

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good morning. My name is Bernard Weinstein. I'm the director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Selma Wassermann. And we are privileged to welcome Nathan Schwarcz a survivor, presently living in North Plainfield, New Jersey, who has generously volunteered to give testimony about his experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. Mr. Schwarcz, welcome.

Thank you.

I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about the town or city and the country in which you lived before the war.

Well, the town was a small town. It was basically an orthodox town. And we had three synagogues. Everybody there was religious. And life was going on. We're economically not very rich, but it was probably, we had a lot of freedom. And in Czechoslovakia, we had full freedom. Everybody could practice religion or go to any school you'd like to.

What was the main staple of income in your community?

Main staple income, I think, was actually farming, gardening. There were a few business people, not too rich ones. But I would say 90% of the income was farming from the land. My father was a farmer. We all worked, but he realized that farm does not generate enough cash. So the children had to learn trades. All my three older brothers went to become tailors. I didn't want to become one of them, so I was forced to learn to be barber. It was not by my choice, but there was no other chances.

I went to learn, and I learned when I went in, I realized it's not a bad trade. And since then, I have been liking it because for one reason, I have the chance to meet all kinds of people, all kinds of nationality, all kinds of religion, all kinds of class. So that gives me a lot of satisfaction.

So you're always a kind of gregarious person.

Yeah. Life was happy because I think it rubs off on the people there that live. Are sort of happy people. They don't have much money, but they are never sad. They are always happy.

Was the town mainly Jewish?

No, no. The town, maybe, 10% Jewish. The town was Gentile, Ruthenian nationality, of course, Czechoslovakia now [INAUDIBLE] and also their autonomy are Ruthenian. And office workers, and it was quite an old town. It was an important town because on the First World War, it was access to [? point, ?] and so it was a rural town that had all the offices, all the courts, the jails. And all the people used to come to us from far away.

You said that the town was orthodox.

Yeah.

Did your family practice orthodox?

Yeah.

Do you have memories of early years?

Yeah, I have memory early. I, for some reason, did not adhere strongly, even though I didn't know other ways. I did not adhere too much. I thought it should be modern. Religion should be modern. I thought that orthodoxy may does not conform to our biblical complete story. And so I was a little bit-- I had my own thinking of how religion should be or how the expression should be. So I had a lot of discussions with people about religion, about how that it's more or less--

you should not just say it, you should express it, you should do it.

And are you a family rebel or did your brothers and sisters share your views?

My brothers and sisters did not oppose. Mom was a little bit, first, she was maybe disappointed, and then I think that she accepted it that I know what I'm talking about. So I told her that I have to be honest. You want me to be honest, so this is how I feel. Then the war was coming, and we didn't have time no more for this. We were thinking about what was going to happen, how the outcome was going to be.

Me, personally, I saw reading from the papers that, to me, it looked like the whole world politically is very stupid. Because I knew the consistency of strength of the Democratic Nations, and I knew that they are stronger than the fascists, but they did not stay together. And they let Hitler have his way. And that became a worry. And people were talking mostly about the war, what the outcome was going to be.

Some were worried about it. I wasn't that much worried because I saw that the Western Allies are still at full strength. They were not engaged yet, and so Hitler doesn't have his last laugh yet.

Did you experience any personal anti-Semitism or did members of your family experience any personal either anti-Semitism or acts of prejudice or racial hatred before things really got bad?

Well, fascist organization started to spring up, but they were still in infancy. And so they were not yet in much influence that they could do damage. There were here and there a joke or a word uttered, but the people, the main people, still had their religious and were still decent. Only things when the Czechs were occupied and the Hungarians came in, they displayed a lot of brutal, brutal anti-Semitism.

The Hungarians?

The Hungarians. The gendarmes were very brutal. And I later went to their army, some of the officers told me point blank when they asked me what my name is, and I told them it's Nathan Schwarz. And they realized that's Jewish. Some of the officers told me, we don't like Jews.

The action of the Czech people to Hungarians.

The Czech people were not there no more. Our state is Ruthenian. And so when the Czechs were being overtaken by the Germans, they had to flee from our state and go back to the mainland of Czech in Moravia. They were no more in charge. This was when the Czechs-- while the Czech's were there, was no anti-Semitism. There was protection of the law equal for everybody. Nobody could do any harm to you because the law was protecting every minority under the Czech's. And nobody had the power to do anything.

