

Beverly Hills, California. Following is interview with Isadore Helfing. I-S-A-D-O-R-E H-E-L-F-I-N-G. Sync take one is up.

We're starting, Bret. Does he know that?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

OK. Can you tell me what your transport and arrival at Treblinka was like?

It was-- they're mostly from my hometown that was picked up in those trains, you know, where they transfer cattle, stuff like that. Yeah.

Describe what it was like when they opened the doors and what you saw and how you felt and what you did.

The minute they opened up the door, I was facing right up at about two-story dead peoples right in front of me laying there. This was the people that came before dead right in the trains, in those trains, and they pushed them out because they didn't have time to haul away because another train came in. And that's what it was-- what I saw.

And what did you do?

What I did-- I saw we're going all-- that's it. And I see boys dragging dead bodies to the grave, you know? And I jumped right in and start dragging those bodies just like I was one of them. And they were pulling them to the graves. And so this was about 3, 4 o'clock. And you know, and then the night turns around and I could not join them so I was hiding myself between the bodies there. It's truth.

And then in the morning, I start doing the same thing. But I seeing that they count 50 people dragging those bodies in this particular time. And two, three were killed. They shoot them because they couldn't drag those bodies. They got sick in some way. So I joined right into the group and I became one of the people. So like in the morning they came in and they count out the people-- how many people-- if the right amount people's there. And somebody is missing, so they were looking what's happened, you know? Maybe he escaped or something.

So you actually sort of broke in to--

I broke right into the crew like I'm one of it. Everybody was wearing the same clothes like the way they came in.

Now, describe to me in detail as you remember it how Treblinka was laid out.

The way it's laid out? They make you go the people in a little alley go and they say, men at the right, woman at the left. And over there they had to take off the clothes and they pushed them right in to the gate. And while they come in to the gate, they come this way and this way and they join together. And they just went-- they just went-- at that time I didn't know where they go, but then they went to the gas chambers all together.

What was the camp like? Tell me about the buildings, how big it was, where you slept. Tell me how everything was--

We slept in a building just like a barrack, you know? It was low floors, sand, and that's the way we were sleeping there in those barracks. This was in the beginning, the first two months when I was there. Later they built, you know, barracks where you can sleep like-- we call this--

Bunks.

Bunks, yeah.

Well, tell me how the whole camp was, how many buildings there were, how big it was, where the gas chambers were.

Describe to me--

The gas chambers was about 14. They was the size of a single garage, something like that. A garage and a half. And they pushed them in there, you know? The Gestapo and the Ukrainian. If people didn't want to go in, they saw it, you know, they hit them and they pushed each other right in. And they were standing up against-- packed and then they gas them. And from the other side, there's a sliding door they just slide it off and another group was taken into the graves. That was the beginning when I got there.

Tell me how long you were there and how it changed over the course of the time that you were there.

The change was they put people in a mass grave. And then when the grave was filled up, and so with the time came a new law something, they digged out the dead people from those graves and put them in one place where a big fire was going and they were burning the bodies that time. This was after a month or so. And they were the-- the new people who came, they go right in and just throw right into the- it was a grave where the fire was, a special fire. And it was burning there.

When you got there, how long had Treblinka been going?

Oh, I don't know. Maybe-- they were building Treblinka-- it was about a month or three weeks. Most of the people was from the Warsaw ghetto. They brought them from the Warsaw ghetto to build Treblinka.

Tell me about the transports, and was it organized? Was it orderly? How long did it take? How often did they come? Describe to me what it was like.

I didn't get it.

The transport. When a transport would come in--

Yeah, oh, you mean inside Treblinka, yeah?

Yeah, once you had been there for a while and you were working.

Some transport had to wait, couldn't get in, because inside going to Treblinka was one track. When they put the one in, they could not come in the other one. There was one track. So they were-- sometimes they were waiting for hours till this one pulled out empty and the other came in. This was going till late in the evening. Not at night.

Every day?

Every day.

What did the people think-- where--

People, the minute they got into Treblinka and they saw what's going on, the dead bodies, they were screaming. That's all. Everybody was screaming. Screaming and crying. The screaming, you know, it was going on the whole day.

Was there a time when it was busier than other times or when you were working--

Yeah, sometimes they had to-- sometimes they were waiting, but sometimes they just in and out and just went through them very smoothly. Some of those, the trains came in, there was 80%, 90% dead-- people were dead there. They kept them so long, for two, three days till they got in there, and they had no water, no ale, nothing, and they died right in the train. I said, when we dragged out bodies from train, people-- their heads was that big from the heat there.

Tell me the story of how you were picked up and when you were picked up and then transported there.

