

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Robert Budway. And today's date is September 3rd, 2020. So, Mr. Budway, when we stopped speaking the other day, it was just about the time when you experienced liberation, first in Klatovy and then in your own home village of "Technovice." Is that correct?

Yes, Těchonice.

Technovice. And you mentioned something about how your mother's English became something quite valuable at that time because American soldiers appeared. American soldiers were the ones of the Allied forces who liberated that part of Czechoslovakia. So can you tell me what happened next, and how did this affect your family?

At that junction, of course, there was excitement, there was hope, that life will entirely be different, and we will revert back what it was like before the war. That was a fiction, which was quickly dissolving day by day. I knew that I could not stay in Těchonice for too long, that I had to continue somehow my career as a waiter. So I left after all this excitement and after everything to Klatovy.

Yeah, I'm listening.

I left for Klatovy. I quickly recognized that there will be not easy things as it was before because Hotel Central was at that time occupied by a German hospital. The hospital was cleared quickly. The Americans moved in. The owner of the hotel was nowhere in sight. The Germans were no longer in streets. And they were now in assembly places, in turn either in the public places and military. They were not visible.

And, of course, I heard they were treated quite harsh. But my problem was how to reconnect again with life in Klatovy and do something useful. Hotel Central was definitely out of the question because it was devastated. And the Americans finished it quite well even there, because they were short time only. And I hang around. And I make connection with them. I don't know if it is worth to talk about my experience of reconnecting with my countrymen?

Tell me about it because did you let them know, for example, that you are an American citizen?

Yeah. I didn't have to do that very much because I have a problem where to find a living space. I have to look for a room. That, of course, means that I have to go to the city hall. And, of course, the worst situation, then personnel in the city hall change in spite that Americans were real combat, open arms, and there was jubilation. There was a new constellation formed. And the city was no longer what it was when it was united against the German occupation. Now city began to be fragmented. Political situation began to be visible.

The countries who had only four political parties, that was a definitely good development, instead of having 20 during first Republic. However, [INAUDIBLE] were visible in places like city hall. The city hall suddenly to be called the National Council. It was called "národní výbor." I would translate it as a National Council. These councils were in every village, every little town suddenly. Somehow mostly even wherever I was, they were dominated by members of Communist Party. That became clear although their aims was not clear and visible.

But I was no longer-- it wasn't easy to move in that city hall. When I requested that they find a room-- and there should have been lots of spaces because Germans were out-- the city definitely did have enough to accommodate one single guy. I find difficulty definitely and hostility. So as I walked out at city hall, on the corner was already military office which deals with civilian security. It was American military office. And, of course, I no longer was showing my Fremdenpass pass to anybody. But I did have my birth date certificate from Oak Park.

So I walk into the place and somehow along, I manage to communicate what my problem was.

And was your problem--

And--

--excuse me me-- was your problem that you couldn't find room, or was your problem that you didn't have identification papers that reflected who you really were?

I was already more or less to be exploring around. I was already seeing I have a other problem than identity. It was my nationality. It was my state citizenship. From people I received nothing but good reception. I was welcome. But the official National Council office and few other places were certainly not receptive because they were in communist hands. That I did not fully understood and even could really operate as I could do today. So I'd walk with my [? complain ?].

And apparently whatever I communicate, they did understood that as a citizen of the United States, just had some difficulty. So they look on my birth date certificate, and they wrote one of those little memo, to whom it might concern.

This is the American--

Which--

--military authorities?

Yes. That was US military authorities, which was temporarily right on a corner not too far from a city hall. So it happened very fast. And I was received well. My certificate certainly caused some interest. And there was a quick response. A young soldier who must have been a corporal and must knew how to type, in fact, went to the commanding officers there, who were obviously next door. And it was very quick. And I had a little paper, which say who am I and how should they treat me. At that particular time, I certainly could not translate what they wrote. But I know it today. And I have many copy of it to make sure that I don't lose anything.

So that was my-- finally I could use it as some sort of identification, who am I? And I went back to the city hall. And within that same couple hours, there was incredible change. The little note produced is resolved. I was getting settled in a nice little room and not too far from Hotel Central. Unbelievable. And my new landlady was very nice, very accommodating, and therefore, I attach myself to Hotel Central, which I visited, where the Americans were already in. And out showing that little paper. And so I was sort of appendage to them and tolerated and, in fact, suddenly being consulted on a few things.

So if I understand this, when you went into the office of the US military authorities on the corner of the same street where there was the city hall with this National Council, they, based on your birth certificate, write a letter-- a short note that says, to whom it may concern. And that note says that you are a US citizen. Is that correct? It identifies--

Yeah, and that I should be treated as such.

And then you take that and go back to city hall, and their attitude changes In the sense that they find a room for you all of a sudden. The landlady is nice. And it is very close to Hotel Central, which is where you had worked as a waiter before? But now--

Yeah.

--it's under American control. And you are somehow rather attached to the Americans who are running Hotel Central. Is that correct?

Yes. They were not running the hotel. They just simply move in and had their headquarters there because it had room for the official deed offices in order to be-- when they clear it out from-- because prior to it, it was German military hospital, which was called "Lazarett" already for the casualties. And they established themselves. And I was very able-- I knew what the hotel was all about.

So you didn't speak any English at that point?

I just have some vocabulary. I did have after all, a few lessons from Monsieur [? Argiacon ?] who once upon a time was also a guest in the hotel. That is during the German occupation. So the little English I did have--

Excuse me, have you mentioned this person to me before?

I beg your pardon?

The person who you had a few lessons with, who was this again? I didn't hear the name of--

That was the Frenchman, Monsieur [? Argiacon ?].

Can you--

--who was the temporary guest-- who was a mystery guest and who I met before I went to labor camp.

So can you spell his last name for me? Because it's not--

That would be difficult because it was French. I only know the pronunciation, [? Argiacon ?].

[? Argiacon ?], OK. So Mr. [? Argiacon ?] gave you a few lessons in English?