A private person could say something. You could say bad, but they didn't have no influence because the law was very strong for the right. So under the Czech's, everything was correct. The trouble started when the Hungarians came.

What specifically was done that you remember by the Hungarian gendarmes in the first months or the first weeks of their occupation?

First week of their occupation, they took anybody who was helpful to the Czechs, like mobilisations or something, and they were taking them for questioning. And they were, I think, beating them up. And they punished them. And then they started to give trouble to the Jewish people by making them-- everybody had to prove that he is from a native born, he was not from another country.

So they made them get citizenship papers. But they made it so hard for you that this became a very big ordeal. People were poor. And this involved a lot of expenses. People couldn't afford it. But you had to have it. If not, you were deported. In fact, when they took me to the army, they came and they took away a lot of people from our area, and they deported them to Poland. They left them there for the Ukrainians to be killed. That was the first trouble. I wasn't home

when they round them up. I was in the army.

This was already after the war was declared, after September 1939 or before?

No, war was not declared by America. The war declared between Poland and Germany.

Yeah. But I mean, this was after the invasion of Poland?

Invasion of Poland.

Yes.

Before the invasion, they didn't have war, too. So this was the first. After that, what they did, the second way was that they took away-- the Hungarian took away the Jewish right. And you had a store or any business, they took it away and they gave it to one of their person. And you were left without livelihood. And people had a very bad struggle to make a living.

I know the barber shop where I learned around two Jewish men. Brother Hungarian from Hungary, and they gave him the barbershop.

So you know, I'm sorry.

Also, grocery store and any other store are being taken away and given to Gentiles, Hungarians.

What was happening to your family at this time?

At that time, nothing was happening yet because we lived on the farm, and the farm was still ours. So it was only the general collapse in the economy that you felt that people didn't have no money, they couldn't buy your milk like you were selling. And so you became poorer, too, in that way. But they still had the farm, and so there was less problem except taxing.

Did the family remain a unit? Your brothers and sisters all--

They remained not for too long. My brothers were already been taken away to labor camps while I was still in the army. They were taken to the labor camps. And then one day, the Sergeant came to me and said, I'm sorry, mate, but all the Jewish people have to be taken out from the Hungarian army. You're going to labor battalions. They took us out, took away the rifle and the bayonet, left the uniform. We were sent away from Esztergom to Komarno.

And there, I find all the Jewish children, all the Jewish boys who got taken out from other armies, other units. And we were waiting there, and we were being put in a note, anti-Turkish, what do you call, bunker-like, bunkers where they built, again, the Turks. It's underground. We lived there for quite a few weeks because they didn't know, yet, what to do with us. It was something new to them, too. But here, they had a lot of young boys of army age, and now they're looking for them for something good.

All of these boys were Jews?

Yeah. They were no political prisoners? Czechs in with others.

No, just with other Jewish. They took them out from the army, and they put him in separate.

These were the Hungarians, the Germans were not involved yet?

Well, the Hungarians, but it was already-- the strings were being pulled by the Germans. They were telling them. And when I was in the army, Hungarian army, I ran across a book where book told the officers to deal with Jews in the army.

A Jew couldn't be an officer. It lined up there that a Jew could only be in the first line. Couldn't be an officer, couldn't be an orderly, couldn't do nothing, just in the first line.

So these laws were already being dictated to them by the Germans. Then when we were in Komarno Finally, they took our group, and they sent us out to the Carpathian in the forest to do wood logging, working with wood. But it was sort of a joke because all those people were educated people, professionals. They were not wood loggers. Probably only wood logger that had any idea about it was me. And I was being left downtown, by my own choice, to be the barber of the staff.

so everybody was in the barracks. They were chopping wood and putting together, and none of them knew what they were doing. Neither were their leaders didn't know what they doing because they were not wood working. It was a chaotic thing just to give them something to do. After that, we were left to go home because we were in the army, we left to go home. And all the Jewish people from, I don't know, from 20 to 45 or 50 were in labor.

In fact, I have to go back to 1940. The Hungarian army was ready to go and attack Romania to take away the Transylvania region that they lost in the First World War. So we were taken to the border to go make war on them, and marching there, I already met Jewish people that were working on the road with shovels. And some of them had hanging medals from the First World War. And they were very, very good soldiers and had a lot of medals. They had medals hanging, but it didn't mean a thing what they did for Hungary. At that time, didn't mean a thing. Hitler dictated not to make no--

Exceptions.