I went together when they came in the morning in my hometown, the ghetto, and they ordered everybody out from the houses. This was in the ghetto. So we all took packages, you know, bags and sit right in the court and the house there because this was-- you know, people lived all the way around in their house. It's like a court.

And then by 8 o'clock, 8:30 we had to-- they told us to go out and go to march right there maybe about a mile from my house to go to the trains. So we all went together, so they picked me up from the group in the side. So they picked up 200, 300 people and put them in a different barrack.

And they needed people to work in the city, so I remained as a worker. But I didn't work. The next day was another transport. I got out from the group and went into the transport because we didn't know we were going. And I said to myself, my parents were not going to survive 24 hours if I wouldn't be there, you know?

People, they were the age, you know, to take care of them, you know? So I went willingly by myself in and then we got into Treblinka. They kept us a whole day in a big field till they pushed us into those trains. What do you call it? Train? I call it that, where they carry the cattles in there.

Cattle train.

Cattle train.

All right, now describe for me again the arrival at Treblinka.

We arrived at Treblinka. And just the way I told you before, they slid up the door, open the door, and they tell them, go right in here. This way. And of course, there was a little arch says woman right, and they go to take a shower and stuff like that. And then they got in at a little field there. Everybody had to get undressed. They didn't keep the people overnight. The whole thing has to be finished off, the whole train. And they put them in the gas chambers. And the other side was another group and haul them away to the graves.

We're going to run out very soon. Let's just reload.

I guess most of this part you have it in the tape, no?

Change film to camera two. Sync take two.

Tell me what kind of a camp Treblinka was, and how it differed from other concentration camps.

Camp Treblinka was [? predominantly ?] a death camp. Nobody was used for any hard labor or anything. The labor was just with bodies, pulling people from the train and taking out different things. But they-- of course, some people, girls a few, worked in the laundry there. Not for us. Just for the Ukrainians, the Germans.

And of course, there was a kitchen. They had a shoemaker, a tailor, a little court that had all the shops, and a blacksmith, you know, to put shoes on the horses. They had horses there too. They used the horses just to bring there-- they didn't have cars, but they used the horses to go in a little town to bring supply for the Germans. Food. Food supply. Yeah.

Tell me how many of you there were and how many Germans there were, how many Ukrainians there were.

There was about 1,000, 1,200 people. But the end was between 1,300 and 1,500 people in the camp working.

And who were all of them? Were they all-- they were all prisoners like you?

Yeah, they're the same here.

All right, now I want you to tell me again how you managed-- what you did when the doors opened. Tell it to me as though you didn't tell me before how you managed not to go through one of those gates and, go into the--

You know, when the train arrived, you know, like they do, they pushed-- they opened up the door. Not opened the door, sliding, you know? And this-- the most-- like I say, the most of them came from other towns. Happens to be from my town when I came out there. Most people got sick there, but not-- didn't die.

But the most train came in and people were laying dead in dirt. And there was a group of the people, that's what I did, pulled out the people, and that's why I piled up a big pile of dead people because the next train is coming out. They had no time to haul away.

And farmers around the neighborhood, had-- it was-- they made a law they should bring a buggy and a horse and leave it at the gate at Treblinka. In the evening they picked it up, their horse and the buggy. So we used the buggy and piled them on the little buggy. And some people were dragging dead people without a buggy because so many people, you know? Because the grave was away by 500 yards, 400 yards from the train, from the rail. And that's why I survived.

Now tell me about your conscious effort to survive. Tell me how you-- what you decided to do.

We knew we were going to die any minute. But that time, you know, you just-- you became one of the-- you're not a human being, you know? I was afraid to kill a fly, and here I had to lay between the bodies, pull the bodies, and it just became like a nonsense, you know? Like not like a human being. This was in the beginning. But then I did something different.

What kinds of different things did you do? Did you have friends there?

No friends. We all became friends. Doesn't make a difference. One from this town, this town. Practically everybody was almost my age, you know? They picked up these young boys. 19, 20 years, 18 years old, you know. But 20, 22, 23, very seldom we found one there. So that was too old at that time.

[? So ?] this, and then they camp got organized. And what happened? How do I got survived? So I worked on a lot of things there. I was hauling water, you know? There was a little, what do you call this, well, you know, where they picked up the water and carry it to the kitchen. I was working on that maybe a couple of weeks.

And then one time they picked up a bunch of people. You see, they separated Treblinka. There was two-- the camp was number two anyways. I'm not talking about number one. But at the number two camp, they separate-- they put a gate. When you came out from the gas chambers, there's another group holding the bodies and put into the graves.

