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Continue, Leo.

I would like to continue why on I call Birkenau a heaven instead of hell. I told you about that every day, as long as I was there, we saw youngsters, to the right and to the left, hanging onto barbed wire. I guess they had enough living under this condition, and they committed suicide. The second thing was, also, that even though that you didn't do it yourself, you were selected, and I will give you an example how it worked.

Once, every so often, you come home from work. You line up behind because they count you. Then you go into the block, whatever block you're appointed to. My block was 28. And we start lining up to go to the front to the door, and you had two assessments. You had somebody who was giving you the soup and you had your canister with you.

And they will ask certain people their number. There was no name. There was no such name as Leo Laufer on the record. They did have a record, they knew my name, but they knew my number. And they ask your number. And it was like catch-22. You never knew. If you give them the number, are you going to remain?

If you give them the number, you're going to go to the crematorium, because when we were in camp, in Lager D, which was called the labor camp, arbeitslager. We saw the chimneys. We smelled the flesh. We knew what was going on, but we never got close enough to actually see what transpired there.

Otherwise, I wouldn't be here to tell you. I'm sure some of the boys knew about it. We had two kommandos, like the Kanada and the Sonderkommando. They knew what was going on, we did not. But they were separated from us, so we never really got any connections with them.

Then they ask you the number. And I remember one time, and especially if you didn't look so good, or maybe you just got through diarrhea or some sickness and you looked like what we used to call Muselmann. I don't know if you have this expression of Muselmann. It's like a zombie, dead body walking around.

And they take your number. And when you got into the block, later on when they closed the door, they called you number and you remained in the block. The rest of them go to work the next morning, and then they take you away and you are gone. You don't know what happened to you, and so on.

I will tell you one incident that happened to me that I don't know what drove me, maybe some will inside or maybe God or maybe an angel told me to do this thing. My number is 143-248. And I remember just a week before, I was really sick. I also had diarrhea. Nobody got through that without having it. And I was so skinny, dried up. I probably weighed maybe 75 pounds.

And I work, the same thing. There was two assessments, asking numbers, and I gave him 143-284. I just switched it, 248 to 284. And I didn't know if I did it right or wrong. I had a feeling if they asked me the number, that they're going to take me away, because I was barely walking. And I walked into the block 28, and I remember I was sleeping.

I don't know if you know the perimeter of the camps. There was a bank on the bottom and then a bank in the middle and a bunk on the top. And I was on the bottom. I was privileged, because you didn't have to jump up so high, because I was small and I really couldn't get up.

And I remember there was a fellow that I got acquainted with in Auschwitz, Friedman. He was the first one and I number two. There were six of us in this bunk on the bottom. And the same night, the blockalteste calls up number 143-284. 143-284.

I don't answer because mine's 248. Just logically, I didn't answer because I did it almost purposely, because I was scared. And he kept on hollering and nobody answered, because maybe 248, 284 was in another block somewhere. And sure enough, the next morning, we all go to work.

And Friedman, his number, he remained, too. He didn't look too good, either. And he remained. When he came back

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from work, Friedman was gone. So we knew right away, because there was no secret about the crematorium down there to us, to the thousands and thousands who were in Birkenau. So I guess I saved my life.

I went through Auschwitz for a year, from August of 1943 to October of 1944. I can go through a lot of episodes, but I think time will probably be limited to it. Maybe some other time. But I will give you some things that really happened that had an effect on me later in life.

I also had the privilege later on to be transferred to another kommando, which was one of the best, and this was called the [NON-ENGLISH]. They were looking for textile workers. Since my father supposedly worked in the textile business by remote control-- it was a textile business, practical nothing. So I considered myself, I'm a textile worker. And I remember since I was 12, I was working for a cousin of mine in Lodge-- in a little, small factory making men's socks. So I considered this textile. I'm an expert.

And so I registered them as a textile worker. And they took me to this place, which was one of the best places in the region. It was the best place. It was inside barracks. And they used to shred up strips of clothes, probably the ones who died or took them away to crematorium, in small strips. And they used pleat it to make some straps for rifles for the army, because I guess they didn't have any [INAUDIBLE].

So this was the type of work, and it was sitting down in a chair, because you had to have a nail on it to put it in pleat, and so on. So it was pretty good work. We had a couple from Czechoslovakia, and then we had another couple. I remember Kurt was a little short fellow with a green triangle, and this was the real murderers, or whatever, if he had a green thing. And they were both very tough. But as long as you worked fast and good, they let you go. So it was [INAUDIBLE] bring you back a little--

Were these kapos?

