

Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back, and I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo, New York. It is February 10, 1992. And we have with us as our guest tonight Henry Silberstern, who is a child survivor of Terezin and Bergen-Belsen. Henry, would you tell us about your childhood in Prague, in your small town?

I was born in the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. And my childhood was a very beautiful childhood. I lived a very nice life. And when we were forced to flee at the Munich Agreement, or after the Munich Agreement in 1938, we moved to Prague. And that's when I first became aware, I guess, of limitations put upon us by the protectors of Bohemia and Moravia.

We have some pictures of your parents and grandparents. Perhaps you can explain them to us.

The first picture is-- that's my mother and my brother, probably 1928. And it's all I really--

So your brother is just how much older than you?

My brother is about three and a half years older. This is a picture of my father.

What did your father do for a living?

My father was an attorney, as was his father before him.

And they had lived in--

They have lived in Teplice for a long, long time. I'm not sure where they lived possibly before that.

And now we have a picture of your grandparents?

These are my grandparents on my mother's side-- grandparent Werner. And they also were long-time residents of Teplice. And that's my brother and I.

And where is this picture taken?

This picture, I believe, is taken in Carlsbad, a spa in the Sudetenland.

So you had a comfortable life?

Yes, we had a very, very comfortable life.

Were you positively identified as Jewish?

We were Jewish in the sense that we understood our religion to be Jewish, although I don't remember any Jewish education as a youngster.

Did you observe the holidays together?

Yes, we observed the holidays. And we went to a beautiful synagogue in Teplice, but I really don't remember too much about that.

We have some more pictures. Oh, this is you. How sweet.

That's a picture of me, yes.

And this is in your home?

No, we owned a garden, and this is a picture in that garden.

And how old are you here?

Possibly three, four years old. So that must have been 1934 or '35, I guess.

And now we have a picture of your brother, a little more grown up.

That's my brother. And that's the only picture I really have of him. I believe he may have been around 13, 14 years of age.

So this is what year, possibly?

This could be as late as 1940-- '39, '40.

So that's when your life begins to change?

Our life began to change when we moved from Teplice to Prague. We were forced to move in-- from what I understand from my family and from some of the acquaintances who told me after the war, my family had tried to emigrate out of Czechoslovakia during that period.

Where did they want to go?

Well, we had sent our belongings in one large box on a lift to London. And I think that that was only the first step of our journey. We were probably trying to come to the United States because my parents' best friends had already moved to Pittsburgh. And I believe that would have been their destination as well.

And you said something about your father retraining?

My father was an attorney. And I think that he realized that that's not very useful. Then he tried to learn some kind of a trade or some means of being able to support himself. He taught school in Prague. But in Prague itself he learned a trade. And that was making flowers out of leather. My mother also tried to learn a trade, and she tried to become a hairdresser.

So they were preparing themselves for emigration?

They were preparing themselves for some new life.

And the papers didn't come through?

No, the papers came through. And again, from what I've been told, about a week before everything was in order the Germans closed the borders. And we were stuck.

So what happened to you then?

The Germans cracked down on Jews all over Europe. And in Prague itself, it meant giving up an apartment and moving together. Our family moved from an apartment which we had rented into a single room, sharing of an apartment with several other families. And we lived in that apartment, in that one room, until we were sent away.

Did you have to wear an armband?

As children, we had to wear a Jewish star, a yellow Magen David. And it had to be sewn on your clothing. It wasn't an armband, but it was sewn onto your coat or to your shorts or to some apparel that was readily visible.

Now, we have a picture of your passport. What was the year in which you got that?

The passport was issued for the purposes of leaving the country. So it was issued probably in 1938. Unfortunately, didn't work out.

And how did you get all these pictures in your passport?

Several people have given me these things after the war. And I just collected them and kept them.

So could you please tell us what happened when you and your--

Unh.

Yes. We'll take a little break.

Henry, you were talking about your separation from your family. Would you please tell us what happened?

Sure. My brother worked in Prague. And subsequent to our separation the authorities decided that he can stay behind because his work was important. My father also remained in Prague because he was too ill to go to Terezin.

My mother and I were given a transport number and were asked to go to the meeting place where the Prague Jews met. And the first time this happened, our number was higher than the numbers of people required. And actually we came home after about two days' being in this one place.

