

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Bart Stern
March 8, 1992
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PREFACE

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BART STERN

March 8, 1992

We got taken out of the ghettos (coughs), or actually, the particular ghetto we were in, and herded in groups of about 5-600, and were to-told not to take more than just little hand bottle??? The Hungarian Gendarmerie, of the kind of ----- or sheriff, what primitive characters were driving us to the railroad station, and when we arrived there, we were pushed upon railroad cars, actually cattle cars. What the amazing thing what I still remember is that all the way being driven or herded by the Hungarian gendarmes, we were singing sul, so-, songs of hope. I do not remember exactly how to translate the song, but I know where, which part of the songs it is in, and we thought that we already enough in it. We were about 50 people or 60, 20 more, 30 more we must have been in that little cattle car, which is about a third of the size of a American railroad car, about 120, 140, and before we knew, whoever didn't make it with the family in the same car was cut off, and then they just slammed the doors, and those who were outside, they still had to put barbed wire on the little bit of opening which was on the outside, on the top of the railroad car. These cars were usually used for cattle transports or for grain. In the car, the situation got, by the minute, worse and worse. People were looking to find a spot for the elderly, elder people to sit down, there were no s-space to sit down. If you sat down, you couldn't get up because we were herded in squeezed like in sardine box. And the journey actually lasted, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, three nights, and about 3 days. If anybody had something to eat. Well, in the ghettos we already used up most of the stuff, but we have been successful taking out of the homes where we were taken out, into the ghetto, had to share it with others. But then we realized that it is not a simple journey of just a few hours. People were holding back, but couldn't, would generally pass it out to others, and suddenly, we start seeing that people are taking care of their needs in the cars, and the stench got worse every minute, and uh, they were, the people who converted to Christianity in the hope that they will be spared, because the churches in ----- said, "Look, if you give us your belonging," this were still in the good days, "you will get free pass, you'll become a Christian." But when it came to that, they were, they run to the cars, they were the first suicides that we had, death in the car, sickness in the car, heart attacks. People were taking medication couldn't take it. It was just indescribable. As a matter of fact, I can't re-recapture the moments of it myself, because if I do, I, I, I go just crazy. I mean you see your whole family languishing in, in, in, in, in, in, in (cough) in bowel movements and this kind of things, and this was a terrible scene. Or people who wanted to say their prayers started to say it, and others said "You cannot do that in a place which is unclean. It's against the law. It's better if you don't say it." They were very, very tough moments. As a matter of face, we didn't want to res-re-resignate to despair, and whoever tried to look out when we went through

stations, through that little bit of opening, couldn't even decipher where we are, and what's going on, and uh, those were, which we called them all, the watch out, but we still cared or ventured to get up because you had to stand on shoulders of others. Said, you know, "We see a lot of people, and they know that we are going by here. They will notify the authorities." Was just a dream. While others said, "They are just laughing." And there was no water. Even if we stop somewhere. Nobody could move on because of the, the cars were pretty, were locked, there was no chance whatsoever. Then we arrived to Birkenau, and that in itself is a story that I hope people know by now. They opened up the, we arrived, what we really realized at that point, when we arrived in Birkenau which was very early in the morning, and we were standing there much longer than we were standing at other stations, and we smelled the stench of the of burning flesh and bones. The amazing thing is that we were not allowed to have radios. Jews were not allowed to have radios. In those days, a radio was not something that you go into the store and buy it. You had to buy from a licensed location, register it, because you had to pay a yearly fee to the government, so everybody had a radio, just like having a car, was registered, and then you were to come for it. Well, we had to give the radios back (clears throat). No Jew was allowed to keep a radio, but we had one hidden in the basement. I didn't even know about it, I was too young to -----to that. We were always afraid if something, somebody discovered the older people, the older members of the family can withstand the torture of, of the authorities, but the others were not trusted with that, but when we come there, my, T---, my older brother says, "This must be Auschwitz or Birkenau, what we heard on radio." They would go down to the basement, cover themselves up with blankets, and listen to the foreign news. Nobody was allowed to listen, not even the Gentiles, and I guess it was so gruesome to want to believe that it is possible, they're having crematoriums and burning people and that my brothers, one of them says to the other, "This is probably what we heard on the radio, and this was really the first time that we?? came face to face with reality.

So tell me what happened when you came out of the cars.

(Clears throat) The doors were suddenly opened. These were fairly wide doors, and the people literally fell out on both sides. And the Germans came with their dogs (barking in the background), "Raus, raus!" means out, out, out! So whoever could get out got out immediately, and there were some who were dead or couldn't move, so we had to take them out, and we were told the bundles to be put, and line up on the other side. So everybody had to give up whatever little belonging he had, which was really very meager, but it meant survival, and we would have uh what was a specialty in those days, re-dried bread, that was bread that it was dried 2 or 3 times so that it had long shelf life, and uh, some people had their prayer books, was, was one of the most important treasures of the --- ----- . And we had to go through and prove that everybody give everything up, we went

another line. We were standing in line, and we saw the chimneys, they were burning flames, going out, and that very thick smoke, dust, landing on us and on the, on the guards, and uh, we were then lined up, and had to go through a gate, and that gate there was a few very high ranking officers, we assumed that they're high ranking because they were differently dressed than other soldiers, which we saw some had the SS mark. That figure was already known to us because by the occupation of the Germans, and others had the uh totemkopf, which mean uh, the death hat, death hat, (clears throat) -----, and they ordered us to go to the gate, to the gate there standing up, these high-ranking officers with white gloves, shiny boots and with a baton, right and left. So, the one on the left, I think that the left meant that they went to death, and the right went to work. When we

We've just run out.

