

This is sound roll number one, Wentworth Films, Holocaust [INAUDIBLE] IPS, 60-cycle sync, March 9, 1992, in Los Angeles, California. Camera roll one is up, sync take one is up. And the following is interview with Shony, S-H-O-N-Y, Braun, B-R-A-U-N. And then the hum that you hear is just on the slating mic.

So the height will be the right.

OK Wait a sec, wait a sec. Are you shy?

Yeah.

I think we can deal with this.

Just after--

False start. Take two is up. Actually, we'll keep one, we'll repeat one.

Yeah, you can hear him.

I want you to describe the transport and then the arrival at Auschwitz. And why don't you, as you describe it, give me your age and who you were with?

Well, the transport was approximately four days as we were. And there were so many. So many things happened even before the transport that probably I will skip it and go right into what you-- to answer your question.

We had no water, we had very little food, just the food which we took from home before we had to board the cattle car. And there were a lot of people died, mainly children and older people. For instance, we were so compact, it was like sardines. If you sat, you couldn't get up. Or vice-versa.

But on the fourth night, we arrived to Auschwitz. And we had to wait. And the train was waiting. Then all of a sudden, the doors opened, slid open, and we were ordered out.

As we stepped out, head prisoners, called Kapos, rushed at us using their whips, and so did the SS. They were beating them, kicking them, hitting everyone they could reach. Then we were ordered to form a line, stand in line. Men in one, women and small children in the other.

While the whip, and the kicking, and the beating was going on, after we lined up, I noticed that a high-ranking SS officer approached. That was the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death, the man who would decide our fate. Instant death in a gas chamber or lingering life of torture and slavery.

We had to file by him. As we did, I noticed that he had a slender stick. Actually was a conductor's baton. Being a musician, even at 13, so I recognized it.

And he was waving it to the right or to the left. He was pointing which way each individual who filed by him to go. My mother and younger sister, Goldie, who was only nine years old, she was motioned to the left along with my mother.

My older sister, Violet, was motion to the opposite side, to the right. My brother, Zoltan, who was 15, and my father-- they next were in line, they were also motioned to the same side where Violet, my older sister. By the way, Violet was 18. I don't know if you had mentioned it or not.

When my turn came, to my great surprise, Mengele stopped me, motioned to stop. And he says, tell me, little boy, how old are you? I'm 13, I replied. Previously coached to say more than I was because this way, I had a better chance to survive and being sent to work, rather than being sent immediately to the gas chamber.

Mengele was sort of looking at me with a suspicion, suspiciously. Because I really didn't look-- not even 13. My frail body and pale. You know, I didn't go out to play football, soccer with the boys, but I was always practicing the violin. But miraculously, he was motioning me to the group where my father and brothers were.

After the selection was over, my mother, my younger sister, and the group that they were in were led away. I didn't know that I've seen them the last time. They were taking direct to the gas chamber.

And they were told that you have to take a shower. In order to camouflage really what they wanted to do, the SS will issue a towel and a bar of soap.

We've got to stop for the siren. Sorry.

After the selections were over, my mother, my younger sister, and the group they were in were led away. I didn't know that I have seen them for the last time. They were taken directly to the gas chamber. There was actually a house where was written the words [GERMAN], means bath.

And each one of them were issued a bar of soap and a towel. And then they said, you have to go in there and take a shower. But in reality, that was the gas chamber room. As soon as they went in, the doors were locked behind them. And then the gas was flowing. And everybody in it died.

The terrible thing, maybe to add to that, I should say, was that then the SS would send some of us prisoners to go and pick up the dead bodies and cart them away. When we were just getting to ourselves what happened, we were taken to another barrack, we were stripped completely, and had to take a real shower.

And the very same gas chamber where these wonderful people and the poor, poor children were taken and were gassed, we really took a shower. While the gas where they're flowing through the pipes, now, they let water through. I know because I was in it also to shower in reality.