Yeah. Yeah, they were kapos. They were not Jewish. One of them was from Czechoslovakia. He spoke Czech, and the other one was a German, actually. He wasn't Jewish, either. And I worked down there, and I really didn't know how long, but I found out later after the war. I got my documents out. One day, I went into the [NON-ENGLISH] and I got out of the [NON-ENGLISH]

And this was until October 1944. Let me give you an episode that you probably heard of, what happened to the gypsies. The gypsies were in camp D. The camps were like A, B, C, D. We were in D, and then you had E and then you had F, which was the fraulein lager, which was the women's camp. In fact, at the [NON-ENGLISH], we worked with some women together.

In fact, I found a young lady who used to live in Munroe, New York. I found her later in Germany in one of the DP camps when I looked around, and found her alive. And she married. A very wonderful woman. So I reminisce about the [NON-ENGLISH].

In 1940, for one day, we used to have almost a pastime when we came home from work. I don't know if you can situate the barracks. There was an alley. The barracks were facing this way, and then you had another small alley in the back, and then you had the barbed wire. Then you had another barbed wire, electric, and then you had the next camp.

And we used to come home. We used to go, some of us, and sneak out to the back and listen to the gypsies. And I guess we thought they were more privileged in us. And the reason they were more privileged, in camp E, they had their entire families together. Women, grandmothers, children, everybody was in the barracks. And they used to play the harmonica. So for us, it was coming a lot like soothing, a different way of life. You come home from hard work and you listen to this harmonica, and so on.

Then one night, we got up in the morning and the camp was totally empty. I don't know how many thousand, but I would say tens of thousands. I'm sure they have some records of how many gypsies were eliminated in one night. And as we lined up the next morning and we went to work, you could see the chimneys blasting. You could actually see the fire coming out. It must be pushed at such a tempo. It was horrible. And when we came home, all of them gone. Not a

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gypsy was in the camp.

A few days later, a new camp filled up, which was called the zigeunerlager, gypsy camp. Got filled up. And who was it? None other but the remnants of the Jews from the Lodz ghetto, October of 1944. Of course, when we went to the wire to listen, hollering, lodge, lodge, lodge.

Of course, I did, too. I went to the wire. And of course, you've got to realize that from one wire to the next camp, I would say would probably maybe 30 to 40 to 50 feet away, so you had to scream. So everybody was screaming, did you see so-and-so and did you see so-and-so? Of course, I was screaming, Laufer, Laufer, Laufer.

Finally, somebody showed up, and I recognized my older brother, who was married. This was October 1944. The joy that I had to see somebody, my gosh. I don't know if anybody, since '40, what happened to them. And I found out just a few years ago that a first cousin of mine, who was now in Israel, by the same name, Schmerl Laufer, after my grandfather, which was my father's brother's son. We were both named after the same grandfather. Was standing next to my brother. I couldn't focus on him. I did not know until I found out just six years ago when I found him that he was one.

So of course my first reaction was to ask Schmerl what happened to my family. So he told me they took them away in 1942. I don't think he remembered the date. So when they took him away in 1942, and I said, Schmerl, where did they go? What camp? Where are they? He said, I don't know. They took him away in 1942. And of course, the agony that I had in those days, even though believe me, you become so hard that life didn't mean a thing. You could step over dead bodies, it didn't mean a thing.

But I got very emotional because he asked me what happened to his wife. And I thought at the time that he had two children and I found out later after the war from the documents that he had three children. And he had a little boy who was born in 1940 that I did not know. Of course when he asked me, excuse me, and what happened to his wife, I told him I don't know. Of course, we knew exactly what happened, because the only woman who got into the camp was probably single one who came by themselves. All of them were like young ones, you know, they never took any older ones. And for her to come when I told at the time was two children and they were all small, and I knew. And I said, Schmerl, I don't know.

And six years ago when I found his cousin, he was trying to amplify because you know my memory doesn't reflect so much because I went on and on to other camps. He remembered. He said, Leo, you don't remember but I was standing next to Schmerl you and I remember you threw a little piece of bread, small, what used to call a [? pica ?] of bread, and he caught it. And he said you don't know what it meant to him because he was with him. Unfortunately, my brother never survived and my cousin did.

So this was gratifying. I don't know gratifying or not to see somebody and then it gave me an extra zest to survive, to find out what happened because I did not know. He was in the Gypsy camp and I was in the regular camp. And we kept on going to work. Two weeks later he disappeared. He didn't come. Because he came every night just to say hello and so on. There was no conversation because he did not know anything what happened to my family.

