

Because that's the family I stayed with after I ran away from Caunterets. And then I was deported. And then I came back to them.

OK. We've got to stop. We've got to change.

Camera roll four, take six.

So now we're going to start with the transports out of Drancy.

In October of 1942, in the beginning of October after I had run away from this forced residence in Caunterets, I made my way into Switzerland with a false identification card. Traveling on a train to the Swiss border.

The Swiss arrested us and sent us back to France. The gendarmes took custody of us, sent us to a camp in southern France called Rivesaltes. On the 20th of October-- I mean, a couple of days later. Yeah, on the 20th, we were sent from Rivesaltes to Drancy. That was in the north of France near Paris, near Le Bourget Drancy. And we stayed interned in Drancy till the 5th of November. On the 5th of November in the evening, we were entrained in the cattle cars in the train station of Le Bourget.

The process of putting us into trains was very simple. They counted out 50. You got into the train. At the end of rifle butts, they pushed us in. And after the 50 were in the train, in that cattle car, in that car, they closed the doors and locked them. Now, if there was a family of four, they would count out 48, 49, 50. And the fourth person there would have been the 51st, a little boy of four, went into the next cattle car.

He was not allowed to be with his family. The family was protested, and that didn't help. If they would have protested more, they could have been killed. The father, for instance. The family was worried. What would the little boy think of us? And the boy would think, thought the parents didn't love him.

So this was the separation of families that began right there at the embarking into the transport. There was one bucket in the center of the car for the uses to relieve, to relieve yourself. And that bucket, within a couple of hours, overflowed. That stands to reason because there was 50 of us in that car.

What we had seen in Drancy, some of the atrocities, my friend and I, Manfred Silberwasser, decided if we can, we'd have to get away. And there was no use trying anything while we were standing from about five or six in the evening till the next morning, which I later found out through the book that it was about 8 o'clock. We had no notion of time. We had no watches. We had no-- all that was all taken away from us.

So during that night, during that long night waiting as to what's going to happen, when are we going to finally start? Because we didn't know what their schedule was. They went by schedule that was meticulously prepared and organized and bureaucratically enforced. We were thinking, what can be done?

Luckily for us, the two windows that were at the opposite ends, diagonally opposite in the car, one had barbed wire bars and barbed wire. The other one had just bars. Barbed wire is never a real obstacle because they're rusted. They can break very easily. You can break them very easily.

But the bars are still an obstacle. So we set all night and wondered, how can we make sure that these bars that are there at a distance like this, become separated enough for us to be able to squeeze through? And while we were sitting there thinking, it materialized in our minds that this is the way we're going to do it.

We'll have to twist them in some way, separate them in some way. We couldn't do it while we were standing because the patrols were outside of the car seeing that everything is OK, shining up and down and looking, and shining in to see that everything's OK.

But as soon as the train started in the morning, and we were out of Paris for about a half an hour or so out of Paris, we

decided our task to pry these bars apart. And we know that when you make a cloth wet, a towel wet, it has tensile strength in ringing it. You can ring it. And when you twist it, it becomes like a tourniquet.

So we took off our sweaters, pullovers, v-necks, and dipped them into that human waste in the bucket. And didn't even have to use the bucket because the floor of the-- we were squatting in it and walking in it and [SNIFFS] inhaling it. And it's still up there in my nostrils right when I talk about it.

And we used these sweaters to twist around the bars. If these are the bars, twist it around and twist, twist, twist, until all the liquid had poured out and had been twisted out. By that time, it had developed that strength. And we did that often enough alternating between him and myself until the bars started to somewhat move in the frame. We saw them move. Why? Because the rust in the frame started falling down in dust, rusty dust. And when we saw these bars moving, that was the light at the end of the tunnel, to use a cliché or-- what do they call it? --a metaphor.

That was it. We knew that if we would continue that often enough, that eventually these bars will be giving enough for us to be able to bend them up and down, up and down, until finally they had moved enough where we could bend them into a position where the opening was wide enough for us to be able to squeeze through. And we did. At a given moment, we did.

And after we escaped, that we lay there in the ravine for a while, that almost seemed like an eternity. Made our way into a village. Went to a bakery. The apprentice came to the door and told us there was no bread now. Not until the morning.

And we said we're not interested in bread. We would like to know where the village priest lives. And he said he was going to take us to his house or home, which was right adjoining-- a sacristy adjoining the church. And we got to him. We had torn off our Jewish stars.

I feel now that if we had them on, it would have been more reassuring for him because he would have known who we were. Although, we could have been-- it could have been a trap. But he reckoned and we told him that we had escaped from a train. We were very frank with him. And we didn't know. He could have been a collaborator too, you know?