Then we were assigned to a barrack. We managed somehow to stay together. My father, my brother Zoltan, and me. And one night, as we were standing in line to be counted-- that was the final count-- a Kapo, which means head prisoner-- I'm going to refer from now on as a Kapo-- came to our line.

And he was speaking business for what they call a Sonderkommando. And among other prisoners, he picked me, too. A Sonderkommando had to go around the camp and pick up the dead or nearly dead bodies and cart them up to the crematorium.

Now, being in the Sonderkommando, that meant separation from my father and brother. I was assigned to a different barrack. And one occasion, as I was picking up a body, I noticed that this man was not dead at all.

And I turned to the Kapo, and I said, Herr Kapo, if we would give a little food or a little water, this man would survive. And then he turned around and hit me with his fist in my face so hard that I fell over. And he said, you are not here to tell me who would survive. We're not here to make people survive.

Now, if you not going to keep your mouth shut, I am going to put you in the crematorium also. Now pick up that body and put him up. And we did it. I didn't say no more anything.

But all my life, even today, even as I am telling you this, I have the most awful feeling that I really had to burn my fellow prisoners, had to go and cart them off to the crematorium so that they would be burned. And they were alive.

So we were doing this for about oh, maybe six days. Now, in that group where I was working, the Sonderkommando, there was another Kommando, a father, who had--

Now, we do have to reload.

Yeah.

That's a good stopping place. We'll just back and forth.

You have to forgive me if I am not so-- but to my great surprise, Mengele stopped me and talked to me. And he was asking, tell me, little boy, how old are you? I said, I'm 16 and I can prove it. And I was gesturing to go into my pocket because I had this birth certificate, of a falsified birth certificate.

Because previously, my father, when we were still home-- I have to qualify that we were told that unless you do your minor children, like I was 13, before coming, before we're taken, you know. And my sister was nine years old. So unless he's getting a different birth certificates, we're not going to survive.

Now, we children didn't know about it, but our father did. So paid a lot of money for that. But we did get the certificate. So I pulled out. But he was looking at me. And miraculously, he waved me to the group where my father and my brother were.

Now, in the Sonderkommando, there was a man who was about the same age as my father. And he had a son who was in the same barracks where my father and brother were. And his son was about the same age, maybe a year or two older than I.

And he heard-- word came to him that the very same barrack where his son was going to be evacuated and they're going to go to France the very next day.

So he contrived an ingenious plan, and he says, listen, I tell you what. Because you like to be with your father and brother, and I certainly love to be with my son, now, when you see that all these prisoners running from every direction to regroup the final count in the evening, go into the line where my son is. And my son is going to take, get into this line, where this barrack line is. And nobody the wiser. Because we were only numbers.

So the plan worked. He was reunited with his son and I got back in the barrack where my father and brother were. Next morning, next day, we were off to France.

I found out later that the very same day when we were transported to France, that all the Sonderkommandos were killed because the SS feared if one of the Kommandos were not-- and specifically the Kommandos-- would escape, would tell the world of the atrocities, of the terrible things which the SS did to humanity.

Because we were more witnesses to their machine, you know, death machine, than any other prisoners. Because we were the ones who were picking up dead bodies and took them and burned them on their order. And I tell you, the image of this father and son will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Now, even when we arrived in France, I was put to work in an ammunition factory. And in that factory, they were making-- it was being built a-- I don't know exactly if the V2 rocket. But a rocket which was designed specifically to shoot airplanes. And of course, mainly the Americans and the Russians.

And that was such a tremendous force. They would all the airplane, if it's got a contact with a rocket, it would be torn to pieces. I was scouting past to that rocket.

Then later, I was put to a machine which automatically filled explosive capsules with gunpowder. One day, a French prisoner approached me and he says, what would you do to stop Hitler's madness? Would you give up your life? Without hesitation, I said yes.

Now, I was operating a machine at that point, as I think I mentioned that. Which beside filling with gunpowder-- we have to go back to that, I'm sorry. OK. We're going to have to go back. Yeah? Can I do that now?