I want you to continue and talk about the registration, but also, although you and your brothers might have known where you were what did people, did people know where they were, did they know what was happening?

No they had no idea, I don't think so that they knew. Maybe some others knew also a little bit, but overall, I don't think so that anybody knew what was going on. There was some talk that this resettlement for work, which was taken out -----into other areas to do...hard labor, but nobody really knew up to that point that there was going to be killing people. No one had any idea of that. Matter of fact, when somebody said that in line, while waiting to be sorted out, "Don't talk ridiculous things. Look this nice shower." There was one building which had indicated that's a shower room. So on. But, almost immediately we realized that situation is different, because while we were standing in line, we already saw -----the previous arrival. Those who were assigned to work, naked women, standing in line, and another group on the other side, naked man, it was at that point, extremely demoralizing, and we knew that this is not something which is normal, and they were not, most who were, we saw naked, were not older people, but they were all the ones who were going to go to work, if not to gas, to be gassed. It was very, every second was a different thought. Everybody thought it is something else, and uh, everybody wanted to believe it is something different, so that uh, we really did not know. We had no idea they did this. Really possible. It's a difficult task, I mean, bitter pill to swallow to think that if certain theory is correct, then those who went on the other side, your parents and younger brothers and sisters were going to be killed, so we really didn't want to realize even if it was a fact that we knew that there's nothing to do, we are surrounded here by Gestapo and SS. This is going to happen. So we, we had no idea. Even that what my brothers knew or somebody else who knew, that didn't mean, didn't seem to be real, that it will happen., so I really don't think so that we knew anything.

Could you tell me what happened then about registration.

Yeah, at that time was no registration, you had but----- the smaller part--part of the people who were taken to labor, were taken into processing, processing meant you had to un--give up all our clothes (clears throat), and the Calader?? Commando, which was handling uh all the processing or receiving of those to go to work had to take apart the clothes to see that there's no valuables in it, and uh, some people were even kept for it, they are told that they should have their bowel movements because they, they must have found before and the people have swallowed some valuables, some rings or they told a story that there came one group, I think they were Dutch people, and they had gold, very thin dollars because dollars was almighty, but and uh they swallowed it. They put into to a caldon???, they swallowed it, they have done that as well. And the shower rooms what we had experienced, which we thought ----- actually, to be, either to be scalded with hot water, to be burned, damaged the skin, those were really showers, went to disinfecting station, then we came out of the other side. We were given the camp uniform, was kind of a pa-pajamas really, blue and white stripes, or grey stripes and blue stripes, and from there we were, everything was in driving, shnell, shnell, shnell, there were, this was a demoralizing process, and I think that we were demoralized by the second, I mean you moved with it, it was as though we were driven in into barracks. We came into barracks, we couldn't believe it, which had 3 shelves for sleeping, -----, and it took, I think we arrived early in the morning until late, late afternoon, they gave us a semblance of what was called a soup, and people refused, first of all it was, tasted terrible, pots and pans and what they used to serve it in, the cups which were, cups which taken from people who arrived. This was our cup which we had to hold on to to get our food in the future. Smelled very bad, and many people didn't want to eat because it was not kosher. They refused to eat, so till after a day or two, there were some learned rabbis and they probably said "Listen, not let's do the job, help the job of the of the murderers. We must eat, and it's a, actually it's a commandment to survive, and we're going to do everything possible to survive. We will outlive them." And this is how was hope was built in us, and these people have given us tremendous hope, because I, I was a kid, and there were many others who were younger than me, and uh (cough) so we defied them, or we were given beatings, instead of caving in, we showed that we do not cave in, we are not that easy prey. And uh, we were in those barracks for a few days, and then we got taken to Auschwitz, I don't know how many miles it was a walk, but I do remember the day we were taken out of -----, walked to Auschwitz, it was a, the strongest pour I've ever experienced. Not even in India during monsoon was such a pour. We were drenched in water, and waiting. We did not know what's going to happen. Then we were taken or driven to Auschwitz with hound dogs and it was a sport to get us every so often to run almost to the

point of exhaustion. We finally arrived in Auschwitz, and there was registration. This was the first time they registered, and we were tattooed, like I have my tattoo on my left arm, and there was a, registration consisted of another small card of 3 by 5 or maybe 4 by 6, they -----out and you had to give your, your family name, your uh surname, father's name, mother's name, where you come from, what are your professions, what can you do, what are you capable of doing? This was for the purpose so that they can glean people for the various jobs. And uh we were there for couple or 3 days, and then we were indoctrinated every minute, if only one of us will dare to do this or dare to do that, we will be put to death, and not only the person who is going to be found to be guilty but the whole crowd, the whole barrack the whole group. And then, and then we were warned constantly to know that nothing will be tolerated here, that with one machine gun they can wipe out all of us, or we can be always taken back to Birkenau where they're going to burn us, by that time there was no secret anymore. The, the, the those who were taken on the other side were to be gassed, and uh, so this was actually kind of an indoctrination to submission, and uh we have all encouraged each other not to give up. We were taken to work, and we were always plotting how we're going to, can we sabotage them? What can we do?

