Look at you. Good afternoon. My name is Toby Ticktin Back, and I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center. For archival purposes, we are interviewing today Mr. William Eisen, fondly called Bill, who was a survivor of the Nazi era. He is going to talk with us today about his life before the Nazis came to his town, during, and after. Bill, could you tell us about your hometown and how you grew up?

To describe my hometown, we were about 40 kilometer from KrakÃ³w. The city consisted of about 12,000 or 13,000 population. And we were about 2,000 Jewish people living. It's small.

It was a nice city with, I think, the youngsters were quite intelligent. Speaking of that, we all belonged to certain kind of organizations, mainly to the Scouts and to the Zionist organizations. And we had school. We had a Gymnasium or high school in our city.

Did you have your own school? Or was this a public school?

It was a public school. The reason I'm saying that, if you know, Toby, some places and many small hamlets didn't have any school. They had to go next place. So we had a school. We had also a Gymnasium. And it was the seat of a county, so we had a fine, fine city there.

And the youngsters, particularly the youngsters I associated with, belonged to Zionist organizations. We always were striving to get organized sometimes and leave for Palestine in those years.

And did you have clubs? Did you play musical instruments?

Well, I didn't play musical instruments. But there were clubs, of course. We belonged to all kinds of clubs. We played football, or soccer, those years. As a youngster, I remember we had a good time.

So your growing up was very normal?

It was normal for a Jewish boy to grow up in this area because to bring it out to you, maybe you would know, Toby, that, as a Jewish boy, we had problems. We always were persecuted even before we went to school.

Especially in the public school we had problems. I understand why. Perhaps I don't justify it. We wore skullcaps during periods in classes. And we looked different than the others. And I feel it originated when the priest came to teach the Catholic children religion, to us came a Hebrew teacher. And you had this division right away there, Toby.

You were different?

Right away, even the first grade, we became different. Until then, Christian children I was brought up with didn't know any different. They knew I was different, but it was not on this level that somebody else taught me different. Besides, I'm sure that the priest taught them during Easter time that we were Christ-killers. They were bad times, those years.

So even in so-called normal times, there were--

Normal times were not normal. Again, Toby, I didn't know this was normal or not normal.

Of course not.

I didn't know any different. We're brought up for generations there that way.

Will you tell us about your family, what your father did, whether he had siblings, what your house was like?

Well, are you talking a house? Are you talking a room? We had a small room. We had six children living in this one room. We have no electricity until 1933. Was no plumbing in the house. Times were bad. We are five brothers and one

sister.

My father-- our father, rather-- the means of support he had, he went to villages. And he was buying things and selling. And he could never provide for us, and especially in the wintertime when he couldn't go out and bring anything home to eat. So we had a tough time as a youngster, as far as financial is concerned.

However, I was the youngest in the house, Toby. And when my older brothers grew up, they brought in some livelihood to the house. So we had a little bit to eat. And I was fortunate enough that I finished public school, which they did not.

Public school meaning grade 12, up to grade 12?

Grade 12.

12.

Seventh. Seventh.

Seven?

Seventh.

Right.

Seventh grade-- this was public school. My older brothers could not because when they were 10 or 11 or nine, they had to go to work. I finished already because was something more when I was 10, 11, 12, 13 years old. So I finished public school.

So you had that advantage?

I had this education, which my other brothers did not have. And then, when I finished public school, I went to a vocational school because my brothers were tailors, and I learned the tailoring. And in order for me to continue this trade, I had to go to trade school for three years. So I had quite a bit of education. Those years was quite a bit of education.

I understand. Now, if I remember correctly, you said there were 2,000 people?

I would say roughly 2,000 Jewish people living. Either they had 2,000 families or 2,000 people.

And how many people were in the town altogether?

About 13,000.

So considerably smaller than Buffalo, half the size of Buffalo?

Oh, yes, like Tonawanda, right.

Tonawanda.

City of Tonawanda.

So here you were, in school. And in 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. Did that change your life considerably?

It changed quite a bit. However, I would like to emphasize that 1934, '35, when Hitler was in power in Germany, the Polish antisemitic party arose. It would become so strong that it was a normal thing to see pickets at Jewish stores. And

it was a normal thing to hear from my neighbors or other people that, wait, Hitler will get you. And this was the normal thing that you heard on the street.

You were being prepared.

Of course, we didn't know what Hitler means and what he stood for. And when Poland, my hometown was invaded by the Nazis in 1939-- it was September 6 or something then-- of course it was a drastic change. And you saw strange people in strange uniforms and strange language. It was quite a thing.