Exceptions, yeah, for anybody. You were good or bad, the best, you were Jewish, and that was it. In fact, this bring me back to another very interesting thing. When we got back from Romania border, we came back to our barracks. I was preparing to go to ask for a holiday vacation. And so one morning, we were woken up, like, in a-- what do you call when there is a-- alarm. And everybody was asking, what is the alarm?

We were being put on bayonets on the rifles, live ammunition, all like going to war, and we are in the middle of Hungary. And everybody's asking, what was going on? And nobody knew what was going on. And we were marching to [? Duruk, ?] a city about four kilometer. On all the wide streets, about 12 abreast, we're marching there. Until 6 o'clock in the morning, we found out what is happening. At 6 o'clock in the morning, we realized that there was a big mine strike. And so we were-- the army was being taken to guard the mines.

It turned out, we were at those mines guarding a month. I realized only a couple of weeks later that this was not a strike by the Hungarian mineworkers, it was a strike initiated by Szãlasi, the Hungarian fascist leader. He wanted to cripple the land so that he could take over the country and serve Hitler better than Horthy did. Horthy served Hitler half-half.

Halfheartedly.

Halfheartedly. So as we were being taken from group to group, from place to place, so that they shouldn't get in cahoots with the strikers. And one day, we were being taken to a mine dynamite-- the mine had the dynamite stored. We were being taken there. And as we come and take over, there were three civilian guards were guarding, but now they reinforced it with 12 soldiers. And as I come and sit down near the table, I see a book on the table, Accomplishments of Hungarians of Jewish Faith.

And I start reading this book, and I see that my eyes opened and I would give for this book a lot of money. And I asked the civilian guard, which was a Gentile, will you sell me this book because it remind myself when I had the discussion with my anti-Semitic officers, I used to discuss with them. But they said they're in, and they don't like Jewish. I ask why, give me the reason. And the reason, naturally, were not valid, and I could defeat them at their opinions.

And one day, they told me, I will hate you for that, too. You are not educated, and yet you can defeat us. And I said to them, well, that's very simple because I am right. And it's so much easier to defend the right. So when I saw this book, I was going to give for this book any money that I would have because I had such a beautiful proof that we do more and

more than our share as citizens and why should they be like this?

And this Gentile owner of this book declined any money for this book. He said, I know for what you need it, he says, but I do the same thing. And there are good souls in every nation, as you know. He was a Gentile, but he defended the Jewish people with this book what we do for Hungary, and he would not sell me the book for nothing. I'll never forget this. In fact--

You were competitors in the same cause.

Yes. In fact, my aim now is to go to the Library of Congress someday. I hope I can find this book, and I would like to own it. I know they wouldn't sell, but would it be possible, maybe, to reprint or something like that this.

You know who published it or wrote it or anything?

This was written after the First World War. The reason for this, I found out, was in the First World War and the war lasted so long and the people got very disgusted and communism sprang up in every country. And so, as you remember, Hungarians had their share, too, of communists. And so because of the communists and [INAUDIBLE], later on, they blamed the Jews. And a lot of anti-Semitism was created.

So the Hungarian government wanted to fight, at that time, anti-Semitism, and they published this book to show that there might be one or two communist Jews, but look at what they did. There is a million more good people than--

Do you happen to know whether the book was ever translated into English?

I have no idea, but I heard here in the United States, that in the Library of Congress, you can find any book.

Right.

And I hope I can find that book. And from there on, I would like to be able to own it. And find a source either to reproduce it. In fact, that reminds me, it comes to another point that we do a lot to fight anti-Semitism, but we don't do anything. For example, a book like this would be helpful even here for people to possess.

A school like this should possess it here or any school. They should know the truth because most of our troubles start from lies, rumors, insinuations, half truths. And how can you fight half truths other than have a book published by a government. And there are a lot of books like this, I think, in a lot of countries, including here. And this would be a good way to show the misguided anti-Semites that they are wrong. So now--

So continue with you with your story. You were in the labor--

Yeah. So now I'm in the labor camp. And from there, we got taken home from the woodchopping. We were taken home back to our base. And another came, but because we were soldiers, we should not go home. We did not believe because we saw all the Jewish people are already in the labor camp. But the time came, September, I think, 1940, we were let go home. '41. We were let go home.

