

Continue our interview with Adam Spiro.

Were you aware of your wife's safety at the time?

During all this time, from the day of separation on that night in the train, I didn't have any direct communication with my wife. She was getting my letters from the military. But somehow, I was-- even in the [? army, ?] we're traveling from point to point, and her letters to me never caught with me. But at one time, I think late in April 1940, I was told to go to Paris to testify before the Commission investigating the causes of Polish collapse in 1939.

And I met in Paris a cousin of mine who was a Jewish journalist in Paris. And he told me that he was in communication with my wife, and knew that everything is well there. So I didn't have to worry. My wife was without letters from me most probably from the beginning of May, when the big battle started, and to September 1940. In September 1940, Commission of International Red Cross came to Belfort, and everyone of us wrote a postcard to the family, just saying that you are well and alive.

From this camp in France, we were sent in November 1940, to Stalag 17 in Austria. Stalag 17 was near Hungarian-Austrian frontier. It was a very, very huge place. The meaning of it is that this was a center of activity for the whole region. There was a post office for the prisoner of war, the hospitals, the administration centers. But we were not generally sitting in a camp. We were sent out in commandos all over the country to work.

It will be interesting to say. We traveled into crowded railway wagons that had inscription five horses or 40 men, and maybe 80 were crowded in it. We were stopping from time to time to let us relieve ourselves. So food was given in advance for the whole voyage, and we came to the camp.

There was the usual searches of the things that we had. And showers and [INAUDIBLE] situation. And then we were on our way to the huge barrack.

There was a separate barrack for Jews?

Yes. Now the group that came from this barracks in France were about 300 people. And together, we were there about, I would say 800 to 900 Jews in the Stalag 17. Now before they brought us, the Germans, to the barrack, they stopped and they told us to take our things, and lay out, and they will go look for things. They were just stealing soap and tobacco. That's what happened.

And while this procedure was taking place, an officer came by. And he started to ask questions. And he asked them to give everything back to us. And the German soldier said to him, sir, when they will come to this barrack, the other prisoners of war will rob them of everything that they have. So why can't we have a part of it? And the officer said, never mind. Give back and bring them to the barracks. And as they said, the moment that we came into the barracks, it was like [INAUDIBLE] attack. The people came on us. And everything that we had disappeared, our Jewish friends.

Now we were keeping together, this group that came from Belfort. And we found out that originally this other 500-600 Jews that were in the camp, came much earlier to the camp, and were at the stalag, and were sent to work in outside, the provinces. And they immediately started the commerce. And population was, police was complaining, and they were retrieved into the camp, and so the Jews would never go back to work. We stay in camp.

Now camp is a prison, with all the tragedies that happened in the prison. Yes? And the biggest tragedy of the prison is louse. That brings sickness. That brings suffering. And there is a louse, an animal louse, and there was a human louse. The people that are sitting in the camp, that can manipulate. Manipulate, if you had cigarettes or soap, you could buy the best meal in this camp. And you're a sucker and doesn't have anything, then you starve.

And the same was true of Jews as non-Jews?

Even more. So here we were in this camp, and we started to make a few friends. In Belfort, intellectuals will start to talk

to us now. And we said something has to be done. Who wants to stick here for who knows how many years? So we petitioned to see the commanding general. And that petition was signed by me. I had a rank [? Ministerial ?] rank, which is a very high civil service rank, and makes impression to mention. There were lawyers and there were medical doctors. So we signed this petition that I would like to see him.

And we were brought to his house. And we asked him that we would like to go to work. We would like to sit in the camp. And he said that he had this bad experience. I would say maybe we will mix new and old prisoners together, and maybe they learned something through this few months that they were sitting in camp, and that things will be better. So all right. I will try.

And we were sent out. Now this was-- I was in a group who were about 50 people. And we went out from this camp. A nice train, sitting like people in the train to place of work. We came to this place in the night. It was dark. No lights yes. And they brought us, opened the door, and we came into the beautiful hall. Light and music playing, it's another world. Not a barrack, it was a mess for foreign workers, and we were given food, and not only to eat as much as we wanted there, but also bread and sausages to take with us for the night with barrack, so a nice reception, very nice.

