

Isaac, when does Sam come back? How long is it, after you've seen father, that you know that he's gone?

Right. May I spend a couple of minutes to mention what happened to me? After, in December of '44, when finally the problem, the political fighting was over, our neighborhood was liberated by German-- I mean not German-- British troops and Greek police. And I mean, everything had been closed. It was-- there'd been no food other than what one had kept in before the trouble started. So the following day, I went and stood in line at the grocery store, two blocks from our apartment, waiting to get whatever was available.

And five minutes later after I started standing in line, a number of police officers Gendarmerie come. And they're going down the line, "Who is Isaac Nehama?" So I, it's me. When they take me, and first they took me to the apartment.

And I saw my father. There were other policemen and Gendarme around, some of them in civilian clothes, some of them in uniform. And my father is really half hysterical, half-- not hysterical, I mean, vocally, but frightened, but at the same time, also resolute because they are doing searches and so forth. And he had a few gold sovereigns left on his person.

And they found it. And for a moment, he thought that they were going to grab it away. And that was the only thing that we had left to our name. So he started shouting and screaming and so forth. Well, they didn't take the money. But they took me away. They took me to the police station.

And they began to pummel me with the butt of the rifles because they wanted me to reveal names of EAM-- ELAS people in the neighborhood. I told them, I hadn't been in the neighborhood for over a year. I was not part of that before I left. Yes, I was in ELAS, but I went to survive, not for political reasons.

And certainly, I did not know anyone in the neighborhood of that. Well, I was beaten for quite a time. But at the end, I was put in a car and taken to the place which ironically, in the center of Athens, was the place where the Gestapo used to round up their prisoners in the basement. It was an office building had the basement or the place for the garage.

And by the time I got there, it was dark. And I was-- the door opened, and I was shoved to total darkness, except you could feel the smell and the noise of lots of other people. In short, they had been rounding up people. And the following day, they put us in trucks.

They took us to a mini camp, detention camp with barbed wire near the shore in Glyfada which is a suburb of Athens, beautiful spot. And I was kept there for a day and a half, and then we were taken and put on to Pireas, on ships. We didn't know where we were going. And after a traverse of, I think, three or four days and nights, then also it happens-- in darkness we were disembarked.

And we found ourselves in the middle of the desert. At least it looked like a desert. And then subsequently, I learned it was Libya. Well, what had happened, the British had taken all these things as prisoners because the people of ELAS had taken some British soldiers as prisoners. So it was kept as a kind of bargaining chip.

Fortunately, in the meantime, my father's frantic efforts, and a cousin of his knew the New York Times correspondent in Athens who knew the [GREEK], the archbishop who had become rigid by that time and told him about the fate of this Jewish boy who goes to save himself, loses most of his family, and now he's a prisoner of the British because two days after I arrived in Libya, then once a day, some British soldier would come with a clipboard and mention names.

And somebody said to me, your name has been called. So effectively, the war had gone down, and I was repatriated. So I think this needs to have a nice bookend for my parties, and--

And this lasted for few weeks?

From the time that i was picked up to the time I returned was, I think, 15 days. I came back, I think, the 7th or 8th of January, '45.

And you were-- go ahead.

I think you were asking me earlier about when Sam returned.

But let me ask you something. This is the first time in your life that you were beaten?

Yes, by supposedly our allies. Well, look, I can understand what they were trying to do. I was beaten by the British themselves. I was beaten by the Greek Gendarmerie, who were, of course, doing the bidding of the-- I mean, the British once I got to the detention place in Athens itself and to Glyfada, once we came under English army control, we were not beaten or anything else.

We were wealthy there. I mean, food was, there, plentiful. In Libya, one day a man came with English uniform. And I saw in his shoulder, a patch that said "Palestine." So I took a chance, and I addressed him in Hebrew, the only phrase that I knew, "Do you speak Hebrew?"

And he says, are you-- I didn't know how to-- I didn't know any more Hebrew other than that. But I told him my name. Then he said, OK, come in the evening. And in the evening he brought me a couple of bars of chocolates. Of course, it wasn't in his power to let me out, but I was let out in a few days anyhow.

Were you very hurt when they hit you?

I mean, I don't know if they did it on purpose. They really pummeled me in the upper body and the legs.

With the butt of a rifle?

Yes. And at one point, the man had this-- even a bayonet fixed. And he went like this-- I'm sure they-- and because I think it pierced my overcoat that famous blue overcoat, which I mentioned to you. I had still saved it from the partisan days. I had brought it back. But it was just a savage beating.

Did that do something to you? As a human being, did that--

Of course-- well, first of all, I was really, for one thing, taken aback that such savagery was possible and especially for something that I had not done or for-- I couldn't fulfill a request, which in good con-- I wasn't hiding anything. It wasn't as if they were asking me the name of my unit or where are they.

