

[TEST TONE] I'm Denise Cohen, and today we're interviewing Art Gelbart, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Good morning, Mr. Gelbart.

Good morning, Ms. Cohen.

Thank you for coming today. I thought maybe we'd talk a little bit about what you're doing now-- what your situation is. Are you working? Do you have a family?

I am in a carpet business. I am associated with a large company with four stores.

And I have a wife and two sons. My oldest one is Jerry, 28 years old. He's a doctor in New York, in a hospital. And my younger one is 25-- Michael. And he's a social worker, and she works in Chicago. And my wife, Rose.

Where do you and your wife live?

We live in an apartment on Shaker Boulevard and-- Van Aken in Shaker Heights.

It's wonderful. It sounds like a nice family.

Yes.

Maybe we could start talking a little bit about, before the war, what your life was like. Where were you from?

I was born in a small town in Poland, near Czestochowa, called Klobuck-- K-L-O-B-U-C-K. And the family were three sisters and a brother and our parents. We were a very large family, with an awful lot of aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents.

My father was a They had two butcher shops in our small town. And it was a very happy family.

Did everybody live close together?

We lived probably within one block, almost all of us. It was different. Everybody was with everybody all the time.

My grandparents, one lived the next block, and one lived right with us in the same backyard. And we were all actually very close. It was small, small town-- just a few hundred families of Jewish people.

What percentage would you say was it Jewish in the town?

Well, probably 15%. That's all. But it was considered a nice community of Jewish people, because almost all families were very, very old that were generations, generations in that town. Like I said, it was a small town, so there were not very many people that kept on moving in. It was mostly people that lived there and married there and stayed there.

What was religious life like? Was there a synagogue?

Yes, it was a very religious area. We come from a very religious family. My father was very religious. We observed Orthodox completely-- 100%.

Did you go to public school?

I went to a public school in the morning. And then we went to what we called a "cheder" in the afternoon. So-- started very early.

We started in cheder. And then, at age seven, we went to public school, where I went for three years. Because in 1936, I

was seven years old. And then in '39, the war broke out, at which time we had to stop school. So I actually had three years of public school.

Did you have any gentile friends?

We had school friends but not very close. I know my parents had a lot of people that they considered friends-- the non-Jewish people, neighbors, and a lot of them. But we mostly were, like I said, we were in cheder most of the time. And those are the friends we usually had.

We always felt a little bit, I would say, a little shy from the non-Jewish people, because we were not loved that much. And I don't remember personally any pogroms, but I do remember a lot of slurs and things that happened where-- I remember there where-- where, the non-Jewish people, some of them would stay near the Jewish stores and yell "don't buy from a Jew" and things like that. I do remember that.

And yet, in our town, that did not happen a lot, because the Jewish community was very well-known and old, and they respected them a lot. But yet, I know for sure we weren't loved-- by no means. And I remember a lot of that stuff that went on.

Before the war.

Before the war, yes.

Did your mother stay at home and-- she was a housewife?

Yes. Completely. I know, from what I was told, that my mother took care of us completely, except when she had each one of us. When we were born, she would have a woman for a couple of weeks to help her out, and then that was it.

And I had two older sisters. I still have them, thanks god. And I have one younger sister. So I was kind of in the middle.

Was anyone in your family ever involved in any Zionist organization or anything political?

I know one of my uncles was, my father's brother. And he belonged to an organization that he was supposed to leave for Israel from, before the war. And the family was very much against it, because, at the time, Israel was-- I believe they call it a "hakhsharot" or one of those, where they would go in the summer and train for that. And I believe that they even wore uniforms.

And he really wanted to go. But the family was against it. The family was-- it was like a family rule. The family-- the grandmother was in charge, and that's the way it is. And he didn't go, and, of course, he perished.

What was the major language that was spoken?

Jewish-- Yiddish.

In the home.

Oh, yes.

And when you were outside of the home?

Yiddish, mostly-- what I remember-- unless we went out to the non-Jewish friends. They were Polish. But 90% of the time, we spoke Yiddish.

So it was Yiddish at home and Polish in public school.

In public school, definitely. Yes.

