https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection

This is Sidney Elsner in the Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section, Holocaust Taping project. And we're back again with Mr. Werner Sauer of Middlefield, Ohio, who had just related to us how, at the end of the war, he'd been freed by the Russians and was now arrested by the Russians for having gold. Go right ahead, Mr. Sauer.

Well, when they had a road block and looked-- at that time, they didn't look for gold. They looked for guns all the time. They looked for guns. And they found my gold. And we got brought in a small booth of the NKVD and were interrogated. And the interpreter of the Russian officer was a Jewish fellow who communicated with me in Jewish, which I understood, but could not speak.

So he brought out, first of all, that everything would be all right, which was his general phrase. And I said, listen, I can prove to you that I'm a Jew. Now, I tried to prove that later on. Everything was all right. Everything would be going fine. I asked him, I said, listen, what happened to the gold pieces? And they said, well, in Russia, we are not allowed to have any gold. Fine.

We went into the answer room, Paul Brown, and I. We were talking. And I hear that this interpreter dictates. And all the phrases he uses is constantly "Nemetsky spy." So I jump up, disregarding the guard who was there with this submachine gun over his shoulder, rush into the room, and said, in my broken Yiddish, I said, listen, we are no German spies. I told you, we are Jews. And more yet, I can prove it to you. You want to see? I am circumcised. He said, well, everything is fine. He said, don't worry. Everything is good.

Well, that was the end of it. The guard transported us in the cellar of the building. And in the night, I put this cap on, which saved twice my life. And Polish militia came into the basement looking where the German spies were to give them a little working over. When they saw my concentration camp, they used the Polish phrase, which [POLISH]-- if I was in Stutthof. And I told them, yes.

That was in the evening. So the next morning, we were transported from one small community to the next big place, which in that case, was Bydgoszcz, Bromberg, in the eastern part of Germany. And those guards changed since we marched, those militia, Polish militia guards changed from the small-- from one small community to the other. While we were walking, I had my cap on again.

A Polish Red Cross car stops and the customary [POLISH]. I said, yes. They said, what are you doing here? I said, well, I said, they bring us here. I said, they treat us-- they say, we are German spies. We are German Jews. So he asked me, do you speak Yiddish? I says, no, I don't speak Yiddish. I said, it's too-- I understand it, but I don't speak Yiddish.

So he smiled. And he laughed. And he says, hey, [YIDDISH], you know? Kiss my rear end. I said, yes, that's one of the few things I know. So he says, OK, so what do you prove that you're Jewish? I said, I-- oh, he asked, do you speak Hebrew? I said, yeah.

So I had to recite in the open sky in Poland at that time the actually only Jewish prayer I know, which is when I-- what I learned when I was bar mitzvahed, the taking out of the Torah roll, the berakhah, you say that. So I recited that. And this doctor, it satisfied this doctor. And he told them, he says, hey, this is a Jew. He is not German spy. So we were treated a little bit better and a little bit better.

Finally, they came to the city Bydgoszcz, which we set out to get there. And one of the first women I met there in the kitchen was-- she was working in the kitchen for the NKVD. Was Helga Lindeman, a woman who was transported on the same transport from Gelsenkirchen to Riga originally.

Well, we start talking, of course. And I had an alibi, of course, too. And she says, oh, my god. You can't say here to those people German Jew. They don't know anything. Either you're a Jew or you're a German, as simple as that. He said, call yourself from now on a Dutch Jew. So starting from that moment, I was [NON-ENGLISH].

I also had a-- this was Passover time. I had an experience I never forget. They had-- the women-- they were only women. As a matter of fact, they didn't even know at that time that there were any male survivors from the

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
concentration camp. Those women were holding the Passover celebration and gave a Seder. And so everybody knows that on the Seder, you put a plate down for the [NON-ENGLISH].

And in our case, an [NON-ENGLISH] came, a Russian soldier from a nearby hospital who didn't have a-- they took away the pants of him, had only the upper clothes. And he sat down. And we had him for our Passover. And Paul Braunschild the fellow escaped with, and I felt like dummies because those Jewish women knew all the rituals and gave a perfect Seder. But that was the only Seder I ever attended to where an [NON-ENGLISH] is appeared.

These were women from what, Lithuania, Latvia?

Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, yes, a whole mixture from all former people who were in the Stutthof concentration camp in the women ghetto.

But not German women?

No.

Except the one?

There were few, probably, too. I mean, all survivors from that Stutthof concentration camp. The only one I knew, and probably the only one, was this Helga Lindemann. Anyhow, they told us-- they had a [POLISH], a Jewish committee of the women in Bydgoszcz. And I got my first official paper, which they made [POLISH]-- Jewish Dutchman.

And on that same office, I met a woman who said, yes, your mother is alive. So what happened is she marched. She thought that was after the liberation. But what I found out later, it must have been before the liberation. She marched with her group of Jewish women from the concentration camp and heard behind women addressing, one woman, constantly, of Mrs. Sauer, Mrs. Sauer, Mrs. Sauer.

So she turned around because the name of the commander in Riga, Kaiserwald, had the name of Sauer. And this woman turned around and said, are you the woman-- the wife of the commander? So my mother said no. So she said, out of this situation, she is positive that my mother was alive.

I told Paul Braunschild then, I said, listen, we get into trouble anyhow. You better take off for Germany, which he did. And I start looking around, looking for my parents, what became of them. And after-- later on, I found out-- I went to a hospital where there were Jewish survivors from Stutthof.

One of them was a Latvish Jewish woman by the name of Chatske who knew my mother very well. And I said, Mrs. Chatske, what happened to my mother? So instead of answering me right out, she start getting to talk with another inmate in Russian, which I didn't understand that good. And she keeps on talking Russian, Russian.

I said Mrs. Chatske, I was in all kinds of trouble. Please, tell me the truth what happened to my mother because I won't give up before I find out. And then I found out from her that she was selected, as it was called, in the Stutthof, was gassed and burned in the end of 1944.

And then about the outcome of my father, I learned quite a while later. And what he-- the way I got separated from my father was the following incident. My father, who got a rupture carrying bags of cement in the concentration camp, was put on a wagon since the march we were doing daily, escaping from the Russians, being ahead of the Russians was too heavy for him.

He was put on a wagon. And late in the evening, we meet. And I says, Dad, come down from the wagon. He says, no. He says, we get all to the same place. His word, actually, are prophetic because we most likely go all to the same place. But we meant in the same camp. He was let into a camp. I think it was Rieben. But of course, offhand, I don't know.

And in this camp, typhus had broken out. So the rest of the group was not let into that camp anymore, but was

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
transported to another camp. When we were transported to the other camp, and after a day that I knew I wouldn't see my father again, I escaped the first time. Now, at approximately that time, I met people who were until the end with my father.

And what happened to him was the following. He didn't give up either. He tried until the very last day. He tried to get out of that particular camp dressed as a native horse and wagon driver, was caught, was beaten badly, starved a few days after that day to death. That's the way how I found out about my parents there. And by that time, I was about ready to-- I wasn't about ready, I had enough.

And when I found that out, I went back to Germany. I met, going to Germany-- I never went back to the place where I'm from. I never want to see that place again. I was on the railroad track with a few French soldier who were in prison camps. And we had to go-- one night, I remember, we had to go off the train because Stalin passed by. He was on the way to the famous Potsdam Conference after the war in Potsdam, by Berlin. And we will following. When--

This would have been August of 1945? July of 1945?

July, somewhere around that time, I was, I'm sure. And at that time, at that time, we got picked up on the street. The whole-- the Russian were extremely bad with-- about everybody. And they had a [RUSSIAN], going home project. What they really did, the survivor of a concentration camp or anywhere-- anything else, they drove them back to Russia.

And when I heard [RUSSIAN] one day when we got caught-- was in Potsdam, by the way-- I took off in a hurry. And I disappeared from the Russian. And by the way, the Russian, when we started talking about the first Russians I met after my liberation, I said we were on a farm. This same farm, we were hiding in a barn. Nobody knew that we were there.

When the Russians came, I said, now, we have enough about the-- not the farm, I meant the barn. Did I say the barn? We were hiding in the barn. Say, I have enough of the barn. I have enough hiding. We go in the main building. In the main building were German farmers who were thousands and thousands fleeing from the advancing Russians.

This farmer had his wife and his daughter. And I tell them, I said, listen, everything will be all right. And after about half a day, I told him, you see, I told you, the Russians are not that bad. The man start crying. And he said, that's fine. You're right. But how long will my daughter survive?

