

[TEST TONE] My name is 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. Mr. Gelbart, we were talking about, just before liberation, what was happening.

Well, we were in that Buchenwald, in a camp. This is where we were brought from Gross Rosen. And this is where we stayed-- like I said, a camp of over 40,000 people, coming and going constantly. They were sending people to Dachau and all over-- different camps. They were trying to eliminate as many as they could, because the war was getting to an end-- coming to an end.

And people were dying an awful lot there, because they came half-dead. And like I said, the ovens were going day and night. They had seven or eight ovens there, and they were going day and night.

And they would take us out, every day, to the Appellplatz and take people, as many as they could, that day. And then the rest of us would go back and camp and wait for the next day-- go back into the barracks. We could already hear some shootings and things like that.

But the SS in that camp were terrible. They were really bad. Some of the people that were on the Appellplatz, they couldn't walk anymore and they couldn't stand up or even go back to the barracks or leave. They would--

I watched it, more than once, where the German guard would take his rifle and put it across the man's neck and just [PAUSES] stand on it till the man choked. And I've seen an awful lot of times. And they were just laughing about it and enjoying it.

Virtually every morning when you get up, you go out the side of the barracks. We had to throw the bodies outside that had died that night. And they didn't pick them up right away either, because they couldn't destroy them fast enough. So sometimes they were laying there for quite a while. And that went on for a few weeks, back and forth. People were coming in, and people were leaving.

And then the shooting started very badly. The American troops were already in a town called Weimar and the small towns. And they had an awful lot of stubborn SS. The big brass, the big people, and the big generals already had left the camp, but they left the camp to some of the old guards and some of the very young diehards.

And they kept on shooting at the-- pretty close to 18 days before the camp was liberated. And all that time, when the shooting started, we had to lay on the floor, because the Germans were firing into the barracks at the same time. They tried to eliminate as many as they could.

And then finally, one morning-- I remember, it was April 11, '45-- the American troops came in. And they couldn't even find the doors to the barracks. They came through the windows. Because we had barracks with very low windows, and they just-- from all over. First I remember seeing is a Jewish rabbi. He identified himself as a soldier.

And [PAUSES] it was probably the biggest day of our life. Most of us just didn't believe or had ever seen, of course, an American soldier. But within a day, our barracks, the children's barracks, were closed off, and they took all of the children out, and they put us into the barracks where the German guards used to be.

And they refused to give us food. And we were very mad. We couldn't understand why. But the reason was that we couldn't eat the stuff. If we would have eaten, we would have died, and most people did.

So what they did is, they fed us about every hour or every two hours. They used to give us cereals and stuff like that-- milk and stuff-- to make us gain back some of the health. And--

How did they speak to you?

Just a little German, a little Yiddish, and that's all, because that's all we knew.

Evidently the rabbi knew some Yiddish.

Yes.

He was able to--

But these soldiers didn't actually stay long. They had to continue. Those were the fighting front. And then they brought in the occupying forces.

And it was a very big thing, because this is the biggest camp that was ever liberated-- the most popular-- whatever. And an awful lot of, even Russian soldiers, would come to visit it. And we were more or less like in a zoo. We were put on display. And an awful lot--

And then I even remember that, after a couple days we were liberated, a German or somebody, a guard, cut the plumbing, and we didn't get any water, because-- and then they finally discovered it was actually done on purpose, that the-- And it was shooting still going on afterwards.

And I even remember that the German people in that city, right out in the outskirts, said that they did not know that there was a camp like this. And the American soldiers made them march through and witness and watch. Every day, they brought in thousands of them and made them march through and watch the dead-- because they were still there-- and the ovens. And they made them watch all of this.

And I was there in that camp even afterwards, after it was over for quite a few months, until somebody came in. By then, I was 16 years old. And somebody came in into camp that already was liberated and came in, and he recognized me-- a friend from our hometown that I was in camp with. They had taken him out from that camp.