Did you or your family ever, during this time before the Nazis entered your town, entertain the thought of leaving Poland?

Yes, the oldest brother-- we saw the picture here-- my uncle sent him an affidavit in 1937. And he was ready to leave. Somehow somebody was a fraud. He tried to get an affidavit through Canada. So the papers were fraudulent. He never came to United States.

And that brother never survived?

No, he never survived. I have no brother survived.

So in 1939, the Nazis come into your town. And you see the soldiers. You see the uniforms. How is your life disrupted? What happens to you? And what happens to your Polish neighbors?

Well, the Polish neighbors-- I cannot say all of them, but I would say there was a low element of people. Right away they took advantage. And they pointed out where Jews are living. The Nazis came around. They took you out to work at night.

Oh, they collaborated?

They collaborated with the Nazis. And they tried to raise themselves to the level which they never had with the hope that they're going to get something for it, which many, many did in our hometown.

What did they get?

Well, assuming that they got a reward for doing this. And eventually they took over Jewish businesses. They declared themselves the Volksdeutsche, which they never were. But as long as they're collaborating, they got these rewards from the Nazis.

Oh, so they got that advantage?

That advantage.

So in 1939, were you at work? Were you apprenticing then, or--

Well, we were still working at home in 1939. But then, in 1940, the Jews were herded to a ghetto. And the ghetto was for--

The Jews from your town?

My town-- a ghetto was formed in 1940.

In your town?

In my town, which was a very small one, but it was a ghetto anyway. And they brought some people in from the

surrounding areas-- not that many. The situation in ghetto was like any other ghetto, but except wasn't entirely locked in. We could get out.

And matter of fact, many farmers did come in to us to do some work for them. And they brought us in exchange either some flour or some meat or something in exchange for labor. The ghetto wasn't that bad that you couldn't survive there. However, there were many, many problems in the ghetto, as any other concentrated place.

Did it affect your housing situation?

Oh, the housing-- of course. If we lived before as six, eight people one room, we lived 15 or 18 or 20. And everybody lived in very poor, poor condition.

Did any of your family die as a result of ghetto conditions?

To start, the first loss I had, Toby, I had one of the brothers in the Polish Army at that time. When the Germans attacked Poland, he never came home. He was the first casualty we had. My older brother was married. And he lived, again, not with us. He lived with his wife and two children.

In the ghetto?

In the ghetto. Until '41, in which he was resettled and sent out to a different place, a smaller place. The place was called WiÅ›lica. And there, they didn't save anybody. I think September '42, they took everybody out and shot them.

Right there?

Right there.

The Germans did?

The Germans did, yes.

Were you closer to the Russian border or to the German border?

We're close to the German border.

German border-- so you got the full force of the German invasion then. So there you are in the ghetto. What's your daily life? You're what-- you're 19 years old?

I was 20 already by then. Anyway, they took me out. Every household had to give one person for labor. So I was assigned to go to work every day. So we worked on the highway. And my whole life is in the ghetto with the-- it was quite bad. It was quite bad.

Again, it was livable. It was livable. We still had the synagogue. I still had my parents' home. And it was actually a so-called home. And then, until 1940, I was taken out and taken to a labor camp, KrakÃ³w-PlaszÃ³w. I was there a little while, about two months. And I escaped, so-called escaped the--

How did you manage to escape?

On the way, we were lined up in columns to go to work. I just broke away and took off. And the reason I was fortunate that time, quote, unquote, "I didn't look Jewish." I was blonde.

You must have been blonde.

I was blonde. And my Polish was excellent because I was brought up in a Polish neighborhood. And I went back so-

called home. And I was with my parents a little while. And then they got me again, same camp again. And I escaped again after a little while, until '42, in September, when the ghetto was entirely liquidated.

How was that liquidated? Maybe you can describe--

Well, they made Judenrein.

Did you see it?

Oh, sure. Yeah.

Did you see the liquidation?

This was September 3, 1942, again, the same routine that any other place, everybody-- the ghetto was locked. And the guards and the Polish police and the Polish firemen-- of course, with the Nazis-- took everybody out from their houses. And they assembled us to a point where we went to an assembly place. It's called--

The Umschlagplatz?

Umschlagplatz. I would like to describe to you a few scenes where the sickly and the elderly who couldn't walk-- of course, they shot them right on the spot in their houses.

One thing stays with me, will stay with me the rest of my life. There was a very pious Jew living in the ghetto next to the synagogue. He was an assistant to the rabbi. And this was Saturday morning. They always made their actions on Saturday morning.

