

Rolling? This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Nathan Weinberger on June 28, 2018 in Lawrence, New York.

OK.

Thank you, Mr. Weinberger for--

You're welcome.

--agreeing to meet with us.

You're welcome.

So tell me, can you tell me what was your name when you were born?

I was born-- my name was Nandor.

Nandor.

Yeah.

Is that Hungarian?

Yeah, and the name was W-E-I-N-B-E-R-G-E-R.

So Weinberger still.

Weinberger, yeah.

And what was the date of your birth?

September 10, 1922.

OK, and where were you born?

I was born in a town. We had a farm, so it was Koromla.

Koromla?

Yeah.

Is it K-O-R-U-M-L-A?

Koromla, yeah.

OK. Oh. OK, I spelt it wrong. It's K-O--

K-O-R-O-M-L-A.

OK, K-O-R-O-M-L-A.

Yeah.

OK, and what country was Koromla in?

In Czechoslovakia.

OK, the eastern part? The western part? South?

Oh, no. That's the northern part.

OK, was it close to any other countries?

Yeah, to Uzhhorod close.

And Uzhhorod was also part of Czechoslovakia?

Yeah.

OK, about how far from Uzhhorod was it?

10 kilometers.

Oh my. It's close.

Yeah.

Today, one could say would be a suburb of a city.

Yeah, we had a big farm.

How many hectares?

I didn't know the acres, but it was a lot of field. We owned the field that was wheat.

Wheat.

Wheat. Mainly wheat.

Mainly-- what other things did you grow? What other things did you grow?

Well, everything for a farm, you know? It was potatoes, beans, corn.

Were you able to feed the family through what you grew on the farm?

Yeah, all the time. Yeah, I was seeing the family. But when I was 14 years old, I didn't like it, so I went to Uzhhorod. That's what I was occupied with. And this big city was a beautiful city.

Was it?

Yeah, beautiful. Beautiful.

We'll come to that. We'll come to that in a minute. Excuse me for interrupting. Right now, I'd like to find out a little bit more about your family, your parents, your brothers and sisters.

My family was not too big, but my parents were-- my father was three brothers, and--

Was his name, your father's name?

Theodore.

Theodore.

Yeah.

And was he the youngest of the three brothers or the oldest?

No, the oldest.

He was the oldest.

That's why he was on the farm.

So was it that he had inherited the farm?

Yeah.

OK.

It was great parents to the parents for-- it was many years.

Well, that was a question of mine was how long was the farm in your family? Was it always part of your family?

Always, yeah.

So it had been for generations.

Yeah. Always was until Hungary occupied, then they confiscated.

OK, we'll come to-- right now, I'd like to spend a long time talking about what was life like before the war and what the circumstances were so we get a bigger picture.

Beautiful country.

Was it?

Beautiful. There was no discrimination between Jews and non-Jews.

How large a place was Koromla? How many people do you think lived there?

There was 200 people.

That's not so big.

No.

Is it so that everybody knew each other?

Oh, yeah. Sure.

OK.

There were about 12 Jewish families, and then there was a Catholic people for the rest of them.

Were they Czechs, or Hungarians, or Slovak?

No, they were Slovak.

They were Slovak.

Yeah.

So was this in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia?

Yeah.

OK.

But Uzhhorod was the big city, so it was close by.

What was your mother's name?

Faiga.

Faiga. And her maiden name?

Hirschowitz.

Rirschowicz?

Hirschowitz. H-I-R-- Hirschowitz.

OK. And was she also from Koromla?

No, she was from Storozhnytsya. That's a city part of Uzhhorod.

I see.

Yeah.

And how did your parents meet? There was-- I don't know.

Was there a matchmaker?

Matchmaker, yeah.

I see.

And they were-- my father was part of three children, boys, and my mother was from Storozhnytsya. They were nine siblings.

Oh, that's a large family.

Yeah.

My mother, but my father was only three brothers.

Did you know your aunts and uncles from your mother's side?

Yeah.

Do you remember their names?

Not all of them, but I remember--

Some of them, so tell us what some of them were.

Well, one was Yisroel, Jewish name. And one was-- my mother was the oldest.

Faiga.

Faiga. And there was a boy. There is-- no, the next one was a boy. No his name was Yisroel.

Yisroel.

Yeah.

And the rest was Golda.

Golda.

Yeah. And Faiga was my mother. And Raphael.

Raphael.

Yeah, and Esther.

Esther.

There was nine siblings, and-- what was-- I don't remember exactly their names.

OK. That's a lot of names, a lot of children.

Nine siblings, you know, so-- but they was a large family.

Did you visit them when you were growing up?

Yeah. Yeah, we did. Sure.

And was your mother also from a farming family?

She was not a farm family because my grandfather was--

[PHONE RINGING]

Excuse us for a second. Hang on.

Yeah.

OK, so we were talking about your mother's family. They were not farming people, right?

Pardon me.

Were your mother from farming family? Was she from a farming family or no?

No. No, her father, my grandfather, was-- he was buying cattle. He was going from town to town, bought cattle, then took him to the market. He sold.

So he's a cattle dealer.

Cattle dealer, yeah.

OK.

Cattle dealer.

So it meant he traveled a lot.

Yeah. Yeah, he traveled. He was providing for family, big family, nine children.

That's a lot.

Yeah.

That's a lot.

Would you say that your grandparents, your mother's family, was well-off or poor?

Well, middle class, but they had family in the United States. They had two sons in America, so they helped out from America. But they were middle class people.

And so this would have been your mother's brothers?

The brothers, two of them came to the United States.

OK.

And the rest were [INAUDIBLE] [? married ?] to different towns. They [? married. ?]

So the ones who came to the United States, the two brothers, do you know their names?

Yeah.

What are they?

Frank and Nathan.

And their last names were what?

Hirsch.

Hirsch. So they shortened them when they came here.

Yeah. Came here, they shortened them.

And what part of the States did they come to?

They came to New Jersey, the two brothers. And they settled there. One had a bar, and one had a grocery store in their town. They were in Jersey, Franklin, New Jersey, and also in-- what is it called-- town. You know where Nathan was? You remember, Lucy?

Yeah, you're asking your wife. I don't-- I can't read that. Excuse me. Hamburg, New Jersey?

Yeah, Hamburg, New Jersey.

Hamburg, New Jersey. OK.

Yeah.

OK, we'll come to them later because I think they figure in your story. Let's go back now to your father's side of the family. Did you know your grandparents on his side?

Yeah, my grandparents from my father's side. Yeah, I knew, but I was too young. I was a child, and so--

Do you have memories of them?

Yeah.

What was your grandfather's name?

Hirsch.

That's your mother's father.

Mother's father.

Your father's father?

My father was Theodore.

And his father was--

Joseph.

Joseph Weinberger.

Waienberg. Joseph Weinberger.

And your grandmother, did you know her too?

She was Marka.

Marka Weinberger.

Marka Weinberger, yeah.

Was everybody who lived in Koromla a farmer? Was that how the village sustained itself?

Yeah.

OK, and was your family's farm amongst the smaller or the larger ones?

The larger.

Large.

Large one of wheat growing the wheat.

Did you sell extra wheat?

Yeah.

OK, who would you sell it to? Who would your father sell it to?

To Uzhhorod. They sell it to big town, yeah. There was a mill, and they bought wheat for flour. And then what else?  
Mainly wheat.

Mainly what.

Yeah.

What about your uncles, your father's other brothers?

One was in Uzhhorod. He was-- that's a big store. He had a beautiful store with imports, all imports he was selling and whatever groceries.

For household goods?

Pardon me.

Household goods or different kinds of imports?

No, all kinds. Everything imported to bananas and oranges we didn't grow, whatever.

Imported food stuff.

Foods, yeah.

OK.

He had a big store.

And did your father then supply him with some of the farm--

Yeah, sure, because they were partners. They brought us with to the farm, but we-- my parents owned the farm.

And the other brother, what did he do?

One of them was in imports, and the other one was in-- he got married. He lived in Slovakia. And he had a grocery store and a bar.



And where in Slovakia was that?

That was in Presov.

Presov.

Presov, yeah.

And the names of these two uncles, what were they?

One was Gyozo. That's in Hungarian. Gyozo.

Gyozo.

And other was Isidore.