Were there any theatres-- any entertainment facilities?

Very little. it was a very small town. From what I can remember, the only entertainment there was-- they used to have what they call a "fire station," and a show or theater or a movie would come to town, we would all go into that place. And this is where they would show it. It was a big event. There were no movies or-- actually, no. No.

Did your family ever go on vacations, before the war? Do you have any memory of--

Outright vacations? The whole family? I do not-- no. But we would go, one of us at a time, when my parents could afford it, to visit relatives in the next city or places like this. Or my father took me an awful lot--

I was the only son, and in Europe that was a big thing. [NON-ENGLISH]. And he used to take me, a lot of times, with him on his buying trips. He used to buy either-- not drive, of course-- we didn't have no cars-- go by horse and wagon or by bicycle. We go to the next towns, to buy a cattle. So he would take me along, and that was a major event. And that was-- or a train, of course, which was not much.

I don't remember being on a train more than maybe once or twice. And in fact, it was my turn to go, next time, to the city of L³dz, where we had relatives, and I never made it. My older sisters went first. We took turns to go.

So it seems like you had a lot of free access to going here and going there.

Oh, yes, definitely. The only reason we didn't go, some of us, is mainly because of money. And it was just plain-- it was just different. We lived in a--

I remember when they put in the lights into our city, the electric light. I remember, we were one of the first houses to have it. I remember that, very vaguely. I must have been five years old.

But the memory stuck.

Mhm. Mhm.

Let's talk just a little bit about you personally. Do you remember what you looked like? Were you a healthy child?

I looked very skinny. [LAUGHS] And I, of course, am still small, but I was very small. Yes, I was very, very skinny.

I used to run a lot and be very active, and they couldn't hold me down. In fact, they tell me now, even, my sisters, that they couldn't catch me to give me a bath. That's how bad it was.

But I was very healthy. I remember, I was being told that, when I was eight months old, I had an operation. And it was supposedly a serious operation-- which, I still have a mark. But I, of course, don't remember anything about it, other than that, except just the hurts of children-- getting hurt with holes in the head and things like that. Other than that, no-- was very healthy.

Would you say you led a sheltered life?

Hm-mm. No. If I would say "sheltered life," means we were very, very free and very happy kids. I wish honestly, with a lot of respect, that people the age that I was could be as happy here now than I was, even though the circumstances were nowhere near. There were no means like this, and the things were not available as they are right now. But somehow I think we were a lot happier than the children are now. That's the way I feel.

What do you remember about the beginning of the war?

Oh, quite a lot. When the war broke out, I was 10 years old. That was 1939. I was exactly 10 years old.

I remember, some friends of ours, my father's friends, were in town with a horse and wagon. And it was when the war already had started. And my father said to this friend, would you mind taking my-- three out of the four children-- the three children, the younger ones, with you? Because we have to pack up. We were running actually from the Germans' occupation.

He said, would you mind taking the three children with you? We will follow. So he did take us, into an even smaller town where he lived. And me and my two sisters, the younger one and one of the older one, went with him. And we walked, and a little bit by the wagon, a little bit-- we walked.

And then, when we came there, we could hear planes already all overhead and all of this. And then, by the time our parents were ready to follow us, with my other sister, the Germans already had come in. So they couldn't go.

So me and these people and my two sisters, we marched to-- we kept on walking, marching, with that horse and wagon and following the man's cows and all of this, away supposedly from the Germans. But of course, when we came to a city called Radomsk, the Germans caught up with us.

So we said, well, it's no use, continuing. So this man said, let's start walking back. And of course, when we were walking back, with the Germans already-- the tanks and the planes and the trucks-- were on a highway, we had to walk back on the side of the road. We couldn't walk back and block traffic.

In meantime, our parents were home. And they thought we were dead, because, from all the bombing and all of this, they didn't realize that we were still alive. And they couldn't leave.

I don't remember exactly how long, but it took us quite a while. We finally walked back to this man's town. And then the three of us walked back home.

The three children by yourselves?

Yes. We walked. And we were not even allowed to walk at night, because it was curfew. So we walked, even--

We didn't know about curfews. We were very young. I was 10, my younger sister was 8, and my older sister was 12.