The second time our number came up, we were not as lucky. And we met in this gathering place. And we were shipped-- just my mother and I-- shipped to Terezin.

How were you shipped?

I think we went by train, but I don't have much of a recollection about that.

So you were, what, 10 years old?

No, I was about 12. And when we arrived in Terezin, my mother stayed where there were women. And I was of the age where I qualified to live in a converted school. The school had about 300 children, all boys, just a boys' school. Had about 300 boys who were approximately my age. And we were assigned a room. And that's where I spent my years in Terezin.

Now, how many years were you actually in Terezin?

Close to two years.

Did you go to school there?

No, school was forbidden, but the people that ran the school very cleverly taught different subjects just the same. It was strictly forbidden, but, nevertheless, they were able to get away with it and teach the children everything from music, mathematics.

Did you see your mother at all during--

Yes, I was able to see my mother occasionally, but I'm not sure of the circumstances. I think there were like visiting hours, that type of a thing, where we could either meet one another in our places or meet in a neutral place.

Did you have a best pal? Did you have fun? What do you remember about those years?

Well, as a child, I actually had some good memories of that horrible place. And I had some friends, had some very good friends. And we played soccer. And we competed for all kinds of prizes. And we sang and played, I suppose like children do all over.

Were you hungry?

There was very little food. But I, again, suppose as a child food is not such a big problem. We were a little luckier than most of them. We were allowed to go on trips outside of the camp itself. And as such, we, the word was, "organized" some food for ourselves. That might have been potatoes or something like that.

That's a word that many people use-- organize.

Organize.

Organize.

They didn't say steal. It was organize.

No, but organize. Now, do you remember the Red Cross ever coming into Terezin?

That is the famous Red Cross visit that everybody talks about. And it was a farce from the first day. The facade on the buildings-- the people were painted. The people were told to dance. People were told to eat. And they brought some food in.

The Red Cross did come. And just as a story ending to the Red Cross visit, after the war they found out that the chairman of the Red Cross committee was a Swiss Nazi sympathizer, so.

So it was really a big bluff.

It was a bluff. The Red Cross visit, though, followed us. There's a certain group of boys. And it followed us right into Auschwitz. And the feeling was that the Red Cross wanted to see also not just how they lived in Terezin, but what happens further east. And that was one of the speculations why we were kept the way we were kept. But I'll get there.

Why were you separated? And how did that separation work?

From Terezin, we were shipped to Auschwitz-Birkenau and lived in what was called a Czech family camp. The Czech family camp was broken up sometimes in May of 1944. And able-bodied men and women were selected to go to other camps for work.

And they picked a group of 100 boys my age to remain behind. And it's never been quite established why. There are a lot of speculations, but it's not been established quite why. And the rest of the family camp was liquidated in those months.

Now, where was your mother during this time?

When we lived in the family camp, I was living with males. And my mother was a female, so we didn't see each other very often. But I did know that my mother was selected to go to some other camp. And that's the last I've seen of my mother. My brother and I were also split.

Your brother joined you at--

No, my brother actually was shipped to Auschwitz-Birkenau with us, with my mother and me. He joined us. My brother

stayed back in Prague but then joined us in Terezin. And as a family unit we were all shipped to Auschwitz.

And what happened to your father?

My father was declared too ill to even go to Terezin, so he stayed behind in Prague, where he died.

Alone, without his family?

My brother was there, but whether he was able to be with him or not we don't know.

And what about the grandparents?

My grandparents Werner were shipped before Terezin was even opened up. And they were shipped to-- the Germans called just to the east. What happened to them, whether they went to a ghetto in Poland, I have no idea.

And there are no witnesses, nothing?

No one that I know.

And what about the other grandparents?

My other grandparents were not alive.

Oh, they weren't alive. You must have had your bar mitzvah around this time. What do you remember of that?

As such, I had a bar mitzvah in Terezin. And like all children who had a bar mitzvah, they received additional rations of food. And I remember that I got some sugar and bread and margarine. But I don't remember much about the ceremony itself, although it was a legitimate bar mitzvah, conducted--

So, obviously, somebody taught you.

--conducted properly, yes.