So two weeks later he was gone. I did not know where he went. Then, a week or so later I was transferred. We went to Dachau. We stayed a very short time. From Dachau we went to Sachsenhausen, and from Sachsenhausen we went to Buchenwald. This was all in a period from around the latter part of October, probably early November, till April of 1945, so it was just a few months.

Of course, Dachau wasn't really too bad. You were already an old soldier. You know how to discipline yourself and so on. Sachsenhausen was also not bad, but Buchenwald was horrible. Buchenwald, if I would have remained in Buchenwald I don't think I would have survived. In Buchenwald I got very sick. It was typhus. And when you have typhus, forget about it. You almost never survive. I don't know by a miracle I got up. I went back to work and then they transferred a lot of people out of Buchenwald to different little camps.

And the satellite camp, the way I understand, Ohrdruf, it was Ohrdruf satellite camp. And we came to Ohrdruf and we

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stayed in Ohrdruf probably not over maybe around three months, approximately two to three months. Ohrdruf was a horrible camp. The reason it was horrible is because of the work that we did. I'll give you an example. The majority of the boys' work was in a mountainous area. Ohrdruf was situated between the Harz and the Thuringen mountains in East Germany now.

In the mountains, they're more like rocks. And we understood from the books after the war that these mountains that we worked on was supposedly be the bunkers of all the treasures that Germany accumulated, the gold and silver and paintings and so on. And it's supposed to be the communications point for the last stop of the Germans before the war ended. And what we did, they used to take dynamite and put it between the rocks. And the dynamite, they blow it and the rocks used to spew out all over the place. We never had any helmets or special precautions. So we used to drag home boys, it was unbelievable, without arms, without legs. It was the tearing, just pieces of flesh coming off you.

I don't know, I guess I was fortunate. And this was the most horrible kommando Most of it was down there. I was again fortunate. Probably about maybe six weeks before the liberation they were looking for a small group they called the kartoffel kommando, the potato command, which was practically the best kommando in the group. And I don't know, maybe I was so small that people had a pity for me or whatever. I don't know why, but I believe I was a good worker. Otherwise, they wouldn't put up with me for so long. So they selected themselves out a few boys. And the whole kommando consisted of 10 boys, and one what we call the leader of this small kommando. Plus we had a Ukrainian who was a guard.

And he had a German Wehrmacht soldier. He used to tell us the horror stories about what was going on in the war. He was a man I wish to God, really, that I would have found him even though he was a German soldier. He was with the Wehrmacht. He was, I believe, 65 or older. You could tell he was an older man. He was like a sergeant or something. He had some kind of a round stripe. And he was very nice. He didn't let this Ukrainian beat us. He was over the soldier, so he used to guard us a little bit. I felt that he had sympathy but he couldn't help himself. He was in the [? trenches. ?]

And we used to go to this kartoffel kommando, and one of the leaders, the leader of the 10 group, was a boy by the name of Sasha. He was a Russian POW who ran away from a POW camp. And of course they caught him and put him in a concentration camp. He was a very sharp young man, Russian. We spoke a little Polish and Russian. He was very good. And this was a tremendous place, because the reason I said that the German was so good, when we came home what we used to do, they used to have around in the area bunkers of potatoes where they covered it up with straw for the winter time. Then you take them out and we used to deliver potatoes to all these small camps around the area.

So we used to load it on a truck and then when we came we used to unload it with shovels and so on. But every night, as long as I worked down there, this German, he wasn't an officer, he was like a sergeant, used to give us two potatoes. He said, put it in your pocket. And he was the one who let us go through the gate. Mind you, even though that you got something in camp, when you came in they frisk you. And he let us through the camp.

And if you can imagine what two potatoes meant a day for survival, it's unbelievable. And what we did, when we came home we used to have this oven in the barracks used to be burned with coal and so on. We used to put the potatoes in the ashes, used to bake it. It was like caviar. And it was good. It was sustenance. It was something.

And then here is already this is already March. Around the latter part of March-- No, let me tell you an episode of what happened. We unloaded a truck of potatoes. This was about three weeks before the liberation. We unloaded the truck of potatoes and I was, I believe, I was a very diligent worker. And I was trying to get off the last potato from the truck, took the shovel and scrape it and put it all out. And as I jumped off the truck, I got kicked by this guard, by this Ukrainian. And he hit me on my upper leg and I collapsed. I believe I was unconscious, because when I woke up I was in the dispensary.