He put on his tallit or the prayer shawl. And he said, God, if you want me, that's what you want me to do-- I served you so many years here. He had this cane. He hit against the gate of the synagogue. I'm ready. And of course, we went down to the Umschlagplatz.

There is another episode I'd like to mention to you. I had my niece with me.

How old was she?

She was seven years old. The reason she was with us-- of course, she stayed with us when my brother was sent out to this WiÅ›lica. She stayed with us because she stayed with the grandmother and grandfather. And I led her by her hand. And she asked me all kind of questions on the way. Where we going, Uncle? How come so many Nazis? Why are we going here? And what answer could I give her?

And she wanted to see her grandmother, which she didn't. A day before, Friday night, we sent out our mother to go through villages. Maybe she would be saved.

Your father too?

No, my father-- again, I knew they're going to take us out. The father we hid in the attic. And Saturday morning they were looking for him. And finally, he was discovered, and they took him out.

And they killed him? Or they took him to camp?

They took him to a Zionist-- we found out later, took him to Belzec, where they were liquidated there. I have no witnesses, but that's what they say. Those people went to Belzec.

Tremendous fear he must have had, to be alone with that-- the support of his family--

He was discovered. I think he was very relieved when they discovered him because he was hidden in a small-- in the attic there. And he couldn't stay too long there, so.

So what happened to your little niece?

My little niece-- we went out. I had a friend-- a girlfriend, matter of fact.

Oh, that's right. You were 20 years old.

20 years old and we were walking down together. And on this Umschlagplatz an SS man was picking young men to work only. He didn't take any women or children or anything like that. And he said, you go to work. He had a whip. He wound the whip around your neck and pulled you out.

And I said, I cannot leave-- her name was Esther-- my niece here. My friend said, go ahead. Save your life. I'll take her. I'll take care of her. Maybe someday we'll see each other again.

And the scene, it was-- everybody started crying. And she took her from me. And I was put in a cattle car where I was sent to a labor camp. The other group, of course, went a different direction.

Did this young woman and little girl survive?

Of course not, no.

She probably jeopardized her life too in having a child with her.

She jeopardized her life. I don't know what the situation was there, but I would say if she saved my life, I would never left her alone. She said, why don't you go save your life? And I'll take care of her. Go ahead. Maybe we'll see each other.

What labor camp did you go to? Well, first of all, how long were you in the cattle car?

We were three days--

What were the conditions?

--although it was only 40 kilometer. We had three days.

Oh, my.

And we didn't know. It was such a long ride. And we arrived to this camp. And next day we woke up and it was a camp. And we worked there for quite-- we're about 3,000 prisoners in this camp.

These are all young people, I presume?

Young people.

Young men?

Young men, yes. We were in this camp till 1943. And the situation for me wasn't that bad. It was bearable because, being a tailor by trade, I was working in a tailor shop, making SS uniforms. And I was good at it.

And during the epidemic of the typhus in this camp, Toby, I had maybe 105 fever. And they came down, an SS man with a doctor. And whoever had a certain degree of temperature-- was no medicine, of course-- they killed and they inject them some kind of poison.

Comes to me, and I was unconscious. And the leader of the camp, a Jewish man, who was with also this SS man, he said, save him. He's the good tailor. He makes SS uniforms. So he give me a break.

So that's another occurrence of your life being saved?

Gave me a break and the fever broke at the same night. And in the morning, I woke up. And there was a lot of blood on the so-called pillow. I suppose I had the blood came down or whatever it is. And this was the--

You had a hemorrhage.

I had a hemorrhage. And the fever subsided. And next day, they took me out immediately.

And you still stayed in that camp?

Yeah, I stayed in the camp till the end of '43. We were taken out from this camp and taken over to a concentration camp, to PlaszÃ³w. It was across the road. There we went for three days without food, without no food, no water because they were planning to kill us, to liquidate us. And for two days, we worked, just doing silly labor, carrying rocks from one place to the other. But a selection was made, Toby. Many were taken out to be shot. Somehow I survived. From there--

Were you with friends at this time? Did you know anybody-- anybody from your town?

Oh, yeah, we had friends-- many, many from my hometown-- I don't know, maybe 20 or 30. Yeah, we had close friends. We had quite a few friends there we called friends.

And you had faith that you-- you knew that you were going to make it? You were going to fight to make it? What were your spirits like?

Many people ask me that. Did you believe you're going to survive? Did you have faith you're going to survive? I didn't think about it because you live--

From day to day.

--from day to day, from hour to hour. And my morale was very low to a degree. They didn't worry about tomorrow because I knew there was no tomorrow. You lived every day. I don't know if I had faith we're going to live or not. I don't know.