And he took me with him. And I stayed with them, a group of about 10, 15 Jewish people, in a town not far from Leipzig called Altenberg. And this is where we stayed. We had a car already by then, and we were driving around, looking for family.

How did you get a car?

Well, the American soldiers would give us anything we wanted. [LAUGHS] We were given food. One of the people that I was with just had a car. I don't know how-- if he bought it or--

And we already were driving around and looking at other camps and looking for lists of people-- survivors and stuff. And by then it was already-- the war was over already, completely--

Can we go back to the camp after liberation? Did the Americans bring in medical teams?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, oh, yes.

So it was quite well organized.

Very well.

They were very nurturing and--

Not the first troops, because they had the Red Cross and things. But they were not equipped to-- they actually didn't stay that long. But then they brought truckloads of medical and-- but they claim about 6,000, 7,000 people died after the war in that camp, because they were too far gone, and they just couldn't save them. And an awful lot of them just were so hungry, and they just ran-- they couldn't be controlled-- and ate and ate and-- and that killed them. There was an awful lot of diarrhea, in these things.

And this is why they did what they did to us, to preserve us, because we didn't know any better. We probably would have run out and done the same thing. So they actually saved our lives by doing that.

But I do remember, at the time we didn't like it, because everybody was eating salami and stuff and we were not allowed to. But it was actually for our own good.

It took a while to get some strength back. I remember when my hairs finally started growing in. And of course, we had the stripes on for a long time. And then the American soldiers, again, they must have found an awful lot of material of German uniform clothes. And from that material, they made each one of us a suit. So we were wearing a suit made from a German soldiers' cloth, this-- the green. That was the first suit we had.

And then, of course, the deal came across where the American soldiers had to give over this area to the Russians. A settlement was made. And we didn't want to stay with the Russians. So we ran again.

We ran deeper into Germany, where the American occupation was. It was still 1945. And there we stayed for a few months. And then somehow my sisters found out where I was. And they came and got me and--

Tell me about that reunion-- [PAUSES] must have been unbelievable. There must have been some kind of organized efforts at finding each other. Were there lists made up? Was there--

Yes.

--somebody who was doing this?

They had what we called the UNRRA, which was an American organization. It's U-N-R-A. Honestly, I don't know what it stood for, but United Relief something. And they were very active. This is how I got here to the United States, actually.

They were very active in finding people. They put lists out. And we drove or went to Bergen-Belsen. We went to all of those camps, to find people, checking lists and all of this. I guess this is how my sisters found me, because I was actually just a few miles from where they were. Because they ran away again from the Russians, where they were, to come to the American zone. And they were just a few miles away-- my two sisters, again.

And then I moved with them. And then, of course, I was inseparable with my younger sister from them, because she was 14.

So we were supposed to go to Israel. There was confusion. They were taking children without parents to Israel, to England, to the United States. So we just didn't care, honestly, because we just--

So my younger sister and myself registered to go to Israel. But it took so long, because we were in camps again-- because Palestine was not open. So finally we went into a children's camp that was sponsored again by the UNRRA. And we waited for about five months.

And then we were sent to the port of-- German port. And we were taken to a boat. And then finally we left for United States. And that was in February of 1947.

The three of you.

The two of us.

The two of you.

By then, my older sister, of course, was married. And my other one had already a boyfriend. She was already 18. So she

stayed on in Germany. And I came here, with my younger sister, to Cleveland.

How did you get to Cleveland?

We came, all of us, to New York. And from there, they were looking for homes-- foster homes, mostly. But from what I-- my grandmother from home had five sisters in the United States-- my grandmother's sisters. And they were living in New York. Four lived in New York, and one lived here in Cleveland.

So either somebody signed for us and took us, or we had to go to foster homes. So my aunt here in Cleveland signed for us. And we came in here to Cleveland. This is how we wound up here.