When I came to the dispensary, it was swollen, it was abscessed and so on, and I stated in the dispensary. In the dispensary it's dead. And you go into a dispensary, if I wouldn't have the courage to get out, I would have never been alive because I would have been like Jack Costen, when he saw all the dead ones when he came into camp. What happened later on it got abscessed and got a lot of pus underneath. And I remember there was a doctor, supposedly a doctor, a French Jew who was also incarcerated. He supposedly was taking care of the dispensary.

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So he said, Leo, lay down on the table. And I was holding my arms in the back and some guy stretched my legs. And he took a knife, or a razor blade or whatever, and he opened it up. And you could feel it, the relief that I got. And sure enough, it healed. They didn't put any stitches on it because I still got a 1 and 1/2-inch scar that you can see. And it started healing. They put a little thing around, they taped it around. And they sent me back out.

When they sent me back out, I went back to my block. This was block one. And the block leader was a fellow from Holland, a Jewish fellow from Holland. And I went to him and I said, I'm back from the dispensary. I want to go back. He said, forget about it. Somebody's already on your kommando. You go back to the mountains. So I started to go back to the rock throwing and so on, which was horrible. And I was limping and I could hardly really walk. And it was very bad.

A few days later-- it shows you sometimes God has his way to do it-- I walked in with this other kommando. While I walked in with the kommando in Ohrdruf, this German with his command of 10 walks in at the same time and he sees me, this old German. He said, what are you doing there? And he walked over to me and pulled me out. Because he's a German, he can do whatever he wants. He pulled me out and he said, he almost slapped me, he said, how come you didn't come back to me? So I said I couldn't. I said, I went back to the blockalteste, and the blockalteste said that somebody is already working.

[SPEAKING GERMAN], he said. This pig. And really started cussing and he said, I'm going to go back with you. Took me by the hand, took me down the block one and came into the door. And the first entrance was a little special cabin for the blockalteste. And he hit him. As old as he was, he hit him in the face. He said, how come you didn't take Leo back to the kommando? And what I found out that he had a cousin also from Holland, Heinz. He took him to this kommando because this was a good kommando. He got two potatoes a day and it wasn't such a terrible job. So he told him, right now you transfer your cousin back there and Leo comes back the block one.

And I tell you, I really, as much as I wouldn't say it, he saved my life. And I went back to block one, started back and the kartoffel kommando, got a little strength in me. And thanks-- When around the latter part of March we already heard artillery fire and we knew something is cooking. We never knew who was fighting, who, believe it or not, you feel when you're incarcerated-- We never saw a paper, we never heard what day it is. You have to look at the moon or the sunshine. You know nobody told us who is fighting who. Nothing. But we heard artillery and we figured the end is near.

And then on March 31, 1945 the whole camp was liquidated. It was such a fast tempo that we ran out from the barracks we line up in five. They usually have twenty fives, and they run you 100 and you keep on going, keep on going and so on. And we don't know what happened. We were marching probably I would say six or seven hours at least.

How many of you were there?

Oh, there were thousands. There were thousands. What happened, where we were marching I don't know. But I understand from what I read that by the time they came back to Buchenwald it was the biggest massacre. There was practically nobody left. They were dying like flies. Thanks to this fellow Sasha, this Russian soldier, I think he had more courage than we had because he was an army man and he knew what to do. And since we worked together, we were friends, and he said, Leo, if we don't run away now, we'll never survive. He said, let's take a chance.

So he commanded us. And then there was another guy-- in fact, this cousin of the blockalteste was one with us. The guy from Holland was with us. And then we had another boy from Warsaw, a Jewish boy. All four of us was the Holland boy and Warsaw and myself, and Sasha. And Sasha was the commander. He told us, he said, Leo take the [? annushka ?] what do you call it, the little thing that you got the soup. He said, drop it.

A pot.

Drop it. He said, you've got to be loose. We had a blanket. Each one had to take his blanket with him. We dropped the blanket We even dropped the shoes. We had these big wooden shoes wrapped around with cloth. We dropped the shoes. He said, you've got to be quiet so you wouldn't make the noise. And he said now after we drop it we want to work

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ourselves in to the first row of the five. We switched. We worked ourselves into the front. In the front you had a chance to see what's happening on both sides.