Let's just wait a few minutes for this noise-----

(Stern talks about noises).

Okay you were talking about sabotaging, plotting.

And uh, this was our preoccupation at that point, how we're going to do that, what can we do? They told all the Germans what escape, no chance, we were in hostile territory, they were Pollock's and they hate the Jews. We had no chance for to ever to survive, even if we should be able, if you have a dream to get out, the Poles are so, they're bloodthirsty for Jewish, for Jewish blood, and the Poles are not going to let us ever survive, so this was clear to us, and then we got confronted this Breshinka, Birkenau was not, Breshinka, in Auschwitz in German was Auschwitz, but in Polish it was Auschwitz, and we realized that we were really entered in enemy territory, and therefore our chances to survive there would be none, so we figured, how else can we do that. Of course, we had dreams that Americans with ----- was going to bomb the railroad tracks, would bomb the crematoria, dreams we had, we had great dreams and great hopes, and we had, really in the camps, people who, they literally sacrificed their lives to send word of encouragement or to sneak in into other groups to tell us not to be despair. That we were singing songs of, of hope, and the kinds of songs we sang when we were taken to railroad cars.

We have to reload.

Okay why don't we pick up starting with singing songs of hope and then can you tell me how you and your brothers supported each other in the time you were together.

In Birkenau and Auschwitz, we brought 4 of us together, and in Auschwitz, we were divided. One of my brothers was taken to a different working commando. Also we made an effort to stick together but it was not possible, and another, another brother still remained in Auschwitz and I went with my other brother to Yavoshna, the coal mine, and the coal mine had also big -----of a uh power generating, station, supposedly the highest chimney in all of eastern Europe. And uh, they had various commandos, and the various coal mines, in the chimney building. A railroad in construction, and there was all the commandos who were still lodged in camp because the camp was a small camp to, to house about 5-600 forced laborers, which we were all forced laborers, and that point we were sabotaged 800. We were questioned most here everybody would decide some kind of underground duty within us to see whether it's possible to have a tunnel to go, and then others said, "Don't waste energy on that because we know that we will end up just in, in a Polish village, and the chance to survive is 0. And others thought, maybe we should do something that the coal mine caved in and therefore, they will realize it, they cannot continue because we have, they have a fresh group of people who will sabotage them. Others thought that we should do something with the chimney, that power generating plant. We had all great ideas. And on a smaller scale we did. It was some people really risked their lives to -----, I had one experience which actually gave me a chance to survive. I was working in a coal mine, I was kind of a gofer. How did it be that I become a gofer? The German civilian population who were working in the camps they were not really German from the mother land, but they were what is called false Germans, they were a second, third grade. Germans what lived in Poland for long time, they were the so-called engineers and uh foremen, and some of these guys could not read the paper, so he took a cutting the paper, and he let me interpret to him what it meant, because they were also terrorized, they could not talk to each other politically what's happening. And this same guy who I worked for, we would get every once another shirt. If the shirt was good, he would supposed to give half a loaf of bread, and give and an old shirt, and even the good shirt what we got tattered in, in a matter of days. So, I was kind of his, his gofer boy, he would send me for equipment this and that. These coal mines were exhausted mines, but with cheap labor and more effort going on they needed to exhaust, to explore every bit of coal they could. I don't know, I hear this that it goes by BTU heat unit so much, but the further the mining is, because it is wet somewhat, it has less BTU units, and uh whenever we would have to use, I don't, I don't know if people know what coal mines are, they are several hundred yards underground, and it is just dynamited out, a certain artery, and then it's built