Now, this whole morning, every Russian who came into the house-- and there was one group after another-- had raped that daughter. I was in the same house and didn't have the slightest idea what was going on. And a hero like I'm always-- and I told him, I said, listen, I protect her. So the next case who comes in, I said, leave this woman alone in my perfect Russian.

So this guy was just a-- he seemed at the time maybe between 16 and 18 years old. But he had a blank German dagger, which the officers of the written-- horse-written officers there. So with this blank dagger he used as a walking stick, he pointed that on my-- middle of my chest. And he said, get lost. Well, I was smart enough to get lost because that was a little bit too close for comfort.

I had, later on, myself an experience when I was alone too with a Russian. And I had already those famous papers. At that time, I still was looking for my mother and my parents. I go through a place in the evening. And I stay with a Russian soldier. Well, he had a bicycle. I had two pieces of luggage, which I had organized in Danzig, clothes. And he tells me to follow him. I follow him.

And we come to a deserted cemetery, where the bodies are laying left and right, and right and left, but not in graves, but outside the grave. So I see something is wrong. I said, hey, I got documents, which he says, I don't need documents, [NON-ENGLISH]. I don't need any documents. And I start cursing at him, which I'm expert in Russian.

And he said, put the luggage down. And I said, you son of a B. I wasn't afraid of the Nazis during that time. I'm certainly not afraid of you. So I turned around, take my luggage, and walk off the cemetery. And this guy takes his machine gun, which he had over his shoulder, takes it down, and says, [RUSSIAN]. Stand-- stay or I shoot.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

And I say, [RUSSIAN]-- shoot. And I start cursing the best I could in the Russian language, and pretty rough, and marched off the cemetery. And if this Russian soldier would have folded his finger, I couldn't have told you this story.

Where did you recuperate? You said you were down to 90 pounds.

Yeah.

And what happened physically right after the war?

See, there was never-- and the people who got liberated like I did by the Russians were very lucky. It was never anything like any support, food, or anything. I remember distinctly one of the first experiences with a Russian. I was lined up.

And I got a speech about [RUSSIAN]-- work. And their system was if you want food, you have to work. So I survived from plenty of stuff which was left over of the German houses. The German population was killed and left alone. That was what I survived. And I built up strength. And that's the way, more or less, I went back to Germany.

And what kind of work did you have to do for the Russians? You worked in a hospital?

Anything-- trade work, drive. And oh-- I at one time, at the time when I found out about the end of my mother, there was a Russian-occupied hospital. And in this hospital was an extremely nice gentleman.

He was a-- most likely, was one of the best watchmakers in the world. He was a man who, at the Lenta in former times, made by hand a-- I have to think now, the most famous lighter in the world is-- I think it's Rollei, which only is made in gold and silver. He made by hand this lighter with a watch built in. And that was a present for Mr. Himmler in person. Anyhow, this man was there. And he says, listen, you are--

This man had been a prisoner of the Germans?

There was a Jew man in that Lenta, where they had all those artisans, where I met him and was very friendly to him. And I met him. He survived and was recuperating in this hospital. Since we were very-- I knew by that time-- by the way, this is when I heard that my mother was dead.

And I think at that time, I knew already too-- yes-- that my father was dead. So he said, you don't have any family. And why don't we support each other? And I said, that's fine. And I was around this hospital.

At first, I loafed around. I got-- there were other people from Riga, who also were there. It was a farm. And I hung around there for a while until the commanding officer says, hey, nobody hangs around. You get lost. And I says, no, I says, I like to wait for Tsivian was his name-- Tsivian-- for Mr. Tsivian when he recuperates. And I want to go with him. So he said, all right.

He said, what-- oh, first-- the first job I got, I was the on guard duty for the hospital. I got a Russian gun, got a Russian military coat. And I had to patrol the area. And later on, I was used as an interpreter for the Russians.

Now, at that time, I already was for everybody a Dutchman. And I was asked how good my Russian is to interpret into German. And I said, well, my German is excellent. I speak excellent German, which, of course, was rare since I was supposed to be a Dutchman.