Yeah.

And that's what you were using at this point?

Yes. And, of course, those few days with Americans already, I was picking up the words here and there. So I was able to communicate a few things because I must have communicated all right with that office, where they gave me there's a little piece of paper, which says, to whom it may concern. So they understood that I had some difficulties.

And what did you basically do for the Americans headquartered at Hotel Central? What were some of your functions? There are a few little things I did. But there was one, which was eye opener for me. They, for example, wanted to hire male dishwashers. And they asked me if I can help them to hire somebody. In fact, they gave me actually carte blanche hire someone. And I had to politely-- I was shocked because that was a first confrontation how the culture in the United States and in Central Europe differ because no man in Klatovy inspired that he would love to be near America, would be employed as a dishwasher. I told them the impossibility for me to--

Why? Was it a demeaning or menial position? Is it one that women generally had?

As far as I know at that time, that was a woman's job.

I see.

It was ingrained in every male, I believe, in that country, in that city, and as far even than me.

I see. And--

That's why I was ready to do it myself just to be near that. But I would not have been happy about it. So I communicate to the impossible. So that is an example of some of the things I did. But they also therefore solved the problem easily. They apparently went in to one of the German military detained place where the German soldier who surrender-- POW, prisoner of war. And they find out about a dozen every morning. And I, of course, was useful because these Germans did just little menial works, which would have been considered demeaning.

And I did have suddenly some sense I was supervising. Suddenly, my position-- I was telling these German soldier, who I only a couple of months ago serve beer, I was telling them what to do for the American in the hotel. So my position was quite turned over.

Of course. The roles changed.

Some of them even had a skill as barbers. So they were-- there was plenty for these Germans. And they were willing and eager to do that because when the Americans had finished their lunch or dinner or whatever in the kitchen, which I knew only too well, whatever is left, the German-- I was directed to tell them that they can carry it off. And they were eating outside. So they obviously get that there were plenty things for them to acquire, which they did not have in the place of their detention. For example, the barber was getting his tips in cigarettes.

That's a big currency.

And that was a very priced item for anybody, and particularly for German POW. So that is what I did. Occasionally, I did find some temporary job in some restaurant and hotel when they have something to do. But outlook for me to be fully employed was diminishing. And even I, not even 17, could see that time is changing. Economics is changing because many people were leaving into a border region, the former Sudetenland. There were plenty of opportunities in Sudetenland.

In the former Sudetenland? Now--

Yes.

--was the former--

Because the Czech were occupying that. And Czech wanted to, of course, bring as more back the former border region. They did not call it Sudetenland. It was a border region. It was called "pohraničí" in Czech. And that's where the opportunity for somebody at my age were. So it didn't last long. I probably lasted in Klatovy a little over three months.

Now was that such that the opportunity in the former Sudetenland was there because there were no more Sudeten Germans? Or were they still living there? They were still there. But later on-- of course, when I finally get into job and post there, they were-- in fact, the Czech administration and Czech new wave, which was coming in to take over not only the administrative situation there, but of properties were behaving exactly as the Germans were behaving against the Jewish population because all German did not have to wear a yellow star. But every German was marked with the white armband on their right hand.

So they were marked exactly same type of restriction Jewish population faced during the war or during a time of protectorate, the Germans were facing same restrictions. They couldn't, for example, go shopping. Every time they went-- they could not go into any movie, any entertainment. They could not go to the hotels where I was working. We could clearly say when I know some of the restrictions Jewish population face at the beginning of German occupation in Bohemia. The Germans were treated exactly in Czech, Sudetenland, exactly as they were treating Jewish population in 1939 and 1940.

And--

That's it.

And what opportunities in this area were available for you? What made it attractive for you to go there?

I had heard, of course, about these opportunities. Nearby-- close, not too far from Klatovy, hardly more than hour by train-- was a well-known tourist attraction called Zelezná Ruda. German called it Markt Eisenstein. And it was located in beautiful spot, what Czech used to call Sumava. Sumava would be translated by German Bohmerwald. And I would translated in English, Bohemia Forest. That was a ski resort. It was a good ski resort, particularly wintertime, not so much during summertime.

Of course. And were you able to find work here?

Oh, soon as I arrived, I was immediately hired because there was only one hotel which was open and accessible to anyone who was able to use this facility. After all, the German owner was still in the hotel, but new and so-called national caretaker, which in Czech was "národní správce." All these places were to be nationalized. Legally, it wasn't done yet. The Czech government in Prague couldn't be so fast. But everything was already ahead of time. This new owner was Mr. Tomasek and his wife.

The one who had been in Dachau?

One who had been in Dachau, former inmate in Dachau. And on top of which, his wife was a Russian Czech. She apparently was left as a child, Soviet Union after the revolution and knew perfect Russian. She was a nice lady. She was a lady, every inch of her, and treat everybody with courtesy and politeness. She was a wonderful new boss. She was a great replacement for Fraulein Pressmar. I was treated as a human being.

And Mr. Tomasek because I think he was definitely-- I think he spent more than four years in Dachau. So he was really survivor. And mentally he had moves where he did not act-- where otherwise he was a very decent guy. But both of them, of course, were a member of the Communist party because they have priority. He not only had the priority to get this property because he was a political prisoner-- a former inmate of the concentration-- but he was also a registered Communist Party member. This is how you get ahead. In that time, in former Sudetenland, if you're coming from inland and want to acquire property.

So here's a question.

If you were a communist, you had no difficulty to be assigned some enterprise and some control. And you were designated as "národní správce." I would call it national caretaker.

So here is-- a couple of thoughts run to my mind. Number one, are the Americans still in military control at this point of that territory that you are in?

Yes and no. Americans present in West Bohemia were there. But they did not come as an occupier. The Czech have control. Americans were present was temporary there. Within four months, they'd be gone back into a zone of occupation of Germany.

