

Hello. My name is Abraham Kay. Today we're interviewing Leo Rzepka, a Holocaust survivor. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women Cleveland Section.

Mr. Rzepka, you were describing how you were now in Auschwitz concentration camp. What was daily life like for you in Auschwitz?

The daily life-- I work all day.

What was your job that you were working on?

It was carpenter work. And I was do work what I tooled the wood. I make for fixtures light and plates for food. But the more, some of them-- they was private. They took away the Germans. They took them away home and made them.

And I didn't know when I got the order to do this-- they give me order. The kapo give me order. I did it. But this was for the Obersturmführer, for themselves. But the kapo put a man over there to watch if it's not coming to higher rank from this. And the man, he didn't pay attention. So he didn't watch.

And then there come a big man. He come to me. And he started looking at this. When he started looking at me, I stood like this. I took off the hat like this for him.

He say, where is the order? To show him the order what I'm doing this. What I can do? What you got to tell him? I stay quiet because I find it out what this is because they told me that they watch that. But he didn't watch. And he caught me. But he watched for the Obersturmführer-- you cannot say that the Obersturmführer, I make this for the Obersturmführer. You know?

I stay quiet. I stay straight. He saw. He give me like this. Boom. [SPEAKING GERMAN] to take it off this. I make plates for the food, nice plates. [SPEAKING GERMAN] All right. Jawohl, I say. I took it off. Then ran away.

They know. They know that I'm not doing this for myself, but I do it for somebody for the top from them. What was my fault? But go and explain them. You cannot go explain them this, that this is not my fault. But anyway.

So I did the carpentry work. I did what they got the orders. And then after this, I did the carpentry work too.

What time would the day start for you?

They started in the morning. Let's say they give you-- there was the gong to [GERMAN]. That was, let's say, about 5 o'clock. Then you got to get dressed up, and fast. And they give you a little coffee.

But in Auschwitz was not bad for me the food. We got enough food. Not all of them, but 90% they give us enough, not from beginning, but later on. Then you went outside.

What kind of food would you actually get? What would they actually give you?

They give you bread. A piece of margarine they give you, and coffee. And twice a week, they give you salami, a big piece salami. So in the weekdays, they give you a slice salami maybe about a quarter of an inch thick and maybe about two and a half inches in diameter. They give you salami.

But Tuesday and Friday, they give you two times in a week a bigger piece salami-- let's see, like two inches thick, inch and a half thick, in a round bar three inches around, two time in the week. And they give you a half a bread Tuesday and Friday. They called this [GERMAN].

And then to these, they give you bonus too, like food stamps, that you can buy something in-- cigarettes or something. In Auschwitz was not so bad.

And then, after work, they give you the coffee, this. Then you can go outside. You meet people there. You trade something. You got more bread, you trade for salami. There was a little market, like a bazaar. This was the life in Auschwitz.

So you would wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning?

5 o'clock in the morning. In the night-- there was, let's say, about 9 o'clock, they got a gong. Everyone got to go in the bed.

Would they line you up in the morning first thing and count you?

Sure. In the morning is what-- you go in the morning out. After the coffee you was outside. They got maybe about 15 minutes or 20 minutes. You walk around. You meet somebody. And then the call for the Appell they call this, to count them. You got to stand them up in the line. And they counted them if somebody not run away.

And after this, then they give an order to go to the Kommando where belongs to what place they got to go work. Then you stand up to the Kommandos where you belong. You stand a gain. And they count you if they have the number what they got to go out for work.

And then they start to go Kommando by Kommando to go out. And the SS, they go from the sides, the guards. And they bring you over there in the place. And over there is again a fence around. And then they stand guards outside. They're watching that nobody can run away from there.

Now, was your Kommando-- was that within the camp? Or did you have to go outside of the camp?

Outside the camp.

How far away did you have to go actually?

That was maybe about a mile. We go there. It was a big factory there. We went there. And we worked there all-- come 12 o'clock, they give you lunch. They give you soup. You got to have with you a plate for the-- all the time you got hooked up by this, that you got to pick up your food.

And then after lunch, what--

And after lunch again to work. And after work, you stand up. You get again in the line to go in the camp.

How long would you work in a day?

About 10 hours, 12 hours, from the beginning to when it get dark.

Now, you said you were working in a factory there?

In a factory, yes.

How many people were working there?