So I went to that farm. And the first command I gave those farmers, they were farmers. I don't have to tell you what is to be done. So starting tomorrow, you do what has to be done. Of course, that interpreting was not enough. And after one day, I was fired. And they actually forced me, then, to take off from there. And that's when I went to Germany, by the way. And it was the last experiences.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
And you went to Berlin, East Berlin or West Berlin?

I went-- you see, at that time, it really didn't amount to a bale of hay, east or-- as a matter of fact, that expression wasn't at all. Fact was that even at that time, the Berlin was divided between the different occupying forces. There was a Russian sector. There was a English sector, American sector, and French sector.

Now, my tough luck was with those French officers. We settled-- first of all, their idea was to not come home to Paris after all those years as a prisoner of war with a empty pocket. They said, we have to organize to do something. By the way, I have to point out again, when you survived all those times, strictly, if you knew how to blow with the wind, organized.

As a matter of fact, to say it more drastically, you had to know how to steal. You had to know how the black market is going. That was the only way to survive. Anyhow, those fellows, as we-- we want to-- we don't want to go empty-handed to France. And let's start in the black market. And we started in the black market.

And where we settled was, as a matter of fact, those two fellows found very fast two German girlfriends. And we settled in the eastern section of Germany. In that connection, that was an extremely interesting episode. Of course, I talked French with those two soldiers. And one of the fellows' name was Michel-- Michel-- Michael.

And one of those days, I called him Michel to a German person. Told me, he says, hey, you don't call him Michel, you call him Mr. See, the French uniform is that close to the American English uniform, he was under the impression those were not Frenchmen, but those were French-- American soldiers.

So that's how we landed in Berlin. And I stood in Berlin until I finally got the papers, which took a long, long time. And one of the few-- the first group-- not one of the-- the first group leaving Berlin was in the time of the famous blockade.

These were the papers to allow you to come to the United States?

Right.

And your uncle in Cleveland signed for you?

Right. They had the affidavit for--

What was his name?

--the visa. Arthur Sauer. Arthur Sauer-- he died just 10 years ago.

And he was the one who managed the Dornbrook Hotel on East 105th Street off Euclid Avenue, right?

Yeah. And he was at the-- years ago, when tennis was almost unknown, he was here in Cleveland the Mr. Tennis. He organized the first tournaments, Clark tournaments. And what is the name, by the way, of the famous man who runs it now?

Clark?

He was on this. He was the president. Not Clark, the fellow, he is the lawyer, probate lawyer who runs all the big tournaments here. Well, I guess it has nothing to do with the Gestapo ghetto.

Yeah. So you're on-- left Berlin. How did you leave Berlin?

By airplane going to Bremerhaven, which were the last station on the troop ship coming to the United States.

Now, this would have been 1949?

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

Right.

What was the political situation then?

This was May. In Berlin?

Yeah.

Well, the-- Berlin--

Was the Berlin blockade going on?

Absolutely. But the blockade was going on. But the famous Mauer, the separation, the official separation happened much later. It was-- actually, it was, I think-- it happened quite a bit later. They only had off-- well, I'm wrong there too. This was actually-- up until that time, you could freely go from one sector to the other. At that time, it was already tougher. But I don't know.

Well, historically, there was not yet the Berlin Wall.

And not the Berlin Wall, but the--

But the Russians had cut off land entry into western Berlin.

Exactly.

Because of a currency problem, a matter of devaluation of the mark. So everything was coming in-- all the supplies were coming in from the United States and France by airplane to support the million people in West Berlin, a million or less.

Exactly.

So all these planes were coming in with food, and cargo, and coal. Then what happened?

I was, like I say, one of the first who were gotten the papers. There was a Berlin consulate, of course, which started giving the visa and so on. But the second step for the immigration was to go through a camp near Bremerhaven in Bremen, which was a main city.

Well, how did you get from Berlin to Bremen?

On this airplane, we were sitting in the coal section.

What airplane was that?

From the blockade, where they were flying the foodstuff in and coal-- coal, in our particular case, that airplane was used to fly coal into Berlin. We were sitting the-- I think not only Jewish so-called displaced persons at the time, all the displaced persons who had the papers to emigrate to the United States were-- at that time the exit was only possible by this blockade.

