

This is an interview being done with Mr. Steven Berger, a Holocaust survivor, on April 22, 1985, at the Holocaust Resource Center at Queensborough Community College.

Mr. Berger, when and where were you born?

I was born in Hungary, in the town of Debrecen.

What year?

In 1930.

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, what your family's background, what the town was like?

Debrecen was a rural town in Eastern Hungary-- an agricultural town, about 100,000 population, of which, about 10,000 were Jewish citizens of Hungary. Most of the Jews were born there, way back for generation and generation. And they were the first one, when the town was established, 100 years before that-- the first settlers in the town. And they lived in that town since up to the time of deportation of 1944.

What did your father do for a living?

My father was a businessman first. Then, through antisemitic laws, he lost his position. And then, he was operating a gasoline station.

What year was this?

That was in the late 1930s. And then, when further antisemitic laws were passed in Hungary, he lost that position, also. And then, he got a position with the Jewish community house-- it's like having a Jewish center here in the United States.

Tell us about your schooling.

I went to elementary school, a Jewish elementary school, and the Jewish gymnasium of Debrecen. This is also-- Hungary was the first country, after World War I, who passed antisemitic laws. Number one, the numerus clausus, which limited Jewish students in Hungarian schools.

And therefore, not only students, but Jewish teachers and professors, lost their position in those schools. So the Jewish community was forced to establish their own school. And that was elementary school and gymnasium, which I think American standard equals two years of college, when somebody finished gymnasium there.

And I am a product of this Jewish school.

Did you experience any acts of antisemitism while you were growing up?

Oh, yes. It was really an adventure to go to school every day, because we had to pass a Catholic school. And we were daily ambushed by the students there.

What did they do to you?

Well, usually ensue the fight-- either we run or we fought. It all depended of the equal number of students being there.

Were your grandparents alive in the '30s?

Yes, yes-- my grandparents lived in a small village about 35 miles from Debrecen called Berettyoujfalu. Berettyo was the name of a river, and Ujfalu meant new village. So it meant a new village by the Berettyo River.

They lived there for all their lives, and my grandparents were 85 and 86, respectively, in 1944 when they were carried into Auschwitz.

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

I have only one younger sister.

Could you describe what life was like growing up in the '40s, now, after the war began?

Yes, after 1939, after the Austrian Anschluss, and successively Hitler occupation of the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia, and later Poland, Hungary was part of the Axis powers. And they were providing Hungarian divisions when Hitler invaded Russia.

So Hungarian divisions were fighting along the German army in Russia, particularly in the Ukraine. And since Jews were not accepted, already at that time in the Hungarian army-- before, they were-- but after 1940, they were not accepted as soldiers.

However, they were called into labor battalions, in civilian clothes, with yellow armband. And they were providing the necessary labor for these armies out in the Russian front, like loading and unloading ammunition, digging trenches, anti-tank ditches, and so forth.

Did you have any friends or relatives who were involved with that?

Well, I had a friend whose father was called in, and I remember, in 1942, they were notified that their father died in the Ukrainian front. And I remember going every morning to his house saying Kaddish when he was in mourning.

Take us to 1944, before the Nazis took you, what was life like? Was your father able to make a living? How did you eat?

Well, not really. At that time, already, most Jews either lost their jobs, or they were scraping out a very meager living. Times were very tough, especially for the Jews. Travel wasn't free anymore-- it was restricted.

The police and the military were asking for identifications at all times, in railroad stations, and roadblocks-- at roadblocks. And wasn't very healthy for a Jew being caught in any of these identification checks.

How did your father earn a living? What did he do?

Well, as I said, he was working for the Jewish center. Pay was very little. We were poor. And most of us in that town were not wealthy.

But he was also called into these labor battalions. And periods of time, sometimes for six months, sometimes for three months. And finally, in early 1944, he was called in, indefinitely. So he wasn't home.

When he went away with these later battalions, did you hear from him at all?