And I came home I was only one of my age, young age, home. It looked very funny. And a lot of--

Who was there from your family?

The family, only my younger sisters and my younger brother who was still not of age and all the rest of the brothers were being taken away.

Your parents were there?

Parents were home. Only the brothers were in the labor camp. Then came bad news that one of my second brother was

in Transylvania and the Hungarians took him there for work. And then because he was a tailor, they were bringing him back to the staff to work on the staff as a tailor. And Hungarian anti-Semite chauffeur overturned the truck on purposely and the truck fall on them and killed my brother and about 12 or 13 other Jewish people on purpose, just killed them. That was the first loss of my brother.

After that, by this time, as you know, the Germans attack Russia. And my oldest brother and the other brother, the third brother, were taken to the labor camps to Russia and my friends were taken to Russia. On the front line, they were picking up mines and doing all kind of work.

Excuse me. They were with the Hungarians?

They were with the Hungarian.

And they were fighting the Russians?

The Hungarians joined the Germans fighting Russia. And they took them out there to do all kind of labor for the Germans, for themselves. And the [INAUDIBLE] command, they were the high commanders over the German and the lower commanders were Hungarians. And they made him do all kind of work, no food. And my older brother, I heard, got taken, died because of no shoes and was working barefoot and he froze the skin. The Red Cross let us know that he got cold in the skin of the bones and he died. That was my other brother.

The third brother was lost with a whole company of men, company workers. They still kept in company units, like army unit. Was lost, and from the minute they were being taken out to Russia, they were lost. Not the Red Cross or nobody could find them. And for all during the war, we tried through the Red Cross to find, and they could not find them.

So by this time, I'm home, and I said to myself, I know they're not going to let me stay home. I'm going to try to go to Budapest. I know they're going to take me to the camp, the labor camp, and maybe probably Budapest. It would be better because they were more civilized. And more people know one another. Maybe, even I'll go there, it'll be easier for me.

How far were you from Budapest?

It's about 400, 450 kilometers. It's about 300 miles.

Did you think of any other alternatives that you could have--

There was no other alternative. Yes, I want to go back to another alternative. This time, when I was home, the [INAUDIBLE] son came to me, and knowing that I'm a farmer, a hillbilly, a field man, and I speak the Slovak languages better than him, and I know how to live off the land. He came to me, he says, Nate, as you see, things are coming bad times. Why don't we go? This was still when Poland was still not attacked. We were only supposed to go to the Hungarian army.

You mentioned other alternatives. So an alternative came to my mind that I forgot about. He says, let's go over to Poland. I have there some relatives. Maybe, we can go over to the English embassy and go to America and join the Allies to fight these anti-Semites. And I said, that's a good idea. Let's go. And this was downtown, and I'm going uptown to tell my mother. I'm going to leave with Yankov we're going to Poland. We're running away. I have an alternative, join the Allies, and come and fight.

I walked into the house, and I still didn't say nothing to my mother. She had one look at my face and she says, so I raised you so hard and now you're going to leave me, huh? I said, mom, what are you talking about? I'm not leaving. I'm not going nowhere. And I turned right around, I went downtown. I said to Yankov, Yankov I'm sorry. Your mother had an easier life, my mother worked hard, eight children. And I'm now of age, I can help a lot, and I'm not going to abandon her.

So we have to go to the Hungarian army, so it's a rough army may be a brutal army, an anti-Semitic army. But if other people can bear it, I'll bear it, too. And I'm not going to-- Oh, he said, I thought you were a self-sufficient guy, but now I see you don't want to let go of mama's apron. I said, that's not the case, mama's apron. It is just that I don't want to abandon mom. I want to really help her. Hard time are coming. That was the only alternative that came in his mind.

But Yankov as of that day, disappeared. Nobody knew anything about him until two years ago I was in Israel. I thought that this guy died. He was a big guy but a very clumsy, and he was not good at languages, Slovak languages. And I thought him being so clumsy and not speaking the languages, going over to Poland, he probably perished. Because when you go to Poland, the other side are Ukrainians and he's going to fall in either with the Polish, anti-Semitic police. And they're going to do away with him. And nobody ever heard nothing about him.