So when we were in the front, of course you had guards on both sides with machine guns. Of course you didn't have it at every interval because it was like crazy. We were running, actually. We were not walking but running. It looks like the end was coming near, the artillery and so on. And as we came to the front, on both sides of the woods, the same area where Ohrdruf was situated, on both sides was woods just like a little highway. And we jumped into the woods, because thank God none of us got shot.

Now we let the whole transport go through. We were sitting in the woods. After they got through, we don't know where to go. So Sasha said, let's go back to camp. We'll be safe down there because the artillery is coming from there. Let's go back where the artillery is firing. We walked back to the camp. We came within maybe 100 feet of Ohrdruf, from the camp, across in the woods. We heard unbelievable shooting constantly-- fire, fire, fire, constantly shooting. We did not know what is going on down there, if the army already occupied or what is it. We didn't know they were doing the killings, which we find out later.

Then Sasha decided that there was an area down there-- When we went to town we used to go through the square. About a half a mile from the camp on a highway, we used to see this air raid shelter. It was like a little embankment from the highway, and you could see two little windows. It was like a tunnel or something. So Sasha said, let's go into this bunker. We went into the bunker, and I will never remember how courageous this guy was. He gave all four of us a rock. He said, If anybody comes into this door, or this door, or the window, kill him. Don't ask any questions. And we were really-- we probably would have done.

Thank God nobody came. And we stayed in this air raid shelter for four days. It was unbelievable. And you know the reason I know? Because I didn't know what date it was or whatever, but I read it later when the army came in. We were inside the bunker, and I hope you can visualize the reaction we had. We were barefoot, rags, no food, no water for four days. And we see a contingency of trucks, of army men, settling below us on the highway. And we looked out from this window and we didn't know what to do.

After a few hours, we really couldn't stay any longer. We would have died down there from thirst. We finally walked down. I remember he said strip. We didn't have any white things to show a white flag so we ripped some clothes and we walked down flagging these things. And these GIs sitting on the road with all the machine guns pointing to us, and we thought now is the end of us. The trouble was that I believe now that the GIs were probably not trained on what will confront them when they see somebody of us like something from the sky.

So when we finally got down, we had nobody who spoke one word of German, not one word of Polish, Russian or Dutch or Yiddish, not a one. They ask us where we're from. We pointed to the camp but they didn't know what it was all about. Finally, I remember there was an officer. I remember later he was the captain because he had two bars. And he had the helmet with a Red Cross. He was with the Red Cross or whatever. And he came over and he talked it was Czech, which was a little similar to Polish. So he understood us.

We told him that we are from this camp and we ran away. And he said to the soldiers, put away your you guns. And then the tragedy came. The tragedy was--

[CRACKLING SOUNDS]

The tragedy was that they did not know what to do with us and how to handle us. So I remember they went over to a truck and they took out champagne and wine and all kind of canned ration and opened up cans and so on. And we were going like animals to this thing and we got so sick. Thank God there was a doctor with this medic cross and so on. And they helped us and we survived and we vomited. It was horrible.

And then we told him we are from this camp. So this captain and some other guys took us to the camp. And we went back to the camp, which was just about a half a mile away from there, from Ohrdruf. This is the first time in my life that I had ever seen mass atrocities killings. And I'm sure Jack must have told you because he went into the camp. We saw

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railroad sidings with bodies, layer after layer after layer with lime. You can see the white foam. The bodies were totally disintegrated. Like you can see limbs and arms and heads just floating around.

This is the first time I've seen dead people, and I'll be honest with you, even now when I reflect, I've seen this mass killing. This was the first time I've seen it. I don't think I had the reaction probably that Jack Costen, may he in peace, saw. Because he was from a different continent. He was a soldier to fight. He probably saw some killings. But to me it was just-- I don't know. I don't think I had a whole lot reaction. It had an effect on me, I'm sure.

And here we had to stay with the dead bodies in the camp. We cleaned up one of the barracks. And the ones who survived we found were straw bags and so on and we rested. And the army took over and they started giving us some food, some Q rations and so on. And we lived in the smell was unbelievable. And still we didn't have a place where to go. The war was still going on, so we didn't know what to do. I remember we stayed probably about two weeks. And I remember a week or so later--

Can I ask a question here, Leo? How many Jews do you know survived Ohrdruf besides you?

I knew a friend of mine, Jerry Silbert. His name was really [PERSONAL NAME] from [? Bedzyn. ?] He became a very good friend of mine until unfortunately he died. He lived in Detroit. And there was another young boy, we used to call him Moishele. He was a little small kid. I don't know whereabouts of him. But Jerry I know. We were friends almost all my life really.