out, put in railroad to get out the coal, and if you hit in a very bad artery, you have to go much deeper to get the dynamite into there to get more of the coal coming out. I don't really know the mechanics of it very well, but it meant if you had to dig, drill very deep to put in the dynamite as deep, the coal did not come out the same extent as a good coal, and then the li--we would have literally to crawl on our bellies, and drag out with our fingers and knees, and nail, and nails, the coal. And very often while pulling it out, it would cave in, and would bury 20, 30, 40 people. Just recently I read in the papers that it happened in Turkey, and I have a very good idea what it means. So, and I was sent to get the, the longest drill, which meant this is going to be one of the hardest job we will face, and uh the others did not even know, maybe one or two of the fellows knew that I sent back for the long drill. A coal mine is like a little city, has streets here and street there, and here they have a little storeroom for, for supplies, and here there is a repair shop for, for the -----
---. And when I went to get the drill, I realized that I'm going to endanger many people's lives because if we don't cave out too high, we have to do it on our bellies, and maybe could be decided at that point to break the drill. How do I break the drill and to, to, to save my life too. I, I was not really willing to die in the, unnecessarily if I don't have to. Figured, I have, the truth is that I tripped at the railroad, so I could, but there was always water, the water was not pumped out like in a normal coal mine. Every coal mine has water. And I broke the drill. Of course, this is considered sabotage even if it would have been an innocent matter. Everything that it was not pleasing was sabotage. Sabotage was the ultimate thing is to kill the person, but to my good fortune, the man who would have the sport to do the killing has left, he was a very high-ranking officer, he left, it was already 11 or 12, and he left I think at 9 o'clock. And we were working shifts from 2 in the afternoon till 2 in the morning, so my number was taken, and tomorrow will be my day of reckoning. Of course, I had advice from others how to go about it, what to do, and I was fortunate to get myself into the infirmary. Oh there was certain process how you get, got in and what kind of sickness you simulated, that it shouldn't be considered a sickness, that you kind of get cured within 2 days, and uh, actually I was taken out of that, the infirmary by Mengele, who came into the infirmary. Certain people he called by numbers, they were destined for, for death, and some of them he just said, "Whoever wants to go for recuperation..." Outside was a big covered truck with about 50, 60, 70 dead bodies, and about 20 very sick people, and a few saboteurs like myself, criminals. And I and we were -----to be cremated. To gas, they cremated in Birkenau. And, if there is hope and there is faith, what will ----- for us. There was one man, it was Saturday afternoon. Saturday afternoon in that -----in a certain symbolic meal. Before that symbolic meal, one has to wash hands. We told a prayer over bread. He said it's time to say the prayers, proceeding down to a certain meal, and he started singing and we were singing. With four or six Germans with in the Cabin front, with machine guns, thought the Jews are crazy. Here they're going to be burned in another hour, and here they're singing. We arrived at Birkenau,

and we were not processed like we knew it from before that you go to so-called shower which meant the gas chambers, and then the crematorium. But we were taken in in the same process like when we arrived to be processed for work. And uh, there, always the German doctor with white gloves and shiny boots, very proper uniform, alongside him was the Jewish camp doctor because if something had to be checked the German doctor would never touch a prisoner. The Jewish doctor would do that, and the Jewish doctor, this was the only time when the little card system, the little card system was transported, transferred from one camp to another. Germans order had to rule. Was not just without any -----, of course they did that so that they should not, they should be able to keep count on people so that nobody can escape. They were very much frightened that if somebody would escape. Well, I don't know, even if they would have escaped, they only one that ever escaped there were Poles, and um...

Wait, we have to reload.

Okay, why don't you proceed.

(Clears throat) And uh, the German doctor, excuse me, the Jewish doctor, he read the card twice because he could not question me whether I'm from there or there, he read only what he saw there because the German doctor was alongside him. He asked me again whether I come from that particular town, ----- "Ja ----," I said, it was just in code language, and we were to great surprise not taken to the gas chambers-----were not cremated, but put into another block if you, which we found out, this was the first Saturday afternoon and Sunday that the gas chambers were not functioning or the crematoria, and I have later visited with a gentleman who was a survivor--who was a liberator of, of Auschwitz. He was also visiting in the Pentagon in uh Moscow, and uh, they still couldn't give a very clear answer what has happened there. Matter of fact, when the gentleman was here to a Yamashoa, we went and they asked him, they says, "Tell, me, how come the, the Germans were in the last two weeks gone a few times and came back, why didn't we and we heard your cannons. Why didn't you come and liberated the camp sooner?" And he sudden lashed at me, he says, "You know, 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 -----," which I still to this very day don't believe, but uh, the crematoria did not function. So we were put in the holding barrack to be there till Monday when the crematoria will be functioning again. In middle, that night, it was Saturday when we came to January the 6th, exactly 3 weeks before being liberated at Au--at Birkenau. Came the Jewish doctor, and as you probably know, the curfew was 8 o clock, nobody could even was even allowed to open up the door of the barracks, not step out, or anybody allowed in the, the camp. The searchlights were going on all the time. Here comes the German doctor, the Jewish doctor, and which we found, later

