

Good evening, it is June 15, 1992, and we are at Channel 4 in Buffalo, New York. My name is Toby Ticktin Back and I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center here in Buffalo. Our guest is Bernie Lewkowicz. Bernie, I understand that you were born in Germany. Will you tell us a little about your childhood?

Yes. I was born in Germany in 1921. And my childhood was just plain simple. It was a good childhood. I come from a nice Orthodox parents. Then they always-- I went to Hebrew school. And I went later, we went to a public school. And this was my childhood until the war broke out.

Well, did you live in Germany all the time?

I lived in Germany until about 1937.

So you were 16 years old?

Yeah, started getting so bad in Germany that we were harassed in school. We weren't allowed to take, participate in anything what anybody else used to do in school. So the antisemitism grew so bad that my father decided with my mother that we better move back before we get--

Move back where?

To Poland.

That's where your family was from?

Yeah, they come from Poland originally.

Well, but why did they leave Poland in the first place?

Oh, because Germany was to be made more money in Germany and was the life, the standards, the living standards were a lot better in Germany than in Poland. We had running water in Germany, which in Poland, we didn't have. And the money was practically doubled you made in Germany than in Poland.

What did your father do?

My father was a baker. And we had a little first-- in Poland, he used to work for somebody. And in Germany, he bought a little bakery. And we lived right not far from Breslau in this little town. And I remember, matter of fact, I remember one particular holiday, for Pesach, we used to bake matzos. And I was a little boy. And I remember that the rabbi came from Breslau as they cleaned our oven and they brought some extra help. And from the townspeople, we had the help.

And we baked matzos. This was something I remember. When I was a little boy, we used to cut little pieces there. And they like playing ball. We used to throw to these people. And they used to roll them and make these little holes and put. And my father was constantly by the oven. And the other older brothers, mine, they used to always stay by the oven. They switched around because it was awful Hot and they used to switch around every half hour. Another one used to put in the matzos and matzos out. It was really interesting.

That's a nice memory.

Yeah.

Tell us about your family, your grandparents, and the town. Were there any Jews there?

Well, the grandparents, I didn't know. We never-- my father was always busy. And for some reason, I don't know why, we never-- I don't remember seeing any of my uncles. I seen-- when we moved back to Poland later, I seen one of my

father's cousins. Cousin I seen. And I seen a nephew of my father's. He came to visit. That's all I seen from my father's side. My father comes originally from Poland, from Zaloszyce. His father was a-- well, you call it an English a judge, or in Jewish is a dayan.

A dayan.

Yeah. The real dayan, they called him.

So he was a real scholar.

Yeah. And all of them were very religious, this I know. I heard about him talking and I heard about my three-- my father's brothers, but I never met them.

And your mother's family?

My mother's family was very close. Her brothers and sisters lived not far apart in Poland, which my mother used to-- oh, once or twice a week, she used to go visit. Or they used to come to us. From Poland to Germany, when we used to go to us, it was a dry border. You could cross over. And as long you showed the papers where you live, you could come into Germany.

So it was close. It was close to the Polish town.

Yeah, right. Later, when we moved, when we decide, my father closed up everything and he sold whatever he could, and we moved to Poland, and so he started working for somebody.

As a baker?

As a baker. And so then on weekends, the whole family used they come to us because we used to get a newspaper from New York or so.

From New York, from the United States?

Yeah, we used to get the Forwards every week. And my mother used to sit outside the window sill. And the people used to stay around. She had to read it aloud that everybody understands. And everybody looked forward already to--

Forward to the Forwards.

--yeah, what is new in the America, the Golden Medina.

How many Jewish families were there in this town in Poland?

On this town in Poland was awful a lot of Jews. Matter of fact, I think it was about, I would say, 60% or 70%, were more Jews Christians in Poland, in Bedzin.

And what was that, a half a million?

I would say so, yeah, because we had about two, three synagogues there, oh, and a little small shtiebels. We also had a bunch of-- I don't know how many, or there was a lot of them, usually. And we had a big, large, beautiful synagogue what wasn't so Hasidic. And right about a half a block further was this big beis medrash, very religious. And then most of them was a lot of religious people, what they wanted to have their own. They had small shtiebels usually, what is they had 20 or 40 people belong to in their groups and so.

When you went back, did you go back to school at age 16?

Yeah, we went back to school. Well, that didn't last long either, the school, because the Polish people started getting almost like the Germans. And we were denied certain things. And so we couldn't get any higher education. They didn't allow us no more. And I didn't go no more to school.

So you didn't finish high school?

And so I was only about a year to finish. And so my father decided not to send me no more.

What did you do then?

Oh, my mother used to teach us. My mother was a very educated person. And she always-- in the evening, we had lessons. My father was teaching us Hebrew, because we had to know Hebrew, good Hebrew. We used to go, and I used to learn than, and I used to learn often-- Chumash and Gemara I used to learn. And now, I'm sorry to say it, when the war broke out and I seen what they did to our rabbis and hazzanim. I used to love our hazzan. He was such a beautiful voice that you never heard in your life. It was just when he used to pray, he just got everything through your blood. I really loved this man. And the rabbi was such a nice person.