Now, what year are you actually going to Auschwitz?

1944.

That's after two years in Terezin?

After two years in Terezin.

Are you tattooed when you--

Yes, I have a tattoo on my left arm.

And could we see that?

Sure.

And when did that happen-- as you came in?

When you arrived in Auschwitz, you were either kept or you were sent to the gas chambers. Those that were kept were tattooed as an identification mark. From that point on, that was your identification. I have a tattoo.

It's not very clear, so what are the numbers?

Well, it says 1843. When they discovered that that was my brother's number-- excuse me, 1842. When they discovered that that was my brother's number, they changed the 2 to a 3. So it's A-1843.

We had a reunion, by the way, in Israel, not too long ago. And I looked at the list of the people at the reunion. And I found it very strange that there were people with a number. We all gave our numbers. And there was people with numbers-- they were five numbers apart from me and I have no idea who they are. I don't remember them.

Did they remember you?

Some of them did, yes, certainly better than I remembered them.

Sounds like you have secured yourself by blocking out a lot of information.

Well, I suppose I built a new life.

How much time were you actually in Auschwitz? And what did you do there?

In Auschwitz, in the family camp, we really didn't do anything. When we were separated and sent to the-- when they closed the Czech family camp and we were separated, the 100 boys or so, we lived in the men's camp. And there we did odd jobs. I think all of us worked on what they call a rollwagen, which was a cart that you took throughout the camp to deliver things, to pick up things-- wood or mail or food and what have you.

Now, you said a group of you were separated. Did that mean your living conditions were better than other people?

Our living conditions were better than in the family camp. And I suppose that's why the speculations why are we kept in the first place. We were able to grow our hair. We kept our clothes.

You didn't have prison clothes?

Not for that period of time. Ironically, I remember playing ping pong with the SS people. This was a very strange, strange period.

And nobody knows why your group was singled out?

There have been a lot of speculations. And one of them is the Red Cross follow-up. Another one is that there was potentially an exchange of us for maybe some Nazis. I don't know what the problem was. But there are about three or four theories, none of which are proven.

Now that new records are opening, maybe someday this will be revealed.

Could be. We didn't stay in that camp too long because in the late summer or early fall we were separated out again. And the 100 boys, most of us were split out to go to different camps.

Personally, I went to another camp called FÄ¼rstengrube, which was a IG Farben work camp where they made Buna, which is an artificial rubber, I believe. And when I came to that camp, as I remember, as well as some people that have told me later on, we were bricklayer apprentices. And we were going to become bricklayers.

Were you still with your brother?

No, I was already separated from my brother. We were alone. We were in FÄ¼rstengrube for several months. I don't remember quite how long. But I do remember learning to become a bricklayer.

Now, how long were you there before liberation?

I was not liberated in FÅ¼rstengrube. I was shipped to another camp called Dora-Nordhausen. And Dora-Nordhausen was known, I guess, if you put it that way, for manufacturing the V1 and V2 bombs. And these bombs were made in hollowed-out-- in mountains. I don't think they were natural caves, but in hollowed-out caves. And this is where we spent several months.

And I don't recall what I did there. But I remember that we worked in these caves making the V1s and V2s. And people in the camp were always joking that for every one bomb that they make, two come back that are defective.

Purposely--

They were sabotaged, I'm sure.

--sabotaged?

And I wasn't there that long. But nevertheless, I do remember seeing the bombs.

Now, where did you go from Dora-Nordhausen?

The Germans were paranoid. And as much as they didn't have raw material or railroad or fuel for themselves, they always managed to find transportation for the concentration camp people. And while the Germans themselves were walking, they always found some kind of cattle cars for us to transport us further inland. I wound up in Bergen-Belsen and was liberated in Bergen-Belsen.

Do you remember liberation day?

Very clearly. First of all, it was on my birthday, which is interesting in itself, I guess. Secondly--

That was what, April?

April 15, 1945.

And you were 15 years old?

I was 15 years old. But I remember even how it came about. For some reason or other, I remember fairly clearly.

We were guarded by SS people. And then, as time went on, the SS people were replaced by home guards, who were old men or crippled men who had all kinds of different-- they didn't have uniforms. They had all kinds of coats on. But they had rifles. And they guarded the camp. And for days before, you could hear cannon fire in and around the camp.