That was one of my questions because what I had remembered reading is that they reached Pilsen and stopped. And then didn't go further, and then eventually retreated to-- or went back to, as you say, being the occupying force in Germany, in particular Bavaria, in the southern zone. So they did not interfere in any kind of civil administration or civil structures or authorities or anything like that?

No, not at all. They were just temporarily there. They were not alone. Of course, most of the country was-- I wouldn't call it occupation. They were liberated from Soviet Union Russia. You have to remember that Prague and much of the country was liberated. American presence in the West Bohemia was in line with Karlovy Vary, going down all the way to Budějovice and Karlovy Vary in Carlsbad and [PLACE NAME].

Yeah, I know the area. It's the really western part down to-- if you say České Budějovice, then that means on the border of Austria.

Correct. That becomes important, that region. American presence-- I know that by September, they were gone.

And when did the expulsion of the Germans take place, after the Americans leave?

That expulsion was, of course, already in a making. Some Germans, of course, left on their own initiative. They had probably those who left quickly. They didn't feel comfortable. And they probably know why. But it was after all decided finally in the Potsdam Conference, where the Allies met with-- as you know, the Potsdam Conference. But it's important to clarify their position in Europe. And, of course, the German

population, not only in Czechoslovakia, but even in Poland, was already isolated for it to be eventually resettled.

They are words how to use-- how it should be eventually-- the Czech political scene. And it was understandable even to me that certain segment of Czech government do very well already in London. The future German-speaking Czech population, which was German but Czech, that their life together into that new resurrected country will not be possible, that there is another political angle. But I don't think so that is what you really wanted to know. And I will not go into it unless you want me to.

No. For me, it is simply-- again, the central part of this story is what you experienced. So when I ask about this, it is usually how you came across this. Did you see it happen? Did you--

I will stick to it.

And since I know that's something that happened, I wondered whether or not you being in that area, were a witness to it.

I find myself to observe all of this. And I find myself, to my surprise, in sympathy and empathy with the Germans what they are facing. I know that most Czechs were, good riddance, and they deserve it. Some did, but some did not. I no longer-- slowly and surely was not for collective guilt. I didn't see everybody deserve what I was seeing.

I see. And is this when you-- what you were seeing is when you are based in this new hotel-- or this hotel that Mr. Tomasek is running-- and you're in Zelezná Ruda. And that's where you see things take place. Is that right?

Right. And I think we can finish that story because there is, within a year, interesting encounter with refugee which running from all across Czechoslovakia into Germany. And I was then connected to this situation, which happened in Poland, Kielce, in 1946. But that is yet to come. At this moment, I knew nothing about Poland and Kielce. But I quickly learned in that region because that the region was something because something was happening there all the time. [INAUDIBLE].

What was happening where all the time, Kielce?

I saw, for example, that little town-- that little resort-- was slowly being Bolshevized. The presence of Zelezná Ruda of Czech was mostly military and gendarme. A gendarme was the local. And then there was the what is called [CZECH], which actually were guarding the border and crossing the border. It mainly elite group and their families. They were coming back to take control of that region.

And the crossing border was-- the border was hardly located. Within 20 minutes, I would be right standing on the border. And there was a lot of legal and illegal going. But it was the political situation which was developing. I find out that we were the only hotel for almost a year which existed. Therefore, if I was during occupation, in Hotel Central, the Parteitag [INAUDIBLE]-- I was watching Communistic Parteitag evenings because the Communist Party was forming and holding their meetings in the hotel where evening, I have to serve them beer and listen to them.

So what was the name of the hotel in Zelezná Ruda?

It was, first of all, much propaganda. It wasn't unreal to me because it was reminiscent of what I experienced in the Hotel Central. Symbolically, even it was practically, graphically happening same thing what I had seen in Hotel Central.

I understand.

A large dining room was decorated in the war, huge, big picture of Adolf Hitler. Underneath was a little stand about his [INAUDIBLE]. That was in gold. And here in the Hotel Slavie after the war, it was a huge big job Joseph Stalin. And President, of course, Benes, was there too. But everything what I saw, it hit me, even

that I was not even 17.

So here's--

I don't know why it hit me. I just was reacting-- as a teenager, I was reacting. And I did not know how to control my feelings. So I showed it either facially or sometimes laughing, some of the things I heard. In no time, I was persona non grata. So I actually caused my situation in Zelezná Ruda to be hard and untenable.

How long--

I started--

How long were you in Zelezná Ruda for?

I was left Zelezná Ruda 1947, early in spring. I will get to it, how did it happen.

Yeah, but first I want to know, how long were you there for? So when did you arrive in Zelezná Ruda?

I arrived in Zelezná Ruda probably at the end of August.

1946?

1945.

1945. So--

I left definitely by-- in 1947 in May, I was gone. I know that.

So it's less than two years that you were Zelezná Ruda?

Yes.

And you see it change. You see it change and become much more ideologically driven. And the ideology is a Communist ideology. And you--

That is accurate.

And you mentioned that local elites were part of these special gendarmes? Is that--

Yes.

--correct? So when they came back, it was not like outsiders coming into the area. What emerged was the local Communist Party sympathizers, who became prominent. Is that correct?

Yes. But I'll add something to it. The people who were coming back to that region, into Zelezná Ruda, those who were driven by Germans during the Munich Agreement, there were very few coming back. Most of the people were newcomers. And in fact, some of them were, in no time, called gold diggers, Czech was called "zlatokop," looking for something to get hold on, mostly stealing.

But the military, they already the infrastructure which control the city council, the national council, the control of the border for a post office. And very important was the railroad employee. They were coming there-- they had jobs to do. But other people were coming there for other purpose and other reasons.

I see. And you're saying most of those reasons were to--

They're no good.

They were to benefit from the--

They wanted to get benefits. And they have much to gain because as I say, civil rights for the German native were simply out of there. If they did have any, nobody really respect them. So it was that Czech who were running-- of course, in Zelezná Ruda later on, I find out I was not the only foreigner. I was really not work on because they want to make it homogeneous Czech.