But we felt we were in good hands as we saw the face of the man. And he said, yeah, they come through here several times a week. And we know. We know that. But you know, he says I can let you stay here for the night. But in the morning, very early, I'd have to get you out of your warm bed. Because between 5:00 and 6:00, a patrol can come by here almost regularly.

So he gave us milk and bread and cheese, warm milk. Put us into a feather bed. Into a crisp, white sheet. And that, after being in Drancy with the straw on a cement floor and vermin putrid stench and-- it was like you were on a cloud. And when he woke us with that soft voice in the morning, hey, fellas. [FRENCH]. You have to get up. [FRENCH] You have to get away because, you know.

Gave us a letter to another colleague of his. Also a priest in the village, not too far. And we spent the next day in his place, an adjoining stable. Not a barn, a stable. And we spending that night lying between cows, two cows. And we-- a cozy feeling to fall asleep hearing them chew the cud. And that odor is still here.

And when I go through a countryside today, I say that too often. And it's really an interesting aspect of when I go through a countryside and I smell manure, dung, I inhale it with a relish. And my kids, ah, what's? I said, well, that brings back memories. But it is interesting that these little things are all a process of surviving and a process of resisting. You look back at some of the thing with horror. You look back at some of the things with a different kind of a feeling, a feeling of freedom and you have made it.

In fact, the feeling after we had escaped-- whatever will happen from now on in will no longer be an obstacle because if we made that, we will come out of it all right. That was our gut feeling. So we did make that escape in that respect from the train.

When we walked the country road the following days, a couple of days later, and I told my friend Fred, I said, Freddy, 30 years from now we'll talk about that. We won't believe it. He says, you're crazy. I said, what do you mean? He says, what are you talking about 30 years from now? You don't know what's going to be three days from now.

And he was right, because I wound up in jail after that. But again, all that was an aftermath and even while I was in jail serving nine months in there. From a year, it became nine months. A quarter off for good behavior. Even while I was in jail, I knew wherever they're going to take me from now on in, I will not let it happen to me.

And that's just the way it worked out. I had the view, I had the desire, the deep desire and the premonition with it that I will come out of it, if for nothing else but to be able to tell a story. Because those who have gone and have perished are not able to do it. So we are here, and that's-- in hindsight, everything just fell in line for me. Thank God.

Were you heroes? Are we about out? [LAUGHS] We're timing these running outs.

Sound roll two, camera roll five, take seven.

The question was, do I consider myself a hero? Whether I did something heroic. It's strange, an escape is not being rewarded by a medal. That's the thing that heroes get as a symbol, a token. There is a reward for that. The reward is that we survived, and I survived to be able to tell a story. That is enough of it-- and pass it on so that maybe future generations can learn from it.

But heroism is not something that you plan or that comes after a big consideration of what you're supposed to do or whatever. Heroism is a spur of the moment phenomenon. When somebody saves-- like it happened some years ago, a young lady from the icy waters of the Potomac in Washington.

That man, when he got up in the morning didn't say, today I'm going to become a hero. I'll be a hero. He happened to be at the time at a place where he took something into his own hands and said, I'm supposed to do that. And that night and that evening and following ensuing weeks and months, he was interviewed. And it was a heroic thing in a way.

And heroism springs from a fear, basically. Now, when you see a monument of a general there in a park and he has won this or that battle. And he was a hero, and he was decorated for it. What that monument doesn't tell you, that stone or bronze statue does not tell you is one thing-- how scared he may have been at the time when it all happened.

So my escape is not so much heroic as it is, as they say in the ethics of the fathers, there isn't a thing that hasn't its place, and there's a man who has in his time, or something of that. I'm paraphrasing it vaguely. It was the right person at the right time at the right place.

And there's two factors in that particular escape and that whole situation of my survival. One is fear. And not just fear spelled out normally, but with a major capital letter. Fear.

And the second is luck. There has to be an amount of luck or fortune or fate, what you want to call it. Something metaphysical. Because the train that left the two days earlier, according to what I hear, there was one escape attempt by man. And he fell under the wheels of the train and his legs were amputated. He was thrown back into the car to bleed to death.

So we had to be lucky after we had taken the decision for it to succeed, and all the ensuing months. To be arrested and to run again and to escape and to have a situation with a German SS officer in the train station of Limoges, when I was observing something, as was the truth. And I told the man then that I was just watching something, not observing. There's a difference between the two. Because I was there to find out something.

But that is my point of my escape. The question was, are you a hero? I don't like to relate to myself as a hero because it was fear and luck. And I don't even enjoy or exalt in the term "survivor." There are many people in the world that have to survive. In circumstances that were not life or death, like mine in this particular time. Because 72 hours later, I would have been gassed according to the statistics. But people sometime have to survive on a daily basis. We see that in our

cities. We see that in present life.