Yeah, yeah.

This French captain-- forgive me. This French man, as I forgot to tell what his rank was, he was actually a captain in the underground resistance movement who was smuggled among us as a prisoner. And he organized a sabotage movement. So this is how he approached me.

And if I would be-- because to him, I was the most important person by working on that machine which filled gunpowder, the capsules with gunpowder. And he said to me, I tell you what, you see those civilians? Those are all Frenchmen, electricians. They were working around the ammunition factory.

And he says, I tell you what you do. Now, these men will supply you sand. And I want you to put in this capsule which you're filling with gunpowder sand and very little gunpowder. So the machine that I was working would be filling the gunpowder automatically, as I just told. All I have to do just pull the arm. But now, I had to put sand and mix it with the gunpowder. And it worked. I mean, it was fantastic how easy it really was to do that.

One day, some new transport came with new prisoners. And another prisoner was put in that very near me, the machine, working cutting parts. And it turned out that that was an SS spy. Wanted to know.

They already detected, they found out that this weapon, the second stage and impact did not work. And that was the idea. I didn't know that. I found out later that the sand was needed to how can I say that? To stop the second stage from exploding.

And our leader was identified, this French captain. He was hanged. And all of us who were around that area had to watch him die. And we were not allowed to avert our eyes from him, nor move away.

After that, about 60 of us were put in a horizontal line and asked to stand still. Order was [GERMAN]. Or stand in attention, maybe, in English. And an SS officer was going down the line, picking prisoners at random.

He passed me. And then was coming back and passed me again. And picked right the one next to me. And a third time, he still went down the line, just looking at prisoners which he sort of wanted to kill, and passed me again. Three times, I was to be taken to be shot to death, and all three times, I was passed by.

Now, the ones that were chosen, they had to step out of line. They were taken out of the camp and shot to death. We were sent back to the barracks. And then we were sent some couples. And we had a beating that I can't tell you. Our face and body were puffed up. And many of them, their ribs were broken in. Because we were around that area.

Now, I was a saboteur. And I got a sort of a form like a half circle written on my back, saboteur.

And the captain, also. Everybody was from there.

No, if you can just start with I was a saboteur.

I was a saboteur. And then go on from there.

Go ahead. So I was a saboteur. And I was marked as such in the jacket on my back. And every time a couple would pass by me or an SS officer or SS guard either would spit at me, spit on me, or kick me. So I believe in God because God saved my life so many times.

That I was not picked yet, in spite of all the three times that SS went by picking people at random and passed me by. I don't believe that was a coincidence. And it was God's way of protecting me.

At any rate, about two weeks later that I had that saboteur jacket, all the jackets were taken from everybody. And for that, I couldn't believe it. We had back new jackets, which was cleaned. And the word saboteur disappeared from my jacket.

So I was again not molested anymore as a saboteur, but freely could walk back and forth or where I was working. So I also give credit to God for that.

Now, I must tell you something is extremely interesting. And maybe one of the million, or 10 million, or 100 million that can happen. I have to go to Cleveland, Ohio for a second because we are still with the sabotage things. When I was in Cleveland in 1950, early, about 1950, I was studying in the university.

And one of my colleagues gave me a check. Now, he was an American. Hungarian and Jewish, like myself, except I was not American, unfortunately. And he gave me a check to pay up a debt, which I had been paying, paying, and never got smaller.

So he says, go in any bank and cash it. But you see, he didn't have an account in that bank or any bank in that area. And I didn't have an account anywhere at any bank. So in fact, I didn't even speak English. Very little.

And I said to him, now, how do I do this? I mean. Oh, no, he says, it's very simple. Here's the check, all you do, go up to the teller, and just say, cash, cash, give me cash. I said, that's all? He says, yeah.

Now, I ran into a-- looked around, where is a bank? And I'm coming from around lunchtime, you know. And I had certainly had to go back to school in the afternoon classes. So I saw a bank. So I go in there. Cleveland Trust, I remember now.