You just existed for the days, just--

Just for the day. And the only thing was to get something to eat or something to drink.

That was constantly with you, wasn't it--

Yeah.

--the not having enough to eat?

What was a bad part, at the beginning when I was in this camp, when they took my parents away-- I didn't know where my parents were-- that you were thinking about them, thinking about my brothers. In this camp, I had an older brother who was sick. They took him out. They shot him-- in the same camp.

So that was very hard, knowing that he was there and wasn't there?

He couldn't come to work that day. And we went to work. We left him. On the way back, we saw they marched out

about 100 people. And they killed him. I know he couldn't walk 50 feet because he was so sick. It was a big loss to us--big loss to me personally.

So you were left with any relatives or?

I wasn't left with many relatives in that camp. I had an older brother who was taken out to a different camp. He was not with me. He was also a tailor. He worked for the SS headquarters in KrakÃ³w, was making uniforms. I was in the labor camp. He was with the SS.

What kind of food did you get during your incarceration?

In this camp, the food was consisted of if I describe a quarter pound of bread and a quart of soup. You could live on it. You could live on it.

Did you have any meat or fish or chicken?

There was no fish. The meat they threw in there was horse meat.

One episode I would like to describe to you. Like 6:00, 7 o'clock, they threw out big, huge bones from horse bones on the front of the kitchen. And people were dashing for it. And the SS or the guards stood on top of the roofs, were machine-gunning people. They did this every day. Although we knew that, people were still getting--

Trying.

--trying to get that because a bone meant a little food, a little extra day of sustenance.

But you would think if they wanted to keep you alive to make uniforms, to be productive, that they would have to give you enough to keep you--

Those years, Toby, you had 10 people waiting to get in. Those years of '42, '43, you have so many people were liquidating places.

So you were dispensable?

That's correct. You see, there was no problem. Matter of fact, people could not get into camp. They were trying to bribe some guards to be able to get into camp. Those people were who run away from the ghettos, and they couldn't be in the hideouts. They want to get into some shelter. They thought this was a safe place--

So that was better than the concentration camp or the ghetto?

The labor camp was better than being in a hideout because people could not keep him for a certain time. Maybe they thought they could. They couldn't get into camp unless somebody had enough money to bribe somebody to get into camp. So it was no problem with the overabundance of people they had.

Were you near Schindler's camp?

I was near Schindler's. I heard about him. My sister was working in his place. But I didn't have any details. Again, we were so isolated. We had no communication with other camps.

Of course, there weren't too many Schindlers to keep people alive.

My sister was working there.

So she has to thank her life to this man.

Yes, yes, what happened-- again, Toby, she didn't take any women out to work from our ghetto. But she was working on the highway, repairing the highways. And that Saturday morning, she left for work 5 o'clock. The ghetto was surrounded about 6:30 or 7:00. She was already working.

Oh, it was Saturday morning, right.

She couldn't come back hometown, so she went to KrakÃ³w. And she wound up in this Schindler's place. That's how she survived.

And she's alive today?

She's alive. She lives in Florida. She's an older sister.

Thank God. So now you're in a labor camp, and it's 1942?

In '42, and they sent us from this camp to Skarzysko now.

Is that another labor camp?

It's another labor camp. You cannot describe what was in this camp. Before the war, there was ammunition factory. And people didn't work longer than six hours a day or four hours a day because the conditions before the war, you couldn't work normally more than those hours. You worked eight hours a day. And what we did in those camps-- in that camp, rather-- we stuffed artillery shells. And the explosive material was very strong. And the color of our faces changed. We were yellow.

Oh, because the material.

The material-- other words-- OK, let me describe a little bit. When we came to this camp after a journey, again, three, four days, we woke up in the morning after we slept quite soundly because we're so tired. We look out through the window. And we saw people-- so-called people-- walking like human skeletons with yellow faces.

And there were men and women alike-- no clothes. The clothes consisted of paper bags with wires around so to keep them together. And they were shuffling their feet like you see sometimes in horror movies.

Like they were drugged?

Like they're drugged because first of all, they were so weak and sick, and they were-- faces were yellow, no clothes on. The reason no clothes on because you could have clothes for 24 hours, and then the clothes dried out. They shattered.

Oh, they disintegrated?

Disintegrated.

Oh, my.

And they urinated yellow. I want to tell you, we had lice and bed bugs. If you pour this powder on it, they just turned over and got brown. So I want to tell you the condition of the people. And people died by the thousands there.

Did they have a clinic or medic?

Was no clinic, of course. If you were longer than two days you couldn't work, they kill you. They shot you. You have to be productive. Why would they feed you?