And when I seen this, I throw away the book. And I for over 50 years, I never look in a Bible. And I am sorry to say, I forgot most all of it. It's just lately, I belong because my-- belong to a Hasidic synagogue because it was convenient to us. And most of my friends joined it, the Ahavas Lubavitz, which now, we changed the name to B'nai Shalom. The name Lubavitz is out.

So what happened when the Germans came into your town, where September 1939?

Oh, when the Germans come to town, right away, they occupied. And right away, they were bombing and burning down the synagogues. And they were going just wild. They were just smashing everything. And it was going on. And so the Germans were moving away from town. Then the Polish people started going after us. They grabbed everything. They took everything. We couldn't find anything.

And just about a week later, quiet down everything. And they ask for volunteers, who would like to go to Germany work. And we get good pay-- two marks an hour. And they prefer professionals, or there were not, at least one person from the family should go. And we're not going to touch the rest of the family.

And I always was interested in mechanical works. They were building a bridge then. I was always watching. And I asked this German people about how I can get to this job or something. As a Jew, they didn't give me. Well, one of the big mechanics give me a book with pictures and diagrams how to build things. And I kept it always with me. I never let anybody touch this book. I learned almost-- I memorized practically everything by heart, I knew this book. And I learned. And this helped me to do a lot.

Before you get into the war situation, were you in Germany during Kristallnacht?

No.

So you had left?

Yeah, we left a year before.

Before Kristallnacht?

Yeah, we left almost a year before the Crystal Night. We heard about it. We knew about it.

So the news did reach Poland?

Oh, yeah. It wasn't so far away from the German border that we knew practically almost everything. We listened on the

radio, you could hear it.

You still had radios? Oh, of course.

Yeah, we had radios. That's all we had. And so then after this, then, I decided-- matter of fact, my mother wanted the older brother to go. I just ran away. And I said, I'm going. And so I volunteered. They took us in a camp. And they took us on trucks and took us, drove us into Germany. We wind up in Sakrau near Annaberg. This wasn't too far from the Polish border.

Over there, they distributed us. And they asked for different people who got professions. What kind of profession you do, or what did you study? Then they looked mostly for electricians. Then I seen a few fellows, to me, they didn't look like electricians. I figured, oh, well, they can do it, I just went over and signed up too.

And the men looked at me. And he asked me how old I am. And I told him that I'm almost 20. I was always a little bigger than the other fellows. And I didn't have no papers. And I figured, they're not going to check. And so I told them I was older. And so he looked at me, he says, all right. What can you do electric? I said, almost anything, what you tell me to do, I will do it.

Says, oh, that's all right.

You had a lot of chutzpah, didn't you?

And so yeah, because I seen the other people, they didn't look smarter than me. And I says, they're going to show me. So two days went by. And they had all the groups out. They give us-- at the time, they give us food. And he says, this, you're going to have to pay back from your own money what you're going to make, which he ask us.

And we said, we all agreed. And so we got food. They gave us food. And of course, it wasn't kosher food. And whoever wanted to ate. And most of the people didn't eat because everybody, at that time, was strictly kosher, especially Polish Jews and German Jews were kosher. So I didn't eat no treif at that time.

So you were hungry then?

Yeah, we were hungry. Although we-- they give us enough food at the time, when we, on the road, we didn't get nothing to eat, other when we came. After a few days, they come out, and they picked one of the electricians. They took us the whole gang and took us outside. And the men explained to us, they got this barracks set up. And he showed us, he says, you got to put in these little clamps on the wires what do we got on the wall. Going to be 12 inches apart in centimeters, going to be every 30 centimeters apart. And figure out how many of those goes in there then.

I'm farsighted. I just look through fast and just was a dumb guess. And I just hit it just right. I said, eleven on this one wall. And I just, I hit it eleven. He says, yeah, you're right. And so he didn't ask me no more. And then he asked me, he said, can you climb? Ooh, I love climbing. I said, all right. Would you like to-- did you ever go on a pole and hung up wire? I said, I did everything, but I didn't do this. I said, when you show it to me, I said, I gladly do it.

Then he took me, took over me and two other fellows. And they give us these little hooks where you put them on your legs and you climb on the poles. Took a few times until we finally learned how to climb these poles. And he showed us how you put these little insulators on on the top. And then you put the wire twist around and how you hook it together.

And they showed us, later, how you splice the wire together. We do it different way than other countries do it. In Germany, we do the right job. I said, yeah, I know, you have all, everything is you have all. And we did it. They showed us. And so I become a lineman for the German.

And so they took us away. A week later, we were already on the road. And we were going from camp to camp. We used to bring it from the main highway, bringing-- used to be from the main highway approximately, I would say, about four or five miles. And we had to string the wire to the camps because there was no electricity in the camps when we arrived.

It was all candles and little kerosene lamps. And we brought them there. And the other crew took over.

So when we finished the one camp, we went to a further camp. Oh, we went to Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, Gross-Rosen, and Annaberg. And a matter of fact, in Annaberg was a camp with all women, all women. Matter of fact, we arrived and we seen, this one fellow says, from far away, looks like all naked woman staying outside. I drove by and I didn't even notice it. I was closer than this. And I didn't look.