The word survivor has a connotation. Almost, it's almost a word of curiosity. You know, I often feel that when I speak to schools and people ask questions, I'm an object of curiosity. And I don't want to be that. This word "survivor" connotes a special situation that you're in, a special character that you are, a special place in life that you have.

Yes, we are survivors. The word tells you that. But the real heroes are really those who are no longer here to tell the story. I think they are the people who went there and-- martyrs in a way, yes. But quite heroic because they were good people.

And especially when we speak about children. Seeing my own granddaughter, when I look at a million and a half children lost, they were the real-- what do you call it? In football, you call it the unsung heroes, in a way. Yes, unsung. Remembered. But very much unsung. That could have been a nation today. A million and a half children growing into a fully grown nation. As Gerda Weissmann Klein says, they were ordinary children, but quite a few of them could have been extraordinary, extraordinary. Yes, these are the heroes.

Can you tell about on the train when you made the decision, and how different people felt on the train about your decision to escape?

It is interesting, when you're together with a group of people of 50 coming from all walks of life. A microcosm, if you will, of Jewry, of humanity abandoned by the rest of the world. At the time, we didn't quite sense that we were abandoned because we were given all kinds of psychological means to think that we were going to be working and resettled and that sort of thing.

People were trying to talk us out of escaping, especially the males in that train. There was one woman on crutches there. I often mentioned her. Dark, deep-set eyes. Gray, streaky gray hair. Taking care of a young child. It was there without parents. On a crutch, on crutches. She had a leg amputated.

And she pointed that at us. Punctuating the air with that crutch like a weapon. You must do it. Run, run. You will tell a story. And others tried to talk us out of it. We had to work feverishly on this thing because we never knew when the train would come to a halt and the guards would step down and try to look.

Lucky. Again, luck. Luckily for us, the train did not stop during that period during the day where they would come by and see perhaps or notice that something has been worked on those bars. They were trained also to watch out for things, like we were trained-- like sixth sense tells us what to do and what not to do. Yes.

And the psychology of it was, why did they try to talk us out? Because before we left the camp, our belongings were taken from us. Jewelry, watches. And we were given a receipt with a number and our name was on it. And that receipt said that this is what we deposited. And we were told, don't lose that. Because you won't get your things back when you get there. That was the psychology of it.

Now, when we worked feverishly and they tried to talk us out of it. Foolish! We'll all be killed. That they will discover you, that you're missing. And then they'll take it out on us. Well, if that's the feeling that you have, then you're not going anywhere where you deal with human beings, certainly. Which only fortifies our premonition that where we're going we're not going to make it.

Rumors had been flying, but they were never entirely confirmed, verified. And then they said, look what we have in our hand. They wouldn't bother giving us this if they didn't mean to return these things to us. That little receipt for the meaningless little pieces of jewelry. In this respect at that time, all that had no meaning. It was just something you wanted to hold on to, because that presents you with a feeling that you're still alive.

But to them, that certificate was in fact, that little receipt was in fact a document telling them that they will be all right, they will be alive. And to me, it didn't mean anything. That was the psychology of it. And we had to overcome not only our own perhaps sometime hesitation. There were still this thing we have to get out and jump. And there's still danger

ahead. That one thing versus them admonishing us don't leave us, in a way. Stay with us. Don't do it to us.

Now, Manfred Silberwasser was and Leo Bretholz, we were single young men. And it's part of a young person's make up to be somewhat adventurous. Maybe not thought out too much. Just to do it. Impulse.

[INAUDIBLE]. We're going to reload the film.

Start with you and your friend.

Coming back one more time to this hero thing. There are some people that had a lot to do with me during those months and a couple of years. First of all, a priest. Now, there's an unsung hero. He could have gotten into trouble. The lady in Limoges with whom I boarded. And my friend Eugene Bass hiding us out up in the attic, knowing who we were. Madame Bergot, lovely lady, non-Jewish, who had a tragedy of her own. When she was 21, lost her husband in the First World War, never got married. A life like this, always helping people.

This nurse in the hospital that I mentioned before. By her telling me she knows who I was, but as long as she's going to be there, nothing's going to happen to me. That's a little unsung heroic story because she put herself out. She could have just gone about her way without saying anything. And I don't know. Madame Bergot's name, I know. And that sister Joan of Arc, I know Saint Joan of Arc. She was a saint, in fact.

But the priest's name I never knew because names, in that moment, didn't mean much, as long as he didn't know ours, we didn't know his. But his action meant so much. So that's more about what you might consider heroic or in the vague description of it, something that borders on maybe being heroic or being there when you needed. Maybe that's also a point of it.

[INAUDIBLE].