Oh, there was couple hundred men. In there, was maybe about 1,000. But there was another branch carpenters too. They was a little further on the same place. But let's say they did furniture in the other branch. We did some work like windows, doors, steps, some other things. There was different kind.

There was a fence too. On the other side, they called this Union. They make the work like mechanics. They work on weapons. They work there.

And this side, there was many factories there. There was what they fixed the autos. Three months I used to work by the autos from beginning because I report that I'm an auto mechanic. That's why they did that.

When they bring the big trailers, they took me over there to load it up in the winter's cold. I say, I make up my mind. I will change the company so that-- somebody told me in another place it's better. They treat better. I say, to hell with them. What's the difference I go here or I go here? Anyway I'm in the camp.

But I didn't know that the block what I was here, that was special for this place. I come to a company where they're working outside by chopping wood or cutting wood. And when there was a rain day, you didn't go out to work.

So I changed the displays. And I was working there. I was working a couple days. And then there was a rain day. On rain days, we didn't go out, but we stayed in the block. I was staying in my block.

There come the Oberkapo. They bring from the day away. He come on the block and he saw me. He said, hey, [SPEAKING GERMAN]. I told him, the Kommando. And he gave me like this. Tomorrow you got to be back in the [INAUDIBLE]. So no choice. I was afraid too because I was-- these people is just a special-- that was [GERMAN], block [GERMAN].

18A?

18A. There was 18-- it was on the first floor. And 18A, it was on the second floor. I still remember the block and the name.

Then tomorrow I have to be there. All right, I come there. And every day, there come new people. When they come there, they stand up. And before they say [GERMAN], to go to work, they ask, who is new people for work?

There come out a couple people new. I was going there too. They're asking me what trade? I didn't say auto mechanic. I say carpenter. OK, they put me to the carpenters. They put me in the carpenter.

I come there. They give me a plane [INAUDIBLE], the knife to set them. There was a double-- or a little rough or smoother, to plane them. But I know the trade.

Then he gave me this. He checked me if I am really a carpenter. Then he say-- he give me a plane-- put them together, the blades, you know? I take the blades. I put them together.

And then I ask him a question. How I got to put the blades? To make a little rough to plane them or smooth, according to the question what I give them, that he see right away that I know what I'm talking. He says, smooth. I put them on the second, just a little bit, see the end. And I put them together, and then a little here and a little there.

OK, he took me there. And I started working there. But still I was-- this belongs in the same block. And then I got a good place there. Why? Because I was a specialist in the trade. And they treat me right because they need me.

But once I got in trouble. I was registered to make the wheels.

Wheels?

Wheels, these too. And they was looking for me because they didn't got the trades. Then they find the top that I register on the wheels. And they're looking for this. They take me off on this.

And the Obersturmführer from the main-- they got a couple thousand from all those days. And they know about me. And they didn't let me go out because I'm a professional there. And they was fighting with them not to get me out from this because they need me. Why? Because they need me because I turned the wood and for carpenter work.

I put a patch where there was-- you couldn't even recognize. I match the grains. I put a patch in the wood. You couldn't recognize if it's a patch there.

I make a mandolin there. The kapo saw me that I make the mandolin. And I play the mandolin. And then he come. You think that I didn't see that you built a mandolin? I look like this. And they let me do it.

So why they did it? They couldn't-- he was stronger than me. He took a transport, let's say about 20 men, to transport them in another place. The Obersturmführer went in the camp there. He bring another man. I was already on the truck. I was ready to get away by the gate. He bring another man he put on my place. He took me back there.

So you stayed in Auschwitz?

I stayed in Auschwitz up to the end. And when I come there, everyone [CHEERS]. They was happy what I come back there in Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, you got dressed clean. The suit was fit. It was different life. If they find a louse-- you know what a louse is? You know that?

Mm-hmm.

They find but one, the whole block didn't go to work-- to make disinfection everything, to clean up. And then they change the wood. They clean up everything. So clean was there in Auschwitz.

Now, you were in a barracks there?

Yeah, in the buildings, were buildings.

How many people were in the barracks with you?

There was about 1,000 people in a block.

And did you have an organization, guards over you in the barracks?

No, it was fenced. There was 24 blocks, built 24 buildings in this Auschwitz. And it was fenced with double fence electric. You cannot go out from there.