As far as you know, you three were the only ones who--

I'm sure there must be some other ones. There must be some other ones because what happened, I'll tell you what happened a couple of weeks later. I remember when we were in camp there was-- Of course, we had quite a few Poles. We had quite a few Russians in Ohrdruf who were also, like Sasha, POWs who ran away and they were in camp. A couple of weeks later, we saw a big entourage coming into camp. It was like cleaning up and all this kind of thing and so on. We didn't know who it is because they were strangers. We didn't know.

But we saw high-ranking officials. You could see the guns they were holding and the surrounding of it and translating and so on. And I remember not until I believe the 70s when President Eisenhower wrote a book, it's called In Review, I opened up the centerfold and I saw this picture of the dead bodies with the translators and I see General Bradley, General Patton, and President Eisenhower trying to tell them what happened in Ohrdruf. And you can see on the right the barrack actually that I was in.

And I said, my gosh. And I said, we were right down there. If the camera would have had a wider angle I probably could identify myself-- or maybe not, I don't know. But I probably could have done because I was there. And then, of course, after that it got so horrible down there because nobody practically took care except for food. And we were staying with the smell of the dead bodies. And we went out. I actually went out, left Ohrdruf, and we went toward the next city which was Gotha, which was about maybe seven or eight miles away. And we walked.

And as we came on the outskirts of Gotha-- And there were several of us. In fact, Jerry was with me and Moishele, and some other guys, Poles and so on. We just ran away. And we came on the perimeter of Gotha and the military police, American military police, identification. We had nothing. So they took us to the camp. They took us in the truck and [INAUDIBLE]. And when we came into this camp, we had thousands upon thousands of every nationality that you want-- Russians, Poles, Germans, everybody was inside there. Jews, everybody was inside there.

And it was really unreal, you know, after your liberation, you know nobody's going to kill you but there was no organization. Nobody took care of it. And I think I had enough gumption so to speak to get out of the camp and go to the city. I remember it was on the square. And I saw a building. It looked like now I would say a bank building, big posts, old building. And I walked in and a GI was standing guard, tall, handsome young man with a rifle, with his helmet SG. And I ask him in German that I wanted to work. And he answered me almost like in Yiddish. I said, my gosh, how could this happen after so many years?

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So we started talking Yiddish, and of course Yiddish was my mother's. And I started talking to him, and he was telling me that he is a soldier in American army. He's from the Bronx. And I knew about the Bronx like I didn't know anything about it. And he finally went and talked to the commanding officer and told him there's a little young kid who wants to work here in the kitchen. And he took me in, and I remember they gave me a little small closet, and there was a little cot like the army cots with a green blanket and an old pillow.

And they took me to the kitchen and they told me, you know, we were peeling potatoes and so on. And we did all kind of kitchen work, cleaning tables and so on, and then they transferred me from there to the officer's mess. And I was already going great guns. They gave me a uniform, without insignia, of course, and these GI boots with the buckles and I felt like $1 million. And then of course I met another few GIs who were Jewish, and they really took like protecting me and so on. And we became friends I would say almost for life.

And then, of course, we transferred. The army changed and the Russians came in and the American army came and we had another GI who told me and Jerry to get on a truck and we moved out of Gotha. And from Gotha we went to a little I believed the town was called [? Sin. ?] It was near a castle. It was a glider area, like a little small airport. And we went down there. And of course I kept on all this life to be friends with him until he just died a couple of years ago. And Ben Kaplan became almost like I would say a father. He guided me from place to place. And Ben Kaplan and Al Schwartz left. Ben Kaplan took over. He said, Leo, you're going to stay with me.

Of course, the army dissolved and everybody went home. Kaplan was single at the time. He was an officer in this 134 AAA I believe, it was the third army also. And he told me, he said, Leo, I'm not going back to the States. I'm going to stay in here. I am very good friends with fellow by the name Hugo Carucci, who was the Director-General of the UNRRA. He was a friend of Fiorello LaGuardia, incidentally. And then Fiorello LaGuardia left UNRRA. Hugo Carucci, he is now in the 80s-- in fact, I talked to him. He still is alive, he lives in Washington. And he made then-- they were friends before-- and then became the director of transportation and supplies for the UNRRA for the camps around the area of Frankfurt, Regensburg, Zeilsheim, all the camps.