Well, he was very fortunate, because of his age. He was close to 50 at the time. And they kept him on Hungary proper. The younger ones, from 18 to 40, mostly they were sent out of the country, to the Ukrainian front.

Describe what happened when the Germans finally took the town.

Well, the Germans marched into Hungary in March 1944. But since you asked me about these labor battalions, I like to expand more on it because these young men were decimated, practically, on the Ukrainian front. Not only by sickness, and disease of starvation, but the cruelty of the soldiers guarding them.

And these were Hungarians-- Hungarian soldiers. Matter of fact, they had better treatment by the German soldiers than by the Hungarians. They were very brutal.

And they were used like human mine detectors. They were driven into minefields to detonate mines on the oncoming German tanks, to save them. And they were cruel and torturous with them. Shooting was an everyday occurrence, without any question.

And in one instance-- and I know that from firsthand, because one of my cousins, his name was William [? Kurtz, ?] and he was about 22 years old, and he lived in that little village I mentioned before, Berettyoujfalú. He was the son of my mother's sister.

And he was called in and went to the Ukrainian front. And later on, after the war, speaking to a friend of his who came back, told us that he was sick and tired. And one of these marches, when they were falling back, he sat down on the roadside. He said, I can't walk any longer. And he was just shot-- shot in the head and left there.

And that's how he died, that young cousin of mine there.

Now, getting back to the German occupation of Hungary-- when they came into Hungary, Eichmann, with his troop, came in first. I mean, after the German army came in, the following day, then he came, and he begun his activities in Budapest. And one of his adjutant came to Debrecen to organize the Debrecen ghetto.

How many men did he have? Do you know?

He had about 35 men in his entourage. He stayed in Budapest, because that was the most of the concentration of the Jews-- about 250,000 at that time.

Do you remember the name of Eichmann's adjutant?

Wisliceny -- his name was Wisliceny. So when they came to Debrecen, just like in Budapest, they set up the Judenrat-- the Jewish leaders who got orders directly from him. And these leaders passed the orders down to the Jewish population.

Who was the head of the Judenrat in Debrecen?

I think his name was Mr. [? Changeri. ?] But there were others, also. It's like-- was not one had really, but a combination of several people. And one was doing the finances, the other was doing the requisitioning of apartments, if they want. So they had different functions.

How did they choose these people?

Usually, they chose them who were already leaders of the Jewish community.

So when they came into Debrecen, they immediately begin to issue orders and demands. They demanded apartments for the German officers, and that included furniture and blankets, and all necessary things to live in that apartment, money. And these orders were issued with the threat of death if not met immediately.

So really, the Jewish population was in an uproar and in terror and so to speak terrorized daily with these demands. Valuables, businesses were confiscated, radios were confiscated, bicycles, motor vehicles. And so the Jews were left, so to speak, with nothing.

And then, after stripping all possessions, everybody had to wear a yellow star for identification. But that wasn't too long, because in a matter of few days, they issued orders for everybody to move into a ghetto, which they designated in one part of the city. And they physically erected a 9-foot high fence. And at certain date, all Jewish citizens had to move into that ghetto.

And naturally, you just took whatever you were able to carry in a backpack with you. All the other possessions stayed in the apartment, or the house you lived in.

And as soon as we left, the apartment was looted by our former neighbors.

Do you remember the address of your apartment, where you lived?

Yes, it was the [NON-ENGLISH] Street in Debrecen. It was right next to the largest synagogue of Debrecen, which was an architectural beauty, really. It was burnt after the war. And it's not there anymore.

So when we were ready to go into the ghetto, they also brought to the ghetto all the Jews living outside the city-- in small hamlets and villages close by. Also, all the Jewish sick from the hospital were brought into the ghetto, and from the mental institutions, and from the old age homes.

But the ghetto had no facility for these sick people. There was no hospital or medication. So you can imagine the conditions were in the ghetto. Beside, each apartment of the ghetto had to hold two or three families, because space was very limited.