He says, where did you see it? And I went back and wanted to see if that's true. Yeah, it was true. So I just arrived. And they had who arrived in these camps after they become working camps, then they were opened. Later, they closed them up. After we worked for a while, and then when we came back to the original camp to Sakrau, there was about two months. Then I seen trucks coming in with wire and posts.

And then we stopped working. And everybody had to go out and start digging holes, put the posts in, and put the wires around. Actually, we built our own camp. We built our own camp. And first, we got paid for the work, how we were doing, because we were hired as professionals. It was good money. I was sending home. We used to write letters home. And it was nice. Then after two months, soon, we got staying around all this wire, closed up, we had to get our clothes off. They took us off. And they give us striped uniforms.

You became prisoners.

We become prisoners. We asked what we do wrong. Well, this is-- we got the orders from Berlin, everything, whatever he said, Berlin, Berlin. I said, isn't there other city but Berlin? Everything, how can one person tell you what to do all the time? Oh, you couldn't say nothing there. When you opened up your mouth, you got beat up. So then we tried to keep our mouths shut most of it. So they didn't even let us talk between each other. They used to actually separated when you see somebody, one of these officers seeing we were talking there, he come over and beat us up for it. So many times-- I always had a big mouth. And I got slapped for it.

What were the living conditions like?

Oh, you had a plain-- you didn't have mattresses like we got here. You had a sack with straw. And you laid down wherever you could. Later, they brought in a bunch of beds, bunk beds, up and down. They brought them. First, we were laying on the floor, on these bags with straws.

Did you have the daily roll call?

Hmm?

Did you have a daily--

Every morning, we had at 5 o'clock in the morning, we had a roll call in the morning there. We had to go fast. And then they give us-- in a half hour, we had to be washed and get our food, where they give everybody a slice of bread-- actually, I would say, about two inches of bread and a bowl of coffee. This was in the morning, we got that. And then when we come home from-- and we had to go out to work. Let's see, from this camp, they took us on the Autobahn, when we came there. That was this was.

Was it already constructed, the Autobahn?

No, the Autobahn was-- they built to this particular place, and we started to go further. Then we took us out to Autobahn. And we didn't know what this was, the Autobahn. Well, later, we start asking. In a few days, we found out because they give everybody a piece about 40 feet by 40 feet. You had to take with a shovel with the topsoil off and throw it on the side because this was backbreaking, the work.

Some people who had never had a shovel with their hand, and when you had to learn how to do it, you throw it overhand, you break your back. And so people didn't know how to do it. And they got beat up constantly for it. These

people were walking around like German Shepherds, just constantly with the stick. They had pleasure just beating people so.

But I done my work. I done my share of it. As a matter of fact, there was a fellow there on the other side. I tried to help him. And this German didn't let me. He was kind of weak a little bit, could see he's a little older person. And he couldn't do it. No, he has to do-- everybody has to do his own work. I that I said, I don't like to stand around. I give you some more work there, you just don't do it. You can't help him.

But when he turned away, I went over and got a few shovels out from the other fellow too. And so this was the work. And so we tried to just keep our heads down and the eye is that we can see that we don't get beat up. Because when you get beat up every day, you're not going to live. And we wanted to live through it because we always figured, the war not going to last forever-- and another, we figured, a year or two the most. And so that's what we were fell.

Were you hungry?

Of course, we were hungry. And we were looking forward to go home and get to see what is there for supper. When we came home, that was the same thing. You get a slice of bread and a bowl, a cup of soup, dirty. I don't think they ever cleaned. Because when you ate, you could feel you're eating with the dirt. But we were hungry then. What are you going to do? You swallowed whatever you got. And just drink a little water, and flush it down, and that's it.

Were you with any friends or relatives?

Was just we made friends. The people, when you stay and work with them, we become kind of almost like brothers. You get used to each other. And you pick your own group. And we talk, and we discuss, and stuff like this. And we just try to keep occupied.

Did you get a day off?

We got Sundays, we got a day off, Sundays they didn't, because they didn't let us out working because the watchman, the officers went home for Sundays. Later on, certain groups had to work because from the war, they had a lot of wounded soldiers. And they didn't have nothing to do for them. Then they made them for watchmen. And that's why they had so many watchmen that we got. They couldn't figure out. Took them a while to figure out what they going to do with all these people.

And they all were on the front. And they fought for a while. They got wounded. So you seen a lot of them without hands, arms. They lost. And so we had to work. And so we finished. After this camp finished, we moved to another camp.

They closed this camp up, and they took us to other camps, and picked always people-- matter of fact, in the same camp, I have to tell you, was this one fellow there, a very religious fellow by the name of-- oh, what was his name-- Grossman. Yeah, little Grossman. He supposedly was married to a rabbi's daughter in Chrzanów, or Oswiecim, something like that. And he smuggled in a tallit and tefillin in the camp for some reason. I don't know. Nobody could figure out.

How did he do that?

Nobody of us, from so many hundreds of people were there couldn't figure out how Grossman got in the tallit and tefillin in the camp. One day, we come on out on a Saturday. We're going out to work. We only worked this particular Saturday a half a day. And before we go out to work, then this one soldier started yelling, stop. I seen a Teufel out there, he says in German, a Teufel. He's seen a monster outside.

The devil?