And consequently, we were the first one where they used the flying out to get people out to go to Bremen, Bremerhaven, where I got another lesson in my life, which is maybe worth mentioning. I'm an extremely strong believer in mind over matter, which probably saved my life lots of times. On this air-- on this way going to the United States, I saw the first people going seasick being on firm ground, looking out of the railroad cars, and seeing the boats waving in the ocean. So that's mind over matter, which, by the way, was extremely helpful. You ask before to survive-- mind over

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
matter is extremely important.

So you took the boat across the Atlantic and came to New York and immediately to Cleveland.

Right. And as a matter of fact, in New York, my parents-- at that time-- my parents-- my relatives at that time were fairly wealthy. And they had a room in the St. Moritz hotel for me. They meant extremely well. We stood about a week in New York, which just more or less was visiting. But on the same visit, I met survivor from Riga, including this man who was there at this-- in the fur business and whose life I had saved there once. And I visited him. I remember that like today.

That was the man that you got food to in the punishment bunker?

Right, right, right, right, right. And I visited him. I don't know if it's right to say it. I used to be-- I was quite a handsome man in my youth. I was good-looking, long, blond hair, curves.

And this wife of his at that time was the former wife-- they got married-- but the former wife of this famous Rudow, who I said who was, during all that time, he run officially-- even for the Nazis, he didn't never count as a Jew, being a Jew, having his father, his brother-- his father, his brother, and the second brother in the same camp. As a matter of fact, his father who was a big storyteller, told me, he isn't-- he's just a stepson of mine.

Of course, he had to say because he didn't know how sure he was with me. And he had one son he was a doctor and one son who was a watchmaker. And from him, he learned to curse all my life. I learned the Russian language from him.

Well, when you got to New York and then to Cleveland, what were your plans for the future?

Well, I'm sorry to say, I-- my relatives had the best plans. Their idea was the first thing is I should go to the university and have the education I never had. And they would have paid for that. Of course, I was always independent. I never would have heard anything of it. I was extremely anxious to get on my own feet.

And you were fluent in English?

Well, I learned English in school, which, for instance, didn't contain any tools or anything like that, which I found out later on. I didn't even know. We never learned in school what a hammer was. We didn't know what a plier, pair of pliers is, and things like that. I didn't know. I was fluent in English. There was no question. Anybody could understand me. But my English knowledge was limited strictly to the schooling.

Anyhow, I didn't take the good advice. But I was the big mouth kid I am today. And I had to do it on my own. And I couldn't start working early enough. So I started working the second week I came to Cleveland. I didn't take any-- didn't take the good offer and went to the university, but started working.

And I worked for a man who manufactured a heating equipment, which that was one of the few fields I didn't know anything about, heating equipment for coal boilers. And we worked all over the United States for him. And it was interesting. I was extremely good and hard worker.

But not knowing the language, I-- this boss wasn't too satisfied the first week. Because if he would have said, go and bring me a bolt and a nut, I wouldn't have known what a bolt and a nut was. So after a week, later on, he said, he was the best worker I ever had. Because-- but the first week, he wasn't too satisfied.

And my uncle told me, you have a pretty good big mouth. Said, he is not even-- he's glad. He only took him on because he wanted to do me a favor for me. So that was my humble beginning in the United States.

When you got to Cleveland, were there any of the Jewish agencies in touch with you? Did you get any help from them or respect for your family?

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection

I really didn't look for them because any help I needed, I got it from my brother, this--

The uncle.

--uncle. And I never approached any Jewish organizations. The only thing is there was in Cleveland, there was a congregation, the Gates of Hope, which at that time, they had on 105th Street, their temple. So my aunt was one of the founders. There is here in Cleveland a very famous old people's home, Schnurmann Home, which is the general foundation for all-- today, it has no-- it takes on every religion. And the Schnurmann Home is quite famous. Anyhow, this lady-- and my aunt-- they were all former members of Professor Strauss. And I belonged to that congregation in the beginning. I'm not-- I think I mentioned that before-- too religious, that's-- never was.

Well, that was 1949 when you arrived. Then how and when did you get married? And did you marry a survivor?

No, I married 1951. And I married an American girl. And when my sister saw her the first time--

A Jewish woman?

No, she is a Gentile. But she has less religion than I have. And she runs around, which she is very proud of, this Jonetta Wolf, the lady who was on the International Committee of the Jewish Women, gave her once a big Ben Gurion medal on Star of David. And I said to my wife [INAUDIBLE]. But she is not Jewish.