Isidore.

Yeah.

OK, so it was Isidore, Gyozo, and Theodore.

Theodore, yeah.

Those sound very Hungarian as does your name, Nandor.

My name Nandor was.

Do you have a Jewish name?

Yeah.

What was that?

Avruhm Nusi.

Avruhm Nusi?

Yeah.

And was that given to you when you were born?

Yeah, for the priest.

What language did you speak at home?

Czech.

You spoke Czech.

Yeah.

Not Slovak. Not Hungarian.

No Slovak. Czech. Hungarian after 1939. We were occupied by Hungary, so I said that my name was Nandor.

OK, so until then you weren't known as Nandor?

No, I was known Avruhm Nusi, Jewish name.

Did you speak Yiddish at home as well?

Yeah, Jewish. Yeah.

So which languages did you use most often at home?

Home was Jewish, but most of the time Jewish. But then I was speaking Slovak. You know, it's like Czech almost.

And was there-- of the people, you say it's about 200 people in the village, the town Koromla. 12 families were Jewish, something like that. Is that what you said?

Yeah, 12 families about. Yeah.

OK, and was that large enough to have a synagogue?

Yeah, sure. We had a very nice synagogue.

OK, and were your parents religious?

Yeah, were very religious.

Would you say orthodox?

Orthodox, yeah.

And you kept a kosher home?

Yeah, sure. Kosher.

And did you start school in Koromla?

Yeah, public school.

OK, tell me about that. What was that like? What are some of your memories from public school?

It was normal. Not a big school, but it was eight grades.

In one building?

One building, yeah, there was a school. But when we were growing up, we were going to cheder. You know, that's a--

Tell us, what is cheder?

Yeah, the Jews speak Hungarian, and they spoke Jewish and Slovak.

Was this a religious school?

There was very little religion in school because mostly were Catholic people.

I see. So were there religious lessons given in school?

Yeah. No, not in the Slovak school, but we had cheder. We were three boys when we were growing up, so went to cheder in the summer especially when school was off. So we went to a religious school.

We got a teacher. My family got a teacher for us to learn the Hebrew readings, which are in Jewish. But at state school, I was Slovak.

OK, tell me how many brothers and sisters did you have?

Three.

Boys or girls?

We had only boys, three boys.

OK, were you the youngest or the oldest?

The middle.

You were in the middle.

So who was your older brother? What was his name?

William.

William.

Yeah.

And your younger brother?

Alexander.

Alexander. All right, and how much difference in age was there between you?

Well, it was, like, almost two. You know, it was-- we were different. My older brother was born on May 10, and I was born on September 10. And my younger brother was born-- he was two years younger than I.

So he was born in 1924?

1924.

And your older brother, was he born in 1920?

1921.

In 1921.

Oh, so you were three boys in the short space of time.

Yeah, but we had other Jewish boys also.

In the cheder.

In cheder.

Yeah, OK.

But they employed a private teacher for these Hebrew lessons.

And he came from Uzhhorod, the teacher?

The teacher, yeah, from Uzhhorod.

Do you remember his name?

No, I don't.

It's OK. It's OK.

I don't remember.

If someone asked me if I remember a name from when I was young, I wouldn't know either.

No, maybe I would remember if I think a lot on it, but I don't know.

Do you remember anything particular from those lessons?

Nothing particularly, just learning the Jewish, the Hebrew, and that's about it, and to write and read.

For being in a-- for being born in a small place with only 200 people, it sounds like you were very multilingual, that you spoke--

I spoke--

--Yiddish. You spoke Slovak.

Slovak.

You were learning Hebrew. And did you also understand Hungarian at the time?

When they occupied in 1939, I learned also.

OK, not until then.

No.

OK. And let's talk a little bit about your home. Can you describe for me what your home looked like?

Very orthodox in the house, yeah.

And does that mean you had two kitchens? Did you have two kitchens, one for meat, one for dairy?

No, one kitchen, but part of it is dairy and part of it is meat.

OK, describe the house in general. Was it two story, three story?

No.

One story?

One story. One story house, but it was large.

About how many rooms did it have?

It had-- let's see-- a kitchen, and a living room, and a bathroom in the house.

So three major rooms.

Three major rooms.

Did you have electricity?

Pardon me.

Did you have electricity?

No.

How did you light? What did you use for light?

We had-- it's like a-- what is it? You know, a lamp with--

Would it be kerosene?

Pardon.

Would it have been a kerosene lamp?

Kerosene lamp.

Let me take a look. What did you write down here? Gas. Was there gas?

No.

No.

No.

OK.

Fire wood was made to make it warm. In the summer was a basement, so we the dairies in the basement because it was--

Did you have a lot of cows?

Pardon me.

Did you have a lot of cows?

Oh, yeah, we had cows. We had horses. We had goats, chickens, everything on a farm.

What was your job?

Geese. Pardon.

What was your job? As you were growing up on the farm, what kind of job did you have?

I didn't have no job. I was just playing around. I was very young.

Oh, so you didn't have to take care of the geese, or the goats, or anything?

No. No, they had maids. We had maids, and they were taking care on the chickens, and the goat, and everything that we had. We had goats. We had cows. We had horses, so--

Did you have a dog?

A dog, we had, yeah.

Any kittens? Cats?

Cats, sure. Cats. On a farm, you must have cats. They were taking care of the mice.

Did you have any pets amongst these animals?

I didn't have no pets. There were geese, and chickens, and what else? And dogs. Dogs, you know? Like, we had all the-- everything, we had on the farm because we were growing everything on that farm.

And the people who worked on the farm, were they also from the village?

They were from the village, and they came from different villages because we had a big field of corn and wheat, mainly wheat, but corn, and potatoes. Everything we grew ourselves.

And were you interested in working on the farm?

No, not at all.

What about your brothers? Were they interested?

No. One of them, the youngest one, yeah.

He wanted to.

Yeah, we both went to this city. My older brother and me, we went to the city. He didn't like the farm.

So remind me again. Your oldest brother was William.

My older one was--

And the other one was Alexander.

Alexander.

So it was Alexander who was interested in the farm and the others not.

Yeah, he was the youngest one. Yeah, so he wasn't.

And your father, did he like farming?

He employed farm people because it was a big farm, and we had a forest also, a big forest. So we had wood growing in there.

So did you cut the wood? Did you sell some of the timber?

Yeah, but I didn't do anything physical really. They had farmers that took care of it. They cutting the trees for wood. And because for ourselves, and they were cutting all sorts of supply to the farms, different farm's wood because we had a big lodge farm.

Your father, had he gone to high school? Had he gone to gymnasium, Theodore?

No, he didn't. But my mother was more educated. She was working for a judge in Uzhhorod.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

That's quite a high position.

Yeah, she was a secretary to the judge.

So she knew-- she was educated. She knew how to read and write.

Yeah, sure. My father, too, was reading and writing, beautiful handwriting.

Had he served in World War I, your father?

My father, yeah, in World War I. He was a medic in the war--

I see.

--in World War II.

In World War I you mean.

Pardon me.

In World War I. Your father was a medic in World War I.

Yeah, he was a medic. It's now that he knew a professional medic, but most of the Jewish people got higher positions because they were more educated than farmers.

Yeah.

So then my father spoke very well Slovak, and Hebrew, Jewish.

Did he speak German?

We had to learn. We were kids when they were teaching us German writing, but completely forgot about.

Tell me a little bit about the personality of your parents. Was your father, for example a storyteller? Did he tell you about what his experiences during World War I were?

Yeah. Oh, yeah, he used to tell us. Yeah. Like, you know, he was-- I told you that he was a medic in the World War I. Yeah.

And what kind of personality did he have? Was he a very reserved, quiet man, or was he a very friendly, open man?

Very friendly, open man.

Oh, yeah?

He was like-- in the town he was the-- how do you call it-- like advisor to the people.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

So people would come to him for advice?

Advice, yeah. And tried to help out the farmers. Some of them, they had boys that had to go to the Army, so in case they had new people in the city, so he would talk to them about it. So he got them out of the Army because they're needed for labor. They got this but--

No, he was very well liked. Non-Jewish people, the Jewish people, was very liked. In shul, he was the president of the shul.

Of the shul.

Yeah.

Is that different from a cheder?

Pardon me.

