, really live with the past and become a very bitter kind of person or proceed with my life and try to lead a normal life, whatever that means?

So I consciously decided to try to not to forget because these kind of things you can never forget, especially since I lost my father, and my grandparents, and all this. But I tried to put it in the back of my mind and not live on a day-to-day basis with a hatred in me. And after I took-- decided my mother-- after my mother urged me to do something about an

education. And I started studying privately and took the exam, and passed the exam. And I started studying engineering.

I wound up to be the only Jew in a German class with all students German, and I had to live like this. And I could have been ostracized and put aside, but I must say that I did not feel the hatred of the Germans. And in turn, I don't feel that every German is responsible for what Hitler did. I don't know in percentages how many were collaborating and how many were killing and the same thing for the Poles or for the Ukrainians.

In the time that you were there in Germany, did you notice any kind of perceptible change in attitude or attempt to reconcile with Jews among Germans?

I had no problems whatsoever with the German students that I went to school with. I graduated in 1951, and now it's 1988. And I still maintain friendship with one specific German student friend of mine who was born and all his life lives in Dachau. And last year, he visited here for the first time. I've visited him in Germany many times.

He was very young when the war was on, and he was taken into the army. He was fighting in the German army as a soldier. He was taken prisoner by the American troops, brought to America, into a POW camp. And he spent some time in Texas in the POW camp. And I know him very, very well, and I know for a fact that he had-- living in Dachau, he did not know what was happening. Neither did his family.

And the people that I met after the war, the Germans-- they were very, very nice and pleasant, and those that probably were guilty were also pleasant and nice. But I could not say who was involved and who wasn't. And the same-- as a matter of fact, if I were to judge people, which I try not to do, I would say that the Slavic people, the Poles or the Ukrainians-- and I owe the Ukrainians my life, really. And I'm not saying that all Ukrainians were bad, but the percentage is probably higher amongst the Ukrainians and the Poles than the Germans that were involved with the extermination of the Jews.

Have you been in contact or have you kept contact with any of the people that helped to hide you during that time?

Well, this woman, the schoolteacher-- when we were liberated and we decided to move-- the way my mother felt, this was more than a sister. She risked her life and her child's life to save us. So we wanted her to come with us, but she was a very strong Ukrainian nationalist, and they have a very strong attachment to the soil. And she was not going to go.

So she did not go. We left, and after we settled in the United States, my mother wrote to her on a regular basis for many, many years without having a reply. But for many years, she wrote-- I don't remember how often, but I would venture to say once every month or six weeks-- for years and years. And one day, after like 10 or 15 years, my mother got a letter back. This was after Stalin died.

She got a letter, and immediately we sent her packages, and moneys, and all kinds of things. And that correspondence lasted for like half a year. And then, all of a sudden, it stopped, and I don't know whether she was alive. If she would be alive-- she was born 1909. I know. She would be now 89 years old. People don't live in Eastern Europe that long under these conditions. And whatever happened to her daughter and to the others-- I have no idea.

I went to the Soviet Union, and I was very much debating whether or not to find her, and I did not do it because I would have done more harm than good because it's not good for them to have contact with the West. Maybe now it'll change, but I don't know.

How do you feel that this experience affected your spirituality, if at all?

Well, if you remember the story where I told you that we were led into the ghetto, and when I walked in, and I saw in every gaslamp two Jewish policemen hanging, and in the middle of the ghetto there was a mass grave that was heaving, and I heard moans out of the grave-- I looked at myself and at the grave, and I said to myself, if there is God, these things could never happen, and if these things happened, there is no God.

And all these years, 40 years later, this is how I feel. I'm areligious. I don't believe in God. Most survivors that I know--

most survivors lived through the Holocaust and became more religious. I became areligious.

Is there anything else that you would like to say in conclusion to your story?

Well, the reason I'm here in the first place is I feel an obligation to tell my story because I witnessed it, and I'm probably one of the younger survivors. And in 10 or 20 years, there will be no survivors. So every time I'm given an opportunity to talk-- and I have talked to different groups, school groups, including Kean College-- I feel it's my obligation. I have to tell the story because this actually did happen, and I lived through it.

I'm not a historian or a lecturer, but I'm a witness to all these atrocities. And when I hear that some professors write books-- in Indiana University, there was a scheme that some people trying to perpetrate on the public that this is an imagination that never did happen. That's ridiculous, and this is why I'm doing this.

I have three children who are American-born, and I want them and everybody else to know that these things can happen. And it happens only when people are not tolerant. People have to be tolerant, and they have to learn something from the past because if you don't learn from the past, the future may not be much better than the past was.

And whether we agree with somebody or not, we have to give them the right to be whatever they want and believe in whatever they want. My right is to be-- I'm very, very committed Jew, but I don't believe in God. But if I see somebody who is a Muslim, or a Christian, or whatever he is, or a non-believer, that's his right.

So I try to be very tolerant, accept things and people as they are, and live my own life. And I hope that the young people grow up with a better sense of values that our parents and forefathers had and would not come to this kind of a situation because now, with all the sophisticated methods of killing, we don't need bullets. With one little bomb, we can kill thousands and thousands of people. That we proved.

I have one final question. How have your children been affected by your experience, do you think? I think that both my wife and myself are-- my wife is also a survivor of the Holocaust. She had a completely different kind of a story. She was born and lived through the war in the Netherlands, where the Dutch population was much, much friendlier towards the Jews and much more understanding.

So my kids are actually products of both parents being survivors of the Holocaust. Whether they want it or not, whether we want it or not, I'm sure that they've been affected. I would like to think that they've been affected in a positive way. My kids are very happy young people. They are basically normal American young people, all going through the turbulent college days. And fortunately, none of them got involved with drugs. That in itself is already a good sign.

They all went through college, and I hope that they will be happy and knowingly that they are children of survivors. Yet they are American, and I hope they are happy.

Do you think it's made them stronger?

Yeah, I think so because of the background. They can't help it. They appreciate the fact that we had to go through this kind of a traumatic times, and they are, I think, proud of the fact that I was able to go to college after the years I lost, that I graduated with a-- came to America as a professional. So there was never a question in our home-- there was never a possibility that they would not go to college.

I don't know whether they're going to become PhDs or whatever, but who knows? More importantly to me, at least, is that they lead a decent life and that they're happy and content.

I thank you very much for being with us and sharing with us in this project, and good luck to you in the future.

I would just like to add one thing--

Oh, surely.

--before you cut me off--

Sure.

Thanks a lot.

--as a responsibility--

That's OK.

--to state my very strong feeling that, although the great majority of Gentiles did not help the Jews, the minority that did help the Jews deserve all the honors and all the titles and whatever because they actually risked-- most of them risked their own and their family's lives to do it.

And I've always wanted to bring this out because there are some people who feel that there were no good Gentiles, and I feel that, without the righteous Gentiles, none of us would have survived. Somebody, some place had to help us. And I thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak to you.

We thank you.

Thank you. We appreciate your having been there and sharing your story with us. And good luck to you in the future.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

Thank you.