But you were also Czech?

Yes and no, because I didn't start to act like a Czech. There were a few Italian families there. There were even Dutch families. I happened to learn to know them. I also know why they were there. The Italian families were longstanding. They must have come there in the 19th century because this was a region, which was building the railroad at the end of 19th century. And Italians were pretty good on digging tunnels because there were a number of tunnels there.

So I think Dutchmen was there because he have a hotel on a very nice location. However, he was not able to open. He was not exactly treated as a German. But that's a different story. Let's concentrate what--

Yeah, let's concentrate on what is happening to you. Now I have a few questions. In that time that you're in Zelezná Ruda, is that far from your village of Těchonice?

It is far, yes. That was definitely already quite a distance. And I was happy to be in Zelezná Ruda because I liked the nature. I liked the history of it. It was a well-known place. Czech writers of 19th century wrote great many story, which I actually read as a kid. So I was feeling very good to be where I was. But I was not happy about have things happening to me because I wasn't marching to the tune. It would have been easy to become a member of the labor union and this and this organization, which I was blessed to join in instead just become simply as one of them. But I was--

What was it about this new system that you didn't like?

For example, I already make my first contact with the United States Embassy. And I was already presenting my application for better ID, so I do not have this hate for Fremdenpass. And I presented my birth certificate, and I was acknowledged already by the embassy, that I have the right to a passport.

So this is the embassy in Prague? You went--

This is the embassy in Prague.

So you went to Prague? OK.

That gives me the confidence-- and that gives me the attitude. I acted in Zelezná Ruda-- I felt I would eventually have a proper ID. I had not requested that passport in the United States with the intention that I will leave. I just want to have some legitimate papers that I'm there.

Now one of the reasons I--

And I couldn't get Czech paper.

One of the reasons I ask whether your home village was far away or not is that earlier in our interview, you mentioned that there was this grand uncle, your grandfather's brother, who visited you there. And when you told him you wanted to leave and go to America, he approved of your plans. Now this visit, this time when you met him, was during the time you were living and Zelezná Ruda? Or had you left there already?

No. I met him already when I was ready to go to join the US Army, almost a year and half later.

So this is after you leave Zelezná Ruda. You return to Těchonice?



Yes. At this time, I do not know anything about where about my uncle or my grandfather's younger brother. I did not know that.

So let's talk now a little bit about when you're at that hotel, how you meet these two Jewish Polish students, who cross the border. Tell me about that incident.

That would be-- by 1946, I felt at ease. And I have a co-worker and good friend that would become a lifetime friend. His name was Jaroslav Rubac. He played an important role. We did it together. He was year younger. And we were the only waiters working in that hotel. And it was 1946. We did hear through the news and in paper and through radio that there was something going on in Poland. And when we read it, we just were shocked because we just suddenly get a new word, "pogrom." I did not know much about what the word "pogrom" meant at all.

And Kielce was quite a distance from Zelezná Ruda. Neither did I know where Kielce were. How little did I know that very soon, Kielce will come to me to Zelezná Ruda. Pure coincidence. So we knew something going on. But we also knew in August that there was a big international hoopla of international student union-- it has a very fine fancy title, which I wouldn't be able to translate. It's sponsored, of course, by Moscow, by Communists, by politicians, to organize-- they were trying to catch young people, and particularly students.

And they have a big international meeting. And Prague was very proud that they have a first great meeting of youth from all over Europe, which was not true. Only east was meeting there. Now that was what we knew. And we did not go anymore into it. But it was still going on because Czechoslovakia government have a difficult situation how to deal with the Jewish population. Whatever it was in Poland were suddenly picking up and leaving Poland. And most of them choose crossing Czechoslovakia into West Germany. They didn't choose East Germany. So they started crossing the border in very places where I was on labor camp during the Germany, in Silesia, mostly in place, Náchod.

You're talking about Olomouc then, when you were in Olomouc?

Yes, I was in Olomouc. But Náchod was not very much because the Czechoslovakian government somehow did not want to let loose this population at will and keep going across without some control. Apparently they must have been pressed either by Polish government, either by occupation authority in West Germany, because they were definitely threatened to be flood with a couple thousand refugees.

So I'm going to stop there--

So Czechoslovakian government created a camp in Náchod. And they tried to hold on this Polish-Jewish diaspora which was pouring in. So they are not lose, completely crossing the-- they tried to act as humanitarians to begin with. That's what press say. And they tried to always draw pacify Polish concern and also occupation of authority in West German, like the British and French and Americans in West Germany. They tried to control who won't get there and how do they get there.

That was obvious even to me at that age. And at this time, as I'm talking, nobody up here yet in Zelezná Ruda. But I know the Polish Jews were detained around city of Náchod.

And just to make it clear, because we're not talking about this in any detail, but the reason why there is this stream of Jewish refugees from Poland post-war in 1946 is because there is a pogrom in Kielce, where several dozen Jews are killed?

Yes.

And that is what spurs this exodus from Kielce for sure and from other parts of Poland as well. And so they're coming into the Czech lands, wanting to get westwards. And the Czech government creates this holding place near Náchod for them. And this is where at which point you are explaining to me how those two Jewish students come to Zelezná Ruda. Is that correct?

Correct. You have it absolutely right. I like the way you say holding. Yes, Czechs were creating holdings. And Czech work was very busy trying to act humanitarian. The Polish two students, which I'm going to talk, didn't come that way. They choose even better way. They apparently had opportunity in students to join that student international meeting, so called, a European movement of young people. They apparently find an easy way to get right into Prague by join this Polish student organization and took part, apparently, in that Congress, which was held in Prague. And by that time they were orienting themselves in the country, and I assume this is how they find out Zelezná Ruda as a point to get into West Germany.