Sure.

The conditions of women were just horrible. They couldn't withstand the horrors. Somehow I feel a man was-- we were a little stronger. The girls were just in terrible condition.

How long did you work at this terrible camp?

I was there about 11 months.

Was that considered a long time to stay alive?

It was a long time there. I was assigned to transport those grenades, Toby, from the halls, hall 58 to warehouses. And before we came, this man who was foreman, Polish man, killed hundreds and hundreds of Jews because he had the satisfaction of killing them. His name was Kwiat. I'll never forget this guy.

And he had a satisfaction of beating us. We couldn't move those trolleys because in the winter you had snow on it. And he didn't care. He'd just pound you over the head. And we loaded those grenades, artillery shells. They weighed 52 kilogram, 50-- loading warehouses.

And right before the liquidation of the camp, I got sick. And this sickness consisted-- I don't know what it was. They call it like a yellow disease. And I couldn't eat.

Hepatitis?

I don't think it was hepatitis. Maybe it was just malnutrition. And when they liquidated the camp-- OK, let's go back prior to this. They already put me next to the door. And I'm sure another day or so they would shoot me because I couldn't work. I was so weak. I exchanged my piece of bread for a little soup because I couldn't eat the bread anymore.

And I was sitting on the front of the barrack. And a friend of mine who was a tailor with me in the previous camp, he saw me. He couldn't believe what he saw. And he said, what's happening to you? And I told him.

So he said, don't go away. Let me bring you something to eat. He brought me a little food made of-- what do you call-- barley. And I ate this. And I slept so soundly the first night. He came again next day. And he saved my life. However, I still was so weak when they made a selection to liquidate the camp, I was picked to be shot because I was, you know.

You weren't productive.

I was so-- the way I looked-- very sickly looking. However, my letter began with A. They call them according to the first letter of the last name. They say, you bring your things together. We cannot walk to the next camp. The next destination you're going to ride. Somehow I had a feeling that this wasn't the case, so I didn't rush. I hid under the bunker-- under the bunk, rather, under the bed.

Meantime, I heard shots already. There were people who did come report. They shot them outside. Later they cleaned the barracks out. And I changed pants. I rubbed my face with a little color. And I passed them.

So that's another instance of--

Oh, sure, I passed them.

--of saving.

I don't know. And a fellow who I was under the same bed, they picked him out. And when he took him out, see, I told you, he said. I'll never live through it. And they brought back the clothing about two hours later, the pile of clothing-- those people. The clothing was still warm. They brought them back. Next day, we're sent out to a different camp.

Your friend who helped you with a little bit of food, did he survive?

He survived. I can't find him.

To this day you don't know?

I don't know. His name was Fasler. I don't know where the man is, where he disappeared. He saved my life. I couldn't live another day.

Also in this camp, I have 25 lashes ahead. I was beat in that camp because-- what happened, the guards were Ukrainians and Mongols who were Russian former soldiers. At night, we couldn't go to the latrine because they were shooting people at night. So you opened the door ajar and urinated through the door.

And they came by in the morning. They saw a puddle the front of the barrack. Everybody out. Every 10 person out. I was a 10 person.

Oh, and you got flogged?

And I got 25 hit.

And you were weak to begin with.

Oh, yeah, sure. I counted to five and then, after that, didn't remember anything.

Did you have a roll call? In many of the camps, that was deadly.

Oh, yes, we had a roll call. Of course, the bodies who died were accounted for like any other place. And we marched out. We belonged to group A, group B, group C.

Is that amazing how meticulous the Germans were, that even in these times, they had to take notes.

This is about the second time. Another incident was the same camp, that I worked in this transport they called-- in the hall 58, with taking the grenades from the hall 58 to the warehouse. And that morning I was assigned, Toby, to go report at night, OK? And about 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock, I was in the barrack. And I heard an explosion. In the same hall, the 58, a grenade exploded.

That had been planted by a Nazi or just accidentally--

No, just exploded accidentally. Somehow it just exploded. And they say about 100 people died. And people who were in the same group I was taken away got killed.

And you weren't there.

I wasn't there. And call it destiny, call it God was helping me. And when they took us out later to clean out the place, you-- terrible thing. Between rafters, you saw heads and arms and legs. And I recognized many grotesque faces and arms.

And again, don't ask me who guided me, what guided me, perhaps destiny. Or if you're a strict believer, had to be God who wanted me to survive. Oh, were so many-- oh, you saw terrible thing.