And but she is non-religious, I would say, which has nothing-- neither anything to do because I'm sorry to say, in my estimation, lots of the misery in this world comes through religion since everybody thinks in opposite what my mother said. She says, who am I to say that my religion is the right one and the other religions are the wrong one?

We wanted to find out now, Mr. Sauer, what were the effects of the Holocaust outside of the engrossing personal experiences? But how often now do you think about the Holocaust? And are you able to talk about it with people? And what thoughts-- after 40 years, what thoughts do you have about it historically?

Well, it starts with historically. I'm sorry to say that I think nobody learned anything from it. Now, the other thing is man's inhumanity to man probably-- will probably always be present. That's historically. I am sorry to say that there are plenty of survivors from the concentration camp who came out and are even today, after all what they suffered, prejudiced.

Thinking of it, I-- actually, I have to say that almost until they came out with the movie Holocaust, I had the whole experience completely behind myself. But when I saw Holocaust and the Hollywood version of the persecution, I got a little bit hot about my collar because if the truth of the inhumanity ever is known in detail, it is unbelievable what happened.

Of course, I didn't know at the time how the actual killings took place. They are such a gruesome nature that is unbelievable that a human being could do that. I don't know if I said. And it is one day, the first group-- there were groups of thousands-- those facts I know from trials in Germany-- groups of Latvian Jews were led by groups of approximately 1,000, starting at 9 o'clock from the ghetto, marched 8 kilometer to a what we call Bikernieki Wahl.

In this world-- in these woods, they were-- they had to put their clothes down-- this, the first of those actions I'm talking about is in 30 of November, 1941. Their clothes down, like it is known. But what I didn't know until I read about it, there were three-- I think I did say about it. There were three ditches were dug by Russian prisoners.

They had to go under their own force, approximately 10 at a time, laying face down in this ditch. It wasn't a ditch. It was much taller, of course. Because it held 30,000 people for three ditches. Now, they had smaller ones and larger ones. In the larger one, the shooting killer who used, which is interesting to know, a Russian submachine gun set on single shot, a single shot in the neck. And those 10 people, the next 10 had to lay on those still-warm bodies, got shot the same way, and so on for a full day-- 12,000 to 15,000 people in the estimate of the German troops, which [NON-ENGLISH].

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection

So the inhumanity-- you asked me historically-- the inhumanity is unbelievable. The-- here today, how this group slaughters that group, if it is in India, if it is in other parts of the world, we hear how the same group of people, just for religion's sake fight in Ireland and kill each other in Ireland for years and years. So historically, I think, the biggest-- the dumbest thing is to try to have Jews live with the Arabs in the same ground and expect them to be peaceful with it, see. Now, you ask me some more questions. I'm sorry to say.

Sure.

But I-- but what was besides historically, I don't think anybody learned anything. And what I think? Anything is possible at all times. The Germans were no exception.

Well, how have the Holocaust experiences affected your outlook on life?

I love animals. I love animals. And I think that has lots to do with it. I still couldn't see anything. I never-- I couldn't-- I do not even kill a fly. But I wouldn't hesitate to kill a suffering animal. See, I wouldn't hesitate anymore because if one thing I've learned, it's how much a human being clings to life.

There were groups, we called them Muselmann. They were not able to lift their legs anymore. And those people clung to life. One of the richest people in-- without any doubt, one of the richest people in Riga, and they had extremely rich people.

The-- Riga was called the Paris of the East. They had a-- the Jewish population in Riga was actually three groups. They had the Russian-educated, who spoke mainly Russian. They had the younger generation, which spoke Latvian, which was a fairly new language. And the masses spoke Yiddish. Neither one really was in full command of the other language, interesting to say. This was an experiment.

You asked me, what did I learn from life? One of those days, this-- he owned half of Latvia. One of those days, this man came to me and asked, Werner, do you have anything to eat? Now, of course, I didn't have anything more to eat than the rest of them. But what on the danger of life-- and this was in the period when I ate the dog food and divided what I didn't have to eat, he asked me.

And I thought to myself, this is how human beings can sink. And I'm sorry to say, I couldn't have made a difference. The next day, this man was starved to death. But I thought, how a human being can sink. But I was wrong. I wouldn't have made any difference.