So how do they cross your path? Tell me the specifics of how--

And that I can be very specific because that was the biggest adventure I have participated in. But I understood those two Polish students very easier. It was, I believe, beginning of September because we had no business. Vacation was over and everything. We have hardly few guests. And suddenly, early, around 11:00-- before noon-- and we would serve only few dinners to begin with-- they came, two students. And they came and asked for breakfast.

And they came, and they were highly visible because they carry on their hats their student Polish hats or caps, which were so visible, nobody-- they certainly went the wrong way about it to come to the border the way they were dressed. So they immediately attract our attention. They have some knowledge of Czech. But it was very bad. So we used communication of Czech, and whatever Polish we understood too.

Were these--

Then we just--

Excuse me, let me ask a bunch of questions here. We are talking about two young men, is this correct? Not any girls?

Yes, [INAUDIBLE] young men who arrived and ordered breakfast before noon. And they arrived with dressed as a student with a Polish insignia signs, which was odd, which was definitely something nobody saw ever before.

And did they stand out in any other way, aside from the way they were dressed?

No, they didn't-- because they were decent, and they have light luggage, it was sort of a-- in Czech they would call "taška." They have very little with them. And they have their breakfast. And only when they [? start ask ?] [? for paying ?] then suddenly one of them ask me because I was their head waiter. I had to take the money from them. And they asked me which way they can cross into Germany, just like that. There was nobody in that restaurant at that moment but my friend and them.

Wow. So they took a risk.

And they asked that. So I assume that he's asking the legal way. So I assumed I will show to him, oh, you keep going this road. And you go get to the border. And then I realized he hesitate. And he say, no, I don't mean that way. And that way, which way? And he pointed out right there, out of the window, he could see the forest. And that was-- I never heard that. I was there already more than a year, but certainly nobody asked me that. Now, I say, that's something interesting.

And I called my co-worker quickly to come in. We find out that to be sure that we understand it, we could not carry that in half-Czech, half-Polish, so we asked if they understood German. They did. So our communication start more or less in German. Their German was good. I believe ours was a little better.

But at any rate--

I start--

--now you could talk to one another?

So we start definitely-- all was done in German from then on. And we just recognize that this is-- we did not recognize right away a reason. We didn't get it. But soon as we got it, when they say, we are Jew, and we are from Kielce-- if they were from Kielce, I don't know because I don't know if they were students in Kielce. But certainly they say we are Jews. And we're running from Kielce. And they explained why they came where they come. They come from Prague because they attend that Congress. That was their purpose they came into Prague.

And their purpose coming in Zelezná Ruda was continue to go. There we were immediately at that age, and they were-- I don't think so they were or over 20. I think they were all around 19, 20.

And you at this age-- at this point, how old are you, 17, 18?

At that age, I'm going to be 17.

So you are younger than they are?

Yes, I was definitely younger. But I understood what they want because it was only a couple of months ago, I was on the run like they were. This probably was one of the response-- an impulse for me to be part of their scheme. I can identify with some of the things they were doing.

So what happened?

I grasped quickly their reason. There was no more question about why for me. I was willing to help.

So what did you do?

So I reach-- can I talk?

Absolutely. I'm saying, so what did you do?

I consulted my friend, and we just decide that-- we'd told them how to go about-- exactly pointing to that hill and to that forest. Then we just realized-- my friend and I-- that that's not a really safe way, that we really don't know that was a say way. We knew that was the direction. But we didn't think it was safe.

So then we decided on a different scheme, right open and daring. Zelezná Ruda have actually two railroad stations and one stop. The main radio station, which was very small, which visitors would arrive at the beginning of Zelezná Ruda, direction coming from Klatovy. And that was small. The final station was at the border.

And there was a stop because from the arriving station, the train had to go through the tunnel. And when that train goes through the tunnel, it announced itself where it is. There was big whistle. And it usually took couple of minutes, the train to make that tunnel. Soon as it got out of a tunnel, there was a little stop. And it went right hardly 100 yards from our hotel.

And there was a little platform. And when the train arrived already out of the tunnel, it stopped at that platform. And usually some railroad employee would get out to [INAUDIBLE]. There was simply no more any people in the train except some railroad employee or somebody who might like to go all the way to the border from the town, might board that train in those few minutes, had a free ride all the way down. And that was our point where we started to scheme how to get them across to the border because we knew exactly how it'd look at the big station, which was a big huge station. It was built during also Hungarian Empire. Half of it belonged to German. And half of it belongs to the Czech.

And on the left side of the station was more forest. And that was only hop into German side, which was called Bayerisch Eisenstein. And if you arrive through that forest station on a train, which is almost empty, and exit the train on the left side, not on the right side, with some direction, you are in no time free into Germany. The scheme was that as we were explaining to them where they came on board, this train on the

platform, which is stopping, and what to do when they get in main station, they were hesitant. They did not get the scheme.

So suddenly I say to John-- I will call him John-- at that time his name was Jaroslav. I would say, why don't we go with them? And it was [? instinctive ?]. And it was fast. We go with you. And we knew very well that we could only do it certain time. Train were leaving just like that. We knew the schedule of the train, that there'd be a scheduled train at 3:20, which would emerge from that tunnel, and we can board that train.

So we devised the situation for them, that I and John will go first, and they will come a few minutes because they will have enough time. Train will announce itself by loud whistle. That means it will take couple minutes before train really come to the platform, where we could board it, that I and John will be the first one to get on. And they will go on the end. They choose different [INAUDIBLE] same thing, that we don't go together, and that they take Polish caps off, which they get immediately. So they don't have that [INAUDIBLE].

And then we travel all the way to the station. And at the end when it stops, and come to Poznan, that station will be received by station master, which is red cap. And he may be the only one standing on the right side of the train. Then my friend will take a raincoat-- it was a little bit drizzly-- will take a raincoat. And when he exits the train on the right side, somehow along, he is going to have a difficulty with his raincoat and throw it such a way that it shows that he is in trouble with his raincoat and cannot quickly get out.

