

Good morning. Good morning. It's March 8th, 2000 now, just about a month since we met last time, and we received the main body of the story of what happened to the Fisch family during the Holocaust. Again, I want to greet Mrs. Elizabeth Susie Wilf and Erwin Fisch, the two representatives of the Fisch family. And we felt when we wrote it up with all your mother's seven incidents that we have two more questions that we want to make sure get proper treatment.

The first question was the role of your father during the Holocaust. The story, as it's told-- and for good reason, which we'll go into-- is that your mother was so very active in saving the family. And she was the one who went out to get the food and so forth. But I was sure that your father had a lot to do with the experience of the family. And how would you describe his role during this very terrible experience?

Well, he was supportive, encouraging, and gave her the will to fight. And you had to get it from someplace. Even she had it in her own, a lot of fight and will to do what she did, but my father was really very supportive and very-- gave her a lot of courage and guidance. She had to talk things out with him, certain things that she did or had to do, or this, and all this was easier to talk it out with my father that he said, is it OK? It's not so OK, and the guidance that he gave her helped her tremendously, and that was the support.

Well, some of the people that helped us eventually get out of the ghetto and survive. And of course, he knew them. As far as we know, he and my mother made some of the arrangements with them to set it all in place, the one instance we told you the last time how this Jewish friend of ours that he knew and the family knew helped us get out through the gates. You know, that that's the type of things that had to be prearranged and set up so that it would work, otherwise, you know we wouldn't be successful.

And of course he worked, he worked outside, and that obviously contributed because, as a working person, they needed some people to work and some of the things that they were doing. So we were able to survive longer maybe because he was working and they needed him. So it was sort of a pass, a daily pass on life, and obviously he was the one who was working until he got hurt the one time where he couldn't work anymore.

But a critical factor in the story is the fact that men could not be as involved in terms of public appearance--

Right.

--of going out, and your mother would go out and buy food.

Right.

And this was a major undertaking with her Ukrainian language and--

Yes.

--and so on. She was able to maneuver, but she was-- what you said last time it seemed to me was that she could do it, and she looked Ukrainian. Is that it?

Well, she--

She didn't-- it's hard to say. Would you say her appearance was one that wasn't as obviously Jewish--

Right. That's true.

--as some people.

Right. That's true.

But a man couldn't do this.

Yes, for a man it was easily physically identifiable of being a Jew.

Even in that small town, Legnica.

Every place.

--they wanted to check you out over there.

Right.

Absolutely.

So as soon as the strangers came--

Right. We had to be a little bit not so visible with strangers because we never knew what their approach will be toward us, and questions, or--

We had to be vigilant at all times.

At all times.

It instilled in us-- my father and my mother, and we were small children. It was just like-- I don't even know how we were so lucky that we could understand it, but it was like second nature. A stranger talked to you. Don't say anything, don't reveal anything, because we were told that it's a matter of surviving, and--

You mean you could talk but don't say anything?

[LAUGHS] That's [INAUDIBLE].

Well, even talk less because, you know--

And if possible, to be-- if somebody strange came to the house that we were, if we knew that somebody is coming, we made ourselves unavailable. We went into the woods to pick mushrooms or things like that, or just an excuse to be out of--

Well, there was always a situation where we knew that, whether it's the Poles or whoever would come, they had no good intentions. They were looking are they Jewish or are they not. That was just a normal way of life during the war and so forth, especially when we were on the farm among Gentiles. I mean, that's just the way it was. So we were told-- I mean, obviously the fear was always on our parents part-- that maybe would come out with something, that it was not proper.

Mhm.

So obviously we were always on the side, and so that's how we spent the war times, just kind of laying low, and fortunately the place where we were at, the farm where we were at, was so isolated that not too often people came, strangers came visiting, so that was very fortunate.

Let's talk about daily life for you during the time that you were in Legnica About how many months would you-- first of all, you had no idea of dates at the time.

No. Not me. My mother, maybe yes.

As children or in general. Even adults probably didn't have an idea of dates.

My mother had the dates. My mother and father had completely dates, and every day was like a year. But for us children to know the dates--

What do you mean? What did they have?

The date-- a day was like a year because it was a daily struggle, a daily concern how to do that day, how to-- it was not like sitting on your laurels and just being for sure that you're safe.

But your mother could have told us the day you came to Legnica and the day you got out?

Possible. More my father maybe more than mother in her later years. But my father I'm sure knew the day and the dates much-- she always said my father had a good memory for dates.

Oh.

She didn't, but--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--but you didn't have the dates.

We didn't have the dates.

All you know is that was '43 until--

Yes, more or less. Right.

--until sometime in '45.