In the inside, you was free. You can go from one block to the other. But sometime they make-- when they make a gong-- [GERMAN] they call this. You cannot go from outside. You cannot go from one block in the other.

Now, were there Jews only?

No, no, no, this is all together-- Jews, non-Jews, Russians, gypsies, all together. Over there it was equal, no discrimination. But the Jews, they got it here a star.

Oh, and what happened from beginning in Auschwitz, every couple weeks, they check who is weak, who's stronger. They call it a Muselmann. And they make selections, choose. But they find the Jews. They make this.

When you come from work-- let's say we come when it's dark-- there was five lines. The four people, the SS, they was staying. And they look over here, you got the star. When a star, on this side. Star, they took off. The Jews, they took them on the side there.

And over there, you was going behind where they cook the meals. Over there, there was a building, behind this building there. And over there, they were staying there with a table with this. And they mark you the numbers. They mark you. You see? They mark you the numbers. You got to go like this, like this.

You're showing me your tattoo here. What is--

[GERMAN]. 87621.

And then there's a symbol under the six. What is that?

Then this. They give us in '44 addition to this number. Call this politics or something-- not just the Jews, that we talk like this, that we got now a chance to be alive, not to get gassed because they put on these. That what they was talking. Who knows?

Because what happened, that they, over there, choose to look on the number. And they mark you the number. If you was weak, they mark you the number. If you was in good shape, they let you go. And everyone they let you go. But they didn't mark you the number.

Then when you come on the block, they call you. Before you have to go in bed, they call the numbers. This and this number got the same block, not to go out on the job. And the morning after that, they counted this. They call this Appell. After this, you got to go back in the block. But they call the numbers.

In the other one, they didn't call the numbers. They got to go to work. So then they took all of them, and they took them to the gas chamber. Once happened they took about 2,000 of these. And they took on a block. And put them on like chickens, Muselmanns-- they was weak-- to gas them in the gas chambers.

They hold them two days-- the order. And then after this, they didn't give them food, nothing-- whatever they got in the block there, but not food. And after two days, there come from the biggest not to touch them, rather to let them go. Half of them was already dead. And the rest of them, they let them go.

And then-- I jumped a little out. Before I come in Auschwitz, they took me from Birkenau. They took me to Buna. I got in there two weeks. They call this quarantine. Why did they quarantine? To check if somebody don't have a sickness, something, a disease, to check if they-- and after this, they will send you in places for work over there.

And then from there, they took us for work. They grabbed what they need extra work. They took us to-- metal, the wire metal. There was bundles. There was one in the other. You cannot even touch them. Long bundles, the wires, heavy wires about half an inch wide, bundles-- grab it you cannot. And they stand with sticks in the heat. And we was there about 500. About 50 was killed over there on the place.

Then one time they give us a big timber. That was maybe about 40 inches thick. You cannot even go to take them like this. They put the people from both sides, like this, in the hands of many people, to raise them. The timber, you even touch even 1/16 of an inch, and they stand with things. [SPEAKING GERMAN]. They kill so many people there, more than half.

In Buna?

This was in Buna. After the two weeks, they happened one man get sick-- typhus. So if somebody got typhus, they took the whole transport back to Birkenau. But we think that they're going to take us to the gas chamber.

The kapos, the Blockaltestes, they started running back and forth. They didn't know where to go. They tried to get mixed up with somebody. They think that we're going to the gas chamber straight.

They took out from the pockets everything, even a spoon, even nothing. You cannot get it. Even what you got there for food, the place, you got to throw away. It means we're going in the gas chamber.

So they took us in Birkenau. And they took us in a block. And they holded us in a block couple days. And then they took us outside. You couldn't stay in the block. They kept you outside. It was cold, maybe about 2 below zero.

They took us outside. Got to stand in front of [GERMAN], what I told you before. You cannot even warm up one to the

other. And then they let you go on the block. This is in Birkenau, after we will go back to Auschwitz.

When we come to Auschwitz, before we started work, they took us in the bath to take a bath. There was about 1,000 people in the block that they take room by room, let's say about 100 people for one time. You got to take off the clothes completely, just in the shoes. It was maybe about 5 below zero-- outside. And there was maybe 500 feet to go to take a shower there.

They took you outside and to stand up [SPEAKING GERMAN], to stand up and then to counted them. You go like this, you know, [INAUDIBLE]. And then they took us to take a shower.

