

[BEEP] I want you to begin by describing the deportation to the brick factory courtyard. And I want you to give a context-- your age, your town, who it was, and roughly what time it was, and how you went there, what you thought was happening.

In 1944, April, at the time when families were without fathers' protections, my father was in a forced labor camp already, unattended only by women to tell their children, meaning my mother, my aunt. It came very suddenly although the atmosphere was there. I mean, we sensed that things weren't right from the beginning of the year already. Schools were closed. Life was just not what it used to be. We wore yellow stars to be singled out as Jews.

And when the Germans occupied-- this was Hungary at the time. The Germans took over the city. And in no time we were just told to pack a 5-kilo package. And they marched us on foot to the brick factory in our own hometown. We lived there under very meager circumstances.

My aunt, I remember, improvised a sled for a bedroom. We had our own pillows and slept under the sky, but we had the sled to protect us from the sides. By brick, we built up the bricks. And I remember my mother's concern that her child had to work so hard. And we stayed there for four weeks.

One night, which was in April-- and everything always happened when it was dark out-- we were ordered to line up. Before we knew, we were in the cattle cars, taken to work per se. Unknown to us, they arrived to famous Auschwitz. We still didn't know where we were going.

My mother's only concern on the trip to Auschwitz in the cattle car was that we had our own little corner, my mother, my aunt, my brother, who was six years old at the time. Her only concern was my father's well-being and myself. And her words were, I hope you don't have to starve or you don't have to be hungry ever, because I know you get headaches, my child. Seemed like she had a premonition that my father and myself will be the only survivors. As it happened, we were. But that's a later story.

We arrived to Auschwitz. The impression was unbelievable. There were these striped-clothes people, dogs, German soldiers. And it was very, very chaotic. We were ordered very quickly to get off or jump off the cattle. I was still with my mother, and lined up five or six in a line, holding on to each other. And as I said, things just happened so quickly. You didn't have a chance to think or to know what's happening to you, or what's awaiting you.

My first impression was of the stripe-clothed people. I said, this must be the crazy unit. These were the workers, the Jewish workers that did the job for the Germans. After the line up, we came up, again, as I said, very quickly. Came to the selecting, where Mengele was standing, overpowering, very tall, looking down on us, and nodding with his finger-- left and right. To live, to die.

I was the only one from the row which was, as I said, five or six of us, to be sent to the other side. But I ran back three times, wanting to be with my mother. I needed her protection. I was only 14 at the time. And Mengele threw me back three times. He practically literally threw me to the ground. It still didn't faze me to the bit. I still ran to my mother.

The third time when the gravel hit me, my mother obviously worried about her child. Said, go my child, go. With the nod of her hand and her permission to go, I did, whatever Mengele threw me down and ordered me to go to that site, unknown to me as to my fate. And this is how I live all my life, with my mother's nod of her hand-- go my child, go. And I went.

Tell me a little more about Mengele. How did you know it was Mengele?

I didn't know at that time that he was Mengele. He was just the overseer. He was the one that decided your fate, whether you will go straight to the crematorium. I mean, that was unknown to us, because we were told that we will see each other. And as long as you have hope, the panic is not so great. Because the hope is an unbelievable strength. Even though it's not real, but you make it real.

We didn't know where we were going or why was I separated from my mother, that I'll never see her again. I just wanted to cling on. I just wanted to stay with her. Who Mengele was, I didn't know at the time. I only found out afterwards.

So really, Mengele was very good to me. He wanted me to live. He threw me on the other side. I was still young. And I guess I looked healthy enough to get some work out of. And the rest was history, obviously.

Tell me about registration.

At the camp? Well, we were chosen, some of us, this particular transport. First of all, we were lined up, thrown to a barrack, and we were tattooed. Well, not everybody. They chose us to go and work to the Brzezinka or Birkenau, whichever name you are familiar with. This was the place in Auschwitz next to the crematorium, where people arrived. They went in and never came back again.

Also, the people that were doomed to live in misery, they were given bath, undressed. They were very hygienic about the whole process, because you had to remove your shoes, if you still had one. We were given, again, the striped clothes. Now I knew what the crazy unit meant. Our heads were shaven completely. And when we approached each other with our friends, nobody recognized each other.