And of course, I became a big shot. I worked down there and I even got paid. I got paid $200 a month with the UNRRA. He stayed with the UNRRA till I believe '46, latter part of '46. In '46 he said, Leo, I'm transferring to the AJDC, which is the American Joint Distribution Committee, and also in Hanau in Germany, near Frankfurt. And he took over as director of supply for the AJDC, which was catering strictly to the DP camps because they had other camps of Lithuanians and Latvians and so on.

And Ben became a big [NON-ENGLISH] and he said, Leo, you're coming with me. So we came to Hanau. I got a beautiful apartment. I got paid. I saved money. In fact, when I came to the United States, I want to tell you a little story that I think the honesty of a person reflects sooner or later.

Al Schwartz, may he rest in peace, lived in the Bronx. He came back in November of 1945, after the war. He married a girl also from the Bronx. Unfortunately, they never had any children. And I became, I would say, like an adopted son. I think my children called him grandfather. He made every wedding. We were in touch-- in fact, I'm still in touch with her. She still lives in the same place in the Bronx.

He's passed away?

He's passed away. She still lives I remember it's on the corner. It's 2933 Grand Concourse. It's on the corner of Bedford Park and in the concourse. And I remember when I was ready to come to the States Ben was really an angel. He guided me. I worked for the AJDC, I made money, I became almost what you call a second-class officer. I couldn't have the title of officer because I wasn't an American, so I had a title of a second-class officer and I got paid accordingly. And all the privileges-- having a car, driving around AJDC he had an old Mercedes and we had a Jeep and I traveled all over Germany.

And my main purpose with the traveling was to look for relatives. I was very fortunate. I made a trip with Jerry, who died. We were friends all the time. In fact, Jerry after the war find a sister in Czechoslovakia. And they came from Czechoslovakia to Hanau and Jerry got married. He went to Bergen-Belsen after the war and we were walking in the

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street in Bergen-Belsen and I said to Jerry, Jerry-- you know we were big shots. We had uniforms with AJDC, the signal. We had passports. We had everything. We even had cards. We could go to the military thing.

And I said to Jerry, I said, Jerry, I heard some voices sounds familiar. Let's go back. So I ran back and I see two young ladies with some men walking. I take a look at her I'm going to die. It was two first cousins, my mother's sister's children. And I remember there were three sisters. I said the youngest one was Pepe. I said, where is Pepe? So she said, we will show it to you tomorrow. And I said, what's wrong? They said, well, she's in a hospital.

This is the first time I saw sick people after the war. She had typhus and she was so horrible looking. She was a beautiful girl when I remember years back in Europe. And she was in a hospital, they showed it to me. She was like no hair, skinny just like a skeleton. I thought she would never survive, but thank she did survive. She made it. She just died just three years ago. So the other two sisters, another sister died already. One of them is still living. They live in Canada.

So we started looking for families. And of course this was an ordeal in itself. When I found them I said, I am going to do all my life I'm going to search and search and search. And I didn't know where to start. Of course, in those days I thought I'm going to find somebody that I wanted to get married. I said, no, I don't want to tie myself up. I want to be free. I want to travel. I want to find the family, in my head feeling that I will find somebody. Unfortunately, I travel to every DP camp there where. I went even to Vienna to Zeilsheim, and to Regensburg, to every part. British zone, French zone, everywhere. Didn't find except these three first cousins.

I remember we had a delegation came from Israel to Hanau because we were involved with AJDC. And this was already around I believe in early '48. We had a delegation from Israel. I believe the fellow who brought him was a fellow by the name Himan, the head of AJDC I believe nationally in the United States. And I was in charge of checking the barges which used to come in from Antwerp in Germany to Hanau. Hanau was a port, and we were unloading to our warehouses for the AJDC and then loading it on trucks. And I used to take counts and so on.

And mostly the workers were mainly there was a big camp down there from Latvia with the [INAUDIBLE] and Estonians. They were usually the workers. So I was already an official then. So I had a little title and I was making money. And I remember they came and I asked one of the guys from Israel. And I said, you know, I remember I don't know what year-- '36, '37, '38, I had a cousin, my mother's brother's one of the sons. And I said his name was Yanov Cheronovski. My mother's maiden name was Cheronovski. And I said, I remember that he came into the house, tall young man in a leather jacket. He was a [NON-ENGLISH] and he said he wants to go to Palestine.

And I said he came in and said to my mother goodbye. And he left. And I said, I don't know what happened to him. They said, we should find him. They took the name. And I think four weeks later I got a letter from him that he was living in Ramat Gan, has a family, has children and so on. Of course, I wasn't maybe astute enough at that time to probe, to really get farther down the line what happened. And maybe I wasn't smart enough to realize what advertising or publicity will do. I wanted to look for more family because this was another first cousin.