To take a shower, hot water sprinkles. It's burning. But what I did it. I go by the wall. I go by the wall. And I took by the hand like this. And I make wet the body, that they see that I'm wet, that I took a shower.

Because some of them they didn't took a shower-- they started. They ran away. And after, when they was through, when they started go out, they didn't get a towel to wipe like this. They see that he is dry. They start to beat him back.

But I got it a little more. And I took my hand like this through the water like this. And I make wet my body. And then when I go through there to go out. And when they saw that I am wet, that I took a shower, see? But when you didn't work with your brains, you lost.

So this saved me a couple times. Sometimes they give a cold shower. The same thing-- I took a little water. I stayed by the wall. But with so many people, the guards, they cannot see that I-- I watch the guard, not the guard watch me. You see? And I see that he's there, I go there. I took a little water and make wet my body. And I go through. And he see that. And I was saved.

Let me ask. Were there ever any-- did you have any friends in the camp in Auschwitz?

Sure, you got friends. You make friends. The friends you got-- let's see. You work with them together or sometimes when you go every day, when you stay in the same line. But that's all. You make friends.

Were you able to help each other at all?

No.

No.

You can help each other when you was friend. Then you can help. But when you're not friend, forget it. No help. Everyone was for themselves. What you can help them? When you got a little bread, you cannot give them the bread.

And when we come to Birkenau, from beginning-- I didn't tell you the story. Let's go back to Birkenau. Over there, there was people who was going outside. They didn't let them go on the block. They was very weak.

They went by the block. They lay on the ground. And they suffer before they die. They can stay a day or two days before they die. Some of them, they come, they tear off the pieces from the cloth from them to cover for their feet or something.

And when they die, there was special from the concentration camp, they got a little trailer where they picked up all the bodies where they was laying on the ground. And they got a storage place. They got there a big, open place. And they piled them up there. And then they put a powder, like flour, white.

Lime?

Maybe lime. I don't know what. A white powder like-- don't get-- how do you call this? To save the air for the infection. And they cover them with a white powder. And they piled up full.

Then they come in the night. They take blocks. They take, let's say, about 20 people from a block with the trucks there to load the dead people to the crematorium.

And once happened with me. There come my line. And I tried to stay away from him. I offer a man close to me that he will go for me. I give away mine bread, the portion bread. And you go for me. But the [GERMAN] they called it, what he take care for this place, you have to go. He didn't let. So that I go-- no choice. I went there.

Four men carry, one for a hand, four men to the truck. And over there was staying two men on the truck. They grabbed it, and they put them on the truck. They filled up the truck. There come another truck. They go to the crematorium to burn them.

And then the kapo, they told me to change the two men what is staying there, that I got to go on the truck. And I didn't like to stay on the bodies. I tried a little to sweep away from them. And he with the thing, he gave once in the head. And I started like this.

And when I started going like this, I grabbed it for the truck a little. And I started climbing on the truck. And he didn't give me the second time. If he gave me the second time, I would be finished.

And then I went on the truck there. And I stood on the bodies. And then I grabbed the dead bodies on the truck and loaded. And they went back in the-- so that every couple days, when they piled up over there, they took the bodies. And they burned them there.

Now, you were in Auschwitz until when?

I was in Auschwitz up to January '45.

And where were you taken then?

From Auschwitz?

Mm-hmm.

Before they evacuated us, we saw the planes, the Russian planes. There were two like lanterns, light, like parachutes, little. We saw them maybe about half a mile away from the camp in the same night they evacuate us.

It was about 3 o'clock. They give a-- that everyone got to go back in camp, so afraid they was going. We come in camp. They gave our order right away to stand the line to go out. They call this a death march, a death march, a [GERMAN]. And they took us out. They evacuate us from Auschwitz.

We was going all night. What they did, they opened the magazines there. There was concern. There was cabbage, sauerkraut. So we grabbed this. We eated this. And then after, we become thirsty. So we took plenty of them. And then we go the whole time. It was heavy. We throw away. We throw away. We was walking.

They way we walk, there were so many people killed on the road from both sides, piles-- piles with piles, whatever's ready was going from before us. Why they did it-- the people were-- they couldn't gather so much. They couldn't walk. So there was a little way from behind there. And there was the SS with the motorbikes, with the motorbikes. [MAKES ENGINE NOISES]

And many, they shot them in the head. The head was just from the head inside. The called this like dum-dum-something, these special bullets. The whole thing inside, they come out.