And I will be coming out same time, except I'm facing into left side, which they will exit. Of course, the left side, where train was already boarded, but for somebody at that age, they have to hop over. And I would-- it was a decoy. Major part-- we both play important part. My part was simply to see before they jump that there is nobody on that side. And I can point to them the direction because it was right from there nose, hardly 50 yards the forest.

I see.

And my friend will struggle with his raincoat in case we are facing on the station platform somebody who might observe this.

Did it work?

And, in fact, it was a possible and easy solution. You must remember at that time, border was not fortified as it would be a year later. It was a different kind of border, different situation. I'll describe what the border was later on. Let's proceed with this scheme, which worked perfectly.

Station master was asking train for pass, station master. So we didn't even have to pretend this great gymnastic we want to do with the raincoat. We did not even have to worry about my job because there was nobody on that side. They could clearly jump and exit. And I watched when they were practically hardly a few yards at the forest entrance. And I could turn to say, John, no need. We can get out.

And it was over. It was done fast. And I think there were maybe two people who may have exited the train besides the station master, standing there with his red cap. This was sort of a railroad yard where trains parked. It was like a parking lot for a train. And that was the final stop. And we exited the station very easily without being noticed because at this point, I and John was not thinking about how to cover ourselves. We just realized that we have no cover story and nothing in case we were stuck.

Were you stopped?

So we thought-- we would be stopped by somebody, boys, what are you doing? Because we were known-- everybody in that region know each other because it was still in flux of immigration. And people moving in the region.

But my question is--

We are the two waiters of one hotel alone.

But my question is were you-- did anybody stop you? And how did you get back?

No, that was easy already. We get out of the station, and we took a road because there was direct road, which we originally suggests to those students. But that would be for people who are legally traveling by car, by any means-- foreigners-- that was the normal crossing over.

I see.

We send them into a legal situation.

Yeah, because they--

And we were able to walk-- it might have take us 20 minutes, half an hour walking. But during that walk back, we suddenly got a little bit cold feet, what did we do? What happens if they get caught? And we were preparing story in case they talk. But our story today right now [INAUDIBLE]. Everybody would knew what we were doing if we late, somebody. But so far, nothing.

We arrived back to the hotel. But we knew one way where we would be sure that they were successful because being only hotel, if somebody get, by the police patrol or by the border patrol, caught, he would be brought into this town, in the local village holding jail. And if it was evening, we in the hotel would get a call from the gendarme and he would request one meal, two, three meals, and we would carry it to the jail.

So we knew that people did get caught. And we knew that we could figure out if our two Polish students of Jewish descent would be caught. And we knew that between 6:00 and 7:00 would be the time that we would be getting called because most of the time, we get to get called. And then somebody carry the food. And we did not, of course, see the prison.

So we were definitely not ourselves during those couple hours as we were serving two later dinners. We were waiting for that telephone to ring. And we were certainly not alert to pay attention. We were tense, I'm trying to say. It was not fear, but tension.

So did they call? Or did they make it?

No call.

No call?

So by 8:00, we were smiling. And yes, we were having little schnapps ourselves-- we done it.

[LAUGHS]

We were successful. And the only footnote to this, is irony, that hardly within a year, I would be using same place to leave Czechoslovakia. I would, however, do it differently. I would not exit the left side. I would exit on the right side through hands of the Czech control and be moved into the American part because Germans were not at time in control of the border. And Americans were very lax. I don't think so they passed the border check. So obviously anybody who make it, as these Polish students did, they were safe.

So here's--

And I did it only a couple months, about in May. I remember it was in May. And my friend John had to do it hardly within seven months later. But he has to do it the Polish-Jewish way. He had to do it illegally because situation in Czechoslovakia was no longer what it was, what I described what we did. The border was tight under control with-- controlled not only with dogs, wires, contraption-- we are talking about a different situation. I am already in Germany. I'm already at that time stationed in an entirely different place. I am a soldier of the United States Army stationed in Oberusel, in [? Taunus ?], and that is outside Frankfurt.

So I want to wrap things up with your leaving Czechoslovakia. And the last time you told me about what was going on with you is when you say that you became a persona non grata at this hotel, Zelezná Ruda, because you are showing your feelings and your opinions of most of these Communist Party activities that are going on there. And what makes you decide that you need to leave Czechoslovakia? Because you say at the beginning-- you were telling me earlier, when you wanted those papers from the United States, originally it wasn't because you intended to leave the country. What made you change your mind?

That is a good question. And I forgot to point it out before this event. I did have many difficulty on the city hall. We call it at that time "národní výbor," or National Council. I've become a definitely hard case for this one Communist city hall because every time I went there for something, like I needed ration card for winter cold. I would need to, let's say, call before winter because I would need lots of things that ration cards were, for example, exempt. And I would encounter this cynical officials, who just look on the little book and find out there, of course, I was Americans. And they did not need to look in the book already. I was already well known for my outspoken and for my abrasive conduct-- again, Bolshevization of this little town.

And I was already no longer serving beer on evening when Communist Party of Železná Ruda met in the Hotel Slavie. In fact, I no longer call Hotel Slavie Hotel Slavie. I call it the Red House.

Were you still working there?

So I obviously--

Were you working on there still?

What?

Were you still working there?

Oh, yes. Mr. Tomasek was very-- in Czech is the word "trpěliví." He was very tolerant. He did have a patient with me. Particularly, his wife, she was certainly on my right. She was maybe amused by some of my outstanding act of defiance and all of it. so--

Tell me, what were some of your acts of defiance? Because you just let me know that you didn't like it. But you didn't tell me what you did that would make you a persona non grata.

It was my conduct when I was told-- in plain, direct language number of times, look, you need an overcoat. Well I just only a couple yards the Americans are across the border. Why don't you get it from there? Or if I wanted coal, fuel for heating the place during winter, well, the British are controlling the route. You can get it from the British.