In fact, when we arrived home, it was already very dark, and it was already curfew. And good thing that our house was on the outskirts. So we knocked on the door, and our parents-- you can imagine-- and--

What did you do at night, when you were walking?

Well, we would lay down at the side of the road, behind a burned-out truck or something. But I honestly can't remember exactly how many days we did that. But I know, when we came back home, we already found that one of my uncles was shot-- my mother's brother. They shot him, right the first day. And his wife and the three children were in our house, crying. And my whole family was laying on the floor. They were afraid to go to bed, because of the-- and that's the way it started.

And then, the next days, we went-- everyone went back to their own home. And this is where we stayed, in fear. And this is when-- right after that, when the orders started coming through, of men going out in the morning to what they call "Appellplatz" and report, to be counted, to go to work and things.

And I remember, my father was a very tall person. He was more than 6 feet tall. And he went out, the first time, and they made them bow to the Germans, and he refused to. So one German came over and hit him with a stick, to bow.

And the next day, we wouldn't let him go out, because they probably would have shot him. So we hid him. And--

Do you remember how you hid him-- where you hid him? In the house?

Yes. Not in the house, actually. We took him to one of our non-Jewish friends, once or twice, and they hid him in the loft till this was over, and then he would come home.

It seems like, almost immediately when the Nazis came into your town, you couldn't go to school anymore. Evidently the men couldn't go to work. Jews weren't--

No, they stopped that, by the way. We-- I mean, some of the stores were open and all of this, but in fear, and not where the-- we got any cooperation from the Polish people-- none at all. They seem to have enjoyed it. And we just actually had to scrape, to survive, to do things.

My father used to go to very small farms that he knew and exchange things for food and things to bring home. And even, once in a while, he would bring, like, a cow or a calf and slaughter it-- sell it, so people have to eat. And we would buy, in return, bread for-- we were, more or less, scraping.

But it sounds like you were afraid to go out into the street.

Well, we did. The first-- what I can remember, the first few months, we moved freely. They didn't bother us actually that much, but with harassment and things. And of course, they had the German police, right away-- the regular police-- no SS. We never saw SS, in the beginning.

And mostly what they harassed were the men that they fought, put him to work. And then, about a year later or so, they started taking the young men to camps-- not concentration camp but to work camps.

And I know that, one of my uncles, he was one of the first ones to go, which was, like, '40, I believe. And he was in all of the camps. That's my uncle that now lives in Sweden. He was probably in a dozen different camps. Then we also found out that one of my other uncles, my father's brother, was shot also in Czestochowa, that bigger city. So--

Were you wearing yellow stars, at the time, to identify you?

Not in '39. But they gave us those yellow stars probably, like, a year later. We were wearing it, yes. I believe it was bands, armbands, white armbands, with the star. And then there was yellow stars and so on.

And that must have been, like, till '41 or the beginning of '41. Then, they made us give up our house, and they made a ghetto, where we had to-- everybody, all the Jewish families, had to exchange with the non-Jewish people where they had designated the ghetto. And of course, we gave up houses for maybe one room and things like that. But we were lucky to do that.

So by then, our father was already gone. So my mother and the four of us and my mother's parents all moved into one room. There was actually seven of us.

This was in your little town that you had--

Yes.

--grown up in.

And moved into one-- to that ghetto-- what they called a "ghetto," yes. And from there, of course, we were very restricted. There was no fence or anything, but we were not allowed to move out freely. And there we were for quite a while.

Can you tell us what happened to your father?

My father was-- like I said, he was very-- a hustler. And he always tried to provide for the family. And I believe it must have been-- I know I was on Rosh ha-Shana when he slaughtered one of those animals and to feed the family and to more or less provide for us. Well, he was discovered that he did that, and they took him away. And they put him first in town--

They kept him in town, in jail, for about a week. And then we were all allowed to go to say goodbye to him, the four kids. And they took him away, and that was it. And he was in Auschwitz.

How did you hear that? How did information travel?