Yeah, the devil. Don't go there. Then we try to-- everybody stopped. And he organized a group of the soldiers. And they all took sticks. And they put their bayonets on the rifles. And they were going looking for this Teufel. I just sneaked out.

And I climbed on the top the pile of wood where he was right behind. I couldn't even figure out how did he get out from camp over there. And he had the tallit and tefillin on and he was davening. It was doing the Shabbos davening. And I went over. I went the first over there. And I started yelling. And I say, stop. It's not a Teufel, it's Grossman.

Oh, my.

I said, he got a prayer shawl on. And he got this other equipment with him, with all the religious Jews were. And even regular Jews davening with tefillin. And I explained to the soldiers. They come over, they beat this fellow so much, oy, that really broke my heart. I was crying myself. I asked them to stop. I didn't believe that a human being can take so much beating what this particular person got. They beat him so much, I tried to stop him, and I got beat up with this too.

Did he survive?

When I left him, I seen him still alive, although this person was getting beatings every day. I don't know how a person could survive with so much. I guess he must have-- I don't think he had any bones in him. I don't think this hurt him anymore.

Well, you were telling stories about the camp where you remembered about how you tried to get food in the kitchen in the officers' bunk. Would you tell us those stories?

Oh, sure. I always try to survive. And I volunteered always to work. And I try-- first, I went to the kitchen. And I try to help out to clean up the kitchen. Then when I cleaned up the kitchen, we washed the pots, the big kettles there. And we figure you're going to scoop up some food from the bottom, which we did. We scraped a little from here and here. And we washed up. Was worth it the hour work. We scraped up a few spoonfuls of food.

It was worthwhile.

And so we worked on this. And then a few weeks later, I checked out. And I figured out, these Germans going home for the weekends. Then I went over to the lagerf¼hrer. And I asked him, I said, could I do you a favor? And I have so much time. I don't know what to do with myself. I said, I would like to clean up the room. And all this shelving you got where the people keep their food and stuff, I would like to clean them up.

So come next week, would be nice for them. He says, yeah, that's a good idea. Then I start cleaning the room with all the shelves, the lockers nice. Then once in a while, these soldiers used to leave me a slice of bread. The first time, I remember, I didn't want to eat the slice of bread I found because I was afraid they probably put it--

As a trap.

--especially just as a trap. Then I just left it there. Then a couple of days later, the same soldier came to me, he says, you didn't-- you cleaned every one of them. You didn't clean my closet up good. I said, yeah, I just left there's a slice of bread on there. He says, don't ever leave it. You clean it up, clean is cleaning.

So he's a kind soul.

And he must have had something in him there that he felt probably that he should give me this piece of bread. And so I appreciated next time. I said, I'll do a good job, I clean it.

Did you think you were in better physical shape than most of the soldiers?

I felt like I must have. I would say so, with my scrounging around for food constantly. And I always was looking when we were digging. Sometimes, we found certain little vegetation what you could eat. And this helped me a lot. Matter of fact, one time, I found some beets. I was digging, we were shoveling there. And I found some beets. And I just left them. And I marked, put a marker there, and wherever we could get to it, I went over there. And there was a little piece of field with some beets in the ground.

And you ate it raw?

Yeah.

Were you ever sick?

No.

Never had typhoid or dysentery?

No, I-- or later on, I was too-- was they needed somebody-- this was in another camp-- it was they needed somebody to feed the sick people where they had typhus or something. Then one of the doctors came. And he was checking out all the kind of people was immune to different thing. And I tried to find out what it is, maybe going to be something good for me.

Then I was always sneaky. And I tried to find out thing. And I always volunteered most of the time because I figured, maybe we get better treatment. And so I come over and say-- and he says, you're perfect. And I heard him say. And yet, I understood very good German because I came from there. Then I heard him saying that I'm perfect for the job. And they picked three of us. We had to go and feed the sick people. And I never was sick.

But I thought in the infirmaries, from what I have read and heard, that they didn't even bother with the people in the infirmary, they just let them die.

Well, most of them they didn't let, not our people. They didn't have no Jews or there something, they would never.

Oh, these were other nationalities.

These were Germans.

Oh, Germans.

Yeah, these were German soldiers.

No.

Oh, German soldiers.

No, us, we didn't go. No Jews were under there.

No, I didn't think so.

You told them you're sick, he shot you. You're not supposed to tell them that you're sick. My god, you kept-- they see you when you couldn't walk no more, they just beat you to death, or they send you away, or they killed you. Oh, my god, most of the people, you just didn't-- when you marched and you didn't stay in line, they just shot you.

Did you ever try to run away?

Huh? Oh, yeah, one place there, I got shot here my shoulder here a little bit. He creased me. He says, next time, I'm going to shoot right. He says, you moved out of the line. I said, I was walking perfectly. Maybe I just moved a little because the tree was in the way. I went around it. No, you weren't in the line.

Did you need some medicine?



I put a little hanky that I put it over, was just a skin crease. There, I didn't need. I didn't want him to take me because when you never were sure where you're going. You tell them you're shot, they might finish the job.

Finish it.

