

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Robert Budway. Today is September 1, 2020. And we are going to pick up where we left off yesterday. And Mr. Budway, please take it forward.

In school year 1941 and '42-- in '41 beginning in September, that particular time, and in June 1942 it was the most eventful period of time for-- in my own personal life and including my friends and including my teachers and including the entire town of Plánice, where we were going to school. I will briefly describe what it was going to school. I was, at that particular time, the only pupil going from Těchonice and-- or the village of Velenovy, where my friend Václav was already living for last two years.

[INAUDIBLE] [? by ?] and we usually joined together in the village of Zborovy and continued to walk about one hour to our school. And we walk mostly on foot because it was rare that a young guy would have bicycle those days. And so that was our connecting. Every day we spent at least a couple hours together.

When we that morning enter Plánice, where our high school was located, and you entered the main square, it might have been more than dozen of us youngster, mostly between age 12 and 14 or 15. We may have been, as every youngster group, a little noisy and a little boisterous. But we noticed at the end of the square a family which we knew was Jewish because by that time the yellow star of any member of Jewish family was highly visible in Plánice. We knew already a great deal of what was happening, too.

So this-- excuse me to interrupt just for a second. You're saying this is a particular day that you go to school, you walk to school with your friend Václav. Do you know about what month it was, whether it was fall or spring?

It was the spring. And it's important because that would be the year, in May-- it was something in March. And then it's May there would be the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, who came-- who was acting protector who came with the Final Solution aim, as everybody know in history. We did not know that. But that is the important period of time when everything suddenly began to move fast. And everybody was affected by it one way or other.

And Václav-- this Jewish family was the first sign of it. And Václav was that very same day also affected by it. That is the day-- I estimate it must have been in March.

So that's two months before Heydrich's assassination.

More or less, yes. Can I continue?

Mm-hmm. Please.

We just were quite suddenly-- we start in to whispering. And it was first time I realized that I had already been going to school for two years, I never saw Jewish children. But in this particular case I saw that family. I think it was a family of five or six. There were children there, too. And they too have a star. That was the first time I saw Jewish children in that town with stars.

And there was a-- also, realization that there were native [INAUDIBLE] students in that and they never mentioned anybody, any child, any Jewish child. Neither did I saw any in classroom in the school.

So Václav didn't wear a star.

I beg your pardon?

Václav Florian did not wear a star.

No, he did not.

And his mother Jula did not wear a star.

That is interesting thinking in what was going through at least my mind, because I knew intimately and closely Václav and his family. Not everybody in that town or in Václav classroom knew that Václav is from mixed marriage. Neither did we talk about this thing.

And I have already, in my previous talk, mentioned how isolated certain villages were. They were not directly, every day affected by the new rules and regulations, which was much more visible in small town where all of the-- where there were more a different kind of-- there were already a bureaucracy in small town. And obviously, they would carry on with their job also, enacting all these rules and regulations which was coming on us so fast. Even we children just simply gave up to follow all of it.

In Plánice-- excuse me. In Plánice was there a German presence? Were there any German soldiers?

Would you just repeat it again?

Yeah. In Plánice where you went to school, was there a German presence?

Germans were not present. This is what you're asking?

Yes. I mean, as far as the occupying authorities.

No. There was a-- there was a gendarme who declared himself as a German Volksdeutsche. He was there previously, during First Republic and so on. Suddenly-- his name was Oberhell. And that will be very important to know in this talk, too. I take a note of it.

Mr. Oberhell was a-- served in some capacity as a town gendarme. He wore, from time to time, a uniform. And his wife was Czech. His name, obviously, Oberhell, was German.

But of course, he must have lived in this town in the family for many, many years because his daughter also went to school in that high school. But at this particular day when I'm describing, she was no longer in high school. She already was in German high school in entirely different town, Klatovy.

That is a footnote, but I clear up, simply, a few things about Oberhell. I did not personally talk-- ever talk to him, encounter him. I only from time to time saw him in uniform. It was a protectorate type of uniform. It was not a German uniform.

I see.

But he was carry on, of course, certain duties there. And those duties I cannot today describe and would not know. But I know that his wife would play important part in a disaster which came few months later on, after Heydrich's assassination. But I don't want to get ahead. I would like to be a little bit chronological of what happened to Václav Florian.

Sure. Sure.

So I go back to Václav Florian.

Before you do-- excuse me. Before you do, I want to make sure I understood Mr. Oberhaus' name. Is it O-B-E-R-H-A-U-S? Oberhaus?

Yeah, I-- Ober, yeah, like German, O-B-E-R. And I don't know that "hell," Oberhell, but I believe it's H-E-L-L.

So it wasn't Oberhaus, it was Oberhell, H-- yeah.

He lived, definitely lived in quite a big house at the beginning of the town, because I would see him early in the morning-- not only, but most of us would see him either getting out-- and I believe he has this job as a town gendarme probably for many years, because the town did have a city hall. And in the city hall, I think, was some small court which took, usually, care of small cases. And because people from the villages, from

town to town-- I know they had to go to Plánice, to the court.

So there was a court there. But it must have been very-- court which dealt with small cases. And it did have a city jail. It probably was-- I never saw the jail, but I knew where it was. And it was up within the city hall, which was rather architecturally not important-- an important building, where I know occasionally is even someone from villages would spend a day or few days. So that was probably Mr. Oberhell's job.

And of course, Mr. Oberhell declaring himself as Volksdeutsche-- that set him apart during occupation, that you were on guard to be very careful what you say and how you behave, because Mr. Oberhell was probably not as mean and dangerous as he looked, but it was his wife who, later on, I learned-- who was-- who caused a great tragedy in that town. But again, that is not part of what I want to say what happened this particular day walking to school.

OK. Let's go back to that.

Now, but we are getting in at school. Our school began already 8 o'clock-- so very early. This, what I'm describing, must have happened between 7:00 and 8:00. We already knew that this group, this family is not the first one who was ready for deportation. But this was the first one we saw in such early days. And this, for me, was the first time I saw children with the star.

And we heard, of course, in Czech that they were getting ready for so-called [NON-ENGLISH], which I understand in English would be assembly point. Where that assembly point was I wouldn't know because that early morning there were a few people out on town who talked to this family. I know that they were upset. I saw tears. But we were quiet and didn't say much to each other.

I see.

And we went in classroom and we began our school day. And usually at 10 o'clock we would have a recess. And that recess would be done in the building because we didn't have a playground. There was only a garden. And it was a building which was built at the end of 19th century, with high ceiling, big walls.

So we would have recess usually 10 minutes before 10 o'clock. And we would be walking those halls, quite orderly manner of boys on one side, girls on the other side, sort of circular way. And then we would talk.

But this particular day when we had the recess, suddenly two friends of Václav Florian run to me because they knew that I was very close to him. And they excitingly and upsetly tell-- report to me that Václav was taken suddenly out of the classroom and that it was the director of the school who himself came to the classroom.

Oh, wow.

And-- the director of the school.

Yeah.

And talked to this group to their teacher. The teacher happened to be Václav's homeroom teacher. And Václav was fortunate-- his homeroom teacher actually taught Václav already in elementary school in Velenov. So Václav and the teacher were acquainted to each other. And Václav felt comfortable with the teacher. And that teacher is going to be playing important part in this story, too.

And apparently the teacher instructed Václav to take everything what he has around his desk, which was unusual. We didn't have much, but it was unusual request. And everything was carried out of where the director and teachers together out they took Václav out of the classroom. This is what was reported to me by the students during my recess.

And then teacher quickly appoint somebody to take care of the classroom. And then, when teacher come back-- it took some time before the teacher came back. That's what they tell me. He told them discreetly and

with-- exactly with some great discomfort what happened, that Václav will not be coming back.

Oh, wow.

And he told them that Václav has left school and is on his way home. And that is what caused me the turmoil. This is what have, I believe, affected me more than some of Václav's close classmate, because I knew him too much. And I felt it was a great deal of humiliation to suddenly walk out of the building alone. And he had to walk two hours alone back home.

And I suddenly was aware with some anger. In fact, I feel sometimes this anger. But it was anger. And I almost felt-- and I took the anger on the teacher and the director. But it was not-- anger not where I yell or scream. It was inside me. I felt, at that age, that directors and-- particularly director and the teacher had some power, some-- that they can make decision and that this was really uncalled for. I'm now really emotional. I'm sorry.

That's OK. That's OK.

And so I was angry. Years later on I find out that my anger was displaced because both the director and the teacher did more than I had ever dreamed they would do. But at that moment I was angry. And I was angry, and I did felt very badly about what Václav had to go through. And I say to myself, I will visit him in his village between-- soon as I will have time to do.

So I must admit I didn't do that, because there were other things which was happening. So I-- was the last time I have saw Václav. That was the last time I have saw him for many, many years.

Really? That day that you went to school together.

For many, many years.

So this--

Together, yes. We met many years later. But to finish the day is that Václav was going home. And of course, his mother already was apparently also at home, ready to actually be taken away. That I only heard through the grapevine talk which takes from village to village-- takes a few days to get this news. And that was also the day, apparently, his mother was taken away, but not his father.

And what about him? Was he taken away that day?

Václav was still in the village. And he would be there for the rest of the war. But he would be there and he would not be carrying, apparently, star because I-- he never mentioned that to me.

But he has younger brother. His younger brother was in elementary school in the village. So they were two boys suddenly without their mother. But their father was with them.

Then I have learned that few weeks later the father was taken away. But by that time they already knew that the mother was going in Terezin. But they didn't-- but it was a different-- the father, he was in some place I don't recall, know the name of the place. But it was in central part of Bohemia. And he was in the labor camp. Labor camp and concentration camp were two different things, because I can speak of labor camp because eventually I would end, myself, in labor camp. But there were differences between concentration camp and labor camp.

So they could communicate more with him. But he could not come home. And they did not see their father from that day, 1942, which was probably in March.

Yes.

They did not see him until 1945, in the middle of May.

So their father survived.

Father survived. They would also see-- the mother survived, too. She would come about few weeks later. So by 1945, at the end of May, family was reunited.

Now, Václav--

That I know. I did not-- that I know very well because I met Mrs. Florian, Václav's mother. I met her because she come visit my mother. But I am too much ahead of them. I just want to know that I was misplaced in my anger against teacher--

So tell me how--

--because Václav--

I have a couple of questions at this point. Václav and his brother, then, stay in the village. But both parents are taken away.

Yes.

Does that mean they go into hiding, or they live normally like they had before?

No, they're not going to be hiding. Václav parental-- the grandfather, his father's parents, were in the village. So they took over the care of the boys.

I see.

They were taken of the-- here's another word which we did not know. Their Aryan grandparents took care of them. And that was another word which we did not understand [INAUDIBLE] the language, because words like antisemitism, Aryan-- these were-- are words which we did not fully understand. But anyway, Václav was under the care of his grandparents and spent the rest of the time in that village.

So tell me, why didn't you see him? Why was it that you didn't reconnect with him after he had left school and ended up staying?

That is my trouble. I get-- within a few months I was in trouble, too.

I see.

And it did require a certain amount of time to get to that village, because I have to go to school. And somehow [? along ?] I always say I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it. That is what I was angry not only with teacher-- then I began to get angry with myself.

I see. I see.

So that is what the anger was. But when I finally met Václav after many years and asking him about that horrible day, that day how he [? walked him. ?] He corrected me.

What did he say?

He gave me interesting information. He say that both teacher and particular director were very discreet and explained to him very much what happened and why they had to do what they did. And the director walked with him all the way from school to the end of the town and promise to visit him. And he did visit him. At the end of school year he brought to him certificate that he completed that school year anyway.

Interesting. Interesting.

The director's name was [? Liperick. ?] And we did not-- as kids we did not exactly-- he wasn't our favorite. We told him he was too disciplinarian, that he was a person with empathy-- with lack of empathy for children. But in fact, Václav corrected me. And I was stunned. After so many years, my anger was waste.

That happens sometimes. But tell me this-- what did--

I find out that those teachers actually were far more concerned about our welfare, and particularly about Václav. And that director, [? Liperick, ?] actually did something what I would have never expected from anyone to do-- to visit him even a couple weeks later in that village, what Václav told me. And at the end of school year bringing him what is in Czech called [CZECH], which means that he was-- he did receive, actually, very good mark, he say, on subject which he didn't even study. So that is what I learned on that particular day.