Well, all we know-- that we knew about him for one year, where he was. And just once, if I remember, even, we received a letter. But after that, we didn't. But after the war, one of our hometown people, he says, I know I saw him as in the early part of 1945 in camp. I mean, we're not 100% sure, but he said he saw him in Auschwitz.

So he must have-- according to this, that he must have been alive yet in the beginning of 1945, right before the war ended. Because I was liberated in April of '45. So Auschwitz was also liberated about that time. So he must have died right before the war.

Was anybody in the ghetto allowed to leave to go to work? Did they send them to labor camps?

No, not from there. Mostly, by then, it was mostly just women and children left and the older people. And we had to-- I remember going, a few times, out of the ghetto. We'd taken off our band and going, not to be caught, and going to the towns of the people that my father used to take me to the farmers, and buy eggs and whatever he could spare, and bring it home. And my mother would do different things, to provide for us. There was just--

We needed very little. It's-- very little. And whatever-- even clothes and all of this-- my mother would change into-- from one sister to the other and fix it. And like I said, we needed very little. It was just a different--

It was different. We were not even used to very luxurious things. And we were very happy in the environment we had, and there was a lot of love.

Did they have a Jewish council in your town?

No.

They didn't set one up in the ghetto?

No. No. They were even afraid. We even had a few Jewish policemen that were appointed and things like that. But I even remember being bar mitzvah in the ghetto-- of course, without my father-- but again, unofficially, because there was no temple. And we just did it in somebody's house. And this is where we'd go to pray on Saturday-- even illegally, because we were not allowed to do that.

What happened to your temple?

It's still there. But this was not part of the ghetto. I understand that the building is still there, in the city. They did not destroy it.

But I personally worked on our cemetery, where I took apart most of the stones, when I was in labor camp already, later on, when I came back after the ghetto. They destroyed our cemetery. And I actually was part of the crew that took apart all the stones and used them for highway building.

So the people in your ghetto, at this time, were just the people from your town. There weren't any outside refugees?

There were a few-- if I remember is, before 1939, some of the German Jews, or supposedly the ones that had Polish

heritage in them, were made to go back from Germany into Poland. And if I recall, some of them were amongst us that came from Germany. But other than that, they were all people from our town, yes.

How long did you stay there?

It must have been about a year. There's one thing I'm not-- is the times. I'm not that sure about. But about a year.

And then, we got wind that they were going to close up the ghetto and moving out. And what they did is, they build a little work camp, about 5 miles away from the ghetto, and they put a lot of young people in there to work. So they were getting ready to liquidate the ghetto.

So, one by one, the three of us, again, the Three Musketeers and my mother-- and my older sister stayed on, because she was already older. She was already then-- 12, 13-- she was already 17. So my younger sister and my older sister, the three of us, and my mother went into Czestochowa, which was already a ghetto. But it was a bigger city, and there was no threat of liquidation.

So we moved-- we smuggled out from this ghetto into Czestochowa, to the other ghetto, which was, like I said, a border. We had to do it at night, not to be caught, because the Germans had divided the two cities where a border was in between. So there we stayed-- it must have been in the middle or so of '42.

And then, a few months before then, the rumors were around that the Czestochowa ghetto was being liquidated. So my sister that had stayed behind in the other ghetto, she already by then had married one of our town's fellows that they were always friend-- he was always in our house. And in fact, they're still married, here in town. And they lived there in town, because he was a painter, so the Germans were using him to paint whatever they needed. And they kind of gave him partial freedom.

So my sister brought first one of my sisters, and then me, into where she was and then smuggled us into that work camp. By then, like I said, I was about 13. My younger sister was 11.

And then, about two weeks before, they closed that ghetto in Czestochowa. My older sister came. And we all wound up in that camp, the three of us.

And then we send for my mother-- which was on Yom Kippur. And she didn't want to go, because she had just fasted and she felt very weak, and it was also on Yom Kippur day, and she wouldn't travel. So she stayed behind, and she said she'll go next week.

But in meantime, that night is when they took everybody out, and they send most of them to Treblinka. All we know is, we heard that my mother went into a bunker and she hid with a lot of people from that yard where we lived. And they stayed there for about 10 days.