Right.

Right.

May, or was it--

Liberated by the Russians.

I think May of '45.

So let's--

No, no.

No?

January or February.

January.

January. It was winter snow. We were walking through the woods, going out from the village.

And what time of year approximately in '43 do you think you went there?

It could have been summer. I cannot recall.

It was the summertime.

Could have been summertime.

So July '43 till January of '45. You're talking about a year and a half, 18 or 19 months.

Yes.

It might have been. What did you do every day for 18, 19 months? There must've been some kind of routine that you came up with.

We tended to the farm animals, and we gathered firewood in the forest for hours. And just--

You had responsibility?

We had responsibilities. We had to take care--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--whatever mother told us to do on the day--

That was your responsibility.

--or that morning, that was it.

Yes.

Or the farm woman that needed to be done something, so she told us.

I remember that my kind of small chore was getting water almost every day. I was getting water--

Water out of the well.

--from the well, which was maybe 1,000 yards from the house down the hill. And I used to get two buckets--

Two buckets on the shoulders was--

--on the shoulders. Right. Such a stick across the shoulder.

Strap thing to carry those.

It was just easier to carry, and I would bring water in. It was kind of a thing that I used to do.

Was it tiring at times for a youngster to do it?

I don't think so. Probably-- no, I don't think so. It was small buckets.

We carried as much as we could--

Right.

--and if not, we went twice.

Sometimes during those trips that I would have to go down to the well, which was right near the barn where my father was hidden, my mother would put in some food or something in the bucket. And I would go down there and drop it off for him, and that's how we got food to him sometimes. Other times, she would take it down there.

Right.

Sounds like you had a job like Rivka and Rachel had in the Torah.

[LAUGHS]

They had to go bring the water from the well, too.

Water. [LAUGHS] Yes, yes.

I remember doing that. I also--

What I'm saying is that Legnica in the 1940s sounds like the same--

Biblical.

--but biblical times.

Times, right.

Absolutely.

In terms of the way people had to get the necessities of life.

Right.

Absolutely. It was very primitive. I think we mentioned it in the--

Previous state.

--first interview.

Right.

I mean, obviously no phones. I mean, just it was primitive, everything was. But in the '40s, 1940s, Poland and most of it other than big cities probably was that way, farms and so forth. It's not the way it is here.

So how did you feel when you were there. In other words, what was life like for you? You woke up in the morning. You were there for a year and a half. Did you have any thoughts go through your mind as to why you're there, or you just figured you had to be there?

We just had to get through the day, and I don't think we worked for the next day, but that they had to be taken care of, whatever that they had to be done. So, for the children, once we were with the parents, the parents did all the worries, the arranging. So it's not so much-- for us children, we just obeyed what we're supposed to do, and that was it.

When you were in Lvov, you had been in school already?

Yes, yes.

And you were also in school?

No.

I don't think so.

No, no.

No.

No, Erwin was not. I just started, and he just--

Prior to before the war, I don't--

So you don't remember being in school?

No, no.

I don't think so.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--started. I just started.

You were in school in Lvov.

Yes.

And now you're not going to school?

No, not at all.

Did you ever think about the fact that you--

Personally? Mother, yes, but I personally didn't think. Didn't think of school at all because we were not permitted to go to school. I mean, it would be dangerous for us to go to school, to be exposed to people and-- no, no.

During that period, we knew it was war, and we were always told that--

But if I'm not mistaken--

--we needed to survive, and someday the war will end, and we'll go back to Lvov, and I remember that.

That's what we were thinking we'll do.

We'll go back to Lvov as soon as the war is over, and we knew that. So it was a matter of every day doing whatever had to be done to survive.

To survive.

Did you have any understanding of what was happening to Jewish people outside of--

Yes.

Yes.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Absolutely.

Sure, sure.

You were aware of--

Frightening thing. Yes, yes.

From the experiences that we had throughout the ghetto times, where we saw people being taken away.

People had to hide also.

And we were hiding. And we were told if we don't hide, then they'll take us away. And it's

Was very frightening.

So we of course, we knew.

Yes.

That's why probably how during the period of the ghetto, we were incubated-- sort of-- that we had to be careful on the outside. And that's how the fear of doing everything correctly--

About our Jewish identity-- about our Jewish identity.

--in order to survive, probably that's how it was instilled during that period.

Yeah. Completely hide our Jewish identity and to present ourselves that way.

And you felt that this period was coming to an end? Did you have a feeling of optimism. That this is temporary, or-- do you have any recollection of how you understood this period of time?

