

Changing film to camera four. Scene, take five.

OK, One of you start.

And the German doctor-- I mean, excuse me-- the Jewish doctor, he read the card twice because he could not question whether I'm from there or there, only what he saw there, because the German doctor was alongside him. He asked me again whether I come from that particular town [GERMAN]. It was just in code language.

And we were, to great surprise, not taken to the gas chambers, nor we not cremated, but put into another block, which we found out this was the first Saturday afternoon and Sunday that the gas chambers were not functioning, nor the crematoria.

And I have later visited with a general, one who was a survivor-- who was a liberated of Auschwitz-- I was also visiting at the Pentagon in Moscow. And they still couldn't give a very clear answer what has happened there.

As a matter of fact when the general was here to a Yom HaShoah event. And I asked him, I says, tell me, how come the Germans were, in the last two weeks, gone a few times and came back, why didn't you-- and we heard your cannons-- why didn't you come in and liberate the camp sooner?

And he suddenly lashed out and me and says, the American liberators accused us of not caring, but it was one of the hardest battles we had. And to justify their reluctance, he says, we lost the finest Jewish generals at Auschwitz battle, which I still to this very day don't believe.

But the crematory did not function. So we were put in the holding barrack to be there till Monday, when the crematory will be functioning again. But that night-- this was Saturday when we came, January 6th, exactly three weeks before being liberated at Birkenau-- came the Jewish doctor.

As you probably know, the curfew was 8 o'clock. Nobody could was even allowed to open up the door of the barracks, not to step out. Not anybody allowed in the camp. And the searchlights were going on all the time.

Here comes the German doctor-- the Jewish doctor, which we later learned his name was Professor Epstein from Prague. And he calls my name at the door. I came out. I say, yes. He says, Stern, at roll call, which 6 o'clock there was roll call, you sneak into working Kommando. Don't come back to the barrack.

And everything had to go with seconds there. There was no time for dilly dallying around. And I asked, can I tell it to others if they are capable to walk, to go to work? This is what I did. And I ended up in a working Kommando. And consequently, I was liberated in Auschwitz three weeks later.

And I was starting-- we arrived-- so hope-- anyway, we arrived in Auschwitz and went to the working Kommando, we already knew that things are very shaky here, that something's going to happen. How can we have a chance to survive and not being killed by them. So there were some thought that we should blow up some sentries-- blow up with what? And we should do this and that.

By the way, when the Germans moved the first time, we found out that they are not in the center, they have disappeared, we have burned down everything possible so that if they should come back they don't have where to go back. But, of course, we did it, but it did not help us. They came back. And at one point, we succeeded to kill a few Germans.

I was not involved in that particular group. And, of course, it didn't do us any good, because they didn't shy away that they ran away. And we had a few things that we could do to discourage them. But it didn't matter. Because in the long run, they won. There were the death marches. And when they came back, they always moved, transported large groups.

Until four days before our liberation, for five days before the liberation, they came back. And they said every Jew, without any exception, get ready for death march. Actually, that's where the death march came from.

And I don't know how and what, where I got the strength, but I succeeded to remain in the camps. I mean, that simply, it was not. When they came back the last time, we were on those shelves sleeping in the barracks, there was either sawdust we slept on or straw. They did not ask one of the inmates to move up, to shake up the straw, the sawdust, but German's themselves, they did this, the Gestapo, the SS.

And here, the high ranking officers were with strong flashlights in one hand. And the pistol in the other hand, to be sure that nobody stays on. And it was by the greatest miracle that I survived. There was-- every barrack had a little cabin in the front, which was separation where the Blockaelteste-- the Blockaelteste meant he was the chief of the barrack.

And every such cabin had all the breadbox, where the bread was supplied, brought in, with a box, with a lock. And nobody could get to it. That door, the hinge of the box, was already torn off. And I was hiding in that box upside down. Here, he comes into search. He even kicks it. But luckily, it gave. He was so skinny, it gave. I could see the-- and I was sure that this is it. This is how I remained alive.

But when they already left, the Germans, about an hour, they left, there was no sign of Germans. I wanted to go back to the barracks. But the Poles and the Ukraines who were not taken on the death march, they wouldn't let me. So I was hiding out in the heap of dead bodies.

Because in the last week, when the crematoria didn't function at all, the bodies were just building up higher and higher. And I sneaked into among those dead bodies, because I was afraid they'd come back or something. So there I was at nighttime. In the daytime, I was roaming around in the camp.