Their name was Esek. And they lived here in Cleveland. And they were very nice. My aunt, in fact, was a beautiful woman. She just passed away about three years ago. And I stayed with them for about less than a year, because it wasn't for us. It was--

So we moved in with a family, me and my sister. And we paid for it. I already, of course, had gone to work. But my sister was only 16, so I sent her to school. And she finished Heights High.

Then I sent her through beauty school-- the only thing I could afford. [LAUGHS] And I worked for about a year, and then I enlisted into the service. And I spent three years in the army.

And your older sister?

After two years after we were here, we brought over-- my aunt filled out papers. And she brought over my other two sisters-- at intervals, not at the same time-- about a year after one, the other one about two years after. And they took out the whole families.

And you were a very close family here in Cleveland.

Yes, very close. I lived with my sister, in fact. When they came here, I lived with them. And then, when I came back from the service, I lived with my sister until I got married.

How do you think you survived this whole ordeal? What pulled you through it?

I don't think it was as much-- it was a desire to live, and just like somebody being in a basement without a stepladder, trying to get out, you scratched and scraped to try to get out, and you-- mostly, I think, we lived from one day to the next. We didn't care about next week. We didn't even have time to mourn.

It was a case of survival. That's what I can remember. And you'd get that piece of bread, and it's something to eat. You'd grab it and eat it. You didn't put it away for later on or in an hour from then, because you might get hungry. You didn't worry about it.

And of course, another thing is, if you didn't, somebody would take it from you. You had to eat it up. And if the soup was being served and somebody was lucky enough to push you in there, or you were able to get a second helping, you'd grab it and eat it. Because-- not worrying about, maybe you should put it away for later.

Did your religious upbringing ever play any part in your--

It must have--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--hope?

It must have. But honestly, I did not have that much. I had three, four years of schooling and [PAUSES] strict family life. And maybe that was more than the religious part, because we were organized. And my three sisters especially-- I know so, because they were-- one for the other one would give her life.

And I remember, my sister, one of my sisters, even got lashed, and her hair was cut, because she tried to steal potatoes to help the other two sisters. So this, I think, must have made us survive-- I don't know-- and maybe the will to live.

I think most of us were like animals. I'm afraid, most of the time, we didn't have as much regard for the other people either. It was just a fight for survival. Because in my case especially, I did not know of anything else. All I know is, I was taken from my mother into this. And it must have been very hard to handle, for kids-- probably a lot harder than for grown-ups, because they were more used to it.

Do you think that the Holocaust affects your life now?

Yes. Yes. I think all of us came out with something in us, that [LAUGHS] we're not 100% normal. And I can see even the people that came out when they were older than me must have been even worse, because they had more past than I had. I mean, all I remember is a few good years before this and the Holocaust. The rest of my life was after.

So it must have really been bad. I can see that, the older they were, the worse it was, because family and all this-- I remember family ties from a few years. I don't remember back to the other people; they do. I think it also affects us somehow in bringing up our children, because we tend to be overprotective-- especially the mothers that went through Holocaust-- more so than fathers.

I think my son Michael happens to know-- we discuss it a lot. And like I said, he's very involved in the second generation. And he is sure that it affect us in somehow.

Is there anything else about it, any general statement you want to say-- you want to share?

Well, only that I hope that the world learned something from this. And I'm very much interested in seeing this, that it shouldn't be forgotten, because what happened actually can happen at any time if we don't watch out.

And I feel a little bad about-- I feel that we were let down-- that most of the world just stood by and did nothing. I certainly think that they could have done a lot, an awful lot. But I'm afraid that we tend to be very protective of what goes around us, and a lot of people don't care what goes on beyond us, and that's not right. Because when it hits at home, it's too late.

Well, we sure would like to thank you for sharing your story with us. I think it was a very brave and important thing for you to do.

Thank you.

This is Denise Cohen. Our Holocaust survivor today has been Art Gelbart. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Thank you.