I learned that his name was Professor Epstein from Prague, and he calls my name at the door, and I say, "Yes?" He says, "Stern?" At roll at 6 o'clock there was roll call. You sneak into working commando, don't come back to the barrack. You know, everything had to go with seconds there, there was no time for dilly-dallying around. And I ask, "Can I -----others, if they're capable to walk, to go to work?" This is what I did. And I ended up in a working commando. Consequently I was liberated in Auschwitz. Uh, 3 weeks later and...yeah, I was telling, we arrived so hope, and when we arrived in, in, in, in, in, in, in, in, in Auschwitz, and went to the working commando, we already knew that things are very shaky here, that something is going to happen, how can we have half a chance to survive, and not being killed by them. So there were some thought that we should uh blow up some -----, blow up his -----, and we should do this and that, but when the Germans moved the first time, we found that they are not in the center, they have disappeared. They have burned down everything possible, so 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, but 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 uh, they came, when they came back, they always moved, uh transported large groups until 4 days before uh liberation or 5 days before the liberation, they came back and they said, "Every Jew without any exception get ready for death march." Actually this way, the word death march came from. And uh, I don't know how and what, where I got the strength, but I succeeded to remain in the camps. I mean, that simply was not, when they came back the last, because we were on the shelves sleeping in the barracks. There was either the sawdust, we slept on the straw. They did not ask one of the inmates to move up to shake up the straw or the sawdust, but German themselves did it, the Gestapo, the SS, and here the high ranking officers with strong flashlights, one had 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 blockelder, blockelder meant he was the, the chief of the of the of the barrack. And at that every ----- cabin had all the bread boxes, where the bread was supplied, brought in, or the 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 come in to search, he even kicks it, but luckily it gave, I was so skinny that it gave. I could see the, and I was sure that this is, it, this how I remained alive. But, when they already left the Germans, about an hour they, they left, there was no sign of Germans, I wanted to go back to the barracks, but the Poles, the U, the Ukraines, who were not taken on the death march, they wouldn't let me in. So I was hiding out in the heap of dead bodies, because in the last week when they have ----- ----at all, the bodies are 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 night time, in the daytime I was running around in the camp. And this is where I actually survived. January 27, I was one of the very first uh-----, that was one of the very first camps being liberated. This was my, my survival chance.

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

Uh, I can give you one particular incident that I have repeated many times. We were working in the commando, and three of us stuck together closer, and there was also an elder person who always said, "That's it," which meant that he was going to do something to commit suicide, or getting onto something to get killed. We would always encourage him, of course, you know, I was 17, and somebody who was 30 was already an old man. He was, he was very old, and we always used to tell him, "Don't, things are better, we heard the planes, we heard this," and we always nurtured ourselves on some of these hopes as well. And of course, you know, the people there are more religious background, so we had hope God will help. You didn't give up so fast, and we said, "Listen God will help. -----." This man just couldn't take it. Nobody could take it, but some had more strength than others. One day, after an exhausted day, a special holiday I think it was, we come back and his ration of bread was stolen, 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? Of a piece of like bread like a brick, which was, as we know now, was sawdust in it and, and, and, and everything, and we gave a third of that, a third of our life, for to this man so he should not give up. Matter of fact to the best of my knowledge, he survived. I mean, so there was tremendous things, tremendous things. Like my own brother, I had very bad uh, uh kidneys, and I was urinating almost anytime. It was so because my kidneys were cold. I don't know how he managed that to cut it out of his little meager ----- from, and, and I had a kind of a blanket to, to warm my kidneys.

Okay, we have to reload.

(Room tone with airplane.)

Um, I think you did tell me about religious resistance. You were forbidden to celebrate any holidays, and yet, how people managed to try to celebrate holidays in the camps.

There was in our camp a Paratafilin??? A -----which a man who at age of 13 puts on ----

-----on his head. I don't know how he ended up in the camp. I cannot imagine that how it was possible to be smuggled in unless it was dropped by helicopter. Uh, defies my imagination even at this point. And the people, a man supposed to do that every day of the week except for Saturdays or on Jewish holidays, and there were a few who were privy to the fact that there is Paratfilin in that camp. People literally risked their lives to maneuver to get to that ----- because before roll call, which was 6 in the morning, nobody was 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 a really a tre-tremendous task. This one of the part of the of the mysteries, still is a mystery of how they got it from there, and how people can, got there. In about 11 months, I succeeded to do it at once with about 50 or 20 attempts other times, but when signals were coming, oh, stop if you can, because they were suspicion that something might see the ----- . And if they would have found out it would have been killing hundreds of people. -----defiance. And it was done, it was done regular basis, but we decide, every day a few who could do that and, it was very tremendously risky to get to this part and to, to put out the -----, to say the prayers and, holidays, of course, I mean, they were the Hannukah holiday, which uh, which uh had treednous, has tremendous memories. One was, see if ev-ever anybody escaped the camp, was could had only be a Pole, or a Ukraine, and if he got out, he f, he ---

We better stop. We'll start with the holidays.