There were so many people killed on the road, on the side, from both sides. They was already before us. We was going two days like this. They called this a [GERMAN].

And then they bring us-- when we walk, a couple times we was going back and forth. They was already circled around the Russians. And then they left them a open space to take us out from there.

The Russians left a space?

Oh, the Russians did it special like this or something. They give them a open space. And they took us to the trains. They took us to the train. They put us on the train, so many that one stepped on the other. Who was stronger was stepped on the other. No food, no nothing. They took us to Mauthausen.

How long was the train? How long were you on the train?

The train was going a couple hours, not long. But we was walking for two days in Czechoslovakia. They took the train there. We passed Czechoslovakia. And then they took us in Mauthausen.

Now, this was in January '45?

This was in January. They took us to Mauthausen. They hold us two days in Mauthausen. No clothes-- just a shirt and the shoes. And they took you outside. They took you to count them in the morning and in the evening, to count if somebody is not missing.

And then they took us inside. Is no place even to sit on the floor, not to stand. And what they did is they make you to sit on the floor in one between like this, one on the other. So many people was there. Then they hold us two days.

Then from there, they send us to Ebensee. This is Austria. They send us there. And over there, there was the finish already.

You were there till liberation?

Yes, I was there till liberation.

And that was actually May 5?

That was May 5. I was there.

What was life like there?

Over there, they give you 100 gram bread. You got to work hard. We worked in the stalls, in the [? mountains. ?] They beat you. When you go to work, you know that the SS with the dogs, they bite you. Everyone tried to stay away from the sides. Not everyone got to be-- who got to be on the sides? The SS make just like this. And the dogs, they jump on you.

We go to work. Let's see. Our Kommando was, let's see, 1,000 men. 100 men, they bring them in the camp dead, every day, day in day. Over there I was till finished, this camp. So we was there.

Were you with anybody there?

Sure, I was with-- was a friend. Maybe you know Gildar Jack. He is have a butcher on [INAUDIBLE]. He was with me there too. He was in Auschwitz with me. He was there. We was liberated there.

Was your brother-in-law still with you?

No, I lost my brother-in-law in Birkenau. I didn't know what happened then. I'm sure he died. In Ebensee, I was up to the liberation. I was here with bones. There was like a pocket. I put the hand inside. I was 70 pounds.



When? At liberation?

At liberation. Here, the finger-- there was here like bone. Here was nothing. Here was thick, here thick, here thick, here nothing, just bones. And here, you can take the bones like this. The bones here was like wires from here. It's hard to believe it. Here, this bone stick over. I put the hand like this. A pocket it was. No meat, nothing with me.

And you had to keep working all the way up to the end?

Huh?

You had to work in the stone quarries up till the end?

Not to the end-- about a week before I stopped already. What happened? There was the planes. When there was the planes coming, there was everyone to go out from the barracks. They make the gong.

Let's say you got this at 5 o'clock, right? OK, you make the bed. You put the blanket. Above me there was three beds. There was a Russian. He was a little more big shot. He made the bed after me. He was laying. I was watching. I heard the gong. Right away, I'm out. He was lay a little more on the bed.

When he made the bed, a little straw come from his bed, from the bottom, on mine blanket. When I come from work, they mark the number from the bed. They call me. Come on. I come there. I didn't make clean the bed. This is my fault when they come from the second. But he's a Russian, you know. He's with the [GERMAN] a little close.

They thought I was-- he put me maybe about 25. I am here. I'm wondering from what side. I got it like this. All right. Then still I got to go work with this. If you're not going to work, you finish. But to the end I feel I cannot go. So that you got to register to go to hospital.

OK, when they counted, I come there. And I told him I'm weak. I cannot go to work. OK, they put my number to stay in block. And they put me in a hospital.

Over there was a man, a friendly man. I do not know. I think he was a Jew too. Then he said to me-- and it was like this. Come on. He took a knife. And he made me like this, you see? And he holded a pail. Boom, like this, to come out the old blood, black like tar, and a piece like a piece of meat from the blood, like leather. It come out. I feel a little better. And then all right.

And then I stay another couple days in the hospital. And then I say, this is the end because in the hospital they didn't give you food. They give you maybe about 10 gram food, no soup, nothing. They give you a little soup. It's like water.