But things took incredible speed. Before we knew--

Hang on a minute. Before we go there-- keep your thought there. But before we go there, you say many years later Václav tells you why they took him. So what did they tell him when they took him out of the classroom and he had to go home? What was their explanation to him as to why they had to do it?

I learned that it all happened. They told him that this had been a receipt or a directive from city of Klatovy, from so-called Oberlandrat. Oberlandrat, that was a German office in Klatovy where there was, apparently, a department also which dealt with-- which the antisemitic-- enforcing the antisemitic law and rules and regulations.

So the Oberlandrat knew that there was such a person as Václav Florian?

Right. Right. No, but it took some time--

I see.

--apparently, because we are already almost-- close to three years the German occupation.

That's right. That's right. But--

It took some time.

Was it, then, just a coincidence that it's the same day that you see this German family with the stars, that the two events have nothing to do with each other? The German--

Now, that's--

Is that so?

That is a good question. I have also told of it. I believe that this order probably was coming, and it was probably coming on somebody's initiative that things are-- they are not moving fast enough, that the local jurisdiction, which was the mayor's office of Plánice-- mayor's office of any little town in the country were-- most of them were reluctant to carry these orders to the letter immediately, because I can give one example, a very interesting example later on which happens in a place called Velhartice. So that would explain it, because I attended only a couple of years ago an interesting exhibit in a Czech embassy. And I don't want to go. And there I find out something-- how this thing really actually work, how these local mayors were receiving these directives. And they have to carry it on.

I see. I see.

Because many actually carrying them out-- Václav apparently was, at that day, identified as Mischling.

I see.

I wasn't identified yet as an alien-- an American at all.

I see. A few other questions before you go on chronologically. So for all intents and purposes the two events were not connected. But it could have been that a directive came down to speed things up. And getting that family prepared to go to the assembly point and getting Václav out of the school were those manner in which things were speeded up.

That is my speculation. And it would had been. And it is probably 100% accurate.

The next question I have--

[INAUDIBLE] because these things were suddenly appearing not only in the little town of Plánice, but it was appearing nearby, in Horažďovice, too. So in Czech they would call it a "razia."

Ah, "razia." Of course. It's a roundup. It's a roundup, basically. And I want to ask at this point, what kind of a young person was Václav What kind of a personality did he have? And what kind of a personality did his parents have-- personalities? And were they very religious, or was-- on either side, or was that something that wasn't very important to them?

Václav seems to had a personality of his mother, very kind and sharing things. And he was a type of a-- I might have been a little bit domineering type of a person. I might have been person to led him to those little boy type of adventure, going into forests and things like that. He sort of followed.

So you were the ringleader, and he's the one who--

No. He was more or less introvert.

I see.

So was he [INAUDIBLE]? But the generosity and good-- something so nice about him was, I think, from his mother.

I see.

And something from his Jewish grandfather, because his Jewish grandfather-- if his Jewish grandfather was left to attend the store where the young couple has to go to-- we children, with few pennies, would go into the store. And I think literally he would give away the store.

[LAUGHTER]

So he must have fond of the children. He went into that jar, and instead of giving you two candy for 10 haléřs he would give you four.

Aw.

So we know very well, the gentleman as soon as we saw the oldest-- the [? young ?] going to the fields, then we knew old Mr. Schwartz is in charge. And we would be going.

Well, children are very wise and very quick about such things. They know where their interests lie. And it's in the candy jar.

So you mentioned that this razia was happening in another town nearby as well. What was the name of that place?

This was Horažďovice.

Horažďovice.

Yeah. And, no, Horažďovice I can tell you far more, because Jewish presence was very-- far more bigger than Plánice. I could not tell you how many families were in Plánice were Jewish-- most likely dozen. But Horažďovice I can easily give you some statistic because I was interested in Horažďovice in many-- very early, and visited only twice during the wartime-- once before the wartime and one after, once with my grandfather and one with my uncle.

But that means-- excuse me. I'm going to interrupt. I'm sorry I'm doing it. But in other words, what happened in Horažďovice is not something you witnessed yourself.

No. No. I witness other thing in Horažďovice. But the presence of Jewish community was far more-- I think that in that particular section of the region of Klatovy that probably was a bigger community, Jewish community and presence than anywhere else. And you probably might have some records in your museum about Horažďovice.

So let's go back to what you were telling me before. And that is the chronology of events of what happens after Václav is taken out of school and life goes on. And so what happens with you?

Before we know, Heydrich's assassination. And the Heydrich assassination brings the end of any isolation in any place in the entire protectorate, Bohemia and Moravia, because after the assassination happened every hamlet, every village, every corner of the West are searched. The country was under martial law.

I see.

The country was under martial law. And I remember when it affected me. It was Saturday. I was not in school. I was in Těchonice, in the village, before noon. I was just bored and just sitting on big stone there. And most people in the village were in the fields. They were doing sort of a late spring type of work in the fields. And children were not required there. So I was there.

And suddenly there is a tremendous panic. And my mother brings [INAUDIBLE] home but did not inform me what is going on. She had run into her cellar and start bringing in jars, clay jars of her creams and butter and throwing it all to the pigs. And suddenly neighbor's yelling, come, my children, my children. She did have quite a children. I thought that she didn't care about them. But she was absolutely-- the people were simply not rational.

Well, what-- excuse me. Let me see if I understood things properly. Your mother comes home, rushes in, and takes food that is cream that she has in a jar, and butter, and milk and things like that, and just feeds it to the pigs?

I think she was under a bit-- I know that, I don't think, because I remember the reason she did that thing, she thought-- she already knew the Germans were in the village. I did not see it because I was at the end of the village. And apparently somehow, along without cell phone and other things, the people in all of these fields quickly knew what was happening. They--

But tell-- yes, but tell us-- excuse me. Someone listening to this in the future will not understand, why would someone, when the Germans are coming into the village, run to take their butter and cream and feed it to the pigs? What does that have to do with one another?

I will clarify. Her feeling was the Germans are coming for food. And of course, that was called hoarding. And of course, for that she would have to answer. And that was violation of laws. She could have ended-- she would be lucky if she ended in the little cell in Plánice. She would end, probably, someplace else. And so she was mistakenly thinking they're going to do a house search for food.

OK. But that was her first thought, is that it--



That was her first thought. But the neighbor-- why was she suddenly concerned about her children? She must have-- knew a little more. And I think I can figure out why she knew more. She was not concerned about food, because my mother even offer her to take it from her. And she certainly had so many children, she would need that food. But she didn't plan it. She kept running-- my children, my children.

So she must have known already that there was a village in the country called Lidice, and that Lidice was liquidated by the Germans. That it was not well known yet. But I think she had a relative who was close to village priest. And there must have been already knowledge of this. I did not know it. Neither did my mother know it. But there might have been people who already knew that this is coming. And apparently she felt differently than my mother.

I see. I see.

She reacted differently.

So the first sign is that there's this panic. And your mother thinks--

Yeah. And it was also first time this village ever come to see Germans.

That's important, too.

Because they never even saw Germans. This is the first-- and they arrived in great force. They arrive in large glory. I don't know, [? Even ?] 40 or 50. Many years later on I find it was a detach-- attachment of Ordnungspolizei. I don't know if you know anything about Ordnungspolizei.

Tell me, what is the Ordnungspolizei?

But they already have a reputation burning and killing people in Poland.

Ah. Well, there was the Einsatzgruppen that would-- that were killing squads in Eastern Europe.

Yeah, are basically in the Einsatzgruppen, but even one which was called Ordnungspolizei.

I see. So they did the same sort of thing.

Yes. They did the sort of same thing. And they must have come from a different place, maybe from Strakonice. And they went from village to village. And they selected Těchonice noontime. They're called the people of God.

And what did they do? When they arrived, what happened?

When they finally arrived in our house there were three of them. And within a moment my life-- between that moment I realized that my life changed for quite a bit, because when they entered in the house they did have a few pictures like picture of a bicycle, picture of a gun, a picture of a raincoat. They wanted to-- they showed them to everybody in the house, and if they had seen this article. These paper-- these article was left on the site of the assassination of Heydrich in Prague. So to identify.

But they were interested more into find out who lives in the house. And every house already, by that time, have social registration, a card, and which every person-- this is, of course, one of the German occupation directives. Every house already have for years, during the occupation, this important registration card. It have every name, listed every person who live in the house, where he was born, when he was born, name, all particulars. This registry was important because ration cards were issued on the basis how many people were in the house.

I see. I see.

Now, our house was a little funny because there were three groups of people living in it-- my grandparents,

whose name was Sebesta; my mother, who remarried and have different name; her husband, my stepfather. And she have another two children. And they were called [? Slivorn. ?] And then at the end there was Robert R. Budway, born in Oak Park, Illinois.

Oh my goodness.

And that was something she was-- my mother absolutely not prepare. She was totally off with trying to get rid of her cheese and butter.

Yeah.

There were many things in the house which would have been-- which immediately attracted them as they went into her best room, where there was on display all her knickknacks from Chicago. There were three big pillow, decorative pillow, which apparently she pick up in dime stores. And one of them has a picture of our first president, George Washington. The other had a picture of our hero, 1927. That was Lindbergh. And the third was a picture of Abraham Lincoln. And there was preamble of the Gettysburg speech. I did not know it. I know it today. And that was prominently all laying around. So obviously I was the target, immediate target.

What did they do?

First of all, they want to know more. And as-- the communication was problem. However, my grandma spoke perfect German. She was educated in a convent in Nepomuk, where they were-- apparently she knew perfect German. Grandpa knew a lousy type of German, Viennese, which was nothing but full of slang. So he did not communicate.

But it was Grandma who took over. My mother was simply out of control. She was not capable to function. But Grandma show herself what kind of person she could be-- tough, and absolutely knew how to handle those Germans. It was unbelievable to watch.

I already knew some German, so I understood how firm she was. I understood her intonation. She was making pancakes. Then she suddenly softened up and asked them to sit down and start to serve them pancakes.

Oh, my.

And they must have loved that. But they requested that Mother come up with the travel documents, passport, all of that thing. She brought her passport and documents in which I was, of course, listed, because in my case there was more documentation because Mother could not leave me-- leave with me from United States. It was quite a bit of documentation. She had to have lots of court documents.

So they went through it. And they immediately wanted to take me with them. Then Grandma absolutely pulled me back of her skirt [? around stove ?] and say, no. She will go. She point to her daughter and say that my mother will go with them.

And then someplace-- I don't know how she accomplished that. And that's that Mother didn't have to go. But all the documents were confiscated. And she received the certain documentation and was asked, in such and such a time, to report to Klatovy, to Gestapo's office, that these documents will be there, that I will have to be listed and register as alien.

So until that point you had all kinds of identifying documents from the States, from the United States. And I presume it must have been a birth certificate and maybe a passport, or if she-- you were listed in your mother's passport. But something that identifies you as being born here, in the US.

Yes.

And when you say your mother couldn't handle it, was-- did she fall apart? Did she cry? Was she nervous?

No, she did not cry. She was simply very nervous. She was not able to get herself together. I believe it was-- she was overcome fear over me.

Yeah. Yeah.

That must have been that. I never questioned her later on that. But I look on Grandmother entirely different way from that day.

Well, what kind of impression had you had of your grandmother before then?

I think she was strong, resolute. And she was not giving any inch on anything. She could solve problems. She could solve problems. And she was confident [? and ?] [? things. ?] And she could dissect details. She stands for no nonsense.

She was the disciplinarian. Grandpa was what is called very liberal, very permissive person. He allow me to do anything. But Grandma, no.

She was strict.

She was strict. She was apparently trying to make up for absent father.

Ah. Now, was your mother's husband, your stepfather, there at the time?

I didn't get the--

I see. There were more people registered in the house, including two other children that your mother had. And--

Everybody.

Everybody was--

Everybody had to be, at that moment, in the house. So everybody witnessed what I'm describing in the family. Everybody.

My mother then went to Klatovy immediately next day. And we had some friends there. She stay there a couple days. They told her everything she had to take with her, including my picture, which she had. And she came home with a new document, new ID for me. And that was unusual. And because everyone in protectorate, at certain age, has to have what was called Kennkarte, ID cards.