Only from what the parents were talking between each other-- our mother. When we heard the artillery shots, there was-- and Lvov was taken, liberated, by the Russians. And we were, I think, a year later liberated. So they were saying, they're getting closer. Liberation comes closer. But of course, it took a year for us to be liberated after Lvov-- Lemberg. And so this I remember hearing our parents talking whenever they--

About the war--

The war.

Some rumors that the neighbors would say. Oh, the Russians did this or that somewhere-- so sort of rumors.

That they come closer, yes.

So there was--

But generally speaking-- what I'm trying to get at-- generally speaking, people have to have a feeling of--

At best, the ideal would be to have a feeling of optimism-- that life can be good and there's a role for me in life, and so on. Here, to say that there was optimism would be very difficult because it was such a difficult time that you were going

through. So what did you think your parents were feeling? Your father was hidden underground in water. And I guess you people, even though you were children, you used to take food out to him too.

Yes.

Yes. Yes, sure.

So you saw this the whole time.

We had to feel.

How did you go through life at that point?

There was always hope.

There was hope. There was hope.

Hope, yes-- hope that we'll make it.

Our parents would always say, hopefully soon.

Soon, it's not long. It's sooner.

And this why on a daily basis, every day was important to keep going.

Yes.

And nobody knew. Nobody knew it would last five years-- the war or whatever, obviously. But there was hope. There was hope. They would tell us that--

That we'll make it-- that we'll make it through.

--hopefully soon. Nobody knew. Maybe they were saying it as encouragement.

What was the attitude in the-- what was the feeling in the family when the Russians came, and you were able to leave your prison, really--

Relief.

--the prison that you made for yourself?

Freedom. Liberation.

You felt it?

Well, of course.

Yes, of course-- of course.

The first thing that I remember we did when we left Legnica is we started heading towards Lvov. So we got on some kind of a truck-- a Russian truck--

Yes, a military truck.



--a military truck. And we started heading towards Lvov. We thought we were going back home. We didn't know. You know how it is. There was no news. There was no information. There was just some rumors here and there. So that was our hope. And of course, halfway to Lem-- to Lvov, we stopped off in--

TarnÃ³w.

TarnÃ³w.

TarnÃ³w.

And we found out that there's no point in going back to Lvov.

Yes.

There's nothing there for us. And we didn't go back to Lvov. From TarnÃ³w, we worked our way back to Germany. And in Germany, we waited to come to the United States.

At this point in your lives, you had been through three stages-- the pre-war stage when you, at any rate, had begun school already,

Right.

Then you had the war-time stage in the ghetto. And then the period of time in Legnica.

Right.

How would you compare your lives in these three stages?

[CHUCKLES] I can-- want me to compare war years--

Yeah, in other words--

--to before the war?

--before the war was normal.

Normal, of course-- good life, enjoyable.

And that was a good life-- enjoyable.

Children, parents, good home, family. Extended family-- the cousins and cousins, and uncles, and aunts, and the grandmother. And vacations and just going to the park, going visiting family, holidays. Everything was--

Life was good.

Was very good, yes. Yes.

You were a little boy. Do you remember this period?

I remember. I remember that period. And it was obviously normal and good.

OK. And then life changed.

Changed, yes.

And that was the period in Lvov.

Period Lvov to the ghetto. We had to move from our apartment that we lived to the ghetto area. And from then on the ghetto gets--

That was the worst part.

Well, after [INAUDIBLE].

I would say the ghetto was the worst part--

The worst part, yes.

--because there we knew.

People were liquidated.

It was instilled in us that--

People were liquidated.

--any day when they took you away, that was it.

That's right.

They took you to be shot or killed or never to be seen again.

And how is it that you weren't taken away? Was that because your father was working?

Working? No, we could hide-- hide in the attic.

You were hi--

In the attic in the ghetto-- an attic--

In other words, you had better hiding places, facilities than others?

Some people did have hiding places. Some hiding places were discovered by a crying child, by different--

It's a combination.

We were lucky our hiding place in the attic was not discovered during the--

It's a combination of hiding places and being very lucky. It's really being very lucky.

And that's when your mother-- or your parents-- decided--

That's right. That's right.

--they're not going to depend on this luck holding out.

Because eventually each thing was discovered--

That's what she said.

--and they would have been.

And then you came to Legnica, which was sort of a holding action.

Exactly. Still dangerous because we could have been taken-- he for his physical examination. And the papers were the false Aryan papers-- were the best when they were in the pocket without had to be shown. Because once they start really getting into the background of those papers, they were not so secure.

All right, so that's the part of the story that we did not spend any time on last time. And I'm happy that you came down today to complete the story of what happened with your family. Thank you very much.

OK, thank you.

Thank you.

Yeah.