In fact, I was not welcome in Zelezná Ruda by certain populations, not all. Many I was actually a good symbol of how to stand against something what they saw was not right to begin with because Communist act obnoxious. I will tell one simple-- I was already told in the US Embassy about how should I behave, that I should not, for example, join any organization. So obviously, here come [INAUDIBLE] trying to enlist me into labor union. At that time, Czechoslovakia was only one union and member of the-- chairman of the union were Antonín Zapotocky, hard Communist. And Antonín Zapotocky will become a president one day of the socialist country, which at that time, he was only chairman of the labor union.

Once in desperation, I want to get rid of this agitator who just bring me the papers to join. I throw 50 korunas in his direction, and I say, if this a question of money, then here's your money. And to my horror, next day, he wrote me a letter that I am a member of the labor union in good standing. Apparently I had already-- in those two years I had, [? the stamps ?] were all three years I had.

Mr. Budway, I want to summarize things. There are a couple questions I have. Can you tell me why the US Embassy did not give you a passport?

They couldn't do it right away. They did have [INAUDIBLE]. At that time, embassy was not issuing passports.

My birth certificate had to get to the State Department. And from then on, they have to verify it. They had to verify even my-- even I gave them my address of one of my relatives in Chicago. They have to verify it.

So that's number one.

It took some time to do it.

And then one other point I wanted to ask you is that during the German occupation, you learned very quickly that it was very dangerous to show what you thought and what you felt because you could be paying with your life for it, like those ladies who were shot because they talked about the positive way of Heydrich's assassination. So you learned that that's dangerous. But you let yourself react during this Soviet or this more Communist kind of atmosphere and control. Didn't you feel afraid? Didn't you feel that maybe it's not safe to do this?

I knew that it was really obnoxious. And perhaps as a teenager, I did not have yet the skill to control what I do and how I think and [INAUDIBLE].

Excuse me.

But however, it was after the war, I had a new sense of confidence. I was no longer [INAUDIBLE].

Mr. Budway, something is happening with the noise. I don't hear you very well. So is something moving at your location?

My fingers because my hand is getting a little numb holding the receiver.

I see. I'm so sorry.

So I will stop.

I'm so sorry. I know it's a long time. But we are coming close to the end of my questions. So your understanding that is it's not wartime anymore. It's post-war. And so you feel somewhat safer? You feel that there's not going to be the same high price for any kind of honest reaction that you would have had to pay had this still been the Nazi time?

Correct. And I have protection. After all, yes, I will say, I was somebody. I was American citizen.

That meant a difference?

That made the difference. I was outspoken. And I acted that way. In fact, those who were anti-Communists, they expected Americans to behave that way. And I behaved that way to be daring.

I see.

Fearless. And I had enough to be starting off.

You were tired of it, tired of being--

Yeah, I was tired of it. And I knew slowly and surely, that as much as you like the country, as much I felt tired because I'd experienced all the humiliation, all the upside down with the rest of the people in the country, I did not feel suddenly that I have any future there. I recognized it.

And it sounds like there was enough people who treated you like an outsider?

Yes.

That--

They were. And particularly those in power or in some power, be it in any office-- the only office which was friendly to me was post office, where I received everything. And it was in hands of somebody else completely, in opposition. Now, railroad? No. Police? No. City council? No. I was safe, of course, in hotel and Mrs. Tomaskova and Mr. Tomasek. I could afford to act the way I act. They already accept me for what I was.

So did you leave Czechoslovakia directly from Zelezná Ruda?

Yes, because I knew the situation. And when I finally got my passport, and of course it wasn't easy to leave because at the embassy, they did not expect-- they just issue a passport, and here you are. How to get to United States, that was my problem. But there was a perceptive clerk-- he was a vice-consul-- who suggested-- and he called military attaché-- that I could join the US Army. There was a replacement depot in the city of Marburg, when Americans of my type were all around in Europe. I was not the only American.

I might have been the only American in the west part of Bohemia, in that situation. But there were lots of Americans, kids of my age, in places like Denmark, Norway, Holland, and, of course, England and Scotland, and big amount of them were in Germany. So the US Army did have replacement depot, where they train American born who were in Europe. We were volunteers. And we were welcome. The reason is because the rest of the soldiers who spent war in Europe want to go home. So we will welcome as a replacement.

So this is the idea you get from the military attache at the US Embassy in Prague, that that should be the place that you go?

Yes.

Did you have a chance to say goodbye to your mother and to your--

Oh, yes. That was done properly. I have actually [INAUDIBLE] who was high-ranking officer. He knew where I was going. I now have his blessing to go. The only thing I have got baggage. Zelezná Ruda. The baggage is a figure of speech. When I find myself in Germany, in training, that is under the episode which I felt I experience what I would call antisemitic situations. But I'm not going to talk about it.

The only thing that-- because I knew few languages and slightly even Russian, on my resume when I finished basic training, I was sent to Oberursel. And Oberursel was headquarters of ECIC. It stands for European Command of Center Intelligent Army-- I wasn't doing any intelligence work there. Because of my profession as a waiter, I was helping to run offices, dining room, and club, and I was in charge of German personnel there.

However, I communicate with my friends in Zelezná Ruda everywhere. And I, of course, wrote where I am. I did not say what ECIC meant. But I was being watched by Czech Communist country in power in 1948. And they watched my movement. And they knew with who I was in contact. And obviously, I was also the cause that my friend John with two other friends illegally left when Communists came into Zelezná Ruda and make it a forbidden zone, where nobody could come because they control-- now the Czech were fleeing. It was not the Polish Jews who were fleeing.

Did your mother ever experience, or your grandfather, any kind of repercussions?

Grandfather no longer lived. Mother, yes, of course, that is another thing because I was reckless. I wrote about anything and everything I saw. I was drunk with freedom. Not only I could do whatever I want, I was having a nice uniform, great meal, I could travel, I have almost \$80 every month, I could travel, and I did. And when Czech Communists took over and did all that, I suddenly was visiting with number young people from Zelezná Ruda who knocked on the gate of my army base in which I work because they knew. And they came.