And this is where I actually survived. January 27th, I was one of the very first-- Birkenau was one of the very first being liberated. This was why my survival chance.

Tell me how support systems among inmates worked. Did people help each other? Did the young help the older people, or the older help the younger people?

I can give you one particular incident that I have repeated many times. We were working in a Kommando. And three of us stuck together closer. And there was also another person who always said, that's it, which meant he was going to do something to commit suicide or getting into something to get killed. We would always encourage him. Of course, I was 17 and somebody who was 30 was already an old man. He was with very old.

And we always used to tell him, don't, things are better, we heard the planes, we heard this. I mean, we always nurtured ourselves on some of these hopes as well. And, of course, the people there are more religious background. So we had hope God will help. Didn't give up so fast.

And we said, listen, God will help, you will see, and so on, so on. This man just couldn't take it. Nobody could take it. But some had more strength than others. One day, after exhausted day, and especially hot day I think it was, we come back and his ration of bread was stolen or disappeared. He says, that's it. He wanted to get kind of our approval that.

We did not let him die. We did not just feed him his words. The three of us each got a third of our meager little ration. What did it consist of? A piece of bread like a brick, which we know now was sawdust in it and everything. And we gave a third of that, a third of our lives, to this man, so he should not give up. As a matter of fact, to the best of my knowledge, he survived.

So there was tremendous things, tremendous things. Like my own brother-- I had very bad kidneys. And I was urinating almost anytime. It was known because my kidneys were cold. I don't know how he managed that, to cut it out of his little meager clothing from inside. And I had a kind of a blanket to warm my kidneys.

OK, we have to reload.

To celebrate any holidays, and yet how people managed to try to celebrate holidays in the camp.

There was, in our camp, a pair of tefillin. Tefillin or phylacteries which a man over the age of 13 puts on his right hand and on his head. I don't know how it ended up in the camp. I cannot imagine how it was possible to be smuggled in, unless it was dropped by helicopter. It defies my imagination, even at this point.

And people-- A man's supposed to do that every day of the week, except for Saturdays are on Jewish holidays. And there were a few who were privy to the fact that there is a pair of tefillin in the camp. People literally risked their lives to maneuver to get to that tefillin.

Because before roll call, which was 6:00 in the morning, nobody's supposed to be going anywhere else, but to the latrine, between barrack and latrine or between barrack and roll call. And here, this had to be accomplished before roll call. And it was really a tremendous task. It was one of the mysteries, still the mysteries of how they got it from there and how people got there.

In about 11 months, I succeeded to do that once with about 15 or 20 attempts other times. But then the signals were coming, no, stop it, you cannot, because there were suspicions that somebody might see or detect it.

Because if they would have found out, it would have been killing hundreds of people, such a great defiance. And it was done. It was done a regular basis, but was assigned every day a few who could do that. And it was very tremendously risky to get to the spot and to put out that tefillin to say the prayers.

And holidays, of course, there was the Hanukkah holiday, which had tremendous-- has tremendous memories. One was-- see, if ever anybody escaped the camp, it could have only been a Pole or a Ukraine. Because if he got out he--

With the siren, we better stop. Let's cut for a minute. And we'll start with holidays again.

Yeah.

Only a Pole could or a Ukraine could escape, because first of all, they were our foreman. They were in good flesh. They didn't look like skeletons. And a Pole would take him in. We have found out later, after the war, that the guy who escaped already has gotten enough information from Jewish inmates to know where his family might have hidden something. So he was considered a millionaire. He knows where the treasures are hidden.

And the Polish population would help him. And he was a Pole. He was one of them. But in a case like that, when a Pole would disappear, they would decimate either the group or the barracks where they came from. And in my own experience, once or twice, the rows in front of me were taken, or the row alongside me. So I was really rubbing with death along these lines as well.

And it was just before Hanukkah, Hanukkah time. They have held back a few prisoners. Of course, there were very few Poles in the camps and very few Ukraines. And they were-- by the way, they Poles were worse than the Germans. They were really miserable. The Ukraines, horrible.

And so, the Germans made a Hanukkah celebration. All the poles of the barracks, on the outside Poles, they hung up the prisoners were chosen to be one of the 10 of the tents, on their feet, head down. We had to pour oil on them. And they had a bonfire.

And we had to sing Christmas songs-- Heilige Nacht. We had to sing the songs while our brothers, our fathers, our cousins were burning. That same night, which we had prepared before, a little bit of oil was sneaked from here and a little bit of oil from there. And of rags made out-- forgive me, I'm completely confused-- knots made out of it.