After the selection, we selected again to this transport which was unknown to me at the time. It was called the Sonderkommando. Sonder means special. The Sonderkommando was one group, the men, that worked in the crematorium, cremating and burning sometimes their own brothers and sisters or families, unknown to them.

We were the ones that selected the clothing that people undressed. We sorted those clothes that went back to Germany. So we had to sort the clothes-- clothing, jewelry, and so on. I even found my very own clothes there one day while I'm sorting clothes. I found my aunt's coat who went to the gas chamber with my mother.

And doing it day in and day out, I still didn't believe I was gazing at the flames, the torch which was forever burning. And I was as far from the crematory as far as I'm sitting from you practically, a few feet. And I didn't believe it. I says, not my mother. Not my brother. I mean, I was still waiting for them to come out.

In other words, I pulled down the shade, and I said it doesn't exist. That was my only defense of my own personal survival. I kept on pretending. Realistically, we knew after being there a year that people went in and marched in, and they just never came out. So your mind is really become so blank at times. Maybe it's helpful or not.

Our job was, as I told you, sorting clothes. Sometimes outdoors, sometimes indoors. We had our own sleeping quarters which consisted of the-- we called it the [NON-ENGLISH], a step up, a narrow piece of cot that five or six people slept. So if one moved, everybody had to move. We used our cup, a tin cup, for a pillow. And we had one utensil, maybe a spoon.

We have to reload. [INAUDIBLE]. Brett?

[BEEP]

I want you to try to give me a basic picture of Auschwitz, how big it was. And then I want you to describe to me your work. And describe it to me as though you didn't already tell me about it. Explain to me how it was separate and how different it was from other parts of the camp, if you can.

As I mentioned before, we were chosen to be the Sonderkommando, which meant that after every six months they would change up the Sonderkommando. Because we were the ones that knew too much for the world to know. And the Germans, as tedious as they were about their own work, they knew that. We were the inside people. We knew exactly how people came and never came out of the crematorium.

We were part of their work schedule, as far as we knew that those things were sent to Germany-- the clothing that was

being separated, the jewelry that was sewn into people's clothing. We found many times in the pants where the waistband is long jewelry. I mean, it had no value to us. Well, it did, because we could get a slice of bread for it because we could do some business with each other. So it was worthless to us.

Of course, the way we worked, there were two Germans always watching the barracks, that we should work properly and fast, because you couldn't stop for one minute. We, in turn, had our own watchmen to see when the German was coming. And we had a password, which was geshem, which means rain in Hebrew. And whenever we heard geshem, then everybody was working very diligently. And otherwise, in our own way, we sabotaged.

If we could, we cut up everything to shreds. Not that it helped, but it was good for us. We were no human beings anymore. We were stripped of our humanity, our dignity, our pride, our existence. But we had to have some sort of a strength within. This was some of our way of resistance. I know it wasn't much, but it made us feel like we're doing something. And the minute, as I said, that we heard geshem, everybody was doing the right thing in the right.

That was sorted out, put into bundles, and stacked up in the barracks. So there were mountains of it. And once, towards the end of the week, a big truck would come and take all the bundles away. And then we would get a reload of new transports coming in.

This place wasn't even ready for occupancy because they were just building the hotel when we arrived. So for the time being, we were stationed at Camp C, the lager. A Lager, excuse me. Not C. And we were called the white kerchief transport. They gave us white babushka or kerchief. How would you call it? And we marched every day.

And we passed the crematorium going to Brzezinka, not realizing what's going on inside. But it was always very solemn when we passed it. I mean, nobody spoke. Nobody dared to move, really, when we passed that area, even unknown to us this is what it was for. Maybe we didn't want to accept the reality. We didn't. I know we didn't.

And after a month, they built up these barracks, and we were able to be housed there. And we remained there till January, until the camp was disassembled. In other words, there was resistance.