And the person in charge, the sergeant, said to us-- the German said to us, immediately he said, I am a Prussian sergeant, an old-fashioned [NON-ENGLISH], he said. And you will do what I say, and we will be friends. Or you will not do what I say, and we will be enemies, your choice, he said. All right. He took us out in the night, went to the place where we were supposed to-- barracks made especially for us. We approached this barrack, and we see it's a new barrack, entirely new.

And one of the doctors, our doctor, went out, stood before the door, and said nobody enters. So this sergeant says, on who's command? He says to him, listen, we have a little louse, we have [? plenty ?] of dirt on us. This is a new barrack, and you think if we come now there as we are, we will infest the place, and we will be forever infested. Bring the machine. Bring us to the shower. The louse that were in uniform and everything, and then we will have a clean place.

And he says, where will you sleep? We'll sleep on the ground. It's pretty cold, but we'll sleep on the ground. The next morning, that sergeant with one of our doctors went to the municipality, and they made the big stink. The camps that were clean, and so he said what the camp says and what we say are two different things. Anyhow they brought this big machines that are washing and delousing the clothes where everything was washed. We went to river. We went to shower, we washed. We went into the beautiful place. A barrack, a military barrack, but clean, everything fresh. Fine.

And we started to work. What we were doing, we were fixing the river banks, that high in the mountain, in Alps, in Austrian Alps. We were fixing the banks that were damaged by the floods in the previous summer. Very hard work, not accustomed to it, in the cold water still.

But they told us the foreman was a Slovak. And he said to us, if you would do so much and so much, I would be satisfied. And I will not pester you. And we decided we will do. We will try to cooperate with them. And it was very nice. We were working there, physically terrible. For a man who's not accustomed to the physical work, yes, hard physical work. Every bone in your body ached. We couldn't sleep in the night. But we weren't hungry, and we were left alone, and we worked.

And here comes a very important thing that happened to us, that gave us hope for future. One day-- near by was a big steel mill, a tremendous steel mill, operated by the French prisoners of war. There were about 5,000 prisoners of war there. And they were organized as a French military group. They had their general, colonels, majors; the whole thing there. And their life was miserable, these people. And they were complaining. And the same general that we had the interview in camp, came to inspect what's going on there.

And it was dirt, and I don't know. He was very, very unhappy, very, very unhappy. And our sergeant said to him, General, would you like to see my command, my Jewish command? And he says, naturally. And he came to us-- clean, nice, pleasant. I would say even for the condition, military life. But not a prison, a military camp. And he sat down and started to talk with us. And he said, he also was a prisoner of war. He was also an Austrian officer in Siberia. And he also didn't believe that he would ever go back home, he said.

And I went, and he said after years, I forgot about the hard time, and all what I was remembering were sometimes the more pleasant things about the captivity. And the same thing will be with you, he said. So the war will end. You will go home. You will forget about all this. You will only remember the nice, pleasant memories. And somebody said, yes, but we are the Jews. He said, you are the French soldiers in the French uniform under the protection of the Geneva Convention. And he says, as long as you are underneath your uniform, the German army will honor their obligation under the Geneva Convention.

In all of this time, were you ever under the scrutiny of the SS or--

Nothing. We didn't have anything to do with them, only later on, when there were a escape attempts that people that were caught escaping, they were sent to special punishment camps, and they had to do with the whole civilian apparatus. I didn't have anything to do with the civilian apparatus.

You were not involved in any attempt to escape or any attempt--

No. I didn't have work to escape, and my wife was writing to me, you sit where you are. This is the safest place for you.

She was right.

Yes.

So the year went by. We were sent from one camp to another camp, to another work. We were landscaping. I was working in gypsum mine for two years. I was working in in quarry. In stone quarry. A nice work for a fine Jewish boy. But after a few months, after the first few months, was bones adjusted to the work, it wasn't hard anymore. And we were often joking among ourselves that the white-collared man has a pity for the men who works hard with their hand. And it is not necessary to have a pity. Because a man works with a hand, if he has food enough and sleep enough, rests, and is much more healthy than the white-collared man who works in the office and then go with the work home. And--

Many, many of these white-collar people tragically died in Auschwitz, because they didn't have the skills that could keep them alive.

