

Beverly Hills, California. Continuing interview with Bart Stern.

Can you back up just a little bit with the Kapos and tell me what you and your brother-- did you make up a story to tell them?

Yeah. No, actually, there were some facts in it, but to make it a little bit more interesting for them, we embellished upon it. And we have given instead of our location, we gave two other locations. Because we were hoping that we will survive, and we didn't want them to be able to get there first. So we have confused them a little bit, in case if they would have been able to come.

But our aim was not only that we benefit by this approach, but we have saw that others also got onto that point that there are-- that Kapos can be bribed, really. Telling them, listen, if you win, you know where you go back and you will get it. Be nice to us. If you lose, we will be helping you.

And this was something that my brother has masterminded and saw to that that it had spread to others too. And though he became-- matter of fact, when there was a group transferred to another camp, and when my brothers ran immediately to that group of settlers and make hay out of this here. This is something which can work.

And they became-- have used every little bit of it at every opportunity there was to make it a survival possibility, not only for ourselves. The amazing thing is that we were really like blind horses, pulled right, and right, left, left. But within our subconscious mind, we had also a very conscious mind. And we have put it to as good use as we possibly could.

I mean, just the same, the will of survival itself was a tremendous, tremendous effort. You know, like, there were suicides in the camps. But it was never religious Jews committed suicide. Even the most primitive Polish people, I mean, if you read some of the book of Isaac Bashevis Singer, in Poland with such a poverty that Haarlem is a paradise. And they had never went to school, just to Hebrew school. But they had the face.

The suicides were always by the assimilated, who were the philosophical. Because they did not see any reason in further survival, because there was really not too much of a chance. But we have always aimed to survival and never to give up. I mean, to give up was the easiest thing. I mean, if you just sat down, like the men with the story who lost his bread, we did not. We were going on with a great belief that we will survive.

And there is a morning prayer that we say that I believe in the coming of the Messiah. And people have, tell this, I am believe that with God's help I will be surviving the camp and I will take revenge on them. This was strong driving force, even if it didn't come from everybody himself. It was fed to him by others, always with encouragement given. Everybody felt itself an encouragement. Of course, I can't imagine that.

I don't remember what I did. I said, OK, stop it. I've already heard it. I mean, because the labor was very hard. The conditions were inhuman. If I would be able to describe it, I mean, if I would have a better vocabulary and I would have the greatest writers, I couldn't give you the complete happening over five minute. I would go berserk myself.

It was beyond comprehension of anybody, beyond comprehension of anybody. It was so out of the extraordinary that one cannot comprehend it. But whatever we have had, it was nurtured by our belief and by the encouragement of others. I mean, like the rabbi survived and having Yom Kippur, that he was considered that he was our messenger to the Almighty. And these are the things which gave us strength to survive.

Is survival an achievement?

It's a rhetorical question really. Yes, survival is an achievement, yes. We wanted to achieve survival.

How does your whole experience make you feel about humanity.

Humanity is very frail, very materialistic. We see that then and today. We need territories. We need more wealth. Presidents need more votes. Politicians need more votes. And this is unfortunately human nature, I mean, humanity.

I still believe that the best people in the world are in America. Before I came to this country, I traveled to many other countries. But I was a student, I had an opportunity to go for study tours. I won scholarships. And we are the best people. Are we? Depends to whom are we comparing ourselves.

So humanity-- and I'm not the best person either. I see people who are much more superior to me. So I'm really not qualified to give a good answer.

Tell me about how you feel about taking revenge. And were you able to at all?

Yes, I took revenge. The only thing happened when we were liberated by the Russians, a few days-- I mean, I was fortunate to be accepted by the Russians. I mean, I only weighed 84 pounds. I was a walking skeleton. But they did not accept us as survivors because the Germans have even put up the skeletons as saboteurs with the Russians.

So they-- I don't know what experiences they had, but I was very strongly interrogated. But to my good fortune, they were the Jewish-Russian general. And I have given him proof that I'm Jewish. So I was accepted, actually. The greatest thing he could do for me, the uniform of a dead soldier was taken off and given me a part of it.

Three days or so having-- and I was kind of a expensive property for them because I could read maps. I could interpret maps. And I was not a great strategist. But I knew there is north, south, east, west, and northwest, northeast. So I was going on with the Russians. They needed me like a hole in their head. They didn't have themselves anything. And I couldn't walk. I had to be on a horse-drawn wagon, seated with others.

We came into a small community not far from Auschwitz, and noontime for the rest. And there were small narrow streets so we leaned onto the walls of the houses outside to take a rest, and have something to eat. It was sunshine. Matter of fact, I remember I had to sit on something because the snow was melting away.

Here after about 5, 10 minutes, we were, well, sitting on our floor. Suddenly there was hailing of hot lead, rocks, even axes from the rooftops. They were not very high houses. So the population has attacked us. And they were also submachine guns. And a few people were killed.

So I was, with another survivor with me, a Polish fellow, he probably was 10, 15 years old than me, a seasoned man. He was in the camps in the first week on. And the Russian soldiers were somehow surprised in a captured village, this to happen. But he was not.