Yes.

ID card. That was another word which we have to learn, Kennkarte. That was another Nazi Deutsch.

So you had to learn words like Aryan, words like antisemitism.

Yeah, Aryan, antisemitism. We did not know what it really, fully means. We began to guess, but fully we did not understand.

Mother came with a document which was very impressive. It was a nicely, with a good cover passport. And it had a Hakenkreuz, the swastika.

A swastika, mm-hmm.

It has the Deutsches Reich, I think. Fremdenpass.

So a foreign pass.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And it was not in Czech. It was all in French and Czech-- French and German.

And did you get back the American documents or did they keep those?

The pass declared me-- what was important about that Fremdenpass, that I was declared as being stateless, "staatenlos."

Oh, that's interesting.

I was declared "staatenlos." Means very well that I no longer-- am no longer-- I was totally under the mercy of German authority in the protectorate, Bohemia and Moravia. And I was at the mercy how long I could stay. There was a stamp there which allowed me to stay there for six months. And after six months I must personally present myself with the document, with the passport, with the Fremdenpass, to the Gestapo in Klatovy to renew.

So but tell me, did she-- did they give her back your American documentation?

No.

Or did they keep it?

They keep it.

They keep it.

They keep it. That I regret, because I will learn much more about my departure from United States at the age of four.

Yeah. Yeah.

I would not-- but my mother somehow did not give them my birth certificate. She had them apparently separate away. If she had it together then I would have been completely lost.

So but this also means that they-- in essence, they destroyed-- as much as they knew, they destroyed evidence that you're a citizen of the United States.

Yes.

And that whatever protection that might have offered at that time, if any, because by 1942 they are-- the two countries are at war, even though the States doesn't land in Europe until-- the Americans don't land in Europe until June '44. You are then, as you say, without any kind of legal-- you are at their mercy. You are stateless.

Yes. I was just simply at the mercy of the German-- of Gestapo, not even Oberlandrat. Already I was no longer dealt even with Oberlandrat, which would be more civil.

And how old were you? At this point, how old are you, when this all happens?

At this point I was not 14 yet. I wasn't 14. So that was a shock.

But that was not the end of the shock. I would not dwell so much what it meant and what-- where the consequences of this development for me for the rest of the war. I do not intend-- I don't know if it is of any

interest. But--

Of course it is. Of course it is.

Within days-- that was Saturday. By Tuesday Mr. [? Goresh, ?] the teacher of Václav Florian, was executed.

Oh, wow.

His wife was executed. The mother of one of my classmen was executed. That took place in Plánice.

Oh, wow.

Plánice. Now, that is different story, because the wives of the teacher, Mr. [? Goresh, ?] who was Václav's teacher-- with her another lady, who was mother of one of my classmates, was Mrs. Novak. They were apparently shopping in a green grocery Shopping. They were buying some potatoes or something.

And there was the wife of the-- Oberhell's wife present. And apparently they talk about the assassination on Reinhard Heydrich. And the ladies make some innocent remark about that. And she carried that remark to her husband. And her husband, at that particular day, was visited by somebody from Oberlandrat from Klatovy. And it all fall in places. So they-- any-- this was martial law. Country was on martial law. This was immediately-- they were immediately arrested, that very day.

Those ladies who said these things?

You see, her husband was not arrested, the teacher, because he was teaching. He was not arrested. But he apparently acted like my mother. He apparently cause scene, and they arrested him too.

And why was the director of the school arrested and executed?

No, he was not. He wasn't caught making any remark anywhere. This was not connected to Václav Florian at all.

I thought you said the director-- I thought you said the director of the school was executed.

No, it was the teacher, the Václav teachers. Homeroom teacher.

So was it the lady homeroom teacher who was arrested, or her husband?

I will try to clarify it a little better. Teacher was Mr. [? Goresh, ?] who was a man who taught in the high school and taught and was a homeroom teacher of Václav Florian and my teacher on geography. And his young wife, who was pregnant with child, and another lady were shopping. And they were overheard make some remark.

And that remark, I understand, that they agreed that good happening that Heydrich was assassinated. They approve of it. How they approve it nobody really can tell, what language they used and what terms they used. But so they were overheard by Mrs. Oberhell [INAUDIBLE], wife of the town gendarme, who is Volksdeutsche.

I thought you said she was Czech. He was a Volksdeutsche, but she was Czech.

She was Czech, but he too spoke Czech. He was--

Got it. I understand now. So she goes home and tells him, and he tells the visitors of-- who are coming from the Oberlandrat from Klatovy.

And of course, they have to act. He had no choice. He most likely-- in fact, after the war he was exonerated, but not his wife. His wife was executed, too, after the war in the restitution court.

Oh.

There was a tragedy [? compiled ?] was going on all after the war, continuously, because he himself would have not done it, in spite that he was a Volksdeutsche.

So was it his--

He would not have done that. But he had to act.

So in other words, one can assume that when she went home she tells him, but in the presence of these visitors.

Right. And the visitor was the men from Oberlandrat.

OK. And so--

In official capacity.

So then the three people are arrested-- the two ladies who share their opinion when they were shopping and then that geography teacher for yourself and the homeroom teacher for Václav, who's the same person. And his name was Mr. [? Goresch, ?] right?

Yes.

And then what happened with these people?

Well, they were taken immediately. There was-- they were taken immediately to Klatovy. And they were immediately-- within, apparently-- that was martial law. They were taken to the forest, which was called Luby-- L-U-B-Y, Luby. It was outside Klatovy. And that was the killing field. They were not the first one to be killed there that particular day.

And why-- and again, but then again I come to this question-- that the two women are taken because they say these things, has a direct connection. But why is one-- why is the husband, why is the teacher taken?

Because he was not the one reported by Mrs. Oberhell. He was executed, I think, day or two days later because we was acting up. He lost control, apparently say even worse thing publicly--

I see.

Front of these official, of German official. So he was immediately arrested.

So it was-- his wife is taken and he loses his temper. He says something that gets him into trouble.

Yes. It was understandable--

Of course it was.

--because I believe his wife was seven months pregnant.

Of course it was. Of course it was.

So he obviously lost-- not temper, he lost senses of himself. And he scream. And he apparently-- if his wife only say some small little thing about good riddance of Heydrich or something, he say far more worse.

And how did you learn of these things?

This little very-- village learned very quickly, because immediately posters were printed and publicly pasted all around the town everywhere as a reminder of what is happening. And the posters state the name, the execution, where, and why.

Oh, wow.

And I have learned later from my classmate whose mother was executed that day too that they had to pay for those posters. In fact, he told me 500 korunas to pay that these posters were plastered everywhere in that town as a warning to rest of the people.

Oh, my. Oh, my.

This was going everywhere. If Plánice was what I'm describing, Horažďovice were far worse. But Plánice is what I saw, what I felt, what I know. I knew the people.

I see. I see.

And I was just as-- well, in fear what is going to happen to me--

Well, I can imagine. Of course. You were a 13-year-old boy.

--with my Fremdenpass. So this is how the situation was at that particular time. This is the time when I witnessed Václav's humiliation and his family misfortune-- his mother gone, his father gone-- and teachers and other people being executed, and me suddenly find myself to be stateless.

What happens then?

Well, I have also a number of restriction, like all Jews did have restrictions I, however, was permitted to finish school.

You were permitted to finish school?

Yeah, I was permitted to finish school. But I could not be going into any other school any more, be it trade school, some professional school. All school of higher learning were anywhere closed already in a protectorate. They were closed. University were already closed as a result of some students uprising first year of the occupation in Prague.

The schools were already closed. Only up to high school and some professional, like business school and things like that. I could no longer [INAUDIBLE] go. I have one restriction, which was fine with me. I could not be employed in any defense industry. That was all right with me.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. So--

But anyway, I have many restriction. Also, my ration card was different. There were number of ration card. For example, the Volksdeutsches get different ration cards. The German official had a different ration card. A protectorate citizen had a different ration card. And people that are stateless, like me, have a different ration-- the Jews have even worse. Jews were completely on the bottom.

So these were the restrictions. So I knew that I-- and I, of course, had to report to Gestapo. And 50 Reichsmark paying for fee. That was a lot of money for somebody who wasn't making even one Reichsmark.

Yeah. That's true. So does that mean the family paid for this 50--

Well, yeah. At the beginning family pays for that. But at the end I pay for it because I was then-- when I finished school, selected to work in a German hotel in Klatovy. And that was a completely where German--

was 90% a German clientele. All the German high-ranking officials which ruled the entire district in the region of Klatovy, including city of Klatovy. And, of course, for military from Gestapo, from NSDAP. Again, I will start as a waiter.

I have to interrupt at this point because there are certain parts between what you just told me and working there that I'd like to cover. So they allow you to finish school. But does that mean finishing that academic year or finishing all of the grades of the high school that you're attending in Plánice?

Yes, I was able to graduate out of high school by 1943.

So that meant that when this all--

I was still one year there as stateless person-- in school.

I understand. So I'm going to try to get the chronology right. So Heydrich is assassinated in May, 1942. Is this correct?

Yes, that is correct. The tragedies I have described was-- the ending 1942, in May.

So all of these things that happen happen very quickly after his assassination. So it's sometime in the second part of the spring, whether it's May, June, or something like that, that the authorities declare martial law. They come to your village. They discover that you have American citizenship. And you become stateless. So that means that the school year in 1942 is finished.

The school finished within a couple of weeks, correct.

Right. So the next school year they allow you to go for the school year of 1942 to-- fall to spring of 1943.

43-- and then I received my graduation papers from the school in 1943. And from that moment I was required to report to so-called "Arbeitsamt," which was a labor office. And as a stateless person I-- therefore they selected for me because there were restrictions where I can work.

I see. So but nevertheless--

And what I can do.

Yeah. In 1943, when you finish your schooling, you're still, then, only 14 years old, going to be 15 years old in August. So you're still a very young person at that point.

Yes. I was not 15.

Yeah. And you have to then go and register with the labor department, this Arbeitsamt. And the Arbeitsamt then gives you this job at the hotel?

Yeah, it was called Hotel Central. And it was under German control, under German ownership-- I don't think it was ownership. And of course, there was incredible coincidence-- the director of the hotel, or hotelier, whatever we call him, was-- name was Alois Binder. And he has a mistress who was Fraulein Pressmar from Stuttgart. And they both were former employee of Baron von Neurath.

And who is Baron von Neurath?

Baron von Neurath was the first Reichs Protector of Bohem and Mahren, Bohemia and Moravia.

I see.

He was also first Reichs Aussenminister in Adolf Hitler first government. After him come Ribbentrop. Baron von Neurath was well-known diplomat of the Weimar Republic. Baron von Neurath also ended in Nuremberg



in the dock as a war criminal.

So I was really in quite interesting situation. And I learned fast.

But it's also a rather elite type of-- even if you have very humble kinds of duties, it's an elite place to work while they're in control of the country. Or was it not? I mean, that's my impression, is that this Hotel Central, if it has all this type of clientele-- then you are working for the cream of the Nazi crop.

That is exactly what it was. However, of course, there were certain difficulties into it, too. I was treated at times, by the all-Czech personnel, very nicely. Anybody I have not, even in Arbeitsamt, who were Czech clerk who had to execute all of these directives, they-- I was treated with great deal of discretion and empathy. I was treated, in a way, just like Václav was treated by director of the school and his teacher.

I see.

I must admit the Czechs who have to do this dirty job were in sympathy and empathy with-- they realized who I was and what situation I find myself. They tried to make it as easy as they could.

So do you think that they're the ones who made the decision for you to be at that particular hotel?

I don't know. But in fact it was my-- it meant to be tough. It ended, actually, as quite an education. I have really learned something about Germans of that generation. And I have learned something about, really what matters and what they stand for. I have observed them at a close range. I have some interesting experiences. I have survived that thing. And of course, I did spend almost more than a year and half. From the hotel I was then eventually sent to labor camp.

Let's talk about the year that you were-- year plus, some months, that you were at the hotel. And so we're talking now from summer of 1943 until when?