And my first recollection of being liberated is, I remember what I know now to be a Jeep-- somebody in a Jeep with a microphone driving through the camp and saying to us in half a dozen different languages to stay calm. We're now liberated. And it'll be a little while before the liberators will come, but the Germans are gone, and so on. And we were liberated by a Canadian brigade, which is part of the British Army.

There is a P.S. to this. One of the Canadian liberators was the rabbi who married my wife and me. This is in Toronto. He was-- [LAUGHS]

That's quite unusual. Now, where is your mother at this point?

I didn't know where my mother was. But a couple of days after liberation, we found out that there was another camp as part of Bergen-Belsen which was a women's camp. And I don't know how anymore, but I found out that in that camp are some women from Czechoslovakia.

So I sent a message somehow through to that camp whether anybody knows the whereabouts of my mother. And the message came back. I received a note from my mother. She was alive and seemingly well in that camp.

What do you remember about how you felt at that time? You were separated for three years, I presume.

We were separated for three years. And I certainly never expected that. I don't remember, but I'm sure I was more than overjoyed.

Now, we have a letter that you received from your mother. Would you tell us what it said and what the other letter said subsequent to this?

This is the first letter. And this letter is very brief. It's written in German. And it says something to the effect that she's overjoyed and can't believe her good fortune that we found one another.

And subsequent to that, you saw her? And you got other letters?

I didn't see her yet. There were two more letters before I saw her. There are three letters altogether. And somehow I was able to go to that camp, although the authorities really didn't want us to move around because of typhus epidemic. And I was able to somehow get out. And I did see my mother once or twice.

What condition was she in at that time?

Of course, my mother seemed healthy to me. She certainly was alive. I don't know if I could go much beyond that. I must have seen my mother at least once. But on my last visit, I remember that she was not in her area. And I was told that they moved her to the Glynn Hughes hospital, that she had contracted typhus. And I never saw her again.

That was the last time you saw her?

That's the last time I saw her.

And your brother, Rolf?

My brother, Rolf, who wrote a letter to someone in Prague in November of 1944-- at least I know that he was alive-- a letter that I received after the war. From the best I could piece together from mutual friends whom I met after the war, I was told that he died in one of the death marches, one of the hunger marches.

Oh, this is a lot for a little boy to absorb. What happened after liberation? Where did you go?

I received a letter in Bergen-Belsen from a cousin who survived the war.

How did he know you were in Bergen-Belsen?

I don't know.

Sounds like one miracle after another.

It's possible that they published some lists of--

Oh, perhaps.

--Czechs. I don't know. But I got a letter from him. And at that point, he knew that my mother was alive too because he wrote me in a letter that as soon as my mother is well, he would expect us to travel to Prague and stay with him as long as we wish.



Now, this is interesting that he wasn't taken to the camps.

It was a mixed marriage. Again, I don't remember now exactly, but I think it was only in the last six months of the war that they went after people of mixed marriage. And he hid out somewhere in Czechoslovakia. And therefore he was not in a camp.

So is that what happened? You went to your uncle's?

I did go to my uncle after the war and stayed with him for a short time.

How did that work out?

Well, he was a very nice man. He taught me how to read and write and taught me how to get back to civilization. He's a very nice man. I was very fond of him.

But my mother had a brother who, just before the war, went to England and was in the Czech brigade of the English Army. But he came back after the war. And since he lived in Teplice, he thought that I should live in Teplice as well. And he became my legal guardian. And I lived with him for about a year and a half.

Did you go to school at that time?

I went back to school in Teplice. Later on, I came to Prague. And I went to school in Prague until the time that I emigrated to Canada.

In what year did you actually immigrate to Canada?

I came in August of 1948. And I came under a Canadian act of allowing 2,000 war orphans into the country outside of their national quota. And I qualified under that. And I came to Canada.

And where did you go?

The HIAS agency took care of all arrangements-- travel, when we came to Canada, where we would stay. It was just preplanned.

And where did you stay?

I moved in with a family that I didn't know, but that's the family HIAS picked for me. And I stayed with them and learned English and worked and tried to make a new life in North America.

