

I'm Sylvia Abrams. Today we are interviewing Maurice Grunwald, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Mr. Grunwald, you told us how you hid out in a village for the last two years of the war and some of the experiences you had helping other Jews hide out in this village. What else was unusual about your life there before the Russians came?

There was a lot of things happened with the Germans, how I handled the Germans. I tried to find out what's going on, while everybody would like to know what's going on, on the front. You see, when the whole thing, they were pulling back. We want to know how far they are, what they doing.

Once I was sitting by the farmers in the room, and about five, six soldiers there too sitting around the table, and talking in German. And I speak pretty good German. As I was listening what they're talking, what's going on the front and this and that. And I was reading a Slovak newspaper. And the Germans started to talk, oh, let's wait a second. Maybe it looks like this guy understands what. As they call me over there, and start to talk to me in German.

I told them [NON-ENGLISH], no German. [NON-ENGLISH], I don't understand nothing. And they start to ask me questions. I told them, no, I don't know. And next guy then said, oh, these dumb Slovaks. They don't speak German. What you're talking? OK, and they let me off. And a lot of things you see like they had a station in a bar. In a bar, you see they had a station where they were listening to radios, the whole station, the Germans.

And when they walked out or something, because I had a friend. He went to the son from the guy from the owner of the bar. And we used to catch the English station, you know? And once they catch [NON-ENGLISH], and they were ready to shoot us down. You know, why are we listening the whole across the English station? Only I don't know. We just came out from it.

It was a lot of things.

When the Russians came into the village, this was in January 1945.

January 9, and this I remember exactly. I never forget. While we were waiting for them.

Did you were free then?

Yes. Sure. The next day I left the farmer.

Was that the first thing you did when you were liberated? Where did you go?

I went home, on my village.

You went back to your--

I went back to Presov, nobody in Presov, as I went to my village.

Did you take back your own name?

Yeah.

Everybody called me by name. They knew me in my village. I came in my village. I had a neighbor, you see. We gave him a lot of things before we left. But he was a mayor in the village. And any papers came in the village from the Germans, what's going to happen with the Jews, I knew in advance. Well, he give me to read all the papers. As I went back there, and I stayed with him. I lived with him.

What did you find of your family's old farm? What condition?

Nothing. Nothing, everything the cows, and everything, they took everything away, the horses and everything. Everything, nothing.

What about the house? Was it still--

The house was still there. Yeah, only they made a school in the house. You see, they made a school.

And I got-- I made arrangement with one room I got back. And I used to sleep there.

How were you greeted by the people in the village, when you went back?

The people, they were friendly, very friendly to me. You see, even these people who was anti-Semite, you see? I knew them. They tried to get friendly. Only--

Did you try to find your family?

No. I couldn't find my family. Well, I knew nobody is left over.

Did you make any attempts?

Sure, I made attempts, and nobody. Nobody, nobody I knew. I knew nobody from these camps. When I arrived there and this, I knew everybody is gone. You see, I had family here in the United States. And once I got a telegram, you know from the post office. That who is left from the family? And the telegram was paid. I had an aunt here from my father, a sister. And she sent a telegram. And I sent her an answer right away.

That just you were left.

Yeah, just I was left.

How long did you remain in the village?

Just a few days, while next I went to Presov. And in Presov, you see, I had some nice people what I knew. And they had a house, a nice big house. Only what happened? The Russian truck went over by the house, and some explosion, and knocked out all the windows and everything, a nice villa.

Just in the basement was a few rooms, two rooms. I stayed there with them in the rooms. And not only this, you see, next came in Jewish soldiers. You see where they came with the Russian, and other guys, and a lot of people from camps when they came back, we helped the people, you see?

We tried to-- it was very hard to get bread or something, food. As we tried to get from the soldiers, you see, so they brought bread over. And we used to help the people, which one they pass through, you see, Presov and they went farther, you see?

Was this an organized community action.

No, that was private. We did it private. And was later on was organized from the Jewish-- how you call it?

Was it the Joint?

It was not the Joint, just the Jewish--

The Gemeinde?

The Gemeinde.

The community.

Yeah.

What were your plans then now that the war was over?

No plans at all. Just we eat and have a good time. You see, anything I did, made a few money, didn't have work to me at all. Just food and nothing else was interested.

You were drafted into the Czech army.

I was drafted.

When did that happen?

That happened in March. You see?

March of 1945?

'45, yeah. Still the war wasn't over, you know?

You have some pictures of yourself in the Czech army.

Yeah, I have pictures. Only they're very small here.

So since the war hadn't ended, and don't you have a picture of yourself also when you first came back to--

Oh, when I came back, yeah. That's after I don't know, a few weeks when I start to eat, and I start to gain.

So that's in 1943?

This was in '43, yeah.

'43 after you came back to the town.

Yeah, after I came back. That was beginning '43.

That's when you assumed that Slovak identity?

Yeah. Yeah.