I didn't want even tell them that. I said, I felt it. And I just took-- wet a piece of rag there. I found like a hanky. And I put it over onto that. I didn't want to even tell them about because I didn't want to lose my job. And so they treated us a little better. They gave us a little more. We had double soup. When we entered, I said, can we have this-- ask what was leftover, they ask, or do you want some that everybody run by?

Why did they treat you a little better-- the electricians, you mean?

The electricians and we were feeding the German soldiers. They always give us some food. First, they give us a little food. And they watched us too that we shouldn't steal any food from the sick people who we care because it was kind of that tempting. Many times, I even said to this one watchman, I said, by golly, some of these guys, I don't think-- they don't want to live. They're just wasting this food, I said to him. And so they were laughing with me. They says, yeah, some of them wouldn't live, although we still have have all the kameraden.

So you couldn't take their food?

No, and I told them-- they knew we're not going to touch it. By golly, we were watched like-- never I was watched so like in the camps as they watched over me. And I said, I hope God watches over me like they did. And so every move was kind of tough. And whenever you seeing, this is kind of the people where they were killing people. I went from this camp, they moved us later to what you call-- they moved us to a camp, I guess it was Sachsenhausen, when I don't mistake. Was a terrible camp.

When I walked in, I seen so many dead people that I never seen. I thought, from far away, it looked like a pile of lumber, when we marched in. And this was all dead people. They were digging ditches. And this was above the ditches already. There must have been quite a few people there. Then they got a hold of a few of us who could still felt pretty good. And I was one of them. And this was my job to-- we had to go grab the people pile them. After a few days, the first couple of days, I fell awful sick. But the later, you get kind of used to it, piling people.

Got immune to it.

Yeah. And then they give us some liquid, like a gasoline, pour over them, and we used to burn. We had to burn them because we were afraid we were going to have typhus.

It's a hard job.

And We burned all these people then. And he says, this Haufen going to be smaller, he says, when it burns down, then we're going to cover it. And so then after this, we piled up, let's say, about 40 or the 50 in each grave there inside. And they burned them. And then they covered them.

Did you recognize anybody? No.

I didn't even want to look because it turned my stomach. I was-- oy, by golly, you know what kind of feeling this is? You can't sleep. You dream constantly, you don't know who you got. You can carry your own brother there. And the people, people were so skinny. We lost so much weight. When I came out from camp, I don't think I weighed more than about 60 or 70 pounds myself. I was barely walking. First, the last week, we didn't have no food at all.

Well, before you get to the last week, why did they call you gypsy?

Oh, they called me gypsy because we were in this one camp. And I guess I can't even call this camp, a small camp. And I see that two camps, one of them was just Gypsies and one was Jews. And I figured, oh, maybe I figured they're still

going him. And I said, oh, maybe there's a little better living over there by the Gypsies.

Then I just found myself a way. And I ran over to their camp. And I stood with them. They didn't want to accept me. And I told them, I'm a Gypsy, I'm dark like you. But I couldn't understand their language. They had a language there. I said, no, you have to talk Deutsch to me. We don't talk any other language here. We're not allowed to talk any other language. But then this, they always-- and then they figured, I guess because they're very smart people, they figured out that I'm from the other side.

And I went over to the oldest. They always obeyed the oldest. That's the type this. And he kind of looked me over. And he says, all right, you can stay. And so when there's the-- every morning, when they called out, they count the people, then there always used to be one or two missing by them. Then this one soldier says, that's the first time you got a full count somehow. I don't know what happened to the other. And then on the other side, I heard yelling over there, somebody was missing.

I see.

Or they say, let it go because they figured other maybe-- I heard him saying that he probably died or they killed him, somebody. They was shooting constantly and so when they come close and they didn't look so good. After about a month I spent with the Gypsies--

Did they work the Gypsies hard too?

Oh, yeah, just-- I guess, I thought they were worked them just as bad as I. I didn't see any better by the Gypsies. And I didn't have-- I couldn't make no friends with them. I actually suffered. But it was so hard to get back to the camp.

Why was it hard?

Because this was about 50 yards to go across. And you got constantly the lights going on you.

But how did you come in the first place? It was difficult.

Well, I sneaked through, I watched out the light how many revolutions makes it. And I was practicing running that I can make it. And so then I said, I got to do the same thing. But in the meantime, they covered my hole what I found before where I went out, was covered.

Oh, so you didn't have an outlet.

Then I figured I got this-- you got to hit this a split second. After I counted one time, there was a little place where was a wooden fence. And I figured, when I run fast, I can break this piece of fence, a board through it. But I got to pick up a time when they sleeping. Shouldn't be awake. And so one time, was about, oh, I would say about between 1:00 and 2 o'clock in the morning. I just made up and was raining very bad. I said, this would be just the time because they can't hear me. And they can't see so good for the light, I don't think. And I figured out, this is going to be the day. And that's what I picked. I remember, it was on a Thursday night go over.

How did you know it was Thursday? Did you have a calendar?

Hmm?

Did you have a calendar?

The soldiers was counting already when they going to go home. They figured already, oh, I only got two more days and I'm going home. And I know the days when they were with. I didn't know. Most of the time, we didn't know the year or the month. We had to ask all the time, although the days, they were anxious to go home one of them.