And I went up to-- waited in line and went up to where was the teller. Put down. And I said, cash, cash. And he looked at me. Saw that it was-- we couldn't communicate. So he was a compassionate man, he said, OK, just a second. He came from his window and escorted me to the president's office.

Now, he spoke several languages. Now, we're going to find out what this foreigner wants, he thought, probably. So I started with-- I spoke to the president of the bank, and I said, [FRENCH], [GERMAN], [HUNGARIAN], in Hungarian. He says, [GERMAN], I speak German. Thank god.

So we start. We waited a little because the teller had to find out if there is money on this account. And he says to me, well, why did you ask me if I speak French? Are you French? I said no, I'm a Transylvanian. But I was in France. And they're looking at my violin case being next to me.

He says, did you study music there? I said, no. But then I related what I was doing in France, that I was doing sabotage and putting sand instead of-- filling up with sand, you know, the gunpowder. And when actually, one of these planes, how the plane would be obliterated.

And he stood from-- he sprang up from his chair, ran to me, grabbed my hand, god bless you. God bless you. I said, thank you. Thank you. I mean, blessing comes always well. So I thank you for it. Says, no, please. He saw my puzzled face. He says please, let me explain.

My son and nine crew-- he was a captain over nine crew and they were bombing around that area where the ammunition factory was. And they were shot with one of these rockets, which penetrated the airplane, but did not explode. I think they were caught in the wing or in the tail, whatever.

And when they got back to their bases, very carefully, they took that weapon that broke it apart to see why it did not explode. They found sand in the capsule.

So we both hugged and started to cry. And I knew then that if I would have been killed and died, it would not be in vain. Because I knew that at least 10 people or nine, plus the captain-- 10 lives were saved because of my sabotage.

I want to jump to the incident in the salt mine.

Yes.

OK.

About my father?

And cutting the electric wire, that resistance incident, before we run out.

OK.

Go ahead.

In September, we were transferred from France into Kochendorf, which was a large salt mine. And it was a terrible, grueling work. And the day of Yom Kippur, all of a sudden, the whole area of the salt mine became dark, completely dark. And we put our hammers down and sat down immediately. A little rest, at least a little rest.

We thought it was God's will. Get on Yom Kippur, at least, sending us something, darkness, that we can rest. And one of the prisoners started chanting the Kol Nidre.

And honestly, I can hear it. I can hear it now. Like then the other one got in, too. And then another one. We were also about 60 to 80 persons around there. And we're sitting. And then even those who did not know the words, and they did not probably even know the melody, but they were humming along. And in a minute or two, the entire section was full of the Kol Nidre, the song of the Yom Kippur.

We didn't know that the SS-- we were not aware of it that SS were listening in. Within 10 minutes, the whole problem was found, restored, and the light came on. Then we found out what was the source of the darkness.

One of us, in fact, he was which I did not put in my booklet, was a Hungarian Jew who used to show-- he had secretly hidden his wives and his little son's picture. And that gave him a little bit of will of living. Because constantly, we had to talk him out of committing suicide, constantly.

And my father was the one who always says, no, you see, you going to survive. And you know. But he couldn't stand it any longer. And he went and cut the wire with a spoon made into-- sharpened it like-- it was like a knife. He was beaten severely, until he fell unconscious.

Then we had to form another line, exactly like it was in France. And one was picked, the other one was let go, then he passed, the SS passed two, then picked the third one, the fourth, then again. So here, half of them were picked, taken out, and shot to death.

I also, again, was bypassed. So you have to puzzle, you have to think, how come I was saved one day before I would be killed as Sonderkommando? Then in France, I was bypassed three times. Now, again. Coincidences, maybe. Who knows? I believe differently. So we were severely beaten. The ones that we were not picked.

Still in Kochendorf, in February, my father turned 42.

Wait. We are going to run out. And we should just start this on a new--