Is that different from the cheder?

Yeah, well, cheder it was just the kids went to cheder, and then both older people, they taught me. You know, they knew it already. They had education in Hebrew.

And did you have a radio at home?

Only late, late in the-- you know, like 1938 or so.

So that meant you would have had electricity by then.

No, they had only-- no electricity, but they had a radio that put in batteries.

OK. Did anybody in Koromla own a car?

A car? No, because everything was horse and wagon. We had horses with wagon, horses to take people to whatever you wanted to go, to Uzhhorod, so we had horses to take them back.

And in the winter was snowed in, the whole town, so go on a sled. Went to Uzhhorod to buy groceries. Well, we had a



grocery store in town also.

In Koromla?

Yeah, we had grocery. We had a bar naturally. Bar was very important.

Yeah. Tell me, why would a bar be important in a place like that?

The people, you know, the farmers would go to a bar and have a couple drinks, then, you know, to entertain them self. That was-- then when they made a wedding in town, the non-Jewish ones-- the Jewish had a bigger wedding.

In the bar?

Yeah, in a bar, yeah. I mean, the non-Jewish would have, let's say, a wedding celebration in the bar.

Yeah.

All right.

And the Jewish ones would have a chuppah and get married, the young ones.

Would people celebrate weddings at those times for just one day or one afternoon?

No, the family, mostly family. They invited the family. There was no big weddings. A small wedding.

I've heard that in some villages people would celebrate a wedding for many days, like two days, three days.

Yeah, but it was not in the village so talking about. It's already in the cities they were celebrating.

I see.

Like Uzhhorod, they were making one of the bigger weddings. But in the village, the non-Jewish people, they made the weddings.

Tell me, was the village a pretty place?

Beautiful place. Beautiful. Surrounded by forest. The whole area was full of forest.

Did you go walking there?

Yeah, we knew every part of it.

Was it a flat kind of country, or did it have hills and mountains?

No, hills and mountains.

Oh, wow.

Yeah, from the forest, it would have a well supplying water to the farm.

Oh, from the forest.

From the forest. The forest at always different places, water, beautiful, clean water because everything came from the forest. They had a supply of water for the town, and then there was also a well in town. Sometimes they had two wells

when they got bigger.

When you needed water in your home, how did you get it?

We got it mainly from-- the running water from the mountains, and then we had also a well.

In your own yard?

Yeah.

OK.

We had a well.

Was your home made of wood or of stone.

No wood.

Wood?

Yeah. No. No, we had part of it was wood and part of it stone. We had a big place where they group stones, and the farmers would cut out part of the--

You mean like a quarry? There was a quarry there for stones?

Yeah, of mountain stone. Yeah, beautiful, strong stone.

Who built your house? Was it your father, your grandfather, his father?

His father, my grandfather, and his grandfather. There was a farm for many years, then inherited from one father to the next father.

And was there a cemetery? Was there a cemetery?

Jewish cemetery.

Was there one?

Yeah, a Jewish cemetery.

Was it large?

Not too large, the Jewish. The non-Jewish one was a big, big cemetery. But mostly we had-- the Jewish people had only a small cemetery and not a big shul but a beautiful shul made out of stone.

OK. So forgive me that I don't know this, but is a shul the same thing as a synagogue?

Yeah.

OK, so now I understand better. All right, and was there a church in town?

Oh, yeah, big church because there was a lot of non-Jewish people.

Did you have-- were your neighbors Jewish or non-Jewish?

Non-Jewish.

Non-Jewish.

But we had Jewish ones also. We had like-- the town was about 12 Jewish families.

Was there anybody in town who was not a farmer?

No.

Everybody was.

Everyone-- it was a farm, but they didn't have so much land. We had big land because it was-- we're growing wheat, so we had a big farm of wheat.

Well, it sounds like the impression I would have is that were well-to-do farmers.

Oh, yeah.

OK.

We were well-to-do. We had horses. We had cows, you know, everything.

And how did people in Koromla get their news? Did people read newspapers? Did they listen to the radio?

Yeah, there was news, but very little news. Only by hearing, and newspaper came also later on in life, not in the beginning.

And so would you say that, in some ways, it was very distant from what was going on in the larger cities and in the countries?

Oh, yeah. The farmers, we had about 200 people, farmers, also, and we had only 12 Jewish families.

Did your father regularly go to market?

Yeah.

What day of the week would he do that?

Uzhhorod. He went to the market in Uzhhorod.

What day of the week would that be? What day was the market in Uzhhorod?

On a Thursday.

On a Thursday.

Yeah.

OK. So did he bring all of the items to sell?

Yeah, to sell. We had cherries, apples, and pears.

And did you ever go with him?

To?

Uzhhorod.

Uzhhorod? I went when I was a kid with my parents, and after that, I was living in Uzhhorod.

OK, so tell me why is it that you didn't want to-- what about being in this beautiful country with beautiful woods, why didn't you want to be there?

Because I didn't like farming. I didn't like to do a farmer's work.

Well, it's dirty work actually.

It was dirty work, but it was if you had land. We had a lot of land, so it was inherited from father from grandfather, the whole thing. So we just kept on doing the farm. My two brothers were in the city.

OK, so what did your older brother do there? What was his-- why did he leave for Uzhhorod?

He went to Uzhhorod. He was an electrician, my older brother. And the younger brother-- I mean, I was the middle one. I was working in a bicycle store.

How did you end up in a bicycle store?

I went to the trade. I didn't like the farm, so I didn't want to stay on the farm.

Did you want to live in Uzhhorod? Yeah, I loved it.

Tell me, what about Uzhhorod-- what was it about Uzhhorod that you loved so much?

Everything, you know, boys, young girls, boys, and it was beautiful country when the Czechs are ruling it. But once they got parts of Uzhhorod, then there was business, more business people was in the towns. The Jewish people mainly had big stores, all goods, everything. Like my uncle had a import export store.

Of groceries. Foods.

Yeah, but very-- food, everything. Food, bananas, oranges, figs, you know, everything. He had imports.

What was the name of his store?

It was-- my father's brother was, in Hungarian, Gyozo.

Gyozo.

Gyozo. So he had a store, like I told you, with imports.

So was it called Gyozo Imports, or was it called Weinberger Imports, or--

Yes, his store was Weinberger Imports. Yeah.

I see. OK, were there many automobiles in Uzhhorod?

Oh, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, sure. There was buses going from Uzhhorod to other sides of the country and then--

Were their cinemas?

Pardon me.

Were there cinemas? Movies? Were there movie houses?

Yeah, in Uzhhorod.

In Uzhhorod. Did you go to the movies?

Oh, yeah.

Do you remember any that you saw?

Oh, no. I don't. No, that was different times. You had to pay admission to go see a movie.

Now, when you were-- you were apprenticing for somebody at the bicycle shop.

Yeah.

How did you find this person? Who found him for you for you to apprentice there?

Who found it? I had my uncle in Uzhhorod, so he found it.

OK, who did you live with when you were in Uzhhorod.

I had to rent an apartment-- not an apartment, really. A room in an apartment.

Why didn't you live with your uncle?

No.

No?

No, he got married, and he had a business. He had two children, beautiful children.

What were their names?

One was Robert, and one was Eric.

Were they younger than you or older?

Oh, younger, much younger because he was the youngest one in the family with my father.

OK, so your father's the oldest, and Gyozo's the youngest.

He was the youngest, and there was a middle one. He got married and lived in Slovakia.

What was his name again, E something?

Isidore.

Isidore. Isidore, yeah. And did you see your uncle often when you were in Uzhhorod?

The one in Uzhhorod, yeah. I saw my uncle. Sure.

So did you go home on the weekends, or did you stay in Uzhhorod?

No, weekends I was going home to Koromla.

OK, by bike?

By bike, sure.

You had your own bike then?

Yeah.

And what was the person who you were an apprentice for? What was his name?

A Jewish name was Hirsch.

Hirsch.

Yeah.

And what kind of a boss was he? What kind of a boss was he? Was he easy to work for?

Yeah, because I liked the trade, so it was easy for me to do things. Was he good at teaching?

Yeah. All he had to do was show me one, and then I knew already how to do it because I was very handy.

How old were you when you started?

About 14, 15, or something like that.

Did you continue going to school?