So how many of you survived this labor camp before you went to--

I don't know what happened, Toby. There was a case that you could escape from this camp, but we're in the woods and

many dead. This was the time when the Russians were in the outskirts of Warsaw and Prague. We're not far from Warsaw.

We were taken to a different camp. From there, we're taken to Czestochowa, OK? I'll get back to this.

This is 1943 or '44?

This was already 1944.

Do you need some water incidentally?

No, I'm all right.

You're all right? You'll tell us when you do.

In 1944, many escaped. How many survive in this camp, I don't know. And we were in this camp, maybe I would say about 6,000 people, men and women alike. And he killed that time about 800 that particular day. This German commandant had only one arm.

You remember him well?

Oh, sure, sure.

What was his destiny? What happened to him?

I don't know. And we were sent to Czestochowa.

We have time. That's fine.

There we worked in like Bethlehem Steel factory. They were manufacturing steel. And I was so weak. And I was assigned, Toby, to go there in this plant and pick metal out. And I couldn't even walk straight. I worked there for a day. And I know I couldn't live.

To go back to Czestochowa, when we arrived, people were already there-- Jews from the Czestochowa ghetto were there. And they were very good to us. And they share everything what they had with us, those people. Beautiful people. And whatever they had, they gave us for the first-- we must have looked horrible. We were yellow and weak, no clothing. They gave us their food and the clothing because they came directly from the hometown to this ghetto-- to this camp, rather.

They had a little bit more?

They had a little more. And they had enough because this was a labor camp. It was not a concentration camp. And the idea was they fed the people enough. And when we came there, they gave us everything. And I'll never forget those people-- beautiful people.

Have you ever met any of them in any of your reunions?

I don't remember anybody because we went in different directions. And this camp, to make a long story short, I couldn't work in this plant. There was no way for me I could pick up steel plates. It was so hot. And I couldn't do it. Somehow, through some miracle, I worked myself into work in a tailor shop.

Oh, my!

The first night was no room for me. And then a fellow asked me, can you make a pair of pants? I said, well, of course I

can make. I'll make a tuxedo for you if you want me to. OK, you work tonight. Next day you go to the plant again.

Next day, he was hanging around again. And I said, please save my life. I can work in the camp. Well, OK, just a few days. And then, finally, I worked at night, and I repaired the people's clothing and patched their pants.

So that's how you survived that camp?

Oh, I survived that camp.

And you got your strength back, a little bit of your strength?

Oh, yeah, I got strength back.

Oh, thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. This was January. We talking about when the Russians were advancing, they were liquidating the camps.

This is 1944?

They were liquidating the camps. And now the camp was called Czestochowa RakÃ³w. And there were three other camps in the same city. The other camps were liberated by the Russians.

We weren't now, because they took us out. In the evening they took us to a railroad station. About 20 police, 20 SS guarded us. We knew the war was over. The Germans were running. We heard shots. The only thing we heard that, in the previous camp, whoever escaped, they found them and killed them. We were much afraid.

We heard of that because the Russians did not advance for two, three months. So the Germans came back and cleaned out the area. We were so afraid to run away. We could run away and be safe. They sent us to Buchenwald. Three other camps were liberated next day because the Russians came in next day.

Oh, but you didn't know, of course.

We didn't know.

You had no choice.

We're so afraid. We didn't know what tomorrow would be. I had the strength, actually, to just take off and go. We could get rid of the Nazis in no time. So we were sent to Buchenwald.

But you didn't know. This is January 1944, in the middle of the wintertime?

This is January 1945 already.

'45-- I'm sorry.

'45.

And how did you get to Buchenwald-- again in a cattle car?

Again, we got to Buchenwald. Don't ask me how many days.

And here the Germans are losing the war, and they're spending so much of their effort on that.

We saw [INAUDIBLE] Czestochowa, the Germans were running. And believe me, they needed the trains for their weapon. But they had everything ready for us. This was a big priority for them.

We were sent to Buchenwald. And I have to tell you what's happened. Prior to entering to Buchenwald, this was January, in the middle of the winter. We were outside the camp. The prisoners in camp told us, get rid of everything, whatever you have, whoever had maybe some valuables like diamonds, whoever had something.

Again, I didn't have anything. People from Czestochowa had because they were coming from the home town, actually. Oh, American dollars-- we were defecating right outside, and they're using this as the toilet paper. American money-- any money they had, the rubles, anything they had.

The normal procedure was, Toby, that we were entering the camp. And we had to undress, of course. And they searched us through rectum, mouth. With flashlight they're looking for some valuables. And again, they had this-- a doctor was examining us.

Were you tattooed?