And then, I guess, from what we gather, is that one of the children started crying. And the Germans caught them, and they shot them all. That's all we know.

And then we stayed, then, in that camp. It was a labor camp, a work camp, but it was not a concentration camp. We were not free to go, except for a couple blocks around the camp.

But we worked, and we would go out every morning then. And then it was strictly labor. We'd go out every morning and tear down houses, most of the Jewish houses that they tore down-- made parking lots or made different things out of. And we were building highways. And like I said, then I was in a command, and we worked on the cemetery.

This was all under German guards.

Oh, yes. This was already under German guard. And we would break those stones with hammers, sledgehammers, and build highways with it.

Did you have enough to eat?

Then, yes. Because, like I said, we were in a town where-- they gave us not too much. They gave us enough.

But we could organize. We would help ourselves. You could go to a farmer and dig up some potatoes, and that was it. That was fine. A piece of black bread? That was fine. No, we did not starve there. No.

It was an open camp. The Germans, actually, they were with guns, but they were not as bad. They were older, mostly, older Germans. They were not those hot-shot SS.

And there we stayed for a while. And then, one morning, they took the whole camp into the city of-- the back yard. And there we were all put on trains and shipped to a labor camp, which was about 50 miles, 50 kilometers, from Auschwitz, a camp called Blechhammer. This is where we all already went-- I mean, absolutely everybody.

And there, as soon as we got there, they started segregating. This is where the segregating started-- women and children or older people, to the gas chamber, and the younger people, left and right. Of course, we were very confused. We didn't know who was going where.

And while I was in camp, in the town, I was a very good worker. I just felt-- I was very small and young-- that I had to outdo everybody, because-- to survive. It wasn't that I was 18, 20 years old and very strong, that they wanted me for my strength. I always had to fight to survive.

And when we got there the-- to when the segregation started, you could kind of feel what is going on. Because my sisters right away were taken-- they were taken to-- separated completely away from me. And they were, the next day sent, to a woman's camp, away. And that's the last I saw them until 1946.

But when we stayed back, the people that stayed back, then they started segregating the children. We were considered children-- segregating the children from the younger men and the younger woman were-- again, the women were sent to camps. This was, like, what we called then a "Durchgangslager," where it was a camp for people coming and going.

So as they were segregating everybody, they were pulling out the people. They said, you here and you here. One of the men that I worked with said to the German, he says, of me, he says that I was a very good worker. So he ran over, and he grabbed my hand, and he showed him the calluses I had and all of this.

So the German was looking, looking, and he said, OK. And he sent me over to the other side. And then, when this happened, three or four other boys my age, my type, ran over and showed the-- the-- so he actually picked five of us, my age-- one was maybe a year older-- none of them were younger-- and the rest all went to-- all the children, the women, everybody, went to the gas chamber.

Did you know where they were going, at that--

No. No, But all we know is, we stayed behind, and the man that we were there-- the man grabbed the five of us and hid us. Because they were afraid the German will change their minds. So we stayed for two days in, like, a shower, until the transport had left.

And then we were just thrown in with the rest of the people. And I stayed in that camp till January of 1945. But this was a regular work camp.

And then, within the year, the SS came in. And they made a concentration camp out of it, by putting the wire fences around it and giving us all tattoos and numbers. And the camp became part of Auschwitz.

So, for a year, it was a labor camp--

Right.

--and then it turned into--

Yes. And then things were not as pleasant. Of course, food was scarce, even in the beginning, even in the regular labor camp. But they made it very, very tough.

First of all, as soon as they came, they marched us right into the shower and shaved us and took our clothes and everything-- gave us the stripes. And--

What were you wearing, before?

We still had our clothes on, with markings, or they had the-- they had cut out holes with stripes in them-- things like that. And then we switched to this. And like I said, they cut all our hair off. They let us let the hair grow in, but they wanted us to have it cut in the middle, like a stripe.

So most of us, for cleanliness, actually shaved their heads, because it was not clean. So if you wanted to stay clean, so we shaved our heads. It was much safer, that way.