I did, only to public school.

OK, so you still went to public school in Uzhhorod.

Yeah. No, I was going to trade school in Uzhhorod.

Oh, I see.

It was a trade school.

OK, and how would your day be? Would you be working most of the day and going in the evening, or would you go to school first and then work?

Between. I had work and I had school also. The trade school, I had to go to.

OK, so sometimes you would go-- you'd first start working, and then go to trade school, and then come back?

Yeah.

OK.

Well, I had supplies from home, like food and everything because I couldn't afford to eat in restaurants, so I got food from home. I went home for the weekend, and then I--

OK, we can cut for a second. Do you need a Kleenex? OK. So did you have friends in Uzhhorod? Did you make friends?

Oh, sure. I had a lot of friends.

Was your idea that you would move and live in the city?

I loved the city. I loved this city more than anything else because there were people my age, and younger ones, older ones, so I loved it. I love people. I always loved people.

So there were things to do.

Yeah.

Did you see your brother much?

Yeah, more or less, the older brother. The younger brother, only on weekends when I felt like going out to the country because there was-- the farm, where it was, was beautiful, beautiful. The whole village was surrounded with forest.

It sounds very pretty.

Oak trees. Yeah, it was so beautiful, especially the seasons were so beautiful. Yeah, you know, Shvues and Pesach, we had--

You celebrated the holidays.

Yeah. All the holidays were beautiful.

Were your parents, did they understand why you did not want to stay on the farm?

Yeah.

OK, one thing I didn't ask you about was your mother. What kind of personality did she have? If your father was outgoing and friendly, was she the same, or was she quieter?

No. No, she was very outspoken. She was more educated because my father was farming from the parents, from the grandparents, all the way down.

So she had seen more of the world than he had.

Oh, yeah. Well, he saw the-- because in World War I. And then he came back. He was working. And he didn't work on the farm, but he ran the farm. He had people employed.

He managed it all.

Yeah, he managed the farm.

Did either of them visit you when you were in Uzhhorod?

My--

Parents.

--parents.

Would they ever come to see you?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, every Thursday was a market in Uzhhorod. They would come in to get things, supplies.

How long would it take you to bicycle from Uzhhorod back to Koromla?

Oh, mostly depends if I wanted to go through the forest all the way Koromla to Uzhhorod, so it took an hour walking or on a bicycle. I couldn't use the bicycle because up and down hill, but I took a bicycle, took it on my shoulders, went up the hill, and down the hill no problem.

So it would be an hour to go from Uzhhorod?

It depends. With a bicycle, it was much shorter, but it was-- you have to go crossing from Koromla to Uzhhorod through the forest.

Was it a paved road, or a dirt road?

Paved road was only around the [? big run ?] going through different villages, but if I wanted to go through the forest straight, it was, with a bicycle, was a half hour. But walking would be an hour.

So it wasn't really far. It wasn't very far.

No. No, it wasn't too far, but it was very pleasant to go through from one small town to the big town through the forest. You [INAUDIBLE] going to see the daylight, just was [INAUDIBLE] to go through--

It sounds lovely.

--with a bicycle. Yeah.

Sounds really lovely.

Beautiful countryside. Beautiful. It was beautiful. The air was so fresh.

And where were you if you remember the summer of 1939? That is right before Germany attacks Poland and World War I begins-- World War II begins on September 1. Do you remember where you spent the summer of 1939?

1939? I was in Uzhhorod.

Still working, apprenticing in the bicycle shop.

Yeah.

Do you remember the day that the war started where you were? Do you remember learning about how the war started?



Yeah, it started at 8:00 in the morning. You work through 6 o'clock.

And did you-- how did you learn of it? How did you learn that there is a war now?

Oh, that was in the papers. You hear the thunders from the canons.

From the very first day?

Yeah.

Was Uzhhorod close to the Polish border?

No, not too close, but not far. The borders were surrounded like with the farm. Ours was the only farm around.

Were there radio reports? Did you hear it from the radio?

Only in the '40s.

OK, so when the war started, it wasn't that learned it from a radio broadcast?

No, I was in Uzhhorod when it started, the war. In 19-- Hungarian occupied part of Hungary-- I mean--

Czechoslovakia.

--Czechoslovakia.

When did they occupy it? Do you remember the month?

Uzhhorod?

Yeah, when was it occupied?

1939.

After the war starts or before?

Before. It started the same time that they started in Poland.

OK, so at the same-- and was it then in September or was it October? Do you remember that, when it came?

I know when they came in, the Hungarians occupied our town in 1939.

OK, was it fall?

Yeah, sure.

OK.

They came into Uzhhorod first, and then they surrounded the countryside.

What did it look like? Did you see them coming down the street?

Yeah, they came, marched in. Yeah, they were marching in from Hungary to Uzhhorod, and so by train, they came from another town to Uzhhorod.

How did your life change after they came?

They came-- terrible.

OK, what happened?

They took away businesses from the Jews. They took away uncle's business. They took away-- he had a beautiful store. He took away the papers. I don't know what you call it, [NON-ENGLISH].

You mean they took away the ownership papers?

Papers from the Jewish people.

OK, so discrimination started.

Oh, yeah, big discrimination when they came in. Jews weren't allowed to-- like they came in-- we had food, all kinds of food from the farm, prepared food for the supplies for the winter and for the summer. So they took away-- I don't know how to say it now.

They confiscated.

Confiscated. Yeah, like they came to our farm. They took away the wheat. They took away the flour, took away everything, and then they gave rations for the Jewish people.

And what about the non-Jewish people?

No, they were living very well because they got Jewish stores. They got Jewish bars, Jewish everything. Well, they had Jewish-- they take it away. I mean--

Confiscated.

--confiscated. Yeah, everything.

So you said that everybody in Koromla had gotten along with one another before.

Yeah, we do. Non-Jewish, Jewish.

Did that change after the Hungarians took over?

Yeah, sure, but their neighbors were very nice, our neighbors, because we treated them well, and they were working for us on the farm. So they were OK. As a matter of fact, they took away the flour from us and everything, and then they-- I got a telegram that I have to report certain places in Hungary. And that was [INAUDIBLE].

You got it in Uzhhorod, or you got it in Koromla, the telegram?

I was there in Koromla, and they gave me-- I got a telegram to go to report in part of Hungary. And then they took me away for slave labor--

Oh my.

--in Hungary.

So tell me, it was from the Hungarian authorities that you got that telegram?

Yeah, Hungarian authorities.

Do you remember if it was in Hungarian, the telegram?

At that time, they were in Hungary, yeah.

Did you already understand it?

Yeah. Yeah, sure. My parents knew Hungarian. I didn't know.

So how far was this place from Koromla that you had to go to?

Well, it was by train. I had to go to Hungary. And from there, they made us-- I'd say about 500, 600 young people, and they all have to report different places. Then they took us away to Romania.

Hang on a minute. When you left Koromla, did you go by yourself alone, or did-- was there like a gendarme who came and took you?

No.

It was alone.

I just got a telegram. I had to report certain place in Hungary.

OK, and did you see-- did you go from Koromla or Uzhhorod?

From Koromla, I went to Uzhhorod. There I took a train to wherever I had to report.

And this was in 1939 or--

Yeah.

In 1939. And when you left your home, did you say goodbye to your mother, and your father, and your brothers?

I said, but I didn't think that I'm not going to see them again because I went away for three years. And then when I came home, nobody was in the house no more. It was everything. The Russians came in to us, and they robbed everything. The Jewish homes, they robbed them. They took away everything from them.

OK, we'll come to that. Let's talk now about when you were taken to report. You go to report because you're told. You have this telegram. Then what happens? Once you get to this place to report, what do they do?

They send me away to part of Romania.

These are the Hungarian authorities.

The Hungarian authorities. And then they made up people-- like, we had, I think, 300 or 400 people, young men.

All Jewish?

Jewish. And they took us to Romania, and then we were working as slave labor.

Tell me about that.

Slave labor was get a group of people. Like, I think we were about 300, 350 young men, and they assigned us to different places. And I had to report there, and they took us away. I was three years in that slave labor.

What kind of work were you doing?

Everything. Cutting trees, making railroad tracks, rocks, crushing rocks.

That's hard work.

Everything was very hard work. And built roads for the Germans.