And we were in small groups with lookout posts. Hundreds gathering to say the prayers and the blessing of Hanukkah, of the miracle of Hanukkah. We really did not give up. I mean, give up. Future, there was none, but we didn't give up. And it was unbelievable.

But heroism we saw daily. I mean, I only know the little bit what I know in my little circle. But I heard other things. And my cousin told us things what happened in his camp, which was unbelievable, which was unbelievable.

I mean, one incident, is going to go back to Birkenau. We were in Birkenau. We were a few nights in Birkenau. I don't remember whether it was the first night or the second night. We were told, by the way, everybody was told it will mean death. If you do this, it's death. If you do that, it's death.

And the curfew was very clearly explained to us. And there was a metal drum cut in half where we had to take care of our needs if necessary. But the door was not to be opened.

But I heard very tender little voices. In curiosity, I got to find out what's going on here. So I sneaked out of the barrack. And I go where I-- led to me where I heard the voices. There were trenches, long trenches. And I saw that nurses-- nurses you could only-- whether they were German or even prisoners, had white uniform with a nice hood and a red cross on it.

They're leading little children, toddlers, from two to maybe four years old, on a little march. And they were intrigued by the fire they saw in the trenches. When they came up to the end, these nurses or whoever they were, just pushed them in. And the kids were burning alive-- those voices.

I came back to the barrack. Fortunately, nobody saw me. And I told my brothers. The first reaction was-- of course, it could be-- there was my brother who had the 11-month-old baby. Though he could not have been here. But could be anybody.

But this was not even that was the concern. The concern was, are you out of your mind? If you would have been detected, you would have been killed. So what have you accomplished? Now you know what it would have meant.

And people must have-- this was-- my case was heroic just to know what's going on. But other people did things. I mean, when I worked in the Kommando, the high chimney, this ceramic for this high chimney is very expensive. And some, to sabotage, broke, dropped pieces. They knew they were going to be killed. Just to stop their progression.

Ironically enough, we went back three and a half years ago to Poland, to Birkenau. And we went to the camp that I was in, the coal mine, [PLACE NAME]. It took the Pollacks about 30 years to build the third which we did not finish. And we did it in-- we-- I mean, we Jewish labor, slave laborers, did it in two years.

And of course, there were no pictures to be taken. We took a picture of it just out of curiosity to determine how much of it did we do and how much did they do. So they got the best workers. We did everything possible to sabotage, everything possible, at the risk of our lives.

Because we figured if I have done something to hold back their progress, I am killed, but will do good for others. This happened on a daily basis, constantly, and in many different areas, many different areas.

There were mechanics who are working on the German trucks and succeeded subfusion of oil or whatever it was. We heard the trucks blew up on the way somewhere. I was too young to have had such mechanical knowledge, but it constantly was done, thinks of defiance. But how much good it did, I don't know.

We may run out. We should just reload.

Changing film. Camera 06 is up. Take seven is up.

OK.

There was a very well-known, actually worldwide known great rabbi of Sienna, great rabbinic descendent. He was working-- we were working in the same Kommando, and he just uttered to me, oh, what he would be willing to give, sacrifice, if he would not have to desecrate the Yom Kippur.

It was a wishful thing, like we wished we would have a cup full of coffee with sugar. And it didn't get lost on me. So I came back to the camp. And I approached the camp doctor. Dr. Erik Cohen with his name, also from Prague.

And if you spoke the same language as the other person spoke, than you were kind of buddies. So I said, Dr. Erik-- and everybody knew the old rabbi. He was not so very old, but to us, it was, anybody over 30 was-- 40 was ancient.

So I said, you know, Dr. Erik, if you could arrange that the old rabbi would not have to work Yom Kippur, you will come out alive from here. He was a very assimilated Jew. I never thought he would respond to that. But he says to me-- if he would have kicked me in my pants, I would have expected that as well.

So, he asked me, did the old rabbi tell you that? I didn't want to lie to him. So I said, no, but I tell you. In that matter, that you will enable him not to have to work Yom Kippur, you will come out alive.

And again, there was no time of dilly-dally. There had to be everything done in seconds. Because you never knew when you're going to be interrupted. So he says, OK. That was like my getting into the infirmary before sent to Birkenau, was you took-- there was exhausted oil which we brought back from the working Kommando-- officially, we could bring it back to the barracks to pour it on the barracks, on the floor, so that it doesn't dust, no mud.