Was that lonely? Did you have a hard time?

There were two very good friends of mine who came to Toronto just before I did. And so I really had someone the minute I arrived in Toronto. I had some friends immediately.

It turns out that the two boys that I'm referring to were with-- this is their story because I don't remember it, but they were with us on the train from Terezin to Auschwitz. And this one boy recalls a story that our mothers argued over where we could put our luggage. How little do they know what they're in for.

Yes. We have some pictures of the school in Terezin and the monument. When was this picture taken?

This picture was taken this past fall when there was a big ceremony. The school has been turned into a museum. And I'm not sure what it was before. But I visited Terezin. And it's very uncanny. It's an old army garrison. And the whole town exists as if nothing ever happened.

Are there no markers or monuments?

There are no markers, except there's a small marker on the school. But the town is full of people who lived there, worked there.

Are there any survivors who remained in Terezin that you know of?

No, I would doubt it.

It is strange, isn't it? And this is the school building where you had different rooms?

Right. This is the boys' school. There was one for the girls and this one here for the boys. And every room had its bunks with, I guess, 20, maybe 30 boys. It was a little world all to its own.

How many boys actually survived of all the boys who were in this school?

I'm not sure that that's just a school. But there's a plaque on the school that says that out of 15,000 children who passed through Terezin, only about 100 survived.

And you're one of the hundred.

I'm one of them.

And recently you had a reunion of your survivors.

We had a reunion. And I think there were about 40 people that were contacted and 30 that made it to the reunion. People live all over the world. They live in South America. They live in Canada, of course, United States, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Switzerland. Two live in Australia.

What was that like, seeing the boys-- seeing the men after so many years?

Yeah, they're not boys anymore.

They're not boys anymore.

They're men now. For me, it was very strange, maybe even awkward, because I didn't remember anyone. And it's very unnerving-- walk in a room and there's a man there, says, Henry, how are you? Haven't seen you in a long time. And you don't know who that person is.

It is unnerving.

It's very strange. But they knew so many-- there's an artist in Israel by the name of Yehuda Bacon. And he must have a photographic mind. He knew so many details about me. I think he knew more about me than I know about myself.

What did he say?

Just some of the details of what we did in Terezin. And don't you remember this in Terezin? And do you remember we were together here? And yes, when he did mention some things, I did remember.

Perhaps that's why he's an artist. He has the memory for details.

Yes. There's another boy-- man. We met him when we were in Czechoslovakia two years ago. He's on President Havel's staff. He's his Foreign Affairs Advisor for German-speaking countries.

And when we called him up that we were in-- I missed him in Israel. So when I called him up in Czechoslovakia, he says to meet him. And he wasn't concerned about whether we'd recognize one another because he knew he'll recognize me. And sure enough, we were in a hotel lobby. And [LAUGHS] this man just walks up to me and says-- in Czech, of course, he says, [SPEAKING CZECH]. [LAUGHS] He just knew who that is.

And did you recognize him?

No. But he gave me some details about our life, not only during the war-- this man and I were bunkmates in Terezin. And there were some very detailed things that he relayed to me. Of course, I don't remember any of them. But he even told me some things after the war. He remembered my uncle. And he remembered that we were doing several of the following things. We were in the kitchen doing some planning, talking about going to school.

Is he the only one of the 100 boys who remained in Czechoslovakia?

No, there are about three or four who are still there. One of them just committed suicide about six months ago.

As a result of his experiences?

I don't know. I'm not sure. We had a very good friend in Toronto, one of the two boys in Toronto. He also committed suicide. He is one that I would certainly think could never find peace after the war. He was very suspicious. He was very unhappy. It was tragic that he committed suicide, but in retrospect I think it was inevitable.

Now we have a snapshot of a tombstone. Perhaps you'll tell us about that.

That's a tombstone of my grandfather Silberstern in Teplice. I didn't take this picture, but it was taken by a relative of mine. Can I take another break?

Are you all right now?

Yeah.

OK. This is the monument of your grandfather.

There is a Jewish cemetery in Teplice that I did not visit, but a cousin of ours did. And when he came across this monument, he took a picture and sent it to me. This is just last year.