Food was absolutely nonexistent. Whatever we carried in with us, that's what we were eating. The first few days, we were allowed to go in each morning for one hour to get food, to buy food. But that was stopped after a few days, and we were left without any provisions.

How many families were in the apartment in which you were?

About three. And it was very crowded. But one learns to live with the situation and makes the best of it.

To provide us with food, we-- once the ghetto was closed, and nobody was allowed to go out-- we, mostly the young people like me, I was 15, 16 years old at the time, we went out from the ghetto illegally to try to buy food. And my-- personally, I went out twice, but we were caught both times by the police. Beaten and brought back to the ghetto.

So happens that, in the store we went into, a former neighbor of mine recognized us, a woman. And she promptly called the police.

We were in the ghetto for about a week or two. And one morning, the police came in and woke everybody up. It was early in the morning, I remember, around 6:00. We had to get all our possessions and line up on the street outside.

They got a horse and buggy and wagons for the sick, and those who were unable to move, they put those on those wagons. And we were marched out to the outside of the town.

Do you remember the date?

It was June, I believe, I don't know exactly the date, but it was early June. They took us out in an old brickyard, where a railroad track came in. Now there, we were living for three or four days, out in the open. And there was absolutely no provisions provided for us at all. Those who had food ate, those who did not, didn't eat.

Meantime, we were constantly harassed by the police for valuables. Even wedding rings were taken away. And those whom they thought were wealthy were taken back to town and tortured-- mostly women, because the men folks were not there anymore-- to give up valuables. And I remember these women, when they were brought back, they were horribly beaten and tortured with all kinds of instruments.

And after a few days, these cattle cars were pulled in. And they loaded us on these cattle cars, for about 85, 90 to a car. These covered cattle cars, with two little windows on each end. And then, after we were loaded on, the doors were sealed with old fashioned wax seal, so nobody could tamper with it during the way.

And the trains begun to roll. And I remember, we tried to look out on these small little windows to recognize the stations we were passing through, to orient ourselves, because we didn't have any idea where we were going.

Was your mother and sister with you on that train?

Yes, they were.

How old is your sister at this point?

14. 14 years old.

Now, in these cattle cars, we could only stand up, shoulder to shoulder. You couldn't even bend down, it was so crowded. With no water, or food, or sanitary facilities provided for us. And you can imagine, if one can imagine for four days, because those trains were rolling for four days-- no food, no water, and no facilities to go to the bathroom. And you can imagine what was inside in that cattle car.

Finally, when we arrived to Austria, a concentration camp called Strasshof-- which was a concentration camp like any other concentration camp. And they were selections there, too, because the old and the invalid were taken away and shipped to Auschwitz the same day. And naturally, they were gassed there.

When those doors were opened, when we arrived, we had about four dead in that car. Several people went insane.

And I remember, myself, who was young and healthy, I remember very distinctly losing touch of reality. I was disoriented. Even if a short period of time, but I remember, I was disoriented. And sometimes, I just didn't know where I was. So you can imagine the older people who were not young and healthy.

So when we arrived to this concentration camp, and after the selection, we were allowed to take a shower. But fortunately, no gas, but the water came-- not like in Auschwitz. Because they had designs for us. We were the property of the SS.

And since labor was short at that time already in Germany, since all the menfolks were in the army, they needed labor. So fortunately for us, the four trains or five trains which went out from the town of Debrecen, two went to Austria, but the rest went to Auschwitz. And they were gassed on the same day after Dr. Mengele's selection.

But as I said, we were fortunate. We went to this concentration camp of Strasshof.

Where was that near that was?

That was near Vienna, outside of Vienna. And the next morning, people came in from all over Austria and Germany, Austria was Germany since the Anschluss. And they were requisitioning labor from the SS.

And that morning, a truck pulled in with two civilians in it. One was an engineer, I found out later, from a factory. And he came before our group, with the SS officer, and the SS officer said, is anybody a mechanic here? So I put my hands up, since I was a pre-engineering student, and I knew something about mechanics.