To 1944, sort of close to the end of 1944, I was functioning there and learning the trade to be, waiter, and serving the German clientele. Occasionally I would also encounter other clientele. And there is one amusing Frenchman who had taught me a little English. But that's footnote.

So did you speak any kind of German at this point?

Oh, I was already-- I actually had a better knowledge of German when I [?working at there?] because German was required all four-- three years in high school I had German.

I see.

Everyone in protectorate had to learn German. German was a must. So I walk in Hotel Central with rather good German. And by-- within a couple months I was pretty good in German.

So tell me about some of these things that you say you learned when you saw things up close, when you saw what Nazism was. Tell me about some of the episodes that stick in your memory.

Well, the episode was they also have-- it was a very modernistic, art deco type of hotel built during the First Republic. It was the best hotel. Of course, Germans would have nothing but the best. Therefore all of the Parteitage all of the Partei meetings would be housed in the hotel.

So all the Nazi party meetings would be held there.

Yeah, they would be all held in the hotel. There would be visitors arriving, which would maybe arrive from the Reich itself. They would be either military or they would also be civilian. And they would also be artistic. For example, I have saw one of the greatest opera stars in Europe, a Jew. Her name was Erna Sack. And manage-- I did not serve her. I only clean after her. So I had been witness to a lot of interesting--

You say she was a Jewish person? Erna--

I beg your pardon?

I thought you said she was a Jewish person, this opera star.

No, I don't get-- I'm lost.

You said that there was an opera star in Europe that you cleaned after. And you gave me her name. Do you hear me very well, or not?

No, I possibly don't hear you very well.

You mentioned an opera star.

Opera star. Yes. The opera star was apparently coming there to entertain the troops, because there were three garrison of troops. Klatovy had a large amount of German military--

I see.

--including-- and it's the upper headquarters, including Gestapo, including the Wehrmacht. So they were a large group. And the opera star was apparently coming as all military were entertained by German artists.

What was that person's name?

Her name was Erna Sack.

S-A-K?

S-A-C-K. She was the greatest opera soprano on Europe at the time. Well-known in United States, too. I take a note of it because I was in [? awe ?] of that. Some of the Germans, the big-shot military with the-- I was stunned.

Well, so--

And they were, of course, also interesting situations. More-- the personnel were all Czech. I was the only stateless. We were serving the German upper crust of the occupation in Klatovy. And I was the only stateless.

Humiliating thing for me was, for example, to get my breakfast early morning. Kitchen was downstairs. And there were maybe 14 or 15 small plates. And on every plate was our breakfast. Let's say-- I would make one example. The Czech, the protectorate citizens, would have two-- on the plate, two slices of bread with jam and a slice of margarine. My plate would have only one slice of bread and not margarine, but I would have the jam.

Oh, my. And that's because of your ration card?

Yes. And that was the humiliating thing, to pick up my food. Was always a little less than the Czech. And their rations were not abundant, too.

Did the Czechs, though, in their behavior-- those who were citizens of the protectorate-- did they treat you differently? Or did this--

My co-workers, no. I was-- actually had an excellent relationship. They were amazed that I'm American to begin with. And they, of course, were entirely in sympathy and [? same ?] feel that I have to go through what I have to go. And I was very close to them, develop close friendship and relations with all Czechs who were employed in the hotel.

I have a correct relationship, too, with the German administration of the hotel. Yes, Fraulein Pressmar acted like-- jokingly we say if Adolf Hitler would have 50 Fraulein Pressmars he would win the war.

[LAUGHTER]

Because she was definitely-- I would not call her Nazi, but efficient, strict. That German efficiency. She was a picture of German efficiency. And she arrived early in the morning in the-- her rooms of the-- the restaurant room. And we were cleaning. I mean, we were working. We were working. If we were a little reluctant in something she used her hand-- I mean, she was free with her hand.

I see. So--

And she used it.

She would slap people.

That's it. And I did get a few times, too. But I don't think that it was done-- I think it was done because of her zeal of efficiency. Somehow [INAUDIBLE] we have tremendous respect for even that-- it was sort of life-- hate and love relationship, because we learn great deal. Everything have to be just right. In German, pünktlich. She knew how to run the hotel. She was efficient. She was a picture of efficiency.

Were there other personnel who were German or who were part of, let's say, the bureaucracy?

Occasionally they had younger sister would come. And there was another Fräulein Hart. Fräulein Hart old German lady, and far more different. She was far-- she did not communicate with us, but when she did we saw a person who care about people [INAUDIBLE] people.

These were the German personnel. They really run the hotel. Each of them have some responsibility. Fräulein Pressmar had the-- actually, the restaurant and everything related to it. Fräulein Hart had [INAUDIBLE] the most-- the [?team of?] personnel which dealt with the rooms and housemates and things like that. So everybody had-- the personnel in kitchen was Czech, was Czech.

The boss, which was Alois Binder, was, of course, overseeing all of it. I have an interesting episode to relate. In my early days, when I was only serving beer, where I wasn't yet skilled enough, he was sitting with one German officer. Apparently he was a Stadt officer, Stab. And I mistake by Stab by Stall, which is office of the stables.

Oh, God.

And when I [? clean, ?] I try to do it with utmost correctness and tried to do it with certain elegance. And I put the stein of beer in front of him and say, jawohl, Herr Stallmeister And he jump. Instead of Stab I said Stall.

So Stab--

And he was offended. And my boss was sitting with him. My boss, though, was laughing and explained and cooled down the officer. So I would recognize that he was human.

So your director, Alois Binder, saved you at that moment.

Yes. And he was fluent in Czech, too. So obviously he must have been suited in German.

I see.

And received this plush job and control of the hotel as a reward being Czech cook of Baron von Neurath. That was a high position. And Fraulein Pressmar was probably something else in the household of Baron von

Neurath. So therefore, that's why she was so knowledgeable and skillful and stickler for detail.

How did you feel serving all of these people who were-- who had such high positions in the-- who had such power, basically?

It was all pretense. It was all pretense. But we work many long hours. And the closing time was 11 o'clock. And at 11 o'clock many of them were not prepared to leave. And we were be standing on the side, and I daydream I would win the war and how I will take the ashtrays and how I will throw that ashtray on this and that officer, and that person.

So obviously, there was lots of-- and one of my colleagues did incredible thing. If I say this thing, it just remind me of George Orwell, who wrote something "ups and down in Paris." And we describe the way it is in the rich in Paris with all the fancy food. What can waiters do?

But this particular older friend who was a waiter who was far more experienced, when he-- before he took the food for German officers out of kitchen he had to pass through a passage of steps sometimes. I dare to say not only would spit in it, sometimes he would take a piece of meat and take a bite of it and put it back in the sauce.

Oh, God.

And we would learn how to treat them, for example, of their ration card, because they have a ration card. We developed skill of absolutely stealing.

Well, how did it work?

Oh, there were so many clever ways. We would carry a plate of desserts out of a kitchen. I was able to put six plates in my-- I learned how to do six plates carried in one hand. It was interesting how you do it with your fingers. And I was able to squeeze even one more. It was very hard and difficult. That was the danger-- that everything can collapse that pyramid, you know.

Of course. But what did it mean--

[INAUDIBLE]

When you--

And every waiter had the scissors. The scissors was cutting the ration card. There was a way-- regular soldiers were easy prey. They didn't pay much attention to how you cut the ration card when you were standing in front of them and taking their order. You would therefore learn to [? whisk ? your scissor and taking that fifth, five grams of fat, maybe. And you learn these skills. And it was a sport to cheat the Germans. And we done very well.

So but when, let's say, you cut off more from their ration card, do you then have the chance to use that? Or is this simply-- is there any benefit to you in a concrete way, or is this just--

In a concrete way it was benefit, because I definitely learned German, which came in handy when I was in labor camp. Because that is later. My German was beginning to be so fluent that I can engage in any subject. And I will repeat only one episode.

There was a situation in the restaurant itself. We served for lunch and dinners. There was one section which was in a easy-- we call it boxes. The people had separate easy cushion an easy type of a chair where people were separating table. So they did not really have to look into each other plate. And it was called the boxes.

And we have this Frenchman with his wife who suddenly show up in hotel from somewhere and speak in very loud French, and acting obnoxious, as we expect all the Frenchmen would. Nobody wanted to serve him. And somehow I ended serving him. And he somehow find out that I'm a stateless and that I came from

America. And he start call me Monsieur Bobby.

Monsieur Bobby.

Yeah. So I become a Monsieur Bobby. And next-- and that was his-- he was so called in German [GERMAN]. That was his table. And I would be serving him. And Monsieur [? Argiacon ?] required a great deal of service and attention.

And there was a neighboring [GERMAN] that was Frau Ruprecht. Frau Ruprecht was the wife of chief of the Gestapo. And she would be sitting with her in-law, with the Gestapo chief's mother. And I would have to serve them, too.

And she was tremendously impatient that I pay great attention to Monsieur [? Argiacon. ?] For her I was Herr Bobby. And for Monsieur [? Argiacon ?] was Monsieur Bobby.

And Monsieur [? Argiacon ?] was very loud and very noisy. And she was annoyed. And she called me and tell me in nice German, tell that Frenchman-- Herr Bobby, tell that Frenchman that he should slow down and remember he is not in Paris. And Monsieur [? Argiacon ?] understood German, too. And he immediately-- she didn't even finish. He told me, Monsieur Bobby, tell that woman-- he called her woman. He did not call her-- I have to call her gnädige Frau. And so he-- I didn't have to tell much because he-- tell that woman to remember that she is not in Berlin.

Oh, God.

[LAUGHTER]

He was absolutely [? that. ?] So I bow. I politely bow. But [? actually ?] my heart was-- I was so delight-- I love this moment. That was my finest moment at the hotel, my time in Hotel Central, where I did-- pretended politeness, bowed to gnädige Frau Ruprecht. And I did not-- and anyway, translate Monsieur-- or get-- relay to Monsieur French-- Monsieur [? Argiacon's ?] message. I didn't have to relate it because she understood. She already-- but I related.

[LAUGHTER]

So these were-- there were many more moments. It was a moment where one learned how to outwit German, how to outwit every--

Was there danger involved in any of this?

There was a great deal of danger. And I only say one more episode which was truly danger. And it involved everyone, maybe about five of my fellow co-worker, waiters, and including myself. And it happened exactly on D-day.

On June--

And it happened on Tuesday. Tuesday was the day when hotel was closed. During the war there was a closing day for every business, one day. And only the hotel serve breakfast. And for that only one waiter was required to serve breakfast. And the rest of us were sleeping or having a good time. This was the day of rest for us.

But this waiter who happened to have the duty on that 4th of July [INAUDIBLE]

4th of June.

--4th of June, when that D-day happened-- there was a beautiful-- because of German, we had beautiful radio. It was big set. It has many speakers and many things. One could get on the radio besides German classical music, which it mostly played-- many stations. Of course, the Reich. And one can also get even

England.

Also, could they do BBC?

Yes. And somehow along this particular breakfast morning this-- on duty was, he's one of my co-workers. His name was Ludwig. And he was on. And he played with the radio knob. And there was nobody at this moment for breakfast. Usually it was very few people. And it was morning time for him. And he played with this radio. And he dialed the BBC.

Oh my goodness.

And he suddenly heard of the invasion. And he drop everything and run into room where we were sleeping and announce what is happening.

Wow.

And from this moment we-- and the next day we, of course, already-- it was announced on protectorate news, too. But we knew it already when it wasn't announced yet. We were few people in that hotel who knew it. But we kept it to ourself.

But however, next day, before lunch, we have a small little place, a room, where we had early soup. All of them were eating soup. And one German-- usually we felt isolated and we felt secure. We felt we can say, among ourselves, anything which come into our heads.

And somehow there was a very sharp-looking officer. He has been in hotel for some time. And he was absolutely sharp. And he was rather elegant and distant. He was a captain. He was young. And we don't-- and he-- of course we spoke to him in German all the time.

At this particular time we thought we were secluded. We thought we were absolutely not earshot with anybody. And we certainly was debating how the Germans are getting it in Normandy. And we did not know-- for some reason he was walking by. And he listened to us behind the door.

Oh.

And he heard everything. And he [? burst ?] the door. And he look at us. And we knew this was a disaster. We knew-- by now we knew what it meant would happen. And he start to talk absolutely Czech, beautiful Czech.