Only a Pole could or a Ukraine could escape because first of all they were our foremen, they were in good flesh, they didn't look like skeletons, and uh, a Pole would take him in. We had found out later after the war that the guy who escaped already had gotten enough information from Jewish inmates to know where his family might have hidden something, and so he was considered a millionaire, he knows where the treasures are hidden. And all the Polish population would help him, and he was employed with one of them. But in case like that, when a Pole would disappear, they would decimate, either the group of the barracks where they came from, and in in my own experience, once or twice, when those in front of me were taken or the ones alongside me, well I was really -----with death along with life as well. And it was just before Hanukah, 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 the Poles were worse than the Germans they were really, were the, were the Ukraines horrible, and uh, so the Germans made a Hanukkah celebration. On the poles of the barracks, on the outside poles, they hung up prisoners who were chosen to be one of the tenth of the tenth, on their feet, head down, we had to pour oil on them, and they have a bonfire, and we had to sing Christmas songs. We -----, we, they, they had to sing the songs while I brothers or fathers or our cousins were burning. That same night, which

we had prepared before, a little bit of oil was sneaked from here, as little of the -----, and of rags made out a cot, uh -----completely confused, uh, knots made out of it, and we were in small group with lookout posts, hundreds gathering to say their prayers of 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 uh, 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, and, and my cousin told us things what happened in his camp, which was unbelievable, was unbelievable. I mean uh, one incident, is going to go back to Birkenau. When 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, everyone was, was told we 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, and curiosity, -----, what's going on here? So I sneaked out of the barrack, and I go where I -----to where I heard the voices. There were trenches, long trenches, and I saw that nurses, nurses, you could only, whether they were German or, or even prisoners, had white uniforms, 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, they, they were tricked by the fire they saw in the trenches, and they came up to the end, though these nurses or whatever they were, just pushed them in and the kids were burning alive, those voices, came back to the barrack. Fortunately nobody saw me, and I told my brother, the first reaction was, of course, could, could be, there was my brother had 11 months old baby, so it could not have been there, but it could be anybody. But this was not even that what the concern. The concern was "Are you out of your mind?" If you would have been detected, we'd be killed. So what have you accomplished? Now you know, what would that have meant?" And, people, after that, I mean this was, ----- was heroic just to know what's going on. But other people did things, I mean, when I worked in a commando, the high chimney, the ceramics for this high chimney was very expensive, and uh, some to sabotage, broke, dropped pieces, they knew they were going to be killed, just to stop this progression. Ironical enough, we went back 3 and a half years ago to Poland, to Birkenau, and we went to the camp where I was in, the coal mine, the ----- . It took the Pollock's about 30 years to build the -----which we did not finish. And we did it, and we, we Jewish labor, slave labors did it in two years. If the, and of course, there are no pictures to be taken, we took 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 for the best workers, we did everything possible to sabotage. Everything possible, at the risk of our lives and we figured if I have done something to hold back their progress, I am killed, but will do it for others. This happened on a daily basis. Constantly. In many different areas. Many different areas. There were mechanics who were working on, on the German trucks, and uh succeeded

suffusion of oil or whatever it was, we heard the production blew up on, on the way somewhere, and I was too young to have had such mechanical knowledge. But there were constantly it was done things of defiance. But how much good it did, I don't know.

We've run out. Let's reload.

Why don't you tell it again.

There was very well-known, actually worldwide known, great rabbi of Cyano, great rabbinic descendent. He was working, we were working the same commando, and he just uttered to me, "Oh what it would be, what he would be willing to, to give, sacrifice, if he would not have to desecrate the Yom Kippur. This was a wishful thing, like we wished they would have a cup full of coffee with sugar, and things like, and they didn't get lost on me. So I came back to the camp, and I approached the camp doctor, Dr. Eric Keller was his name, also from Prague, and if you spoke the same language as the other person spoke then you were kind of buddies. So I said, "Dr. Eric, and everybody knew the old rabbi. He was not so very old, but to us, it was anybody over 30 was the 44th engine. So I said, "You know, Dr. Eric, 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 says to me????, "Old rabbi tell you that?" I didn't want to lie to him so I said, "No, but I tell you in that ----- that you, you will enable him not to have to work on Yom Kippur, you will come out alive." And in the camp there was no time or really there had to be everything done in seconds because you never knew when you're going to be interrupted. So he says "Okay." It was like my getting into the infirmary before sent to Birkenau, was you, you took uh there was exhausted oil which we brought back from the working commando. Officially we could bring it back to the barracks to pour it on the barracks, on the floor so that it doesn't dust or mud. And this oil, we took a few spoons of it, we got diarrhea and with diarrhea you could get into the infirmary. He says "Okay, well you have to go with him." And the procedure was already, we knew it. We got in it to the infirmary. We had, we were assigned one bed, the bed was not any wider than 24 inches, maybe 26 inches, was a very narrow bed. And it was so stuffed that we were assigned one bed for the two of us. Here, this rabbi tried to also to encourage the others and -----despair, had said Yom, Yom Kippur prayers which are very long, very long. He knew them from the very beginning to the very end by heart. So we were two ends of the blankets we put on our heads. The orthodox Jews supposed to cover his head, head when he say 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 "-----"

-----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 would 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, did, there were other things 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, of on the count of this man, and uh, it was unbelievable when the others asked me, in the camp, can you imagine, the struggling, they said, "How was the prayers? What did he say? How did he say it?" 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 or made the drop dead or we killed the Germans, he says "No, not kill. May they change their hearts." This is how he, he, he felt and he expressed himself. He didn't want, want anybody's unnecessary death.

We'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 -----up your spirits?