And I said, I'm a mechanic. So this civilian, who turned out to be the chief engineer of that factory, the name of the factory was [? Urani ?] & [? Wolfram. ?] In peacetime, they manufactured milk cans. And it was-- in German, they called it [GERMAN] in Vienna. It was a section of Vienna. And the name of the street was Pasettistrasse, I remember very distinctly.

So he interviewed me, and evidently, he liked what he heard, because he told me to go on the truck. And I refused to go without my mother and my sister. Which the SS officer did not take kindly. And he threatened me with his gun.

But the engineer calmed him down, he spoke to him. And then, he allowed me to take my mother and sister with me. They chose another 20 to 30 people from the same group, and we all went on that truck, and they took us to this factory.

Next to this factory was a miniature concentration camp with barracks and barbed wire. Already had prisoner of war there from France and Russia. But we, Jews, were separated from those barracks with another barbed wire.

And we worked in that factory for the duration of the war.

What did you do?

Well, we worked on machines, production machinery. I worked on a lathe and milling machines. I worked with a foreman-- an old Austrian foreman. He liked me. And time to time, he gave me some sandwiches during the day when nobody saw, because each of these factories had a Nazi party member who oversees the happenings. So it wasn't healthy for him to help a Jew, a slave laborer.

The food was very little. The labor was hard.

Can you describe the food?

The food, we got a small piece of bread, the size of a roll, for one day ration. It was very black, and hardly tasted like bread. I really don't know what was in it.

We got some potato, which we made soup out of it. We got a small ration of margarine. And that was about it.

What did your mother and sister do?

They worked in the factory. And there was a time when my mother was allowed to cook for this group of Jews there. So she worked in the kitchen

Did you ever get out during that period of time?

Yes, there was a time when-- by the way, during the train ride, which I described before, somehow my eyeglasses fell off. And naturally, I could not retrieve it because I couldn't bend down to pick it up.

And in that horror of four days of train ride, somebody stepped on it and broke. During this work in the factory, I approached my foreman to see if I could replace those eyeglasses. So, this Austrian foreman approached the camp commander that, since I'm doing essential work, would be beneficial for the war effort to have eyeglass for me.

So the camp commander did not make any promises, but he said, he's going to come back with an answer in a few days. Which he did. And he said, he can send me to an address out in the town of Vienna, where I maybe can get some help with my eyeglasses. But he says, I have to remove my yellow star, because we were wearing the yellow star.

And if I get caught outside the camp, he doesn't know anything about it.

Do you remember his name?

No, I don't recall his name. He was a Slovakian, a Czechoslovakian, fairly decent fellow. But I guess he had his limitations, also.

So I took the chance and I went out. And I found this address, which was the old Jewish center of Vienna. I went in, and I asked for the person who was in charge of that center. And he directed to me to a room where I found a short, stocky little man, who introduced himself to me as an Austrian Jewish eye doctor.

And I guess he was a sort of prisoner in that center because he didn't know what was going on outside. He asked me all

sorts of questions. Where I come from, what's the situation out. And I told him what I could.

Remember his name?

No, I don't know. He never told me his name. No.

Then he said, do you want eyeglasses? I say, yes. So he led me into a room. And at tables in that room, and on the tables, in neat rows, had thousands of thousands of eyeglasses lined up in boxes, as far as I could see down the row. And I says to him, my God, where are all these eyeglasses come from? And he says, why, don't you know, that comes from Auschwitz.

And that was really the first time it dawned to me what was going on in Auschwitz. So I wore somebody's eyeglasses during this period who perished in Auschwitz.

And you got back into the camp?

Then I went back to the camp, yes. And I told the story to the others. And naturally, everybody was terribly upset, because although, if we may have heard of Auschwitz, but we really never knew what was going on there.

How long before you were liberated?

Well, we were deported in June 1944, and we were liberated in April 1945.

Who liberated you?