But then, it got tough because work was very, very hard. And it seems like, almost every second day, we had hangings, and we had to witness it. They actually made us come in, when we came from work-- if there was any reason for anything, for anybody to hang anybody, they made us watch it. And we already knew, if we were marched in through one side of the gate, that we were going to see that-- they wanted us to witness it before, of course, we got to eat.

And that went on all the time. And even though it was not-- it was a very hard labor camp. But we did not have any gas chambers there or anything. But they would take them from there and, of course, send them to Auschwitz.

What kind of labor did you do?

For about two years, I built highways. This was a town where they produced an awful lot of gas and oil-- what do you call them-- "petroleum"-- those big tanks they had. And the area was being bombed a lot by the British because of that. It's very important. And this is where they had the camps of--

They had Jewish camps. They had Russian camps-- Russian prisoners. They had English prisoners, working there an awful lot, because we constantly had to rebuild what they bombed.

And we were building roads. I was in a group, for about two years, just building highways out of-- they brought stones, and then they brought sand-- was no cement. And we would build these highways from that, with the hammers. And they would have a bulldozer come over and press it down.

And then I worked, for a while, making mattresses. But most of the time, I was on a highway, building roads. We got to be so good that we actually worked on a accord. Accord means, they gave us so much to do, if you finished it a little earlier you actually could take a half-hour off. So you had to do so much, so many feet a day, and then they'd actually let you relax for a half-hour, which was a big thing.

But it seemed, the older we were getting, it was, the feat that we had to do a day was more. It seemed like they increased. They expected more and more. But somehow, even as bad as it was, and being alone, we always had so much hope. I think that's what kept us alive more than anything.

Was there a group of you that were--

Yes.

--very friendly?

Some were still from our hometown-- the older people. But like I said, as far as my age, there was only about four others.

And what was the barracks like that you lived in?

The barracks--

Were you together?

--yes.

Those of you that worked together slept together?

Not necessarily. But the barrack I was in-- I was in one barrack all the time-- there were double beds-- bunks. The hardest thing was to keep clean, ourselves. That was the hardest thing, but we did it. And we tried--

We used to have-- each barrack would have a man in charge of making sure the food gets distributed and all of this. Because there was a problem. There was a problem, too, with people that were smoking and didn't have cigarettes. And they would give up their food for it. And you had to watch that they should have enough to eat or--

Then there was also a problem, being youngsters. The Germans didn't have a woman enough, because I remember a case where I was invited to a German-- in fact, he was the second in command of-- I honestly haven't talked about this with anybody, but I think it kind of merits--

He was the Lageralteste, which was a German. And he was the second in command, and he was an invalid. And one night, I was invited to go to his house. The other boys were there-- they had free meal and some fun. Of course, being 14 years old or so, I went.

But when I went there, when I got there, I finally realized, being so dumb, what it was-- that he was actually using the boys. And I couldn't leave. So I stayed. And I even remember eating. But of course, it never got to me, thanks god, and I left and never came back. Because I realized what it was.

Now, as [LAUGHS] naive as I was, I realize that a lot of it must have been going on. In fact, later on, it just dropped it. Nobody ever said anything. When I was asked to go back, I just didn't go, and that was it.

But I feel it-- nothing wrong with talking about it, because it actually had happened and must have happened a lot. In fact, later on, I was such a good worker, and they rewarded me by making me-- in camp, they used to call a "runner"-- means a "jogger." What it meant-- they pulled me off the road, and they put me at the gate-- when cars would come in, the Germans and whatever-- to open up the gate. Or if they needed a message sent in, that's what they used me for.

So I actually knew a lot what was going on. And I would go in a lot to the man in charge of the camp and to the Germans. They had me shine their shoes. And sometimes they would--

They, of course, ate well. Sometimes they would send me into the kitchen, to get their food for them. And the guy in the kitchen would give me a couple potatoes. And I would take into camp. Because I still lived, of course, in camp.

And that was not for long, just a few months, because, then of course, we left. But they already gave me, then-- they gave me then-- they took off my clothes and gave me that regular clothes, with the stripes again, because they wanted me to be little dressed, I guess. I enjoyed that. Also, it meant more food.