And then even my fellow soldiers who were guarding the entrance to the army base, they keep laughing. And they keep calling me. And they say, Budway, your Czech cousins are here again. And they laugh. They



say, you must have many cousins in that country.

[LAUGHS] Yes. But my question is, did your mother, who stayed in Těchonice, did she experience any unpleasantness because of what you were doing and the fact that you had left?

Obviously, yes. And she had other idea because she more or less-- I might have inherited my sassiness or my belligerence from her because even in that little village, she was acting as daring. So she was on a Communist list immediately. She did have difficulty. And eventually, years later when I was already a civilian and wanted to invite her to visit the United States again and visit Chicago and to come and say hello to her younger generation, which she know in Chicago, she received very quick answer, absolutely-- it was in two sentences-- she had no chance.

That is another story. And it's a long and complex story. But she did not-- and she, of course, was unwillingly, unknowingly a part of what would it be like a subversive war because these Czech friends-- of course, I help them financially and many ways-- and finding places to live and going, and things like that. But one problem they have to communicate with home, to let their people know at home where they are if they're safe. And there was no direct mail communication-- civilian mail.

You're talking when you're still in--

While deep in Germany.

Yeah, when you are still in Germany in 1947 and so on, that they have no--

Yes. I was using my Army-- APO, Army postal organization-- I'm using any communication to Czechoslovakia-- at that time Communist Czechoslovakia-- by, of course, my letters arrived with US Army stamps. My mail would be going to England and London being flew back to Czechoslovakia. And, of course, I was a mailman for all these Czech refugees. I took their mail. I mailed it to my mother. And my mother was the mailman. She was the one who delivered it.

I see.

So she unknowing was doing something would become-- or her pride-- because before they were-- and because of that, people in the countryside have learned to know if they have somebody in their family who left the country, how do you try to trace them? And this was what incriminate me in 1962, a spy, placed to be, explained to them that time that I was only a corporal who was in charge of offices, dining room and probably I was in charge of German personnel, they wouldn't believe it.

Thank you for answering that because you mentioned in the early part of our interview that when you returned to visit in 1962, you were arrested as a spy. And this provides some of the explanation for whatever rationale they might have had to do so. And I'd say that with this, we are probably at the end of our interview. And you've covered a really wide range of events and provided us a picture that is both complex and very detailed.

And I thank you for that because it is unusual to be able to hear such a story, where you start from Oak Park, Illinois, and then are in the small village of Těchonice. And talk about what happens to your friend, Václav Florian, and other Jews that you see during the Nazi occupation, your own experiences there, and then give us at least a little sense of what happened after the war ended in those post-war years, and that although it had been liberation, it was not necessarily freedom. And--

That is true.

And so is there anything else you would like to add to this interview before I conclude it?

Only that-- very quickly because in Zelezná Ruda, I encountered one gentleman whose name was Arnost Zajic. And he had a pastry shop. Before we coming to Zelezná Ruda, he has a pastry shop into little town of Velhartice. Little did I know this gentleman was a true good soul and good Samaritan. I have learned just

only recently what work he did in Velhartice, helping three Jewish families during the early days of antisemitic enforcement of the rules, which were-- they eventually ended in Terezín.

Mr. Zajic and his family find a way how to send packages. He developed even a recipe of certain gingerbread, which was-- I just on my last visit in today's Czech Republic learned more-- because I was given the little booklet-- learned a little more about Mr. Zajic's activity. All of the three families which he supported, with his gingerbread, during almost five years in Terezín survived to come to tell him thank you.

And Mr. Zajic, of course, did survive the Nazi and doing what he was doing, but he did not survive Communist regime. That injustice was a pain I just learned a year ago because there was local writer who write about his story. And to my surprise in that little book, which was given to me, my name is also named by the family of Mr. Zajic, that my name is fully and properly spelled in that book. I feel that Mr. Zajic at that time already showed himself if I was showing it abrasive and teenage way, Mr. Zajic was showing it humane and nice way. He was truly a good Samaritan. So he help during the war.

And how did I find about it? That is another story because I find it by visiting Czech embassy about 10 years ago, where there was a special exhibit. The exhibit is called People Who are No Longer With Us. And one panel have a story of Mr. Zajic [INAUDIBLE]. It had that Mr. Zajic did not respect any Nazi antisemitic law. He conduct himself how he always did to all of these customers, and never mind if they were Jewish.

And do we spell his name Z-E-I-T-Z?

Zajic is Z-A-J-I-C. And Arnost.

Arnost Zajic. And--

A real person who helped. If I only helped two Jewish students, it was different. This man really helped people.

Did you know him personally?

I know him personally. Family knows him personally. I even received his son, who was studying medicine, in Oberursel. But I did not know that there was a writer now who is collecting information about people like Mr. Zajic, and that are children in today's Czech Republic who are actually finding Mr. Zajic's story by being given a task by a teacher to go and investigate about people who are no longer among us. And I believe it was a ninth grader, who must have visited today's mayor's office in Velhartice and apparently went into archives and get a number of documentation. And one was, of course, during wartime, when Mr. Zajic is clearly incriminated by his refusal not to share his Jewish custom, and particularly children. They could come any time, anywhere. Mr. Zajic simply would not obey.

Thank you for bringing his name to my attention. And thank you again for what you have shared with me over these past few days. In the name of the museum, we're very grateful. I very much appreciate it. And I will say now that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Robert Budway on September 3rd, 2020. And you are in Washington DC, and I in Falls Church, Virginia. Thank you again.

Yes. It was pleasure to do it. I only apologize that I get sometimes emotional--

Oh, that's not a problem.

--and intense. I apologize for it. The person who cries to me in heaven for justice is Mr. Zajic. And Václav Florian, who I am very happy to say is living a long life and living it among his grandchildren and among his family. He's alone now, but he's doing well.

That is good news. That is very good news. And thank you for bringing this to that conclusion.