Then he told me that his brother is in Russia and he is back in Poland. And he got another sister who is now in Australia. She was saved by a group who went from Sweden, you know, went to Sweden from Poland. So I already got six cousins. And I said, God, I got to find maybe a brother or sister. And I couldn't. I searched all my life.

Six years ago, I went probably for the 12th time to Israel because we go about once a year or twice a year to Israel. And my wife, I think I got to thank her for it, she's very persistent. She doesn't give up. She said, I want you to put an ad in the paper. And we put a big ad in the Jerusalem Post in the [INAUDIBLE] giving the whole story, who the father and so on. We stayed at the Diplomat Hotel in Tel Aviv. And a young lady called us. She said, are you Leo Laufer? Is your Hebrew name Shmuel [PERSONAL NAME]? I said, yes.

I said, was your father's name David? She said, yes. I said, who are you? He said, well, we have a Laufer in our family name Shmuel Lai Blaufer and he lives near Ramat Gan. And when I heard this, I sad, couldn't be nobody else but my first cousin from my father's side. Sure enough, he became a first cousin. He came to the hotel. We talked about him. He said, Leo, do you know that you had an aunt in here by the name of Bacharach? I said, no. I said, who is she? That's your father sister.

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I remember when I was a kid my father used to tell me about having a sister in Germany but he never elaborated. And I realized why. My father was a very-- he was a [NON-ENGLISH] if you know what [NON-ENGLISH] is. You belong to a certain tribe and so on. He was very religious. He got up in the morning with a prayer and went to sleep with a prayer. He ate something with a prayer, thanked God for the food. And I mean it was constant and this is the way he was brought up.

And I guess his sister was a little more like I was when I got a little older and he didn't want to have any connection. That's why he didn't elaborate. But when he mentioned it I said, fine, let's go see the aunt. He said the aunt died in 1969. She has three children. In fact, she was the real aunt, a real sister of my brother. My other cousin Shmuel Lai Blaufer, is from another wife that one of them died from the second. So this aunt was a real aunt, a real aunt, one of the children is still alive. And from this children I would say there are hundreds of grandchildren, great-grandchildren. And one of the daughters is still alive and she still lives in Ramat Gan.

The irony of it is when I found this I said, my gosh, you got to continue the search. You cannot give up. So we didn't give up. We looked through-- in fact, I'm going to Israel in about three weeks and I'm going to spend two months this time and I'm going to go through to each one of the family to get on tape all the information that I possibly can. And I found a picture of my mother which I have never had of me as a 12-year-old boy and I had a brother who died about a year and a half older than I was.

I found a picture of my brother that I met in Auschwitz. I got a picture of my grandfather that I'm named after. But I never found of the children and so on. Evidently, we were so poor or we were so religious that they didn't take pictures you know. So this might be either of the cases. And from this, a whole family sprang up. When I met this cousin, it's a cousin, the aunt is already dead, she was telling me episodes-- because she's in the 70s-- about my father, how religious it is and so on.

She said, you know what? You know that your real name is not Laufer? I said, no. I said, I'm not aware of it. I said, why? She said, well, your grandfather's name, which is her grandfather's name, was named Laufer. My father was named Laufer and I am named Laufer, and I thought this was it. And she is so much older and I guess she was more freer than I since her childhood. She says, you know that your great-grandfather was named it Itsinger. I said, this is-- now this is just six years ago. I said, Itsinger? And I said, I don't believe it. She said, well, I'll show you something.

So she shows me a letter which is dated 1917 that my grandfather wrote to his daughter, which was my father, the one who died in 1969, and the way the letter describes--

OK, please go ahead. Continue.

The way the letter describes is observe the Shabbat and please believe in God. I want you to be a good child and so on. And then it mentioned in the letter about the grandfather, that he was a rabbi in a small little town on the border of Czechoslovakia and Poland. And when he got older, he wanted to go to Palestine, to Jerusalem. [INAUDIBLE] And in the letter it says that he lives in Jerusalem.

My daughter, my youngest daughter Lisa, who is now in Israel, she just left last week. I said, Lisa, you're going to Hebrew University. You know Hebrew I want you to go and research about my great-grandfather. So she went to the [INAUDIBLE] Commission.

We have to stop for a moment because we're running out of tape. Can we continue for a few more minutes? We'll put on a smaller tape and just continue for a few moments.

Good.

All right we're going to.

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