Then I make up my mind. I better go out to work. I will have more food. Then I registered that I'd like to go work. Then there come order. They put my number. And a couple of them there were. There come the SS, the SS man. He put us in the line. And he looked at us. And he asked me, did you feel-- [SPEAKING GERMAN].

And I went out from the hospital. Then I got a chance. He asked me what block I'd like to go. And somebody told me I was in block six. It's a good-- the block what he'll take care, he's a good man. I registered on this block, and they put me on this block.

When I come in this block, right away they took me in the night shift to go to work there. Oy, I saw from on this block. [GROANS] But no choice. I was in this block a couple days. And then later, I was so weak, I couldn't go more. I went again to hospital.

And over there, there was to finish. From there, nobody comes out. Here was the hospital, here was what they cook the food, and over there was the crematorium, one by the other. From the hospital, they went right away in the crematorium.

There was four men in a bed. There was three beds in the hospital. Who was stronger-- there was two men in this side and two men in the other side. The bed was like this, see? When you lay like this, who was stronger, you got the feet on the other one. So every half an hour, they called, [SPEAKING GERMAN] to take off the dead people there.

Then I was there so weak that I couldn't go even on the bed. I was laying on the floor. I was laying two men on the floor. You cannot stick out even the head outside. If not, the Stubendienst, like this, he kick you.

You got to go even-- you lay on the floor. There was space like this from the bed to the floor. You cannot even-- it was hard for you to turn over to the other side. Was laying on the floor. So when they give you the coffee or something, you got to go a little out to drink the coffee and then back like this.

I was about two or three days I was there. Two days I didn't got it in my mouth, nothing already. And then, so about 2 o'clock, it was the Americans coming.

And that was May 5?

That was the end. Then everyone started to go out. I see the block becomes empty. I started looking what's going on. I couldn't walk. I go like this. I come to the window. And I grabbed the hand on the window. And I look like this.

I saw trailers staying not far from this building. And the Americans, the army, the soldiers, they snapping pictures from the trailers. There was trailers with the bodies.

They was like herring piled up. But they took them to burn them, but they didn't got the time so much to burn them, the bodies, because it was impossible. There was in the thousands. So many was killed there. So they snap pictures.

And then I come outside. I started going there. I find a little flour. I started licking. There come one man, say, what I'm doing? Go there. They're giving food on the big-- I started walking there. And then I find skins from the potatoes, what they already-- I picked up the skins.

And then I come there. I was so weak that the Americans, they took me by the wall there. They're all what they was weak. And they prepare food.

And then for what they was very weak, they give half a [INAUDIBLE] for two people. But I didn't got it what to take the food. So I got to wait that the other finished it. Then they spilled it. He give me half and half. The other man was stronger than me that he didn't give me half. He gave me just a little. He took away the rest. What you-- go fight. But I am just like this.

And what was good-- what they can't stay in the line, that they started pushing to the front. They couldn't stand them up. What they did, that they give a order that everyone got to stand-- Polish with Polish, Jews with Jews, Catholics with Catholics, so that they give them time to play around, to get busy so that they will get able to prepare the food.

And they prepare the food. They started giving the food. Who was stronger, he took the food. They finish the food. They go back in the line. They go maybe about three, four times.

How long did you stay in the camp after liberation?

No, after the liberation, I didn't stay in the camp.

Where did you go then?

After liberation, they give us a special place from the [PLACE NAME] in Austria to give us places to stay there.

In Austria?

In Austria.

Did you go back to Poland at all to your hometown?

No, never. I will never trust them to go back. And I never will see them. I don't want to see. What I would like to go there, just to come sometime to go to the concentration camps, to pass there like a free man. That's what I planning to do, choose a time to pass the concentration camps there like I'm a free man, to see the concentration camps. When I saw there, when a free man they was working, I was looking like them. Why I got to suffer like this?

You had, what, two brothers who survived with you?

Two brothers.

How did you find them after the war?

I come one brother. He was in Auschwitz. When they took me in Auschwitz from Birkenau, in the same block I find mine brother. He's in New York now. I find him over there.

And how did you find him after liberation?

After liberation, they was in Austria, in a camp. We find each other. And then the third brother, he was in Russia. So we find it up. He's in Linz. He was there in a camp. We find him there.