No, Buchenwald did not tattoo. And they sent about half of us to the crematorium. And the gate in Buchenwald says, "Arbeit macht frei," freedom through work-- all those things you had. And they sent away quite a few people to the crematoria.

And how did you escape it?

I must say that, again, not working hard, I didn't look that badly. And we were taken to a hall, like a long hall. And this was everything naked. And it was cold.

Wintertime.

And they gave us bars of soap. And on the soap, on the bars, were written RIF, which means pure Jewish fat, Reine Judische Fett.

Yeah, Reine Judische Fett.

Before that we're given the soap, we had to go in these big tubs with some chemicals to clean ourselves from-- after we were shaven, of course, all over.

Oh, that must have been very--

And it was a very burning feeling. Everybody was squealing like a bunch of pigs in a big thing. Finally, we got that soap. We got on the showers. And we washed ourselves with--

That was the first shower in a long time?

First shower in a long time because they were afraid because Buchenwald was a clean camp. There's no lice at all. And they did everything they could to-- we were lousy, all right. Shaved the hair and all over, on the arms and all over.

Did you know what the soap indicated?

Yes, we knew. We were told.

It must have been terrible.

Yeah. It says, R-- the soap, Toby, it's something that-- it was different than the soap we had in the past or we have it today. It was lightweight. And I wonder whose soap that was. And it just-- ill feeling. But we used it. We had to. We

had to

Yes, you had no choice. So you were in Buchenwald until you were liberated?

No, I was not. Actually, Buchenwald, in those years, was actually a transient camp. Not too many people worked in the camp. Many worked, but worked outside the camp.

But we were sent out to another camp. It's called Stassfurt. This belonged to Buchenwald. It was a labor camp. In this camp, we worked in abandoned salt mines manufacturing airplane parts because the war was almost over, so the production went underground.

And they still had hopes of conquering the world?

Of course they had hopes. Oh, yeah, they had hopes. I was there from January to April 1945. And there were a lot of Russian prisoners of war. We took their places. We worked at night, and they worked during the day. And we could exchange a few words. And they told us that the Red Army is victorious. We could exchange a few words-- that the war is almost over and don't give up hope. Don't give up hope.

How were the working conditions in the mines?

We worked actually on equipment there-- we make parts. The conditions were not too bad. The only thing was not enough air. And you were falling asleep-- lack of oxygen. If you fell asleep, you never woke up.

And the camp, of course, the situation in the camp was bad. We were with many, many Frenchmen because this was a camp was sent from Buchenwald. And Buchenwald was not only Jewish, as you know.

Were these political prisoners from France?

Political prisoners, so maybe it was some partisans or some--

So they wore a different kind of insignia, I presume?

And as you know, how were we identified in Buchenwald, Jews had a Star of David. Politicals had a five-pointer star. The Polish people or the Russians had-- it was written on it "East." Ost. Ost is in German I think. They had bandits who had a green triangle. Homosexuals, it would go up the other direction. So everybody was identified.

Everybody was labeled?

Labeled. I had a number, 116,390, on my suit. I didn't have any striped suits, but our civilian clothes was painted. And in this camp I received, of course, in Buchenwald, before I left, a nice pair of leather shoes. And I'll come back later to that, why leather shoes saved my life.

And again, in April '45, this camp was again liquidated. And we are gathered outside the camp. The commandant told us the war is almost over. We're going to take you to Theresienstadt, to Red Cross. We're going to hand you over to the Red Cross, and you'll be free people. This was April. And we sort of had a feeling the war was over.

What happened, we were 700 of us, Toby. And we marched about 30 days. And out of the 700, 180 survived.

And this is in the wintertime, in the snow?

Wintertime was spring already. The cold did not kill us. What did kill us is lack of food and the torture. We marched every day 30 kilometer, 40 kilometer. And if somebody got weak and fell, he couldn't get up anymore. And they did-- you had 10 SS men, a liquidation battalion behind-- a squadron, rather. Whoever dropped, couldn't get up, they kicked him to the ditch and shot him. So this how they killed people.

At night, in the morning, when we're supposed to get up and go, people hid in the hay or straw. So they had long bayonets and--

And found them?

And found them, so that--

Did you march with shoes on or without--

Pardon?

Did you march with shoes on or without shoes?

Well, you marched with shoes. But many, many received in Buchenwald, Toby, is those wooden shoes.

Oh, the clogs.

The clog-- they call them Holland shoes, the Holland shoes.

Holland shoes, right. Is that what you had?

No, I had leather shoes.

Oh, that's right. You were telling us the story.

And the people who had those shoes couldn't walk. You cannot shuffle your feet. They had blisters. Eventually, they took the shoes off. And they couldn't walk, and they just dropped.