And I thought for sure he perished. And so I never heard since then from him until two years ago. I'm in Israel, and his brother lives in [Place name] And I came to visit him, and I said what about Yankov?] He said Yankov is in Russia. He is running a grocery store, the manager of a grocery store. He says he wants to come over here but he's not in health to fine, but we're trying to bring him over. So far, they didn't bring him over. And so this was the only alternative.

Other than that, after I left the Czech army, a lot of the Jewish boys ran away from the Hungarian occupied Czechoslovakian territory. Because they ran away, they were afraid to go back. There'd be reprisals. So they could not go home, but they took a road someplace. They said they're going to try to go to Israel. Well, who knew anything about them. Nobody heard until after the war.

Now, those were the boys which came somehow to Italy and Greece, and then somehow got together some old dilapidated boats which were already not permissible to go on the ocean. And they found some old, drunk, retired captain to take them. And the English blockade didn't let them in and most of them perished in the ocean, the Mediterranean Ocean. I know. This was the other alternative. There probably maybe there was any other, but it was really hard.

First of all, nobody knew that time, nobody believed that we are going to be killed for no reason. If this would be the case, I am sure our mothers would have told us go, children, go. But people didn't believe that-- nobody could believe a thing like this. They're going to kill us for what? We never did anything to nobody in our life. We know war is coming. War is always hard. And therefore, if war is hard, the boys, the children that have a trade or could help something home, naturally, try to be around the family if they could or be around to help.

Did you know, at the time, what was going on in Poland and in Russia and in other places where they were having the ghettos and the rounding-up and the Einsatzgruppen and the killings, the mass killings, all of that.

We knew a year after the Germans occupied Poland. We knew that they are doing harm to the Jews because a couple of people tried to run away to Hungary. And they ran across our borders. And some of our people tried to help them get inside the country. Because on the border line, the law was more strict and you are more easier to identify. And therefore, you cannot stay on the border line.

Very few trickled, and maybe a handful of people trickled through. And our people tried to somehow get them in to the city. And from the city, they went to Budapest. And I heard of some organization help them getting papers and they were under hiding there, certain people.

But as this was happening, I was taken to the army. And my girlfriend's uncle, who was one of the persons who brought him to the train or closer, a family like that, was being taken by the Hungarian FBI. The Hungarian FBI was the most brutal FBI of any nation on Earth. More brutal than the Gestapo. They took him prison, and they were beating him to a pulp. And he came home six months later, he didn't look like a human being. He looked like a black carpet.

Also, a friend of mine, a girl, and another friend of mine, a man, was taken and tortured. They should say they helped. They never had anything to do, but they were just rounded up. And their FBI, Hungarian FBI, and were very, very much tortured.

And they were also Jews?

Yeah. I am sure, I say I was lucky that I wasn't home, because I am sure being home, I would be one of them being rounded up, too. So I was lucky that I wasn't home. Anything that they could just suspect you, they wouldn't think nothing of taking you in and torturing you. And then they torture you, even if you didn't do it, you would say you did it because of the torture that you got to go through. Terrible torture.

So we knew that things bad things are going on, but we also know that Poland was always a land where enemies go back and forth and fight, and it's bad for everybody and bad for our people, too. We never thought that this was going to happen right now. It's Hungary, it's still a government. And I didn't think they're going to resort to that.

In fact, there was a lady in my town who was the mother of a photographer, and I used to I used to do amateur photography I used to bring my films to develop. And she would always tell me, they're going to finish off. They're going to finish us off. And I say, but, Edith, don't worry. The Allies are strong. The Allies are going to win. They're going to lose already. The Germans are going to lose, and they wouldn't dare to do things like this.

Well, little did I know after the war, there was a gentlemen's agreement between the world that anybody can do to the Jews whatever they want. I mean, it's been proven by the meeting that I figured out later on. 1939 was it?

In Á%ovian?

Yeah.

Yeah. And they made that one similar way, one where you can do anything. So I didn't know about it. After the war, I found out a lot of things that it was a gentlemen's agreement. Not the Pope, no Gentile leadership, no government did anything. They could have done a lot of things and they didn't do. So I found out later. Anyway.

So you got to Budapest.

I got to Budapest. And I worked there a couple of months. In January 15, 1943, I go on the streets, and I see two things. One, that the French fleet committed suicide in Toulon. They sunk themselves. And the next thing was that they were announcement that everybody from this age to this age, which I fall in, should report to this and this school. in the eight district.