Oops. Here we go.

I want to go to the choices and the difference in choices, like you and your friend on the train were young men. But choices that other people wouldn't have had with families.

It is very simple for young people who are unattached, want to be impetuous, adventurous. Take it into their own hands. Make a decision at the spur of the moment. Well thought out or not thought out at all. But the decision, it had to do with basically survival in mind. And I have to come back to the big word, "fear."

No matter how a family that was, for instance, in the cattle car. No matter how such a family would have wanted to get out of the situation, no matter how much a father, perhaps seeing me squeeze through, would have been tempted to also squeeze through and get to freedom. There was that family situation that would prevent him from doing so.

A distant relative of mine was in that same train with me. And she was the one that handed me my bag, my rucksack, through the window, between the bars. Handed it to me and I put it over my shoulder. Toni [? Gutfreund, ?] she went to Auschwitz and perished. And these faces I see.

The choice was ours because we were free. Unfettered, in a way, to do it. Free to jump and go and do what we wanted to do. Families couldn't. Ill people couldn't. Infants couldn't. Somebody came and was dragged into a cattle car on a stretcher. Actually brought from the camp on a stretcher, couldn't walk. These people couldn't.

And it so happens that, according to what I hear, there were less than a dozen attempts at escape during that period from Drancy to Auschwitz. Between the period from spring 1942 to almost into the fall of 1944. There were about a dozen attempted escape and only several, three or four succeeded, actually. So.

When I did mention my escape to Professor Gilbert when he wrote the book Holocaust, he became very interested in it. His first question was, if you were on that train, so how are you here talking to me? That's when I told him about the

escape. And he was especially interested in the aspect of the Swiss having sent me back. Because he had a very prominent chapter there on Switzerland and their dastardly acts during that period.

Not everybody could make the decision. In fact, "not everybody" is quite, quite, quite an understatement. The majority could not make decisions like this from a train because trains were quite often entirely without windows at all, especially in the east. The trains are also packed much more in the east. About 100, I understand, per cattle car.

And escape routes were not as available. Although some people tried to hack a board out of the floor. There were sometime older cars and they were loose anyway. And with an instrument that you may have fashioned, manufactured in camp, a knife or some such sharp instrument could do it. Some of it went through the roof, perhaps trying. But there was not everybody could do that.

In fact, the psychology-- and that's again, prevented you from doing foolish things to endanger yourself. You can get killed for that. They will take it out on you. And the proof of it is that down to the very last minute and these are the reports. Then they were taken to the gas chambers being told that it was showers. And they were told to hang up their clothes on those hooks and put their shoes right under their clothes. So when they came out, don't forget where you hung them. Don't misplace them because you will not be issued new clothes or different clothes, other clothes.

That psychology worked until the very last minute when the men and women and infants in their arms walked into the gas chambers. Nobody in France could believe in these cattle cars that they were going to transport us 72 hours, though we didn't know how long we were going to be in these trains. But turns out, about 70 to 90 hours.

Nobody having been put in that cattle car at the moment, if you would talk to people, would actually believe that they're taking us there to be killed or gassed. Because if they wanted to do something to us, they could do it right here. Why drag us 3,000 miles? That was so Machiavellian, that was so organized, so psychologically prepared down to the most minute detail.

All that created at Wannsee the conference that we just remembered that happened 50 years ago last week on the 20th of January. Everything was meticulously prepared. And the word went out from the SS, from Himmler, and from the generals, from the colonels, that when you will-- nobody in the future will believe that anyway. So you don't have to really worry about it.

And that was the psychology of it. Why we were so unusual in having done it when others didn't do it. Because we were free and they were not free to do it. And they were also, as I said, never quite psychologically prepared to believe that it was within the power of a human being to do that to another human being. And I come back to the thing, to a child, to a child.

That's the big tragedy. That people still believed in people, in the goodness of people. When you see Winds of War in the last segment and the woman opened the door. They open the door for her and she stands there and she talks to the SS man standing there with his dog and his white gloves.

And she said, sir, we have seven people, seven dead people in this car. And he turns to her and says in a very wry smile, these are the lucky ones. That's when she realized that she was confronted with somebody who was not really human. But in the car, as the car was rolling on through the French countryside, that beautiful, bucolic countryside, nobody could believe that this was possible to be happening.

Because human nature doesn't want to believe that another human being can do that. Anne Frank says it. At the last sentence she says, at the bottom of it all, I still believe that people are good. In the final sentence in her diary. And that's what the belief was, that no matter what they say, what the rumors say, that isn't quite possible.

There were these gamuts of moods running through that train, from prayers to tears to despair, resignation, quite a bit of hopelessness. And some people were telling jokes to overcome, to still life, show life.

We're going to reload.

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