And it is a monument on my grandfather's grave. And it still stands today. The lettering is as clear as I suppose it was in-- I believe it's 1926. And the amazing part also is that no one has visited this grave now since '37, '38.

Looks like it's in excellent condition.

It does.

So the Nazis didn't wreak havoc with this cemetery obviously.

I don't understand. Apparently, it's-- I don't know whether that's the only one that-- no, it can't be the only one that's in that shape.

Is this the grandfather that wrote the letter?

This is the grandfather who--

Perhaps you'll tell us about that letter and read it to us.

--who wrote a letter. He wrote a letter to my father on his confirmation. His mother--

On his bar mitzvah day?

On his bar mitzvah. My father's mother died sometime before that. I don't know the exact year. And my grandfather wrote my father a letter.

This is written in Teplice, June 27, 1908. And he says in the letter, you may not understand the letter today. But I'd like to write you and have you keep this in the hopes that you'll understand it some day.

And what year is this written?

1908.

1908. Do you want me to read it? Do you want to read it?

No, I'll read it if you want.

Please.

"On the assumption that you are not yet in a condition to grasp the reach of my words, I wish to express to you on this birthday my desire in writing. In four days, we will memorialize in the usual fashion the death of your mother, who had been early torn from us. But today we must remember her as a recompense for the rich measure of true and proven love that she has preserved for all of us. You must, above all, out of love for her, make the firm resolution to do only that which would have her approval.

From the lengthy preparations, you perceive that to the celebration of the 13th birthday is attached a special significance. According to the views of our ancestors, the time of childhood ends with this day, and simultaneously a period begins in which you yourself are responsible for all your deeds and omissions. This becomes evident in today's religious festivity. Up to now, your attachment to Judaism resulted independently from your will. But today you have taken a vow in a consecrated spot that you want to be a Jew.

To be a Jew does not mean to adhere to dietary and ritual regulations. To be a Jew means to act as a man toward his fellow men without regard to religion or race. This is possible only through strict performance of the formulated moral laws of the Jewish religion.

To be a Jew means to support the weak, to help the needy, to provide recreation and comfort to the suffering and despondent. To be a Jew means to strive for and promote one's own will, the good and the noble. To be a Jew means not to deviate a hair's breadth from the right and to avoid the slightest injustice. To be a Jew means to try to spread these moral laws by one's own example, by one's own deed, and to make them the commandments of all humans so that these commandments of the Jewish religion can be made the commandments of all mankind.

With your solemn declaration given today to want to be a Jew, you have assumed above all the duty always to bring your life in harmony with these moral precepts. If this be realized, you will be exalted in calling yourself a Jew. And you will endure lightly and without any grief and with a feeling of pity for those of other faith who, through ill will, envy, and ignorance, do the Jew wrong.

Through the knowledge of such deficiencies in others, you will guard yourself not to fall into similar errors. You will also acquire the deep humility and keep yourself from vanity. If, in addition, you will try to become a useful member of the human society and seek to possess a rich knowledge, then you would grow into a complete man, as your blessed mother would not less ardently have desired than your fervently-loving father, Rudolf."

It's quite beautiful and sensitive. I understand that your own daughters have incorporated this speech in their bat mitzvah

speeches?

They did. Both picked some parts of it. And they incorporated it.

We have just a little bit of time. And we'll conclude with the jewels of your family, with a picture of your grandsons. Maybe you'll tell us about your--

That's Sam-- Sam the Man, in Albany.

[LAUGHS] And he's how old there?

He's, I think, nine years old.

And then we have--

That's his brother, Daniel, also in Albany, of course. And he's four years old. And that's our youngest one-- and live in Rochester. That's Michael.

And he has a sibling? Oh, yes.

And he has a brother, who is also nine years old. His name is Jonathan-- of course, from Rochester.

You've covered all the Bible names. In conclusion, Henry, did you want to say anything-- some message, some thought, some introspection about your life?

On a personal note, my life has been two parts-- one part which I thought I would want to forget, another part which was, I guess, when I came to North America and built a new life, culminating in my four grandsons, I guess.

That's the message. Life--

That's the message.

--a good wife, good children.

Good wife, good children, very lucky, if you discount the first few years.

Thank you very much. Thank you for coming.

I'm sorry --