I had my shoes on. And I would contribute that saving my life again those shoes. And another thing I found out-- when you march in a column, that somehow the first few people walk behind the columns run all the time. So I made sure I was the first in the column. You know, I was in camp since 1941, '40.

You were very educated, weren't you?

I was educated. Somehow self-survival-- I don't know. I was in the first column. Besides, you had the dogs behind you always nipping at you. You always had to run, run, run. And you couldn't run all the time. You just had to be--

You had to survey your situations in order to survive, as you say.

I did it unconsciously. I did it. I don't know why, but I did it. On those marches, the Germans didn't have much more those years. We're talking those months before the war was over. You're talking about a half a potato at night or we'd get some potato peels. That's what we received. And people were dying.

We also were eating grass. The Frenchmen taught us what kind of grass to eat. You know what happened. People died. People died.

[CROSS TALK] poisonous grass.

Once, we were in a barn for about a week, with nothing to eat absolutely. And down below, Toby, there were pigs, pig stalls.

Didn't slaughter any pigs?

No, we didn't We couldn't slaughter anything. So I snuck down with two other fellows. And we got that slop for the pigs were eating. We stuffed our pants and went upstairs. And we're stuffing ourselves with it.

The other two fellows died. And I had a disease. I was defecating with blood in the diarrhea. I got very weak from what we ate. Don't ask me how I survived.

Again.

Again I survived. We didn't want to share with anybody that thing. We packed ourselves. We tied our pants with a little rope. And we stuffed ourselves with that food. And many people died, either through this or they died through starvation. Or they died eating grass. They also had some kind of disease.

Anyway, on May the 8th-- and prior to this, we saw the Germans running, civilians running. On May the 8th, '45, we were put next to a forest, top of a hill. It was a nice, sunny day.

Where is this-- in Poland, in Germany?

This was in Germany, not far from Czechoslovakian border. The place was called Annenberg. And the commandant comes up. He says, the Russian is here. Fortunately, the Russians came, not the Americans, because if the Americans would have come, they would take us to the woods and kill us.

The Americans would have killed you?

The guards, the SS.

Oh, the guards would have killed you.

They were not afraid of the Americans as much. They were petrified of the Russians.

Oh, I see. They didn't want retaliation on the part of the Russians.

So they did. They left us. And they took off, took whatever they had, and they run away. A few got killed that time because a few zealous SS were shooting people.

Anyway, I just ran away, two, three of us. And we hid on a a little mountain. And maybe two hours later we saw everybody running, a lot of confusion. And we saw from a distance a motorcycle with two Russian soldiers came. Those were my liberators.

You greeted them? Or they greeted you?

We greeted each other. And I could converse a little bit with them in Russians. And they were about 17, 18 years old. And they took care of us for a while. And they took us-- I remember these two Russian soldiers. And they gave one of the guys a gun and says, anybody's touching you, shoot those German pigs.

And took us to a house. And they told the German woman, give them shelter. Give them food. And next day I'll check on you. They came next day to check then. He want to shoot them next day. And we said, well, don't do it. They took good care of us.

And the next day, we left the house. We walked on the street. And some Russian soldiers told us not to stay in the city because they're going to leave. And until the Americans would come to that city, it was no man's city.

No man's land.

They were afraid of our lives. Anyway, we remained there. I couldn't go any place. I was too weak. And the Americans

came two days later.

So you were in a difficult position for those several days too?

Oh, there was. However, I think it was two days later. They arrived a day later. And the Americans showed up. And it was actually somebody-- not too many American troops. And I couldn't converse with them. But already we had food enough. I was sick, and I was taken to a hospital for four weeks.

Was this Red Cross supervised?

It was Red Cross, yeah. After the four-week period-- you got time? After four week, I returned to Poland and my hometown, looked for some relatives.

And did you find anyone?

No, I did not find anybody because nobody showed up.

So that was how you spent your youth.

My youth, yes.

And today is your birthday.

Yeah, today's my birthday.

And your birthday when you were 25 years old was not as--

I weighed 75 pounds when the war was over.

That was quite a change from a happy-go-lucky boy. I went to thank you very much. I know it's so hard for you to remember all these ghastly stories and remembrances of your family, but this is for educational purposes. And we thank you.

I would like to leave a legacy for the future generations because how many of us will live many, many years?

How many survivors can talk also.

Can talk about it.

We thank you very much.

OK.

And we'd like you to come to the Holocaust Resource Center--

I will.

--and see what we're trying to do.

I will, Toby. OK.

Thank you very much.

OK.