Oh, yes, there was a lot of it. Matter of fact there was always in a, in any group, with any commando, commando means a working group. We had some who were telling jokes so that we should feel better and um quoting of prophets. Matter of fact, there were some assimilated Jews who came from some parts of, of Europe, they did not even know that there were such great philosophical teaching existing in Jewish learning, and uh, we were joking about hunger. We were joking about hard work and uh, I, I remember we were working in 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, "Oh you don't want that. Then you will have to pay twice as much for your coal." And there, there were all kind of, of jokes played, but they were more of the serious nature of jokes, but I was amazed at how many quotes of the prophets were given, but one in particular, they say, said that quoted in the holy temple, the jackal comes in and the, the def-uh-def-uh, I mean defaming the, the holy temple, says, how I'm laughing because it says that after this happens, then the temple will be purified and then the whole people will be purified. It's things like that and it it was amazing, those who had knowledge had always something good to say. Uh, show you here an example. We had two Kapos, two German guys. These were the most notorious robbers in German history. They were such famous robbers that they have from what we understood, built a tunnel in the heart of Berlin to the central bank, and it was built officially, so that people thought it was the telephone companies wiring built. Well, these guys were apprehended, they ended up in jail, and I don't know how many years they got, but these guys, of course, as all other criminals were taken out of

jails and made kapos in the, 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 us, and they did it very -----
----- . The best shrink will not get things out of you as well as they did, and he caught on to that. So my brother prepared me how the answers should be because he said "If they will ask 20 times over again and again so we have to have a very clear cut story. Have to give this to them, and stick to that." Their plans were that if the -----, if the war wins, they knew that they were going to survive because they were infallible. They are going to survive, and our chances to survive is was zero, in their eyes. And they're going to go back hometown and they will dig out whatever. The gigantic treasures of the Jews were now German to be multimillionaires. Every Jew must have had two big boxes of, of gold and diamonds. So with this worked, and these guys became good friends, they actually made quite a bit of effort to, to be lenient towards other, I mean, they hit everybody for -----, but they hit, did not hit us. Well, we had maybe easier little jobs. So we have spread this out to others, say, "Listen, if you have intelligent Kapos, let them know that that they have a chance to survive, and that you will leave them to it." Like when my brother said, "Listen, and if should you not, should German 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.

Can we 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 up on it, and uh, we had given instead of one location, we gave two other locations, and uh, because we were hoping that we will survive, and we didn't want them to be able to get there first, so we have to confuse them a little bit, in case if they would have been able to come. But I, well, not only that we benefit by this approach, but we have saw that that others also get on to that point that there are, that Kapos can be bright 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 us, how to benefit the--- to others too. And uh we became, matter of fact, when there was a group transport to another camp, and, and my brother run immediately to that group and said, "Listen, make hay out of this here. This is something which can work." And it became, uh we have used every little bit of bait on every opportunity there was to, to make it a survival possibility, not only for ourselves. The main thing is that we were really like blind horses, pulled right, right, left, left. But, within our subconscious minds we had also a very conscious mind, and we have put it to as good use as we possibly could.

I mean, just to think that that the will of survival itself was a tremendous, tremendous effort. You know, like there were suicides in the camps, but there was never a religious Jews committed suicide. Even the most primitive Polish people. I mean, if you read some of Book of -----, Poland was such a poverty, that Holland was a paradise. And who never went to school, just to Hebrew school, but they had to 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 then never to give up. Well, to give up was the easiest thing, I mean if, if you just sat down like the man with the story with who lost his bread, he did not. We were going on with the great belief that we will survive, and there is a morning prayer, that we say that I will, I believe in the coming of the messiah, and people have said that I am believe that in God's help, I will be survive in the camp, and I will take revenge on them. This was strong driving force even if it, it didn't come from everybody him-himself, it was fed to him by others, always was encouragement given. Everybody found himself with encouragement, of course. I can't imagine, I don't remember whether I did, I said, "Okay, stop it, I already heard it, I mean..." There, there, there were labor was very hard. The conditions were inhuman. If I would be able to, 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, the complete happening over five minute there, was going berserk myself. And it was beyond the comprehension of anybody. Beyond comprehension of anybody. It was so out of the, the ex-the extraordinary. The, the that uh, one cannot comprehend it. But there, whatever he have had it was nurtured by our belief and by encouragement of others. I mean, like the rabbi survived in having Yom Kippur that he was considered that he was our uh our messenger to the almighty. And the, these sort of things which gave us hope, gave us strength to survive.

Was survival an achievement?

That's a rhet-rhetorical question really. Yes, survival was achievement, yes. We wanted to achieve survival.

How does your whole experience make you feel about humanity?

Humanity is very frail. Very materialistic. I, I es--we see that then and today. We need territories, we need war, guns. Presidents need more votes. Politicians need more votes. And uh, uh this 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 travelled many other countries, and as I was a student, I had an opportunity to go for a study tour, 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 really not qualified to give a, a good answer.