I would have told them, but there was nothing secret about that. But they were-- and I can see that this was not done at the request of the British, but it was simply on their own initiative. It was a horrible thing. Greece, unfortunately, is the only country where the resistance, which, in spite of all these horrible political infighting, at least did something to shore up the morale of the people, inflict losses of the Germans and the Italians.

It was never officially recognized until about 10 years ago, where finally Papandreou, the Prime Minister who was dead, rammed a law through one of the two houses of parliament. He didn't even clear both of them. And this is the tragedy, the pity of Greek political life and affairs, that even after 50 or more years, they are not even willing to say bygones be bygones, at least recognize the contribution that was made of substantial dimensions.

OK, Sam.

All right. Well, I then resumed my life in the sense that I began to prepare myself. Now it's beginning of the year of '45 for taking the entrance examinations at the Polytechnic Institute in--

The same place you were going to go to--

In September, right. But it needs preparation. Well, of course the World War is still raging in Europe-- I mean, still

going on. And finally, it ends at the end of April of '45. And soon thereafter, the story's first trickle then becomes a torrent, both in the newspaper stories as well as the newsreels to see the emaciated, the things in the extermination camps-- the crematoria, the piles of corpses, and all this horror. Well, what can one do but-- without any trace of where our loved ones are?

And it was not until, I think, beginning of August of '45 that first, on the radio, at the time of news, they didn't have the things as bulletins. For the time of news, it would be an extended time that it took to recite names because as news began to trickle down, come down from Europe of prisoners from the concentration camps, in some cases, Greeks themselves, political prisoners who were in Dachau, then there was also news from contingents of Greeks that had gone, some of them forcibly, some of them voluntarily, to work in German factories.

But they got-- of course, also caught by the fighting of the war. Some of them never returned. And so they also had to be enlisted. And then one day in the beginning of August of '45, a neighbor called me and told me that she heard my brother's name mentioned. But because I didn't know whether she had heard correctly, whether she made a mistake or the possibility of there being another person of the same name, I didn't tell my father.

And I immediately came down-- it was very early in the morning-- and I ran to the offices, the nearest office of a newspaper. And I went to the [INAUDIBLE], and I told them what I wanted. And they had the list that was going to appear in the afternoon paper.

And then I saw Sam Nehama, comma Athens. So I was confident because I knew that we were the only Nehamas in Athens. So I then brought this thing with me and showed it to my father. And now there is no waw-- I mean, I asked at the newspaper office, how can one get in touch? Because usually this information came via UNRRA, who was the relief organization that shepherded all these DPs in their displaced persons camps.

But there was nothing tangible. But while we are fretting-- I mean, when are we going to hear? When is it he going to come? The following day, he called on the phone. Now, on the phone, he told us that he was in Bari. So, all right, that meant that he was going to take the ferry, which takes about a day to get to Corinth.

And then-- so we thought it was going to be a few days more. And then about half an hour later, the phone rang again. Remember, he was at the neighbors. I had to run upstairs. And it was Sam again. He says, I called you from Corinth. I didn't want to break the news so suddenly upon you that I'm here. I'm not in Bari.

I'm already in Greek territory. I'm in Corinth, which is an hour and a half. So I told my father, Sam is here. He couldn't believe it. Of course, he couldn't come. I ran to the radio station. And he came off-- it was a whole-- hundreds, literally, of people returning from Germany and Europe.

And he had on a short corduroy, brown corduroy pants in the manner of lederhosen, which I'm sure he must have gotten in Germany from one agency or the other. And of course, first of all, what impressed me was his size. He was a grown man and certainly he was not thin. He looked rather very, very healthy and well-fed. And--

And how old was he now? You were nine-- you were--

At the moment, we are talking about our reunion. OK, he was 15 years old.

And he's a grown man in your mind because of what he's looking like.

No, no, he's still has a youthful face, but he has the stature of a grown man. He was not the little short boy that I had left before. And let alone that, in my mind's eye, having seen the newsreels and read the stories, and when I knew that he was also liberated, I thought I was going to see a broken individual, if not emaciated or a skeleton with skin, but certainly, even with premature gray hair.

Fortunately, none of that had touched Sam, which I'm very, very happy for him. I think, in contrast, I think I had been much more affected by the war, though I do not see the horrors that he did, but by the separation, because I was at an

age where I could begin to think about things like these and internalize them.

It's interesting because one would assume, theoretically, that a young boy who went through Auschwitz would be more affected than a boy who was in the resistance.

Sure.

Yes?

Originally when I was told that you were interested in interviewing me, I told Sharon [? Mueller ?] that I have nothing to say compared to what Sam went through. But Sharon is a wise lady, and she said the invitation is not proportional to the travail that one has undergone, but what one has to say.

So that persuaded me to come and talk with you. But I always think that compared to what he saw and what he went through, mine really paled to practical insignificance, except the things that-- the way the affected me.

Affected you, yeah.