What do you think are the reasons for your own survival?

The very first thing is lots of luck. That's one thing. Because without luck, there wouldn't have been survived. The other thing is my looks, the command of the German language, a trade which was in demand--

Bricklayer.

--bricklayer, building-- I did-- if it's concrete work-- you see, in the United States, everything is separate. I tell you, in that circumstances, it's interesting. When I came to Cleveland, I told you about my first work, which was very disappointing. Oh, the second day, I was to plaster a room. The plastering in German is done with a trowel to throw the mortar on the wall.

So I started plastering, of course, like I knew it from Germany. After through the first three trowels, this man says, no, no. He says, forget about it. We find something else for you to do. Because he thought, he's nuts.

The next day, we went someplace in Indiana where they build boilers. So this man asked me, do you know how to drive a car? I says, yeah, I have a driver's license since I'm 16 years old. So he said, do you drive a car, the same way like you plaster? And at that time, of course, I didn't know. So I drive a car a little bit better than I plaster the American way. So that was just a little-- well, why did I say that? Well, because I come from one story into the next. That's why.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

So what helped play a role in your survival through these vast experiences, Mr. Sauer? You told us were very physical. You were-- you had stamina. But how about your outlook on life?

I like to put something in there. I said before that I'm not religious. I'm not organized religious. I'm a extremely strong believer in God. And I pray my own prayer in former times, almost every night. I am an extremely strong believer-- not religious, but believer, if something like that is possible. That too-- I had a-- I had an exceptional mother.

Now, you talk about my English. My mother used to write letters in English. And it was unbelievable. She could have written here for a newspaper or anything else because that's how perfect the language she is.

Oh, and this was her belief too. She used to say, I don't have to go to a temple to pray. The sky on the horizon is my temple. And I can say my prayers the way I feel. And I do. I believe that was part of my survivorship too. I would say my mother was a big part. When I was not being afraid and everything else what was-- I try to blur out.

What thoughts do you carry now in 1984 out of all these experiences when you remember what you went through?

Again, I'm sorry to say that people didn't learn anything. I'm amazed how hurt, herd-minded reporting is. Just want to bring out one thing. When the massacre in the Palestinian camps happened, the Jews were blamed by the whole world again, being there and allowing those things to happen. At the same time, all those reporters who wrote for years daily about the president of Lebanon-- what is his name?

Gemayel?

Gemayel. They were all daily-- he was in the newspaper. Until today, I miss one reporter asking the question, what he ever investigated who did the killing. And no reporter writes about it either. So I see just as black today as I see before. The people are not properly informed.

And I said, while we had the intermission before, without radio, there never would have been a Hitler. Because the mass communication on Dorothy Fuldheim, the old-timer from Cleveland, said Hitler was the biggest salesman she ever heard. Without radio, there wouldn't have been a Hitler. The whole antisemitism didn't start and end with Hitler. It's as long as history. The first one, as far as I know, was a Greek poet, who was the first antisemitism-- wrote about.

What made you decide to share your experiences with us for this archive project?

The feeling I have, it's, I'm sorry to say, not only feeling. Even people who deeply involved and knowledgeable people, not people like me, do not know enough, especially about the gigantic killings in Latvia or in the eastern-occupied territories of the Germans, which, of course, in my opinion, has one reason.

First of all, the Russians are not too proud of what happened when they were allies of the Germans. And the Germans covered their tracks almost immediately from the-- in 1942, they start covering their own tracks. So I think it is necessary that people know about it and know better about it.

Tell us, what is an appropriate way to commemorate the memory of those who survived the Holocaust-- rather, those who did not survive the Holocaust?

Preach the ending of prejudice, as simple as that. Nobody-- if the Lord forget one thing-- my famous saying, he forgot to make a mirror in front of the human being to see themselves for what they are.

Do you think that survivors have a message that others need to understand?

Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. You-- obviously, things like that never should happen again. But if the few survivors don't talk about it, it is ancient history. And even today, in Germany, it's called the Big Lie, despite court hearings and court documents, they don't believe it happened.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection

Mr. Sauer, we want to thank you again for a very gracious--

You're welcome.

--way of spending your time with us.

I don't know if it's correct to say it was a pleasure.

It was fascinating.

Thank you.

It was an experience. Thank you very much--

Thank you.

--again.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.