By the Russians. One morning, we woke up, and all the guards were gone. The camp commander was gone. Even the Austrians disappeared from the factory.

And then, the Russians came and the camp was liberated.

How did the Russians treat you?

The Russians were indifferent to anybody.

Well, they knew that they were prisoners, because we had Russian prisoners next to our compound. And naturally, as soon as they came into the camp, those prisoners joined the Russian army.

All they did, just they let us go wherever we wanted to go. So we-- although the situation inside Vienna was chaotic, because the fighting was still going on, and it was a lot of looting and raping, so we tried to keep very low until a more civilized rule was enacted by the Russians. Which took about three to four days.

You stayed in the camp, then, during that period?

No, we left the camp. And we went to the cellar of a nearby apartment building, and we hid out there.

And once things quieted down, where did you go?

Well, once things quieted down, we joined with other little groups of Jews, and we tried to get hitchhiked back to Hungary to see who survived, and back to our old home.

It took over a week to get back because trains were not running. Only freight trains, or once in a while, a troop train going back that way. So we tried to hitchhike-- walking or hitching rides back.

What did you do for food during that period of time?

Well, whatever we could find in the town, begging, or buying, giving a shirt or a socks, or something like that to exchange for food.

And you got back to Debrecen when?

We got back by toward the end of April. And we found that my father was alive, because all this time, he was not with us. Fortunately, we found him alive.

And then, we tried to pick up a normal life. I went back to school, but I did not stay too long in the town. I just had no taste for it to stay among those people.

How did they treat the Jews that came back?

Well, they were disappointed that we came back. Because naturally, they were afraid that they have to give back all the looted businesses, and houses, and apartments. So they were hostile.

Did you go back to your own apartment?

No, no. Somebody was living there. So we didn't get that apartment back. We got another apartment.

And how long did you live there before you decided to leave?

Oh, I decided to leave in the same year-- 1945, December.

Where'd you go?

We went back to Austria and Germany, to DP camps. Right after we came back to Debrecen, we joined the friends who survived, and I joined a Zionist organization. And we trained ourselves to go to Palestine, at that time.

I have a question-- going back to the beginning of the occupation-- what did that was happening around you, and why didn't you try to leave earlier? Before the Germans occupied Debrecen?

Well, as I said before, most of the young males were taken away already. So who's left in the town is young children, women, and old people. And you could not go anyplace. First of all, you couldn't travel because you couldn't go from one town to another without a permit. And permits were not given.

So there was just no place where to go. And then, even if you thought about hiding out, it was very risky because we live among a hostile population. And I know only one person who survived, hiding out among the population. And the only reason he survived, because he dug himself a bunker somewhere in the country, with his wife, and without anybody knowing it. He hid out there.

But it's very hard to hide out in between a hostile population. And in a small town, everybody knows everybody.

Have you been back to Hungary since?

Yes, after 40 years, I went back to Hungary. Curiosity, mostly. And I had a few relations, and I wanted to see them.

Have you told your children about your experiences?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, they know very well my story, and the story of the whole family. And they know what happened to most of our family. It's round 26 of them, in my close family, was killed in Auschwitz.

Matter of fact, only one came back, one female cousin came back from Auschwitz. And she told us that the day they



arrived, the same day they were gassed, and my grandparents-- who were, as I said, in their 80s, mid-80s, they had to be carried into the gas chambers on stretchers, because after the train ride, they couldn't walk any longer.

And most my family was gassed on the day they arrived. And this cousin of mine was the only survivor. There was another who survived the selection, Dr. Mengele selection. A male cousin of mine who was, I think, a year younger than me at the time.

So he was probably around 14 or 15 years old. But he was shot during the last day before the liberation. He was shot by the SS because the SS was killing all the inmates just before the liberation. And he was shot through his lungs.

But he was alive when the Americans liberated the camp. And was taken to a hospital. But in a few days in the hospital, he died.

Thank you very much.

You're very welcome.