And those people with this people didn't got together. It's in the same field, the same people were running there, the SS and the Ukrainian, but we didn't get together. One time they picked me up. Every morning they had to pull out all the people and they counted how many people were here. Otherwise there were two, three missing, they know somebody escaped, and they punished and that and that for that, punished other people not to escape.

So one time they picked about 20, 30 people from this group and took them to the other side where they pulling people to the grave. And I saw over there I cannot survive 48 hours. The next day, then they make me hauling water, and the water was at the other site where the train came in, this part of Treblinka, and I saw what's going on, and I see the Ukrainian is not looking at me and he just went to somebody else and talked.

I left it the two barrels of water and got back to the same group where I was before and started working. So that's why-- and then I got back into the same group. Over there, there was food because people came to Treblinka. Somebody had a piece of bread and that and that. So you picked it up, you found the food to eat there.

And over the other side, you're dealing just with the dead bodies, you know? And this side was the people just arrived. They left the clothes, everything. Over there, just plain dead body. So I got back to this thing and that's why-- and then I remained in there. If they would have knew I changed the job, they would have killed me right on the spot. But we knew anyways we're going to be killed. Nobody's going to survive.

So it happens like this. The way I survived is like this. In that camp there was a horse and a two-wheeler buggy that picked up garbage, you know? It picked the garbage and took it to the grave where the people were burning. And he backed it out and dumped the garbage in for burning. There was no trash cans, something to haul away. Everything that went into the grave to burn it. Nobody had a canister or anything. There was no such a thing. This is going to burn-- not going to burn.

So what happened, when the guy pulled back the horse, I told him-- the horse pushed him to go backwards, the horse got wild and backed it up and went in right to the fire with the buggy. And then the German was run to see what's going on. He shoot him.

There was a stable. There was five horses. And they used the horses for horseback riding and two horses for going-- to bring the materials, you know, the food from the other towns for the Germans. So they need another guy. It happens to be I was in the barracks with a guy who worked in the stable, cleaned the horses, feed the horses. And he says, you're going to be good, and I substitute the other guy who got killed when sitting there. On account of that thing, I survived in Treblinka.

From then on, I had nothing to do with the people-- working by the dead people. I just used the horse. I learned how to clean horses and feed them and bring water. There was no [INAUDIBLE] you know. You had to go to the well and get the water. And this fellow happens to be-- he was a few years older, and that Ukrainian-- there was a Ukrainian who was in charge of this stable.

When he got to the town, he got for himself food, you know, all this salamis and vodkas and that. So I have-- as far as food was concerned, I was eating there and it was OK. And then he want me to drink some vodka. I didn't touch it and the guy said, don't you touch it. Otherwise if they came and they see you are a little little drunk, you'll be killed. Now, I was listening to him and that's why I survived. That's why I survived that long to be in Treblinka.

Did you have Kapos in Treblinka?

Yeah.

Tell me what a Kapo is.

There was-- one of my Kapo, he was a young fellow. He came a little earlier, and his name-- I can tell you his name is [? Moniek ?] because we called him that. I remember that. He acted towards the Gestapo is rough to the people, but he didn't harm people. He didn't harm nobody, this particular guy. So there was about two or three Kapos, but he was my Kapo, this particular guy.

All right, we have to reload. About the uprising. Tell me all about the whole plan and then go right through it.

So I was the one who knew we going to have the uprising because they came to the stable and they told me, listen, this is going to be an uprising. What happens to me was a little boy who was very young, his father was there working in a tailor shop. And happens to be he was from my hometown. Happens to be he was from my hometown.

That little boy was a shoeshine boy at the barracks where the Germans were living there. And over there they had the supply of ammunition there, a supply. And he had a way of going in. He brought out a lot of-- stole a lot of ammunition and distributed to some people who knows how to handle.

Not everybody in the camp knew there's going to be an uprising. And I was told when you hear the uprising-- when I hear the uprising, I should grab the rifle from the Ukrainian because he had a rifle laying there openly loaded. I got access to it all the time, but he didn't care because I've been there a few months there. So they told me when you hear the uprising, grab that rifle and run with us and the uprising.

So in the end, the people from the barracks where they used to tailor shoes, shoemakers and that, in this particular time, 11 o'clock, if any of the Gestapo comes in there, to the room there, to the place, grab him, chuck him, and he cannot say

I will just kill him there because the uprising is 11 o'clock.

Somehow it delayed and the people who knew about it didn't know what to do. So the uprising was a little later. And maybe two or three of the Germans were killed and then we start running. The wires around the barracks was not electric in Treblinka. They didn't make any tattoos on the arms. You wear the clothes what you wear all the time. That's the way this camp was like that.