Everybody meaning Jews?

Jews. Everybody of Jewish faith from this age to age should report there. And that night, I went there, reported. I know this is the beginning of my second labor battalion. And when I came there, I was taken by good surprise. All the theater people were there, all the opera stars, singers to the cello to the violin, accordion. All were there in my company, and the officers who are over them some, the Gentiles were also from the theater. And there was such a camaraderie, and they were making theater the first night when they came together.

I have more culture in there than all my life because I happened to fall in. It was planned by me not to stay in the Carpathian, come to Hungary, be in Budapest, and maybe you'll be in the better spot. And so my plan worked better than I thought. And so we were having entertainment, free entertainment every night. We were making music, making songs. And we only went to work to shovel the snow in Budapest.

And after about a couple of months, like in March, we was taken out to [Place name] The Germans, at that time, were already experimenting with jet planes. And they chose a plateau above the-- they had a toll they had in Hungary, Balaton. This is a big plateau by 15 kilometer. And they're going to build there a jet airport. So they were about 30 companies laborers taking away this topsoil and we were building this thing.

We were under guard. We were given some food. It wasn't that bad. And we worked hard. It was nothing to me because I was a hard worker anyway. It didn't mean a thing. But one day--



How old were you?

Well, this was 1943, I'm 25 years old. And one day, the boys start talking to themselves. Oh, we got some good news. What is the good news? The good news is that the assistant sergeant was a Jewish fellow, and he worked out an agreement that if we finished the work faster, that we can rest. And so as we are going with a wheelbarrow wheeling the stuff, the earth, I start to tell those people that tell the guy who came up with this idea that he is terribly stupid.

And so they went to this handsome six-foot, college graduate assistant sergeant who just happened to be of my name, too, Schwarzc. And they told tell him, you know, this Carpathian hillbilly said that you are stupid. He got terribly embarrassed, college educated. An uneducated hillbilly tells me he's stupid. He wanted to confront me and ask what is it all about? He confronted me and I said, sure, you're stupid. So he says, well, explain. So I waited until more people get together, and I said, first of all, you forgot Egypt.

He says, what are you talking about? What has it got to do with Egypt? I said, do you know Niro went to school to hide? I said to college. I said, don't you know, if you don't learn from history, you repeat the same mistakes. And remember in Egypt, a smart follower made the Hebrews work [? awkward, ?] work for money. When he realized how much they can do, he told him now, we can do this for free without money. I said, this is number one.

And number two, I said, you are a city slicker. What do you know about hard labor? And you're not supposed to rush with a wheelbarrow because you're going to kill yourself, and then you're going be good for nothing, I said. Hard labor has to be done slowly, systematically, and that's the only way you can survive. So they start looking at him and at me and, hey, the hillbilly has common sense. You don't have common sense.

So that time, they started a little bit looking up to me. And they realize that I speak their language very well without school, and I speak Slavic languages. And a group came over to me and asked me, I apologize that they look down on me. And they want to ask if I want to join. They have a little organization, in time of trouble, we should escape. I said very fine. I have this in my mind all the time. I said, I'm not going to let them go down just like this. If I'll have to go, I'll go. Take with me as many as I can, anti-Semites. So we had just 13 people organized. And when the time comes, we're going to run away.

After that, they get taken out to Yugoslavia. We were there a couple of months, also, to work on an airfield in Zomba. We got taken back to [Place name] And in the spring of 1944, we are taken out to Poland. We were working defense lines, start working defense lines in [INAUDIBLE] three. One thing made us happy there, at night time, we heard slide (HUMS). I know this is very far away, maybe a 100 gun artillery duels. And I was very happy that the front line is getting so close. The Germans getting pushed back.

And as soon as we got there, in my naive people wanted to run away. They said, let's run away. I said it's very nice of you to say let's run away. Could you tell me what you're going to do when you run away? What you mean? I said, who's going to feed you? What are you going to eat?

I said, this is in the Carpathian, the Polish Carpathian, there's no food here. You're going to starve. And the people themselves have nothing left to eat because the Germans take everything from them, the cows. If we have a chicken, you got to give someone eggs. If we have a cow, you got to give someone milk. It's terribly poor.