And then let's see--

Next, here you see, they draft me in the Czechoslovakian army. Here I am on the side. I am-- I don't know how you call it. You see in the American army, you see, that's a company. You see? And everything I do for the company, the administrative and everything.

Like that's the adjutant?

I don't know.

Yeah, I think that's what that is.

You see, I can tell you in Czech, you know? That [NON-ENGLISH]. You see? I am here on the side. You see I had to get in the morning on time. I have to prepare everything, everything do for them, you see?

They found you to draft you because you had re-registered with your own name?

No. Everybody they registered. They start to draft everybody. They put me in a jail one night, while I didn't went on time. Why? Well, you see I had my farm. And the farm somebody took over the farm. As I start to work on it to get it back.

You thought you'd go, you'd reactivate the farm.

Yes. So I didn't want to go to the army right away until I don't get everything straight out. When I came in, as they put me the first night, I slept in the jail, you know? Well I wasn't on time.

So how long then were you in the Czech army?

In the Czech army, I was till sometime September.

1946?

'45.

'45.

You see, while I was in the regular army from '36 till '39. Only here, you see when they draft me, you see, as I had to function. As everybody went home, you see, the war was end of the war. And they didn't let me go. I have to liquidate everything. It wasn't such a big thing to be anything there.

So then when the war finally ended, so the war ended in May of '45.

Yeah, in May only. You see?

But you were in the army then until September.

I was in the army till August, end of August, September.

Then where did you settle when you were got out of the Czech army?

In Presov.

And what did you do?

Almost nothing.

You didn't have a trade of any kind?

No. I worked on this. I had a farm, you know, and I started.

So you lived in Presov, and went back, and tried to work with the farm?

No, I didn't work on the farm. I just got back the farm, you see. And I gave over some guys. You see, they were working on it and everything. And I was sharing with them. In Slovakia, farmland was very-- they didn't have enough land, the people, the peasants. And it was they would do anything just to raise anything. I gave him the money and anything, you see? And they was working on it. And I split with them.

But you didn't remain in Czechoslovakia. You left in what year then?

I was in Czechoslovakia till '48, end of '49.

You see it was during in '48, you see that came organization from Israel, came some [NON-ENGLISH]. And they start to organize, you see a Haganah, a transport to go to Israel. And as I was the first one in Presov, I registered for it.

You returned to your Zionism.

Yeah. I registered, and I went and we used to-- they were supported from the Czechoslovak government. At this time, this time was Slansky. I don't know. He was supporting the Jewish, how you call? The President from the Communist Party.

He was supportive of the Jewish cause, and Israel.

Yeah, he was supporting this. Well they were thinking, you see, they're going to make from us some good communists, and to send us to Israel to build a Communist Party.

So you went in 1948 to--

At the end of 1948, I went to Israel.

When did you get married?

In '47.

So you got married in Czechoslovakia?

In Czechoslovakia.

Did you marry a survivor?

Yeah, my wife, she was three years in Auschwitz. She got a number. She was the first girl transport from Czechoslovakia to Auschwitz. But she's a Slovakian woman who you met in Presov then?

Yeah, she's from Czechoslovakia. And she survived Auschwitz, you know? We met, in [NON-ENGLISH] at Presov. You see, and I got married in '47. And next, I registered to this Haganah. And we went to Israel.

I had the registration to go to the United States, only I had an aunt. She sent the affidavit. Only I didn't know where she sent it. Right away in '45. Yeah, from the beginning '45.

Only she send it to the Joint to Prague. And they never send me. You see, they had my address and everything. I don't know what was going on. They never let me know. And I couldn't-- You see, if you don't have an affidavit you cannot register. And next when you got the affidavit, you have to have a passport. And till I find my affidavit, and some kind-- how you call with a passport in the government something went wrong. You see they was making false passport in Pressburg, in Bratislava.

And when I went to register, it took me three months to get my passport. Usually, I could get it in two weeks. And still I registered. I got a very high number, over 4,000. And this time I was going from Czechoslovakia, the quota probably about 1,100, maybe not even 1,100.

So it would have been a number of years till you could have ever come.

Yes, I didn't want to wait in Czechoslovakia, while I was seeing what's going on. You see the communists, you see, how the communists was handling the government and everything. I left for Israel.

In you're going to Israel before that, did you get any help from Joint at all?

No.

Did you get any help from UNRRA?

No.

None of the organizations?

I never asked no help from nobody. I had enough my money.

What year did you come to the United States?

In '56.

And did you come directly to Cleveland then?

Yeah, I had here a brother, and I had friends, and a lot of families, cousins. Cousins, which one I don't even know today.

When you look back over what happened, did you talk to anybody about your experiences?

Not really. Once, yeah. Somebody came from a high school, Mrs. Rabinsky or something. She was working with people. And Mrs. Bertha Lautmann or somebody else. I don't know. They give somebody a name, a girl. And she came over. She called up, if I would give her an interview. Yes, once I gave her a short interview.