And so then this one rainy day I picked was so-- it was thundering and beautiful. I speeded up so fast, I didn't make-- I had this one light on me. But they didn't see me. And I broke this one board. And I climbed back. And I found a piece of rock, put back the board. And I got up. Then the Jews didn't want to take me.

Oh, you couldn't go back to your original group?

They didn't want to let me in by theirs. They occupied my bed where I was laying. Somebody else moved in on this place.

Oh, I see.

I had to find a room where to get in there. And finally, they said, that Zigeuner is here. Then they start calling me the Zigeuner.

Oh, that's how you got the name Gypsy.

Yeah, that Gypsy. And so I started looking where the fellows where I was with. I said, what do you mean, you forgot about me? It's me. I tell them, I said, I went over to the Gypsies. Yeah, we knew you went over. We see you running. And they wanted to know how everybody got along, and find out how was over there, how was over?

I said, forget it, it's just as bad as we do. And so there's no way where to run. And so they figured out, the Gypsies were figuring they wanted to run away, a few of them ran away. Well, they figured out, it's no place where to run because the camps were built approximately an average of about five to 10 miles away from the main highways, also in a remote area.

So there were no nearby villages.

And they made something that is open field. They figured this out. Because I remember, when I worked on the electrical and we climbed up on the top, you couldn't see nothing. You didn't see no houses. Once in a while, you'll see a farm someplace. Or it's all fields.

So where you going to run? They had dogs, they had rifles, they had a lot of soldiers around. You couldn't there. I know, I seen a lot of people, they try to run away or this. They only run about 100 yards, they got shot. I see many of them because I had to go and bring them in. I said, we went out every few days, we had to go out and bring so somebody tried to run away.

And nobody made it?

No. And then people there-- there was just the hunger, people were hungry. And they just wanted to be shot. I think that they wanted it, would be better off dead because they constantly get beat up. And you know what means that hunger, this hurts.

You're starving. They were starving.

The veins in you, this pulls you together, it's a terrible pain. It's terrible, I'm telling you. I know what I chewed on bark many times. We used to march sometimes from one camp to another for days. We didn't stop. They didn't feed us. And see, you didn't even have some. And once in a while, we were happy we found someplace is still that we can get a little water.

How did you have the strength to march?

Why not you just barely crawled. And sometimes, they didn't have-- most of the times, they took us in trains, in boxcars, loaded up to capacity that you couldn't move. People used to die in the boxcars from suffocation. Was no place even where to go. You couldn't, it's just like herring standing up. You couldn't sit down.

And so was in every car, used to have-- when we came in the trains, there was also a lot of dead people. And then you can't have even a night sleep because you're constantly dreaming. You're afraid you're going to get killed or you're going to live next day. And you go through in terrible. That's how they were feeling. A person who didn't go through it, it's impossible. I don't know that he's Jewish or not Jewish, it can have the feeling what a person what went through it. It's impossible to understand it.

Just too different.

And it's to tell somebody is also, I don't think that the people who listen to me, even when I tell you, they would believe me that was so what I'm telling them. Because a person has to go through it. That's why I didn't want to go on this program and tell you about this because when I went through here a few times, I was invited with some other-- some guests someplace or something. And they ask about the camps or something. After we got through talking and discussing, then I heard them on the way up. I don't think this-- they couldn't be so like what the man said.

It's hard to believe, isn't it?

Yeah.

It's very hard to believe.

And I said, I was there. I'm not a liar. I don't make up no stories. I said, you're not giving me anything for telling this. And I'm not gaining anything. I'm just telling, you ask me a question, and I'm telling you. I run in here once to a teacher here. I tried to tell him that. And he couldn't get over it. And he says, it's hard to believe.

It is hard.

And he told me. I like the person. He came to my business a few times. We discussed it. And he says, he couldn't sleep over it, and he always come back, and he says, it's hard to believe. And he told the truth. It's hard to believe, and I'm telling it.

That's almost impossible. Bernie, where were you on liberation day?

Oh, first we went-- well, no, we went--

And when was liberation for you?

--we went first to another camp, which I didn't tell you yet. The Germans were shortened-- they were short in soldiers. And we were taken to, marched out. And then they transferred us to Gross-Rosen. From Gross-Rosen, they tried to pick up the healthiest fellows available. And they tried to make an army from us and send us to the Russian front.

Of Jewish soldiers to the Russian front?

Jewish they wanted. They picked up about 1,000 fellows. There, they picked us to this one camp and brought brown uniforms from the Organisation Todt. This was a labor organization. They was shoemakers, tailors, they were these kind of uniforms.

What year are we talking about?

This was in 1944, almost-- yeah, in 1944, beginning '44. This was in between '43 and '44. I know it was cold, was terrible cold. Was right after New Year's. They picked up about 1,000 of us and put us in uniforms. And they brought us a lot of-- they brought us double portions of food. In fact, each one of us got us a round little, like you see this pumpernickel bread here we got, each one got a whole bread like this.

That was a feast for you.

Oh, this was usually for a week. It was usually. And boy, I took this piece of bread. And oh, did I eat it so fast that nobody can steal it from me. Because I seen two brothers one time cut the portion bread. They give us once in a while, they gave us for two. We have to cut. I seen one brother stabbed this other one with a knife because they were fighting who got a bigger piece of it. He didn't believe in it for hunger drove the people crazy.