Oh my.

And he told us, you-- he told us, you little fools. You ought to be careful. He gave us dressing down, and all in beautiful Czech. And we were so stunned. And we ask him, how come that you-- we did not know that you can speak Czech. And he let us know he was a former Czech officer in the Czech army on the First Republic. Of course, he was Sudetendeutsche, Sudeten German.

Oh my. Oh my.

So were we lucky?

You were.

And we learned a lesson.

Yeah. Yeah.

And I will stop. There were many other episodes. But this one was eye-opening. We were caught on-- and there were six of us. And I will not go into detail how we, as teenager, absolutely green, raw-- how we

described Germans and what fun we had about the invasion, because by now it was clear the invasion was proceeding in Allies' benefit. We knew that that would be the end. And we [? act ?] and we were reckless.

And I just want to say one thing. We mentioned, both of us, that it was June 4th. It was actually June 6, 1944, that D-day happened. But that's quite an experience, because you could have ended up just like your teacher and his pregnant wife and the other lady very easily.

We knew it immediately. At that moment, when he opened the door and saw him in that sharp uniform. I do realize that because of his expertise in Czech that he must have been important in some Nazi organization in the town. But it was military. It was army. And his rank was captain.

His rank--

So we knew-- but after that time we did not know that he spoke Czech. So we learned quickly not to speak front of somebody and thinking that they might not understand Czech or German.

Yeah. Yeah.

But it was for good fortune nothing come out of this. I do not know how long he was there, but he didn't report anything, including to the proprietor of the hotel. Otherwise we would have known. He absolutely kept it to himself. And he gave us a good dressing down.

That's quite an experience. I can understand why it stayed in your memory.

It is in my memory because it was a close call.

Was there any time when it didn't end so well, when there was danger and somebody paid the price for some kind of interaction with any of the clientele?

No. And of course, there is Frau Ruprecht. I must go back to Frau Ruprecht. Frau Ruprecht appeared to me like exotic gypsy from the Balkans. But she was immaculately make up and everything make out of leather, everything well to do. We knew that she was-- she was the wife of the Gestapo chief of the city of Klatovy.

We knew she was important. We only communicate with her in German. But after the war, that is another story. Of course, she absolutely stunned us. Suddenly, after the war, she knew Czech too.

Hm. Was she a Sudeten German?

There is another episode which happened already in 1945 and in another place because she was apparently released after the war from Czech prison and ended on the way into Germany. And she stopped in a hotel, another hotel where I was already working after, and as a-- and come to me. And suddenly, go [INAUDIBLE]. She [? was ?] [? and ?] she recognized me and want to have a meal and talk to me in perfect Czech. But of course I had to decline the meal because the boss would not serve this German.

Oh.

That's a footnote to Frau--

Ruprecht.

--Ruprecht, because I recognized from then on, be careful to speak any language from somebody you think they might not understand you, because they will. There's always this. But that's a different story I might tell later on [INAUDIBLE].

Well, mentioning what happened or what the-- your interaction was in the post-war year, immediate post-war, is also related to our topic, because she crosses your path again. And she was the wife of the Gestapo head. So that's not an inconsequential post. And the hotel proprietor where you worked after the war clearly

knew who she had been, knew who--

Oh, yes, because he would-- he certainly, before every meal was served-- lunch would begin 12. The proprietor of the hotel or the director of the hotel would pass by all these [GERMAN]. And we bow to them and would use the German word [GERMAN]. So obviously he knew everyone. And we learned very quickly who these people were, too, because we have to know their station or what was-- whatever. She was gnädige Frau. Of course she was Oberlandrat and so on.

But what I'm interested-- what I was talking about now is after the war, after she was released from prison and she crosses your path again and you're working in a different hotel and the proprietor does not allow you to serve her. He knew who she was.

We would be find ourself in a situation in Hotel Slavie in Zelezná Ruda, where I encountered those two Polish students who want-- Jewish students who want to escape to East Germany and I am helping them. That was the place after the war. And I-- if I-- you want me to explain this I would carry on and tell you how that happened.

The proprietor of hotel was no longer proprietor. He was called, in Czech, "národní správce." He took control of the hotel from a German. This was a reverse situation. And the proprietor was Mr. Otto Tomasek. And he was a former inmate of Dachau.

Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

So obviously he watched for things like that. And Frau Ruprecht was apparently, after the war, apprehended in Klatovy and put in a jail. But for some reason she was released after-- apparently, after a couple of weeks in jail and receive a ration card, and apparently [? ex-- ?] travelled on her own way into Germany. She had to take train from Klatovy to the border, which was Zelezná Ruda.

And before she get out of train she have to cross the border in the proper place by the railroad station. She stopped in the only hotel who was open. And it was us, the Hotel Slavie, where I am already newly employ after the war, back in the hotel business. And my new boss is former inmate of Dachau.

And what town was this in?

Zelezná Ruda. That is a sort of a tourist attraction, mostly for skiing. This was not during ski season. A ski season was a big thing. And in German it's called Markt Eisenstein. On the other side it is called Bayerisch Eisenstein. And it isn't a good connection if one want to get to Munich.

I see. So it is--

And it was a border crossing into the Germany.

I just looked it up online. Zelezná Ruda. And it is-- yes, in German called Markt Eisenstein. And it's in the Plzen region of the Czech Republic.

Yes.

And so this was the place where she walks in and you are working after the war.

Yes.

And your proprietor, who doesn't own the place but who manages the place, is a former inmate of Dachau.

Right.

And he knows-- he sees that either she's just a German, or did he know, actually, that she had been the wife of the Gestapo?



He knew very well already that because the-- her entrance in that restaurant, in that hotel was right at 2 o'clock. It looks to me like she planned it on purpose because by that time there was nobody in the restaurant itself. The lunch was over-- lunchtime was over.

And she suddenly entered with great bravado, recognized me, and yell on me, I have a ration card. Can you serve me something? I was taken quite back. I was almost back to days of gnädige Frau Ruprecht I seated her. I seated-- I was overwhelmed by her assertive conduct.

Yeah.

And she speaks Czech.

Yeah. For the first time.

This was a revelation to me. At that time-- I never, during that time, knew that she was capable to talk Czech. This is a wife of former Gestapo chief of Klatovy. And suddenly here I am, 1946, probably, I think, in August. Suddenly she makes this grand appearance.

But I think my boss, Mr. Tomasek, the ex-inmate of Dachau, must have been alerted by somebody else who saw her walking into hotel, who must know it, because in that particular place almost everybody knew each-- everybody, because there weren't too many people yet in that region after the war.

I see. I see.

It was still in a region where Germans had to play the reverse role. If the Jews were-- carried the yellow [INAUDIBLE] I mean, yellow star, Germans were marked with a white armband. They all had to wear the armband.

After the war?

After the war. And they would not be served and admit in any place-- Czechs were playing the reverse.

I see.

Czechs were behaving-- getting even.

So whatever happened to Mr. Ruprecht the head of the Gestapo?

Well, obviously that is a mystery. I would never know that she was released-- apparently she must have-- and that she was foolish to be-- I think her husband must have left her and run away.

Ah.

Yeah. He must have left her and run away because-- and she was foolish enough to stay in Klatovy because I was not in Klatovy at the end of the war, really. Or I just-- at the end of the day. But then it was coming I was in labor camp. So I really don't know why some of these officials didn't run in time out of Klatovy, because they must have known what will end-- what will happen to them, that some of these people were caught.

But some of this not. The Gestapo chief of Frau Ruprecht was apparently not apprehended. He must have run out and left her there.

I see.

And she apparently could not give them any information. This is my guessing.

I see. I see.

This all-- [INAUDIBLE] at this moment I'm guessing I was just only shocked that she made the appearance, that we crossed again, because much has happened from the episode I am describing, Frenchman and Frau Ruprecht. Much had happened.

Of course. Of course. So let's go back to that point and let's go further in the sense that you are working in the hotel until late 1944.

'44. '44.

Then what happens to you?

Then, of course, the situation in Germany and situation for Germans have deteriorated to the point the shortage of labor was obvious. And they were looking for every possible resources. And they were building, also, defenses against invasion. And I was suddenly, as a staatenlos, as a stateless person, easy target to call to an Arbeitsamt and assigned to the labor camp, and transport-- thereby transport from-- all the way to the very East front, to Silesia again, and to the Russian front.

And I was assigned to build defenses because German army was retreating so fast. And somebody else had to quickly find defense position for them.

So when you say Silesia, Silesia sounds like it's Poland. Were you in Poland?

Yes, that was on the border of Poland, Silesia. It was and still-- it was Czech, Silesia, but on the border of Poland. There's a big city I can locate. Czech city would be Olomouc. Olomouc. In Germany Olmutz.

Olomouc.

And Polish, [PLACE NAME]. That area. It was a desperate situation because Germany was squeezed on-- from the East, from the North, and from the South, from Hungary and Austria. [? Both ?] Soviet army was actually cutting the Germans from Slovakia. So I was in the northern part as one of their laborer to do these defence.

Well, tell me, so you were sent to a labor camp. So you get dismissed from the hotel.

Yes. I was released. It wasn't dismissal. I simply was simply called [INAUDIBLE]. And because of my staatenlos thing I was simply [? found ?] as a candidate before they would call anybody else. And there was a large contingent they had already. In my situation it was probably exactly what was happening in Plánice when I was observing these Jewish family to be a roundup for assembly points. The assembly point was Klatovy from-- other young people were suddenly assembling and ordered on a train transport from Klatovy all across to the East.

It took couple days to get there. Ordinarily it should have been between about 10, 12 hours. I know that we were on the train a couple days because it was a-- [? wood ?] was slowly [? whooshing ?] everywhere, from every side in the German-- Germany itself and close to occupied Bohemia and Moravia. And trains did not move. Trains would stand, sometimes, idly, in same place for hours. And I believe the train-- I estimated a couple times there could have been anything to 300 of us on this train.

And were you-- what kind of facilities was the train? Was it a regular passenger train or was it a cattle car?

No, it was-- you have a-- on display in the Holocaust Museum you have a display wagon of a-- where Jews-- people were transported to concentration camp. It was something close to it.

I see. So it was like a cattle car.

But it had benches. It had benches. We could sit.

So it's a little different.

It wasn't as bad what you have on display in Holocaust Museum. Because I remember visiting your Holocaust Museum quite often. And I put my hand all the time on that thing which you have on display there and tried to feel something, because I feel some-- I'm debted to visit.

I see. And so-- yeah.

We were even given little package of food. It was terrible, but it also was not very good. It was a local bread. And it must have been so bad, because we all had gas. The smell was terrible. I won't talk about that. But it was not as bad what you have in Holocaust.

So it was like a cattle car, but you had a place to sit. It wasn't--

Yes.

Right.

There was a place to sit. And there was even some toilets where we could get into.

I see.

So it wasn't as bad. And we were provided, at the beginning, with some food, but not during the trip at all.

So here's another question. You say it was near Olomouc. What was the specific labor camp name?

That is [INAUDIBLE] you see, this is a different [? beast ?] than concentration camp. It did not have a name because this was all emergency action by desperate Germans to build defenses and build them fast and quickly by forced labor. And anybody who get caught in-- like, in my case would get [? him. ?] And therefore we were build-- we were housed in abandoned building, school building usually.

So if you didn't have a name, near what town-- in addition to Olomouc, was there another place that it was close to?

Yes. I think where I would call this [? area, ?] because this is something where we could not orient ourselves so well. But I know it was called Repcin.

How do you spell that?

R-E-P-C-I-N. Of course, "R" will have the, again, [INAUDIBLE] so you have Repcin. And it was school. We did have certain liberties. It was something where Václav father was exactly. That was the motto of the labor camp.

Now, excuse me, I'm looking for a place name. So it was-- you're saying that it was in a place called [? Zepcin? ?]

[? Zepcin. ?] I think it was outskirts of Olomouc.

I see. So it's really close-- it's really close to Olomouc.