And this oil, we took a few spoons of that, we got diarrhea. And on diarrhea you could get into the infirmary. So he says, OK, but you have to go with him. And the procedure was already we knew what.

We got him in into the infirmary. Me and he were assigned one bed. The bed was not any wider than 24 inches, maybe 26 inches. It was very narrow bed. And it was so stuffed that we were assigned one bed for the two of us.

Here, this rabbi tried also to encourage others. And they shouldn't despair. He had said the Yom Kippur prayers, which are very long, very long. He knew them from the very beginning to the very end by heart.

So the two ends of the blankets, we put on our heads. An authorized Jew is supposed to cover his head when he said the prayers. And we said the prayers. And he interrupted in the meantime to go over to others who were sick and who were really in bad shape. And he said prayers to them.

He gave me a blessing. And he says, in the merits of having done this for him, God will help me. I will come out. And I said, rabbi, you will also with God's help come out. He did survive the war.

The fact is that he could stay in the camp, in the infirmary, to say his prayers. I understood later that thousands in the camp felt good that he will be saying the prayers for everybody.

I can't comprehend even today that how such faith can permeate in case like that. And it did. It did. There were other thing we did, which I-- just I'm so emotionally involved in the moment, I cannot even think clear.

So this is how I have spent Yom Kippur because of, an account of this man. And it was unbelievable. When the others asked me, in the camp-- can you imagine, with struggling. They said, how were the prayers? What did he say? How did he say? It was unbelievable, unbelievable.

And he really, I think, and I strongly believe, he did it so that he should be able to pray for the welfare of others, for the welfare of others. And when I have uttered a bad word, may they drop dead or be killed, the Germans, he says, no, not killed, may they change their hearts. This is how he felt and he expressed himself. He didn't want anybody's unnecessary death.

I'm trying to see if the plane is going to- Why don't we cut?

You've talked about faith, and religious resistance, and mental resistance. Did you ever-- in the camps, were you ever able to find relief by joking with each other, by shoring up your spirits?

Oh, yes, there was a lot of it. As a matter of fact, there was always-- in any group, in any Kommando-- Kommando means a working group-- we had some who were telling jokes so that we should feel better. And quoting of the prophet. As a matter of fact, there were some assimilated Jews who came from some parts of Europe, they did not even know that there were such great philosophical teaching existing in Jewish learnings.

And we were joking about hunger. We were joking about hard work. And I remember we were working at the coal mine. There was a civilian worker. He says, you know, we told the Jews they will be mining coals. And the Jews said, you don't want that. Then you would have to pay twice as much for your coal.

And there were all kind of jokes cracked. But they were more of the serious nature of jokes. But I was amazed at how many quotes of the prophets were given. That one in particular, they say that-- the quoted in the holy temple, the jackal came in, and the prophet laughs. The jackal comes in defaming the holy temple.

He says, I'm laughing because he says when after this happens, then the temple will be purified. And then the whole people will be purified. And things like that. And it was amazing. Those who had knowledge had always something good to say.

Show you here an example. We had two couples, two German guys, which were the most notorious robbers in German history. They were such famous robbers, they have, from what we understood, built a tunnel in the heart of Berlin to the central bank. And it was built, officially, by the people thought it was the telephone companies wiring build.

Of course, these guys were apprehended. They ended up in jail. I don't know how many years they got. These guys, of course, as all other criminals, were taken out of jails and made Kapos in the camps.

But these were two very brilliant guys. And they saw in me and my brother that we come from well-to-do homes. So, they pumped up us. And they did it very-- the best shrink would not get things out of you as well as they did.

And we caught onto that. So my brother prepared me how the answer should be. Because he said, they will ask you 20 times over again and again. So we have to have a very clear cut story. And to give this to them. And stick to that.

Their plans were that if the one in the war wins-- they knew that they were going to survive because they were infallible. They were going to survive. And our chances to survive were zero in their eyes. And they were going to go back to our home town and they will dig out whatever, the gigantic treasures. Because Jews were known in Germany to be multimillionaires. So every Jew must have had two big boxes of gold and diamonds.

So when this worked, and these guys became good friends, they've actually made quite a bit of effort to be lenient towards-- I mean, they hit everybody, but they hit us, did not hit us, or we had maybe easier little jobs. So we have spread this on to others, say, listen, if you have intelligent Kapos, let them know that they have a chance to survive, or that you will lead them to it.

Like my brother said, listen, and if should you not-- should Germany not win the war, we will protect you. We will be here vouching for your good behavior and for your humane behavior.

We have to reload.