Did you ever see a German during this time, during those three years?

Not only Germans. Hungarian also.

But you saw there were Germans there too.

Part for the Germans. Part for the Hungarians. For the Hungarian Army, supplies for the war, and for us, mostly building roads for the Germans.

And how were you treated? How did the authorities treat these young men?

Not good.

Tell me about that.

Very hard labor. Very hard labor. Everything, like I said, crushing rocks, building road, building railroad tracks.

Did you get-- how were you fed? What kind of food did they give you?

Very meager food. Meager food. All kinds of food, whatever they chose. The soldiers-- they couldn't give to the soldiers, so they gave it to us. Gave us horse meat.

Horse meat.

I don't know what I was eating. As long as they gave us food, I was happy, very happy.

So does that mean you went hungry a lot?

Oh, yeah. Hungry. Very hungry. Didn't give much food, but you manage by stealing.

A train came in with supplies for the Germans. Normally, it was in paper bags. Some of us, when we got to a train with paper bags, it's was-- or potatoes, or food, anything, so we stole it. Right on the bottom of the legs, put on a rope, and put everything in their pants. Stealing food, which would have it when we came to the barracks, we should have something to eat.

Was anybody ever caught?

If you got caught, then God help you. They beat you up so that you-- you couldn't afford to get caught. Most of the time, you couldn't afford to get caught because they beat you up so that you can't sit and can't talk hardly.

But it means you've got very fat legs with all those potatoes in there.

Yeah, they'll put in anything. Anything we could get, we put it in the pants and told them there is another bag for the rest

of them. When they went to get their supplies, tell them which [INAUDIBLE] to go to, that there is open bag, then they steal.

And so what would-- did anybody of the authorities ever find an empty bag, an open bag?

We had to get-- finish the bag and then put it-- hide it in their pants. And then when we come out, we threw it away.

So it's as if it never was there.

No.

And did this-- this worked basically.

Yes, well, because we were very hungry, very hungry all the time.

Sounds horrible.

You know, we were young and hungry.

Did people get sick? Yeah?

Yeah, got sick, but most of us, we learned to survive. We support each other. Between us, everyone supported a friend, or two friends, or three friends, whatever you could get.

We worked in a potato factory drying potatoes, so we had to get a potato and peel it, then a group of people peeled the potatoes. And then I was doing boiling the potatoes. So what do you think I told the guys working in the kitchen boiling their potatoes?

If you could find a wire, keep it in your pants, and you can give it to me. And I will get it done, and put it on a wire, and boil the potato, then put it in the bag, hide it. And when we went and as we get to the barracks, then you had something, a potato [NON-ENGLISH], especially a baked potato.

So instead of a raw potato, you have a cooked potato.

Yeah. I put it on a wire, and I put it in the hot boiling water. And it cooked the potato, then I give it back to the people that they were peeling the potatoes.

Why did you need a wire for this?

To boil the potato.

So in other words, you couldn't just put in the potato and then take it out with a spoon?

No.

No? Was it a big, big, big--

Big barrel. Big barrel boiling. And that's where I put in the potato, and then they went out into cutting it up into potato chips and drying it out. Then you steal whatever you could steal mainly.

Well, it sounds-- within a place that sounds like hell, being in the kitchen and boiling the potatoes is not a bad place to be--

No.

--if you're in hell.

If you are in good health and strong enough. I was very fortunate I was strong because--

And was there danger that you would get caught if someone saw all those wires in the barrel?

No, we have a transport. Like, the ones that were peeling the potatoes, they'd put it on the wire. They send it to me with other potatoes, and I put it in, boiled them, then send them back. So we--

It's like getting-- you're being a bit like a short order cook.

Yeah.

You get the potatoes. You send them back to the person who sent them to you, and you don't get confused by this one's order or that one's order.

No.

Was it always the same number of potatoes?

Yeah.

What's it like everyone sends you one potato or two potatoes?

Oh, no. They put it on a wire, two, three, four, potatoes whatever they could hide. And they put it on [INAUDIBLE], send it to me. I boiled them, then I send them back with-- you know, came in a barrel, send them back do the guys who were peeling them. And then they hide it for us, and then when we came to the night to the barrack where we were staying, then I had potatoes.

Well, let me tell you, it sounds like you were a popular guy.

Yeah, because I was stronger than any other ones, so I was strong enough to do everything. Hard labor, everything, I did.

And nobody from the people who were watching you never could catch on?

No, never catch on because it was-- they didn't put it on top, put the raw potatoes on top. And they brought it over, then they send it back a boiled potato on a wire, the same wire. And then they put on new potatoes, and then send it back to me, and I put them in the boiling water. A lot of stealing. Otherwise, you were hungry like anything.

Did that bother you in the beginning that you were stealing?

No, didn't bother me. There's no conscious there. All you did was try to support my friends, and they did the same thing to me. They tried to support me.

It's a huge change from the world that you described.

Oh, yeah. Oh.

You know, you go from one world, where you have all the food, and all the-- and this beautiful food, and this beautiful environment.

The environment-- and then I went there. It's all slave labor. That was only slave labor.

How did it change you at that time as a young person?

I was lucky that I was strong. See, we came to a forest. We had to cut down trees, so for the railroad, building the railroad. So I had to cut the tree down from the root, then cut it in pieces.

That's hard work.

Hard work. Everything was hard. But some people were strong enough. Some people were suffering because they weren't strong enough.

Did people die? Were there young men who died?

Oh, yeah. They died, and they buried them. And that's it.

Were there others who got sick?

Sure. I think.

And what about-- did you see any violence against any of the slave laborers?

Yeah.

What kind would that be? What would happen?

If they find them guilty about anything, a little thing, they beat them up, and they watch them not to get caught again because if he gets caught again, they beat him like-- not only, but they used to-- I mean, if they caught someone, they would hang him by their hands until he passes out, then pour water on him, and revive him if they found someone that stole something.

So they would take the person's hands, tie them behind their back, and hang them by the hands.

By the hands.

So by the wrists or something.

Yeah, on a tree, like, you know?

That's painful.

By that time, he passed out. Then they poured water on him to revive him. And then that guy would never go again because, you know, you hang him by the hand on a tree. So it's--

The weight of his body.

Body, that's what make him pass out if they found him. But most of us tried to avoid everything to get caught.

How long did it take you to learn Hungarian?

Well, I was with them three years, so in three years, you learn a lot of language.

Yeah. And did they move you around from place to place?

Sure.

Was it always in Romania?

In Romania. The same, yeah, until the Russians were coming again. And the Germans were retreating, so they go and took us with them.

So here, I want to make sure I have my dates right. You get taken almost immediately when the war begins.

Yeah.

That's in September or the fall of 1939.

Yeah.

Three years from that is 1942, and the Germans are still winning. They start losing in 1943 and start retreating in 1944 in general.

Yeah.

So does that make it that you were in slave labor five years, not three years?

Three years.

Three years.

Three years.

So does this mean that you're talking about 1942?

Yeah, we started-- the Germans started retreating because they were part of Russia-- occupying part of Russia. Then the Russians beat them back, the Germans, that they had to retreat. Then they took us with those.

OK. I know that it's hard to remember dates, but from my understanding, the Germans start to lose the war after the Battle of Stalingrad.

Stalingrad, right.

And is it that after that battle that the Russians start taking that territory that you were in?

Back, yeah.

OK, did you ever hear or see any fighting during that time.

Russians when they were coming in beating back the Germans. Sure. They were shooting cannons around us.

When you were being taken back with them, under what kind of conditions was that? Were you walking?

Terrible. Walking.

You were walking.

Walking constantly, but sometimes we got assigned to taking care of horses. And horses I knew because we had a farm, so why do you think when we were going at night, I got on the horse, riding the horse [INAUDIBLE]? They didn't need me because they marching at night because during the day, they were shooting at us, the Russians.



And so during the day, where would you be? When it was daytime, would you be sleeping? Would you be--

No. No. Depends. If they were bombing the Russians, then we were hiding out in the-- you know, like in dig.

What kind of clothes were you wearing?

The same clothes that took me away with. Never changed clothes.

In three years?

Three years. Never change clothes. After a while, my shoes tore, and I was walking just with rags around our legs in the winter.

Oh my. And did you get frostbite?