I would-- perhaps I would have felt, and I've had the same kind of-- even if I was in hiding because I was at an-- even two or three years made a difference. And maybe my own inclination [INAUDIBLE] was to think about these things. And I thought a lot about them.

And the pain of not finding them, seeing them in newsreels, what had gone on, and seeing the enormity of these things, all of those things then combine to very quickly leave, at least in me, what I perceive-- I cannot, obviously, speak for Sam and what is deep in his mind. But I had a much more-- I felt it, I think, more than he did. I think that I did. I'm not sure that that's true objectively.

But you also, in terms of being with the partisans, and maybe this makes a difference-- not only were you older, but you had time to think about it. You had time to--

Yes. Although, in both cases, there was always the question of survival. But can you imagine when he retells in his tape the death march from Auschwitz to only a rail head, which is less than 50 kilometers away, and it took three days, and no sleep. And you don't dare fall by the wayside because you're going to be shot. I think a minute of that is more than the entire year of what I went through.

My suspicion is, but I don't know, is you didn't ask him immediately what happened. You waited until-- or did you? Did you go alone before you went to see your father?

No, no, I didn't-- no. I knew that my father was waiting and anxious. I wouldn't have dared take Sam and say, let's go and have a chat. So no, we went. But even in the subsequent days, because I did not know, number one, seeing the horrors in the newsreels and not knowing yet how much they had affected him.

Now, arguably, he's fine. But I wanted to be careful. So I did not broach things like this. And really, even things like, when did you arrive in Auschwitz? Even I asked him a few years ago, because then, I wanted to find the exact date.

He said, I can give it to you within four or five days. When I went to the Holocaust museum, I went to library, found the famous Auschwitz Chronicles of Danuta. And what do I see? 17th of August, an entry that a contingent is expected tomorrow, of 20 odd thousand-- 2,100 Jews from Rhodes.

Was a mistake-- they didn't include the Athenians. And then he says, X number of males were given numbers starting from B something to B-- and I know Sam's number is B7464, so it was right smack in the middle of that range. So I know now that they got to Auschwitz.

Now, I asked Sam, what time of day? And he told me it was still dawn almost, just before dawn, because I try to think,

when did my mother and father-- my mother and brother die? Nobody knows, but from Sam, I know it was either the same day, or the latest, the following day. They didn't keep them. They had no place to-- they had to dispose of them. So at least I have narrowed the day of my mother's and brother's death.

But his coming-- his coming back was confirmation that no one else was coming back. And how did you--

First of all, I didn't know whether he was coming back given his age and seeing that at the time of the arrival, the very young, the very old, or women who were very young, regardless of their own ability to work or not, the flick of a finger-- I mean, who do you expect-- how do you expect that-- what expectation do you have that a 14-year boy will appear capable of concentration camp labor?

So I mean, only the darkest thoughts existed. And it's a miracle that I think he survived because he was bigger for his stature, for his age, plus that thing that he did in the great concentration camp. I think he's responsible for his not being chosen to go the other direction.

What did he do in the concentration camp? Because anyone who's watching this will not know what you're referring to.

Well, Sam is very good about that. He said, well, first of all, he had to undergo quarantine that lasted for several weeks where there was very little to be done. Then he was taken into-- there was a neighboring camp-- actually, a farm. It was about 10 kilometers from the main Birkenau camp called Budy, which was a farm or a farm complex. And young kids were doing farm work, picking things up and things like that.

And that's from where he eventually had to do the march and get to Buchenwald. And I think the interrogator asked him what he did in Buchenwald. Without missing a beat, he says "nothing" because Buchenwald was not that kind of a camp. It was not a labor camp.

How did your father-- when he met Sam, it must have been that he was extremely torn with joy at seeing one of his children and the loss of his wife, and the youngest boy.

Right. I can see the scene. You know, he was crying. Well-- but I think both he and I, without even discussing it, we took it easy. We didn't pry Sam with lots of questions right in the beginning. And in fact, some of the details, which he relays on the tape, in particular the beating that they received at the hands of the German police, I only heard it for the first time, myself, on the tape.

So I-- because we do not know what effect this kind of questioning would have on him. It would certainly would open up wounds that, perhaps, ought to be left to heal for a bit. So we're very, very careful. Plus, unfortunately, I don't know, you realize that although you want to know, you're hungry for that, but it isn't going to change the outcome.

So waiting a little bit longer-- I don't want to say that didn't want to know. What I think was much more operative was, we wanted to tread very carefully because we do not know what this might do to Sam. In the same way, I think that even my father did not pry me with very pressing questions continuously about my experiences in the camp. I mean, I thought I told him-- I mean, not the camp-- in the mountains.

After I told him of traversing, the bus trip, and then getting to Karditsa, and then how, finally, I got there, from then on out, from time to time, I would tell him a few things have happened in the mountains. But he didn't need to press. I think that if I had stayed longer, we would have exchanged stories. He would have told me things about his own childhood. And I would have told him about my mountain experiences.