So I said you cannot run away, you're getting beans every day. And as long as you get-- I used to laugh at that, too, certain affluent people, when they got the beans, they complain. And I was laughing at them. What are you laughing? I said, I'm laughing because I think you should be so lucky. I think as long as you get beans, you'll survive. It's good. Some people are getting at these beans. And somebody say, well, I said, that's number one.

Number two, I said, don't you know that if we run away, they're going to take other Jews, they're going to line them up. One, two, three, out, and they're going to shoot every third man. I said, do you think your mother is a better mother than his mother? Oh, they say, well, if that is the case, what is the use of our organization? If you care about everything and everybody, then we will never be able to run away.

I say, yeah, we will be able to run. We will run away in three situations. I said, one, if they work us so hard that our strength is diminishing, then we have to run away because if your strength is diminished, you become nothing. Then you get sick and you die. Or if they want to shoot us. They said, oh, it's going to be too late. I say, we are taking the risk, but don't forget, we are all of army age, strong young. Our guards, we can subdue in no time. I can take two or three, you can-- in no time, we'll take that chance.

I said there's a third alternative. I said, when the political situation on the front line is very bad for our people, anti-Semites, then they worry about their own heads. Then we can run away because we are happy to get rid of them, they won't know what to do with all of them. These are the three occasions we're going to run. I said, don't bother me no more, just watch me. And every Sunday, we go wash our clothes to the river, so we had this meeting, we talked.

And on the way, then they got pushed back finally, and we are on the Carpathian ex-Czechoslovakian border, inside. We're going to sit on the border line to make a new defense line. And they work us very hard, and the Hungarian engineering battalion, and they took a squad of our people. We were carrying nine-and-a-half yard long pines by half a yard thick at the bottom.

We were carrying for about a couple of miles, for a tank barricade, to build a tank barricade. And they were being taken off the shirt and everything they had to carry on their shoulders, their naked shoulders. This kind of rough worked in all the meat and all the skin was off the bone. I said, they were doing this to them for a couple of days, a week almost. They came home, they couldn't move, was all infected. And none of the anti-Semites did.

And while we were building the defense line, a couple of nights, they didn't let us go home, they make us work all through the night and the next day, on the same little portion of beans. It was very brutal. And this passed and looks like somebody stopped these guys from doing these things. And after that, a week or two later, news came. The news that I waited all through the war to come, the best news. There was somebody in the Gentiles between the staff that was over us that were giving us the news. They were not supposed to. We're not supposed to hear news from nobody. We were not supposed to talk to outside people. We're not even supposed to talk among us, among ourselves.

So the news came that the Romanians turned against the Germans then with the Russians, made an agreement with the Russians. And the Russian army broke in through Romania and came in through the flatland of Hungary and now proceeding with a powerful wedge against the other side of the Carpathian defence lines. And the Hungarians came to us. They right away started to fortify the three passages which come from middle Europe to Eastern Europe. They fortified, but it looks like the Germans already had the war plans against the Russians. They told the Hungarians to build this--

Fortification.

--fence near the passage. It was not a fortification, just in the rocks, the passages are. Anti-tank weapons, they couldn't go through. They were building this since 1939 as soon as they came. And so they were sure that if ever the Russians start pushing them back, they would stop them at the Carpathian. It's a natural defense line, they will stop them there.

By this time, they got flanked out just like the French got flanked out at the Maginot Line going through Belgium. They got flanked out when they were going through Romania into the flatland of Hungary. And when I saw this news, I saw our officers, their noses got long, not ours. They got worried. And so that's when I started to blink my eyes at the boys we were organized with.

Now, I didn't want to say already to them, let's run away, because if you get caught by the military field police, who made you run away, they're going to say me. I didn't want to talk. I just give them a blink, and I took a guy with me who was very intelligent Budapest guy. He was very schlemiel. He was very helpless, but a very fine soul, and I took him with me. And I told him a story that he forgot the shovel and they trusted me because I was the best worker. I was a natural, and they trusted me.

So I ran all the way for the shovel, I'm still coming back with a shovel. And the rest of them sneaked me with the [?]

terrain ?] that they could sneak away. And as I said, that they were in such a trouble, they heard it out flanked, they're finished. And so they didn't pay too much attention, and my group remained slowly slipped away.

And then I came back, and I picked them all up. And I went into a village. I start talk to the people. And I said, I ask where is the game warden, the forester? Because I knew that if there's anybody who was going to be in contact with the Partisans, he must be. Because otherwise, you couldn't go into the forest. He knows the connection.