Oh, yeah, I have frozen fingers, and my legs.

So frozen toes.

Toes. Frozen toes.

Were they then later amputated?

No.

No. No, just luckily we were young, so-- we all was young, my age.

I'm going to go back to a question I asked before. Before all of this happened and you're still an apprentice in the bicycle shop, I asked you to describe a little bit about your parents' personalities, what they were like. How would you have described yourself? What were you like before the war started?

Before the war started, I was not in the city. I was on the farm because there was food on the farm. In the city, there was no food, so I went back to our farm. But then we haven't got-- didn't have the food because they took away the food from the Jewish people and gave them rations.

So I'll rephrase this a little bit. Would you say that it was-- would you say that you were an innocent young man before the war started, that you were someone who trusted in the world, or--

Yeah. No, I trust.

Yeah, how would you describe your own personality?

Well, I was always not like that I didn't know how to help myself. I was strong enough, young enough that I would always take care of myself.

Even before the war.

Even before the war, yeah.

And you said earlier that you liked people, that you-- that's one of the reasons you liked Uzhhorod is that there were a lot of people around.

Yeah, a lot of young people like my age.

And after you had been through such an experience as you went through, did that change you?

Sure.

In what way?

I got more self-educated, you know, what's good for me, what's not good for me. That's what. I just learned to survive, really. That's what I had to learn how to survive.

Did that mean that you also didn't like people as much as you had before?

Oh, yeah, but not people, my friends. We were still close friends, which tried to help each other.

Did that make a big difference that you had someone in this circumstance that you could trust?

Yeah, sure. I could trust my friends, especially. I could trust. They trusted me, and I trusted them. Very close.

So it wasn't that you-- even during this time, you weren't completely alone. Can I make that assumption?

Yeah, I wasn't alone because I was the same age people with, so-- and they was the same situation. The only thing I had more than any one, I was young and strong, very strong.

That makes such a difference.

Oh, yeah. Sure.

Anything they told me to do, I did it to my best ability. I never got hit because I was so [? ready ?] not to get hit. Whatever they told me to do, I did it to the best ability I had.

OK, a way of surviving.

That's how I survived, yeah. I survived three years in slave labor. Then I tried to run away from the Germans.

So let's go back to where you were on the road, and you are taking care of the horses. And sometimes in the middle of the night, you ride the horses. But you're not seen because it's nighttime.

Because of nighttime. Yeah, dark.

So then what happens after that? How long does this take that you're part of this group? And was it Hungarians or was it Germans who were watching you?

Hungarian. Part of it Hungarian. Part German.

OK.

Yeah.

Can we stop for a second? So it was both Hungarians and Germans--

Germans.

--who were watching you.

Yeah.

And how did things progress? I mean, do you know about how long you were on the road, how long you were walking?

Oh, yeah, it was a long walk from Romania all the way to Hungary. Then we find out, we weren't very far in Hungary already, that they were going to take us to Germany. The railroad station was not too far, so they were going to take us to the railroad station and ship us for Germany or wherever they were doing or planning for us.

Did you have any idea what that could be?

Yeah, I was worried about it, and I decided with my friends-- I says, we have no future here. We have to escape.

At that point, had you heard about the murder of Jews? Had you heard about Auschwitz?

We heard about it but very vaguely. We didn't know just-- when we were in Hungary, they somehow got to us that they going to take us to Germany. Then I get with my friends, and we escaped.

And how did you do that?

When the cattle was coming home in the village from grazing, ran between the cattle hiding out, and then running into a yard, a farm, and hiding out there for a while. But then the farmer remembered because he was [? sure ?] that at night there is action in this stables.

Ah, so he heard you in the barn.

Yeah, so he gave me- he says Hungarian to us. If they catch me, you are hiding out here, they going to hang me, and they're going to hang you too. You better get out of here. So we had to escape from there.

How did you do that? What did you do then?

Just tried-- when the Germans were retreating in Hungary-- Hungarians, between them, hiding out until the next village, so we could get escape, so we escaped--

The second time.

--the second time, and the third time, and the fourth time. I constantly was escaping from them because I didn't want to go to Germany.

Well, when you escape, but then you go back, or you're caught? What happens that it makes--

I didn't get caught.

So it's sort of you run away. But then you find you can't go further, and you rejoin the group.

Yeah, for a while, just to hide out a little bit. And then I then escaped again. I escaped about three or four times during that time.

OK, tell me about the last time, the final time when you really escape and don't go back.

Yeah, because I met someone from our town.

From Koromla.

Koromla. A young man, he was retreating also, so we decided to escape.

Do you know his name?

Yeah, Alexander. He's not alive no more. He left-- I left, came to the United States, and he remained in Czechoslovakia. Then, unfortunately, he died.

So you met someone from Koromla, and you decide to escape together.

Yeah.

What do you do?

I escaped. I escaped when we were in a village. Also between cattle, we were hiding out until we got to a yard that you could escape to. So we escaped, and then we tried to get back to Hungary where I was coming from.

From that part that now was Uzhhorod--

Yeah, was waiting to go to Uzhhorod, both of us.

How did you do it?

Escaped. Took chances. Took chances all the time until we got to Uzhhorod.

Well, from the time you finally escaped the final time to the time you get to Uzhhorod, how much time was that?

Oh, maybe months. I don't know.

And you were still wearing the same clothes?

Same clothes.

And how did you eat?

Whatever we could find on the farm. Like the cabbage, I grew up with a cabbage. We took off the head from the cabbage and the roots from the cabbage, picked it up, tried to cut off pieces, and eat it.

And did farmers ever see you, those places where you were going from, or did you-- or did they not see you?

Did not see. Had to hide out mainly at night. I mean, we really have to go to towards Uzhhorod until we got--

Now when you were traveling at night, were there other people who were on the roads at night?

No, only two of us.

Just the two of you.

We were watching out for each other and eating whatever we could eat on the road.

And what month was this? About what time of year?

In the fall.

So this might have been the fall of '44 or the fall of '43.

Yeah, '44. '43, '44. Yeah.

OK, and so you get to Uzhhorod after about a month of this.

Yeah.

And where do you go when you get to Uzhhorod?

I went to see if there is any Jewish families in Uzhhorod. So there was some young people that got also to Uzhhorod so they went and had businesses, different businesses, young Jewish boys.

And were there as many Jewish people as there had been before?

No. Not even a third of people that were there. Jewish people, I mean.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm talking about that. What had happened to the others?

They died in concentration camps and whatever.

So when you get there, is this after Germany had taken over Hungary because they took over Hungary in March 1944?

Yeah.

And then the deportation of Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz started.

Yeah, they started in 1943, '44.

And you get there in the fall. So what do these other young Jewish people tell you of what had gone on?

Well, people are here in concentration camps. They're trying to get back to town.

Did you hear now about all those concentration camps or not yet?

Yeah, sure. Well, we heard in Hungary when we were retreating that Germany took Jewish people to the concentration camps. So when I got to Uzhhorod, there was not too many-- just young people or very little, and they started businesses like black marketing.

Were the Russians already in control?

Yeah, and part of Uzhhorod. Yeah.

OK, so when you get back there, it is already safe from Germans and safe from Hungarians?

Yeah.

Is that the case?

Yeah. It's not really safe from the Hungarians, but there was no concentration camp after the war.

OK, so you get back to Uzhhorod after the war ends or before the war ends?

I got back before the war ends.

OK.

Yeah, was wasn't finished yet. They were still fighting, the Russians, the Germans.

OK, so tell me, did you find your brother, William?

He found me because I was there already for about three months before he came back from the concentration camp, and then I was very disappointed that my younger brother didn't survive.

So did he tell you what happened to the rest of the family?

Yeah, they were in the concentration camp, and my brother got shot.

How?

It was a death march by the-- I mean, the Germans.

So had your brother been in Auschwitz?

Yeah.

The younger one, Alexander?

Yeah, and the older one also, but he was freed by the Russians in Poland because he was in a contraction camp.

And did your brothers stay together when they were in Auschwitz, or were they separated?

They separated them because my older brother was an electrician, so he was working for the Germans. They were making, in tunnels, light because he was an electrician. And my younger brother, they said that he got killed on the death march when they were marching.

Was your older brother with him on the death march?

No.

No. How did he find out?