Did the other boys or men in your barracks [PAUSES] have problems with that? Did they--

No, no, no, no.

--change their relationship with you, because here you are, walking--

No, absolutely not, because it was a camp that was run very strict by one of our Jewish people. he was a German Jew. He was excellent what they call Lageralteste. He kept that camp--

I mean, even the Kapos, the people that were in charge over us, had to be very careful, because he was so nice, that man. And anything he could do to help, he did. And anybody that even wanted to be out of hand couldn't. Because he was very-- a good person, a great person. He saved a lot of people.

This is the German Jew.

This was a German Jew, but he was one of the prisoners. He was one of the prisoners. In fact, he just died, after the war, in Germany.

But no, no, they-- definitely not, because, if anything, I brought a lot of food into the barracks-- what was possible. A lot of times, they would finish their meal and leave it out of their room-- put it outside, for me to put away. There was some left, and I would put it together in one plate and take it into camp.

So definitely not, because I actually wasn't working for the Germans. It was mostly for both sides, to be the messenger between the two.

And you shared the food.

Yes. Because, as was a small as I was-- I believe I weighed something like 80 pounds-- so I didn't require an awful lot. [LAUGHS]

With all these experiences that you've had, what was the most painful for you?

I think watching people die hanging.

What did they hang people for?

Well, very little, small things-- sometimes for stealing something, yes. Sometimes for being caught to smuggle something. Sometimes for trying to run away. Different things.

I myself got lashed, once, 25 lashes, because I was smuggling in a piece of bread from the outside. And I got away-- I got away with murder, by just getting lashes. And in fact, four of my teeth were knocked out. But that was already nothing.

But most of the time, I think that was the most-- for me, as a child or a young man, it was the most horrible thing to watch, up until then-- up until then. Because later on we saw worse things. But I was really older. I was really used to them. But being in this place, in the beginning, and being away the first from my family, that was probably the worst thing to see.

You were in this camp until liberation?

No. It's where the fun started. I was in that camp till January of 1945. And then we heard already the Russian tanks and guns, and they were getting close. So this is when they started liquidating the camp.

The very sick, they left in the hospitals or sent them to Auschwitz, to the chambers. And we marched out, 4,000 of us-- started marching. And that was in the winter, with no clothes except what we had on.

And in Europe, cold is cold. It's not like here-- very cold. Although we're more used to the cold weather.

And we started marching deeper into Germany. While I was in that camp, in fact, I found out where my sisters were-- in what camp. That's all I heard. I had a letter once, through a German guard, that this is where they were.

And we started marching. We actually passed by where a sign said 4 kilometers, which is 2 and 1/2 miles, to that camp. But of course, we couldn't leave.

And we started marching towards a camp called Gross-Rosen, which was a very large camp. And we marched out, 4,000 of us. And we arrived to Gross-Rosen 1,500. The rest of them were all shot and killed. But that was a very tough time.

Where was this camp?

That was already in Germany. That was already in Germany. And that was again, like, a Durchgangslager, a Lager for all-- they were sending a lot of prisoners and then decided what to do with them. It was more or less a dead camp. It was a very bad camp. And people would actually throw themselves at the wires, to kill themselves.

What was it like in there?

Well, there was no food at all. And we stayed in a newer part. They didn't have enough room. And the regular camp is where the regular prisoners stayed, but we stayed what-- they opened up a camp, and they put up tents-- no floors. It was mud.

And this is how we slept. And you actually would sleep next to somebody, and you wake up in the morning and find out you had slept with somebody who was dead. They would die like flies. Really, it was bad. Because they came there half-dead anyway.

And in the morning, they would have a truck-- a wagon-- horse-- come by-- throw bread at people. Well, whoever could catch it, or whoever could walk-- but of course, the people that couldn't walk didn't eat. And it was the most horrible camp. It was.