Yes, it's very, very close. And because we were marching, then, up North to build these fortifications we were-- in the camp we was in the hands of the director or whatever you will call people who were operating the place where we were sleeping and eating, and were operated by Czechs-- by Bohemians and Moravians. However, the work was supervised by Germans, by-- it was supervised, I would say, by expert engineers, and also guarded-- we were guarded by not SS, or we were not guarded by Gestapo, but older men in what was called Storm Troopers. Storm Troopers. But the Brownshirts. They were armed. They have rifles.

And you were building what kind of fortifications? Mostly, I think, for retreating artilleries, because I am very familiar how it was builded. The reason for it is that within a couple days the engineers, who were interested in efficiency and build it-- they were not interested how we live. They were not interested to make our lives miserable at all. They were interested in efficiency to build it.

It was the Storm [? Trooper ?] who were guarding us for security and safety or for anything. They, therefore, needed somebody to translate, because I was surprised that nobody knew German as well as I knew. And in one ditch by which we were describe how to do, suddenly everybody was lost. And the engineer suddenly recognized that-- I don't know how it happened, that I did say, is it a-- oh, a 50 centimeter? Is it an 80 centimeter or so? And he just told me, one and a half meter deep. And so before he knew it, I spoke German. And he make me a Dolmetscher. Dolmetscher is translator.

Translator. Translator.

Translator. And of course, that relieved me from digging. However, it was something I didn't really-- I realized it within a few days. I didn't want it to be because, in fact, I would be in concentration camp called Kapo. I would be the favorite German.

You would be the favorite person of the Germans.

I was their favorite because I have to translate it. All these boys who were very much same age-- some younger, some older. I have to translate it. So I was the German lackey. And their resentment was quick.

Was it really?

And I realized that. So I quickly switched. I quickly, instead of following the order, following the direction how to-- which direction to dig, which direction to do, what to do, I quickly say, boys, this is what he is saying, but this is what I think you should do. Don't do that. Do this. He say do it 20 centimeter here. Do it 10. And in spite, I play what Czech used to call "Švejč."

[LAUGHTER]

You understand--

Yeah.

--what "Švejč" is [? it mean? ?]

Well, "Švejč" is that novel written about the good soldier, Švejč. I believe it was in the beginning of the [INAUDIBLE].

I simulate everything. I just make everything in fun. I play a dangerous role, too, because it backfire on me, because these engineers were no fools. Within a couple days they recognized what I was doing. I was caught. [INAUDIBLE]

And what did they do?

And it was consequences of it. And again, I was lucky. But that's-- I [? am spending ?] time on this. I will continue.

Yes, please.

So I find myself to be Dolmetscher. But I quickly recognize that's the role I did not want it, because I actually was more popular play American. And I play the American. And I played to the hilt. And I was sort of mystery guy of their-- what I was doing them, that was a mystery to everyone. And I could play it like Hitchcock.

Wait, this you have to explain to me. So you-- what I has been able to follow is that in order to avoid the jealousy and the anger of your fellow Czech laborers, forced laborers, you then tell them the wrong instructions. And in a few days the German engineers catch on to what you are doing.

Because when then they did construction of this defense position-- the positions were apparently planted for heavy artillery, for heavy guns, because it was circular. And he recognized we were building entirely something else.

And so what did they do to you?

So he knew-- he recognized that in spite that I was fluent in German I wasn't giving the instructions what he was giving me to tell and translate.

So what kind of measures did he take against you for this?

He recognized and he stopped. He come, and there was a ditch. And it separated me from a ditch. And he let me know. He say, I know what you are doing. I know. And you are going to be sorry for that.

And he-- in fact, I-- he actually revealed himself that he didn't trust any of us. And he knew that we were not to be a reliable worker, that he has people who are forced to do it. He knew it. And he always tried to scare us and tell me about what is coming, that we are naive that we think that the Russians are going to liberate us. And he really let me have it.

And of course, that was it. And I immediately wised up and tried to figure out how to create some kind of excuse. I know he didn't believe me. But I came with the excuse that I had misunderstood that it was [INAUDIBLE]. And he said, you let me-- you explain it to me.

And so when day was over and we marched back into the camp I relate this thing to the director of camp, what happened to me. The director of our camp knew that I was staatenlos, that I was American. And [? he ?] [? had ?] all this empathy. And he say, you are in danger. You have to write letter. Let's state this thing. You have to disappear.

And was the director of the camp Czech or was he German?

He was Czech. He was a Czech teacher who apparently was also a forced laborer.

And so but the German engineer said that you have to speak to this Czech director?

That's the reason I have confidence to relate to him what I did and what situation we are all. It wasn't only me. It was all of those workers who were building it wrong way.

I see. I see.

Because therefore I had to report this in order to let me get into that school. So I did report that thing. And [INAUDIBLE]. So we come--

Excuse me. Something is wrong with the sound right now. I don't hear you very well.

I hear you very well.

Now it's better. Now it's better.

Now, the director said, we must write-- at least we start with the letter. And we start with the letter. And we did with the letter. And then I say, well, how do we end this letter?

Then I realized that-- let's play real Nazi. I realized that is the first time and only time-- and this is where I would call myself the collaborator. I signed the letter with Deutscher Gruss, heil Hitler.

And who was the letter addressed to?

To the chief engineer.

And what did you write to the chief engineer?

I write to him excuse that I did not understand the direction, that I regret that we [? that-- ?] I promise that we will do much more better. It was nonsense.

Of course. Of course.

It was nonsense. I handed the letter next day to him. He look it. He read it. He read the letter without comment. He put the letter in his pocket.

But the problem was the SS man-- not the SS, SR, NSDAP man. The old-- his name was Miller. Because he watched that continuously. He was actually not only watching me and the laborers and [INAUDIBLE], he also watched the engineer. I believe they didn't trust each other, too.

So I more expected worse from the Storm Trooper who was in uniform of-- the well-known uniform which Adolf Hitler appeared so many times, the Brownshirt uniform. So of course, the engineer was in the army fatigues, a thing [? like that. ?] I knew that he was the chief engineer, that he has a certain rank and certain knowledge and ability. And he was interested in job being done and done fast and accurately.

So he didn't say anything. And to my surprise, I was left to work on that day. And everybody, of course, who knew-- all these workers, all these boys who were my co-conspirators knew that I was in a jam. They knew that worse will happen to me. They immediately change. They recognized that I had to play straight, and therefore, accept everything I have to say.

But the director of the camp knew I would be eventually in trouble. So he figure an ingenious way to get me to do something else. He knew that I had some background as a waiter in a kitchen. So he find work for me to be oversee in the kitchen. And I was suddenly deployed by him in the kitchen detail.

And he knew that I couldn't be there too long, that I would be inquired from either the engineer or the Storm Trooper where I am. So he told me, you will have to get out of here.

So you have to escape, basically.

You have to escape. And of course I know where the railroad station were. And he said, pick up two other boys with you. And I pick up two boys from my region, from the region not too far from Plánice. In fact, one was from Plánice and one was from village of Neprochovy.

And we are going such and such a time evening. We're going to be let out. And we're going to go railroad station, the main railroad station. And we going to get to Prague.

So you go to the main railroad station in Olomouc.

Olomouc, yes. But because we already live couple months in such isolation we really didn't know the changes which took place all in the town, in the city, and at all in the country. The railroad station was in chaos overcrowded. There was no departure. There were no what was called departure or arrival. there was no schedule posted anymore. There were just haphazard train moving and going and coming. There we faced the biggest challenge and danger.

And this is about when? Is this now-- we're talking the winter of 1945?

We are talking, already, April.

Oh, we're talking April.

We are very close to the end of the war.

So you are in this labor camp.

In Olomouc, in the railroad station, I believe Adolf Hitler is still alive. But he is-- it must be around-- it's after his birthday, so it must be well after 20.

So but let me establish this, then. You were in the labor camp for four months, five months? How long were you there?

About four months.

So it's right after New Years that you're in the labor camp.

Yeah. These were months which took a tremendous change. In fact, the front in the West were going faster than in the East. I find later on that the Americans were holding on the gates of Klatovy while I was still in the East.

Yeah.

They were actually moving fast from the West then they were moving east. So here we were. But it was a complete chaos And there I endangered, again, the situation. My two Czech compatriots were depending on me, with my knowledge of geography and German, to take the lead.

So I was very naive. Today you would call it stupid. I asked nicely, politely the German three soldiers who were-- apparently had drunk, laying close to the floor, if they know which is the next train going next to Prague, because we could not see anything. And I did not realize that they were drunk. And they were deserters. That I didn't know, too.

But they reacted. Very drunk. And they were on that [INAUDIBLE] and they have gun right away aim on my head. They were just-- my two-- bodyguard? No, they were not bodyguard. My-- I'm sorry. I'm a little confused. But I know what I'm talking about.

I know. I know.

My two Czechs are standing by. And I know this is my moment of true. Should I throw myself on the ground and roll, because I know they will shoot? And that is a process, a mental process with how quickly should I act? And suddenly one of my Czech compatriots there, who knows nothing but few words in German, throw himself with open arms on the German and call him comrade, comrade.

And I run. I clear out. That was my way out. And different part of station. And I don't know how long it took, but our-- my savior did find us hiding-- a little [? of ?] [? that, ?] too. And he had cigarettes. He had number of things.

And he laughed. He say he-- all he did was to kept cursing in every curse-- Czech word he ever know and curse them. And they were just drunk, and they gave him stuff. But he never find out any departure of train and never find anything.

We quickly arrive that there were vigilantly walking through the railroad station, and they were Hitlerjugend. And they were apparently looking for these deserters of the Wehrmacht. This was probably why these three German drunk soldier react to my polite German.

Oh, I see.

That was why they react with that-- how they react. I was too nice. And that was, I think-- we realized that

we're not going anywhere asking any questions. So we get to the station, to the ramp of the station. And there stands train. And it was direction going to Prague. We just get in the train.

And it move about in half an hour. But we knew immediately we went on the wrong train. It was train loaded with wounded soldiers from the front. It was horrible. I realized this was a military train.

And we hardly pull out of city of Olomouc, and it actually was-- not derailed. We did not know that a partisan action and resistance were already waiting out of cities. And we simply have to get out of train. Train derail.

So they derailed the train?

They [? redail ?] the train. There was emergency. And there was an action of partisan. It was again our not know-- four months in this isolated-- we were not totally isolated, but we did not know that that situation in the country is not the one-- when we were riding from west to east, that we were in a war zone.

That things had changed so drastically, because you had been so isolated for so-- for those four months.

There were no [INAUDIBLE], no regulations [INAUDIBLE]. No civilians were allowed to travel certain distances unless you have a paper and reason to go someplace, which we did not have. There were number of emergency rules which we knew nothing, which we have to learn as we're going out. We did not know that there is such a resistance, a partisan group already moving, attacking, already retreating Germans, and that we get by mistake in military train. And we didn't get too far.

But at that moment when the train did have to stop and was derail. And everybody was going out and half of it was in a different direction, we realized, clear out of here and on foot. No more trains.

And so what did you do?

From on on my two compatriots has to depend on me. I had a good knowledge of geography.

Excuse me. I need to interrupt for a moment. There is some other kind of noise going on as you're speaking. Can you-- are you jiggling something? Because there's some other kind of noise that I'm hearing.

OK. I will check quickly with my-- check with my son. He may be doing something downstairs.

No, no, no, no, no. It was very close to the telephone. It was-- were you handling something? It's stopped now. It's stopped now. So let's keep on going.

I think it's my wheelchair.

Ah, maybe that's what it is. Maybe that's what it--

I will therefore lean forward. I won't [? do it. ?] Well, we start to go on foot. And it's a long way from east, from Silesia, to West Bohemia.

Of course. Of course.

And I don't-- and we encounter many, many things. But we were somehow-- guardian angel-- we made it. And I am not going into one air raid when we find ourselves trying at the passing Prague. And we were already in the center of Bohemia. We were getting close to city. And we want to get into Plzen.

And we find out there are no trains. Then we find out the American Air Force has a total control of airspace. And anything which move on-- they were just waiting for and attacking everything. And we witness one of attack. One railroad station from which we were hoping we would be able to travel a little short leg to Plzen. From big city already we're in the territory which we knew what to do. But that was not to be. There was air raid. And it was on.