So we run. We start running and I jumped across the wires and the people, you know, patrols started shooting left and right. Now I was running in the field and I saw how the bullets popping in the ground in front of me. And then we got into the-- then it got dark and I got into the deep woods because from the distance we see black, this was woods. We were running straight into the woods. And we hid out overnight.

And so the next day, we didn't where to go, what to go. I saw a little farm-- a farmer all by himself. I was with another guy. And we got into his place, and we told him the story and he kept us hiding. But later he used us to help him work. And this was-- I don't know what to say now.

Tell me on how big a scale it was, how many of the inmates were involved, how many do you think got away, and then what happened afterwards.

It got away a handful. There rest, all of them were killed right on the spot.

How do you know that? How do you-- how did you find out what happened?

Because after the war, we tried to get together how many people survived. There was only 27 people from Treblinka from both camps. The camp where I was called Treblinka two, and there was another one, a labor camp. They chopping wood and making rolls. Altogether was 27 people after the liberation.

How many people did you kill during the uprising?

Nobody. I was running.

How many did inmates kill in general, do you think?

Inmates killed or the Germans killed?

How many of the Germans got killed?

About two, three.

Two or three.

Yeah.

Now, go back to when you were in the camp and tell me about any sabotage that you did or that other prisoners did.

There was two prisoners tried to escape at night. They tried to crawl up under the wire, and they were caught. And they brought them right into the appell in the morning when we had the appell for counting us, the people. They hang them right in the middle. Everybody should see what's happened. And they hanged them up by the legs and they were screaming and swearing they want to be shot, you know? They were hanging up by their legs. In that they showed us a sample. If we do run away, that's what's going to happen to us.

And then a guy who didn't behave himself, they showed it at the appell where we were standing. They gave him 25, you know, with a heavy belt over his back, and some of them couldn't even make it after that. The one with the big power.

And of course, there was a guy. We called him Lalka. He was-- his face looked like-- Lalka is a doll. His face was like a doll, but he was a murder-- a sadist, this guy. He went with a-- he had a German shepherd walking around, and if he didn't like how the other guy walks, he just told the dog and just tear him apart. He was just dangerous, this guy. Just dangerous, this guy.

And at the appell, there was another guy. We called him [? Kivi. ?] His name was not [? Kivi. ?] We just give him a nickname. And it looked like a Jewish typical guy, you know, the way his nose was raised and stuff like that. And he was terrible, that guy. I think this guy got killed, this guy. I found out from the guys after the war was over. And there was many thousand things. I could not even think. Maybe if I lay down in bed and think about it I can give you twice as much.

Tell me about when you went back and walked through the camp and how much you remembered about where things were.

Back? What--

Yeah, when you went back recently in the last 10 years.

Oh yeah, nothing there. Nothing. There made a big statue there. And then where the grave where they were burning the people, they put the stones, you know? Memorial stones. And pointed out just Warsaw, my hometown, all the towns where people came into Treblinka, every town. It's just like mushrooms sit there in a big spot.

And the gas chambers, they poured asphalt just to make note this was the gas chambers. A big line. But you know, they were the size of whatever the size is of the gas chambers. It's laying on the ground. They poured asphalt and they say, this is the-- there was the gas chambers and this was the size of it. And the rest, everything is filled. Pine trees has grown there.

Did you and other prisoners talk about getting even while you were there? I mean, at night when you weren't working, was there--

You mean in Treblinka?

Yeah.

Oh yeah, there was the one appell, it was right in front of me, a guy went in and stabbed that guy who count the people, and then they spreading bullets. And people from the group, a lot of people died there too at the same time. The guy knew he's going to die so he took revenge, you know, and stabbed him right in the back and killed him.

This was during the time I was there. I saw it. It was right in the-- appell means everybody gets up before they go to work and they count them out how many people's here, how many went in at night to sleep and in the morning if anybody's missing. They didn't want nobody to escape there.

So he killed a German?

He killed a German. And he was shredded from bullets, that guy who did it. But he knew it. He went for revenge then. Yeah, when I came in with the train, there was a lot of people tried to get out with the train so they were behind. They grab-- they try to go underneath the train. When the train goes back out, then they can run out and escape.

And all of a sudden, one is going through, so everybody seeing that, whoever was capable, done the same thing. When the German saw it and he shoot them right there underneath, you know, behind [? grip or ?] some kind of items that he can hang on to it, and the train will go out, and then he'll try to escape.

People tried to escape when they were sorting the goods, you know, the clothing and packing during the day into the train. So a lot of people got stuffed in-- got inside and they jumped during the time that the train was going. I don't know

where this train was going, but it was the clothing, people's clothing. And they jumped out through the little window.

All right, we're going to run out in about five seconds.