And then my brother was working in Auschwitz. And they took them from Auschwitz like in a village, in a farm, a big farm. And he did the work from the fields, a special what he worked there. They was not far from there.

But in the day away, where I used to belong, we make their beds for the women there, for the girls. There was like fix, six-- for six girls, one-- how to call this? A big bed that we make this. We got to put them together there.

So that I know the kapo, and the kapo know me. I was going outside to work in the houses. I bring in salami, some eggs. And I give the kapo too a little, that I told him, look, Janek, I'd like to go there because my brother is there. Send me there to put together the beds.

He say, OK, fine. And he put me there with the transport to put them together. But after this, they got to send me back to Auschwitz. What happened?

Let me ask you. While you were in Auschwitz and after Mauthausen and-- what was the camp, the name of the camp at the end?

On the end-- Ebensee.

Ebensee. Did you think that you would survive the war?

No.

What did you actually think?

Nothing what you can think. You didn't even think about your life then. I was so weak that you didn't even think about surviving or something.

Are there experiences that happened while you were in the camps that really stand out in your mind that you haven't told us yet, things that happened in the camp that really are in your mind that you haven't told us?

What do you mean, what camp?

Things that happened, something that was painful or whatever that happened in the camps that you think about.

I don't understand this question.

Were there any things that happened while you were in Auschwitz or afterwards that really stick out in your mind that you think about a lot?

Nothing what you can think. You're not helpless. You cannot do nothing. If you can do something, you help this. You have a choice. You can do something. But over there, there no choice. You got to go just like this.

Did you at all know what was happening in the war while you were in the camps?

Nothing, nothing, no.

You didn't hear anything about it?

Nothing. You cannot know-- no papers, no nothing here. You see, when my brother was there, I come there to-- there was a place there. And they like my work. And what happened? They didn't want to let me go back.

But the kapo and the Obersturmführer, they know about me, that they need me like this. They started working. They want me back. And they bring me back there. And for me, it was better to be in Auschwitz than there.

Now, when did you marry after the war?

I married in Israel.

All right. When was that? What year?

That was in February 1952.

Now, you were telling me you were trying to go to Israel in '47?

Yes. When I started to go to Israel in '47--

Now, this was from Austria, right?

From Austria. That I was in Austria, and I was in Badgastein. This is the world kurort. We got a nice place there in Badgastein. They treat us nice. And there, the British, the Americans, they offer us to go anywhere what we wanted at their expense, but not to Israel. And I say, no, I wanted Israel. I suffer enough. I like to have my own country, Israel.

What happened? So that I went from Austria not legal to Italy. They catch us in the night. And they took us in a place there in Italy. In the middle of the night they catch us. And they ordered us up to the second night to get dark. Then they took us back about five miles.

They shower this place where they catch us that they took us back. It was a transport about 500 people. And then after this, over there we was waiting there. And there come trucks, Italian trucks, from the army. And they took us in the trucks back because the Jewish-- the UNRRA or something, they paid plenty. And they took us back over there in a place.

And we clean up. We wash up. We shaved up nice. And then they took us to the train. They took us to Milano. We come to Milano. Then we stay a couple days in Milano, then to [PLACE NAME] there. And from then, they took us in another places, in villages there.

And from there, I started to go to Israel. There come a ship, the ship Hatikvah, the name. And they got it.

The ship was built boxes, like herring. You go in. There was a little hole there. And from both sides was boxes, just to go in with the feet and with the head to the front. You was laying because there was a place to stay. And they piled up and was going with the ship Hatikvah.

It was going 11 days in the water. I feel not bad even. In 11 days, the British, they catch us.

While you're still on the water?

Yes, that was five miles before Haifa.

And this was what-- when was this, 1947?

It was 1947. And they catch us. All right. And they catch us with the planes in-- in a short time, there come five destroyers around there. When they see this, they give an order. OK, everyone they can go on the deck, because anyway they got us. So we went on the deck. All right.

When they let us go, we were coming five miles before Haifa. They talk by the loudspeakers not to fight and then they will give us everything-- food, clothing, medicine, what we need for the kids and this. Not to fight.

And they took the all what they is ready to fight-- we got little sticks like this. We went around the ship. And we stayed around there. Let them come fight. We will fight.