In general, when you were here in Cleveland, did you become active in the Jewish community, or did you ever join a synagogue?

Yeah. You see, I had when I came over here, I had a boy, six years old, and a girl not even two. And we didn't spoke English. As I have to send, just Hebrew. As I had to send him, I couldn't send him in any school. And I send him to the Hebrew Academy. And yeah, I belonged to the [NON-ENGLISH] synagogue. And I still belong there.

Are you active in the Jewish community now?

Not really. Not really. I go, and all kinds of fairs, only shall I be active. It's not really too active.

You told me that until you retired you were involved in the furniture business, in the warehouse there. How did you train for that kind of work?

I didn't. You see, when I came over here and I was looking-- excuse me. I was looking for any work I would find, you see? In Israel, I was working in the building trade. As I knew something. And I had here an uncle. He was a plumber and this. And I asked him if he can get me in the union. He said, no. He said, that don't exist something like that. You see a friend of mine, I start to work on a truck. I start to deliver furniture. I worked very hard, late into the night. My wife, she was standing till 11 o'clock watching the window when I come home.

It was really hard. And later on, you see I start to be like a salesman. A lot of people came to this country.

You want some water?

No, it's OK.

And I speak German, Hungarian, and Slovak, you see? And not only this, you see. Anybody who speaks with any broken language, I can figure out, you see? As I used to work in a store. And I used to take all this language to start to sell.

And later on, I started to sell. I worked for Lee Edwards Furniture next. I went over to Furniture Mart. That's happened later on, they changed the name to name brand. Probably everybody knows name brand, [? Berdreger. ?] And I started to be a salesman. I could talk all the languages. I can talk with Polish people, with Yugoslav people. I can understand. And it was easy for me. Later on, the company got bigger and bigger, you see. As they needed a man to manage the shipping, receiving, and everything for the stores. He had eight stores here. And that's why I got the job there.

And I was working till there until 1980 when they sold the company. And anyway, I got sick between the time and I retired.

When you look back over the years and what happened to you, do you ever think much about those years?

No. No. I closed my-- what do you call? Everything. What it's unbelievable to me. It's like a dream, a bad dream, you know? I was dreaming and I forgot the dream or something. You can. It's unbelievable, you see? Myself, I cannot believe just what I went through, what a person can take how much. You see, how much you can take and leave everything, all these things.

When you look over it, what do you think was the greatest loss?

My family.

You see, my family, they were hard working people. If I took my family to Israel, and arranged them, you see to be a farmer there, they would do over there terrific, just by that, you see, couldn't happen. And that's about it.

Do you think that what happened to you affected the way you make friends and your social relations today?

We have friends, mostly from Czechoslovakia. I have here friendly. I have a lovely wife. She is very friendly. Everybody likes her. And same thing with us. You see, anybody we know, we are very friendly with them. You see?

Do you think the experience affected your outlook on life? I don't know. Look, in life it's not to me-- I don't know. It don't look so rosy the whole life what's going on. You see? You see the whole world, the whole world people killing themselves, and it's just a horrible thing. You see? We are living in a time-- I don't know. This is just, I don't know how to explain it. It's just a horrible time, horrible life what's going on.

What's going to happen with the next generation? It's very black if you think about it, what's going on. You see, when I think, for example, in Israel. It was a hard life and everything. Only still we used to be more happy with this, what we didn't have there, you know? And here are people are not happy, even they have more. They have looks. The life is different. They don't know what to do with themselves.

It's I don't know where we're going.

I think you expressed that very well. Do you think survivors are different from other people?

Who?

Do you think survivors of the Holocaust are different from other Jews?

No, no. They're not. Some of them, yes. Some of them they forgot everything what went on. I can see here in Cleveland some survivors, they don't know. They don't know. They forgot everything. You see, not me. I still like to help people in any place I can. Anybody would call me up at 10 o'clock or at 12 o'clock at night. You need a ride with the car or

something. I would help.

You were a very resourceful person in a very difficult time, and did what a lot of people couldn't have done, to run away and to take a different identity, and to still help others. When you look at that time on this tape for others, what personal message about the Holocaust years would you want to share with everybody?

It's we shouldn't forget. We shouldn't forget what went down, and what we still don't know what we can expect from this world. At least I'm looking like that. Take a look today. A lot of people went to Israel. From Israel they went to Germany, and they forgot everything what went on.

You see? And there's big antisemitism in Germany. You see antisemitism here. You see, as we shouldn't forget. We shouldn't forget. I don't know what we can expect. Like I told you, you see all this in Slovakia, what there used to be, the newspapers, the radios and everything was talking against the Jews, and this and that. And still, the people you see, this time I don't know. This time they didn't start to kill and something the Jews.

Only here, I don't believe here. If here would happen something like this would be a bigger catastrophe than over there.

I see. I want to thank you very much for sharing your story with us today. I think it's very important that you did so that other people can learn from it.

This is Sylvia Abrams. Our Holocaust survivor today has been Maurice Grunwald. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section.