When he came back from the concentration camp. When he came back, I said, where is my younger brother because I know he says he didn't get back. He got killed. He knew someone that was with him, and he got killed on the death march.

And what happened to your parents?

They never came back. Uncles, nieces, everything. Nobody came back. From my father's side, nobody came back. My mother's side, two brothers were in America, so they helped us to come to America.

So let's go-- when did you go back to Koromla. After you came to Uzhhorod, did you go to Koromla?

Yeah.

What did you find there?

Empty house. Not a door. Not a window. Nothing.

Animals? Any animals?

No, nothing at all from the farm. Nothing at all. They all took it away, the non-Jews.

So the neighbors.

Yeah, they took away everything. The Russians also took part of it. The Russians took-- that's what they told us, that the Russians finished the house, took away all of the house.

Oh my. And was anybody working the land? Was anybody working on the fields farming?

Yeah, they were working in the farm. The government took it over.

I see. So did you stay there in Koromla?

No, I hated it to come back. Empty house, no windows, no doors, nothing. So I just went back to Uzhhorod.

And where were you when the war ended?

I was in Uzhhorod.

Do you remember the day you remember hearing about the war being over?

Yeah, because they wanted me to join the Czech army, but I didn't want to go. I don't want to have anyone being over me in charge of me, so I never--

Was it now part of Czechoslovakia again?

Yeah.

So the Hungarians were gone?

Yeah.

OK.

And the Russians came over.

And what was that like when the Russians came in?

They took away everything. The whole farm was emptied. No horses. No cows. No nothing. Everything was gone.

And how did life in Uzhhorod change with Russians there?

It changed because it robbed. Every store was robbed, When the Russian army came in, they robbed all the Jewish stores, so there was nothing left. When they came back from the concentration camps, they found the same thing like I did find, nothing, empty houses.

And how did you live then in Uzhhorod? How did you live?

Black marketing.

What did you do?

Whatever. Of course, in the market for if I needed cigarettes, I had to go to some town where they had cigarette--

making cigarettes. I bought the cigarettes, brought them to Uzhhorod, sell them. Then I heard about there is some wine that you could buy and sell it in Uzhhorod. So me and my friend, we went to where you get wine and bring it to Uzhhorod and sell it. And then buy Russian money, change it to dollars.

Were you able to change it to dollars?

Yeah, we could always do something between young people, business people.

Was there a danger of you getting caught?

Sure.

Did you ever get caught?

No, I tried to avoid not to get caught. Yes, I did get caught in Uzhhorod delivering cigarettes from one town to another. They took away the cigarettes from me, but they-- I asked them, leave me alone. That's all I have. It's nothing else. I was telling them that where I was so they didn't bother me. But then I was caught with cigarettes, the militia, that was the Hungarian like a--

Like a militia?

A militia, yes. It was a Russian militia.

It was Russian militia. OK.

And they were taking me to prison because I had the cigarettes on black market. So but I saw a Hungarian man, and I told him Hungarian that see my brother. He knows the police there, the captain of the police in Uzhhorod. So he told them where I am, and there they took me. So he sent over police and got me out of the prison.

Oh, I see, so your brother had some connections.

Yeah, with the prison-- I mean, with the police.

Now did you intend to stay in Uzhhorod?

Yeah.

OK, what made you change your mind not to stay?

Well, maybe because I found out that an uncle of mine was in the Czech Legion, and he came back. So he was-- like had stars, you know? He was promoted in the Russian army, but then he got shot by the Russians-- I mean the Germans, not the Russians. And he told me about it.

So was he on your mother's side of the family or your father's?

Mother's side. My father's side, nobody survived.

So this is from the cattle dealer family.

Yeah.

So what was this uncle's name?

My uncle's name was Yankel.



Young?

Yankel.

Yankel. Yankel, and he had been in the Czech Legion. Did he come to Uzhhorod?

He came to Uzhhorod, but he had some kind of stars from the Russians because he got shot. I think he got shot off.

OK, so that meant that he had some power, some clout, some advice.

Yeah.

In what way?

Because he was a soldier, so he had clout.

So what did he advise you to do?

Do what I was doing, black marketing, because that's the only way to make a living. So when my brother came back, so it was easier for me because he was--

Can we cut for a second?

Rolling.

OK, so we had a little break, and your wife reminded me of one episode that I'd like to ask you about. When you go back to Koromla after you-- the first time and you see your empty house with no windows and no doors, you were still wearing the clothes that you had--

For three years.

--for three years. And one of your neighbors saw you.

Yeah.

What did he do? What happened then?

He was a childhood friend, my next door neighbor, a non-Jew. So my brother, when he was leaving, they were taking him to the concentration camp. He says, just in case someone comes back or I'll come back, please, this is my clothes. Hide it for me, and for whoever will come back will get it. So when I came back-- and I couldn't go into his house because I was full of lice because I was three years in the same clothes.

Did he invite you into his house?

Yeah, but I--

And you said no.

I said, I can't go because I'm not clean enough. So he went into the house. He brought out some kind of liquid. I don't know what. He pour it all over me to keep me clean, put me in a barrel of hot water in that stable, not in the house. I wouldn't go into the house.

Was this the first time you had had a bath in three years? Was this the first time you had a bath in all that time?

Yeah. All that time.

Yeah, I can't imagine what that feels like. I can't imagine it.

I was very lucky always that before I escaped, my friends that I knew very well is not far from us. So he says, I'm going to-- I have a horse and supplies. I have new boots, soldier boots, strong. I want to get you because I see you wearing only rags on my feet. So why do you think I went that night to his horse and [INAUDIBLE]? He gave me a pair of boots.

That's huge.

And that saved my life. The rest of the--

And the feet fit? The boots fit?

They had to fit.

They had to fit, yeah.

Had to fit. I didn't look at the size exactly. But as long as I could put on and take off the rags and put on shoes.

So that was the only thing that changed is that you had the same clothes but these boots.

Boots, yeah.

And when-- once you were in that barn, and took that bath, and had the lice-- was deloused, then what happened?

Then a barrel of water, hot water, and I-- he put me in the water. He cleaned me off first with the liquid, but he deliced me, then put me in a barrel of warm water, and washed me off, and then gave me my brother's clothes, whatever he had left.

Was this Alexander or William?

William. Alexander never came back. He got killed on the death march.

But whose clothes was it?

My brother, older brother.

William's clothes.

William's clothes.

OK.

So he gave me that, and then other people also came in that they had some of us clothes. So he put it--

So did-- well, first of all, do you remember this neighbor's name?

My neighbor's name?

Yeah.

Yeah, it was-- the second name was Mikhael.

Mikhael?

Mikhael.

Mikhael.

Mikhael.

OK.

And the second name was Scotch.

Scotch.

Yeah.

OK, and he was not Jewish.

No. No. My best friends, we grew up together, and he came to our house. When we had something going on like Saturday, we had to buy bread. They didn't have white bread. They had only black bread.

That's a difference. White bread was a treat.

Yeah.

And he gave me everything. He changed my life.

Really?

And then I went into the house, gave me a big meal, the first meal that I had in years that was edible. And didn't care if it's kosher or not kosher. I ate everything.

And the other neighbors, you say, had they-- did you feel that some of your former neighbors had taken some of your family's things?

Yeah, sure. But the ones that were honest, the ones that we knew for years, they gave us back. When my brother came back from the concentration camp, they gave him whatever they had. They gave us to help ourselves together because we had very good neighbors. They were another farm workers. Because we had a big farm and we had wheat, we supplied half of the farmers with wheat.

You know, it makes such a difference when you can still have this faith in your neighbors and have that kind of experience.

Oh, yeah. They were life savers some of them. Life savers.

So let's go back now to when your uncle, who was decorated for his war wound, comes. What effect did his visit have on you?

Well, it was like someone that I really knew because it was my brother's-- my mother's brother.

Yeah.

So it was a big effect on me also because he tried to help me also because he was in uniform. He could get anything from the army.

Oh, so he was able to help you with some supplies?

Supplies, yeah.

Did there come a point when you wanted to leave Uzhhorod?

Yeah, because when my aunt came back, she met her brother, American soldier, in Prague.

OK, this aunt's name, what was her name?

Esther.

And she was your mother's sister?

My mother's youngest sister.