The Sonderkommando that I was telling you about who worked the men group, among them was a very close friend of ours from our hometown. We talked to him one morning through the barbed wires. He said, we have it too good. We are being fed well, and we sleep under beautiful covers. I mean, why that made such a difference to him, but silk covers. This is exactly what he said. This means the end, end for us. But they are not going to gas us. And just then, a German approached. And he had to run away because we weren't allowed to talk to each other.

Next morning we were awakened by gunshots. And the whole barrack had to go out. And we were shown all the dead bodies right at the barbed wires, to show what deserters are doing. These were the deserters, the ones that refused to be cremated. So they shot them to death, and then they cremated them. Among them was this friend of ours from our hometown, who told us that he knew what their fate was. So that was the changeover.

By then, there was also another conspiracy that we heard of. There was another camp in the city of Auschwitz. This was Birkenau. There was a city. There was another crematorium. And people had jobs. For instance-- and I'm ashamed to tell you, but I have to say the way it is-- Scheisskommando, which was the sanitary group that was transporting it from camp to camp. They had an access to visit different camps because of their so-called job, dignified job. And they were able to bring news.

And the conspiracy was that this crematorium and the one in the city, they will burn it. The inmates. They were planning on it. Well, from then on the crematorium stopped. I don't know how successful they were, but partly they damaged it so they weren't able to use it anymore.

Now, by then, the Russian and the American planes were flying over us. You know what? I still don't understand up to date. I remember they were taking pictures. The planes were so low as the ceiling. We could see the pilot out of there. And still they didn't bomb the area. That was already in December. End of November. They knew where the camps were. They spotted us. And we still went through from January until the cremations stopped in Auschwitz.

We were again put through the different transports. Before we were taken to the road, which was called the famous death march, from January till April on foot in the--

Wait, let's back up before we go into that. In your work in sorting clothes, how close were you to the crematorium? I mean, were you part of the Sonderkommando? Or were you another group? And tell me how your life was and how you were treated.

We were not part of the crematorium Sonderkommando. This was another unit, the working unit of separating the clothes. We were treated like animal inmates because of the Zehlappell, which meant to be lined up every day, rain or shine. They forever counted us. We were very valuable for them. And if you looked bare or weak, you were transported elsewhere, which meant the crematorium. They only kept the people that were able to, in their estimation, work.

Now, we were a foursome with my girlfriend, her sister, and her mother, who I claim was my strength. To be able to aid her and give her strength gave me strength to go on, because I felt whatever I would have done for my mother I could do for her.

She gave up living the minute she got into camp. There was no will there. After her hair was shaved and started growing back it was white. And she was pitch black her hair. I remember because she was maybe 36 years old at the time. To me she was an old lady. When the hair started growing, it was pure white. She looked like a 75-year-old old lady. Not 75 young, but 75 old.

And when we would stand in Zehlappell, in this lineup, we got beets for food. That was our delicacy at times. We kept the beets just to put makeup on her face that she should look healthy. We rubbed the beets on her face. And we would just try to put her in the back that she shouldn't be too noticeable. And we carried on. I mean, we kept her alive for as long as-- up until the very last minute, which--

We have to reload. Is somebody upstairs?

Yeah.

Interview with Agi Rubin. February 25, 1992. Detroit, Michigan.

Is she moved too much?

[BEEP]

[BEEP]

Can you again tell me the story of the people who ended up being shot, who knew that the end was coming? And tell it to me with the background of who they were, how you met them at the fence and they tried to tell you what they thought was going to happen, and why you think that happened, what they were planning.

This friend of ours who was our family doctor and a friend of the family, we were in the back of their fence. Our back yard faced the crematorium. The barracks where we were sleeping in. Not working, where we were sleeping in. Inmates were not allowed to speak to each other. So it was just in a glance.

And this friend of ours came very close to the barbed wires and told us in a hush-hush way, we have it too good. They are feeding us well. We sleep under beautiful covers. They are feeding us up to kill, because we are next to be cremated. But I promise you that we are not going to be cremated. They will shoot us.

Next day, we woke up for the sounds of the guns. They forced us out. They lined us up right in front of the barbed wires. All the men, the whole group, was shot to death. And we had to witness their death there with a warning that this is what deserters become, shot to death. So in other words, if we would attempt anything heroic, we should just forget

about it.