I went to the forest and I speak our language fluently. And I told him, I'm a native guy and I have these guys, we want to join the Partisans. So he says, well, come on, I'll go and I'll find out. Even on first day out, he didn't meet them. Second day, when he met them, he came back. And in meantime, I made for the rest of the guys room in the farmer's houses. And he came back the second night, and he says, I didn't give him my real name. I wanted to give him a real Ruthenian name. I said, I'm [INAUDIBLE] [? Ilkoff. ?] Because my name is really Hebraic and Jewish.

You are in Poland now?

This is Czechoslovakia.

Czechoslovakia.

It's actually Hungary, but it's ex-Czechoslovakia. I'm in my state in the Carpathian state. I'm a Carpathian now. In my state, but it's occupied by the Hungarian. So I-- where was I. Yeah, so he says to us, the second day he came back and he says to me, [INAUDIBLE], the Partisans have no more time to accept new recruits in their lines, in the Partisan lines. He said that they said that they have already fighting orders. You should sit tight, you'll be liberated soon. This was October the 10th I run away in 1944. And about the 13 when he told me this news.

And so we sat for a couple of days. And then the farmers got very edgy. These peculiar looking guys, the guys who are from Budapest, they were dressed in a radial hat like the French used to wear. And people notice it's not native people. On me, they couldn't tell. On them, they got very disturbed, and I got worried. So I took them out, we went in the forest, on the edge of the forest. We hide there behind big trees, put some leaves on.

We head there. And I used to go every second day in the evening, I go down to the forest to find some news. And so the 24th of October, this forester tells me, get your guys. Get them all down. He says get them all down here to me. He already knew that the frontline is here, and it's going to be fight, and it's going to be liberation soon.

So we came down that night. Artillery and mortar was shooting over the roof. And the following morning, I saw like in a film, a duel between the Partisans attack Hungarian wing, and they chased them out. The line, I knew Hungarian units comes in around lunchtime, enforcement of about 60 men. And by this time, it was on this side of the hill and that side of the hill. And you're looking just like in a movie. We are watching how the Partisans, maybe 12 or 15 of them, take positions on both sides of the line. They let them come in and they occupied line. And then, they start shooting at the commander, they killed him. And they got chaotic, and they were running away, too.

And the Partisans are in charge, but artillery duels were going on between a Russian mountain unit which was broken to the side. And so the following morning, this mountain unit came in at 6 o'clock in the morning, the forester-- we were in the attic all sleeping. And the forester say, hey, you could come down. And he introduces me, her the mountain battalion is marching near the house. They went to the side road.

And so we are, so to speak, being liberated, but I'm very disappointed. I want to speak to those fellows, and they don't speak to me. They're sort of scared. It looks like the Russians under Stalin were so scared. They were afraid to speak to foreigners. Although, I tried to speak to them as much as I could in their language, because I do speak Ukrainian, and I do speak a little bit Russian. I try to use that, but they would not speak to me.

And so they left. And the following day, we were arrested by a Russian sergeant, taken to the provision headquarters. And there, I met a boy, a young boy, who run away from Poland in the forest. And the Russian army came, they took come along just to save him. He was not serving, he was just with them, the army, a young Jewish boy. His parents were

killed, and he ran away.

So I snuggled over to him, and I said, well, what's going to happen to us? He said, oh, you are going to be taken to Russia and given [INAUDIBLE]. Who wants to go to Russia? Where is, I said, the headquarters? He says it's up down.

And so up town, they left for the frontline, and we were left alone. And I went to look up town for the headquarters, I want to get some papers so that I should give to these people that I liberated together. We should be able to move.

And the headquarters moved, too. I found out there is the Partisan office. I went into the Partisan office, and I tried to get these people papers. Of course, they're from Hungary, and they don't speak the language, but it looks like nobody would take any responsibility and give any papers. He didn't want to give nobody papers. So I told the people, come with me to my home town. I'm a barber, and I make enough money. I'll help you out to live, and I'll give you some place to sleep until your cities will be liberated.

And they said to me, oh, no, thank you very much. You did enough for us. We'll be all right. And me and a friend went across the mountains home to my hometown.

We'll have to stop right at this point for a few minutes so they can rewind the tape.