And where has she been taken, Esther?

To concentration camps, and she survived. She was a cook in the concentration camp, so she had more--

Access to food.

Yeah, so she survived with a cousin-- two cousins. They survived, and they came home to Uzhhorod. So when they were in Uzhhorod, they were waiting. Some people will come back from the concentration camp.

Can we cut for a second? So your Aunt Esther comes back, and she comes back to Uzhhorod.

Yeah.

And does she then say that you want to go to Prague, or does she want to go to Prague?

No, she was in Prague and getting back to Uzhhorod. So they went by train from Prague to Uzhhorod. And then they met my brother and me. We were there a while already. And then she said she spoke to her brother in American army, and she send us-- they send us papers because she knew from my uncle because he was a soldier. She went to Prague. I don't know exactly how it was, but he told the one American soldier that we are alive in Uzhhorod, so send papers where ever they could get papers because I had two uncles in America.

OK, I want to see if I understand the story right. Your Aunt Esther survives the camps.

Yeah.

She comes back to Prague, and from Prague to Uzhhorod.

Yeah.

And her brother, Yankel, is the one who is decorated in the Czech army.

Yeah, Czech army.

OK.

And the other one, brother, was American soldier.

OK, did that-- did she meet the American soldier or not? Who was the brother?

Prague.

In Prague.

I don't know exactly how it happened or what was in Prague.

From what I understood is that in Prague, she met an American soldier, but it was not her brother.

The brother.

Hang on a second. Can we cut the camera? Sylvia, what was it? OK, so what I understand-- Sylvia, who is your relative, just said is that Esther, your aunt, was her mother.

Correct.

And Esther met her brother, Uncle Yankel, at the steps of the Red Cross in Prague and learned that you had survived and a few other people had survived. And then she writes a letter to her other brothers, who are in the United States, and she finds an American soldier in Prague, who is not related to you, and gives him that letter, and asks that he send it to your relatives in the United States.

United States, yeah.

Did I get the story right?

An uncle of mine.

OK. And so she asked that this letter be sent to an uncle of yours--

Yeah.

--who had been in the US Army, and had been in Europe, but had not met her while he was there.

I don't know all the details. I don't know.

OK. So at any rate, the connection is made.

Yeah.

And what happens after that letter reaches your American uncle?

They make affidavits for the whole-- whoever survived.

OK.

So we came to United States in 1946.

That's pretty early.

Yeah, because we had affidavits to come.

So tell me, did the affidavits come to you were in Uzhhorod, or had you already left Uzhhorod?

No, we left Uzhhorod already because we were planning to come to America.

So where did you go, to Prague?

We went to Prague, and then we went to the Sudeten.

OK, Sudetenland.

Yeah.

--which is close by in the region.

Not too far from Prague.

And is Uzhhorod far from Prague?

Yeah.

About how long does it take to get there?

Oh, Uzhhorod from Prague was-- I remember going from Uzhhorod to Prague took a day and a night by train.

Wow. That's a long time.

Yeah.

And how long did you stay in Prague?

Not too long because my brother got a farm in Russia-- I mean, a German farm. The house-- took away a house from a German. And he lived there in the Sudeten. It's Cheb. It's a town.

It's called Chleb?

Cheb.

OK, and that's where you went to stay.

He stayed. I didn't stay.

So your brother never came to the United States?

I wanted to come, but I didn't stay. I tried still to make black market because that's the only way to make some money.

And when did the affidavits come?

In 1945. 1946, in October, we came to United States.

Was it with your Aunt Esther, or did you come by yourself?

No, I came by myself. I didn't want to go without my brother and his wife, so I wanted to come to America together. But then I got affidavit to go, so I waited for my brother. Then he got the affidavit to come, and he had to go with his wife.

And I suppose to go in the Czech Legion as a soldier. And I was supposed to go in October, but in September, we left Prague. I've been in the Sudeten. But we left, and we came to Prague. We left from Prague, We were coming to the United States.

From Prague, where did you go to get the boat?

Sweden.

To Sweden?

Yeah. I traveled by bus from Prague to through the Sudeten to Germany, and from Germany, I went to Denmark. And from Denmark, we had a boat ride to the United States.

Do you remember the name of the boat?

I think it was [INAUDIBLE]. It was a big boat.

Were there many refugees on it?

Yeah, but we got affidavit, and my uncle's paid for the trip for us each. My brother had \$1,300, and I had to pay \$650 for the boat.

So that is your uncle sent you the money to pay for the boat?

Pay boat, yeah.

OK.

And he requested the money back. So as soon as we got the money, paid, saved up, then--

Paid him back.

Yeah, gave him back the money.

So tell me, when you got to the United States, where did you land?

In New York.

OK, were you met by your uncles?

Yeah. He was in New Jersey. Both of them from New Jersey, so they picked us up at the boat. They took us to their house in New Jersey. We stayed there a weekend only, then they wanted us to go back to New York because there was no opportunity to do anything. So I did whatever I could do.

What was your first job?

I was doing tailoring like a sewing kind of machine and doing everything. Whatever I could do, I could do, so I worked all the time.

Did you ever go back to school?

In the United States, only for night school a little bit. That's all. I didn't have a chance because I had to work.

Did you meet your wife in the United States?

Yeah.

How did you meet her?

She was-- my mother-in-law, she rest in peace, she was, to me, like a mother. And we met my wife when she was 16 years old, and she asked me, what are you doing for the weekend? So I says, I go to the beach with my friends. Would you mind to take my two little girls, Lizzie, my wife, and my sister-in-law, to take her to the beach also because they finish school for the summer. So I said, sure, I'll take them. So took them to the beach.

And that's how you met.

No, I met her in the house.

So you rented a room or an apartment in the same house?

The same house where they were, yeah.

Oh, OK.

We were there before. I was there living with my brother, and then her mother came also to the same building.

Where was this building located?

In New York on the East Side.

On the East Side.

Cannon Street. 31 Cannon Street.

31 Cannon Street.

Yeah, a walk up on the second floor, third floor. I don't know. But we had an apartment.

Fourth floor? OK. So tell me--

She was on the fourth floor. I was on the third floor.

Did you ever go back to Europe? Did you ever go back to Hungary?

I couldn't go back. I had very bad memories from there, so I didn't want to face them no more. I didn't want to go back, and I was scared that if I go back, I probably couldn't get back so soon. So I was staying--

That's a reasonable fear, a very reasonable fear. Well, you know, we've come to the end of our interview, and I want to thank you for it.

Oh, it's a pleasure.

Is there any final thought that you would like to leave with us about all that you went through for your children, for your grandchildren, for anybody?

Until I came United States, and then I met Lizzie's mother, she was like an angel, like a second mother to me. So I really appreciate everything. She tried to be a good mother, but she-- unfortunately, she had to work seven days a week, so--



It wasn't easy, was it?

No. Nobody had it easy when we came here. We have to earn money right away to survive. Not easy at all.

First of all, money was very scarce at that time, 1946. A dollar still was a dollar, not like now. It was very hard, but we tried hard, all of us. The young survivors, we tried to make a living. Whatever we could do, we did. Never refused a job.

Did you tell your children about what happened to you?

My children, we didn't want to discuss our lives with the children because it was too hardship. We didn't want them to know about hardship. I tried to work seven days a week also just to survive.

Well, I appreciate that you have told it to us today. I appreciate that you have shared your story with us today. Thank you.

My wife's mother, like an angel, she was, to me especially. She was like a mother to me. Then when we got to know each other better, she says, you're my son-in-law. I was getting married. She says, you're not my son-in-law. You are my son.

Oh.

So I had a mother. I had a mother. I didn't have no one, really, because only my brother survived, so it wasn't easy.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

OK. I worked myself up that I was-- thank God I'm here 40 years in this building paying rent, and now I own the house-- my apartment-- not a house, my apartment. We [INAUDIBLE] our apartment, and since I married, we never have bad feelings about us never.

What a lovely tribute. What a lovely tribute.

That's my life.

And thank you for sharing it.

OK, thank you. Thank you for listening. I wish I could express myself better, but--

You did beautifully.

--that's the best thing I could do.

You did absolutely beautifully.

Thank you. And I will say then with this, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Nathan Weinberger on June 23, 2018 in Lawrence, New York.

OK, thank you.