Sure, understandable.

And so they give us enough food. And they give us a big bowl of soup. And it was good soup this time. So it was some kind of spaghettis with some kind of corn was inside or something. I don't know. I don't remember it. But well, the taste was a little better, that food.

This was to fatten you up for the front?

Yeah. And they told us that we're going to go to the Russian front. And they need to take the railroad. The Russian railroad is six inches wider than ours, than theirs. And we have to take the railroad apart one side and pull it in. And it's very cold. And we have to see that.

And they took also, they took was a few Russian prisoners. They took them also. They had to volunteer for this. The prisoners didn't want to work. And then I'm trying-- I tried to learn a little Russian from these prisoners. And so we learned a little, but not much. Paper, he wanted [NON-ENGLISH], paper there, he can roll his tobacco with that. He didn't find tobacco there. Wherever he found a leaf, he used this as tobacco. And so they sent us to near Stalingrad.

Oh, you did actually go.

Matter of fact, we could, from far away on a clear day, you could see Stalingrad. You can see the buildings there. And you can see there's bombing. And oh, boy, you can see there's fighting going on because we were not too far away from the front. Then we worked. We were just there a few weeks, not more, about-- I would say, we were there only about three weeks. And we didn't last long because most people, most of our, and they froze to death. In fact, they give me this loaf of bread in the morning, and I couldn't, it was so cold that this bread froze.

So you couldn't even eat it.

You couldn't bite it. I tied up a hanky. And I had this bread. And I chewed on it. I chewed on it. And only by noon, I had half of it. I worked and chewed it.

So how long were you on the Russian front?

We were there for almost a month.

That's '44?

Yeah.

And then they brought you back to Germany?

It was not many left over. It was only about 50-- I don't think it was 100 people left over.

Out of 1,000.

We froze. Were not this Russian soldier, I would have froze too. This Russian soldier taught me how to keep warm. We took, when we came back from work, take off the shoes. And we took the bare feet and rubbed with the snow, really.

Oh, for the circulation.

You rub it and it gets really warm. And then he found and he gave me the same thing. We found old cement bags. And we use the paper, rub around the feet, and put it in the shoes and boots. And this kept me twice as much warmer than before.

Circulation.

And every time, we'd say the same thing with the hands. Every few, a little while, take the gloves away and rub it in the wet snow. When you rub it in, your hands get really warm, which I-- unbelievable. I see what they do and I was doing. And I was one from the lucky ones that I really, I didn't--

You survived.

I didn't think we were going to get through it there because it's-- I never seen. I came from the east myself, but I never believed that such a cold place is like this. Really, this one wind, for about two, three weeks, the wind didn't stop. It was blowing. And we were covered up. All over, you could see the eyes a little bit. And we were doing our work. And the soldiers there on the end, from the beginning, in the first week, so used to go around with the-- constantly with the sticks. And they had these little strips and beating, beating.

They stopped doing this too. They were frozen themselves. In fact, I've seen a couple kicked over there. They died. Because I went to take a look one, I could have got the gun from them. I don't know whether who am I going to shoot, where I going to go. And so finally, it was only a few left over from them. And he says, when the next car going to come with the fresh nails, we supposed to get, then we just hopped on the railroad, and they took us back.

To Germany?

Yeah.

How long were you on that train?

Oh, we traveled about two or three days, I guess, we traveled. I fell asleep. And I don't even remember exactly because I was so tired. And I warmed myself up and was sticking-- we were sitting all of us so close together to keep ourselves warm. You know, it was cold. And so we found out later, they took us back to the same camp. Was nobody there in the camp. They decided, we march. And we wound up in a place which I never seen something like it.

I guess it's Mauthausen or the Sachsenhausen, something like this. I'm not sure of the name of the camp, which when you come in the doorway, is the concrete must be about five feet wide thick, the entrance. And was a big tree hanging across. And six people were hanging. They doing this every two days, they explained to me. Whoever don't obey or doesn't do the work gets strung up here, they tell us. And then we walk a little further. And I never see, I know that's unbelievable to see so many people congregate in one place. That's the biggest machine shop I ever saw in my life. It's so huge, into the mountain was digged out the whole mountain.

What were they making there?

They were making the [GERMAN], the rockets. And they give me a job. He says, you know anything about mechanical? I said, yes. And we had to put in the timers. And when you didn't put it in right, he told me, he says, you see this fellow there? You'll be next. And everybody was scared. They had two entrances. And they seeing this six people hanging on each entrance, and all the time different ones.

You worked very hard there.

And boy, we had to, really. I seen those people, six people holding their hands up as they can in these empty shells, brought them in, and the rest of them down from the machine. So we used to bring the parts, and we had to assemble,

and put it inside. I was assigned to put in the timer because they checked my eyesight that I can see. I said, I can see from far. Then we had to line it up, just like you got the screen there, and had to be lined up just exactly like this is because--

Is that where you found the little boy that you saved?

Yeah, this is the thing that we got out. We worked there. And they stopped this. Then we got back towards Breslau, they took us. Then I seen this little fellow. Oh, yeah, we were working on this little locomotives they wanted us to work and start them up. Well, we started from the beginning. We went back to the same place.