And on that station, apparently, there was a young Hitlerjugend guy. And how did he find himself there, standing against window? I was standing [? next ?], but in a safe place. And somehow, when the air raid come and everything start to move and windows start to come up, he was apparently hit by this flying glass. But I did not know that. I didn't see that. I only can conclude that is how it happened, because I managed to get out of railroad station. I managed to get across the little creek, which was like little river, across to a few bushes where I would hide.

Was this in Plzen?

That was in that little town called Sdice. You might not-- it's on the way to Plzen. But we are not in Plzen.

I see.

That was where we were hoping we would catch train.

I see.

We were told that sometimes evening train might move. And we were hoping, by watching and sitting in that station, waiting, that train might come. It was wishful thinking. That's how we were caught in this little station in-- railroad station in Sdice.

How do I spell Sdice?

Did you find it?

No. Can you tell-- can you spell it for me?

S-D-I-C-E. It's right south from Prague. It's on our way-- Sdice, and then come Beroun and Rokycany. It's very close-- it's hardly 40 miles from Prague.

Got it. Got it.

And from there we were thinking we get into Plzen. And from, with some local train or some way we will get to West part of our country. I would go to my Těchonice. The other guy would go to his town of Plánice. And I could clearly give them directions. I knew where we were.

How did you get to Prague, eventually, from Olomouc to Prague?

We walked.

You walked. You walked to Prague.

We walked. And we found out we could-- we find out that we could not travel from Prague to Plzen at all. There we find out that we were lucky, on a railroad station to find, when we asked to buy a ticket-- and there was a young girl who was maybe hardly year older than me. And she quickly could see that we were running.

And she quickly tell us, I can't give you a ticket because you don't have any paper that you need to go to Sdice. But I am going to give you ticket. But I can-- no, she said, I can't give you ticket to Plzen, but I give it to you to Sdice, because after Sdice comes Kontrolle.

Oh, I see.

And so you can get-- and maybe later in night you might find a train. So we were fortunate, again, to get just a little hop. Little hop. And there we find ourselves waiting for the [INAUDIBLE], for the train which may come, because as I say, American Air Force, with planes which we call divers, [CZECH] or something-- they dive. They simply are accurate. And they finish anything which move.

And they-- apparently there was something on the railroad station. There were some trains and something. And that was the attack. And we were just caught in. And there was a little creek, and I find myself across, laying and hoping that I will survive this attack.

And next to me is this Hitlerjugend guy. And he-- I admire his belt. I admire his knife. He have knife, sort of a German type of Hitlerjugend have-- I simply was in [? awe ?] of that part of his uniform and his corduroy pants.

And he was picking-- he was bloody. He was picking up eyeglass parts out of his hand. And he was cursing. Verrückte Amerikanische. Oh, he was yelling and speaking. And he find every curse, German curse on the-- cursing the American gangster.

Yes, because--

And I say to myself, if he only knows one of them lay here right next to him.

[LAUGHTER]

That's right, that one of these--

That was the irony of-- irony of that. I see him as the day. I see his hand. I see that blood. And from then it was over. I reunite with my two friends because this, of course-- and things like that, at that age-- we pledge each other friendship and that we stay to each other. But when moment of truth arrive we all scatter and every man for himself.

Sure.

This moment was clearly learning. I learned something about myself, that I was concerned suddenly by my safety and they were concerned about their safe-- but we finally reunite and decide, no more ever try anything. Just walk.

So you decide at this point you're going to walk.

Well, and don't try to go through my main highway. Forget about going straight. You're looking for-- from now on we fully realized we were in [? just-- ?] we were in war zone. We realized country was full of surprises to us, full of unexpected things.

And we did find ourselves, even in our walk, into a situation where I was in danger more than my two Czech friends. We were in a little town called [? Venishep ?] or something. And there were two gendarmes-- these were protectorate gendarmes, Czech policemen. But we call them četníci.

And one was younger, one was older. And they absolutely knew quickly that we were running, we were on the run. We were absolutely in sad shape. We were also hungry. And we were also dirty.

And the youngest stop and want immediately identification. He want immediately Kennkarte. And I have to come with my Fremdenpass. And he was so zealous. Apparently he did not understand English, neither-- I mean French. And neither did he understood French and-- or German.

But the older [INAUDIBLE], I remember how he talked Czech to him. I remember that his name was [? Pepic. ?] [? He goes, ?] [? Pepico, ?] [CZECH], which meant, just leave it. Let them go. Leave it. But this guy was determined that he would detain me. But the older one somehow convinced him, let me go.

So we get we had to be even more careful not to even go to any place at all, just looking for forest. But anyway, there is more to it, but I think I'm taking you away from you-- what you want to really hear than telling you about my homecoming from this forced labor camp during upheaval, which was at that time 1945, at the end of April in central of Europe.

Well, this is-- I was waiting until we-- I was wondering, first of all, are we at the end of the war yet? When you're going through this you say that you escape from Olomouc about the time that Hitler's birthday had passed. And that's April 20. And then there's only three or more weeks left before the war ends. So were all-- was this entire trek from Olomouc back to Western Czechoslovakia taking place during those three weeks?

Yes. For this trip we took more than week--

I know.

--what I'm describing. My homecoming I was not in shape to do much walking or doing anything. My feet were bloody. My homecoming-- I won't describe that right away.

But if I will continue, then, we finally make it in the south of our country, call in the city of Blatná. Blatná is the southern part Czech-- and we are close. I already know that we have to turn to the right, to the west. And I already know that it will take a matter of hours and we will find ourselves on the road home.

But we spend the night in the railroad station at Blatná because we did not want to spend it outside. And there was hardly anybody inside the railroad station. We are spending it in the waiting room that night. And it was a night of-- where we were close to a point we have had it, as they say here. We are absolutely-- are we going to make it? We have to try. We are not only in sad shape, we are hungry.

Of course.

We are hungry. And we are afraid to any [? ask ?] and come to contact with people. And we know we are close. So we have to make it. We get out early in the morning, early, before anything we can-- and we get in country road. And we finally get into a little town which-- and this is early in the morning. And we suddenly know that we are close to the war zone. We heard artillery. We already know that on the left side of-- us we hearing the front.

So we are a little bit-- [? let's ?] [? play. ?] We begin to be a little bit like a chicken.

Well, of course. You're scared. Who wouldn't be?

We begin to-- and we were hungry. And we are moving into the village, which later on I realized was called [PLACE NAME]. And we moving in a hill. And on the road is a farmer. And he's doing something. And he take one look on us-- he take one look on us and he says, boys, let's go with me, [CZECH]. I mean, he did not ask anything. And he took us in his farmhouse. And it's the beginning of the village, beginning of the village.

And he get us in the farmhouse. And his wife-- and he order breakfast for us. And lord, she make eggs for us. And there was coffee. There was bread. Well, it was unbelievable. It was unbelievable. We were fed suddenly. And he gave us very good direction of where to go, what to do.

He may have introduced himself, but in that confu-- in that shape we were like in trance--

Well, you were--

--because I mentioned that if anything bigger thing had happened in me until-- on this episode it was this. Forget the German encounter. It was this encounter of somebody human and compassionate and giving us to eat and giving us direction. And we are not showing much of gratitude. We are just taking.

And I was [? bad ?] all my-- all years about this encounter, that I neglect to ask about the man name, everything. But I remember the hill. I remember the farmhouse. I remember it so well.

It has ending, and it is not a good ending, because I remember him 1962, on my visit, when I visited tourist as a Czech-- as American tourist and being-- and I'm being taken into custody and charged on espionage and subversion. During my stay in 1962 and visit I reconnected with this man. I reconnected and find out

that his name was [? Maching ?] [? Novak. ?]

And I came to visit him with [? Brenda ?] early in the morning as a tourist, as a business-- as a grown-up man who had been around the world and suddenly remembered that this was the place where I met somebody with so much help and compassion. And I wanted to say thank you. And it was unbelievable.

I find out so much that this was true patriot, true person, true character. And he-- soon as I appear, early, on his courtyard where I met him after so many years, he say, I know. I know. I know who you-- you are one of them. I met you. He recognized me, too. And he [INAUDIBLE] went in the house and he ordered same breakfast.

Oh, gosh. Oh, gosh.

And he talk. And I let him know who I am and what I-- I take his address. And I say, I'm staying in such a place, Těchonice [INAUDIBLE]. I'm just visiting here. I just dropped in. And I'm glad I find who you are. And I will let you know, and I certainly will remember you when I go back to America.

Well, I gave a goodbye and was very emotional. And of course, within a few days he pick up his son-- they have a motorcycle. And they drive and find the village of Těchonice visiting-- with the intention to visiting me. But I wasn't in the village because I was always someplace else. But they visiting my grandmother.

So there they make connection. They left a letter for me. And this letter was [? find ?] [? up ?] when I was arrested, on my possession, and his address.

And I'm not going to do that, because this is long and complex and horrible story-- how it ended for a man of character because he was draw into my affairs [? are, ?] which was nothing but stupid and foolish thing. I was not a spy. I was not there to do any subversion or anyone. I was just naive person who had-- full of nostalgia, want to retrace steps which were so meaningful in my life.

I'm going to summarize this a little bit and see whether or not-- you tell me whether I understood it properly. What you're talking about is, in the last days of the war, before you even reach home, when you and your two friends, your two compatriots are at your-- are at the final stages, where you haven't eaten, where you're hungry, where you've been walking for such a long time-- and one morning-- and you're avoiding people and you're avoiding train stations because they could be dangerous for you. And one morning, as you were already in the Western part of the country, you meet up with this farmer who takes you home, who feeds you, who-- so you have some food and sustenance for the first time. And you feel bad because when you leave you don't say thank you or you don't remember his name or whatever. You don't acknowledge that as much.

And so the next time you are able to, which is when you visit the country in 1962-- and that's about 17 years later-- you stop by. You visit him. You say hello. You leave your name. He knows who you are.

And he then goes and leaves a letter for you in your town, where your grandmother gives it to you. And then, during this visit is the time where the Czech socialist Soviet authorities arrest you for espionage. They find this letter. And he, in some ways, is-- has a great many unpleasantness because he is then involved in your case. Is that correct?

It is so correct that you make me feel ashamed--

Why?

--because you summarize this beautifully. It was exactly-- that is a short and precise what it was all about.

So in other words, you had wanted to say thank you to the man. And--

That was the purpose.

--because of your contact of wanting to say thank you he then gets into trouble. And was he able to extricate himself from this trouble in 1962?

Yes. I was eventually, as you know, released six months later, was eventually reaching back Washington, D.C., and assume my normal life, and with much more chastised with my experience, but much more richer. And I kept least written contact with him. I send him at least greeting. And I kept minimum contract with him in writing.

But very careful knowing my experience what happened. But in his case, because he was a [? patrioted ?] Czech and he apparently had a large [? farmer, ?] and his farm was confiscated. His family was driven out of that village into entirely different region. And he died naturally as a result of it in very early age, which was only not-- he was only 67 when I learned from his son where he died and under which circumstances. And certainly, I feel guilty.

I see. So are you saying that as a result of your visit the authorities realized he had a big farm, and then they confiscated it from him? That is, he came into the attention of the authorities.

Yes.

That's tough. That's really tough.

And then I find-- can I continue?

Yes, please.

When I finally arrived to Těchonice-- and, as I say, our house is at the end of the village road to Plánice I was only left with my-- one accomplice, who had two hours more to go to Plánice. I saw my grandmother splitting wood in the courtyard. But she did not recognize me. She did not even much pay attention when I--

Excuse me. I'm hearing that noise again.

Oh, my problem. I'm sorry. She apparently did not recognize-- I must have looked horrible. And she did not recognize who am I. And then I suddenly spoke. Did she come out with [INAUDIBLE] and that country and that [INAUDIBLE] this is [INAUDIBLE] Bobby. And Jesus, Maria, this is Bobby. This is [INAUDIBLE].

And from that moment there was a commotion. They put me on some chair. They put some water on my feet. And I must have passed out. And I must have slept very long hours, maybe two days. Maybe two days.

And when I did woke up I did [? explain ?] I already learned that Adolf Hitler was dead. I already learned from them that war is nearby. And I already learned from them, you sit tight. Don't go anyplace. And I suddenly felt I should visit Klatovy. But that would be [? suddenly-- ?] and unfortunately, I wouldn't listen to them. And there was no way to get to Klatovy but walk.