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

Yes, I took revenge. Uh, let me see happened. When we were liberated by the Russians, few days, and I was fortunate to be accepted by the Russians when I only weighed 84 pounds, was a walking skeleton, but they did not accept as a as survivors because the Germans have even put up the skeletons, that saboteurs, -----the Russians, so they don't know what experience they have, but was very strongly interrogated, but to my good fortune, there was a Russian, a Jewish Russian general, and I give 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 take off and given me, a part of it. Uh, three days or so, having, and I was kind of a, of a expensive property for them because I could read maps, I could interpret maps, and I was not a, a great strategist, but I knew where is No-North, South, East, West, and Northwest, Northeast. So I was with a going on with a Russian, they needed me like a hole in the head, they didn't have themselves anything. And I couldn't walk, I had to be on a horse-drawn wagon, seated with others. And we came into a small community, not far from Auschwitz, and uh, noontime was the rest, and there were small narrow streets, and we leaned on to the walls of the houses outside to take a rest, and have uh something to eat. There was a sunshine. Matter of fact, I remember I had to sit on something, because the snow was melting and we after about 5, 10 minutes we were all sitting on our, on the 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, and there were the submachine guns, and few people were killed. So, I was with another survivor with me, a Polish fellow. He probably was 10-15 years older than me. A seasoned man, he was in the camp since 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, and we see there was, just -----middle of lunch. -----, and uh we didn't find them, goes down to the basement. See the basement is short and he sends out somebody else to measure out the length of the house, and we saw that the basement was cut about half, and there was straw on the end of a, pulled out the straw there, he found a family. Of course, we had to shoot them because they had, all had ammunication, and this has been a very bad scene, I am, the ----was terrible. So from then on, every uniform, Pole or German became a problem--most of the Germans, this was Monday, we shot on to as much as we could.

We have to reload.

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

I get out the question whether I have any hatred towards 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 enjoy the, the, the spoil of Jewish properties. And 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 what I will as far as my not compensating the Germans or, 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--I mean even now I, I tell people "Aren't you ashamed, your father was killed in Auschwitz and you, whoever it is, and you buy Mercedes? Why don't you buy an American car?" I to that extent yes, people say they go vacation Germany, I said, "Have you vacationed in America? Do you know how many nice things 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 in the institution that I'm enti-entitled to. I'm 65% invalid. But, then finally I did because I figured, who, 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 \$300.00 a month. For the Nazis, as you know, they got considerably bigger pensions. But hatred, I do not, I do not hate. No. And uh, I'm I, they cannot count on me as 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 a memorial prayer for them. Just like they would be my father or brother or sister or mother. This what I say for them. And another what I do say, that we don't have to cave in for anything. We have to be alert. We have to watch out. If it's a a metzger or a cannon, we don't si-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 , 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's bound to happen again.

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

That is absolutely ridiculous to say that. You know when, first of all, nobody ever believed this to be possible. Like American people even today. I'm not talking a -----, who say that..., but the

good-thinking American people, it couldn't be possible, just the fact to accept it is a big order, to live with that. They did not go by the...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. Always hindsight. But we didn't go as, you have no idea what, what resistance there was even in the ghettos. You, I mean, I remember it, in, in, in our own town, some of the gendarmerie there attacked for, for to what good was it? They outnumbered us by by the thousands. It was not only the uniforms. Unfortunately the population as well. The people who lived door, 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 them being deported. So we were outnumbered one to, to a thousand. There was really very little we could do, and , even so, some of the ghettos when they came to railroad stations, they threw Molotov cocktails. It was sure death. I mean, the sheep, I mean, I 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, but he tells me, asks me, he says, "How come that you were herded as sheep, let yourself be herded as sheep in the cattle cars to being flushed out?" And I asked him, I said, "How come, America with all its mighty power, American soldiers are killed every day, what are you doing?" " I never thought about it that way." I think we were much more courageous with no means, than, than, than any other people would be. We were not, but the fact is that we really did not have any ammunition, nobody behind us, even when you know about cases of partisans. The partisans themselves, the Jewish partisans they destroyed, they wanted to take the credit for it, and so therefore, this what we did not have, we did more than with, than, 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 is, it's really to defame, the atroci-atrocities what took place. I don't think so, we did, we were, we can be even use that word. I know, it has its use. If I find people, and we went back to our hometown 3-1/2 years ago. The people said, "Why didn't you burn down the city. Who would have known? I told him, I said, "What would you have done? These were boys my age, non-Jewish boys who from my hometown. Said, "What would you have done, that you came back from the churches, Sunday always with great hatred, and, and the best thing you could do even the good days was break the Jewish home windows. You know, it's nice to, to say that, but I ask him, "What would you have done if it would be the opposite way?" You know what his answer was? "I have a pen knife in my pocket. You see this? It is 50 years old." "What would you have done with it?" I don't think so that any of the writers, anybody who said that is even aware of it what he says.

Thank you very much.

You know what I would appreciate, before you cut the film--

The following will be about 40 seconds or so of room tone with interview with Bart Stern.

End of room tone, end of sound roll. Short roll.