And then we stayed there for quite a while. And then they marched a group of us-- they came one morning, and they took us-- I just remember, we started walking. We didn't care where or didn't have any choice. And we started walking towards the railroad station. And they put us on cattle trains. And we started--

The train took off, and we didn't know where we were going, of course. Only thing I remember, vaguely, is we drove by Leipzig, which was a gorgeous city. And we stopped there. For some reason, we had to stop on the railroad station to-- for water or changing. And I saw the most gorgeous railroad station.

And then, of course, they-- we passed-- continued. As it turned out, we were going to Buchenwald. So the next thing I remember, they stopped. There was a lot of alerts-- bombing-- because the British-- we knew already, when the British were coming, they had the chrome, shiny jets. And we knew there were English jets. We learned already what to look out for.

And one morning, in the morning, we arrived at the train station, and they left the train-- I guess they were waiting to pull it into Buchenwald. Buchenwald was a very large concentration camp. But while we were on that station, the planes came and mistook the plane for a German transport. And they bombed-- they bombed us.

And when the Germans saw this happening, the guards, they left the train and went into the woods, and they left us sitting right there. So about half of us got killed then. But a bomb fell about 2 feet from the section where I was. And all of us were completely covered with debris, because it all fell in.

And they started digging us out. And this is when I found that I had-- my leg was very bad shot up. And four veins were severed. And I developed a lot of temperature from that. By then, of course, I was already 15.

So again, the friends from our hometown, the people that I was with-- and then, when this was over, they fixed the train, they took us into Buchenwald.

So they hid me there for a couple of days, because if the Germans were to find out that I had a temperature and that I was sick, there was no-- they had the ovens there, and they had everything. They just did away with people. So I stayed for about two or three days. And they just gave me water-- that's all. And the temperature left, and I couldn't walk it, but I limped, and I was fine.

Where did they hide you?

We were-- for about three or four days, before they found barracks-- they didn't have. So they put us in one of those big, like, a garage. And all of us just stayed. Which was a lucky thing. If they would have made us walk or go into a barracks, they would have discovered that I was sick. And that would have been it, because they actually wanted us-- planned on us working or shipping us away to different camps.

But then, they put me in a children's barrack. They had a separate barrack. First they put me in the regular barrack, and then they came in and took all the youngsters out and put me in a separate barrack. I didn't know what they had in mind, with it, but--

That was already March. And then they started, every morning, taking out groups. We had to all fall into a place in the-- the Appellplatz, a big-- outside, where they took groups out and shipped them away to different camps. And of course, there we knew already-- we could smell-- the ovens were going day and night. Because this was a camp with actually over 40,000 people-- prisoners.

And this was one of the first camps that Hitler built, in 1933. So they were not only Jewish people there. You had Germans there, too. You had homosexuals. You had Communists. All had different insignias, wearing, where they could tell what they are. One was insignia for this and an insignia for that.

But we were in the New camp-- what they called. Again, they didn't have any room, so they put us in some of those stalls. And there we slept, like, 18, 20 people on one--

And remember, we had to go for the food. And we had to go and carry it and bring it to us, like, in big buckets. And this is where they fed us.

Were you walking, at that time--

By then, I was already walking, yes. I was already walking. And-- [PAUSES]

It's a break?

So they would give you food in a bucket, then.

Well--

There was something.

They would carry it over, and-- spinach. I lived on an awful lot of spinach. I got to hate spinach, [LAUGHS] when I came here.

I'll bet.

I still don't like it. [LAUGHS] I still don't like it.

Can you remember anything else? Did they give you any of that famous coffee?

I could never drink coffee, maybe being because I never drank it at home. We weren't allowed to. But I remember, I used coffee in Buchenwald to wash my face with, because there was no water.

Most people would have given the-- they-- but I just couldn't-- I couldn't-- just like I couldn't get used to the spinach. It was more or less-- it was like leaves. It wasn't actually spinach. What I hated about it, they'd use a shovel, and shovel it in to cook it.

And when you ate it, you had that sand. You could feel it. And I said, I just-- but of course, after a while, I ate it. There was nothing else to eat.

Did they give you a piece of bread?

Well, they would give, for instance, slices of the very, very black and sticky bread. Yes-- often, not all-- not every day. But like I said, it was amazing, how little we needed. Just mostly surviving. That's all it was-- is to survive.