Why did you want to go to Klatovy?

Because I want to know what was happening in Hotel Central and with all my friends there. And I was also a little worried about that I was really, actually, illegally on the way. I want to reconnected. I did not know that Klatovy was close to war zone. It was plain stubborn and foolish.

But anyway, I made it to Klatovy. And I pick [? up ?] a day. It was May 5, May-- 5th May. And it was a very historical day. I couldn't pick up a better day to be in Klatovy, because when I arrive and head for Hotel Central I found it was no longer Hotel Central. It was made out to be an army, Lazarett, which is a temporary hospital, taking care of wounded. Simply hotel was not there.

So I turned back. And now as I walk to the main square, suddenly sirens and everything incredible commotion start. I did not know. I find it was interesting that when I entered Klatovy it was quiet. There were very few people on the road, practically nobody.

I should have paid attention. That was odd. Klatovy and people in Klatovy knew far more than I can ever get. They knew and they expected, this is the last day of German occupation, because this was a day that suddenly, German signed-- German authority in Klatovy signed capitulation of Klatovy.

Excuse me, something happened again. I didn't hear you. The Germans did what in Klatovy?

Germans did sign-- they signed the--

Capitulation?

They capitulate. They capitulated to Czech authority. And the Americans were not too far. Americans were actually a few miles back of Klatovy.

I see.

And I happened to be, in that moment, in Klatovy on the day of liberation.

That's amazing.

I just pick a day to see the end of war in Klatovy. And it was different day in Těchonice, where I also [INAUDIBLE] It was a different thing to be there. And of course, the excitement and everything was unbelievable that day, when suddenly all of those flags-- where all those flags came up from-- Czech flags, American flags. And then all these people on the square and the commotion. But it was not without violence, because I think everybody was too enthusiastic to-- it was euphoria. It was just-- everybody act irrational, including me.

What did you do?

Well, in that moment I was standing in Klatovy. And I was trying to destroy my German ID. I have a document which [INAUDIBLE]. And I was tearing it apart. That was the wrong thing to do. Fortunately, I did not have my Fremdenpass, because I would be without ID. I was-- as people were trying to get rid of German sign, German symbol, German this. I was trying to do something visibly. So I tried to get rid.

When you say you try to get rid, were you trying to get rid of your Kennkarte, your ID card, or your Fremdenpass?

I did have a written recommendation which-- and it had my picture. And the picture would have been interesting show me, really, the way I look at that age. I had tremendous loss of weight. I certainly looked fake. And I would have liked to show what it was like, the end of war, that I did not look right. I destroyed it. I destroyed it.

But I suddenly-- suddenly there was a commotion and big crowd of people. These were Czech vigilante-- let's call them vigilante-- who took the laws into their own hands prematurely, before Americans entered the city. And they went into a location where Gestapo was. And they went in the location where the NSDAP headquarters was.

And they apparently located Herr Green. Herr Green was an absolutely harmless Storm Trooper. And he did not look like German super man at all. He was obese. He looked like an ape. He certainly was not a picture of a super race, super man.

And he was actually not even second fiddle. He was actually nobody in that organization of NSDAP. And he was actually [? pulled ?] to stay in that headquarters. He was absolutely-- he looked abnormal, subnormal.

And he must have asked someone. He must have [? shoot ?] out of the headquarters of the NSDAP building. And he was apparently captured and beaten. And [? on ?] the entrance of Herr Green with the vigilante was nothing but [? mass ?] of [? blocks. ?]

Well, was he beaten to death or was he still alive?

He was not beaten to death. Irony, again-- he lived long enough-- and I have actually find out, when I was, 1962, in a jail in Plzen. I [? simply ?] find up somebody who remember Mr. Green. He was imprisoned in [? Renumines ?] in-- near a city called [? Februm. ?] And he was still there in 18-- I mean, 1957. So Herr Green survived.

But at that time, at that day, he did not look like survive-- not like he would survive.

Yeah. Yeah.

They were not-- what was left at that moment I will not describe in detail. But I already went and stayed there, waiting for Americans to arrive. There were delegations. There were everything.

But Americans were not coming. And I was waiting. And it was already 6 o'clock evening, 7 o'clock. And I knew it will take me four hours to walk back to Těchonice, home. So I finally left, 7 o'clock. And that was the wrong thing, to walk that night when Klatovy was liberated-- walk during the night on the main road back to Těchonice.

I encounter lots of German army personnel. Some of them I would not know their ranks or what branch of service they belonged. They were, of course, fleeing and trying to get out. They must have the bad conscience. And somehow or another I made it to place which is called Nalžovské Hory today. From there, which is hardly half an hour to Velenovy, where Václav's-- to Florian's home.

And it is night. It's practically midnight. And I did not know this little town and little village of Velenovy has also vigilante. And there was a little turn and there was a little bushes and little-- some-- this tree. And there was a shortcut. And I get that shortcut during the night.

And suddenly I'm being hugged. The vigilantes were-- Czech vigilante was waiting in the night. And they have only a flashlight. And they asked for identification. And I'm already so close to home. And I had nothing but that Fremdenpass. And when they see Fremdenpass with Hakenkreuz, with swastika and with all of that thing they are ready to shoot. They think they got the Germans.

And they had with guns. They have weapons already. They had [INAUDIBLE] [? now. ?] But anyway, before they [? do ?] [INAUDIBLE] I talk Czech to them. They call somebody, and somebody come around. And it is one of my classmate from high school. His name was František [? Labart. ?]

And he say to them nicely in Czech, [SPEAKING CZECH], which means, boys, you are dumb. This is Bob from Těchonice. So they would have made big mistake. And there are lots of apology. And they let me go. And I kept going to Těchonice.

I expected that some fools in Těchonice are going to be vigilante, too. But I glide into Těchonice close to midnight. Nothing. Těchonice were rather sleepy already. And went to sleep.

And early in the morning I wake up suddenly. There's a great deal of commotion. Somebody's running. And everybody is calling Maria [CZECH]-- that's in Czech-- we need you. We need you. Americans are here. And everybody, apparently, in the village remembered that she is the only one who can communicate with them.

She's the one who was in Chicago.

Yes. So she knew that she could communicate. So I [? get way ?] ahead. My mother, of course, wouldn't run into her early attire from cows and everything. So she put some clean dresses or something on. And meantime I made it. I run.

And sure enough, in the middle of village there are three Jeeps. And they are GIs. I think there were about six of them altogether. And they have machine guns, wire close to the Jeeps. And I think this is apparently

an advance patrol, advance patrol.

And they are suddenly in the middle of the village. And all people all around. And I come. And everybody made [? room ?] for me because they also think that I might know English, or sure I knew because Monsieur [? Argiacon ?] taught me a few phrases. And it was all very English. I bow and say-- I say, how do you do?

[LAUGHTER]

And this GI-- and GI, they busted in laughter. Incredible laughter. And I was taken away while they were laughing. I know from little later-- I just didn't realize, within hardly two years I will be wearing same uniform.

That's amazing. Two years.

And was an absolutely-- and with my little [INAUDIBLE], I am so and so. Good morning. Suddenly my mother appear. And that I never knew about mother-- up to my date that was a different woman than when she was facing the Ordnungspolizei in the house search, when she was lost and did not know what to do. This woman suddenly knew exactly what to do. She was in no time in full swing and conversation with them, answering every sort of questions, including when all the women will arrive and ask her in Czech, [? Marchino, ?] ask them how is our Pepi doing in Baltimore, which was funny.

[LAUGHTER]

That's funny.

It was funny. This old woman had her relatives in Baltimore. Mother's laughing too. I say-- so she asked them where they are from. And these boys were actually from places like Ohio. I remember it sounds funny, Ohio, to me at that time. And they were also from Pennsyl-- but thankfully they were not from Maryland. And they knew nothing about Pepi from Baltimore.

However, the old woman was not entirely off base. I learned after many years that actually, her grandson-- that was her grand-- her grandson was actually in Sušice in US Army.

Isn't that interesting?

Yeah. But at that time it sounded that she was asking for the impossible thing. But that's another side of the story. But that actually is finally-- I am feeling, finally, I am in Těchonice. Country is liberated. I am seeing a liberator. I am seeing Americans. I am one of them. And I am feeling glory. I am feeling great.

And that day-- that day I never forget. And of course, they wouldn't stay in Těchonice because they-- as mother told me later, they were advanced patrol. And they were sent on a patrol because Těchonice were surrounded by forest. And they were, of course, [INAUDIBLE] mother, did she see any German, did they have any weapons? Things like that.

Yeah, of course.

Things like that. And of course, then they thanked her. And of course, all the people around her are asking of Mother-- of course, they call her [? Marchino-- ?] ask her-- because they were smoking, ask them for a cigarette. And before I know my mother-- I never knew could actually ask for things. I would be little ashamed. Without any shame she asked them for this and that. And of course, that's the first time I saw chewing gum. I saw this because she was without shame asking them for things, including cigarettes.

Amazing. Amazing that-- yeah. But it was--

And of course--

This was May 5th? Was this May 6th or May 5th?



This was May 6 already. This is morning 6. This is after Klatovy. And there is, therefore-- and they are being [? known ?] they are in large number in town of Strábrné Hory, today Nalžovské Hory, which is hardly our-- and so that day everybody who was anybody in that village and could walk walked to Nalžovské to see the US army.

I was ahead of time. By the time I met my mother, who was [? on the hill. ?] She had number of things. She had a can of tuna fish. She had some cheese. She had some tooth powder.

She have so many things-- so she have chocolate because she was asking left and right . She was in talk with them and talked with the women who were, of course, eager to find out what should they cook for these Americans, what-- the Americans have enough to eat. They didn't need to. But they did cook for them.

And I witnessed a first American field kitchen in the war because they were feeding the troops who were stationed and temporarily occupying this little town, which was an important [? point ?] on the way to Klatovy, on the way to Horažďovice, on the way to Sušice. It was important point. How many of [? them-- ?] they have tanks. They have communication systems. That was enough for local population to see that the army was well supplied and abundance of everything, and that they were generous to everyone.

And then they set up the field kitchen. And there were, [? I ?] [? remember, ?] [? a ?] [? place ?] distributing food. We could see how they well-- they were organized and how well they were fed. And they suddenly had two crates of oranges.

There were children there in line who were looking who never saw oranges. And what was interesting-- the army who was in charge-- I wouldn't know who was it then-- lined up the little kids for oranges. And I remember that we-- all the kids want to get in line, too. But he's only gets the children who were up to maybe age of six or seven.

But everybody get oranges. So from then on my situation's entirely different. I and Mother suddenly got important-- we find ourself that people suddenly looking for information and looking for [? reference. ?] I couldn't give much, but my mother certainly have lot of things to say. That, however, created problem for her later, when the communist regime established power in Czechoslovakia. That was her problem.

Well, I'd like to--

I was no longer in the country. But that was our best time for her and for her to-- I realized that she knew English very well, that she could commune-- she told me later that there were times where I think she must have stumbled. She said there were certain terms, military which she did not know about. For example, I know that she have problems with arms and guns.

Ah, yeah.

So with her-- she knew what the guns was, but apparently she mistake a few things. She said that took her some time to figure out what they really were after. But otherwise her communication-- because they actually want her to stay there and be communicating with them. She stayed absolutely for absolutely a day there. I did not see where she was in some military post, I think in some place where they have radio station. They sent us immediately some [INAUDIBLE] communication system. And that's where she was. I was with the rest of the kids around.

So that is the end. I'm not-- was the end for Václav in Velenovy because he was there, too.

So I think that there are just a few things for us to cover later. I don't think that we're quite yet at the end of your story. You have a-- there are a few more questions that I have. And I would like to schedule another day. Can we do that? Would that work for you?

Tomorrow?

Tomorrow I cannot, but Thurs--

Which day?

It would be Thursday, probably around 3:30, something like that. Would that work?

That's fine. That's fine. I will only think that the most important thing for you would be the story of the Polish student.

And also, I want to find out what Jula told your mother when she comes back from Theresienstadt. That would be interesting.

OK, fine. I will be ready. I am home almost every day. I don't think so-- my son is going out and shopping himself.