They knew, and they were going to die a heroic death. And in my book, in my estimation, they were the heroes of survival, the heroes of camp. Where there was no way of fighting back, this was their resistance. Like in our unit the resistance was to cut clothes to shreds that it shouldn't get to Germany or to slow it down. This was their way of defiance. Without ammunition, without strength, without human physical ability, but they were resisting.

That was the last time, of course. As I told you, we saw them dead on the floor. And I was faced with a meeting with this doctor's son, who lives in Washington. And he dedicated his life to the memory of his father and his friends, almost in a sickening way, because where I'm seeing it, it became an obsession with him.

What were his father's last words? And then there wasn't really much I could tell him. This was it what I'm telling you. But he sent me numerous tapes. I should tape it for him. I met him when we had the Holocaust reunion in Washington. He went back to the camps to look for his father. In other words, he never accepted his father's disappearance or death.

Again, talk about how you resisted facing what was going on and how you finally came to realize it and accept it. And how you felt.

Accept? We had no choice but accept. It wasn't an acceptance. It was-- well, I accepted it, but by pulling down the shade. That was my way. It's not happening. I can't realistically say, now that I'm looking back, whether I was hopeful to be liberated, but we still talked about it.

The lady that I mentioned to you who became so old overnight and she was the pillar of my strength, in as much as I was for her, I feel that she was mine more than I was hers, because while we worked and went-- what are we going to eat when we go home? What is your favorite meal? And we would go over everybody's. But she always cooked my favorite meal, which was chicken paprikash with lots of good bread in it.

Up today, when I make chicken paprikash, I don't have the heart to eat it with bread because-- I mean, if I make it, I make it because of her. I shouldn't say because, but I have her in mind every time when I make it. And I didn't know how to cook at the time, and she was going to make my favorite meal.

These were our most important pastimes. We didn't read books. We listened to music because in Brzezinka they had the first group of inmates that comprised of an entertaining committee. When the groups would arrive, we were awaited with culture. There was a band of musicians that greeted us, to show the mass that things are great here.

That was a very smart way for the Germans to-- because people didn't go crazy immediately. They were just getting to it. So the quorum was kept by trying to create a calm atmosphere. So we even had that.

But aside, among ourselves. the most important thing was survival. How far can we stretch one slice of brown bread, which was like brick. How far will it go? Because we never knew if we got one next day. Or when we would line up for soup, if you were the very end they probably ran out of it, which was only water.

I don't know what was in it, but it must have been the peel of the potato, if any. Something was floating in it. I can't tell you the taste, but it was something like water. And you lined up and they poured in like the prisoners here, except it was not food.

And they talk about the future or the past, what we did at home, how were the holidays, how were the families. We fortified ourselves with nice things. And if you had nice things in the past, that does fortify you at your present misfortune or for the future, because that foundation nobody can take away from you, which is your inner strength. Again, what gives you inner strength is if you possess something before. If you possess the feeling prior to it, that will carry you on.

In my case, it was a beautiful childhood. And I always look back to it as my virtue of my strength, because I was able to have a nice childhood. I didn't look at it that this was a temporary existence, but I didn't think beyond that.

Only towards the very end of the war, when we were at the death march, that I had a secret feeling or a premonition about my father being alive, because in one point, as we were marching-- and it's hard for me to describe to you that march, or I would have to open a different chapter to that altogether. People that hardly walking because energy-wise we were [NON-ENGLISH]. Shoes, oversized shoes. If I wore a 37 shoe in European number, it was 42, if I found one, which you were wiggling back and forth.

On snow-covered roads, and if you were to step aside from the road that you were supposed to line up and go march directly like--

[PHONE RINGS]

Anyway, if you stayed out of the line, you were shot. So you had to behave yourself. You had to be strong. The way we slept, five people in the row, four held on to one. We took turns sleeping. One slept five minutes, then we woke each other up while walking. That was our existence. And that lasted from January till practically the end of the war.

But when I saw the German truck and the soldier, I identified my father as a soldier because he was, as I told you in the beginning, he was in forced labor camp.