So we went into the next house across the street. Here we see there was-- that they took off, middle of lunch. The soup was still warm. And we don't find them. He goes down to the basement. See, the basement is short. He sends out somebody else to measure out the length of the house. So we saw that the basement was cut about half.

And there was straw at the end. Pulled out the straw. There he found a family. Of course, we had to shoot them because they all had ammunition. And this has been a very bad scene. I am-- to kill was terrible. So from then on, every uniformed Pole or German-- we came across mostly Germans. This was Monday. We shot them as much as we could.

I just want you to back up and tell me about taking revenge and how you feel about it.

I get asked the question whether I have any hatred toward the Germans. Hatred is not something I'm going to accomplish anything with. And what does it matter to the German? They take comfort, and probably enjoys the spoil of Jewish properties, that I'm hating him. I'm going to destroy myself. Nothing to them.

But I am more rational about it. I will not buy German goods. I will not go vacation in Germany. I will not sponsor their events. That's what I will, as far as my not compensating the Germans or not helping them. But hate, what do I accomplish by that? What do I accomplish by that?

If I could say that America produces a better car, then I would surely go out and tell everybody to buy it. I mean, even now, I tell people, aren't you ashamed your father was killed in Auschwitz and you, or whoever it is, and you buy a Mercedes. Why don't you buy an American car?

I, to that extent, yes. People say they go to vacation in Germany. I said, have you vacationed in America? Do you know how many nice scenes there are here? To that extent, but I don't hate. I don't carry on a grudge. No. And I tell you something very foolish on my part. I didn't even claim for years any restitution that I'm entitled to. I'm a 65% invalid.

But then finally, I did because I figured, what am I going to do? Am I going to defy them? They will get the profit of it. Today I'm getting a very big pension, about \$300 a month. Of course, the Nazis as you know, get considerably bigger pensions. But hatred, I do not-- I do not hate, no. They cannot count on me being their public relations person, no.

What would you say for those who didn't survive?

I know that they have probably have tried more-- as much as me or more, for them. The only thing I can say for them is what I do every day. I say the Memorial Prayer for them, just like they would be my father or brother or sister or mother. That's what I would do say for them.

And another thing what I do say, that we don't have to cave in for anything. We have to be alert. We have to watch out. Whether it's a Mezger or a Buchanan, we don't sit there and say, don't rock the boat. We have to rock the boat. And not only for us Jews sake alone, for the rest of the world. We cannot let these things occur again. Unless we know it, remember it, and tell it to others, it is bound to happen again.

People say that Jews went like sheep to the slaughter. How do you feel about that?

That is utterly ridiculous to say that. You know, when-- first of all, nobody ever believed this to be possible. Look, American people, even today-- I'm not talking of the revisionists who say that-- but the good thinking American people It couldn't be possible. Just the fact to accept it, it is a big order, to live with that. They did not go [INAUDIBLE].

We were not trained to kill, true. Would we have had some leadership who would have made this more plausible to tell us, we would have acted differently, It's always hindsight. But we didn't go with-- you have no idea what resistance there was, even in the ghettos.

I mean, I remember in our own town, some of the gendarmerie were attacked. But what good was it? They outnumbered us by the thousands. It was not only the uniformed. Unfortunately, the population as well. The people who lived next door who have profited by living with us, and been friends just for that little bit of whatever the Jews still had, they were happy to have him being deported.

So we were outnumbered one to thousands. That was really very little we could do. And even so, some of the ghettos, when they came to radio stations, they threw Molotov cocktails. This was sure that. I mean, sheep-- I mean, I heard that.

And I have said it before, I was in Vietnam in '60. Our ambassador, Mr. Nolte, I don't know how he became ambassador. Although he tells me, he asked me, he says, how come that you were herded as sheep, let yourself being herded as sheep in the cattle carts to being flushed out. So I asked him, I said, how come? America, with all its mighty power, American soldiers are killed every day. What are you doing? He said, I never thought about it that way.

I think we were much more courageous with no means than any other people would be. But we are not. But the fact is that we really did not have any ammunition. Nobody behind us. Even when you know about the case of partisan, the partisans themselves, the Jewish partisans that they destroyed, they wanted to take the credit for it.

And so therefore, with what we did not have, we did more than people who have with what to do it. So that is a very, very wrong concept and nobody should think along those lines. Because it's really to defame the atrocities what took place. I don't think so. We can't even use that word. I know it has it's use by fine people.

When we went back to our hometown, 3 and 1/2 years ago, the people said, why didn't you burn down the city? They wouldn't have known. I told them, I said, what would you have done? These were boys my age, non-Jewish boys from my hometown. I said, what would you have done? I said that you came back from the churches, Sunday always, with great hatred, as though best thing you could do, even the good days, is break the Jewish home windows.

You know, it's nice to say that, but I asked him what would you have done if it would have been the opposite way. And you know what his answer was? I have a penknife in my pocket. You see this? It is 50 years old. And what would you have done with it? I don't think so that any of the writers, or anybody who said that is even aware of it, what he says.

OK, thank you very much.