Yes. Yes. Now about the food, very early we learned that we have to live with the Germans. So when we were going somewhere to a new place, the first thing that we will do, we were negotiating the amount of work that we are supposed to deliver. In order to get a special nourishment cart, special ration for the hard-working people. And then we will negotiate with the owner, with our employer, that one of our men would stay in barracks and cook. That we would make our own food from our own provisions and that we can get through the camp. And it worked very nicely through all this time.

Now pleasant or unpleasant moment, naturally there were unpleasant moments, because the people-- our people didn't behave always correctly. So there were punishments, and they were unpleasant. But from myself saying, I would say this. I don't believe that outside of American, any prisoner of war could spend the war as safely as I did. I was getting packages from my family from America. So I wasn't hungry. I was hungry, but I wasn't hungry, yes? If I don't know you, you had missing bread. The food wasn't normal food. But I didn't starve. I had the force to work.

I was working in the-- I wasn't giving up my vital force. I was-- I lost weight. But I wasn't starved, as people--

You weren't emaciated or sickly.

I didn't have, until the last few months before the end of the war, I didn't worry about my life, that they will come and take me to the extermination camp.

At the end, did you?

Yes. I would-- if you will have time, I will say a few words about it. I was in steady communication with my wife. I was working high in Alps in good house. So I was blessed.

Indeed.

I still thought that I lost my best life, the best years of my life, that I was a victim of the war, and so on and so on, until I came to France after the war, and found out what happened. And then I said, shut up. What you have to say? Be happy. Smile. You're safe. You didn't suffer.

Did you know what was happening at any point?

Yes, from German soldiers. We were in all those places that we were working were transportations. The Germans were coming for-- the trains were coming to pick up the material. Yes? So we were serving-- we were serving our material on the station or a railway station. And there was continuously on this railway station, a military transport that were waiting for the right of way. And we were talking with one of the German soldiers. And they were telling us that terrible things are happening. Maybe we didn't know about the camps, about killing in the camps. That we didn't know. But we knew about ghettos, about people taken to camps, about what's going on.

You didn't know necessarily about the final solution, in other words?

Yeah, no.

Did you ever see the boxcars with the people on them?

Only in the last-- later in February 1945. There was a moment, there was a occasion that a military factory that was nearby was bombed out, and that was when we were working at the gypsum mine. At the gypsum mine was also fabricated the gypsum plates. And they needed these plates to rebuild the planes. So they sent workers from the other factory to our place to make these planes. And there were Polish boys from Warsaw. And they told us about Warsaw, about the fence of Warsaw ghetto, and what happened in--

'43.

And then I knew that there are no more Jews, that Jewish population of Warsaw doesn't exist anymore. And I was mourning the family. And they were very nice about this, because I came at night into the barrack, and I cried the whole night. I told them what happened. And in the morning, the friends went to the foreman, and said, leave him alone today. Let him-- let him stay. So I went into the forest to spend the day.

The prisoners of war have a trustee always. Every group has a trustee that speaks for them. We had also a trustee, but he was letting me very often to talk, and I had-- I talked German, as a high-class German.

[NON-ENGLISH]

And the German soldiers and even officers inadvertently were respecting what I was saying, because I talked to them the language of their superiors. So I had-- let's say we had privileges of shower, in [INAUDIBLE] our town, in a coal mine. And then somehow somebody says no, and they stopped giving us permission to go to shower. And we were dirty. So I started to yell. So the officer came. And I yell at him.

He said, later on, [INAUDIBLE], he said, we are afraid he will shoot you. I yell at him and we got back. Now I will talk about one special accident, not accident-- incident, and then about the end. The incident is this. We had a radio that was working only on BBC channel. Radio made in the camp and brought to us. And we were listening Sunday afternoon to the broadcast, special broadcast for prisoner of war.

And here we are, Sunday afternoon in the barrack, laying on beds. And my bed is the third high.

Third tier.

Yes. The third tier. We were resting, and the door opened. The guard comes in and yells, Achtung. And three officers, three young officers come after him. Search. So I have this earphone in my ear. I dropped the earphone and put under the pillow. And I spring down. But a moment too late. Everybody is--