After four to five years.

Yeah. Then I seen this little fellow they lined up. They lined up the people go to Auschwitz. They marked everything, this goes to Auschwitz. We didn't know what meant to Auschwitz. We didn't know that they got the crematorium. We know they goes to Auschwitz, that's the end of the-- actually--

You didn't know what.

--we didn't know, actually, that they were burning people there. We just assumed because why did they go all, everybody goes there. We never seen nobody coming back. Then we assumed that must be the crematorium. We called it, as they didn't want to tell us. Although we, actually, 100% none of us knew about it. And I asked around, these German soldiers, they said the same things, they don't tell us nothing. We don't know anything. They don't print in the paper. And nobody tells them nothing. Well, so they found this thing that I seen, this young little boy with payos.

The sideburns.

And I looked at him. And I said, I need a help, a little one to crawl into the hole that it's inside. And he says, all right. The soldier took him, brought him over. And I come over. Then he started crying. Then I slapped him in the face. I said, you don't cry. He just look at me. And I took the knife, I cut his sideburns off.

And I said, from now on, you're going to stay with me. And better stay close to me where you want to. And we're both going to live. And so we got in. We got the job for cleaning these locomotives. And we went over, this one fellow taught me a little bit about it too.

He was a good German, this one. Actually, he always felt sorry for us. He always used to tell me then, he'd kind of don't say anything, that I'm afraid, he was really afraid himself. And he taught me everything what I have to do, and do it, and so. Then this little Levi Kahane got in the machine down in the oven. These little pipes, we had to always hammer around they shouldn't leak.

So you helped him survive.

And then I said, we're going to learn. And we're going to become locomotive engineers. And we're going to survive and go to Jerusalem and going to drive the biggest train they ever had. And so thank god, we did it. After a while, when we went to Israel, we found-- I found him.

Found Levi Kahane in the train.

His name Levi Kahane. And he driving in Jerusalem. And he drives the train. And it was really a pleasure to see him. But I tell you something. It's hard to tell because I always, whenever I'm talking about it, I can't sleep for a week.

Bernie, let's get it to a more cheerful part now because we don't have much time. The war ended for you on what-- when was your liberation?

Liberation in 1945. I remember, the first Jeep came with four soldiers. There was one with a little beard. And I said he

was-- that was a British outfit, came to Bergen-Belsen.

That's where you were, then, Bergen-Belsen?

Yeah, I was in Bergen-Belsen. We wound up the last two weeks before, we came to Bergen-Belsen. And then we were freed.

Now, we have some pictures to end the tape. So maybe you'll show us a picture of yourself.

This is after the war. We came out in 1945 from the camp, from Bergen-Belsen. I went into the next town, to Celle. And I went to a German house. And I asked for some food. And they had a big pot of soup. And I just ate the whole pot. After this, a couple hours later, and by the next day, I started getting cramps. And I blew up like a barrel. Then this man who worked on the railroad, and he see me laying outside, and he told me, he says, you want to live, you go to Bad Nauheim. And he drove me on map how to.

Oh, that's when you became an UNRRA soldier-- I mean in a worker with the UNRRA.

Oh, later, this was later. The first, that's how I wound up to go to Bad Nauheim. He sent me to go there to a doctor. And I took three beds. And they fixed me up. I was good as new. Then I looked for a job. So the UNRRA was looking for a driver. And I learned in camp how to drive. And they give me a job. So they put me a uniform, a nice one went on. And I was working for them for a while.

Then I tried to-- I went to Eisenhower's office. I wanted to join the American Army. They refused. He says, we only take citizens. Then they assigned me to escort dignitaries who come from overseas because I know Germany and I spoke the language. And they gave me the job from there.

Well, let's get the last picture. Show us the pictures. Tell us a little bit about the pictures. In this picture and the next picture, will you tell us?

This is a Memorial we put on in 1945, right almost on the end, almost '46, for the Memorial plaque for the lost--

For the Jews that didn't survive in the synagogue.

--who perished, yeah, that's right.

And this is your wife, whom you met?

This is my wife. In 1947, I got married to my wife, Jutta. And we got two wonderful children.

And here's the wedding and listening.

Here you see the wedding chaplain gave us a chuppah condition. And there's another little rabbi there from a Hungarian. He didn't like the way he did them.

And this is your?

That's my oldest son with my wonderful three grandchildren, Jason and Megan.

And then we have another picture.

And this is my daughter with her three children and her husband, with beautiful three children. She's coming in a couple weeks. In 1940, I got married. And I got a lovely family, which are so dear to me. And we're so grateful that you told us this story. Do you want to, in one minute that we have left, do you want to say anything in conclusion?



Oh, I don't have much to say. It's just I took me a long time to come and tell you the story. And I can sit and talk to you about it a whole week, there's so much to tell you. It's just I told you just as little as I could in the short time. But they really, who don't believe in this story is-- it must be mentally retarded, I'm telling you. Because I know a lot of people don't believe it.

It is hard to believe.

It's hard to believe that a human, one human person can do this to another. It's unbelievable. I seen Romanian soldiers who joined the German Army going out and shoot people just for target practice.

Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Bernie.

You're welcome.