And then they built the ship-- in the sides, they put from metal and make them like this. You see, like this. And they anchor this to the ship, anchor this that they cannot come with the ships to our ship-- with metal sticks from both sides.

And then on the ship there was big poles, square poles like this, from metal. There was with bolts-- the emergency little bolts hanging on this. And they was in the side hanging, in case of an emergency. They took the bolts. They put on ropes. Heavy ropes they tied up. And they took it off the bolts. They took it off, just all the time the ropes.

And then, when there come the ships, they go on an angle like this, two ships from the sides. And they come to our ship because we didn't want surrender. And they go like this to the ship. And the two sides where there was-- we built it up, they smash them like this, like this.

And they come closer to the ship. When they come closer to the ship, then they cut the rope. And from both sides, the big, heavy metals-- they were on their ships. And they damage them one tank.

The end from the poles grabbed the tank like here. They cut off the whole head from the tank they cut off. You know where they turn? They cut off the whole head. And our ship was going to the angle like this, so I think we also go in the water.

So the British captured you there.

And they started shooting with hot water, with tar water, with gas. You cannot even open the eyes. In five minutes they got the ship.

And what happened then?

And then they took us to Haifa. And then they took us over on another ship. And they took us to Cyprus.

And you were there for how long actually?

I was 21 months in Cyprus. That was in Cyprus. And we were staying there. I worked there. I make suitcases there, just

to keep me a little busy.

When did you come to the United States?

In the United States, I come in '56. I come here.

And you had met your wife-- after Cyprus, you went back to Israel?

I met my wife after Cyprus, when I come in Israel. I come in Israel.

You married there?

They took me in the army. I was about five months in the army. And then when I was released from Israel, I started looking-- because I was single, I was looking to get some rooms, to get a little. And I couldn't get it. I didn't get a chance to settle there.

Let me ask you. Do you think about the Holocaust, the whole experience? Do you think about that a lot now? How often do you think about that?

What do you mean? How often I think? It's not a week that I don't have dreams about this, sometimes two times in the week and three times in the week and sometimes once a week. All the time I have this on my eyes.

Are there particular things that you dream about?

I have something, things in my mind what this don't even happen. And I have this now. Sometimes I have dreams that there stay the trains, open trains they stay, right? It's funny dreams that there stay open trains. And they loaded the people to the gas chambers, some kind of dreams like this.

Do you talk about what happened with your family or with your friends?

Sure, I talk, sure. For this, my kids will like to tape this. In the future, maybe they will write a book or something like this and what happened.

Do you talk with them about what happened?

Pardon me?

Do you talk with your kids about what happened?

Oh, yeah. When I talk to my kids, they have the crying. It's hard to believe it. But they did it.

Does everything that happened-- how does it affect your life now? How do you think it affects your life?

So far, I feel good. But you cannot go away from what happened-- not just for me, but in general, how the world was staying and to look on this and to give Hitler the green light to do this.

When in Auschwitz, when the airplanes-- every day there come 12 o'clock, when it was sunny, you see like white birds. They passed Auschwitz. They shoot them. You see the smoke around them. But they was higher than the planes.

They went to Buna because over there was big factories with ammunition. They passed the crematoriums. They passed the railroads. They didn't drop even one bomb to destroy the factories, to hold them off a little not to burn the Jews there. They didn't do it.

They saw the factories. They saw the railroads because they went through the line right-- because we see them straight.

They went through the crematorium. It was four crematoriums-- one two, three, four.

Mr. Rzepka, do you ever think that there's a reason as to why you survived? Do you ever think about that?

Pardon me?

Do you ever think that there's a reason why you survived?

Why I survived?

Do you ever think that?

The reason what I survived is because I didn't suffer two years in Auschwitz. I didn't got it. I didn't suffer with food. I got enough food. They didn't beat you there. Clean, you know. And this helping.

What I suffer the most from beginning what I was in Birkenau, I suffered. In Buna I suffered from beginning. But from beginning, you can take it because you didn't-- still you got more power to alter this. And in Auschwitz, if I ever got the same thing, I wouldn't be survived.

All right, Mr. Rzepka, I'm going to thank you. We're going to stop here. This is Mr. Leo Rzepka, our Holocaust survivor.

My name is Abraham Kay. And this interview project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women. Once again, let me thank you very much for coming here today and giving this interview.

This is all?

This is all.

I have even more to tell you.

OK.